



A Roundtable Meeting for Professionals in Higher Education and Research

Why the Fathers of Tomorrow Need Our Attention Today: What's the role for colleges and universities in healthy male socialization?

The following list of issues was compiled by attendees at a Male Socialization Roundtable held on February 25, 2005 in Collegeville, Minnesota. These notes reflect the opinions of the individuals in four small group discussions. For a reading list on male socialization, visit www.mnfathers.org/malesocialization.html.

Healthy Relationships and Healthy Masculinity: What are the basics / foundations of healthy relationships?

Current State of Affairs

- Kids know what a good dad is. This is different than 20 years ago. But men don't necessarily know how to get there, how to reach their kids' expectations. "Be there."
- Men's relationships vary: they are both good and bad (with other men, women, their children, etc).
- Father absence and father abdication are two concerns that are common in our society.
- Core values / processes: How do men learn healthy masculinity and healthy relationship-development?
- Cultural differences: healthy relationships and healthy masculinity vary across cultures.

Gaps and Challenges

- Paradigm / awareness shift about what constitutes a healthy relationship in the context of healthy masculinity. But there is a lack of behavior, tools and permission to reach these new expectations. Men may feel trapped in outdated roles / outdated expectations.
- In society there is a lack of commitment and resources for achieving healthy relationships and for helping men understand their role in achieving positive relationships.
- Where / who are the models of healthy relationships? What are the barriers?
- We need to re-socialize many men and fathers.
- There is a lack of courage by some men to step up / come forward.

Possibilities for Change

- We can help individuals understand what constitutes a healthy relationship by:
 - o Starting at the birth of a child;
 - o Working with men;
 - o Working with kids;
 - o Working with women as resources for change.

What We Need to Address

- Men working with men. Men need to feel empowered to live as positive role models for one-another; to identify and correct unhealthy relationships; to accept the shifting expectations of masculinity.
- Men must be comfortable developing with boys – power, authority, authenticity – in a positive way.

Dealing with the Backlash toward Healthy Masculinity

Current State of Affairs

- There has been backward movement / stagnation since 9/11. There is a renewed focus and celebration on heroism (firefighters, police officers, war in Iraq). Less focus has been placed on the broadening definition of manhood and fatherhood.
- War perpetuates the old paradigms of "masculinity" and the "boy code" that instill independence and aggression while devaluing intimacy and emotional expression.
- On a positive note, there is some freeing up of expression of masculinity in music, the arts, etc.
- There is a growing interest in seeing fathers being involved in raising their children.
- New interest in the idea of "multiple masculinities".
- The newer father is given permission to be more nurturing.

Gaps and Challenges

- There must be more diverse options for men of color to express their masculinity (our culture focuses on sports, rap, drugs, and gangs).
- It is difficult for men to show empathy for others who are struggling with the same oppression.
- We need to bring more diverse groups to the table to discuss the issue of male socialization.
- Rather than focusing on the end result of negative male socialization, we must shift our focus to preventing negative male socialization. (i.e., Stop building prisons to address male

- aggression. Start educating young boys to be empathetic and compassionate.)
- Fragmentation of men's issues takes power away from the movement toward healthy masculinity.
- Media messages need to be combated. Men need to see alternatives to negative male socialization.
- There is a lack of promotion of positive images and messages for boys and men.

Possibilities for Change

- We must develop consistent, unified messages about healthy masculinity and then distribute the same message in multiple ways to everyone (stay "on message").
- We need a clear, consistent message about what it means to be a father. Broaden the definition of fatherhood (it doesn't mean just biological fathering; it means raising a healthy generation of children).
- Teach boys and girls, men and women to listen, read and watch messages with discernment. Follow the example of Dads and Daughters – they are doing a good job combating negative media stereotypes about girls.
- Educate teachers to deliver and practice philosophies of healthy masculinity.
- Combat language that narrowly defines masculinity and engenders homophobia.
- Increase male involvement in delivering the message.
- Gain support of more women's groups, violence prevention groups, etc.

Practical Ways We Can Re-Socialize Boys and Men

Defining mature manhood:

- What is a model for mature manhood? How would women define mature manhood? (Immature men "mess things up".)
- How do we help fathers to help their sons?
 - o Pillars of support for fathers.
 - o Some fathers are still developing and have to develop their children at the same time.
- You have to know yourself. You need a sense of meaning / purpose.
- The loss of community (suburbia). Smaller communities can be nurturing. How do we help men find groups of supportive men?
- Connectedness: Being connected to self / animals / family / church or religious affiliation.
- Male socialization is often equated with loss.
 - o Boys are forced to be independent.
 - o The concept of masculinity is based on scarcity (of skills).
 - o Negative models for men based on capitalism.

- o Media portrayals of men (and their attributes).
- o Words have a powerful impact.
- Nurturing healthy males:
 - o Women can help teach boys about manhood.
 - o Men must step up as role models.
- Combat homophobia
 - o Homophobia hurts men and boys by limiting their expression.
 - o Homophobia prevents men and boys from facing their own realities.
- Isolation and distrust must be combated:
 - o Younger men often don't trust older men (they make the rules).
 - o Straight men often don't interact with gay men.

Skills to be taught / developed in boys:

- o Listening skills
- o Communication skills
- o Self-awareness
- o Laughter
- o Ability to identify own feelings
- o Problem solving skills
- o Thinking critically
- o Politeness
- o Empathy
- o Deep friendship
- o Parenting skills (how to care for developing children)
- o Sexuality skills
- o Intimacy
- o Impulse control
- o Self disclosure
- o Ability to negotiate or mediate
- o Civic engagement
- o Nurturing
- o Boundary setting
- o Resiliency
- o Anger management
- o Play

Skills can be taught through:

- o Intentional thinking
- o Role modeling
- o Boys' groups and men's groups
- o Story telling
- o We must teach values, attitudes, skills and behaviors that promote healthy, trusting, positive relationships.

Non-Custodial Fathers: Needs, Rights and Challenges

Current State of Affairs

- A bias exists against fathers. Men are not "front and center".

- Old paradigms continue to perpetuate roles of mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners.
- Unmarried / divorced fathers often feel that they are demonized and treated as lesser parents than mothers.

Gaps and Challenges

- Lack of funding for organizations / institutions to promote healthy fatherhood.
- Need a paradigm shift toward accepting fathers as equal to mothers. It's not about dads taking anything away from mothers. It's about dads gaining equal respect and acceptance as mothers.
- Defensiveness. Numerous institutions and individuals benefit from the status quo and are, therefore, resistant to changing the paradigm.

Possibilities for Change

- Non-custodial fathers must tell their stories of bias.
- Fathers' advocates must work to change inequalities in our culture.
- We all need to address bias that exists.