

# Improving Father/Son Communication

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They sat across from each other in my office looking nervous and apprehensive. I called Bill in so that his son, Clayton (pseudo names), could express his anger and hurt feelings to his dad, something he felt he could not do at home because of Bill's angry responses. They had fallen into a common father-son interactive pattern where the son no longer opens up to the father because of the father's harsh responses to the son's expressed anger. Clayton really did not want to proceed with this, fearing he would "get it" once they got in the car. I reassured him that things could be different and started the dialog.

Children are quite disadvantaged when it comes to expressing their feelings. They lack the appropriate words to use and feel anxious about expressing intense feelings; they are often scolded when feelings are expressed raw and unedited. If Clayton could speak maturely to his father after a bad exchange, he might say to his father, "You hurt my feelings; I feel scared, embarrassed and am really angry with you." In order to do this, Clayton would need to feel safe and secure in his father's love. He needs to know his father will receive his message and respond in a calm, understanding manner. Without feeling safe, Clayton will lash out in anger and hysterics. That's when many fathers pull the "I'm your father" card, saying things like, "watch your mouth son", "that's disrespectful and I won't tolerate it", "you just lost computer for a week." It's a terrible cycle that can corrode the relational underpinnings and the father/son dyad.

Before inviting Bill and Clayton into this session, I met with Bill for a individual session and covered a few important things. First, fathers need to prioritize relationship over respect during disagreements. Respect can be a close second, but relationship always needs to be first. A father needs to remember at all times that this is his child he is struggling with and not some member of an opposing sport team whom he wishes to dominate. Relationship and communication are the criteria for victory in this game. A win/win outcome is always better than a win/lose. In the expression of intense emotions, children are not intentionally meaning to show disrespect. A calm reminder often does the trick like, "Clayton, I see you are really frustrated. I want to hear what you have to say but I need for you to watch your tone of voice with me and show respect. Let's slow down, take a few deep breaths and keep working at this."

Second, the father needs to nurture the relationship with his child so that child develops the intrinsic desire to please the fathers and show respect. Many fathers completely miss this, demanding immediate respect with the threat of negative consequences if respect is absent. This is an extrinsic reward, an if/then approach to parenting. Extrinsic motivation has its place but is often misused and over relied upon by fathers; "If you show respect, then you won't experience my anger." It's short-term oriented, conditional and creates anxiety within the child. Intrinsic motivation includes the desire to please, the expression of gratitude, and the desire to show respect. It is something the child wants to do from deep within, rather than something the child has to do in order to avoid negative consequences. This type of motivation is created by the father nurturing the son through his attention, physical touch, play, patience, and encouragement. It is a stronger motivation that develops over time. If Clayton feels secure in his father's love, he is far less anxious and thereby better able to control his emotions and maintain respect for Bill.

Finally, the father needs to focus on the child's progress rather than on the final product. Fathers can become obsessed with their child's performance in athletics, academics, or whatever the father's chosen focus. Performance statistics are overly focused upon, such as grades, the number of hits, tackles, or baskets, and their artistic rewards. Fathers may not see the negative results of this until their boys become teens and want nothing to do with them anymore. I've seen this countless times, broken relationships due to demanding, discouraging, critical fathers. If Bill wishes to restore his relationship with Clayton, he needs to focus on positive progress rather than disappointing final results (products).

A very helpful exercise for fathers is to pull out a sheet of paper and write down how they wanted to be fathered as a child. For some, this could be a very painful exercise. Their relationships with their fathers caused them great pain and they continue to struggle with feelings of shame, self-contempt, and poor self-confidence. Working through their own pain can greatly benefit their relationship with their children. Fathers shouldn't run from their pain as it becomes displaced

onto their children. The childhood wounds should be worked through so that they can parent their child from an internal place of peace, freedom, and love. A mentor to fathers once said, "You cannot impart what you do not possess." Heal yourself so that you can better fulfill your desire to produce a healthy, confident, young man or woman as a result of your fathering.

I'm happy to report that the session between Bill and Clayton went well and that the changes made by Bill greatly improved not only their relationship but Clayton's overall happiness and performance.

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