



What is a good father?

Generative Fathering

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By Kim Askeland

Minn. Fathers & Families Network
161 St. Anthony Ave., Suite 845
St. Paul, MN 55103
info@mnfathers.org

Visit us online at:
www.mnfathers.org

InfoSheet 10: What is a Good Father?

What is our perception of a “good father”? In terms of generative fathering, we think of a good father as someone who considers the needs of his children and that of the next generation. Generative fathering is a way of looking at the role of fatherhood through a lens of asset-based development with a presumption that most fathers want to help the next generation to live a better life.

In my family, I see generative fathering occurring through my father-in-law, my husband, and my children with the image of the family farm being worked from generation to generation. Today, as in the past, teamwork is essential and the family must work together to get the job done. A learning process and bonding takes place in these hours spent with grandfather, father and children. Yes, these hours are related to work, but in that process enjoyment and satisfaction occur and cohesiveness develops between the generations. There is a revitalization that occurs through the renewal of grandfather, father and child relationships. Historically, this was how fathers learned how to become “good” parents, through the experience of their elders. Today, it has become common to rely on professional help or literature on parenting (Fagan and Palm, 2004).

Generativity is a word coined by Erik Erikson “to describe the satisfactions of the mature years of having generated thriving and productive ideas and activities.” It includes “an ongoing commitment to growing, raising, breeding, or feeding something” (Pruett, 2000).

Generative Fathering

When defining generative fathering, one must go back to the work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, generativity is the developmental task of caring for the next generation. According to Erikson’s theory, generativity, which occurs during adulthood, is crucial to healthy adult development. Generative fathering is a process that takes consistent attempts at progress towards good fathering (Fagan and Palm, 2004). When regarding generative fathering, there are several major assumptions to take into consideration.

Major Assumptions of Generative Fathering

Generative fathering is seen as generative *work* (productive/creative work) instead of as a social *role*. The major assumptions of generative fathering are as follows:

- Fathers have the choice to be responsible and involved, and also have the strong desire to be good fathers.
- Good fathers place emphasis on meeting the needs of the younger generation over meeting the need to respond to societal expectations.
- Good fathering is the most important work men do.
- Fathers and children need each other and generative fathering is essential to healthy father development.
- The needs of our children are based in the challenges and opportunities of the human and family conditions.
- Generative fathering is a moral response to the obligations of the next generation.
- Men have various fathering skills, growing and developing into their fatherwork.

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- Fathering occurs in an atmosphere of constraints and challenges.
- Fathers and mothers together meet most of their children's needs. However, some needs can only be met uniquely by fathers or mothers.

(Dollahite & Hawkins, 1997)

Perceiving generative fathering from this point of view, that of work rather than as a social role, places it in a framework that is comfortable for men. Making education and support available for fathers in this role is crucial.

Generativity: The larger context

According to Erik Erikson, human development progresses in stages. Erikson named one of the final adult stages of development “Generativity vs. Stagnation”. At this stage, an individual copes with the challenge of solidifying his/her legacy. For most adults, this stage includes decisions about how to guide the next generation and to care for others. Generativity is larger than simply having children; it focuses on determining how the next generation will carry forward a culture imbued with values, morals, and a better life.

Generative fathering is a means of looking at fatherhood as a tool for positive social development – as productive “work” and not simply a social “role”.

strengths men have from growing up male. These strengths are building blocks for a good relationship between fathers and their children. Many fathers possess the following strengths:

- Playfulness
- Promotion of Risk Taking
- Encouragement of Problem Solving
- Providing a Sense of Security
- Being Less Emotional

In acknowledging these strengths, we are able to see male socialization in a positive light (Palm, 1997).

Conclusion

Generative fathering is a developmental process. In this process, men have a natural desire to be good fathers. When men move through this developmental process, they progress not only to become better fathers, they progress to become better people.

Support for Generative Fathering

This education and support can occur through Parent and Family Education. Parent and family educators work with men in many different family situations. Although men perceived support as a low priority in parent education programs, when they received this support it was appreciated (Palm, 1988). Focusing on the strengths that a father brings to the family based on their unique way of parenting supports generative fathering. We can support generative fathering by moving beyond the focus of inadequacy by comparing our perspective of what a good father should be with our perspective of what a good mother should be. Unfortunately, a view that men perform the role of being a good father inadequately has been a common perception in our society. This view of fathering based on deficiencies does not take into account the many good fathers. This is a Role-Inadequacy Perspective of fathering (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). Parent and family educators have an opportunity to provide a support system for fathers by emphasizing their unique parenting strengths.

Strengths of Fathers

Instead of using a “good mother” as the model for a “good father,” parent and family educators should focus on the

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