

Teaching Men To Be Nurturing Fathers

By Mark Perlman, M.A.

Can we teach nurturing? Do men really have the capacity to learn nurturing skills and attitudes? I would answer a resounding “Yes!” to both questions. Men do have the capacity to nurture. We see it in our culture today. A “nurturing father” is a man who actively provides guidance, love, and support to enhance the development and growth of children for whom he cares. Men holding infants; interacting with daughters and sons on playgrounds, on ball fields; wheeling the stroller or holding their child’s hand in the mall. As we notice these nurturing interactions, we feel a sense of warmth and security, just as the child must feel when interacting with a nurturing father.

Whether nurturing comes easy to us, or we want to nurture but find it difficult, any man can learn to be a more nurturing father. **The Nurturing Father’s Program** helps men develop nurturing attitudes and skills. This 13-week, group-based program helps men experience and practice the very attitudes and skills that translate into nurturing behavior. One or two facilitators meet with a group of 10-16 men one evening a week (2 ½ hours) for 13 weeks. The facilitators use a curriculum to guide the group in discussions, activities, games and experiences that allow the group members to choose to adopt nurturing behaviors.

We begin at the beginning – with a focus on our own fathers or father figures. Who was this man we call “our father”? Was he present or absent? How did he relate to us? In going back to these “roots”, we see what our fathers left us, and we begin to make a choice. What do we want to keep and carry forth; what do we want to throw away and leave behind; and what new tools do we want to add of our own. So we begin, from recognition of who our father was, to choose the type of father we want to be.

The next step on this journey asks each father “How good are we at nurturing ourselves?” Men aren’t really good at self-nurturing (successfully identifying and meeting our own needs). Until we learn to do this, we cannot easily give to others. The group explores many ways to successfully nurture ourselves so that we have the resources to provide nurturing to children and other family members.

In the weeks that follow, the group spends time learning tools for dealing with feelings, communication, positive discipline, managing anger/resolving conflicts, fathering sons/daughters, teamwork, and play. The focus is on supporting new learning and growth. Men help each other solve problems, address barriers, and provide concrete support. A deep sense of camaraderie and trust forms in the group, and this further supports and encourages each group member to activate and cultivate their nurturing potential.

One of the core issues that **The Nurturing Father’s Program** addresses is the issue of male power. Is male power in some way naturally hurtful; is it contradictory to nurturing? The program introduces us to two forms of male power: one, “power-over”, is based on control and dominance, and it is often hurtful. The other, “power-to”, is more helpful, collaborative and encouraging. It is, in fact, a core attitude and skill for the nurturing

father. These discussions regarding power lead to meaningful self-exploration and provide additional encouragement toward becoming a nurturing man.

This group experience is definitely not all work and no play. We find that the weekly meetings are fun and funny. Men like to laugh and play, and each group develops its own style of humor and fun. This seems to naturally emerge from the shared experience of men being together in this way. In fact, one week we create a Play Shop and invite all the children to join us for a night of fun, games, music, food, etc. These have been enjoyable and memorable experiences for all.

On week 13, as the culmination and ending to this journey into nurturing fatherhood, a Graduation Ceremony is held. Each father invites children, spouse, and any other family member he chooses, and writes his commitment to his family entitled, "The Father I Choose To Be". We form a large circle composed of all fathers sitting with his children and family, and each father, one at a time, reads his prepared statement. At this time, we present each group member with his Graduation Certificate. It is a powerful and beautiful ending to a journey we shared together. And of course, there is food and celebration.

During the 13-week group experience, each father has been doing Home Activities in his personal workbook entitled, "A Nurturing Father's Journal". This workbook becomes the personal documentation of his growth in the program. It is also filled with useful information that he can continue to refer to after the program ends. Often the group members choose to keep in contact and continue to meet.

The Nurturing Father's Program, published in 1998, has years of outcomes measurements proving that it is effective.

For ordering information, or to talk with the author Mark Perlman, call (toll free)

1-888-390-1119 or visit us on the web at www.nurturingfathers.com