



Photograph by Maria Lindsey - <https://www.pexels.com/@margemedia/>

## FATHERS OF SONS: DISAPPOINTMENT, POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

*Rob Pluke*



### ABSTRACT

*Disappointment is associated with negative parent-child relationships. It is linked to fathers' expectations of what fathering is, or should be, and the emotional and relational density underpinning the hopes fathers carry. Analyzing fathers' responses provides important insights into what power actually feels like for a father who loves his son. Parenting challenges, like disappointment, provide opportunities for fathers to confront themselves and, sometimes, to change. Acknowledging these aspects is important for anyone wanting to understand, or work with men. Practitioners need to help fathers see and value the various ways they can draw close to their sons, or "be" with their sons, in the absence of shared activity.*

**Keywords:** disappointment, fathers, masculinity, power, sons



## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a study that explored fathers' experiences of and responses to disappointment in their sons. I chose this topic because I wanted to give close attention to the kinds of things fathers expected or hoped for in their relationships with their sons. Also, and importantly, I was interested in the ways fathers coped when their hopes and expectations weren't met.

In sharing and discussing the results of the study, I want to highlight the kind of relational and emotional work men do in their significant relationships. I offer this as something of an alternate lens to much of the current work on fathering, which tends to foreground issues around masculinity and power. Of course such factors are important, but when they are the focus, men's personal and emotional experiences tend to be marginalized. And, as Seidler (2006) points out, frameworks that prioritize power give us little sense "of how men can change, or of how they might be engaged in processes of transformation" (p. 56). To get to these questions, Seidler suggests, attention needs also to be given to men's emotional lives, their hopes and desires, and the internal tensions they experience as men.

With this in mind, I turn to fathers' experiences of disappointment and difference in their sons. I think the following excerpts show something of the emotional and relational density underpinning the hopes fathers carry. I think, too, that analyzing fathers' responses provides important insights into what power actually feels like for a father who loves his son. We also see how parenting challenges, like disappointment, provide opportunities for fathers to confront themselves and, sometimes, to change. Acknowledging these aspects is, I believe, important for anyone wanting to understand, or work with men.

## BACKGROUND

The problem of disappointment in the father-son relationship is a relatively neglected area of research. Previous studies show that fathers carry particular expectations of their sons (Nydegger & Mittenen, 1991; White, 1994), and Miller-Day & Lee (2001) suggest that sons may be especially affected by paternal disappointment. In fact, generally, disappointment is associated with negative parent-child relationships (Barber, 1996; Miller, 1995). Yet according to Schafer



---

(1999), while disappointment can be very difficult, it's actually a common and *necessary* aspect of relational life. For Schafer, disappointment can puncture our idealizations, and teach us to tolerate imperfection without diminishing our “capacity for love, hopefulness, enthusiasm and dedicated effort” (ibid. p. 1095).

Disappointment is, of course, linked to fathers' expectations of what fathering is, or should be. Previous research finds that middle-class fathers believe they should develop their children's abilities and character so that their children can enjoy future success (Kremer-Sadlik & Gutierrez, 2013). Consequently, fathers want to get involved in their children's school and sports activities, in order to teach their children important life skills (Kay, 2007). Perhaps obviously, this aspect of fathering has its tensions. Gottzen & Kremer-Sadlik (2012) find that 'involved' fathers have to strike a balance between pushing their children towards achievement, and nurturing their children regardless of their performance. This hints at the relational complications that keep disappointment in the mix. Indeed, Coakley (2009) finds that fathers tend to criticize their children's performances, and pressure them towards acceptable attitudes. Levant et al. (2018) have shown the harmful effects such expectations can have on sons.

The notion of acceptable attitudes points to expectations regarding masculinity, and in this vein, it's argued that father-son disappointment may be linked to the problem of difference. Certainly, from a social constructionist perspective, constructions of similarity and difference are central to doing gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). But notions of similarity and difference also underpin orthodox psychoanalytic perspectives on gender development, where the son's masculine identity is established via identification with the father (Benjamin, 1995; Frosh, 2012).

In terms of encountering difference, Benjamin's (1988) concept of *recognition* holds particular utility. It addresses the problem of accepting the independent mind of the other, and the challenge of “bridging-across-difference” (Frosh, 2010, p. 113). Recognition involves seeing the other who exists beyond one's fantasies and desires. It is akin to connecting or attunement with another, and so it is a vital ingredient of healthy parent-child attachment. For Benjamin, interpersonal recognition is a tenuous accomplishment. It exists in constant tension with destruction; the impulse to relate to the other as an object – an extension of one's fantasies and



---

desires. The challenge, for parents, is to restrain the impulse to control, or to demand, such that the realities of the child's experience can be recognized. Importantly then, there is a level of powerlessness inherent in recognition. It requires being receptive to the other, accepting who s/he is. This reminds us that there are real limits to a father's power, if he wants to enjoy a close relationship with his son.

## **METHOD**

A homogenous sample of South African, White, English speaking, and middle-class fathers in two-parent families was selected. Participants were recruited through two sampling techniques; utilizing professional contacts, and via participant referrals (Kvale, 1996). Eleven fathers were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, with participants first being asked simply to tell the interviewer about their sons. Invariably, this opening prompt elicited rich reflections, which enabled further exploration of participants' expectations and experiences of disappointment.

The first stage of analysis involved a thematic analysis, which identified the main themes. The second stage involved more detailed analyses of extracts that were selected because of their pertinence and richness of data. Here, a psychosocial lens was used combining social psychological insights with psychoanalytic readings of the texts.

## **RESULTS**

Five main themes were identified and these are presented below. For each theme, an extract is included to illustrate how fathers experienced and wrestled with the challenge of disappointment in their sons.

### ***Theme one: Similarity and difference between father and son***

In describing their sons, participants invariably compared their sons to themselves. This meant that issues of identification emerged as central to the challenge of fathering a son, with profound implications for the father-son relationship. Similarity was linked to the ability to understand the son, a like-mindedness, whereas difference was associated with perplexity. In turn, similarity was linked to bonding between father and son and the gratification of shared interests and activities, whereas difference was linked to disappointment, frustration, and the risk



---

of relational distance. And so two versions of similarity emerged: similarity of attitude, and similarity of interests. Similarity fulfilled men's expectations of fathering which, for some, coincided with performances of heroic masculinity (Wetherell & Edley, *ibid.*) where fathers could feel like a competent authority and guide for his son. Difference, on the other hand, was constructed as a disappointment that, in some cases, prompted a more reflexive and uncertain fathering.

In the absence of similarity, uncertain fathers had difficulty describing a clear basis for their relationships with their different sons. Some participants resolved this difficulty by taking up attitudes of respect towards difference, such that respect emerged as a common antidote to disappointment. Two types of respect were identified. Some fathers developed an adult respect for their different sons, where fathers suspended their wishes and worked to recognize their sons for who they were. Key to this process was that sons' differences were seen as acceptably masculine and so something with which the father could identify, recognize, and even admire. In other cases, positions of respect were more guarded, with fathers being more distanced and disinvested. Here, the father did not identify with the son's differences. Instead fathers moved to tolerate difference, but this coincided with withdrawal, which is a hallmark of disappointment (Zeelenberg et al. 2000). Of course, fathers could also vacillate between these two stances through one stretch of talk.

In the extract below, we see Jake working to relinquish his assumptions regarding masculinity, in tandem with accepting and promoting his son's different ways:

*I also just used to worry that he would um... uh ... I used to worry sometimes that maybe he was just too generous, you know, I kind of wanted to - I wanted him to just sort of, just fight a little bit more. But then I started to think "but that's what you were like", you know. Everything I got I had to fight for. And I thought, you know, "I don't want him to have to fight the way I fought". But it took me a good while to kind of come to grips, you know. I wanted him to be - at one stage I almost wanted to toughen him up: "Hey I've gotta make him tougher now!" you know. And then I realized that I was slipping - you know - my thinking was slipping into some old thoughts (ah ok) and if I'm just confident - because to - you know - it's very easy - cos I've been a very conflicted individual, and you know, complex ... just because of perhaps how I was brought up. And everything for me has been just hard work... you know ... nothing at all has just fallen in my lap. I've had to grind and grind and grind and fight (mm)*



---

*and when I was in the corporate world it was very competitive, you know, and you just, you know, you didn't sabotage those around you, but you didn't lift them up either. Because it was all about me and kind of - that was the world I was a part of.*

*And then I realized I don't want it to be like that, because there is another way, you know. I'm not always able to go, you know, "that's why the other way is better" or ... but I realize ... I look around and I go "Gosh!", you know, and I look at some of the great leaders in the world, who've been successful. They didn't go through life the way I kind of - in my - my thinking. So you know ... he'll be ok, you know. He's gonna be just fine hey. You know, he's - uh - grounded, he's kind, you know. Who's not gonna like a kind person? You know, me - I would - I would have probably taken advantage of people's generosity. And so, you know, in my mind I'm thinking people are gonna take advantage of his generosity (ja), you know.*

*And so, for a while, you know, I've gone through all these like - they're all me things, um, where a lot of my concerns have kind of come from. But for the most part I just know that um, uh, I'm comfortable with who he is, and I'm comfortable with the choices he's making now*

Jake begins by saying he used to worry that his son was "too generous". But what does this mean? And why is generosity contrasted with "fighting"? It seems that what Jake has in mind is an *attitude*, a kindness or, more worryingly, a lack of assertiveness and competitiveness towards others. This contrasts with the masculinity Jake knows. His son is different. In response, and as a loving father, Jake moves to protect his son, both from a world where you have to "fight" and "grind", but also from himself as a "tough", competitive corporate man. So in a sense, Jake the father has to contain Jake the man. Jake has to try to keep part of his own masculinity at bay; to consign this to "old thoughts", so that he can continue to protect, admire and promote his son's different ways.

Yet it's not easy. It's "taken a little while". It hasn't been seamless, or without internal conflict. Jake has had to confront and contain an urge to make his son "tougher", and to resist "slipping back" into old and familiar ways which he established as a way of coming through his childhood and prevailing as a man. Recognizing his son involves seeing that there "is another way", but because this isn't a way that's implicit to Jake, he can't automatically or spontaneously father his son. Instead, he has to look to other mentor figures - "great leaders" who can serve as exemplars for his son. All the while, as the father, Jake has to contain anxiety and uncertainty ("but for the most part... I'm comfortable with who he is"), and to monitor, uneasily, the kinds of choices his son makes ("but for the most part I just know that um, uh, I'm *comfortable* with who



---

he is... and I'm comfortable with the choices he's making now").

### ***Theme two: Making an Effort***

Theme two focuses more closely on difference of attitude by exploring the internal states (Stern, 1985) or attitudes fathers wanted to promote or instill in their sons. Interestingly, although fathers were very reluctant to say they were disappointed in their sons, fathers, *were* prepared to express disappointment when their sons wouldn't make an effort. This was especially so when their sons had potential, but wouldn't use it. In this case, fathers actually felt right to express their disappointment. At the same time, fathers were very careful to separate effort from achievement, mainly to deflect the notion that they were indulging their own desires for success. Of course, fathers did want their sons to achieve, and it was evident that insisting on effort preserved fathers' implicit hopes for future success.

In some cases, the morality of effort was linked to issues of acceptable masculinity, with fathers wanting their sons to possess qualities like animal or killer instinct. This is evident in the extract below, where John struggles to know what to do as a father of a son who fails to demonstrate effort on the sports field:

*I mean he's a brilliant-he could be a brilliant Rugby player, he um, and I don't - I don't push him. It's just not in my nature to push-push-push. And he's in the A team, but ... like, I've noticed that he lacks that animal instinct. I mean there are some kids out there who are just boom-boom-boom, always in the ruck, on the ball. An-I can see Sean, ugh just taking his time to get up, and looking around for the play, "Agh, I'll go over to where the play is". And I'm like "Sean...Go!" you know (laughs). And so yeah, I mean, then you wanna like kick him up the backside and say "Just don't waste this beautiful God-given talent. You're a big kid. You're strong, and you know, you could really ... I mean look at these other little kids that are not even - you know, three quarters of your size. And they're outperforming you! And look at your ab- at your God-given talent and ability". And I don't say this to him, because I wouldn't wanna, you know, like kill his spirit for it. So yeah, I mean you do. You get disappointed. I mean ... what do I do? How do I...?*

As John opens, we see how he's caught between recognizing and appreciating what is ("he's a brilliant"), and the enticing fantasy of who his son could be, if only he had a better attitude ("he could be *brilliant*"). In a sense then, the son can never do well enough, and the threat of disappointment constantly hovers over John's engagements with his son.



---

However, John quickly distances himself from being a pushy parent (“and I *don’t* push him”). This suggests that the moment John gives voice to his idealized fantasies of success, he needs to defend against a domineering impulse, and this makes John anxious. So, John goes further; he disowns pushing (“it’s just not in my nature”) particularly of the insistent variety (“push – push – push”). John then points out that his son is “in the A team”, which offsets his disappointment. However, (“but”), this is temporary. John has “noticed” that his son “lacks that *animal* instinct”. The conjunction “but” restores a sense of dilemmatic tension: John does not “push, push, push”, “but” his son lacks a crucial masculine quality that accounts for the gap between his performance and that of a “*brilliant*” rugby player.

John goes on to make unfavorable comparisons between his son and “some kids” who represent acceptable or ideal masculinity. These boys are “out there”, physically assertive (“just boom-boom-boom”), tough, and goal driven (“always *in* the ruck, *on* the ball”). In contrast, Sean is passive. The way John sees Sean (“ugh, just taking his time”) positions Sean as culpably passive and avoidant (“looking around for the play”). John then “speaks for” his son (“Agh I’ll go to where the play is”), so entrenching Sean’s position as both indolent and “less than” his peers. This justifies John’s disappointment, and so he wants to induce a more aggressive attitude in his son (“and I’m like ‘*Sean! Go!*’ you know”).

John then introduces an imaginary hostile father position which shames the disappointing son. Sean is a “*big* kid” but he is being “outperformed” by “other *little* kids”, the shame of which causes John to “wanna kick him up the backside”. John justifies his expectation by making it “God-given”, which means that, as the father, he *should* get the best out of his son. So John tries to make his son excited about what could be. He wants his son to see that he’s “big” and “strong”, and that “you could really ....” This phrase expresses John’s idealized fantasy which, because it is left unfinished, retains a fantastical allure that he wants his son to see and share.

However, because his son won’t comply, John again shifts towards exhortation and shame. He compares his son to “other *little* kids” who are “not even, you know, three quarters of your size”, but who are “*outperforming*” Sean. Thus, Sean’s physical advantage is emphasized, which undercuts any excuse Sean may proffer for his passivity. Then, to underscore his righteous indignation and his son’s culpability, John re-emphasizes the fact that his son’s ability is “God-





---

given”.

Following the above outburst, John withdraws from his hostile position (“and I don’t say this to him”) because of the awareness that he could damage his son (“I wouldn’t wanna...*kill* his spirit for it”). The word “spirit” points to his son’s vulnerability, whilst the word “*kill*” hints at the destructive capacity of the disappointed father. Nevertheless, by restraining his hostility, John remains disappointed and stuck with a dilemma: “I mean, what do I do? How do I?” John’s son could be “*brilliant*” but he won’t take up the right attitude, and if John tries to assert his ways, he risks both damaging and losing his son.

However, although John recognizes the possibility that he could damage his son, he is still the father who must get his son to comply (“what do I do?”). Recognizing his capacity to damage his son limits John’s options, but it does not alter his fundamental project. John doesn’t want to hurt his son, but at the same time he is captivated by the prospect of his son “*outperforming*” other boys: he wants his son to move towards real achievement. “How” to press towards the ideal takes precedence over recognizing and accepting difference. In this sense, remaining disappointed in his son’s lack of “effort” preserves the fantasy. But one can also see how, in his disappointment, John is caught between what he wants and the guilt of pushing and then damaging his son in process.

### ***Theme three: Mentoring***

*Mentoring* refers to participants’ desire to teach their sons, and guide them towards success. In line with previous research (Kay, 2007; Machin, 2015), mentoring was a key concern for this sample of fathers. Mentoring incorporated a cluster of hopes, which made it a primary site for disappointment. Mentoring preserved participants’ fantasies regarding just what the son could achieve, and who the father could be, if only he would accept his father’s ways. However, and importantly, mentoring also provided a forum for fathers to bond with their sons and, in many cases, to correct the disappointments fathers experienced in their own childhoods. Hence, in the face of disappointment, none of the fathers entirely relinquished the mentor position. Too much was at stake. Instead, participants commonly vacillated between just loving their different sons and reasserting mentoring positions. This kept hope alive. Here participants commonly warded off their disappointment by remembering that their sons were still young. This preserved the



---

hope that, in time, the son would turn to the father as mentor, and take up his ways.

One sees something of the emotional significance of mentoring in David's interview. Early on, David describes his own father as authoritarian and uninvolved – he “was there ... and I loved him”, but he “did nothing” with David. Now, as the father David yearns to do things with his son. The problem is that David and his son are different. David is “sporty” but his son is not. This means that an amalgam of hope and disappointment is woven into David's encounters with his son. In the extract below, I ask David to describe some of his best moments as a father:

***“And the best moments?”***

*Um... yeah, um... few best moments, I think. Some of which are, (ahem), teaching him something that he learns, like how to canoe... ummm and he listens and he gets it and he practices and, and he actually can paddle the thing that I can hardly paddle, you know (ha). Ummm teaching him things that he learns – wonderful! Yeah, teaching him “You don't bowl like that-you bowl like this” and I see him-all afternoon - bowling (laughs) at a tree or something, you know ... [begins to cry] ... (10 seconds)... (Yes, special hey) mmfh ... (12 seconds) ... Shoo .... Mmhm.... (6 seconds)... (really special hey) .... (8 seconds) (yeah)... (ok)... (13 seconds) Geesh ... mm ... shoo, digs up some emotions these questions!*

*They do... they do ... you're not the only one (mm) and uh, I suppose, it's just, we love these little guys so much hey... Yeah.*

*Yeah ... (6 seconds) anyway ... (3 seconds) managed to get through the last two*

*You did David ... You nearly had me going! (We both laugh)*

*Yeah .... Yeah ... Poor\_little guy*

In the above excerpt, David associates “teaching” with his “best moment” as the father. His position as teacher is matched by a son who “learns” and “listens” and “practices”. It's “this” complementary relationship between father and son that elevates this mentoring moment to a “best moment”, where David is able to feel close to his son, and animated as the father.

This illustrates how significant and rewarding mentoring is for David. It also shows the vulnerability of the mentor position, in that the son holds the power to accept or reject the father's offering. When he is allowed to be the mentor, David can become the proud, enthusiastic father of the achieving son. His son can paddle a canoe that David “can hardly paddle”. My response (*ha!*) indicates that I received David's invitation (“you know”) to recognize his son's



---

suitably masculine accomplishment. This accomplishment strengthens David's sense of himself as father-mentor and it activates and strengthens the hopes he carries for his son. However, David's very enthusiasm points to the intense disappointments he has to contain, when his son doesn't or won't listen or learn.

There is a sense of pathos in the image of a non-sporty son bowling "*all afternoon*", just as his father has taught him. At this point in the interview, David becomes very tearful. Perhaps David is moved because this moment signifies hope revived. Perhaps too, as he recalls his son bowling "*all afternoon*", David is able to feel close to his son. The bond is palpable. It is evident that I have resonated with David's emotions, and I articulate this as having to do with a love that David and I both share for our children.

Yet something else is also going on. The discourse "digs up some emotions" for David, which suggests that he is displaying sentiments that are usually suppressed. Perhaps David's sadness is also prompted by his unconscious identifications with the son who bowls "all afternoon" because he so relishes his father's approval and affirmation. David's conclusion "*Poor little guy*" implies this: that his emotions are prompted by recognizing, and perhaps unconsciously identifying with a boy's efforts to please, and enjoy closeness with his father. This is the very closeness that the boy in David has been yearning for, and there is the sense that his own childhood sorrows are caught up *and met* in this mentoring moment. Perhaps too, as he imagines his son "bowling all afternoon", David realizes and identifies with the pressures his son experiences, and the lengths to which he will go, to please his father.

#### ***Theme four: Pushing***

What does the good father do when he's confronted by a son who won't accept his agenda? As the above extracts suggest, this was a central dilemma for this sample of men. Does the father recognize and accept his son as different, or does the father assert his mind and his ways? All of the fathers worried about this, and none wanted to be seen as pushy. Partly this was based on fears of public censure – being seen as a bad father, but there was also real concern about hurting the son in the process of teaching him. Fathers tried to be encouraging, and the way this was gauged involved supporting what was deemed to be intrinsic to the son. This kind of thoughtful wrangling is evident in the following extract:



---

*I think that the tricky part of parenting is to get that mix right, you know, between encouraging and pushing them (Yeah) to draw the line (Yes) you know, what is where. Because obviously we all want our children to do well, and we're proud when they do. Umm, you know I don't publicly push him, um ... I do encourage him. And I do try and do things with him. And try and show him through experience that um, certain practices lead to success and certain practices don't lead to success.*

*So for instance I - you know, if I was ...I used to run time trial with him once a week. And umm from that he gained a lot of fitness and as a result he did very well in the cross country season (hm!) at school (hm!), which then, you know he was able to see the benefits of training from ... and which now he understands and which I don't have to say anything to him. He knows and understands the benefits of training.*

*Umm, you know, there were times where he would have said "No I don't feel like running time trial" and I - I would say 'No. Come run. You don't have to race it - just run at your own pace'. But his natural competitive nature would take over and he's end up pushing himself (mm). So ... but I knew I had to just get him there in order for it to happen (mm) you know, and that...once he was there he would enjoy the experience (Yes, mm) of participating so.*

*And I think, you know, a lot of parents or people might see that as being- being pushy. But I think that's where a parent needs to get involved (mm) because children often don't - they like to do well, but they don't realize that in order to do well - you've actually got to put some work into it (mm, mm). So if you can get them to put the work in without them even realizing they're putting the work in, then that's great. I mean if you can make it fun for them (mm)*

Nick begins by describing parenting as an admixture of encouragement and pushing. Pushing is there, but it's housed in encouragement. The phrase "don't publicly push" makes pushing a private concern, between father and son. In this way Nick looks to avoid the threat of shame, both for his son, and perhaps for himself. Instead, Nick looks to join his son, showing him "through experience" the way towards success. It's orthodox "side-by-side" mentoring that Nick has in mind.

Nick then gives an illustration. He joins his son in a weekly run, thereby giving his son the scaffolding to do "very well" at Cross-country. This leads to the son "seeing" and "understanding" such that similarity of attitude is achieved. Pushing is there, but at the same time, Nick tries to stay close to, or recognize, his son's reality ("just run at your pace"; "pushing himself"). As the father, Nick has to get him there "in order for it to happen". So, with some pushing from the father, the intrinsic emerges ("his natural competitive nature"; "he would enjoy the experience").



---

Nick also justifies his pushing by splitting his son's inner reality into contradictory "wants". As the father, Nick pushes past his son's inclination towards lethargy, and gets him to do something he doesn't want to do ("work"), so that another part of his son can enjoy the success he actually also wants ("they like to do well"). With the phrase "I mean if you can make it fun for them", Nick ends by containing pushing within playing, which suggests that he tries to make what he wants as the father, "fun" for his son.

Overall, Nick presents this as a successful negotiation of the pushing-encouraging "line". Nick does, however, have to contain some anxiety. He needs to defend against an audience who "might see this as pushing", and what he does do can't be done "publicly". Perhaps, to some extent, Nick realizes that, in the process of encouraging his son, the reality of his son's *reluctance* is negated (or "destroyed") rather than recognized. As such it lives on as an unacknowledged presence within his relationship with his son.

### ***Theme five: Fathers, mothers, sons, and disappointment***

How does the father position the mother in his responses to difference and disappointment in his son? In this sample, where similarity and mentoring prevailed, mothers tended to be placed outside the father-son bond. However, where difference and disappointment lay between father and son, fathers tended to feel more like the outsider, looking on at the mother-son bond. This mother-son bond was characterized by understanding, such that mothers tended to be seen as mediators between father and different son. As mediators, mothers represented an accepting and supporting kind of stance that offered a potential solution to the disappointed father. Participants tended to vacillate between taking up this accepting position and then distancing themselves as fathers who must get their sons to take up ways that were valued and recognizable to them as fathers.

Much of Craig's interview went towards describing his acceptance of his son's differences. Craig describes this as a "journey of mourning" where he "stands back" in order to let his son be. In the extract below, Craig shows how this contrasts with the mother-son relationship:

***"So thinking about that would you say that umm that uh you have a particular uh function as a father that would differ from Sarah?"***



*I think increasingly so hey ... and I think that is part of the dynamic because Sarah and I parent very, very differently hey. So I might sort of compensate for her in some ways as she does for me umm. But I'll – I would say uhh my/my current approach with Michael is just to kind of be that uhh parental gaze hey. Uhh and if I can make it more gender specific, that paternal gaze. I just almost feel my job's to pitch, watch and if he then if he invites me, then I'll participate up to the point where he wants me and then he'll fire me and I will go and watch again hey. Um but I seem to be doing a lot of watching of late I must say. Shoo*

***“Quite a restrained place to be?”***

*Yes hey! Uh, very restrained. Or being a sort of a-an appreciative audience when I am invited in an' he wants me to have a look at - you know - a drawing or how he's like - changed the pond around. Or how he's, you know, managed to catch a beetle or something stupid you know. Michael!*

***“And in that way it differs from Sarah- Sarah's role or the way that she does things (Yes!). So for instance Michael's going down the wrong road as far as you can think, but you will be restrained and Sarah's role will be different?”***

*Yeah Sarah will freaking hey. Sarah will be crapping on him and cajoling him and reprimanding him um but in her particular style that's not, I don't think, traumatic for the kids at all hey. I think that they quite like scrapping with her. They have lots of arguments, um sometimes I think, can get a bit disrespectful - I/ I hear coming out of my own mouth “hey treat your mom with respect” far more often that I would like to have to say um. But there again I think I have also realized that I can't mediate for Sarah and Michael. I've just got to let them have their messy relationship. So I think with me there is lots of restraint and respect, and with Sarah there's uhh a lot of mess and um boundarylessness. But it's also a good experience for him hey. He knows he is - he's deeply loved by Sarah hey... yeah...*

Craig begins by making his restraint a counterbalance to his wife's parenting style (“I might sort of compensate”). Craig goes on to reiterate his position of distance and restraint, where the son is given agency (“if he invites me”; “he'll fire me”) whilst Craig is conscientiously restrained and quite passive (“I'll participate up to the point where he wants me”). It's an attenuated kind of fathering, somehow incomplete. Craig accepts his son's negations of him as mentor father, but his repetition of the word “just” shows that for Craig, this feels incomplete. What appears to be missing is the gratification of identificatory love (Benjamin, 1988), where father and son delight in each other as similar, and the son follows his father into the father's world. In Craig's case, because of his son's rejections, he watches and waits. The conjunction “but” followed by the words “I seem to be doing a lot of *watching* of late, I must say, shoo” indicates that, as a father, “doing a



---

lot of *watching*” is both frustrating and limiting for Craig. He wants more.

Craig then supplements his “very restrained” position with that of being “an appreciative audience”. Here, the “I” is consciously performing a father function that has to do with recognizing and appreciating his son’s goals and interests. The phrase “or something stupid” signals that Craig is adjusting his attention towards his son’s world – trying to attune – and that this activity is *not* personally gratifying for Craig. There is no real sense of father-son delight or enjoyment. This is more akin to the parenting experiences of early mothering, where there is an element of “self forgetfulness” (Hollway, 2007) for the sake of the infant’s needs.

The emphasized “*Michael!*” follows after Craig has articulated his son’s ways and conveys a mixture of love, appreciation - and vexation. This seems to illustrate Benjamin’s (1995) point that recognition entails the pleasure of “contacting the child’s mind”, but that this requires encountering the difficult paradox “that “you” who are “mine” are also different, new, outside of me” (p. 35).

In terms of power, Craig occupies an interesting position. In one sense he is an authority figure who inserts boundaries of respect between mother and child. But from a relational perspective, he does not or indeed cannot impose his will on his son. The clue as to why this is, lies in the word “traumatic”. Craig has the sense that he can’t engage as directly or vehemently with his children as can the mother (who can “freak” and “crap” on her children), because he fears that, as the father, he would cause damage. So Craig’s restraint is distinctly an act of protective love towards his different son. But it comes at a cost. Craig must contain the anxieties he carries for his son, and he must endure a kind of solitude as a father who cares for an independent minded son.

## DISCUSSION

I said at the outset that I wanted to foreground the kind of relational-emotional work that men do in the process of caring for their sons, and I think the above extracts do this. I suggest that this internal work is not motivated by social notions of good fathering as much as it is by the love these fathers have for their sons. My argument goes like this: *because* these fathers care deeply for their sons, they want to help their sons achieve. For these fathers, loving means



---

promoting. However, caring deeply also means that there's an inherent tension to this relational arrangement, requiring psychological work in the father: I love you, and so I want to help you do well. But, I have to accept that I can't push you beyond a point without hurting you. And so, I have to yield (at least in part) to your will and your ways, so that I don't lose you. Hence, for loving fathers, raising a son incorporates managing the wishes, both conscious and unconscious, that the father has for his son. As Schafer implies then, disappointment should probably be seen as an inevitable and ordinary feature of the father-son bond, which means that the capacity to manage disappointment is very important for engaged and involved fathers. Again though, and contrary to much current work on fathering, the *relationship*, through experiences like ordinary disappointment, plays a key role in changing what fathers believe and how they behave.

This raises the centrality of mentoring to fathering, because this study suggests that it involves multi-layered hopes. Mentoring certainly represented a primary vehicle for these fathers to draw close to their sons, and it functioned as a launch pad for the powerful hopes and desires fathers had for their sons. Mentoring intentions were also nourished by the hurts and disappointments these fathers experienced as children, functioning as a (perhaps unconscious) context where these men could repair or replicate important aspects of their personal stories. Perhaps all this explains why, in the face of disappointment, none of these fathers abandoned mentoring. For them, to abandon mentoring was akin to abandoning the son, and perhaps even the project of fathering itself.

Now, because mentoring is loaded with hopes and expectations, it is a primary site for the challenge of disappointment. And so these fathers have to confront themselves and the biases they carry. As an involved and caring father, John has to work hard to contain a heady mix of “killer instinct” and the potential “brilliance” it could bring. Standing on the side of the Rugby field, John is suffused by masculine aggression, force and dominance. He senses that its expression could “kill his son's spirit”, and so he works towards restraint. Ultimately though, he wants his son to take up an idealized version of masculinity. This brings the question of “effort” to the fore, and its links to acceptable masculinity. It also involves the vexed issue of “pushing”. This was the clearest manifestation of power and the problems it could cause between these fathers and their sons. Perhaps one can say that the more “effort” is linked to idealized masculinity and





---

success, the more risk there is for the son. John's excerpt shows how glamorizing "killer instinct" can mean that a boy gets shamed for being "less than" as a boy.

According to Benjamin's framework, it could be said that, to the extent that the father is invested in idealized masculinity, it becomes very difficult for him to recognize his son as an independent centre of being. Corralled by fixed expectations regarding what a boy should be, the mentor-mentee relationship is biased towards an inequality of realities, with the father's reality in the dominant position. John's extract shows how fathers can become preoccupied with their sons' "internal state", and that if the son lacks the "right" attitude, he is well on course to being a disappointment to his father.

So recognition takes hard work and. It involves, as Nick's extract suggests, ongoing self-reflection and a careful balancing of assertion with sensitivity. It can also involve self-denial, and the acceptance of one's limits. We see this most strikingly in Craig's extract. Readers may wonder why Craig isn't more assertive in his dealings with his son, but again this is the dilemma of the loving father: "What if I hurt or lose my son through my assertions? And how can I tell whether my assertions are founded in self-interest or the interests of my son?" Craig gave a very mature, humorous and insightful take on "fathering on the outside". But where difference prevails, fathers (and perhaps even Craig) could at risk of a certain kind of paternal dysphoria – a disinvestment – and, perhaps, an envious undercutting of the mother-son bond. So what are the alternatives when similarities aren't obvious, and mentoring is stalled? How can fathers enjoy close and affirming relationships with sons who don't want to "do" things with their fathers? What can fathers learn and assimilate from the maternal bond? Practitioners need to help fathers see and value the various ways they can draw close to their sons, or "be" with their sons, in the absence of shared activity.

There is also the question of what, in the face of disappointment, fathers should do with what they know as men, or even with themselves as men. This is important because the above fathers carry an implicit knowledge regarding what it takes to be successful, as a man, and they want this for their sons. And it's a particularly animated wanting. It may be repressed, but as Jake's extract shows, it's never far away. Partly this is because these fathers want their sons to have what it takes to achieve. But also, as David's extract shows, there's an exultant intimacy when the



son “gets” what his father is trying to teach. Those working with fathers will need to be sensitive to this passionate yearning, and help fathers to track its effects on their every-day dealings with their sons. It will also be important for practitioners to acknowledge and embrace the values implicit in “effort talk” and to be ready to share ways that fathers can teach “toughness” and “hard work” without hurting their children.

In closing let me say that talking about hopes and disappointments was not easy for this sample of men. For them, talking about disappointment felt wrong – a betrayal of their sons. Also, and quite often, participants became emotional as the topic was broached. Talk of hopes and disappointments takes one into very personal and usually private relational territory. So one has to approach the topic with respect and care. For me, it was a privilege. I got to witness, up close, the love these fathers have for their sons, how much they want their sons to do well, how powerless they often feel, and how hard they are willing to work to keep their relationships good.

## REFERENCES

- Barber, B.K. (1996). Parental psychological control: Revisiting a neglected construct. *Child Development*, 67, 3296-3319.
- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Benjamin, J. (1995). *Like subjects, love objects: Essays on recognition and sexual difference*. London: Yale University Press.
- Coakley, J. (2009). The good father: parental expectations in youth sport. In T. Kay (Ed.), *Fathering through sport and leisure* (pp. 40-50). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1999). Imagined futures: Young men’s talk about fatherhood and domestic life. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 38, 181-194.
- Frosh, S. (2010). *Psychoanalysis outside the clinic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frosh, S. (2012). *A brief introduction to psychoanalytic theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gottzen, L., & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2012). Fatherhood and youth sports: A balancing act between care and expectations. *Gender and Society*, 26(4), 639-664.
- Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K.E., Fremmer-Bombik, E., Kindler, H., Scheurer-Englisc, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2002). The uniqueness of the father-child attachment relationship: Fathers’ sensitive and challenging play as a pivotal variable in a 16-year longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 11, 307-331.
- Hollway, W. (2007). *The capacity to care: Gender and ethical subjectivity*. [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Kay, T. (2007). Fathering through Sport. *World Leisure Research Papers*, 2, 69-82.



- 
- Kremer-Sadlik, T., & Gutierrez, K. (2013). *Homework and Recreation*. In E. Ochs & T. Kremer-Sadlik, (Eds.), *Fast forward Family: Home, Work and relationships in Middle-Class America* (pp. 130-150). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London, UK: Sage.
- Levant, R.F., Gerdes, Z.T., Jadaszewski, S., Alto, K.M. (2018). 'Not my father's son': Qualitative investigation of US men's perceptions of their fathers' expectations and influence. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 26(2), 127-142.
- Machin, A.J. (2015). Mind the gap: The expectation and reality of involved fatherhood. *Fathering: A journal of theory, research, and practice*, 13 (1), 36-59.
- Miller, M. (1995). An intergenerational case-study of suicidal tradition and mother-daughter communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 23, 247-270.
- Miller-Day, M., & Lee, J.W. (2001). Communicating disappointment: The viewpoint of sons and daughters. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 1(2), 111-131.
- Nydegger, C.N., & Mitteness, L. (1991). Fathers and their adult sons and daughters. In S.K. Pfeifer, & M.B. Sussman (Eds.), *Families: Intergenerational and generational connections* (pp. 249-262). *Marriage and Family Review*, Special Issue 16.
- Schafer, R. (1999). Disappointment and disappointedness. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 80, 1093-1103.
- Seidler, V.J. (2006). *Young men and masculinities: Global cultures and intimate lives*. London: Zed Books.
- Stern, D.N. (1985). *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Wetherell, M., & Edley, N. (1999). Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism and Psychology*, 9(3), 335-356.
- White, N. R. (1994). About fathers: Masculinity and the social construction of fatherhood. *Journal of Sociology*, 30, (2), 119-131.
- Zeelenberg, M., van Dijk, W., Manstead, A., & van der Pligt, J. (2000). On bad decisions and disconfirmed expectancies: The psychology of regret and disappointment. *Cognition and Emotion*, 14(4), 521-541.
-



## AUTHOR PROFILE



**Rob Pluke** is a registered Counselling Psychologist in private practice, and he lives and works in South Africa. Particular areas of interest include child and adolescent mental health, parenting, and issues relevant to men. Over the years Rob has presented many talks and workshops on parenting, including ‘Courage to Connect’ which is specifically designed for fathers and their children. Rob’s PhD focused on fathers’ experience of disappointment, and the ways fathers coped with and responded to this difficult relational challenge. Rob has written articles for various magazines, and he has written two books: *Parenting the sensitive child* and *A son to be proud of*. Underlying both is the notion of the transforming potential of the ‘I – Thou’ encounter between parent and child.

**Contact details:** [pluke@polka.co.za](mailto:pluke@polka.co.za)

---

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE.

THIS JOURNAL USES OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS 2.3.4.0, WHICH IS OPEN SOURCE JOURNAL MANAGEMENT AND PUBLISHING SOFTWARE DEVELOPED, SUPPORTED, AND FREELY DISTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT UNDER THE GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE.

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://NEWMALESTUDIES.COM](http://newmalestudies.com)