

Courage in Action

Helping Young People Thrive

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In our church community, there are quite a few of us who work with teenagers. It might be in teaching, pastoring, counselling, youth work or in allied health. I think it's safe to say that most of us do it because we love it – young people are brave, funny, honest and engaging. And of course, there are fathers, uncles and grandparents who care deeply about young people and who are also aware that we have much to learn when it comes to walking alongside the next generation. Young people act as a barometer of current society; you get a pretty good idea about what's happening in our community based on how young people are feeling and thinking.

They really notice, and they notice YOU.

Each one of you reading this today is a male role model. No matter your age or situation, you each make an impact, whether you realise it or not.

RUPTURE AND REPAIR

Imagine this situation: A classroom of teenagers, including a vulnerable student who has limited family support and poor mental health.

One day, the male teacher—despite knowing the student's struggles—makes a flippant remark about suicide, directed at the student, in front of the whole class. The student is distraught but holds it together enough until later that day, when they have a scheduled appointment with the school counsellor.

The student and counsellor sit and talk the situation through. By this stage, the student is shaking and crying, overwhelmed by the situation. The counsellor spends time helping the student regulate, not rushing to react, but taking the moment to pause, consider and pray. This ends up being an impactful part of this story, because of what happens in that pause, showing how beautifully God works.

Because later that afternoon, the teacher, unprompted, approaches the student. He says: *"I'm so sorry for what I said earlier. As soon as I spoke, I realised I'd made a big mistake. It was hurtful and you didn't deserve that. I should never have said it. I'm going to speak to my boss, the principal, so he knows what happened. And please talk to anyone you need to about this too. I want you to know that I'm truly sorry and I'm going to do what I can to make sure it doesn't happen again."*

I hope you can imagine the expression on the student's face after this exchange. **Pure amazement.**

They had never had a male adult apologise to them before. They had never had a parent apologise for an angry outburst or unfair situation. This apology becomes a moment of deep healing for the student and helps them progress in understanding who God is.

The teacher in this example showed courage by **repairing the rupture** – the breakdown in trust caused by the insensitive comment. The act of repairing trust ended up being even more powerful than the original mistake.

We are sinners living in a sinful world. Ruptures in our relationships are frequent and frustrating. The challenge is how we approach the **repair**, particularly with young people.

ADULTS MAKE MISTAKES

Stop for a moment and think back to your own adolescence – when you first realised that adults weren't perfect. As

children, we see Dads, Opa's and Uncles as heroes. Strong, smart, funny – they can do no wrong. So, when they let us down, it can lead to two reactions:

1. Belligerence

"Why should I listen to him? He's a hypocrite." This often leads to an entrenched resistance to authority.

2. Disassociation

"I'm sure that was a misunderstanding, or maybe it was my fault. I'm not thinking about it." This can render a person passive, hesitant to speak up and engage.

Both reactions keep a young person stuck in their maturing process and unable to grow in understanding of God's grace toward sinners. As male role models, you can help young people navigate this by being genuine, humble and real. Young people can spot fake behaviour a mile away. Your example really matters, and the impact that positive, godly role models have on young people is very apparent to those of us who work with this age group.

DISENGAGED AND DYSFUNCTIONAL

On the other hand, disengaged or dysfunctional role models have a damaging effect on young people, and we see that too. No one wakes up one morning and decides to be dysfunctional, but sadly, there are men in our community who have unintentionally—or otherwise—fallen into this pattern. By *disengaged* we mean men who are physically and/or mentally not present and not part of the day-to-day of a child's life, leaving that to the mother or school staff, and avoiding interactions with their children. By *dysfunctional* we mean fathers whose headship is characterized harmful behaviors such as conflict or violence, untreated mental illness, alcoholism or other substance abuse, neglect, lack of boundaries, hypocrisy or manipulation.

According to current research (The Fathering Project, 2022), the four areas that our children are being impacted by disengaged or dysfunctional fathering (in all its forms) are:

1. Reduced academic performance
2. Poor physical and emotional health outcomes
3. Increased rates of risk-taking behaviour
4. Increased rates of delinquency and incarceration.

I would argue that the most devastating effect of all is the level of **spiritual confusion** experienced by children who have poor male role models in their lives. How can a young person develop a deep and true understanding of God as their Father when their own father causes harm? How are they to make sense of the world and how God guides and upholds His creation when their own home is full of chaos?

To avoid being disengaged or dysfunctional, and to have a good understanding of how to repair ruptures and be a positive influence, there are 4 core understandings worth considering:

1. Know your identity in Christ.

This is the foundation. A clear conviction of who you are in Christ is crucial, especially when guiding young people. Look deeper than the surface here- what does your identity in Christ really look like for you? Are your actions congruent with your beliefs? What could you say about God's priority in your life and how engaged are you with bible reading and prayer? Teens often struggle with who they are in Christ. Not the intellectual aspect; they get who Christ IS. It's how that's played out on a personal level and how it relates to their sense of self. Your faith and steady assurance are huge- they can lean on you, learn from you.

2. Examine your emotional maturity.

Are you self-reflective? If you're over the age of 25, your prefrontal cortex has fully developed – despite what your wife

or mother might tell you! So, you CAN look back at your younger years and think, what unhelpful, damaging, limiting beliefs have I formed over time (especially my adolescence) and how are these affecting my current relationships?

Any core childhood wounds—neglect, abuse, bullying, detachment, dismissal—need to be dealt with. It's difficult to interact healthily with those around us if these core wounds haven't been addressed, so please seek out help if this is you.

I know the stereotype is that men 'put things in boxes' in their minds – they compartmentalise very well. This is a trait that I envy, as it allows a high level of functioning! However, compartmentalising can also be *unhelpful*, in that you're not facing things that should be worked through. As a human being created by God, you are an embodied soul, and you are impacted by your past and present.

3. Parent beyond your own upbringing.

Or: 'Parent Past the Point'. We tend to parent based on what we learnt from our own parents. Even if you don't have children right now, or you're a grandparent, you will have ideas about young people and their behaviour based on your own experiences. Unless we're willing to do the work, adults usually only parent—or can think about parenting—up to the point of our own parents or childhood role models. "My dad did such and such, it worked for me." Or "My Dad never apologised, or said I love you, so why should I?" This is not about blaming or finger pointing, rather, as role models, the goal is to consider what can be learnt regarding present or future parenting and grandparenting. Please note though that doing this work doesn't mean we will move in a lovely trajectory forward, generation after generation, getting better and better all the time (wouldn't that be nice!). Rather, in our sinfulness, and through our varied experiences in this broken world, we are constantly challenged by the push-pull of how we would like to show up for our children and how this really plays out in everyday life. This is why it's so important to think about how we 'Parent Past the Point'.

4. Keep Learning and growing.

Part of this is continual learning. An important aspect of mentoring young people is understanding childhood development. We do a pretty good job in Christian circles of reading books about parenting, teaching and discipline; but one of the things that's often missing, perhaps because it's more scientific, is brain development. Neuroscience has made vast leaps in the last decade. Pay attention to current research because it really does impact your parenting and mentoring when you can understand what's happening biologically in your child's brain as they develop (Raising Children Network (Australia) Limited, 2024).

It's not easy or fun to read or learn about things we're uninterested in. We naturally gravitate toward our own soapboxes or topics we're comfortable with. So, the challenge is to seek information outside of your normal comfort zone that will enable you to keep learning and growing (and yes, that might well mean you need to read—and then talk about—those sex ed books). And side note – please use your own brains and initiative to be a critical consumer of information! Don't rely on your mate's recommendation or your wife's google search – go the bookshop or library or online shop *yourself*.

COURAGE AND VULNERABILITY

All of this takes Courage. Courage is part of the process needed to reorient us to God's purpose. Courage may make you feel vulnerable. However, contrary to what your body and brain might tell you, vulnerability isn't fatal. But the *feeling* of vulnerability does often prevent men having the courage to be effective role models.

ROADBLOCKS TO COURAGE

Because at the core of courage are two roadblocks: pride and fear. Two emotions rooted in shame. Pride is often loud and angry. It is usually masking something in a person that feels scared or less than. Shame comes from an inability to handle vulnerability- mostly in yourself but in others as well. If any of this strikes a chord in you – if you recognise elements of shame or pride that might be limiting your capacity to be courageous—there is an antidote. And it's not necessarily a therapist or another help book, or a podcast or panic. Go back to the bible—especially the gospels—and focus on Jesus; how He humbled himself. How He spoke to women and children. How He came alongside his disciples to lead and

teach. I'm always going to advocate for sound, professional mental health help, but please, start and continue with the one who understands your vulnerabilities and is the very best role model of all – Jesus.

COURAGE IN ACTION

What's been discussed so far is crucial for Dads, but important for grandparents, uncles, and mentors too. The research shows us that while the father's impact is vital, other male role models can fill this space when the dad is unavailable or uninvolved. And despite that- whenever a baby is baptised in front of the church, we ALL pray with the parents that the child will be raised in love and faithfulness – it is our collective responsibility.

While many of us love *working* with young people, we can all acknowledge that *living* with and *parenting* young people can be incredibly challenging. There will be men reading this who have had experiences with young people that have literally brought them to their knees. And there is no quick fix, no magic strategy. There's no therapist out there with all the answers. We all need a massive amount of God's love and grace to keep putting one foot in front of the other and asking for wisdom to parent in a way that honours Him.

So please have courage to keep going. Please be present. Be interested. Go watch that soccer game when you'd rather mow the lawn. Read that picture book rather than scrolling your phone. Ask about that computer game even though you question the value of playing Call of Duty. Take your teen out for coffee and resist turning it into a lecture. You will not see immediate results—and your young person won't give you a medal—but your actions will have lasting impact. Can I ask each of you to **take action** for the sake of the young people in our community? To have courage? Courage to repair ruptures. Courage to be self-reflective and keep growing. It is never too late, and you can make a powerful difference in the lives of young people.

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Remember that young people act as barometers of our society. That their thoughts and actions often indicate when something is amiss in our community.

Dads, uncles, grandfathers, teachers, and mentors, if young people are barometers, what are you? Our young people need direction! They are desperate for connection, correction, compassion.

They need a compass. They need YOU. What will you point them to? Who will you point them to?

Have courage. **Be their compass.**