

A Shared Delight...

What is it that my clients missed in their memories of their fathers?

by Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

In my search for the particular quality of father-son bonding that is fundamental to the development of the boy's masculine identity, I have been led to a phenomenon that I call "a shared delight."

I am convinced that the healthy development of masculine identification depends on this phenomenon. This special emotional exchange should be between the boy and his father, although a father figure or grandfather may serve the purpose where no father is available. It is not a single event or one-time occurrence, but should characterize the relationship. This particular style of emotional attunement is especially important during the critical gender-identity period of development

Homosexual men rarely, if ever recall father-son interaction which include activities they both enjoy together. In "a shared delight," both father and son share in the enjoyment ("delight") in the boy's success.

Psychologist Robert Rupp observes that the homosexual man is "delight-deprived" in the relationship with his father, which is to say he cannot recall his father generally taking pleasure in his son's activities, accomplishments or success.

Homosexual men have great difficulty recalling childhood father-son activities that were fun, exciting and enjoyable and included success and achievement for the client-- a shared delight. They do not have positive memories of their fathers teaching, coaching or encouraging them to gain a new accomplishment that involves bodily activity or strength. Indeed, many lament this deprivation.

On the other hand, most *non*-homosexual men do recall sharing an activity with their fathers that involved the possibility of failure, injury, fear, and danger.

An example of "a shared delight" is found in writer and social commentator Malcolm Muggeridge's autobiobiography. Malcolm's father was his hero; and as a teenager, Malcolm would travel to his father's office in London. When the young man arrived, he noticed an embodied shift in his father:

"When he saw me, his face always lit up, as it had a way of doing, quite suddenly, thereby completely altering his appearance; transforming him from a rather cavernous, shrunken man into someone boyish and ardent. He would leap agilely off his stool, wave gaily to his colleague... and we would make off together."

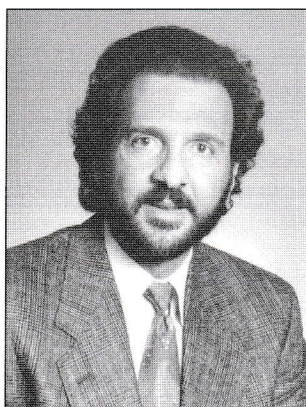
"There was always about these excursions an element of being on an illicit spree, which greatly added to their pleasure. They were the most enjoyable episodes in all my childhood."

In contrast to a "shared delight" which lies at the core of the true father-son bonding experience, there is a shame experience reported by many homosexually oriented men. As one of my clients explained:

"When I recall my father, I feel this big, black, heavy-weighted force that washes over me in a powerful, oppressive wave. My dad looked at me, not as a person, a child, his son, but as a thing. His look at me said 'I made a mistake'--literally, I made a mistake, I made that mistake--'and I don't want to interact with that.' That's the oppressive wave that washes over me."

A shared delight derives from an experience of shared success, with father and son achieving something together. This 22-year-old client laments missing that experience:

"I wish my father could have gotten excited by my activities, my accomplishments. I want him to be proud of me. I want him to make me feel proud of myself. I wish he had worked with me, pushed me, challenged and encouraged me."



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Another client recalled:

"I don't think my father was happy with me. Somehow he seemed unhappy, and I couldn't help think it was about me. When my father came home and sat at the table, he had a look of unhappiness. I'm sitting there and he's unhappy. Somehow I felt, 'I'm failing to make him happy.' It's confusing; I couldn't be sure if my dad felt bad about himself or bad about me."

The "shared delight" typically occurs within the context of physical activity involving success or failure. There is the quality of risk, danger and adventure, in which the boy is first terrified--then with encouragement and coaching from dad, achieves success and feels good about himself. The excitement is no doubt intensified by the risk of failure.

Studies show that mothers and fathers "babysit" for their sons differently. While mothers will attend to the child, protecting him from harm, fathers engage their sons in play. Often this play includes reckless, even seemingly dangerous activities.

Let's consider the significance of a commonly observed bonding ritual -- an activity we have often witnessed but

perhaps not fully understood. We have all observed a young father tossing his infant son in the air and catching him. Anyone observing this universal ritual will see that the dad is laughing while the son looks petrified with fear. Soon the boy begins to laugh because Dad is laughing, while Mother is practically having an anxiety attack, not understanding any of this. The boy has just learned an important lesson that older males teach younger males; "Danger can be fun." More importantly, the boy learns another lesson; he can trust his father -- "Dad will catch me." And from that early relationship, he learns to trust other men.

Let's contrast this bonding ritual with a quite different early memory related by a temperamentally sensitive man, who experienced his father's well-meaning but rough play in an entirely different manner:

"I was probably three or four years old and Dad was throwing me up into the air and catching me. I think I liked it for a while, but soon his hand and thumbs began to chafe and poke into my armpits. I either cried or complained. I do not remember if my father said anything, but he did stop throwing me.

"I felt ashamed. I felt as if I had spoiled his fun. I felt separated from him and that made me feel sad. I was afraid that I had disappointed Dad and he wouldn't play with me anymore."

In this case, the boy--who was an emotionally and physically sensitive child--sensed his father's disappointment in him. The result was an emotional gulf and mutual misunderstanding that slowly grew wider between father and son over the years.

As we work with men who experience same-sex attractions, we hear that repeated theme--their inability to recall "a shared delight."

Physical interaction between father and son appears essential in making the father feel familiar, non-mysterious, and approachable in the boy's eyes. So much of what lies behind adult same-sex attraction is that deep, lingering, unsatisfied desire for physical closeness with a man.

With internalization of the father's masculinity, there will be no need to sexualize another man. ■