



Boston Catholic Journal



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A Few Things that Fathers and Daughters Ought to Know

So much is taken for granted by both fathers and daughters — some things, in fact, that ought not be taken for granted in the sacred bond of love and trust that should bind father and daughter.

The responsibilities of fatherhood should be connatural to a man, but somehow have become terribly vitiated, and have frightfully dwindled over a generation more concerned with gender and power than the far more vital notion of gender and love, especially as it pertains to, is enacted within, the relationship between parents and children — and most especially fathers and daughters.

So many women ask fundamental questions that, at first, perplex a father. They perplex us because we take some things for granted and fail to understand that what we have understood in our relationship to our own children is not necessarily — perhaps even largely — the shared experience of other fathers and daughters. A confusion has set in. The notion of what is normative seems, sometimes, to have

vanished totally. And this is a stunning — more than a stunning, it is a frightening realization.

Mutual Expectations

What ought children, especially daughters, expect of their fathers? And what should fathers expect of their daughters? These are questions that should not have to be asked — even as we now find it terribly urgent that they must be asked. Many relationships between fathers and daughters are deeply wounded, broken — even ... and this is the greatest tragedy ... *violated*.

We cannot expect the children to be answerable for this horrific state of affairs. But we can ask the fathers. And if the fathers no longer clearly understand their role in the lives of their daughters, then let us presume to articulate it for them. Please God that for most men and women who read this, it is redundant and unnecessary. But for those who still ask deeply painful and recurring questions that linger from their childhood relating to Dad and his relationship to them, let us at least explain what a father ought never do.

Sexuality and Children: A Beautiful Abhorrence

God has given fathers, by nature, what can only be called a “beautiful abhorrence” toward any notion of anything remotely sexual with their own children (and all children). It does not — or must not — even enter the consciousness of a father. It is not that the father detests anything of the child or her sexuality (of which he is the holy guardian); nothing of a child is abhorrent, or detestable, to a father — absolutely nothing — except the notion of sexual intimacy with the child.

If your father has sexually abused you, understand this and understand it very, very clearly: **IT IS NOT, WAS NOT, IN ANY CONCEIVABLE WAY, YOUR FAULT!**

You did nothing to invite it. You are not **IN THE LEAST, IN ANY WAY, RESPONSIBLE FOR IT**. It is your father’s fault. Not yours. You may still love your father and find yourself unwilling to ascribe blame to what he may have

done. You may deny it. More than likely you fear it. But this is the point: **IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT IN ANY CONCEIVABLE OR POSSIBLE WAY.**

Children are innocent. That is the immense beauty of children. It is an innocence cherished by God Himself Who is Father to “*Jesu, Innocens Patri*” ... “Jesus,

Innocent of the Father” ... the Innocent One whose Holy Innocence is most closely approximated ... by children.

Any father who has changed a diaper knows the absolute beauty of this innocence. If there is one single factor motivating chastity in men, it is in having had a daughter. He sees in other women the innocence that is in his own daughter. It does not distort another woman’s sexuality — it ennobles it!

Physical remoteness from your child will come — much to the anguish of your heart — even as you delight in her becoming a young woman in her own right. Until that time — when budding womanhood no longer makes possible the rough and tumble playing that fathers enjoy with their daughters, to the glee and laughter of both — do not be stingy in your affection for your daughter. Kiss her. Hold her. Caress her head. Comfort her. Tickle her. Bite her (gently!). Chase her! Let her beat you up! Play with her! The days will come when remembrance of such beautifully innocent love between father and daughter will pass, with anguish, into memory — although it will never leave you.

Never Strike your Child in the Face — or do Him Lasting Physical Harm!

Especially in the face! Especially with a fist, or even with an open hand! A spanking on the rump will never hurt a child and will correct behavior not amenable to all your reasoning and pleading. It is simply the case. Is it “punishing” the child? Yes; for unacceptable behavior that must be curbed for the good of the child (and there is such a thing as “for the good of the child!”).

A blow to the face, the back, the chest, the stomach — is something else. It is terribly frightening to a child. Not because of the physical pain, but because of the horrific violence that they see behind it, that they find in you! It is a fearful, frightful, terrible violence that, to a child, is the harbinger of things worse yet to come.

“If I can be beaten through this violence in my father ... what could he, what could this terrible violence, do to me if he really got angry? What if he could not control it, even as he cannot control it right now? Will he Kill me? Mutilate me?”

Striking a child is not inexcusable — it is despicable. You are so much bigger, larger, taller, stronger than they are. They will perceive themselves as hated, and deserving of hate. Who, after all, violently strikes someone he loves? Is it ever an expression of love?

If you try to bring up a virtuous child, then they will come to know enough of hatred from the world — they do not, must not, find it in you. You are the giver of love! Nothing must overshadow that. Nothing must obscure it, diminish it, or mar it. Your child's ability to love and be loved later in life will largely depend on your ability to communicate your love for them and their “loveableness” to you. If your own father does not love you ... who, then, could ever possibly love you ...?

Do not slap a child in the face! This shames and humiliates the child. It is violence pretending to be less than violence. You cannot be “graciously” violent!

Don't Drink!

Period. Alcohol is one of the greatest precipitators of violence in a family. This holds true for mother as well as father. Do not deceive yourself that your drinking is something of a social grace, that it is “sophisticated” and that — for you fathers — it is a “man’s right” to get drunk once in a while. You never have that “right”! You shame yourself; your mouth becomes coarse and foul, you become violent and something terribly frightening to a child — and then excuse your violence by blaming it on the liquor. Do you love your children? Toss the bottle and drop the pretensions. Real men do not dishonor themselves through violence and shameful excesses. They avoid them. Love of their children compels them! And if love will not suffice, then honor will — or at least ought to.

Spousal Violence

Never physically abuse your spouse! This goes for women as well as men! Do not let your child witness this — which should never be seen because it should never

happen! A child seeing a frightened mother, a humiliated father, grows fearful and insecure. Those entrusted with their care do not even care for each other!

“How will they possibly care for me? What is more, both are big, and I am little! What if he or she did that to me? They can do it to each other. They can do it to me!” Want an insecure, recessive, child? Beat your spouse and humiliate them before your children.

Do not Manipulate Your Child!

Threats of any sort are just veiled forms of manipulation. You are teaching your children to use other people to their own selfish ends. The worst — and most common — form of manipulation is emotional. You tamper with, leverage, your own child's greatest vulnerability: their emotions. Fear, sorrow, shame, guilt, to name a few — you use these cleverly to force the child to conform to your own ultimately selfish ends. Invoking fear, shame, guilt — if you find a word more condign, more suitable than “despicable”, write me — is one of the most harmful things you can do to your child. Children should not fear. Children should not be brought to shame. Children should not bend, be broken, under guilt no matter how justifiable you think it is.

There is appropriate sorrow for a child, but children are sinless and therefore guiltless. Don't lay your burden on your child and then hold them accountable for your own deficiencies or inadequacies. Accountability and emotional extortion are very, very different.

God Himself has given them their innocence. Who are you to take it away? He does not hold them “guilty”. Who are you to stand them in the dock? God has shared His Fatherhood with you. Who are you to misuse it? To abuse it? Love your children! God Himself does! Are you greater than God?

Being a Father ... is being a man — not an excuse

Fatherhood is the most dignified and honorable vocation possible to a man. God may give kings thousands of subjects ... but He gives you — and, yes, even kings — something far greater still: children. Worldly success, power, esteem,

wealth, “trophy houses” ... these are so many cheap monuments to your own immature and distorted sense of grandeur. Tomorrow they will pass to another. Despite your illusions, they have nothing to do with “you”. If you think they do, and lose them, you have lost everything.

Not so with a child, with children, who cleave to you when all else is taken from you. Flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, they are inseparable from you — from your very identity! You are a father forever — their father — not only in time, but in eternity. Nothing can sunder this — or deprive you of it. Children are from God, and belong to God — Who has dignified you with a participation in His own Fatherhood!

The world is made for them — contrary to your own self-centered illusions.

In fact ... so is the Kingdom of God, into which no “man” will enter — only children.

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