

4

GUIDING BOYS TOWARD THE  
WORLD OF MEN

*Train a lad in the way he ought to go;  
He will not swerve from it even in old age.*

—PROVERBS 22:6<sup>1</sup>

Closeness and competitiveness are the hallmarks of the phase of development Sigmund Freud termed the “oedipal stage,” when boys are between the ages of three and a half to nearly six. Although boys look to their fathers for guidance, they also lock horns over important issues of autonomy and achievement. When these conflicts between fathers and sons are successfully negotiated, sons learn to deal constructively with their aggression, competitive feelings, and exploratory desires as they further their healthy sense of masculinity.

In this chapter, I will discuss how fathers can help their sons to successfully navigate in the world of men and how the ways in which they “lock horns” with one another set them on course for the kinds of relationships they will have with people in the world outside their family. This father-son struggle can play out in many ways. One example is Marty, a patient of mine, and his five-year-old son, Jason.

Marty told me about something that was bothering him. He described sitting with Jason building with Legos and noticing how much he enjoyed building next to his son; then he spontaneously said to Jason, “Hey, my tower is getting to be pretty tall.”

Jason replied that his tower was “much, much bigger” than his father’s and as his competitive juices began to flow, he grabbed another handful of blocks, adding them to his tower until it started to wobble and finally crashed to the floor. Jason then began to cry.

Marty, who was pleased with his own, much more secure tower, took a moment to comfort Jason, and help him to rebuild his fallen tower. Marty then tried to instruct his son about providing more support to the tower’s base, but Jason wasn’t interested. He wanted to do it his way, and so he set about building a second tower the same way he’d built the first, by adding brick after brick to the top.

Jason proudly boasted that his tower was now taller than his father’s just seconds before it crumbled to the floor like the last one. Even more enraged and humiliated than before, Jason burst into tears.

Marty confided in me that he had wanted to tell Jason, “I told you so!” though he wisely refrained. But he wasn’t sure what to do and asked me, “What *should* I have said? And what am I supposed to do with that feeling in the pit of my stomach that I can’t squelch where I realize I’m more than a little happy to see my

own tower still standing while my son's lies in ruins?" He finally did tell his son that he may want to start building it again; but Jason would have none of it as he stormed out of the room, saying, "Leave me alone!"

This vignette, ripe with oedipal undertones, suggests the importance of a father's recognition of his own competitive feelings with his son. As I'll elaborate later in the chapter, it is crucial that fathers learn to use their aggression in constructive ways, particularly because a father's primary role during these oedipal years is to mentor and securely guide his son into the world of men. Fathers are especially needed because around the time their sons turn three, boys begin to acknowledge the painful reality: that as close as they may feel to their mothers, they are *not* like their mothers physically or biologically. This news is not only a blow; it forces a boy to alter his perception of himself. In conjunction with this narcissistically wounding realization, between their third and fourth birthdays, boys are simultaneously undergoing an intense period of pulling away, both physically and emotionally, from the mother with whom they had been so close. This effort to differentiate themselves from their mothers, as described by many developmentally oriented psychoanalysts, can be perplexing, frightening, and saddening, as well as exciting and challenging.<sup>2</sup> Boys instinctively turn to their fathers for help in negotiating such an important transition.

#### FATHERS MODEL A MALE IDENTITY

An engaged father empathizes with his son's need to move away from his mother while simultaneously offering a healthy alternative love object: himself. A major part of successfully showing his

son the value of embracing this new relationship is by making obvious the similarities inherent in being male, which ultimately helps the boy slowly grasp a healthy sense of *his* gender identity.

For example, even though many boys learn to use the toilet at an earlier age, only now do they begin feeling pride (and pleasure) during the experience of urinating while standing. They also recognize that they are doing something their fathers can do while their mothers, quite obviously, cannot. This new skill enables them to focus on being more like Dad rather than on “pleasing Mommy.” Furthermore, when the father presents himself as a male model of bathroom behavior—which includes, in addition to urinating standing up, shaving his face—the boy can absorb the elements that make adult males unique. Differentiating himself from his mother and the so-called “feminine” is thereby further encouraged, core gender identity is supported, and phallic masculinity and gender role are better established.

Fathers teach their sons to “piss in the wind,” “make bubbles” in the toilet, and otherwise enjoy the touch, familiarity, and control afforded by aiming their penis like a newfound toy. The capacity for ingenuity and pleasure in autonomous mastery is new. It is something they did not experience so straightforwardly when they were younger, but now it is directly reinforced as they proudly display their phallic power in their fathers’ presence. This healthy exhibitionism and accompanying phallic omnipotence express the boy’s intensely felt need for his father’s admiration and reciprocal identification.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the privacy reminiscent of the bond boys had with their mothers becomes less important as the male model of peeing together takes precedence. This signals the beginning of a boy’s enjoyment of male bonding.

I’ll never forget taking my son, Alex, when he was about four, to an NBA basketball game in Los Angeles. During one of our sev-

eral trips to the bathroom, Alex found himself standing next to one of the city's sports heroes, Darryl Strawberry, who was then playing baseball for the L.A. Dodgers. Alex stared at him—I think he was flabbergasted merely to be standing beside a man so tall (Darryl is about six foot seven). And then he said to the Straw, "I can hit the bull's-eye, can you?" Strawberry broke out in a smile so warm that he will forever remain dear to me for his kind acknowledgment of my son's achievement.

The mutual interest in each other's bodies, however, extends beyond the bathroom. It's evident when father and son rough-house on the floor or stage an arm-wrestling tournament. This robust, constructively aggressive and sensual physicality (along with a sense of play, excitement, and discovery) all help to assure the son that the world of men includes pleasure, spontaneity, and vitality. When fathers and sons are able to enjoy affectionate body contact, typically involving large muscle activity, boys imitate their fathers and, in turn, deepen their masculine identification. Through such "rough-and-tumble" play, boys directly experience their fathers' controlled yet authoritative masculine strength, and learn to use aggression constructively. In short, a boy embarks on forming his initial sense of masculinity largely by identifying with his father's physicality, modulated aggression, autonomy, and eagerness to explore.

REDEFINING MASCULINITY WHEN  
DIFFERENTIATING FROM THE MOTHER

By creating a safety zone in which boys can express their autonomy, curiosity, and aggression, fathers pass on to their sons another lesson: that masculinity also has a soft, nurturing, and

protective side. Previously, boys associated these caring qualities with their mothers; but now, as boys realize that their dads take care of them as well, they recognize that affection and caretaking are not exclusively feminine qualities. And in recognizing his father as a loving man, the boy himself can love in conflict-free ways as well since he has already embraced the similarities between them. Instead of renouncing all of his “soft” qualities, he can hold onto these traits and still think of himself as a “man” like his father because he no longer associates them solely with his mother.

The father also acts as a moderating influence on his son, encouraging the boy to move away from an all or nothing position about the so-called feminine parts of himself. Boys with this insight develop a conception of their masculinity that is not rigid or fixed but varied; their sense of maleness isn’t an either/or proposition, but rather a complex mixture of multiple identifications with both parents. In time, boys learn to acknowledge and accept the loss of the close bond to their mothers while also realizing that their sense of masculinity isn’t something fragile or brittle, but instead quite flexible, and secure. Such a boy should grow up to be a man who is comfortable with a more fluid, and thereby more healthy, sense of masculinity.

As a result, the son is able to wean himself from his mother in a way that is gradual rather than abrupt, effortless instead of traumatic, and partial instead of total, because he does not perceive masculinity and femininity as being so disparate or at opposite ends of the spectrum. When he can integrate qualities from both his mother and his father while simultaneously recognizing that he is an autonomous being, who is not identified so strongly or exclusively with either parent, a boy can differentiate himself from his mother more naturally.

. . .

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A FATHER'S INVOLVED  
PRESENCE IN CULTIVATING HEALTHY MASCULINITY

For boys on their journeys to becoming men, gender identity and constancy are difficult to achieve. This is because as a boy grows, he receives powerful messages, both from within the family and from the outside world, that he has to stop identifying with his mother. Indeed, he is urged to separate from her, often prematurely, as well as to display behaviors that are specifically not associated with mothers or femininity in general. To experience themselves as masculine, boys are pressured to repudiate any and all aspects of themselves that might be construed as womanly. They also learn to anticipate strong negative reactions for cross-gender behavior and attitudes from their parents, peers, and society-at-large any time they cross certain gender boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

A boy who doesn't "cut the apron strings" is berated as a "mama's boy" or a "sissy." Our culture uses shame to ensure that boys leave their mothers and all female behavior behind once they reach a certain age. Boys may grow up particularly sensitive to shame as a result of being humiliated, often brutally, for behaving "like a girl." Because the opprobrium for this type of behavior is directed at them when they are so young, and because of its vehemence, boys want only to escape from shame. To do this, they create rigid boundaries between masculine and feminine behaviors. With these in place, they won't risk exposing themselves to more shame.

Yet most boys also want to recapture and preserve positive aspects of their earliest nurturing relationship with their mothers even as they know these feelings have to be disavowed. As a result, boys and men are left with a longing for something that

had once been present in their lives but can no longer be consciously embraced. This is why so many men are insecure about their masculinity and, to compensate, why they expend so much energy affirming it. Inside, sensing how they really feel, they worry that they're not real men.

Psychoanalysts refer to the rigid, exaggerated adherence to a stereotype of masculine behavior sought by many boys, and later, men, as "phallicism." The phallus, represented by the boy's penis, is actually a mythic, archetypal monolith or talisman that, because it is permanently erect and available, stands for invulnerability, freedom from dependency, strength, untrammled growth, and masculine omnipotence. It will shield the boy from experiencing loss—particularly loss of the closeness with his mother. That's because the boy imagines that his penis can conquer the world, including his mother, and will never be viewed as needy or weak.<sup>5</sup>

While this type of phallic narcissism is a natural, or adaptive, stage in every boy's development, it remains a primitive response that does not serve a boy well as he matures. The boy who has "good enough" parents—a mother who recognizes and supports her son's maleness, and an involved, responsive father—finds that the dominance of his phallic narcissism naturally wanes. In its place, a more integrated sense of maleness begins to evolve. When a boy's phallicism does *not* diminish, often because no father is present to help him during his early individuation attempts, the boy develops a rigid sense of masculinity that leaves him unable to admit to weakness, fallibility, or dependence. He remains stuck in his phallic narcissism and frequently will have considerable trouble forming intimate relationships.

A more inclusive conception of a boy's masculinity, one that I contend ideally integrates both masculine and feminine qualities, evolves when several factors are in place. First, a young boy needs



a father who is involved with and available to his son, shepherding the boy through his development. This father also must be one who respects women and femininity, as well as his son's unique way of being himself. Optimally, such fathers are sufficiently secure in their own manhood to be nurturing and sensitive, as well as authoritative and mentoring, toward their sons.

To support their son's masculine identification, both parents need to recognize and accept the "otherness" of their partner. If fathers don't hate or fear women and mothers don't hate or fear men, and if competitive feelings can be tolerated in the context of a fundamentally supportive family, then a boy won't feel compelled to side with either Mom or Dad, thereby emotionally splitting himself apart in the process. Such a boy won't feel pressured to abruptly and dramatically cut his ties to his mother, repudiating his attachment to her along the way. Instead, he'll realize that he can extend those apron strings so they become more like a secure, yet flexible elastic band—a powerful symbol of protection and shelter—as he reaches out to his father, who will guide him through the world of men. In this way, an involved father both facilitates and buffers this transition: the more the father is secure in his own sense of maleness, the more he will be able to help his son make the transition from maternal safety to paternal identification.<sup>6</sup>

For an involved and loving father, his *gender role identity*, particularly when reflecting nurturing and caretaking qualities that society may characterize as feminine, won't threaten his *core gender identity* as a man. Such a man doesn't need to think of himself as more masculine when he is being authoritative, aggressive, dominant, or independent; neither does he have to be "all man" to feel manly. Rather, he can accept both the limits of his gender and the fact that masculine gender is inclusive.

When a boy does not benefit from good enough fathering dur-

ing this period, whether the father is absent or simply unavailable to help his son in constructive ways, this boy might have extreme difficulties later on in his life, as is illustrated by Seth's case. Seth was a rock guitarist and, on the surface, appeared very much a "man"; however, he carried a deeply rooted sense of shame for some reason, and told me he had considered himself a "sissy" since the age of five. As a result, he persisted in defensive phallicism that involved repudiating his emotional self through an exaggerated yet aloof, "cool" masculine demeanor.

Seth was an only child, whose parents divorced when he was seven years old. His highly narcissistic father was contemptuous of all women while also prone to tantrums and impulsive behavior. He had subsequently remarried twice, and had carried on extramarital affairs throughout these marriages, yet he would constantly caution Seth to be careful because "all women are out to use men." His mother, on the other hand, was described as "very doting." Seth went on to tell me that she didn't like it when he had girlfriends, and discouraged him from learning to drive until he was twenty. He also mentioned that he had recently discovered that she had breast-fed him well past his third birthday. Additionally, much like Seth's father, she was highly critical of her former spouse and of men in general.

Now, Seth found himself desperately seeking a "father figure" who could help him discover who he "really was" and assist him to feel, in his own words, "okay to be who I really am." During our early sessions, he felt lost. Sometimes a little boy, sometimes a young teenager desperately in need of direction, he seemed as if he were in a state of arrested development, coming to me not to explore his troubles but rather for a "feeding"; that is, he required little from me other than to be present and exclusively attentive to him. He came to our sessions every week without fail, and ultimately I found myself acting as the father figure he

had been looking for: a kind and loving mentor, who could direct him toward an informed understanding of both himself and the world around him.

Seth often spoke about his feelings of inferiority and shame, which revolved around his masculinity, specifically that he constantly experienced an overwhelming desire to “hide” what he called his “emotional self” in “a dark cave” every time he felt himself indulging in any “weak and feminine” behaviors. The cave alluded to a place where he’d hidden his emotional or feminine self, and the fact that it was dark spoke to both the depth and the terror of his early bodily identification with his mother.

During his third year of treatment, Seth described a dream in which he saw a piano in a friend’s house. He began playing it, started to cry uncontrollably, and felt exceptionally sad. He became embarrassed and tried to leave the room without anyone seeing him, but he ultimately could neither hide his feelings nor leave the room.

Following the retelling of his dream, we were able to explore Seth’s “repulsion” at the thought of touching his mother, as well as his long-standing terror of “feminine” women. These sentiments certainly arose from his inability to connect with his father at the crucial period in his development when society expects young boys to pull away from their mothers. Seth’s mother was holding onto Seth too tightly, and with no father figure to help loosen her grasp, Seth was left with no other option than to be held, much to his reluctance. We also used this dream as an outlet to discuss how, without an available and mature father, Seth grew up feeling stranded. He had no healthy, adult man to identify with, and he was at a loss to understand how he could find maleness by relating to his mother. As a result, Seth created for himself a rigid version of masculinity, an either/or gender identity wherein he was either masculine *or* feminine,

either strong and independent *or* weak and clingy. According to this schema, he had no choice but to repudiate “feminine” qualities in order to feel like a man.

An indispensable component of what I did for Seth was to become a model for a full, all-encompassing masculinity with both paternal and maternal qualities. This helped him to understand that his narrowly constructed sense of masculinity left him estranged from himself and others. By exploring his conflicts around his sense of masculinity, and the underlying unconscious restrictions that he had placed upon himself in order to adapt to his earlier familial circumstances, Seth was able to use his insights to negotiate an internal cease-fire. No longer at war within, he could realize that both his masculine and feminine sides were available rather than forbidden. He saw that a healthy, stable, fluid, and flexible sense of masculinity is founded on a dialogue between our masculine and feminine sides, and that acknowledging this ongoing dialogue is the only way a man can remain true to himself in all his diversity, complexity, and multiplicity.

FATHERS AND SONS COMPETING:  
FACING THE OEDIPAL CHALLENGE

By the time boys begin kindergarten, preferably with their initial sense of masculinity sufficiently established as a result of having had good enough fathers guiding them, they are confronted with a new challenge, commonly referred to as the “oedipal conflict.”

This key developmental stage is named for King Oedipus, whose tragic story is recounted by Sophocles, one of the great Greek dramatists, in the play *Oedipus Rex*. According to the most straightforward and well-known rendering of the legend,

Laius, the king of Thebes, was informed by an oracle that his newborn son, Oedipus, would grow up to murder his father and marry his mother. Hoping to avert this tragedy, Laius ordered that the infant be exposed to die on a mountainside. By chance, a shepherd found the infant and brought him to Corinth, where he was raised in the royal family.

When Oedipus was a young man, he heard the oracle predicting his father's death at his own hand. To prevent this, he immediately fled Corinth for Thebes, still under the impression that his adopted parents were his biological parents. At a crossroads, he met a man with whom he got into an argument about the right-of-way, and Oedipus impulsively slew him, unaware that this man was in fact his father. Making his way to Thebes, Oedipus solved a riddle and relieved the city of its plague, and the grateful Thebans made him their king because Laius had just been killed. As a reward, he was given for a wife Queen Jocasta, the late Laius' wife and Oedipus' own biological mother.

Years later, furious that Oedipus is tampering with his fate, the gods visit Thebes with yet another plague. Oedipus is then told that only when the murderer of Laius is discovered will the plague be lifted, so he vows to find the truth. Ultimately, he learns that he is in fact the murderer, not to mention the husband of his own mother with whom he has had a number of children. Beyond despair, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus gouges out his eyes with Jocasta's brooch. Though he has tried to escape his destiny, he has fallen squarely into its net, and is in fact the agent of his own downfall.

Two millennia after Sophocles, Sigmund Freud referred to this legend to illuminate the psychological phenomenon he appropriately called the "Oedipus complex." During this period of devel-

opment, Freud proposed, a boy's fantasies shift from being his mother's baby to her lover, and from his father's baby to his competitor. In other words, father, mother, and son enter into a triangular relationship characterized by desire, competition, jealousy, rejection, and aggression. Most significant from the Freudian viewpoint is the fact that young boys, as if drunk with their newfound masculinity, enter into a period of rivalry with their fathers, often competing for their mothers' attention.

What happens is that the boy's traumatic loss of what felt like paradise—his symbiotic closeness with his mother early in his life—leaves him feeling as if he needs to become powerful enough to defeat the forces that are keeping her from him now. His unconscious wish to regain that lost sense of unity with her typically takes the form of a wish to conquer and possess her, to penetrate her and to have her all to himself. This is an example of "phallic power": a boy's illusion that sheer willpower can transcend limitations. Specifically, the son thinks he can win over his mother and replace his father.

But no sooner does a boy enjoy this nascent sense of masculine power than he begins to fear losing it to what he now perceives as his rival, his "vengeful" father. The boy's overblown sense of strength leaves him feeling terrified that his much stronger father will read his mind, uncover the boy's secret desires, and, seeking revenge for the boy's fantasies, retaliate. The ultimate retaliation would be for the father to castrate his son, rendering the boy not only powerless but sexless. This is what is known as "castration anxiety," which is manifest in fears of loss of love, punishment, and humiliation from the father, as well as in the loss of capacity to feel desire itself.

To keep himself safe from being overwhelmed by his fears of reprisal and competitive impulses toward his father, a boy has to learn to channel these impulses. Once again, he turns to his

father. But his father, interestingly enough, is likely to be experiencing the same feelings of rivalry, anger, and aggression toward his son. No matter how old a man may be, he is not above such feelings. The Oedipus story, for instance, isn't simply about a boy killing his father and marrying his mother, as Freud and the early psychoanalytic thinkers interpreted it; it's also about Laius' excessive pride in trespassing against the gods, and his intention to kill his son. In fact, many contemporary psychoanalysts focus not so much on Oedipus but rather on Laius as representing the darker side of fatherhood.<sup>7</sup>

A father helps his son during this period by recognizing and then taming his own competitive impulses so that he can once again exist as a positive role model for the boy. Even in the context of competition and rivalry, a father who is able to feel proud and encourage his son's budding sense of aggressive strength can demonstrate the genuineness of his love and help soothe the angry sentiments his son is unavoidably experiencing.

A good example of this occurred in the case of my patient Marty, and his son Jason, discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Hours after Jason had stormed out of the room following the collapse of his tower, Marty noticed that Jason had also kicked down and scattered his father's tower in pieces. Marty felt enraged and began cursing loudly, only to realize that he had to find a way to modulate his temper. He knocked on Jason's door: seeing his son cowering under the covers, he realized that the boy was afraid of him and felt powerless.

As angry as Marty was, he did not wish to humiliate Jason or to encourage him to avoid responsibility for his own actions. Using his understanding of Jason's competitive impulses and fears toward his much bigger father, Marty calmly but firmly sat down on the bed and told Jason that what he did was not all right and that if he destroyed someone else's efforts, he had better "pick up

the pieces.” Before kissing his son and saying goodnight, Marty told Jason that he understood how much he wanted to make the “biggest tower,” but that sometimes he won’t be able to do so and he’ll have to learn to deal better with his disappointment.

If the father isn’t available to his son during this phase, the boy can be plagued with jealousy and feelings of exclusion as an adult. Dave, for example, came to see me in his middle forties because he’d been feeling increasingly irritable at home. Describing himself as a “jealous type,” he complained about how much time his wife spent talking on the telephone with her friends, helping their fourteen-year-old son with his academic work, or shopping with their seventeen-year-old daughter. Inevitably, Dave felt left out, snubbed and ignored.

As we discovered together over the course of his therapy, his parents’ marriage had been so entangled that it apparently left no room for the children. As a child, Dave’s perception of his parents’ seemingly exclusive relationship left him feeling as if he had to fight to win the attention of others. This extended into his adult relationships, which were all seen as similar competitions for attention. Because Dave’s father couldn’t reach out to him when he was small, particularly during the oedipal phase, Dave the adult found himself perpetually excluded, trapped in a competitive oedipal struggle, trying to “win” the person he desired from rivals—he had even reached the point where he experienced his own children as bitter opponents. Fortunately, once Dave became aware of his problem, he no longer needed to live it out so unconsciously and painfully in his present-day relationships.

The oedipal father must be able to “hate” others, but particularly his son, in a contained manner. The pederastic Laius represents the outcome of unconscious, intergenerational rivalry enacted



by a malevolent, vindictive father. Loving fathers must also know their own envy of and competitiveness toward their sons and sublimate their darker impulses by making efforts directed toward limit setting and age-appropriate differentiation. Through this boundary structuring, fathers promote healthy identification, superego development, and the capacity to accept and tolerate aggression, conflict, and ambivalence. The good enough oedipal father is thereby established as a figure of benign authority. This, in turn, greatly reduces the chances that he will act like King Laius.

It is not always easy, however, for a father to walk the fine line between competing too hard or too little with his son. Boys at this age especially need their father's strength, and to experience healthy male aggression in order to feel comfortable with their own. However, some fathers can't control their competitive aggression. Pat Conroy's novel *The Great Santini* portrays the disastrous consequences of such a father, who wasn't able to get over the need to "slaughter" his son, thereby destroying his boy's self-esteem and sense of self-worth in the process.<sup>8</sup>

In order for the son to take in and accept his father's male strength, the father needs to compete in a modulated, orderly fashion. He needs to relinquish his wish to dominate his son. But should a father always win? Or should he sometimes let his son win? There's no way to answer such a question. What a father needs to do is watch his son and see how he reacts to victory and defeat. The goal is to push and challenge the boy, not to overwhelm him.

Boys whose fathers don't challenge their sons' nascent sense of power in a restrained manner often have difficulties forming close relationships when they're older, and consequently, grow up with a specific form of father hunger. Such was the case with Raymond, a man in his mid-thirties who began treatment follow-

ing an incident of physically abusing his wife. He was depressed, remorseful, and feared destroying his marriage “with the best woman [he had] ever known.” Moreover, occasional episodes of alcohol and drug abuse threatened his career, causing him to worry that, like his father, he’d “make shit out of everything worthwhile.”

His alcoholic father had abandoned Raymond and his infant twin brothers to his “loving but very dotting” mother’s care when he was six years old. Through he “hung out with many coworkers,” Raymond had enormous difficulty relying on other men unless they were joined together to “defeat another organization.” A charming veneer barely disguised the considerable distrust that initially marked his relationship with me. I sensed that his being an African-American man made it difficult for him to feel safe with me in what he might experience as a competitive context. Once I was able to introduce our racial differences and his concerns about me as a white man as topics for discussion, Raymond saw that I was open to learning from him and also that I would speak truthfully to him. In short, by creating a context in which he could begin to talk safely about “sensitive” topics such as our cultural differences, Raymond was eventually able to use me as a father surrogate to help him with his rather arrested differentiation process. Our work now could begin to explore Raymond’s deeper transferences and dynamics reflecting his sense of oedipal conquest and the accompanying failure to establish triangular relations. These dynamics are encapsulated by what Raymond said in describing his mother: “She was like my wife in a way, and I was her ‘special dude,’ who helped her raise the twins.”

During our second year of working together, Raymond related a dream that reflected his longing for a mature and responsible father who would be connected to his mother. This *triadic father* would be emotionally involved both with Raymond and his

mother, while also being someone with whom he could identify and yet remain junior to. In the dream, Raymond was a teenager playing one-on-one basketball on his driveway with his much-revered high school coach. In the midst of an intense game, Raymond elbowed the older man away. The coach's nose bloodied and he dropped to the ground like a "wounded bear," leaving Raymond stunned and frightened.

His mother had been watching and she ran straight to the bleeding coach, ministering to him. She looked toward Raymond as if to say, "I love your teacher like a husband and I will take care of him even if you are scared."

Raymond awoke feeling upset yet oddly relieved. To me, his relief spoke eloquently of his longing for a father with whom he could identify while still remaining young. In psychological terms, he was searching for a strong oedipal father who, being *coupled with* his mother, would be able to take over the burdens of fatherhood. This would release Raymond from feeling plagued by the unconscious burden of acting as a "child-father," with its accompanying sense of oedipal victory and excessive guilt. As we discussed this dream, Raymond was able to acknowledge his dependence on me as a man whom he needed to validate his private experience and respect his vulnerability. He needed me to be a transference father who could both bear his distrust and understand the competitive and aggressive feelings that had come alive in our relationship. As a result of this work, he began to voice his criticisms and negative feelings toward me more freely, and because I encouraged him to do so, he realized that his expression of those feelings wouldn't defeat me or destroy our relationship.

With this understanding, he was able to overcome some of his trust issues and begin to build some real friendships with other men. Most significantly, he was beginning to understand that his

sons needed him to use his authority to help them develop, rather than disappearing and leaving their development solely in the hands of his wife and their school. Raymond continued to require my help in learning to channel his aggression and use his authority constructively. Over time, he was better able to express himself in words, especially with his wife and sons, while proudly becoming more active in raising his boys.

But a father need not be physically absent from the home for his son to grow up with a father hunger that makes it difficult for the son, in turn, to father his own son. As this chapter has shown, sons need their fathers as authority figures who can socialize them for the “real” world. Many fathers, like Raymond, have to learn how to teach and discipline their sons with calm yet unyielding authority. When fathers can accomplish this, their sons emerge from this developmental period thinking of their fathers as compassionate and benevolent, yet authoritative. Moreover, by serving as a civilizing, authoritative presence for his son, a father has a unique opportunity to resolve some of his own issues with authority. Oftentimes, these long-standing issues, which arose in the context of the person’s past relationship with his own father, have a tendency to spill over to people and settings outside the home—at work, for instance, or whenever men interact with an authority figure.

What all boys wish for is a father who can shelter them with what the psychologist and author Sam Osherson describes as “male strength.”<sup>9</sup> This strength shows sons how to become strong men without also becoming destructive, which in turn enables the sons to facilitate their fathers’ development during this stage of life, and beyond.