

Male stereotype hinders the job of parenting

By SHEILA MCCARTHY DUNNELLS

The role of the mother in the parenting business has been scrutinized since Oedipus unknowingly married his mother.

All but forgotten is the fact that raising a child is not a solo effort by the mother.

What of the father's role? How does he affect his children?

Believing the stereotype of the successful provider, many males view their responsibility to be just that — being good providers. Add the sometime role of sport's buddy and/or handy-with-a-wrench fixer-upper, and many will say that's enough.

But those male stereotypes hinder the father's role in child rearing, says John L. Spain Jr.

Spain's expertise is in clinical psychology in which he holds both master's

and doctoral degrees. In addition to his family counseling clinic in Birmingham, he is chairman of the psychology department at Mercy College and has conducted clinics in parent effectiveness training.

THE BEHAVIOR exhibited by two of the more common stereotypes, the macho-man and the male chauvinist, has a profound effect on the child, he believes.

"The macho-man syndrome is focused around power," he said. "However, it is power in a negative sense. The macho-person can be typically identified as insensitive, unable to respond to feelings and incapacitated if not in control."

The daughter of a macho-father sees her father as one who is driven by power. Since the macho-man cannot relate to a woman unless she is needy or vulnerable,

the daughter usually plays the needy child-daughter role, putting aside her strengths and capabilities, he said.

"The son feels pressured to be like his father. He learns that in order to be important in life he must have power."

The male chauvinist demands obedience.

"The male chauvinist is a liability because he is operating out of a single way of life. He insists that others respond that way. The chauvinist father cannot be open and varied in his approach to life."

"The parent-child relationship remains open until the child reaches adolescence and starts asserting some independence."

"When the insecure father feels threatened by this independence, he brings in the 'big guns' and becomes more rigid in an effort to control the child."

Spain also enumerated the damage such rigid treatment can inflict during the development of the child.

"If a child obeys, conforms and the parents and teachers all say 'wonderful child,' this child is exhibiting a lack of self-confidence. The child will need rigid and carefully defined rules for behavior for the rest of life."

In short, he said, the rigid parent

"develops either a child who is a good conformer but a poor creator or a child who is boldly disobedient or rebellious."

INSTEAD of operating from one set of ground rules, Spain suggests that fathers engage in "active listening, which allows children to be who they are, not what a parent has determined they should be."

"Instead of the father assuming he knows how the child feels, the active listener allows the child to express exactly what is being felt."

One of the many positive by-products of active listening, the psychologist said, is self-confidence building. "Self-confidence stems from acceptance. The child is free to be who he is."

To those who find his suggestions too permissive, the counselor points to the behavior of a child whose feelings are ignored and disregarded.

"When a child feels upset and needs to talk about life and the parent will not actively listen, the frustration frequently manifests itself in destructive behavior," he explained. "The child unconsciously knows that destroying something will get immediate attention."

Similarly, the child who feels something unfair has been done to him will

also choose to retaliate with destructive behavior. Frequently the manifestation comes with the child breaking a favorite possession of the parent's.

WHEN COMMUNICATION fails, some fathers believe the easiest way to jump into a child's life is through sports. Society applauds this participation, he added.

Frequently heard is the remark "He's a wonderful father. He hasn't missed a single Little League game."

But is attendance at a child's game intrinsically positive? According to the counselor, not necessarily.

"Attending a game is only part of the role of the father in a child's world. The relationship must be ongoing. Too often, the father's involvement in the sport's program is a pressure for the child. He must perform, indeed excel," Spain said.

"For some fathers the homerun isn't for the child, it's for himself. It represents something he did or wanted to do."

Spain suggests that fathers look at the whole parent-child relationship. An interested father will try to walk that fine line between showing interest in the child and yet not exerting undue pressure on the child to excel.

The father should evaluate just how

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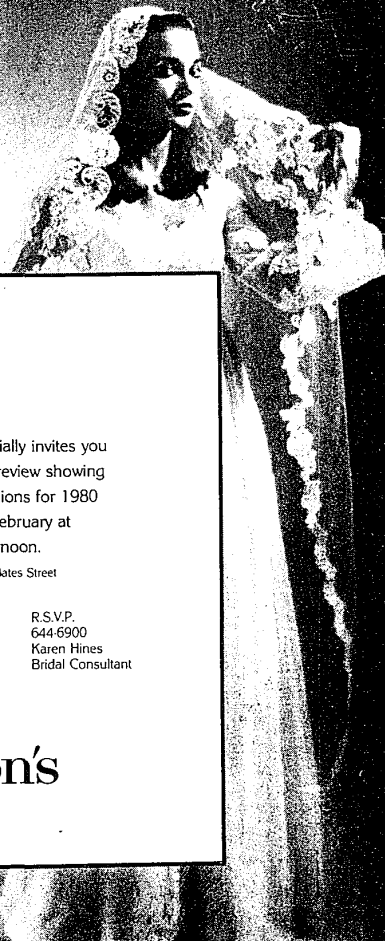
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