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Working with Fathers...Fathers as Protectors -- Building Circles of Safety

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Fathers as Protectors — Building Circles of Safety



Key Words

fathers (working with), protection (& fathers), safety (& fathers)

Children have often looked to their fathers to be their protectors. They see fathers as gigantic, awesome and imposing. It is this physical size and power that can give children a sense of security. In his recent book, *Reaching up for Manhood*, Geoffrey Canada (1998) describes some of the advantages to sons of having the power of fathers on their side.

“There was another distinct advantage the kids with fathers had over those of us who didn't have them. The older boys dared not bother a boy with a father. Fathers would come downstairs in a rage if some older boy beat up their son. I had seen my father on the streets and I could tell he didn't take no stuff off nobody.” (p. 38)

Fathers could be counted on to protect their children from neighborhood bullies, usually older boys and sometimes other adult men. In a brief



anecdote from an article on lessons from fathers in *Men's Health* (1991) a son recalls the following experience of his father as protector.

“My adult next-door neighbor was always picking on me. Once, I was riding my new stingray bike and cut across a little piece of his lawn. He came running out and yelled, ‘you little son of a _____, you ever do that again, I'll break your _____ neck.’ My dad was just coming around the corner in the car with his window open and heard what the neighbor said. He looked at him and in a quiet voice said, ‘Anderson, you ever talk to my kid like that again, I'm going to wrap this bike around your neck.’ I'd never heard my dad talk like that before, but the neighbor never bothered me again. It made me feel great to know he was there to stand up for me when I needed him.” (p. 31)

These anecdotes illustrate an ambivalent mixture of positive and negative values around fathers as protectors. Fathers in these two stories are admired for their physical strength and willingness to use this strength to protect their children. Yet this use of physical strength linked with potential violent behavior provides an ambiguous message to children. When this power is turned towards children it can be frightening and possibly abusive. Fathers as protectors takes on a new meaning as we look beyond the male instinct to protect one's children to the use of physical strength and threats of violence to others.

Fathers of young children today identify a variety of threats to their children. They worry about child kidnapping and child sex abuse. They are concerned their children are being exposed to media that is increasingly violent and explicitly sexual. If they live in poor neighborhoods, they worry about drugs, gangs, and guns. Fathers themselves may also be a threat to their child through their inability to manage their anger or their abuse of substances. The role of fathers as

protectors deserves a fresh examination to better understand how fathers can provide their children with the sense of security and well-being described in the following quote (Chethik, 2001).

"Because we fathers tower over our sons, we must use our power judiciously... Sons told me they wanted their fathers to be strong but to use that strength as a buffer against danger, a shield against the bad guys, ghosts, and other demons." (p. 20)

Fathers must learn to use their physical power judiciously by first creating a safe home environment and then addressing neighborhood and societal threats.

This article will present a lesson plan outline for a group of fathers of young children to address the issue of fathers as protectors. The lesson plan will assist fathers in looking at the changing role of fathers as protectors in their family, community and society. It will emphasize the types of behavior that make children feel safe both at home and as they move out into the world.

Fathers — Power and Protection

Learner Outcomes

- ◆ Fathers will explore changes in our thinking about fathers as protectors.
- ◆ Fathers will understand the circles of safety that they must create to promote positive growth and development in their child.
- ◆ Fathers will discuss strategies for using their power and strength in positive ways to create circles of safety.



Session Outline

I. Introduction/Warm-in

1. **Defining the issues** — Ask group to brainstorm the safety issues that they are most concerned about as they raise their children.
Write a list of concerns on the board or large sheet of paper.
2. **Early Recollections** — Ask men in the group to share a time when they felt safe with their fathers.
What made them feel safe?
Why do children look to their fathers for protection?
3. **Review the Goals for the Session** (Learner outcomes above)

II. Understanding Circles of Safety — Mini-lecture

Present a model of three circles of safety that fathers must understand as they work to protect their young children. They are based on David Walsh's (1995) model: 1) Home/Family; 2) Neighborhood/Community; and 3) Society. These circles represent the social ecology that influences the growth and development of young children. Review the different levels and ask dads to add to some of the risks identified below.

1. **Home** — the risks to children include, parental substance abuse, marital/partner discord, domestic violence, and abusive behavior towards children.
2. **Neighborhood/Community** — This may vary depending upon neighborhoods and parent levels of income. Risks include: environmental hazards, unsafe housing, traffic, poor quality day care, drug use, gangs, gun violence, etc.
3. **Society Level** — Risks include: Racism, sexism, poverty, consumer values, media violence, TV, computer games, Internet, etc.

III. Strategies for Building Circles of Safety

Brainstorming and Discussion:

Look at each area and describe ways that men can create a sense of security.

1. **Home Strategies** — What can you as a father do to make your home safe for your child? (Address both physical and psychological safety.)
2. **Neighborhood/Community Safety** — What can fathers do to protect their child from the risks identified at the beginning of the session?
Look at adult versus child responsibility for safety (i.e., young children should not be responsible for protecting themselves from “strangers”).
3. **Society** — Protecting children from social values that may be threats. What should dads do to teach the values that they want to pass on?

IV. Children's Story about Building a Sense of Security with Dad

Read *Night Driving* by John Coy. What does the father in this story do to build a relationship and make his son feel safe?

V. Closure

The session questions our old ideas about fathers, power and protection. Fathers must begin by with making their child feel safe at home before using their strength to defend their children against the evils of the world. This is an important message for men who may feel uncertain about the best ways to use their physical strength and power to create a sense of security for their child.



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