



The Essence of Responsible Fatherhood

When you hear the word, “father,” what images come to mind? What about the word, “daddy?” Depending on what type of father you had growing up, these words can elicit very positive or very negative memories. Some children grow up with fathers who are actively and positively involved in their lives. These fathers love their children, spend time with them, praise them, play with them, protect them, teach them, and help them deal with the struggles of life. On the other hand, some children grow up with fathers who are very uninvolved. Their actions do not convey love. They spend minimal amounts of time with their children; they do not encourage them, and they provide very little guidance.

What is the essence of fatherhood? Is it simply the establishment of biological paternity? Do fathers simply provide a paycheck? Or, does fatherhood encompass much more? Perhaps the more pertinent question is this: What constitutes **responsible** fatherhood? Responsible fatherhood cannot be proven with a blood test, nor does it consist of simply providing a paycheck. Responsible fatherhood cannot be reduced to a single dimension. It involves commitment, self-sacrifice, integrity, and unconditional love. Responsible fathers are concerned with the well-being of their children, and their desire is to see their children succeed in all areas of life.

Ken Canfield, President of the National Center for Fathering, has developed a framework that summarizes the growing body of empirical research and literature on fathering (Canfield, 1999). This four-part framework, which serves as a valuable guide for discussing the essence of responsible fatherhood, consists of the following dimensions: involvement, consistency, awareness, and nurturance.

Involvement

Research on fathers clearly demonstrates the importance of positive father involvement. While there are exceptions, the general rule is that children who have positively involved fathers tend to do better socially, emotionally, and academically than children whose fathers are not positively involved. What does it mean to be a positively involved father? According to Pleck (1997), positive paternal involvement means “high engagement, accessibility, and responsibility” (p. 102). In other words, involvement means that a father spends quality and quantity time with his children. Spending time with children sends a strong message that a father cares about them and values them to such an extent that he would rather spend time with them than with other less important matters. Active involvement on the part of fathers also teaches children the value of commitment and responsibility.

If allocating ample time with children sends the message that a father loves his children, what message(s) do fathers convey when they fail to spend time with their children? There is no set formula for father involvement; however, responsible fathers diligently search for ways to be actively involved in the lives of their children. Involvement may consist of coaching a child’s baseball/softball team, helping a child with homework, feeding an infant, changing diapers, reading to a child, tucking a child in at night, taking a child to the mall, playing with a child, or simply being accessible. Children’s lives afford fathers numerous opportunities for involvement.

Consistency

Responsible fatherhood is rooted in consistency. Eric Erikson, noted child development theorist, contends that one of the primary goals of early child development is to establish trusting relationships with primary caregivers. Trust, however, cannot be established without consistency. Responsible fathers can build a trusting relationship with their children by providing consistent encouragement,

consistent discipline, consistent protection, consistent care, and consistent love. Being consistent implies that a father will be present during the good times and the bad. Consistency in behavior on the part of fathers promotes a sense of security and confidence in children, which in turn, lays the groundwork for a healthy self-esteem.

Awareness

William Shakespeare once wrote, “It is a wise father that knows his own child.” Responsible fathers know their children. They express a genuine interest in their children’s development beginning with infancy (or earlier) and extending into the later years. Becoming aware of a child’s needs will help a father to be better equipped to meet those needs at various stages of a child’s life. Awareness, however, requires motivation and active involvement. Responsible fathers want what is best for their children, so they take the time to get to know them. They understand that every child is unique, each possessing a different set of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social characteristics.

Nurturance

In the context of a parent-child relationship, to nurture means to train, to educate, and to foster a child’s healthy development. It is unfortunate that in the American culture, the concept of nurturing is almost invariably associated with the mother-child relationship. Fathers also play a critical role in the nurturing of their children by providing responsible and loving care that meets their emotional and social needs.

It is important to understand that the characteristics of responsible fatherhood and motherhood overlap; however, they are not identical. Researchers have discovered that there are a number of gender differences in the parenting styles of mothers and fathers, and one style is not necessarily superior to the other. For example, fathers tend to engage in physically stimulating and exciting activities that promote assertiveness rather than politeness (Snarey, 1993). This type of interaction can offer tremendous benefits for sons and daughters. Therefore, women can learn from men, and men can learn from women what it means to be a nurturing parent.

Children need fathers who are committed to fulfilling their responsibilities to their children. As Charles Augustus Ballard, founder of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, stated, “People are saying it takes a village to raise a child, but first it takes a mother and a father, who are understanding, compassionate, nurturing, and responsible—working together to instill discipline, character, integrity, and responsibility in their children.”

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References

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