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Strengthening Father-Child Bonds
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PREFACE

The content of this paper, Strengthening Father-Child Bonds, is serving as a vehicle to illustrate a dilemma facing anyone trying to teach relationship skills to others. The basic dilemma is like the "be spontaneous" paradox referred to, among others, by Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974). By requesting spontaneity, it can no longer be offered. Demanding something of someone makes it impossible for them to freely give it. So also, when training therapists, educators, students, or clients in new behaviors, we may, by our very role as trainers, create conditions which reduce the likelihood that the new behavior will be learned. (How many of you counselors can remember being in training and being observed with a client by your professors and peers? You were supposed to show unconditional positive regard and use techniques "a" and "c" with the client. Effective counseling--or relating--probably requires total involvement with the other person. How could you do that if you were psychologically concerned about the observers? How effective were you with a client who did not have your full attention? I can remember feeling very ineffective but didn't figure out until later that one reason was the fact that I was "playing" to the observers and being such a "good counselor" for them that I was, in fact, a terrible counselor for the client.)

Anytime a person is trying to learn a new behavioral skill, he or she feels as awkward as when first learning to ride a bicycle. The novice bicycle rider may be paying attention to an assigned technique ("Chuck, remember to turn the front wheel in the direction the bike is falling") But to turn the bike into the fall seems, cognitively, daring, impossible, or foolish. Then, at some point, the bike rider gets the "feel" of the bike and its balance, and suddenly is doing it! Hooray! How did it "happen?" Usually, the now confident biker cannot say exactly. He or she just "caught on" to it. Rarely does the trainee say "Well, I just turned the wheel in the direction the bike started to lean." However, after the fact, the bike rider sees the logic of the suggested technique.

So also, in training therapists and educators, it may be more appropriate to assign a task ("See how well you can understand what this client is feeling") than it is to assign a technique ("Use reflective listening with this client"). The latter assignment creates a non-spontaneous way of relating to the client, while the assigning of a task leaves the counselor free to examine how to achieve understanding.

Therefore, a recommendation of this author, in advance of discussing techniques of strengthening father-child bonds, is that when training fathers, counselors consider assigning tasks to the fathers in terms of intended outcomes, rather than assigning specific techniques themselves. Techniques serve as illustrations of processes, not as rules of behavior. (For a theoretical base for this recommendation, see Polanyi, 1962.)

A second prefatory note: This paper encourages therapists to educate fathers. Educating means teaching skills and attitudes to someone to expand their behavioral repertoire. Therapy refers to getting someone to the point where they can learn from their experience. Therapy makes possible seeing the impact of their behavior on others. Some fathers may need therapy before they can benefit from education. The task of this paper will be to discuss educational processes.

INTRODUCTION

Sufficient empirical support now exists for the notion that certain parental behaviors do contribute to the positive development of children (See Baumrind, 1971; Rollins and Thomas, 1975, for example). This means that marriage and family therapists, when confronted with individuals or families with defective or disruptive interaction patterns, can recommend and demonstrate alternative ways of behaving for their clients which are validated by literature in the field.

In addition, it is proposed that when unable to work with entire families, therapists could serve as educators of their clients as to what behaviors they could add to their parental repertoire. Educating fathers for more productive involvement with their children can be a prime task of family therapists, as well as family life educators.

The purpose of this paper/demonstration is to identify significant dimensions of positive father behavior and to advocate some specific means of training fathers in obtaining positive bonding with their children. Although these dimensions of behavior apply to mothers as well, it is maintained that the style of expressing these behaviors would differ somewhat by sex. Consequently, the focus of this paper is on how these behaviors can be integrated into the behavioral role of males in the father role.

At least four dimensions of father behavior can be noted as beneficial for their children. These dimensions are nurturance, induction, agency, and control.

NURTURING PROCESSES

Nurturance refers to the expression of care and concern. It refers to communicating warmth, support, and affection toward others. A nurturing parent strengthens the impact of his or her modeling on the child and produces children more
Specific nurturing behaviors could include giving emotional support verbally by sharing feelings (Father says: “I’m glad you’re my daughter; I’ve enjoyed this time with you; I’ve missed you; I feel bad that I don’t understand”). Physical contact, including the arm around the shoulder, the soft punch on the forearm, the hug, are means of communicating warmth.

Disclosing past experiences can be a particularly rewarding nurturing activity. However, if fathers wish their disclosure of past experience to be nurturing and bonding, they need to disclose the processes of discovery through which they have passed, and not just the outcomes. For example, young Danny is complaining about having to walk a mile to school. The stereotyped father’s response to this usually includes “disclosure” of how father tramped three miles to school in waist-deep snow when he was a boy. That kind of disclosure does little to bond son to father or to encourage son to meet the “journey to school” task any differently. The type of disclosure father is employing is disclosure of outcomes.

If father were to report the processes of discovery which were involved in his snow-tramping, he would, of necessity, be disclosing his emotions about walking to school, as well as how he dealt with the task. A sample paragraph of this kind of disclosure is offered:

Danny: Boy it gets cold walking that mile to school. I hate it.

Dad: I can remember hating the cold, too. I didn’t like it at all. I remember pulling two pairs of socks on inside my boots to keep my feet warm and then getting to school and having my feet start to itch in the warm schoolroom.

In disclosing discovery processes and the emotions associated with them, parents are teaching the how of life as well as something about its reality. When fathers report only that which shows them as supermen, they teach an illusion as well as something about its reality. When fathers acknowledge emotions with which their children can identify, father-child bonding is more probable.

The author acknowledges that, traditionally, men have been less nurturant and less disclosing than women (Kenkel, 1963; Jourard, 1971). That fact is one of the basic reasons for advocating the training of fathers in nurturant and disclosing behaviors. In addition, some evidence exists for the fact that when men do exhibit nurturant (expressive) behaviors, it is most likely to occur in a family setting (Leik, 1963), and is positive for the development of children.

INDUCTIVE PROCESSES

The second father behavior advocated here is induction, or the use of reasoning. Reasoning with a child means pointing out the consequences of behavior to the child. Induction can include pointing out the “right” or “wrong” aspects of behavior as related to others.

One way to use induction is to specify, point by point, what will happen if the child pursues a certain course of action. For example, a father could point out that if Julie spends all of her allowance on candy, then there would be no chance to attend a movie later that month.

A second way to use reasoning is to ask the child to rehearse the future. Father could ask a series of questions to guide the rehearsal: “Julie, if you spend all your allowance now, what does that mean about your activity the rest of the month?”

A third way to use inductive processes is to help the child learn from others’ experience by rehearsing what choices others have made in order to obtain the consequences observable. Whether it is a neighbor, a TV character, or a newspaper story describing some incident, it can lead to a parent-child inductive discussion. For example, a news item describes a fire in a neighboring city which destroyed a home of a family away on vacation. Father can begin dinner-time discussion with “What if our smoke alarm went off in the middle of the night—what should you do?” As children answer these questions, they are learning to reason further—and gain some knowledge of what to do and not to do in such situations.

Reasoning is often ignored by fathers who are ignorant of its impact on children, or who find that their goal is not the transmission of values, but “obedience.” Fathers who use commands and demands repeatedly in their child-rearing (“Hurry up! Sit down! Stand up! Do it! Do it this way!”) may produce obedient, but emotionally distant, children. As the children grow older in stature, they may not grow older in wisdom, because of a lack of practice in reasoning. Frequent use of induction produces a greater likelihood that children will begin to assess the consequences of their actions before they act. Such sons and daughters, when older, will have the skills, as teenagers, to reason with others rather than to resort to rebellion. Using inductive processes early decreases the probability of negative parent-child interaction patterns as the children get older.

AGENCY PROCESSES

In discussing the third dimension of father behavior—allowing children the exercise of agency—a working definition of agency is presented. Agency is the opportunity/responsibility to make choices. Normally, the more knowledge you have of the consequences attached to certain activities, the wiser you can be in your choice-making. Some decisions will always have to be made not knowing what tomorrow will bring, but others need not be made so blindly. A father who uses induction with his children is teaching them to look for consequences. A nurturing, inductive father is increasing the probability that his children will pay heed to his example in reasoning and reflecting on consequences. And, a nurturing, inductive father who allows
Children the exercise of their agency, is teaching them to learn from their own (and others') experience about the relationship of personal choice to behavioral outcome.

A father starts with small things (out of small things come that which is great). A boy is given choices regarding when certain of his home responsibilities are to be carried out. A girl is offered instructions on how to study in whichever school subject she chooses. Choices are given within parental boundaries at first, so that children are only given choices parents are willing to allow them to choose. As a child gets older, those boundaries expand even to include some alternatives which, if pursued, might not be wise—except as a learning tool. Ultimately, of course, individuals choose according to self-set boundaries. Their experience with various sets of consequences helps them choose courses of action which are, hopefully, self-developing rather than self-defeating. A father’s giving his children opportunities to exercise agency in small matters helps prepare them for the exercise of agency in the larger matters facing them in their tomorrows. To foster the best use of agency as a learning tool, fathers should offer knowledge of consequences to their children. Explaining in advance to children the potential good and bad news of their choices makes it unnecessary for “I told you so’s” after decisions are made.

Secondly, fathers can point out alternatives to children. Many poor decisions are made by children who face a poverty of options. Offering alternatives makes possible comparisons and the weighing of different sets of consequences. Finally, father needs to get out of the way while the child is making the decision and then be supportive of whatever the decision is. (If father cannot be supportive of the child's choice, then the alternatives discussed must not have been within parental boundaries).

**SETTING LIMITS/CONTROL PROCESSES**

The fourth process, control, is used in the literature as a major heading under which comes sub-headings like love-withdrawal, induction, or love demands (see Hoffman, 1963). Induction has already been given major status in this paper, and is not seen so much as a method of control, as a method of instruction and training. In this paper, control refers to limit-setting by parents and the methods they use to enforce the boundaries established. When control is exercised, whether it be by one's personal authority, physical size and strength, negative, non-nurturing commands and demands, or other extrinsic punishments, the ideal teaching or training situation has been abandoned. The use of these control techniques can be seen as attempts to “steady the ship” or reassess family directions, values, and goals. However, parent-child power struggles can be rooted in situations which neither party fully understands nor knows how to resolve. Moreover, a patterned power struggle, repeated regularly, is a self-defeating pattern. It will not steady the ship, but capsize it. When control is exercised by the stronger family members against other family members, there is a breakdown of cooperation in the family. Whether fathers find themselves in such situations is of less concern than whether they know how to extricate themselves from them.

The exercise of control measures becomes necessary when the boundaries are over-stepped. But even then, a hoped-for outcome is the cooperative resolution of the conflict. This author claims that most control/forced obedience issues can be resolved through the re-institution of nurturance, induction, and agency processes as applied to the issue at hand. The parent who uses these processes in the midst of conflict keeps the door open to resolve the conflict.

Typically, some conflict spews from disagreements between the parent and child. If the parent first tries to seek agreement (and fails), then some kind of control technique is used by either side in order to “win.” An alternative approach is to ignore the disagreement itself. Put on the shelf the goal of achieving agreement and seek instead to understand the perspective of the other. When understanding is placed first, there is a possibility that agreement can be achieved or that disagreement need not be disruptive to the relationship.

A father and a daughter disagree over some issue, major or minor. Dad offers to hear his daughter’s rehearsal of how unjust dad’s “use of the car” policy is. After two and a half hours of the father seeking to understand his daughter, he still disagrees with her. Dad’s perception of the time is that it was wasted. Daughter’s perception differs: “I didn’t think Daddy cared about me enough to listen to my complaints for a whole evening.”

They still disagreed, but was the time spent wasted? Too many people seek agreement when understanding ought to be the goal. It is possible to accept disagreements when understanding has been achieved. It is unlikely that agreement will be appreciated if understanding has been ignored.

Even a role-reversal, where the daughter might use her father’s arguments and where he plays the role of his daughter, might make limit-setting more acceptable to both. Setting limits is less likely to produce hostility when understanding is obtained, even though the parent and child might yet disagree.

**SUMMARY**

Four major behaviors in which fathers could be trained have been defined and illustrated. Nurturance, induction, agency, and setting limits were discussed, and it was recommended that fathers be assigned tasks with their children rather than be assigned techniques. The processes by which a father might be trained in the use of these behaviors is deemed one of the most valuable educative functions performed by a therapist.

**REFERENCES**


