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# How Does a Father Protect His Family?

by James B. Stenson

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How does a man act to protect his wife and children?

Let's approach this question by first examining a man's masculinity, the distinctive character of any normal adult male.

Men are different from women. They are wired differently, think differently. They have instincts and attitudes and physical strengths that empower them for tough-minded, sacrificial service to those people who count most in their lives, starting with their families.

All the special features of an adult male's personality, developed from boyhood--his muscles, will power, stamina, competitive drive, aggressiveness and assertiveness, mathematical and abstractive powers of mind, love for strategic planning and manipulating physical reality, strong sense of fairness and ethical conduct--all coordinate toward a single great purpose in life: *protection*.

Nature, it seems, endows men with the physical and mental powers they need to protect their loved ones. The instinct to *protect from harm* lies at the core of a man's masculinity, and it is an immensely powerful force.

I once witnessed this protective instinct dramatically in action.

One warm Sunday afternoon a few years ago, I was strolling with a friend near the Boston Public Garden in Boston's elegant Back Bay neighborhood. My friend and I stopped at a pedestrian light and waited with a few other people to cross Commonwealth Avenue. Cars whizzed by, true to the pattern of that city's notoriously frantic traffic.

Across the street, an elderly lady was walking slowly alongside two young girls, about six or seven years old. I would guess they were her granddaughters or grandnieces. She was blind. In one hand she carried a red and white cane while her other held the leash of a German shepherd seeing-eye dog. One of the little girls was stroking and patting the back of the huge, friendly animal.

Suddenly--chaos. From down the block hurtled a large mongrel street dog, barking and snarling loudly, spoiling for a fight. Swiftly he lunged at the German shepherd, who sprang back at him in snarling, furious rage. The two dogs pounced and snapped with bared teeth at each other, growling and barking ferociously in an all-out serious fight. The noise was loud and shocking.

What happened next was even worse. The blind woman wildly thrashed her cane back and forth trying to scare away the attacker, while the two children screamed hysterically. The little girls stood transfixed, absolutely horrified, loudly shrieking and sobbing in terror. The street echoed with the children's terrified screams mixed with wild, furious barks and growls.

Something in that sudden, frightening sound--kids screaming and dogs wildly barking--electrified everyone within earshot. My friend and I dashed across the street to help the lady and the little girls. As we did, we saw other men running at full speed from every direction.

A taxi screeched to a halt, and the driver and his passenger leaped out. Other cars slammed their brakes, and men, leaving their car doors open, dashed out to help. Doors flew open in the townhouses nearby and men ran down stairs into the street. One professorial looking man had evidently been reading the newspaper. He held his glasses in one hand and his paper in the other; he quickly pocketed the glasses and rolled up his newspaper to use it as a kind of club as he ran toward the dogs.

In seconds a group of 12 or 15 men, including a couple of college youths, pulled the screaming kids and the woman back to safety, while the others belted the dogs with jackets and rolled-up papers, anything at hand, to separate them and chase off the attacker. (A brave thing to do, for it's dangerous to meddle in a dogfight.) The mongrel quickly broke off and ran away. All the men then turned to calm down the children and assure them everything was OK. A woman, the professor's wife I assume, beckoned from a townhouse doorway and gently led the blind lady with her dog and the kids inside to rest up. People stepped back into cars and drove off, while pedestrians drifted away.

What happened in this rescue was something primitive and powerful, a force thousands of years old. Each adult male within earshot heard a sound that reached deep inside his male instincts and jolted him into enraged defensive action--"Children being attacked by beasts!...Save the children!...Repel the beasts!" Men dropped what they were doing and, heedless of their own safety, flung themselves forward to protect the kids.

That's my point here. Men are hard-wired--in their minds, muscles, and tough aggressiveness--to protect women and children from harm. This incident, though dramatic and violent, underscores what a man does in countless subtle ways in family life. He is there to ward off harm.

This fatherly protection works in several different important ways.

First of all, a family man devotes his manly powers to protect his wife from anyone who would threaten her. It seems to be a natural instinct among males, to protect the women in their lives--wife, mother, sisters, daughters--from outsiders' aggression. For instance, if a man were standing next to his wife in a crowd and some male stranger turned to speak loudly and angrily toward her, the husband would instantly rise in rage to her defense. Adrenaline would rush through his blood, his muscles would tighten, and his first impulse would be to rearrange the aggressor's face. No self-respecting man would stand by and let anyone treat his wife with disrespect. He would take swift action to defend her.

Peace, it is said, is the condition we enjoy when other people just leave us alone. Throughout history, the father of a family would protectively stand in the doorway of his home and say, as it were, to the whole world: "Leave us alone.... Leave my family alone."

Related to this physical protection, here's another aspect of a man's protectiveness, one that fathers today often fail to understand. A man permits no one to threaten or upset his wife--and *this includes their own children*. A hugely important part of a father's job is to defend his wife against their children's rudeness, insolent disobedience, and impulsive aggression. This protection counts most to his wife when the kids are small (under 7) and later when they enter adolescence. A man will permit no one to disrespect his wife, including--and even especially--at home.

A man also defends his family through what he earns in his work. That is, he doesn't just provide for his family; he protects them from poverty. He shelters them, takes care of their needs for a roof, food, and clothing. While Dad has a job, the family feels secure. Even in a two-income home, it seems, children sense that Dad is the main provider, and therefore the family's main protector.

Moreover, he protects his children from forces that threaten them here and now: drugs, bullies, criminals, unjust aggressors of all types, and potential disasters arising from their inexperience and impulsive mistakes (like dashing out into traffic or playing with matches).

For instance, if a father glanced out his living room window and spotted a male stranger chatting with his small daughter, coyly beckoning to her, he would swiftly lunge into defensive action. He'd race out the door, stride aggressively toward the stranger, then confront the man and demand to know what he wanted. With muscles taut, he would stand between his daughter and this potential aggressor, physically shielding her from harm.

Another example: When his teenage daughter is being picked up for a date, a father goes out of his way to size up the young man she's going out with. He wants to meet him--insists on meeting him--to look him in the eye and intuitively size up his intentions and his worth. A father senses a duty to assess any young male who approaches his daughter. An unspoken message seems to pass between them: "She's my daughter. Treat her nicely, kid, or else...."

But most of all--and this is crucially important--a father protects his children by *strengthening them so they can later protect themselves*. In the lives of his children, he asserts *loving leadership toward responsible, competent adulthood*.

It is a father's mission, the challenge that brings out the best in him, to form in his children the powers and attitudes they will need to succeed in life, to strengthen them so they in turn can later protect themselves and their own loved ones. So, in his children's eyes a great father is a lifelong leader and teacher. His protective, empowering lessons about right and wrong live on in the inner lives of his children, long after they've left home for good, and indeed long after he has passed to his eternal reward. A great father never stops being a father, for he lives on as a great man in the hearts of his children.

So how does a man protect his children long-term? What sort of lifelong strengths does a smart, effective father teach?

- A father strengthens his children's *competence*. He forms lifelong healthy attitudes to work, along with serious habits of work. Without a father's leadership in this arena, his kids can have trouble grasping the connection between effort and results, between standards and achievement. If he fails here, his children may never outgrow the dominant attitude of childhood--that life is play--and remain stuck in a permanent adolescence. This can later destroy them, their careers, and their families.
- He teaches *respect for rightful authority*. He insists that his children respect and obey him and their mother. His wife sets most of the moral tone for the household--what's right and wrong in family life--and he enforces it. Being smart and far-seeing, he knows that when children fail to respect their parents, they can later clash with all other forms of rightful authority--teachers, employers, the law, God's law, and their own conscience.
- A father teaches his children ethics and gives final form to their lifelong conscience. That is, *he shows his sons and daughters how to comport themselves justly and honorably in the world outside*

*the home*. In his children's eyes, he is an expert on fair dealings and personal integrity in the workplace and community. He shows his kids how their mother's moral teachings carry over later to life outside the home: telling the truth, keeping one's word, putting duty first, deferring to others' rights and feelings. By his example and correction at home, he shows how responsible adults respect each others' rights and assert their own.

- A father builds healthy *self-confidence* in children. His presence around the home as a physically strong man leads his children (daughters especially) to feel safe, securely protected, and therefore self-confident. As a father, he corrects and encourages, and he helps his children to learn from their mistakes. In this way, he leads his children to form a realistic sense of their strengths and limitations. Youngsters who receive this protective fatherly love, along with self-knowledge and experience with problem-solving at home, eventually form a lifelong self-confidence.
- A father leads his children to adult-level *sound judgment and shrewdness*. He helps them to use their brains like responsible adults: to frame questions and answers logically, to think ahead and foresee consequences, to assess people's character and values, and to know malarkey when they see it.
- A father provides an *attractive example of responsible masculinity*. He acts as a model for his sons' growth into manhood. And he conveys to his daughters (most often unconsciously) the traits they should look for in judging the character of men their age, especially suitors for marriage. In countless subtle ways, Dad forms a pattern for manly character in each of his sons and, indirectly, for the kind of man each daughter will someday marry. (This may explain why great fathers so often get along well with their sons-in-law.)

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