

The Father–Son Project

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ABSTRACT: *Family-centered therapeutic and educational approaches generally include men. However, fewer men than women utilize the services of most family agencies. The author describes a three-generational men's retreat for grandfathers, fathers, and sons. The program allowed participants to observe the affirmative and painful interactions of other participants as well as provide valuable contributions of their own.*

UNTIL RECENTLY, fatherhood was the subject of little talk and even less action. Weiss (1990) reminds us that only 25 years ago men were still excluded from the birth process. Almost two decades ago, Lamb (1975) described fathers as the forgotten contributors to child development. In 1982, when beginning research for *The Nurturing Father*, Pruett (1987) found virtually no articles about infants and children raised by their fathers. *Nurturing News*, one of the earliest journals addressing men's issues, was not begun until 1979.

Many refer to the PBS interview of Robert Bly by Bill Moyers in the winter of 1990 as the beginning of the men's movement. Certainly, this interview was a catalyst for much discussion about men's issues in the popular media. The attention focused on *Iron John* (Bly, 1990) and *Fire in the Belly* (Keen, 1991), both on best-seller lists for weeks, attests to the growing interest in men's issues. What was a virtual vacuum only a few years ago has now been filled by a plethora of books and journal articles in the popular and professional presses addressing both men's issues and fatherhood (Bozett & Hanson, 1991).

Most family agencies have purported to serve men. "Family-centered" approaches, whether therapeutic or educational, include men

in the family-systems focus of most family professionals. In actuality, however, far fewer men than women have utilized the services of most family agencies. This is slowly but steadily changing. Attention to fatherhood, particularly, is drawing men to utilize mental health services. On the therapeutic side, "father hunger," discussed by Bly and others, has been a key therapeutic focus for many men. In *Men in Therapy*, Feldman (1990) described disengagement or father absence as the most common dysfunctional pattern of father-child relationships. Osherson (1986) states that unfinished business with fathers causes boys to grow into manhood carrying a "wounded father" within. Fossum (1989) suggests that part of the male rite of passage to adulthood is coming to terms with our fathers and making peace with them.

Family educators also report growing attention to father-child relations, not so much on past relationships as on present relationships. Father's groups and their derivatives—groups or

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workshops for stepfathers, long-distance fathers, teen fathers, “Daddy and Infants”—are becoming more common in many places. The challenge for many family professionals is to respond effectively to fathers who seek services. Program models and methods need to be adapted to fathers if, as, for example, in the case of parent education, most participants have in the past been female. Family professionals need to keep up with the growing literature on the differing ways men and women experience or process their worlds (Gilligan, 1982; Tanner, 1990). Times of cultural transition require flexibility and creativity in service delivery.

This article discusses a particular model used with fathers and sons. A three-generational men’s retreat for grandfathers, fathers, and sons is presented. My intent is not to suggest that one model can serve most needs. Rather, it is hoped that the process of developing models or working with fathers and their families can be examined and addressed by family professionals.

Project Background

The Father–Son Project began as a response to issues men were experiencing in therapy. Three male therapists, all of whom did individual and group therapy with men, were frustrated about their inability to address issues related to fatherhood using traditional or innovative individual and group therapy approaches. The men in therapy frequently brought up issues with their fathers or issues they had as fathers. This intergenerational connection among fathers and sons was the major issue for most of the men in therapy. In some instances, the fathers or the sons of the men in therapy were included in family sessions. However, the therapists believed something more could and needed to be done and began speculating about the feasibility of initiating intergenerational group experiences that neither group therapy nor individual work with fathers or sons provided.

For almost 20 years, I had worked with multifamily and intergenerational issues (Bowman, 1976; Bowman & Kieren, 1985). I was also a family educator by profession, a perspective that augmented the therapeutic orientation of my colleagues. Our mission was to create experiences for men that would enhance and extend

therapeutic or educational work with or about fathers. Many models were discussed and explored, and resources were investigated. To our knowledge, no existing models were similar to the vision that emerged. We believed that the intergenerational connections of grandfathers, fathers, and sons could best be addressed if they shared experiences together. We believed further that the impact of such shared experiences would be reinforced if individual families of men worked in the context of other families of men. All the men and boys could benefit from the modeling and support of their “gender brothers” as they addressed issues of importance in their relationships. As Keen (1991) writes,

Good men are not products of an instant. There is no Shake ‘n Bake identity, no microwave masculinity, no easy formula for authentic manhood. We can’t create ourselves overnight by willpower, guts, and hard work. . . . At the center of my vision of manhood there is no lone man standing tall against the sunset, but a blended figure composed of a grandfather, a father, and a son. The boundaries between them are porous, and strong impulses of care, wisdom, and delight pass across the synapses of the generations. Good and heroic men are generations in the making—cradled in the hearts and initiated in the arms of fathers who were cradled in the hearts and initiated in the arms of their fathers (p. 185).

Drawing on this notion, and grounded by our personal and professional experiences, we planned a three-generational men’s retreat that would focus primarily on enrichment rather than on therapy. In other words, the emphasis would be on aiding families of men to make, strengthen, or affirm their connections. To this end, we decided that men in therapy who had major unresolved issues with their fathers or sons would not be accepted as participants. Participants needed to be in a position to explore openly and/or celebrate father–son relations. To ensure this requirement, interviews were held with each registrant before his participation was confirmed.

Recruitment was enhanced by this decision. We knew it would be difficult to enlist the number of participants essential for success. Multifamily groups are difficult to establish (Bowman & Kieren, 1985). The program depended on strong invitations from the men to get their fathers and sons to attend an event with other fa-

thers and sons. An enrichment focus, we speculated, would be much more appealing than would a therapeutic focus. Thus, we recruited participants who were able to acknowledge and build on the legacy of their families. We believed that many participants would continue work already begun in therapy. Others might return to therapy as a result of issues that surfaced during the project. The Father-Son Project was viewed as a natural extension of and complement to therapy.

Procedural and implementation matters needed to be addressed: ages of participants, whether participation would depend on all three generations being present, recruitment strategies, and duration of the program.

To maximize interaction among the three generations, we decided that the boys had to be 10 years of age or older, preferably adolescent. Although younger children could benefit from such an experience with their fathers, wide developmental differences would interfere with significant verbal exchanges among fathers, sons, and grandfathers. Adolescents are developmentally prepared for critical reflection, a major component in this model. We hoped that adolescents would be willing to participate fully and consequently be affirmed as emerging young men.

Regarding three-generation participation, we decided that this would be a goal, not a requirement. The fathers of some men were dead; others' fathers or sons could not attend for various reasons. However, our goal was made known and multigenerational participation was encouraged. At a minimum, two generations present were required, one of which was to be the middle-generation male. Photographs of fathers or sons were brought to the group so that the group could become acquainted with each man's family.

The time frame developed originally for the group proved to be unrealistic. We projected three separate day-long or overnight events within a three-month period, the second of which would include all three generations and the other two only the middle-generation men. Very few men were able or willing to make that time commitment. Our subsequent plan for having a weekend to build cohesion among the middle-generation men in preparation for the three-generation day, which in turn would be followed by a debriefing day, had to be significantly modified. We settled for a day-long experience for all

three generations at a retreat center. As the planning of this project made clear to us, time and scheduling constraints are major obstacles when planning intergenerational groups (Bowman & Kieren, 1985).

Participants were recruited from the case loads of each of the four leaders. Men who were currently or previously in individual or group therapy and who fit the criteria received the following announcement, accompanied by details related to cost and time of the event.

The Father/Son Project:
A Three-Generational Experience in Bonding

A father's place in a man's life has often been described as one of absence, distance, or abuse. Fathers have minimized the richness they have to give to their sons and the culture has often described their impact on their children as negative. A son's experience of his father, whether it is one of absence, neglect, presence or abuse, is a powerful one and directly impacts his sense of himself as a man and as a father. Consequently, men carry within themselves a male legacy of values which becomes promulgated through the generations.

This workshop will provide men the opportunity to explore the psychological and spiritual connections between the three generations of males: grandfather, father, son. The bonds of connection and the understanding of each generation for the other can be strengthened. Men will have the chance to play, converse, and identify each family's legacy of values.

Project Design

As the families arrived, each was welcomed by one or more staff persons. Name tags were provided and refreshments made available. After a brief overview of the day, the middle-generation men were invited to introduce their father and/or son. Fathers or sons who were absent were introduced through photographs. Following introductions, the Road Game was played. This game simulates group and individual decision making, leadership dilemmas, and issues of competition and winning within a brief period. The content of the game was viewed as less important than was providing an experience that would engage everyone immediately and allow the younger generation to assume a significant role in the group. Moreover, the game required conversation across the generations and is fun. After

the game, members made insightful comments about the game's content, pushing the group early in the program to consider patterns of behaviors and values.

Following a break, participants gathered in mixed-age triads to discuss mentors and heroes in their lives, men whom they had looked up to, men whom they had tried or would like to emulate. Our purpose was to encourage participants to share stories about figures in their lives who personified important values or principles.

Following this activity, the triads created a "job description" for a father based on their personal experiences as sons and fathers, what they wanted but did not receive from their fathers, and impressions of others. The groups attacked this task energetically. Participants were discouraged from talking only about what they had not gotten from or had been unable to give to their father. Rather, they were encouraged to use those experiences and others to develop ideal attributes of a father. Keen (1991) uses the image of the "wounded healer" to urge men to become the fathers they had always wanted. That image was shared in an effort to encourage participants to develop and share their visions. Participants shared the following attributes:

- Demonstrates love
- Pays attention to the relationship with the son
- Passes on legacies
- Shares experiences
- Is a role model
- Talks with children about important aspects of life
- Allows children to be themselves
- Is reliable
- Provides acceptance
- Is able to listen
- Shares values
- Is open-minded

In addition to photographs, the middle-generation men had been asked to bring "worthies," that is, tangible symbols of their generational connections.¹ Items might include something passed on to them by their elders; something they had made or written for the older or younger generation; or something that repre-

sented a worthy aspect of the father-son relationship. Clearly, the participants had taken this assignment seriously. Only one participant came unprepared. One man brought a tape, never heard before by his son, of his stevedore father in his role as cantor for his synagogue. Before the tape was played, this man told his son about the dual lives of his father, the hardworking shipworker and the spiritual leader. Another man talked to his son about his and his son's mutual love of camping and hiking and how much he enjoyed those times. He told his son of the gifts of information, lore, and support that he had received from his father during those times, symbolized by the canoe paddle he brought to show. A third man brought a pocket watch that his father had given him a few months earlier. The watch had been passed through six generations. He talked about its legacy and how it challenged sons to learn about the men in their history.

For some of the men, this activity was the highlight of the day. Objects, or "worthies," freed them to say things that might otherwise have been difficult for them to relate. The men valued and took pride in these objects and wanted their fathers and/or their sons to know how they felt.

Finally, the generations were split—the two older generations in one group, the younger in another group. Fathers and grandfathers were asked to think of messages they wanted to give to their sons:

If something should happen to you on the way home, what would you want your sons to have heard from you? What are the most important things you can say to your sons? What do you want your sons to remember as your legacy to them?

The sons, for their part, were given the rare opportunity to prepare advice for their fathers. "What do you wish to say to your fathers and grandfathers about fatherhood?"

The groups reunited to share their results. Both groups developed one or two primary messages from the various individual responses. These messages were expressed with feeling and passion. The sons, in essence, told the fathers:

Give us some slack. Let us make our choices—guided, yes, by your input and your values. But regardless of what choices we make, don't

1. Sigurd Hoppe, a staff member of the Father/Son Project, introduced the concept of "worthies," a tool he has often used in therapy.

ever abandon us. Hang in there with us, no matter what.

The fathers and grandfathers stated, "We love you, sons, and we are proud of you."

Men who had never cried before in front of their sons, or, for that matter, other men, cried openly. One father, long estranged from his children, said, "I think we are definitely on the way back to the kind of relationship I yearn for." Messages were shared and discussed at length.

Individual family time followed. Each family was encouraged to reflect on the day, to make plans for the future, and to bring closure to this step in their process. The program ended with a brief group closure, which included reports of individual family plans and affirmations.

Commentary

The overview presented here does not do justice to the informal exchanges that occurred during breaks or over lunch nor does it capture the interchange among participants during the activities. Many participants expressed pain, regret, guilt, and shame as well as the affirmative messages presented above. Keen's (1991) image of the "wounded healer" helped participants reflect on painful memories and to confront their need for the father or son they yearned for but did not have. Participants observed others and learned from their interactions. The leaders used their therapeutic and educational skills to guide the process, demonstrating shared leadership and mutual respect as colleagues and friends. The staff got as much out of the program as did the participants.

Stories

Many people learn best by projecting ideas, thoughts, or images outside themselves and thereby bringing perspective to their personal situation. Stories facilitate this process. Stories of mentors, heroes, and heroines were used to help participants identify important and strong influences in their lives as well as to become aware of important values and principles. This method helped the men clarify their values and define that which they wished to convey to their sons or fathers. Buechner (1982) writes about a kind of "seedy sainthood" that is part of each person's heritage:

all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken and the whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints (p. 74).

Heightened awareness of these figures can guide men in their search to find balance, healing, or celebration in their lives. Many stories about fathers and children are available for children and adult readers (Scull, 1992; Keyes, 1992; Moramarco & Zolynas, 1992; Walker, 1991; Wood, 1992). Public librarians can be an invaluable resource to family professionals in accessing such material.

Practicing

The concept of *practicing* was encouraged throughout the retreat: "Try something here that you haven't done before" or "Begin something here, with our help, that you might be reluctant to do on your own." Developing skills is a concept with which men are particularly comfortable. Males practice for sports; historically, apprentices were placed with skilled persons to practice and learn their craft. Many men, and some women as well, prefer a "hands on" approach to education rather than constant discussion or critical reflection. Thus, we emphasized the need to practice throughout the retreat. Note the emphasis on practice as opposed to role play. Many men will run the other way if role play is the announced activity. Practice, however, is a familiar term that has positive connotations for many men.

Games

The use of a game was an effective icebreaker and allowed participants to experience role differences. When divided into teams, some groups were led by boys, others by grandfathers. The mixed (nonfamily) groups encouraged participants to start talking immediately. That many participants gained personal insights from the game was an added benefit. When planning the program, we debated about the use of competitive vs. noncompetitive games. The "Road Game," although it includes elements of a contest, does not overemphasize competition.

Discussion and Critical Reflection

Winding through these activities was a constant flow of discussion and critical reflection. Ac-

tivities stimulated the sharing of personal thoughts and feelings among participants. Grandfathers, fathers, and sons may fail to take time to reflect on how they are connected to one another. The activities and environment of this program stimulated meaningful discussion and reflection.

Conclusion

Intergenerational father-son programs address family legacies and allow participants to identify and express issues that are important to them. Variations of this model could be used effectively with a single generation of men or the model could be adapted to focus on issues such as male friendships.

Although grandfathers were the smallest group of attendees, their presence added immeasurably to the event. They were the visible link

to past generations. Their comments provided the historical perspective to help other participants identify changes in roles, expectations, and fathers' behaviors.

The model presented here could serve as a complementary tool for therapeutic or educational services. The intensity of even a one-day session is difficult to duplicate in weekly hour-long sessions. Clearly, the activities described here could be incorporated into other settings. However, moving from one activity to another throughout the day created momentum that enhanced the quality of each successive activity.

Innovative approaches are needed to access the special relationships between fathers and their children. No single model will fit all fathers; many approaches are needed. Professionals need to share their methods and resources to develop varied programs for fathers and sons.

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