

Soul 

Connections

Boys Need their Fathers

(Article published in the Irish Examiner, Sept.6th 02 'Daddy s Boy)

Life seems to be tough for boys at the moment. Girls outstrip them in schoolwork, exams and the ability to relate and have close friends. According to one source, 80% of children with behavioural difficulty are boys. (Humphries, Examiner April 02). Emotionally speaking, boys lag behind girls in their development, and are more likely to retain lasting psychological damage from early life events such as the breakdown of their parent s marriage than girls. They are more likely to commit suicide or become criminals. These facts alone indicate that emotional isolation and terrible loneliness forms part of a great many boys and young men s lives.

What is the reason for this imbalance? In my view, one major factor is absent fathers, something which is on the increase. All children need their fathers, as they do their mothers. Boys, however, need their fathers in a very specific way. It is from his father that a boy learns to become a man. Quite simply, boys in order to be boys, take their cues from their fathers. A father is a boy s role model.

Although the role of the father has never received as much attention as that of the mother in the life of the child, it has increasingly become apparent that the absence of father in our modern world has given rise to all sorts of problems. Everyone is concerned with the increasing crime rate, the vast majority of which are perpetrated by males. Perhaps it is not commonly known that one of the major things a father brings to his child psychologically speaking is a sense of order. Unfathered men have been shown to have greater difficulty in ordering their lives and working towards a goal than those who were adequately fathered. Boys look to their fathers for direction, and many unfathered boys find this in sports and other male dominated activities that can act as a form of male bonding.

Studies show that children who are adequately fathered do better, have a higher self-esteem and are more confident than youngsters who have no father present. Fathers may be physically present but unless he is also emotionally available to his child, the child will experience him as absent. Fathers also help their sons find a purposeful outlet for their natural aggression. Unfathered boys are found to be reactive rather than proactive and have more difficulty asserting themselves and making decisions. Or, feeling weak internally, they may turn to violent behaviour as a way of self expression. A strong father son



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- 2 -

relationship will help the boy develop into a strong, confident man; this is because father brings a sense of strength and structure.

Difficulties in relating intimately mean that many fathers do not have a close emotional relationship with their children. This is a pity because it is from his father that a boy will learn about love and relationships from a male perspective and how to be a father himself one day. When a boy does not have a close emotional relationship with his father he is likely to have difficulties in intimate relationships later on. He may have a fear of commitment due to an unconscious but powerful emotional bond with his mother, which he will take with him into adult life. This is because psychologically, it is the father who helps the boy separate from his mother in order to grow into a man able in time, to choose his own partner. If father is absent, then the boy remains not only emotionally tied to his mother, but also father hungry. This hunger will drive many of his relationships with other men.

I believe that changing ideas about masculinity and the erosion of traditional male roles has confused boys. It is common knowledge that men now appear to have become the more vulnerable sex. They die younger, are more prone to stress related illnesses, and suffer more from a depression that is likely to end in suicide, than their female counterparts. Studies indicate that men do less well psychologically than women after a separation or divorce. Many fail to move on and develop new long lasting intimate relationships that fulfil them emotionally, or enrich their lives in other ways. Hurt by their pasts, men are more likely than women to close the door on their hearts. They may have many 'friends' but nonetheless remain emotionally isolated. The problem from the start is that men have more difficulty expressing their feelings than women do. Such difficulties are compounded by society, where men by and large are expected to be tough and where any display of emotion particularly around love, is seen as a weakness.

Quite simply, there is no place to go when it hurts. Women are better at dealing with emotional pain; they talk to each other and are more likely to go to a therapist or counsellor. As a therapist with many years of clinical practice behind me, I can say that the number of women seeking help far outweighs men, and in work with couples, it is usually the woman who brings the often recalcitrant man along. This is nothing new, but in today's fast-paced society, where awareness of our growing hunger for spiritual guidance is driving many to explore their inner souls, men are being challenged as never before to open their hearts. And boys need their fathers to help them become good fathers themselves some day.

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