

Mental Map Fatherhood

Do you ever feel lost as a father? Does it seem like your idea of what should be happening ... *isn't*? Maybe the path your child is taking or the level of success he is achieving doesn't quite match up with your timeline?

I struggled with this with both my sons growing up. When they were growing up and playing soccer there were too many times when I was convinced that they should be able to master a physical skill—like riding a bike for the first time himself—until I discovered that some six-year-olds can't do that yet and that was way down the line after multiple years of trauma of demanding extraordinary expectations.

A few months ago, I was watching a show about extreme mountain climbing in the Himalayas. It was about climbers where disaster struck with the climbers. It did give me some insight on some of my fathering habits and why I tend to react some of the ways I respond or react. In the clips we see climbers who become lost and even die in the ice-coated mountains. It made me think that people meet their ultimate demise this way because they don't adapt. They apply old forms of reasoning—which we might call "mental maps"—to new experiences, and this often leads to bad decisions.

For example, even accomplished outdoorsmen will sometimes struggle while hiking in unfamiliar terrain and higher altitude. They may make decisions based on past experiences, underestimate or fail to adapt to the new challenges, and miss common-sense solutions that would save them a lot of time and trouble—and maybe even their lives. They become victims because they aren't willing or able to adjust their mental maps

I believe mental maps are used in fatherhood as well. It could be a dad trying to relate to his daughter by applying the map of reasoning he depends on at the office. Chances are, it won't work; he needs to adapt his approach to her specific needs.

Maybe it's more common for dads to use the faulty mental map that I call a case of the "supposed-to's": Casey is supposed to eat what Dad tells him to. Brady is supposed to be making all A's. Casey is supposed to be the starting mid-fielder in soccer. While these may be valid expectations, our mental maps, rather than solid

evidence, often drive our actions. Maybe you were strong in a certain area, so your child should be too.

What's wrong with this? The desire to force a child to be a certain way sacrifices the growth that could occur otherwise because it doesn't consider the child's unique gifts and interests. Consequently, this impedes a lot of the good the father could possibly do in shaping his child. Maybe he's not a very gifted athlete right now. Well, he may never be if he feels pressure to perform beyond his capabilities. This is a faulty mental map that has not adapted. Forcing a child to perform is like training for a sport by skipping the basics.

Also, too often dads use mental maps like I described with my son: we assume we know how quickly our children should be progressing in life, and we try to force our own time line on them and overlook their talents and developmental growth. It took me years to determine to lose 50 lbs due to health issues. Had I been forced into a shorter time line, I may have never attained it. Your daughter can possibly be the best softball player in town, but if her spirit is wrecked from ridicule because she's not making immense strides, you can forget it. Little by little, children can excel, and we must respect that. That's not me talking, it's nature.

What's a better approach? I have two suggestions:

First, check your motivation for why you are pushing your son or daughter to succeed. Is it for his good or for your own? There is a deep pride that fathers carry when their children succeed at something. When you see a glimmer of talent in a child, excitement takes over, and it may take over so much that your child's acceleration to the next skill level may be impaired because of your desire to get him or her there too quickly. It's important to distinguish between your own dreams and desires for your child and what is truly best for him.

Now, if your encouragement and prodding is based on evidence of the child's talents and past accomplishments, then that may be a different matter. Children can be lazy unless they are pushed to do their best, but please make sure they can reach the goals you set for them. If your goals are too lofty, your child could fail repeatedly and become discouraged.

Second, you must understand your child. Ask yourself, "What is he good at and how can I help him get better?" Focus on discovering a child's strengths and then helping him capitalize on those strengths. Avoid comparing him to other kids or basing your expectations on some other faulty mental map of where you think he should be. By stepping back and analyzing the situation, you can get a clearer grasp of where your child is, which will greatly increase the chances that your actions as a father will help him achieve his full potential. You may need to give up with some of your own goals and expectations for your child, but it's much better for the child in the end.

Dad, if you're like me, you're often very quick—sometimes too quick—to jump in and fix things. If my first attempt doesn't work, I sometimes get frustrated and do more damage than what was there at the start. (We're more emotional than we'd like to admit sometimes.) Please do take action to help your child follow his dreams and find success in life, but please take it slowly. Sometimes, as hard as it is, you just need to stop and think. When you understand your child and what he needs from you, you're much better prepared. That's the best mental map for your fatherhood.

Another great benefit of understanding your child is that it will naturally lead to a tighter bond with them.

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