

My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not



Opening Icebreaker

Bomb and Shield whole group activity, game (10 min)

In advance, create an open area in the classroom where participants can walk around.

Tell everyone in the group to imagine that the room is a battlefield littered with all sorts of boobytraps and one huge bomb. The only defense they have from the boobytraps and huge bomb is a protective shield.

Next, tell each person that they will pick one per-

son in the group to be their “bomb” and one other person to be their protective “shield.” However, **they cannot say who they picked.** They must keep their selections to themselves.

When everyone has their “bomb” and “shield” in mind, ask them to stand up and walk around the room. Tell them they must do everything they can stay away from their “bomb,” either by walking away from him or her, or by standing behind their “shield.” If their bomb gets within one foot of them, without their shield in between, they’ve been injured and must sit down. After one or two minutes of walking around, tell everyone to take a seat.

Story & Workshop Summary

Time: 60 minutes

Materials: chart paper, markers

Theme: Setting appropriate boundaries can be a way to protect yourself

Plot: Troy loves his father, even after his dad walks out on the family. As Troy grows older he gives his father many chances to connect, but keeps getting let down. Eventually he confronts his father. But after he gets stood up again, he tries to resign himself to the fact that his father won't change.

Youth Development Goals:

- Participants will understand that you can't change how other people act, but you can change your expectations of them.
- Participants will learn how to develop personal boundaries in their relationships and that it's OK to set boundaries with family members.
- Participants will increase their range of responses to unsatisfactory relationships.

Break It Down (5 min)

- Who was your bomb? Who was your shield? (Go around the room asking people to quickly name their bomb/shield.)
- Was anyone's bomb someone else's shield?
- If we think of the bomb as a symbol for something or someone in real life, what do you think it could represent? [A person who could be harmful to you.] What about the shield? [A person who is supportive or protective.]
- Are there times in life when someone can be both a bomb and a shield?

[Story begins on next page.]



Read the Story and Talk About It (20 min)

Introduce the story: Tell participants they are going to read a story about a boy who has to figure out how to deal with a father who keeps disappointing him.

Take turns reading the story: Pause from time to time when there is a passage that you think is ripe for discussion. Ask the suggested questions, or any others that you think will be helpful to your group.

My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not

By Troy Shawn Welcome

1. **M**y father was very popular in Guyana, South America, where we lived until I was 9 years old. His friends used to tell me how it was difficult to walk down the street with him without being noticed. I could only wonder about that because I never spent time with my father. I saw him only on those rare occasions when he slept at home.

My father was what you'd call a playboy. He had a son with one of his mistresses and also a daughter with a second mistress.

But despite all of his faults, I still admired my father. When his friends heard me speak, laugh, or walk, they'd say, "That's Terry's son alright." I was just like my dad, and I felt proud to be like him. He was my role model.

After we moved to America, he and my mother started to fight constantly. I hated when they fought, because he'd hit her.

Q. What impact might this behavior have on Troy's life?

Real Men

He started disappearing for days and then weeks at a time. For some time I'd only see him on weekends. One weekend, he took my brother and me to a Yankee game. I don't like baseball; the only thing I liked about the game was that he was there.

But the thing I remember the most was the weekend when he taught my brother Rob and me how to ride bicycles at the track and field next to Yankee Stadium. I remember going down the straightaway part of the track with my pops at my side. I felt a bond with him.

2. **Weekends Together**

Those weekends were great, but they didn't last. When I was 11, I started to see him less and less each month. I'd wake up on Saturday mornings hoping to see him that day, but most of the time I'd be disappointed. After about a year he called and asked Rob and me to spend weekends with him in New Jersey, where he was now living. Even though I was happy to be with him, I didn't show it that much. I was hurt because he had left us for so long.

The weekend stays at his house went so well that he asked us to spend the summer with him. I enjoyed that summer. He'd leave money on my pillow before he left for work in the morning. I looked forward to hearing his van pull up when he came home. I felt mad good because I had a dad again.

3. **Wedding Bells**

The year that followed was good because I saw him almost every weekend. Then one day my father picked up my brother and me and took us shopping. He bought us suits, shirts, and ties, and we went to his house in New Jersey, where he was living with a woman named Fay.

The house smelled like a bakery and there were a lot of suits lying on the couch. I had no idea what was going on, so I joined

Q. Make a prediction: What do you think will happen to this family?

Those weekends with my dad were great, but they didn't last.

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two of Fay's sons who were playing video games.

Suddenly my pops came into the living room, called me and my brother over into the corner, put his arms around us, and said, "We're going to a wedding on Saturday."

"Whose wedding?" I asked.

"Me and Fay's," he answered.

I had an idea that he'd say that. I was happy for him. I rejoined Fay's sons at the television, hoping to start a conversation because I really felt like I didn't belong. "Yo, you heard... your moms and my pops are getting married," I said.

"We knew that for a year already. You just found out?" Shawn asked.

I was embarrassed because my brother and I were the only people who hadn't known. I thought that everyone was laughing at me. "Now he has new sons and he doesn't need me anymore," I thought.

4. **Treated Like a Stepchild**

On the morning of the wedding, my brother and I had to help decorate the hall where the ceremony and reception were to be held. It was hard work, but hours later the hall was transformed with tablecloths and all kinds of decorations. I didn't mind doing all that work because I was looking forward to being a part of the wedding.

But I didn't have anything to do with the ceremony. When it was over, I was still hoping to sit with my father, but I could have waited years for him to notice me. I was disappointed and upset. I felt as though my pops used me as his maid, as though I wasn't important to him.

After the wedding I spoke to my father only when it was absolutely necessary. As years raced by, the number of times that I saw him decreased.

I was angry at my pops for treating me like a stepchild at the wedding, but I still needed him in my life. It was very hard, and still is, to be a teen and my own father at the same time. I'd

Q. Does it matter that Troy is last to find out about his father's marriage? Why or why not?

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question whether I was good enough to be considered a man. I couldn't get through a day without stressing myself out about whether I acted, talked, or looked like a man. All that stress affected my life in many ways.

Q. Why is it hard for Troy to figure out how to be a man? Can't he figure it out from other people around him instead of his father?

5. The Confrontation

Finally, about a year and a half ago, after years of keeping my feelings inside and many, many sessions with my counselor, I raised the courage to call my father up and confront him.

"What kind of father are you?" I asked him. "You don't call, you don't come to see us. If anyone met me in the last two years, they'd think that I didn't have a father. I don't understand what's going on."

"Ah, um, I have been calling and coming by," he countered calmly. "But you are never there."

The way he spoke to me made me feel like we were two executives at a board meeting.

"You haven't been calling or coming cause I would've gotten a message," I said. "I think it's because you got your new sons and Karen [my older half-sister] over there, so you don't need us anymore."

I couldn't get through a day without stressing myself out about whether I acted, talked, or looked like a man.

I was hoping that he'd say that it wasn't true and that he still loved me, but that didn't happen.

"I don't think you should be taking this tone with me," he said. He was starting to get upset. "You call me up and tell me this bull about—"

"Bull?" I interrupted. "This ain't bull. It's the way I feel. I'm telling you the way I feel and that's all it is to you—bull crap!"

"OK, it's the way you feel. But I'm still your father and you shouldn't be speaking to me like this," he said.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're not my father. You haven't

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been and will never be my father," I told him.

"You will always be my son and we will be together in the future," he said in a patronizing voice.

"If you're not here for me now, what makes you think that I'm going to need you in the future?" I said. "Listen, I have another call so I gotta go, a'ight."

Click.

The conversation pissed me off. First, he had an annoying tone throughout the conversation. It made me feel like he wasn't taking me seriously. Second, he made me realize that I was right—he didn't want me.

But I felt a little relieved to at least know how he felt. It was the hardest thing that I ever did. I was trembling while I was speaking to him. My emotions were so strong from keeping them in for so many years. It was good for me to get them out because now I don't think about him enough to get me depressed anymore.

Finally, I raised the courage to call my father up and confront him.

Q. Do you think it was helpful to Troy to make this phone call to his father, or was it a mistake? Why?

6. **The Last Straw**

Surprisingly, he did call me back a few weeks later. He told me that he wanted to hang out with my brother and me that Friday. I canceled my plans just so I could be with my dad.

At 7 o'clock on Friday night I was waiting for him. Nine o'clock came and I was getting frustrated because I hate waiting for people. I finally decided to call and find out if something happened to him. Fay answered the phone and told me he was sleeping. She woke him up and he gave me some story about having a long day. Then he asked if he could see me on Sunday and I agreed.

To make a long story short, he never came on Sunday. From that day I realized that I was never going to have him in my life again. I haven't seen or heard from my sperm donor (that's what

Real Men

I call him sometimes) since that conversation—a year and a half ago.

7. **Mom Says I Should Love Him**

My mother still tries to convince me that I should love him because he's my father. But how can I love someone I don't know and who doesn't know me?

Today things are better. I've managed to hide my feelings for my father so deep that I'd have to dig to find them. I still think he doesn't want me. But I realize that no matter what he did to me, it's no excuse for me to have a messed-up life.

Strangely enough, he did teach me something. He taught me that the best man I could be is his total opposite. I now know that having children left and right doesn't make a man. Staying around to raise them does.

Troy was 19 when he wrote this story. His relationship with his dad continued to affect him (read more about it in p. 212).

Q. Is it reasonable to assume, as Troy is doing, that his father will probably not be part of his life again?

Q. Do you think Troy is giving up on his father? Or is he letting go of him in order to protect himself? What's the difference?



Explore the Ideas

Activity: Boundaries of Love
group work, share (15 min)

Introduction to Boundaries: Begin by asking the group what a boundary is. They may think of boundaries as the invisible lines that separate countries or neighborhoods, or the lines that mark what's out of bounds in a sports game. Explain to the group that people also set boundaries between themselves and other people. In relationships, boundaries help us regulate how much of ourselves we're willing to share with other people, and how much we expect back.

For example, if you think of a boundary as a wall, you'd probably have a pretty high boundary with your boss at work, and a much lower one with your best friend. You wouldn't tell your boss the steamy details of your last date, but you might tell your best friend, and be hurt if he didn't share the same with you. The ability to set boundaries lets you have some control in your relationships.

Note: If you have time, you can expand on this discussion. Ask teens: When you're in love, you often have really low boundaries with the other person, or none at all. What's good about that? What's dangerous about it? If you've gone through a painful breakup or been betrayed by someone you love, you might put up high boundaries between yourself and any other potential girlfriends or boyfriends. How is it helpful to have high boundaries? What's bad about it?

Tell participants that the following activity will explore how to create boundaries that work for you.

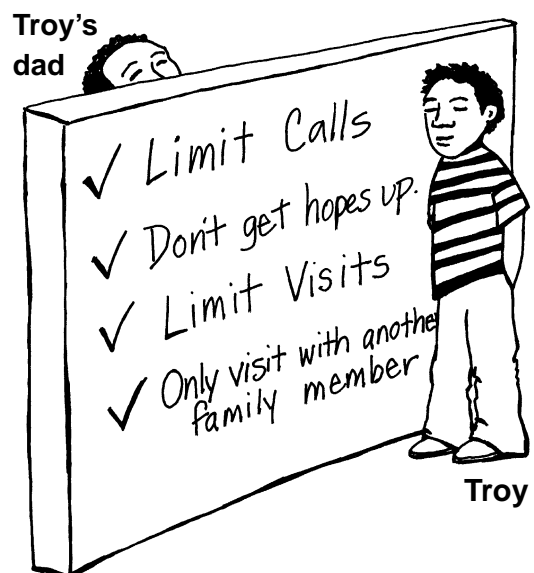
The Activity: Divide participants into small groups. Give each group a piece of chart paper and a few markers. Then tell them that they are going to help Troy take more control in his relationship with his father by helping him draw clearer boundaries.

These boundaries will help Troy know what to expect in his relationship with his father.

Tell participants that Troy's father decides to call a year after the story ends and check-in to see how Troy is doing. Tell the group that they have an opportunity to give Troy some advice on how to handle his inconsistent father before he has a phone conversation.

Ask each group to draw a wall between Troy and his father on their chart paper. (They can draw stick figures to represent Troy and his dad, or just write their names). *The wall should be as high or low as they think Troy's boundary with his father should be.* On the wall, the group must write four or five ways they would advise Troy to set appropriate emotional boundaries before he is disappointed by his father again.

For example, "I would tell Troy to view his biological father as an acquaintance, but not a family member." Or, "I would tell Troy to tell his father that he is only allowed to call once a year, at a time that is convenient for Troy."



After five minutes, bring the group back to share. Ask each group to explain how their advice would help Troy protect himself.

Break It Down (5 min)

- What should Troy expect of his father? How would changing his expectations give Troy more control in the relationship?
- Why might it be hard for Troy to set boundaries with his dad?
- When do you think it is important to set boundaries with people?
- Is it OK to set boundaries with family members, or should you always be open to them? Is it OK to “cut people off?”
- What happens if you are in a relationship with someone who has high boundaries with you, while you have low boundaries with them? What about the reverse?

Closing Question (5 min)

Ask each participant to respond to this question:

How do you know when you need to change your boundaries with someone?