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Fathers, Anger, and Breaking Barriers

By Mark Brandenburg

"What are you thinking?" I said. "Don't you remember what I just told you?"

I had just avoided a fish hook, swinging perilously close to my eye. At the end of the fishing pole was my six year old son, who now bowed his head. As soon as I said the words, I wanted them back. But I knew the damage was done. In fact, he not only felt shame from my comments, he did what many young boys start to do when they hear these kinds of comments from parents.

He pretended it didn't hurt.

He popped his head up quickly, with a grim look that was determined to "tough it out."

"I'm sorry I said that, buddy, I'm just getting impatient."

"Can you put the worm on my hook, Dad?" he asked.

He didn't feel much like "processing" our encounter. He just wanted to move things along. And in this encounter, like many other encounters between fathers and sons, the only emotion that surfaced was anger. The sadness, the fear, and the shame were shoved down.

Sadly, this is often the way it works with boys and men. Historically, the role models provided for boys have been utterly dysfunctional. They've been men and fathers who don't dare to show sadness or fear, for these emotions disqualify them from "manhood." Boys are taught from an early age to bottle all their emotions inside them, save the one emotion it's acceptable for men to express: anger.

Author Robert Burney tells the story of attending his grandmothers' funeral at age 11. He cried so hard, he had to be taken out of the funeral home. Burney wasn't crying because his grandmother had died, but because he'd seen his uncle cry. It was the first time in his life he'd seen a man cry, and it opened the floodgates of all the repressed pain he was carrying. After that day, he went right back to repressing his feelings, because he'd still never seen his father cry, and his father was his role model.

Fathers, Anger, and Breaking Barriers

There's a new generation of fathers out there, with an opportunity to put an end to the "tough guy" culture that still exists for men and boys. This opportunity demands that we show the courage and resolve necessary to break the cultural stereotypes that are still dominant today.

Here are five ways to help your son to be more emotionally intelligent:

1. Show physical affection to your son. Hug him, as well as other men that you care for. Show him that men can show love for each other. Research shows that boys who receive physical affection from their fathers are happier, healthier, smarter, etc. If you're squirming, you're a good candidate for this one!
2. Have enough involvement in your son's life to know who else might be reinforcing the "old school" style. This could include teachers, coaches, other family members, etc. If necessary, intervene and set new guidelines.
3. Reinforce your son's knowledge of emotions. Help him identify what he's feeling. When you say, "You seem really sad right now," you help him to identify the feeling, and to "own it."
4. Judge people less and empathize more. Instead of saying, "What a jerk he is!" you can say, "He seems to be really angry right now." Being kind and loving yourself will create a clear path for your son.
5. Keep examining how you raise your son. Do you push him away emotionally, or shame him when he's showing signs of "weakness?" Continually monitor your responses to his behavior, and if possible, have a third party that watches your interactions as well.

The prevailing cultural ideas about manhood have done a great deal of harm to the development of strong, sensitive, and nurturing men. The responsibility of fathers today is to be aware of these cultural myths, and to show their sons a new path.

For the sake of future generations, this is an idea whose time has come.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, coaches busy parents by phone to balance their life and improve their family relationships. For a FREE twenty minute sample session by phone; ebooks, courses, articles, and a FREE newsletter, go to

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Top Ten Ways to be a Better Father

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

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The expectations for fathers are increasing both at work and at home. Here are ten ways for fathers to be more effective in the most important job they'll ever have:

1. See your kids as capable

The achilles heel of many fathers is to see their kids as "not good enough." Your kids will feel this, and they'll live up to these expectations. The more you approve of them, the greater they'll be!

2. Make time for your kids

There will always be more work, but you won't always have the chance to be with your kids. Are there ways to include them in chores around the house? Your kids will know if they matter to you by the effort you make to include them in your day.

3. Use positive forms of discipline

Punishment is not very effective. It tends to create more of the very behavior that fathers are seeking to eliminate. Use natural and logical consequences instead—if you don't pick up your toys, they get put in a bag and taken away for awhile. Give them choices. Positive discipline methods help kids learn responsibility, punishment helps them learn to dislike you.

4. Have a great relationship with you wife

You are the main role model for your kids, and this is the main source of information for them about how to have a close relationship. They're watching very closely to learn how to do it.

5. Be aware of your kids lives

How much do you really know about your kids? Are you aware of their hopes and dreams? Do you know what inspires them? Do you know their friends names? What

they like and dislike about you? If there are things you don't know about your kids, you can always ask!

6. Be nurturing with your kids

Hug and kiss your kids, and let them hear plenty of "I love you's." And also don't forget to wrestle with them. Both boys and girls benefit from wrestling with their dads. Kids need to see your "soft" side, so show it to them frequently.

7. "Really" listen to your kids

Put down the newspaper and look your kids in the eye when they talk to you. Be aware of your own tendency to "filter" what your kids say. Reflect back what you heard from them. If you want them to listen to you, you've got to show them the way.

8. Examine your relationship with your own father

A poor relationship with your own father will affect your ability to be an effective father. Are there things you want to say to your father? Ultimately, forgiving your father will go a long way towards allowing you to father to the best of your ability.

9. Take care of yourself

It's difficult to be kind and nurturing to your family if you're not kind to yourself. Find ways to take the time to relax, exercise, and keep your stress levels lower. And use friends and family to support you--don't become an "island" in your family. Your family will appreciate it.

10. Have a plan for your anger

Men can have a difficult time with the overwhelming emotional intensity that families can experience. The result is often anger, which breeds anger in your kids and creates a vicious cycle. Make a plan with a specific relaxation technique that helps to defuse your anger. Remember that one bad episode can impact your kids for a long time.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, coaches men to be better fathers and husbands. He is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" <http://www.markbrandenburg.com/father.htm>. Sign up for his FREE bi-weekly newsletter, "Dads, Don't Fix Your Kids," at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com>



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