

The understated affection of fathers

June 13 2017, by Kory Floyd



Credit: dvdfilm/flickr, CC BY-NC

[Men may not be from Mars](#), but – compared to women – they do communicate in very different ways.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the relationships of [fathers](#) and sons. Outwardly, [many father and son pairs may appear distant and disengaged](#). A guy who wouldn't think twice about hugging and kissing his mom might offer his father only a stilted handshake. Dads who shower their daughters with affection [may go years without telling their sons they love them](#). Men are often chided by their wives or mothers for

not being willing to show more affection to their dads or their sons.

Such criticisms overlook a larger truth, one that I've spent years exploring as a communication researcher: Often for men, showing affection is more about what they do than what they say. Their ways of communicating love can be subtle. And while to outside observers they may seem like weak substitutes for genuine affection, to many fathers and sons they're every bit as meaningful as words, kisses and hugs.

Different ways of expressing love

Glenn, a 41-year-old participant in one of my studies, has what many people would call a typical [relationship](#) with his dad, R.J. On Sundays, Glenn and his wife often visit Glenn's parents. While Glenn's wife catches up with her mother-in-law, Glenn and R.J. watch television, tinker with R.J.'s car or tackle a household repair, barely saying a few dozen words to each other over the course of an hour.

In many relationships, these behaviors seem cold or distant. But in the case of Glenn and R.J., the two simply favor actions over words.

[My research on affectionate behavior](#) has consistently shown that, in general, men are more likely to communicate affection by doing something supportive than by making verbal expressions, such as saying or writing "I love you."

While I've found that this is especially true in their relationships with other men, it's also true in their relationships with women. With his guy friends, a typical man is more likely to show his affection by organizing a road trip or helping with a roof repair than by saying "I care about you." Around his wife or mother, he may be more inclined to help with a task that needs doing – mowing the lawn or rotating the tires on the car – than sending a Hallmark card.

It's easy to devalue these types of behaviors as substitutes for "real" [affection](#). For example, Glenn's wife believes that Glenn and his father prioritize shared activities because they don't know how to express the way they feel about each other.

However, Glenn and his dad say that their favorite, most meaningful times together are spent sharing an activity or working on a specific task. To them, that *is* the expression of love: it signifies and reinforces how they feel about each other.

The tension between intimacy and masculinity

It's easy to understand why many dads and sons appear indifferent to each other. At least in our culture, [affection is commonly communicated](#) through verbal expressions and also through nonverbal gestures such as hugging.

Both of these are less common in relationships between men, making it seem as though there's something missing. But what's really at play is a misunderstanding about the complexity of father-son relationships.

Family communication scholar Mark Morman and I have found that [the father and son pair is complicated](#) by the need to negotiate a complex tension between masculinity and intimacy.

On one hand, the bond between dads and sons is a family relationship. People tend to feel closer and more invested in their families than they do in many other social bonds.

On the other hand, the father and son pair is a relationship between two males – one that's subject to cultural expectations about how men are supposed to act toward each other. [Traditional masculinity](#) has tended to privilege qualities like competition, independence and self-sufficiency.

This comes at the expense of outward expressions of intimacy, which can convey vulnerability.

Wishing for more

Glenn told me that his dad became less outwardly affectionate toward him once Glenn became a teenager. I've found [this evolution in the father and son relationship](#) is quite common. At a certain point, many [dads](#) and sons will base their relationships on shared activities instead of shared words. Meanwhile, [fathers tend not to curtail verbal displays of affection with their daughters](#) in the same way, nor do mothers with their sons or daughters.

Like Glenn's wife and mother, many women wonder aloud why the men in their lives aren't more expressive and open. From time to time, even Glenn wished aloud that he and his dad could talk about their feelings for each other more directly.

As I explain in my book "[The Loneliness Cure](#)," there's nothing wrong with wanting a more expressive relationship. Indeed, many men do successfully become more verbally affectionate with their fathers or their sons.

There's an important lesson here, though: Many male relationships are already richer and more meaningful than they appear to be. And the unique way men relate to one another deserves to be honored rather than belittled.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The understated affection of fathers (2017, June 13) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-06-understated-affection-fathers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.