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Fathers and sons

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IT IS difficult to grasp the impact of not having a father present, physically or psychologically. When we are young, we struggle for a way to adjust or to compensate.



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As children enter the teen years, their behavior is likely to be marked by sullen withdrawals or angry violations, i.e., they strike out at those around them. Today we have a disintegration of societal values with a steady increase in violence, thoroughly manifest in the behavior of juveniles. Why? And what can be done about it?

For the past 18 years, I have been a clinical consultant and group therapist for Concept House, a residential treatment center for substance abusers at Northeast 49th Street in Miami. A significant percentage of the young men and women have tried several treatment centers and/or have been within the system for several years "doing time" of some kind.

As each puts aside his or her fears, pains, and angers, each progresses on the therapeutic journey. Inevitably the journey brings them to a profound and basic search for fathering.

For the majority, self-destructive behaviors start with dysfunctional families. And the dysfunctional family's problems stem from the absence, physically or psychologically, of male leadership, a committed husband and parent whose power is used positively, affirmatively, and caringly. Family life calls for the father to be the most powerful, and most significant person.

Boundless behavior demons

The absence of the father, particularly with young men, invites uncontrolled and boundless behavior demons. The youngsters thrash about for years, many times getting sucked into the criminal justice system. That system does not usually benefit them in the sense of implanting any values, although it may keep them out of circulation for a while. Eventually they wind up in treatment centers, often two or three times, where efforts are made to encourage appropriate maturity. Sometimes that maturity is not achieved.

Five, 10, 20, or 30 years later the desire to have, or find, a father resurfaces — even when there has been a long rejection or separation. Thus therapy becomes an effort to prepare the youth for the fact that the father may not accept the invitation to become part of his or her life or to re-establish some kind of agreeable, conditional relationship. Nevertheless, the young still want to try . . . one more time, perhaps now my father will love me.

The key word is *love*. The anger and the pain inherent in violent crime by fatherless juveniles or young adults is not lessened or healed by prison. It is not healed by getting gangs (established families of another sort) to make peace. It is not healed by education and a better job. These things only mollify anger, at best. The angry, rebellious, violent young adult can be healed by a true, sincere, genuine — even awkward — love relationship with his or her father.

Hurt and angry . . . and scared

Gathering father and son together may not be easy. However, both are likely to hunger for a satisfactory relationship. That's true even though the younger is hurt and angry and the older scared, guilty, and feeling generally bad because he has not taken responsibility.

"Boot camps" are an effective option because they provide examples of the firmness and decisiveness by which father figures maintain values. The camps may be the best way available to address the issues. But perhaps the greater good lies with using the power of the system to get father and son together, and then monitor their mutual growth.

With love, the hostility, anger, and violence of juveniles and young adults can be redirected into positive, life-affirming actions. Our other options are at best compensatory and at worst provide further instruction in negativity and alienation. Let us invest some good hard work in bringing fathers and sons together.