



The Family LifeLine

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The Role of the Father in the Family

Adrian Lim Peng Ann is passionate about fathering and its impact on the lives of children. A husband and father of two young sons, he is a Registered Counselling Psychologist, Registered Social Worker and Registered Counsellor, and was recently featured on MediaCorp Radio 938LIVE's The Living Room on 19 June 2009. During the radio interview, he shared with listeners insights from his doctoral thesis to NUS Social Work Department entitled "Men's Transition to Fatherhood."

Adrian sat down with FLS' Nick Chui recently to share his thoughts on the many challenges faced by fathers today.



Adrian and Puay Wun, with their two sons, Emmanuel age 9 & Ezekiel aged 7, at MacRitchie Reservoir.

Traditionally (and perhaps stereotypically), Asian fathers tend to leave the raising of children to their wives while they concentrate on putting food on the table...

If you mean from the Industrial Revolution onwards then, yes, Asian fathers tend to do that and to be honest, it is not healthy. This tendency is part of the overall tendency in our modern society to "sub-contract" what is supposed to be a joint task by husband and wife in raising their children. First, fathers decide to work and leave the child-minding to their wives. Now women are encouraged to go into the workforce. Who then looks after the children? Childcare centers come into play. The government recently announced that it would build another 200 childcare centres over the next five years. We now even have infant care where you can hand your three to four-month old baby to someone else to nurse and take care of while you go back to work. Families need to be clear with their infant/childcare options and its consequences

Are infant-care and childcare centers really such a bad idea?

Childcare centers do play a role in giving some respite to busy and stressed parents. But if they take over the role of parents as the primary care giver of their children, we are going to have very serious problems. I firmly believe that the vast majority of childcare teachers are very dedicated and sincere people who love children. But the research on children brought up primarily in childcare settings makes for somber reading. For instance, research from the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development concluded that "the more time children spent in childcare from birth to age four, the more adults tended to rate them as less likely to get along with others, as more assertive, as disobedient and as aggressive". Similar results were seen in a UK longitudinal study.

It is not really difficult to see why. In a childcare setting, children of varying needs from a very young age have to compete with their peers for the teacher's attention. Infants and children below three to four years of age need consistency and a person who loves him/her

unconditionally. There is no replacement for the mother. To do that, they may have to cry louder and later in pre-school, behave more aggressively. I am concerned about children aged three and below, especially those in infant-care centres, for a full-day from 7.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.

So then, if fathers want to "take back" their children, what should they be doing?

Many fathers are familiar with the role of being providers to their families. They are less familiar with the role of being "protectors". When I say "protectors", I don't simply mean keeping their children away from physical harm, although that too is important. But more than that, they should be the protector of their children's emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being. To do that, they would have to be involved in their children's lives by being present and in touch with their child's daily living such as calling them from work at lunch, 'SMSing' them, trying to reach home for dinner in the evening, telling them bed-time stories and praying WITH them and FOR them daily.

How does that look like when fathers are involved in the lives of their sons?

You might recall the passage in Luke's Gospel (Lk 21:22) where God the Father publicly declared His love for His Son, Jesus. "You are my Son the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That is a powerful affirmation for Jesus from His own daddy to empower His entry into public ministry to proclaim His Father's message of salvation!

I think this is significant especially for sons. Sons need to know, feel and hear it from their own fathers that they are the beloved of their father. A father models for his son what it means to be a man, that he is different from mum. When your son is an infant/toddler, get involved in changing diapers, feed, carry them, making funny faces, sing, talk and play with them. Later, read to them, tell stories, play physically especially games which involve a certain amount of rough and tumble. When your son is older, grow along with their interests in board games, chess, swimming, cycling and martial arts. When your sons approach puberty at around 10 to 13

years of age, fathers can become a steadying influence. Fathers can teach their sons how they ought to treat girls. He should have "one-on-one" time with his son to talk about what it means to be a man. "One-on-one" time can mean going on "makan hunting", adventure hikes together or just simply sharing shopping for groceries together or make breakfast and giving mom a break.

The lack of male affirmation especially from their fathers is a cause of many problems. David Blankenhorn in his book titled, "Fatherless America", details the dysfunctions of a society, especially among males beset with the problem of fatherlessness. If I may say this, without an assuring male presence and voice supporting a boy's journey into manhood, he would encounter gender-confusing messages, attacks on his self-worth and competence, be unsure of his worth and be prone to other's bad influence.

And what of daughters?

If fathers model for their sons on how to be a man, then they model for their daughters on how a man should treat her as a woman. This can be seen first and foremost by how a husband treats his wife. Relating to his wife with respect and love will go a long way to help his daughter differentiate between lustful jerks and loving gentlemen. Her mother's advice on how to look out for the right man is theoretical. The father gives a living practical example.

Fathers are also "guardians of their daughter's chastity" and emotional well-being. While mothers model femininity to her daughter, it is her father who "confirms" her womanhood. "The father is the first man who loves her." Do you notice and wonder why in weddings, it is the father who gives away his daughter in marriage and not the mother? After much scrutiny and assessment of his future son-in-law, the father symbolically entrusts his precious daughter to the next man, her husband to take care and love her in marriage just as he has loved and nurtured her with the mother. I remember the show which starred Ben Stiller and Robert de Niro called "Meet the Parents". The character whom Robert de Niro

played subjected Ben Stiller to a lie-detector test to see if he was true to his daughter or was he hiding something. That's a comedy of course. But it is still an example of a father being the guardian of his daughter's future well-being.

Sadly, research shows the horrific consequences when fathers are abusive or violent, it is their daughters who are more likely to marry similarly abusive men or become more sexually active. Girls, too, need to be loved and affirmed by a man. If they don't receive the appropriate affirmation at home from their fathers, they find love in all the wrong places and people.

You are a father of two boys and a practicing Catholic. Do you have a personal motto for being a Catholic father? What are the principles you try to live by?

I am constantly inspired and challenged by the last verse in the last book of the Old Testament, the Book of Malachi 4:5-6. Yahweh says to the prophet Malachi, "I will send you the prophet Elijah, before the dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse". That is the last thing Yahweh said. It is a warning that if we, as fathers, do not win over the hearts of our kids, God will strike our land with a curse. The "curse" of fatherlessness is not difficult to see. Poverty, delinquency, various forms of addictions, repeated cycles of abuse and violence, gender identity confusion, pre-marital sex, abortion (12,222 in 2008), sexually transmitted diseases, marital problems, separation, divorces (7,220 in 2008), low birth rates, and even the decline in religious and priestly vocations.

My role as a Catholic father is to turn my heart to my children so that my children will return that love and love God as well. One thing that I do is to actually bless my children. It's really simple and Biblical, too, viz Genesis 27. "I, daddy bless you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And they reply, "Amen" or "I receive your blessing in Jesus' name." When my kids were older, I, too, asked them for their blessings in return.

The faith formation of my children is something I consider very important. I teach my children how to pray, who God is and why God is important in their lives. I don't leave catechetics simply to the catechists alone.

Finally, on the "practical" side, my wife and I make sure that we spend not only quality time but actually "quantity" time with our children. It is very important for my children to feel that we are there for them and not too busy being caught up with our careers. I work full-time and guard my family time. As a result, over the years I've had to turn down better prospects and higher paid job offers which I feared would turn my heart away from my family. Career ambitions can wait. I advocate planning to be a "1.5 Income Family" wherever possible. For a period of time, I was a "Work from home Dad" which was when I left St Joseph's Institution as school counsellor after 10 years in 2006 to pursue my PhD research. I also wanted to spend more time with my family.

With his professional experience, research, and training background, Adrian will be involved in the upcoming fathering movement called, "Dads for Life", which will be launched by MCYS and he prays that Catholic fathers in the local parishes, will rise up to live out their vocation of turning their hearts to their children as fathers.

Prayer for Fathers

(composed by Adrian)

"Heavenly Father, I pray that the father's heart, beginning with mine, be turned to our children just like Your heart is in perfect love for Your Son, Jesus. Help us as fathers to draw from Your love and grace, so that we can be the father that our children specifically need. I join this prayer with Your son, Jesus, that they may be one just as Jesus and You His Father are One (John 17:11). Amen!"



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If you have a personal story to share, comments or feedback to give, please feel free to email to nickchui@familylife.sg