



# Working with Fathers...

## *Raising the Standards for Good Fathering*

By Dr. Glen Palm,  
Associate Professor, Child  
and Family Studies, St.  
Cloud State  
University, St. Cloud, MN.

Dr. Palm is co-editor of  
***Working with Fathers:  
Methods and Perspectives.***

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There are many current efforts to illuminate and support good fathering in contemporary U.S. culture. The “raising of standards” for fathers has been a theme promoted by many different groups including the *Promise Keepers* (1995), *Jesse Jackson* (1994), *Blankenhorn* (1995) and the *National Fatherhood Initiative*. The confusion about good fathering has been exacerbated by social changes and the recent emphasis on family and cultural diversity. Family professionals may find themselves caught between various perspectives about good fathering. The emphasis on cultural and family diversity moves us towards a relativist view (Kipnis, 1987) of good fathering (e.g., Hanson & Bozett, 1985). From a relativist perspective we may be reluctant to make a judgment about good fathering unless a father has clearly crossed the boundaries of abandonment or abuse. Feminist perspectives (e.g., Hochschild, 1989 and Ehrenseft, 1990) suggest a new standard based on the ethic of gender equality with equal household work and child care work as a measure of good fathering. Blankenhorn (1995) in his social critique of contemporary fatherhood reconstructs “the good family man” as his definition of the good father. This view begins to move us towards a more absolutist view of good fathering. The “good family man” must be a provider, protector, partner in the family workload and is a spiritual/moral leader. Blankenhorn’s view raises a specific set of standards that incorporates many of the roles fathers have played throughout history. He pushes us towards a more absolutist view by prescribing roles that appear to exclude men who do not fit rigid definitions of the best family structure and religious beliefs. The standards are clear and high and include a number of important functions of good fathering yet they may exclude men who are striving to do good fathering in difficult circumstances.

Both Blankenhorn and the *Promise Keepers’* movement remind us of the importance of raising standards for good fathering at a time when our standards are fuzzy at best. As family educators we need to work towards an understanding that doesn’t prescribe good fathering from a narrow moral perspective yet does not avoid the task of clarifying good fathering because family life is too complex and too diverse to develop meaningful standards. This article will begin to address the issue of raising standards by defining good fathering as an ethical issue and exploring the roles and strategies that family educators can employ to support a careful examination of good fathering.

One of the most important learnings about fathering has been to define fathering as a *process*. The ethics of good fathering has to recognize that the focus of fathering is on the *evolving relationship* between father and child, not a static set of roles. I have found myself challenged by experiences with a variety of men who do not meet the role requirements of a “good family man” yet appear to be working towards good fathering. For example the 17-year-old father in prison who brightens when he talks about his six-week-old daughter. His toughness begins to melt as he describes his recent visit with her and his delight with her first smiles. The depth of his caring is apparent as is his inability to be a provider or to share in the day-to-day care taking. I begin to ask myself, “Can men do good fathering from behind bars?” When I reflect on Blankenhorn’s set of roles as an effort to set high standards and I agree with the general thrust yet they miss this budding expression of good fathering. The dilemma here is wanting to set high standards for all fathers and wanting to affirm and support the efforts of the

## Good Fathering as an Ethical Issue

17-year-old father in prison. It becomes clear that we need more than role prescriptions to help us to define, understand and support good fathering.

Recent work with ethics in family education (Palm, 1994) has emphasized the importance of bringing different perspectives to understanding ethical issues. Three very different approaches to ethics were identified and can be applied to the ethical question "What is good fathering?"

**1. Relational ethics** can help to describe the caring relationship that all fathers should both initiate and nurture with their children.

**2. Virtue ethics** can help to think about good fathering in terms of dispositions that men need to do good fathering. More specifically, what are the critical characteristics that help men in a variety of family contexts to do good fathering?

**3. Ethical guidelines** are those general principles that guide men towards good fathering. These guidelines may be the closest to the current interest in setting higher standards for fathers and father involvement. These three views of ethics can help us to reflect on good fathering in a constructive manner. They will not eliminate complexity or controversy but they do provide guidance and describe virtues that assist men in good fathering even in difficult situations.

Some examples of specific applications of these perspectives will serve as a heuristic device to stimulate thinking about the ethical issue of defining good fathering.

### Relational Ethics:

*The principles of relational ethics for good fatherhood might include:*

- The father as an adult has the responsibility to initiate a caring relationship and to work to maintain a positive relationship with his children.
- The father should be sensitive to the developmental needs of the child and adjust his support to reflect growing independence and interdependence.
- The father-child relationship exists in the context of a larger family system. Fathers have a responsibility to maintain and nurture a healthy family system.

### Virtue Ethics:

*What are the dispositions that fathers would find essential in contemporary society to do good fathering?*

- Commitment
- Caring
- Moral Leadership

### Ethical Principles for Good Fathering:

*These are general guidelines for the conduct of good fathering.*

- Relationships with Children
  - ↳ Children need a stable base of unconditional love from fathers.
  - ↳ Children need moral leadership and guidance from fathers.
  - ↳ Fathers must respect and be sensitive to a child's individual needs and differences.
- Relationships with Partner (Child's Mother)
  - ↳ Responsibility for children must be shared in an equitable manner where partners negotiate the meaning of equity.
  - ↳ Differences in child rearing styles should be resolved in a respectful manner.
  - ↳ Clear and ongoing communication with partner is essential.

## Responsibilities of Family Educators

**“Raising standards for good fathering must be accompanied by communities providing education and support for men as they strive to do good fathering.”**

### References

Key Words: fathering, ethics (in examining fatherhood)



- Relationships with Community
  - ↳ Father has a responsibility to provide for child's physical and psychological needs.
  - ↳ Father has the responsibility to provide a safe environment for children at home and in his neighborhood.

These are just a few examples of how each different approach to ethics could be used to describe concrete standards for good fathering behavior. The three approaches provide a way to address and raise standards that balances the tendency towards either relativism or absolutism.

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The primary responsibility of family educators is to begin to collaborate with parents, especially fathers in exploring the ethics of good fathering. Raising the standards for good fathering should not be the exclusive domain of professional experts or spiritual leaders but should involve all members of the community, *especially fathers*. The following list of roles and strategies is provided as a place to begin the discussion of higher standards.

- 1. Engage men in a dialogue about good fathering.** This can be done as a specific topic or can be interwoven throughout a series of classes. The concepts of absolutist versus relativist perspectives should be introduced so an informed and respectful dialogue can take place that avoids the pitfall of these extremes.
- 2. Explore the dilemmas about the meaning of good fathering in a variety of family contexts.** Provide stories or case studies to point out the importance of the process of good fathering versus prescribed roles.
- 3. Discuss the virtues that men need to be good fathers in contemporary society.** Ask the group to generate a list of virtues and then focus on the 3-4 most important characteristics that men need to do good fathering. This view supports men to strive to be virtuous and realize that good fathering is an ongoing developmental process that needs constant attention. A description of virtues also can be affirming to fathers.
- 4. Advocate for both formal and informal support systems that will assist fathers in a variety of family contexts and situations to practice good fathering.** Maintaining positive relationships between father and children can be difficult in the best of situations. Non-custodial fathers, single fathers, fathers in prison, fathers who are unemployed may all need additional support and information to do good fathering.
- 5. Initiate a community dialogue that goes beyond absolutist prescriptions as the only recipe for raising standards for good fathering.** This process should include other professional, community leaders and fathers in affirming the need for good fathering and raising the expectations for men in concrete ways. An inventory of community resources for fathers may also become part of this process.

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