

THE LIFE CYCLE OF FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

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Have you ever noticed how children want to be just like their parents when they are young, nothing like their parents when they are teens, and then become just like their parents for better and worse when they become adults? This could not be more evident than in the relationship between fathers and sons. From the evolution of childhood through older adult, predictable stages occur in the way sons view and relate to their fathers. The acronym that will be used to capture these evolving stages is IDEAL.

As children, sons **idolize** their dads and think they can do anything. This identification is most often demonstrated by a son's imitation of his father's behavior by walking like him, talking like him or wearing his clothes or shoes. At this age, a son wants so much to please his father and receive his approval and acceptance.

As teens, sons experience a period of **discord** in which conflict is the central theme they share. They often reject the expectations, values and directions their fathers have embraced and take on more non-traditional philosophies, placing them regularly at odds with one other. The teen may resent or even fear his father depending on the intensity of their differences, at times, carrying over into the son's early twenties.

As young adults, the father-son relationship enters into a period of **evolving**. Distance may still exist emotionally and they may even ignore each other. The conscious attempts at being different than one's father so characteristic in the discord stage begin to appear more like competition. Competition with another can be viewed as one of the most indirect but highest forms of flattery that exists. Mark Twain once said, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

As adults in their 30's and 40's, sons begin to move into the stage of **acceptance** toward their fathers. They have begun to forgive, recognize strengths and even admire the qualities that once seemed so out of step with their previous "know it all" manner of thinking. They begin to accept each other's differences. Fathers and sons often become friends during this time, share common interests and express opinions without heated exchanges. The son may even experience challenges as a father with his own son. Charles

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Wadsworth once said, “ By the time a man realizes that maybe his father was right, he usually has a son who thinks he’s wrong.”

In their 50’s, older adult sons become a **legacy** of their father’s influence for better and worse. Time tempers painful memories and in their place often remains admiration and respect for the difficult job being a father must have been. Older adult sons who have not yet resolved those issues with their elderly or deceased fathers, however, typically see them replayed with their teenage or young adult sons. If elderly fathers are still living, an ironic role reversal occurs with older adult sons beginning to take care of their aging fathers. Perhaps the best revenge is to live long enough to be a problem to your children! Life gives us numerous opportunities in key relationships to learn from our experiences, work out our differences and pass on those legacies that are truly worth living. To successfully pass through these stages of **idolizing, discord, evolving, acceptance** and becoming a **legacy**, is an “**ideal**” goal for every father and son.

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