



**By Gordon Dalbey**

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## **Reclaiming The Father Instinct**

*"Is there a 'father instinct'?"*

The men's retreat question-and-answer session had been lively, but suddenly a strange silence settled uneasily over us all. Up to this point, we'd confessed feeling inadequate as fathers, and how that often makes us pull away from our children in shame. But now, everyone seemed to sense--and not without healthy fear--the quantum leap which this new question promised.

What if men have an inner resource for fathering, apart from outside models and teaching?

With only one child myself, a pre-schooler son, I invited any more experienced dad there to stand and respond.

"Well, we've all heard of a 'mother instinct'," one offered hesitantly.

Murmurs, nods, and then, more silence--and puzzled frowns.

Gingerly, I suggested this as a "homework question," and went on with another issue.

Not long afterward, however, I got my answer in a frightening, but decisive way.

My wife had taken our son to a friend's swimming party, and I was off to a business meeting. I arrived to discover the meeting had been canceled, and after a moment's thought, decided to visit my son at the party.

As I walked into the pool area--a bit uncomfortable in my dressy street clothes--I saw my wife in the pool helping my son paddle as he splashed around half-heartedly. I smiled and waved at him; immediately his eyes lit up and he began kicking energetically.

Puzzled, my wife turned, and then saw me. "He sure picked up when he saw Daddy was watching!" she laughed. Beaming with fatherly pride, I waved and pulled up a deck chair.

Moments later, the boy wanted to get out of the pool and show me the nearby Jacuzzi. As I knelt beside the edge with my wife, he eased down the steps into the Jacuzzi and onto the foot-wide ledge around the inside, which allowed him to hold onto the tile edge with his head above the water.

I noticed that inside the ledge, the water dropped off perhaps another two feet to the bottom. "Hold onto the edge and keep your head up," I warned in my best firm-but-caring fatherly tone--then turned to chat with my wife as he scooted around just beside and slightly below us.

Moments later, I was startled mid-sentence as, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my son's head disappear under a swirl of water in the middle of the Jacuzzi, his hands reaching out above him as he sank. In the wink of an eye, I found myself leaping thigh-deep into the Jacuzzi, grasping my son, and yanking him up with me out of the water.

Sputtering as I knelt beside him, he wiped his face and smiled sheepishly. "That was...fun, Daddy!"

"Well...", I murmured, dazed. Shifting, I felt my shoes squish--and suddenly awoke to what had happened. "Fun?" I shot back, shaking. "You don't know just how close...."

I stopped as my wife nudged me gently. "Don't scare him," she whispered.

With a sigh, I realized she was right. Gathering myself, I reached out and affectionately rubbed my son's soggy hair. "Daddy loves his boy," I said at last. "Can you try to hold on better next time?" Shaking my head in dismay, I looked down at my dripping trousers--and suddenly the three of us burst out laughing in comic relief.

Nevertheless, as I drove home later, both fear and excitement swept over me. What in the world seized me when I saw my son go under that water? Where did it come from? All rational processes had short-circuited. Something beyond a higher, moral desire to help someone in need, even deeper than animal self-preservation, had activated.

Almost like...instinct!

Even as water from my slacks soaked into the car seat, I straightened up, confident and alert: I have a father instinct!

Today, long after plunging into the Jacuzzi after my son, I remain awed--and troubled. What if, in fact, a father instinct is part of manhood and includes the impulse to save your child from harm?

For openers, the whole focus in the abortion debate would be changed.

As a counselor, I've been surprised to see many men emotionally devastated after their child was aborted--even when they had no emotional bond whatsoever to the mother. Something powerful, even spiritual, is going on here.

The shallow, self-centered question, "Does a woman have the right to determine what happens in her body?" would have to yield to the deeper, more compelling one, "What happens to a man that allows him to override his father instinct and instead abandon his child, even to be destroyed?" And what long-term damage does that do to a man's deepest sense of his own masculinity?

In fact, are there other dimensions of the father instinct--equally unsettling and equally basic to manhood itself--which we haven't yet dared to recognize?

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