

# On Paternal Presence

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Over the past 60 years, a cultural transformation has taken place in much of the world. As part of an ongoing gender discourse about female and male identities, and in the context of a gradual redistribution of labor in society, new family structures have emerged that also challenge the traditional role of the father.

A father is no longer the strict and fearsome figure we know from the image of earlier centuries - even if this stereotype was not always true back then. Fathers today appear softer and more approachable in contact with their children, including physical contact. It seems more natural for them to also play a caring role in bringing up their children, even if it is usually the mothers who take on the bulk of the domestic work. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the image of the “new fathers” emerged culturally. The new fathers explicitly wanted to distinguish themselves from the image of the distant father who was uninvolved in childcare, and much of this effort has been incorporated into the attitudes of young or even older fathers today. But because the term “new fathers” is very imprecise, I prefer to speak of a *committed father*.

On the other hand, there is also the impression of a gradual cultural disappearance of the father - not only because of the otherwise often cited focus on business work instead of the family, but also because modern reproductive medicine can be misunderstood in the sense that real fathers have become largely dispensable.

In this respect, fathers or men who are considering becoming a father are often unsure not only whether, but also *how* they can be a father today.

This makes it even more worthwhile to take a psychoanalytical look at fatherhood today, whereby psychoanalysis needs to be in touch with neighboring disciplines such as neurobiology and social science.

Neurobiology is important insofar as now research findings prove that the hormonal balance of a man who consciously decides to become a father begins to

change temporarily. There is indeed a temporary drop in testosterone and an increase in hormones such as oxytocin or prolactin, even in a man who is involved in caring for his child. This does not make him a woman or a second mother, but these biological changes are in line with the fact that a man and father also has a wide range of different behaviors available to him socially. The necessary diversity of paternal attitudes, which cannot always remain the same in contact with one's own child but can and perhaps even must be very different at different times, concerns us as psychoanalysts. There is another side to fatherhood besides the caring one, namely the one that has more to do with limitations and setting rules, as well as internalizing authority. This is a side of things that psychoanalysis is perhaps better known for in public – of course you are all familiar with Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, according to which the fantasy of patricide is part of the usual development of at least boys and can only be overcome by the imposition of a paternal prohibition with the threat of castration. I would like to make two comments on this: first, we now consider that in the myth – and this also applies to human fantasy – the first impulse to kill did not come from the child, but from Laius, Oedipus' father. We must therefore also deal with the fact that paternal hatred or fear of one's own child exists. And secondly, it is important to emphasize that a father's committed care for a child and the usually later setting of rules for a father do not exclude each other. In psychoanalytic theory, we speak of an 'early' or pre-oedipal and a later or oedipal father. These terms are based on a model of a child's development over time, from infant to toddler to adolescent and adult. I myself like to speak of a 'dichotomous position' of the father, because in my opinion, a father's caring and limiting attitudes alternate again and again in contact with his child and are not static – and it should be noted that limiting actions also promote development if they are not destructive.

What is crucial is the *emotional presence* of a father in his various attitudes and actions. Incidentally, this also applies to fathers who are not the biological father of a child, but who take on a paternal role as an adoptive father or partner of the mother – or in a homosexual partnership. A paternal attitude is not necessarily bound to

biology, and when I speak of forms of paternal presence in the following, this 'social paternity' is always included. Paternal presence thus marks above all a *psychological quality*.

So let me define:

As a counterpart to motherliness, fatherliness or 'committed paternity' is based in a life-affirming love relationship and in this link, it is connected both physically and imaginatively with the procreation of life and something living. From this essentially creative quality, it follows as a further characteristic of fatherliness to stand up for the protection of growing life and in doing so to be attentive to one's own wife as partner and mother together with their child. I consider *procreation* and *protection of life to be* the two essential pillars of fatherliness. Both can be found beyond their immediate biological meaning as mature mental attitudes in the world of a man's inner representations, and they are also important when it comes to generativity and the support of the younger generation in social contexts. Even though there are many different forms of family life today, children's inner images of their parents and the associated relationships with their mother and father are fundamental to their emotional development. We are talking here about a family triangle, and the relationships that take place in this family triangle with their associated fantasy formations gradually give rise to a *three-dimensional mental space* in the child. If a child has the opportunity to experience itself in contact with its mother as well as in contact with its father and equally with itself, the 'mother-father-child' triangle opens up a perspective for the growing child to experience itself more and more and at the same time to increasingly gain a perspective for a world outside of itself.

As a listener, you may now ask what about children who grow up without a father or who live with same-sex parents, and you may object that this model of the triangle no longer applies. If you ask this question, I will partly agree with you, but for the most part I will not. I agree that the biological father does not necessarily always have to be present for a three-dimensional mental space to develop in the child. What is crucial is the experience and the resulting mental image of a *third*

*person* in addition to the mother-child relationship. This third person can certainly be another man if the mother is in a loving relationship with him and this 'social' father remains present for the child. The same applies to a same-sex couple who are in a loving relationship with each other and at the same time allow the child sufficient experience of differences within the couple. In such constellations, too, a child is given the opportunity to form an idea of a third person and something third, so that the image of the family triangle retains its validity as a basis for different forms of life. Furthermore, a mother will unconsciously always also convey experiences with her own father when in contact with her child, which is also something third.

The psychoanalyst Hans-Geert Metzger has spoken here of a 'paternal space' that can also be represented by the mother in some situations. I find this a good image and I share his assessment.

Nevertheless, I will speak of the father again in the following, because the biological father is of course still important and because I include all the forms of the third party mentioned. All psychoanalytical father researchers agree on the high emotional significance of the father in addition to that of the mother. As examples of many others, I would like to mention a few terms that illustrate this. Michael Diamond speaks of 'paternal watchful protectiveness', or James Herzog coined the term 'father hunger' in a child. And Donald Meltzer named the paternal qualities as attitudes of "goodness, creativity, usefulness, courage...." (2006, p. 94). Developmental researchers have found how important and attractive it is for a child that the father is different from the mother. This once again underlines the importance of the differences between mother and father, as I just mentioned, because these differences enable a child to have a wide range of experiences that leads away from an exclusive relationship between two people. This is not about better or worse: a child needs both experiences with different perspectives, and it also needs to experience that the parents understand each other despite all their differences and remain in a loving, inclusive sexual relationship with each other. Of course, I am not talking about observing overt parental sexuality, but a child senses

whether a father brings something new, perhaps exciting and pleasurable, into the contact with him and thus represents a certain alternative to the mother, but at the same time loves and values the mother and helps to strengthen the importance of the parental relationship as a couple.

What are the exciting differences, although it can of course always be different from person to person? While mothers have closer physical contact with their children, men engage with their babies in a *more distant way* through imitation, grimacing and visual stimulation. Fathers also often engage in riskier physical contact with their children, for example when a father lifts his child high in the air, swings up and down with him, or turns around his own body axis. These *limited dangerous* actions are usually associated with experiences of mutual pleasure for both father and child. They create trust in the father's ability to hold him in case of danger and stimulate physically active experiences. Herzog (1982) has called this body play “kamikaze play”. The physical and emotional presence of such an active father contributes greatly to the child's affect regulation. At the same time – and this is a genuinely psychoanalytic perspective that attachment researchers often disregard – unconscious “enigmatic messages” also emanate from the father during this physical contact, which, alongside those of the mother, contribute to the development of unconscious infantile sexual fantasies in the child (see Laplanche 1987/dt: 2011).

The father from an early stage lays the first foundations for the child's gender identity. In general, physical contact with the father is specific in promoting exploratory and expansive behavior in boys and girls. However, developmental researchers emphasize that there is a gender-specific difference in the way a father deals with his son or daughter, in that the father tends to experience his son as a mirror of his own self, while he can allow more diversity with his daughter (see Seiffge-Krenke 2001). Men generally treat their daughters more carefully and tenderly, while interacting with their sons in a more combative, but also more disciplinary way. From a psychoanalytic point of view, both sexes need the father to

develop their unconscious erotic and aggressive fantasies, which flow into their own sexual self-constitution. Even if there are gender-specific emphases in the way fathers interact with their children, traditional gender attributions have now become blurred. A tender relationship between father and son does not mean manifest homosexuality, just as a wilder physical play between daughter and father does not automatically lead to the emergence of a masculine woman. A tender father-son relationship can help to prevent the inevitable Oedipal conflict from becoming destructive. Conversely, a girl can develop her own physical vitality in conscious and unconscious ways through her early playful encounters with her father's body. Just as a father's balanced, combative engagement with his son plays a significant role, so too does a non-invasive eroticism in his contact with his daughter. The psychoanalyst Adrienne Harris has emphasized that girls who do not receive joyful physical and emotional responses to their liveliness from their fathers are often inhibited in the development of their female self-awareness. According to Harris, a father who turns away when his adolescent daughter undergoes sexual changes can exert a deadly influence on her aggression, ambition and sense of power.

Taken together, all these aspects underscore the directly nurturing side of the father, or what I call the fundamental object-libidinal quality of a fatherly presence. The father is different from the mother, but he is in loving connection with her and has an actively stimulating influence on the development of strength and eroticism in sons and daughters.

*The Oedipal side of the father's dichotomous position*

But, as already mentioned, there is also another side to the paternal position, and this relates to the mediation of separateness, detachment and distance from the immediate relationship between the mother and the child. The psychoanalyst André Green has provided the following description of the basis of this function of the father within the family triangle: Freud saw the father in an “anti-sexual position”, because excluded from the immediacy of the lustful dyad, he functions as an *observer of the scene* between child and mother. His view of this scene forms that third party onto which the child projects all feelings of displeasure and limitations that run

counter to the fantasy of a fully satisfying fusion with the mother. A core conflict is inevitable for the child: in the end, his parents share the same bed. This is the source of the child's true hatred of the father, because his body gradually interposes itself between the fusional relationship between mother and child and limits their pleasurable exchange. Thus, the father begins to exist for the child as a separate entity, and the child also experiences itself as separate – but at the price of loss and terror. In this way, the father creates the necessary reference points for the establishment of a conflictual situation: by being a separator, he allows the child and himself to be hated: hated for his prohibition of being able to continue something without limits. By simultaneously offering himself as a substitute for the loss, he becomes an Other who can also be loved and who loves in return – in this way he achieves the role of the third party, who also grants *protection* (ibid. p. 41).

Due to the short time available, I can only give a very brief account of this 'classical' psychoanalytic view, which follows Freud's description of the Oedipus complex. However, it seems important to me that when comparing the two perspectives, i.e. the one that emphasizes the early bond on the part of the father, and the classic oedipal view, the *protective function of the father* is central. The oedipal limitation on the part of the father also serves to promote and protect a child.

*What does this mean for us today?* In my view, a psychoanalytic theory of the father that seeks to do justice to current socio-cultural changes must incorporate and discuss these two perspectives despite the polemics between them. We have to distinguish which father we are talking about: whether we are talking about specific father-child relationships in everyday life, about imaginative images of the father, or about the analytical situation in which the analyst can become a father in the transference. Regarding everyday father-child relationships, I would like to note: the empirical findings show that the specific otherness of the father and his physical interaction with the child does not mean a doubling of the mother-child interactions.

His care, the reassurance on sleepless nights, the comfort he provides have an independent receptive quality. His playful, lustful behavior promotes strength and autonomy in a healthy development, as well as feelings of mutual admiration and pride. It is a source of early closeness and love for the father. Green had warned against too much physical contact by the 'new fathers', because they would ignore the incestuous stimulation too much. In my view, this warning runs the risk of becoming too rigid and of seeking affective liveliness mainly at the level of mental representations. I do agree with Green's concerns, however, when a father constantly moves on a dyadic level with his child and has no inner or outer boundaries of his own. Fathers should know and be aware that, if it is overly sexualized, a father's physical play can also trigger feelings of guilt in the child. A developed paternal presence is grounded in the knowledge of the boundary between a lively erotic promotion and a possible incestuous destruction of mental structures. However, this makes internal and interactional conflicts just as unavoidable as different affective states, which in turn affect the unconscious fantasies of everyone involved. A father can best accompany his child when he can deal with both poles of his dichotomous position, i.e. when he is able to use playful physical closeness as well as an ability to maintain physical boundaries, depending on the situation. For this reason, I prefer to speak of an '*anti-incestuous*' rather than an '*anti-sexual*' position of the father. In my view, anti-incestuous describes the father's oscillation between stimulating libidization and prohibiting destructive boundary transgression more accurately.

Stefano Bolognini, former IPA President, has coined a beautiful image for this when he says that every father should dance a waltz with his daughter once in his life, but only once and only in public. And the psychoanalyst Helm Stierlin, once spoke of a necessary '*loving fight*' between a father and his son, not a deadly duel, even if it may appear that way at times. In this context, it is also part of a paternal attitude to recognize one's own mortality in later life and not to dispute the younger and subsequent generation's place. Such a father enables generativity and is

different from Laius, who feared his son Oedipus and was possibly killed by him for that very reason.

I cannot give a clinical case study in this podcast, but I would like to note that in a psychoanalytic process, an analyst can assume all these dichotomous aspects in the transference, which should then, of course, be experienced and understood in the process in order to help the analysands to understand their own image of the father more deeply and, if necessary, to see it in a new light, or to be able to be a better father themselves.