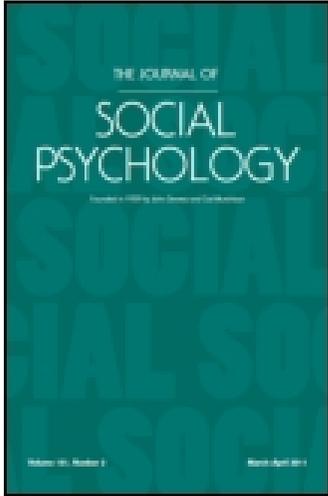


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Human Affection Exchange: II. Affectionate Communication in Father–Son Relationships

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ABSTRACT. The father–son dyad might be the most socially significant male–male relationship in the life course, yet its negative qualities have been the sole focus in most research on the relationship. One communicative aspect that has received little scholarly attention is the expression of affection between fathers and sons, despite the strong correlation of affectionate communication with positive involvement, closeness, and relational satisfaction for fathers and sons. In 2 studies, the authors tested hypotheses about father–son affection that were derived from affection exchange theory (K. Floyd, in press). Results indicated that U.S. men are more affectionate with biological sons than with stepsons or adopted sons and that they are more affectionate with their biological sons than their biological sons are with them.

Key words: affection, fathers, sons

MEN'S AND BOY'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FATHERS might be among the most influential and socially significant same-sex relationships that they form in the life course. Numerous studies have documented the effects that the father–son relationship can have on sons' emotional health and relational success (Beatty & Dobos, 1993; Berry, 1990), attitudes toward sexuality (Fisher, 1987), communication behaviors (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Yerby, 1981), and even

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relationships with their own sons (Floyd & Morman, 2000; Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1991).

Although some studies have focused on intimacy (Buerkel, 1996), confirmation (Beatty & Dobos, 1993), and relational satisfaction (Beatty & Dobos, 1992; Martin & Anderson, 1995) between fathers and sons, the majority of scholarly work in this area has instead addressed the more negative aspects of the relationship, such as conflict (Comstock, 1994), aggression (Beatty, Zelle, Dobos, & Rudd, 1994), and dysfunction (Lee, 1987). Much of that research appears to reflect what Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) termed the "role inadequacy perspective" (p. 1) by focusing on men's shortcomings as fathers and advancing the assumption (at least, implicitly) that most men are ill prepared for the demands of fatherhood.

Although illuminating, a focus on the problematic aspects of the father-son relationship can obscure our understanding of its more positive characteristics and of the many benefits it can entail for both fathers and sons (e.g., see Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). One communicative aspect of the relationship that has received little scholarly attention is the expression of affection, although affectionate communication has been found to be strongly associated with relational satisfaction and to be a critical component of relational maintenance in many significant relationships (Barber & Thomas, 1986; Floyd & Morman, 1998; Morman & Floyd, 1999; Schultz & Schultz, 1987). Perhaps because father-son relationships are so challenging and often are so contentious, many might be inclined to think that they could not be particularly affectionate. However, as dialectical theorists have acknowledged (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), human relationships are often characterized by seemingly contradictory patterns of interaction, making it plausible that affection is an important aspect of even the most contentious relationship.

Affection Between Fathers and Sons

There are very few published studies of fathers' affectionate communication with their sons, and most of those have focused on the fathers' relationships with their male children (e.g., Noller, 1978; Salt, 1991; see also Rane & Draper, 1995). Far fewer studies have addressed men's affection with adolescent or adult sons. Yet, as Salt (1991) pointed out, the social expectations surrounding the expression of father-son affection are considerably more lenient when the sons are children than when they are adolescents or adults. As we argued previously (Floyd & Morman, 2000), sociocultural proscriptions against overt male-male affection begin influencing the communication patterns of father-son pairs when the sons reach adolescence and continue to mitigate against affection exchange in the relationship as the sons grow into adulthood.

From those studies that have addressed men's affection toward adolescent or adult sons, at least three important findings have emerged. The first is that both fathers and sons value the expression of affection in their relationships. In two

separate studies, for instance (Floyd & Morman, 2000; Morman & Floyd, 1999), we have found that affectionate communication is strongly associated with both fathers' and sons' feelings of closeness to each other and their satisfaction with their relationships and with their communication. Likewise, Salt (1991) reported that affectionate touch is very important to fathers and sons in their relationships, although more so for fathers.

A second important finding was that fathers appeared to be more affectionate with their sons today than their own fathers had been with them (Floyd & Morman, 2000). We surmise that the difference reflects what others have called the "changing culture" of fatherhood (Daly, 1995; LaRossa, 1988); that is, the way in which fatherhood is conceptualized and the expectations that are placed on fathers have shifted significantly. Chief among those changes is the increased expectation that fathers should be more nurturant, more loving, and more involved in the raising of their children than fathers previously have been (Backett, 1987; Lamb, 1986; Marsiglio, 1995; Pleck, 1987). Consistent with that reasoning, we found not only that fathers are more affectionate with their sons than their own fathers had been with them but also that today's fathers report greater relational involvement, satisfaction, and closeness with their sons than with their own fathers.

A third important finding is that fathers and sons tend to express their affection toward each other more through supportive activities, such as doing favors for each other or helping each other with projects, than through direct verbal statements (e.g., saying "I love you") or direct nonverbal gestures (e.g., hugging; Morman & Floyd, 1999). Several scholars, including Swain (1989), Wood and Inman (1993), and Parks and Floyd (1996), have suggested that expressing affection or intimacy through activities rather than through overt verbal or nonverbal displays is a common pattern in male-male relationships, in which concern for avoiding potentially sexual interpretations of affectionate behavior appears to be stronger than it is in female-female or opposite-sex relationships. It is thought that to avoid such misinterpretations, males express affection for each other covertly through supportive activities, so as to preserve the significance of the gesture. Although familial male-male pairs, such as brothers or father-and-son pairs, are less susceptible to such concerns than are male-male friendships, recent research suggests that they are not entirely immune to them (see Floyd, 1999, 2000).

Despite those important findings, the small body of research has been limited in at least two ways. First, in no published research has the question of how affection exchange differs in father's relationships with biological and nonbiological sons been addressed. Rising divorce rates and the increasing prevalence of adoption make stepfather and adoptive father relationships more common now, yet our understanding of affection exchange in biological relationships might very well fail to generalize to those types of father-son pairs. Second, with few exceptions (e.g., Morman & Floyd, 1999), research on father-son affection has relied only on fathers' reports about the relationship. That approach has been limiting because it precludes any comparisons between fathers' and sons' communication

patterns. Rather, it has been assumed that what is true for the father is also true for the son. That can be a faulty assumption, as Cicirelli (1985) pointed out.

Our purpose in the present study was to illuminate the following two issues: how affection exchange differs in men's relationships with biological and nonbiological sons and how affectionate behavior of fathers differs from that of sons. We have grounded our investigation in affection exchange theory (AET; Floyd, in press), a propositional theory in which affectionate communication is linked to humans' superordinate evolutionary goals. We will present the tenets of the theory and then report the results of two studies that tested hypotheses that had been theoretically derived concerning affection exchange in father-son relationships.

Affection Exchange Theory

AET theorists conceive of affectionate communication as an evolved behavior that contributes to humans' superordinate motivations to survive and to procreate. Such theorists assume the Darwinian principle of selective fitness, whereby those organisms best adapted to the demands of their environments are most likely to survive and reproduce. AET theorists explicitly link the communication of affection and humans' abilities to survive and procreate. Specifically, AET posits the following:

Postulate 1: Affectionate communication increases survival chances because it contributes to the development and maintenance of human pair bonds, exposing each person to his or her associated resources such as food and shelter;

Postulate 2: Affectionate communication increases an individual's reproductive opportunities by signaling to potential sexual partners that that person would be a fit parent;

Postulate 3: Individuals' long-term procreation motivations are served when they communicate affection to their biological children, because the benefits associated with receiving affection make the children more suitable as mates, increasing the chances that the children will themselves reproduce and will pass on their parents' genes to yet a new generation.

AET posits that in those three ways, affectionate communication contributes directly to humans' superordinate goals (a similar argument was made by Hazan & Zeifman, 1999, pp. 346-347, with respect to attachment). According to AET, affection exchange is an adaptive behavior, so it is also governed by the very motivations it serves. Thus, AET theorists also further posit the following:

Postulate 4: The frequency of affectionate communication is proportional to the directness with which it serves one or both superordinate goals.

One would therefore expect, for example, more affectionate communication to characterize more intimate relationships than less intimate relationships, the

former providing more in the way of shared resources and reproductive opportunity than the latter.

Framing affectionate communication in those terms has numerous implications about affection exchange in parent–child relationships. In the present study, we tested two primary predictions: that parents communicate more affection to biological children than to nonbiological children and that parents communicate more affection to biological children than biological children communicate to them. In both cases, we tested those predictions within the context of men’s relationships with their sons.

STUDY 1

AET provides that the superordinate goal of procreation can be served by affectionate communication in two distinct ways. First, one can express affection as a means of attracting mates for reproductive opportunities, and second, one can express affection to one’s biological children as a means of contributing to the children’s survival to reproductive maturity. In the latter case, one’s own procreation goal is served through the increased likelihood that one’s biological children will themselves reproduce, causing some of one’s own genes to be passed on to yet a new generation.

If affectionate communication to one’s biological progeny serves one’s own procreation goal (Postulate 3), and if one’s amount of affectionate communication to another is proportional to the directness with which it serves one of the superordinate evolutionary goals (Postulate 4), then individuals ought to communicate more affection to their biological children than to their nonbiological children. Affectionate communication expressed to nonbiological children, such as stepchildren or adopted children, does not serve one’s own procreation goal at all, because one’s own genes are not passed on when nonbiological children reproduce.

In Study 1, we tested that prediction using data from fathers’ reports of affection communicated to their sons. The specific hypothesis follows:

Hypothesis 1: Fathers communicate more affection to their biological sons than to their nonbiological sons.

Method

Participants

Participants were 493 adult U.S. men who were fathers of at least one son aged 12 years or older. The participants were part of a larger-scale survey of fathers and sons, some results of which were reported in Floyd and Morman (2000). In the present study, the men ranged in age from 35 to 94 years ($M = 49.14$ years, $SD = 8.57$ years). The sons about whom they reported ranged in age from 12 to 53 years

($M = 21.30$ years, $SD = 7.13$ years). Most of the participants (442) reported on a biological son, whereas the remaining participants (51) reported on a nonbiological son (in 32 cases, a stepson, and in 19 cases, an adopted son). At the time of the present research, 16.0% of the participants had a high school education or less; 26.5% had completed some college but had no degree; 34.8% had an associate's degree, a baccalaureate degree, or both; and 22.6% had a graduate or professional degree. Most of the participants (77.5%) were Caucasian, whereas 14.1% were Black or African American, and the rest were of other ethnic origins.

Procedure

Undergraduate research assistants at two universities in the midwestern United States recruited qualified men to participate in the study. We gave those who agreed to participate a questionnaire to complete and return anonymously to the researchers in a postage-paid envelope. We asked men who had more than one son to report on their relationship with their oldest son. We used that guideline to standardize selection procedures among men with multiple sons and to avoid a selection bias whereby fathers might choose to report on the son with whom they have the most positive relationship.

For part of the questionnaire, we asked participants to complete the factor-based Affectionate Communication Index (Floyd & Morman, 1998), a 19-item Likert-type scale that measures the extent to which participants communicate affection to a target other person by using verbal messages (e.g., saying "I love you"), non-verbal messages (e.g., hugging), and supportive activities (e.g., doing favors for each other). We present Cronbach's alphas for each of those three subscales in Table 1.

Results

To test the hypothesis that men communicate more affection to biological sons than to nonbiological sons, we analyzed the three affection subscales (ver-

TABLE 1. Internal Reliabilities for Fathers' and Sons' Nonverbal, Verbal, and Supportive Affection

| | Nonverbal | Verbal | Supportive |
|-----------------|-----------|--------|------------|
| Study 1 | .84 | .83 | .71 |
| Study 2 fathers | .80 | .82 | .63 |
| Study 2 sons | .75 | .83 | .63 |

Note. We based the reliability estimates on Cronbach's alpha.

bal, nonverbal, and support) together (average $r = .59$); Bartlett test of sphericity, $\chi^2(3) = 546.59$, $p < .001$, in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with relationship type as the independent variable. The MANOVA, which employed Type III sums of squares to compensate for the imbalance in cell sizes, produced a significant multivariate main effect for relationship type, $\Lambda = .96$, $F(3, 476) = 5.93$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$.

Univariate results revealed that as hypothesized, the fathers communicated more verbal affection to their biological sons ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.53$) than to their nonbiological sons ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 478) = 17.02$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Likewise, the results revealed that the fathers communicated more nonverbal affection to their biological sons ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.28$) than to their nonbiological sons ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 478) = 8.22$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Finally, the results revealed that the fathers communicated more supportive affection to their biological sons ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 0.91$) than to their nonbiological sons ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.96$), $F(1, 478) = 6.85$, $p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The results supported Hypothesis 1.

Discussion

In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis, derived from AET, that fathers communicate more affection to biological sons than to nonbiological sons. Despite the large imbalance in cell sizes, the MANOVA produced hypothesis-confirming results for all three forms of affectionate communication measured. The results supported the idea that fathers are more inclined to share resources—emotional or otherwise—with their biological progeny than with those to whom they are not genetically related because the fathers gain more in an evolutionary sense by contributing to the well-being of those who can pass on some of the fathers' genes to future generations. To phrase the implication in the opposite way, parents might be more inclined to withhold resources—including affection—from nonbiological children than from biological children. That principle is reflected in Daly and Wilson's (1988) construct of *discriminative parental solicitude*, which explains that to maximize chances for long-term evolutionary success, parents are often forced to invest resources heavily in some children and less or not at all in others. Such an observation casts doubt on nonbiological parent-child relationships, such as those involving stepchildren or adopted children. In fact, Daly and Wilson (1995) reported that "living with a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse risk yet discovered" (p. 22).

That situation raises the intriguing question of how biological children's own probability of reproducing is related to the amount of affection or other resources that they receive from their parents. Are children who are unlikely to reproduce less likely to receive parental resources than children who are likely to reproduce? AET indicates that they are.

In one test of that prediction, Floyd (in press) compared heterosexual men

with homosexual men with respect to how much affection they received from their fathers. Reasoning that gay men are less likely than straight men to reproduce, Floyd hypothesized that fathers would be more affectionate with their straight sons than with their gay sons. The results confirmed the notion for all forms of affectionate communication measured. The results of other research have suggested that developmentally disabled children, who might be less likely than normally developing children to reproduce, receive less affection from their parents than do other children (Compton & Niemeier, 1994).

Despite the significant findings reported in the present study, the small number of nonbiological father–son relationships included was a limitation, particularly insofar as it was too small to allow for adequately powered tests of the hypothesis with stepfather and adoptive-father relationships separately. Future research with larger and more balanced cell sizes will allow such comparisons. Stepfather–son and adoptive-father–son relationships might be illuminating because although both are nonbiological, they might differ with respect to resource exchange. Specifically, because adoption is a newer feature of the human experience than is acting as a stepparent, it is possible that the evolved pattern of withholding resources from nonbiological children does not extend to adoptive relationships to the same extent as it does to stepparent relationships (M. Daly, personal communication, September 20, 2000).

In addition to differing in adaptive imperatives, fathers of biological and nonbiological sons might also differ in their relational history, its duration, and its quality. Although those differences tend to reflect the nature of parenting biological and nonbiological offspring, they might contribute to differences in parents' patterns of communication. An intriguing possibility for testing AET's implications in a more equalized environment would be to compare males not with their biological and nonbiological fathers but with their biological and nonbiological uncles. (The authors thank one of the reviewers for this suggestion.) Because it is common for males to have both types of uncles, yet not to clearly distinguish between the two, a comparison between those two types of relationships might provide a cleaner test of the adaptive imperatives that AET suggests.

In Study 1, the comparison was between fathers with biological sons and fathers with nonbiological sons. We did not examine the affectionate behavior of the sons themselves. We designed Study 2 to examine differences in how fathers and sons are affectionate with each other.

STUDY 2

If affectionate communication to others serves one's survival goal (Postulate 1), affectionate communication to one's biological child serves one's own long-term procreation goal (Postulate 3), and the service of a superordinate evolutionary goal increases the likelihood of affectionate communication (Postulate 4), then a second prediction that can be deduced from AET is that parents commu-

nicate more affection to their biological children than their biological children communicate to them. According to the theory, expressing affection to biological children increases parents' chances both for their own survival, through the sharing of resources that accompanies human bonding, and for their procreation, through the children's increased reproductive opportunities.

However, expressing affection to one's parents, while clearly serving one's survival goal, does not directly serve one's procreation goal (except through the increased reproductive opportunity that naturally accompanies longer survival). Thus, parents have more to gain in an evolutionary sense by communicating affection to their biological children than their children have to gain by communicating affection to them. Also, according to Postulate 4, parents should therefore communicate more affection to their biological children than they receive from them. (Of course, such would not be the prediction for nonbiological children, because communicating affection to them would not typically serve one's own procreation goal at all.)

As in Study 1, in Study 2, we tested that prediction in the context of men's relationships with their sons. The specific hypothesis follows:

Hypothesis 2: Fathers communicate more affection to their sons than the sons communicate to the fathers.

Method

Participants

Participants were 136 U.S. males who comprised 68 father-son dyads. The fathers ranged in age from 39 to 74 years ($M = 50.08$ years, $SD = 5.07$ years), and the sons ranged in age from 12 to 45 years ($M = 22.15$ years, $SD = 4.70$ years). Of the fathers and sons, 92% were Caucasian. At the time of the study, 4.6% of the fathers and 15.5% of the sons had a high school education or less; 17.2% of fathers and 43.5% of sons had completed some college but had no degree; 43.6% of fathers and 39.1% of sons had completed an associate, a baccalaureate degree, or both; and 34.4% of fathers and 1.4% of sons had completed a graduate or professional degree. All of the father-son pairs were biological.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Study 1, except that both the father and the son in each pair completed the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher independently. Both fathers and sons in Study 2 completed the verbal, nonverbal, and support subscales of the Affectionate Communication Index with respect to how much affection they communicated to each other. Reliabilities for the individual subscales are reported in Table 1.

Results

To test the hypothesis that fathers communicate more affection to their sons than the sons communicate to the fathers, we analyzed fathers' and sons' reports of affectionate communication with each other in a repeated-measures MANOVA, with role (father vs. son) and affection type (verbal, nonverbal, or support) as within-subjects variables, and the amount of affection, as reported by fathers and sons, as the dependent variables. Role produced a significant within-subjects main effect, $F(1, 67) = 17.03, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$. Examination of the means revealed that as hypothesized, fathers communicated more verbal affection to their sons ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.42$) than the sons communicated to the fathers ($M = 3.72, SD = 1.39$). Fathers also communicated more nonverbal affection to their sons ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.04$) than the sons communicated to the fathers ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.96$). Finally, fathers communicated more support affection to their sons ($M = 5.61, SD = 0.84$) than the sons communicated to the fathers ($M = 5.05, SD = 0.89$). The results supported Hypothesis 2.

The MANOVA also showed an unexpected within-subjects main effect for affection type, which used Hunyh-Feldt-corrected degrees of freedom because of a violation of compound symmetry assumptions, $F(1.954, 130.897) = 186.11, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .74$. Post hoc analysis with the conservative Scheffé test revealed that fathers and sons engaged in nonverbal displays of affection ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.46$) significantly less often than they did verbal displays of affection ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.41$), and that verbal displays were significantly less frequent than were displays of affection through supportive actions ($M = 5.33, SD = 0.87$).

Discussion

The idea that there is a difference between the amount of affection that fathers give to sons and the amount that sons give to fathers might be counterintuitive, particularly since social pressures toward a norm of reciprocity should encourage equity in the exchange of a resource like affection (see Gouldner, 1960). Indeed, unreciprocated affectionate expressions can be traumatic events in personal relationships (see Floyd & Burgoon, 1999). However, parents and their children are not on equal footing in the evolutionary game. Specifically, whereas affectionate behavior between a parent and child should contribute to the survival of both, the third postulate of AET provides that affection that parents communicate to children contributes additionally to the parents' procreation goal because it represents an investment of resources in children that increases the children's chances for reproducing. When children procreate, of course, some of their parents' genes are passed on to a new generation, and the parents gain additional evolutionary success. Affection that parents communicate to their children thus serves both the children's and the parents' procreation goals, so long as

the children are their parents' biological children. In contrast, we do not expect that affection that children communicate to their parents will directly contribute to parents' procreation goals, putting more at stake for parents than for children in affectionate communication within their relationships. As Study 2 demonstrated, that difference manifested itself in a mean difference between the amount of affection that fathers communicated to their sons and the amount that their sons communicated to them. Most important, the results supported the notion for all three types of affection measured.

In our earlier research on fathers and sons (Morman & Floyd, 1999) and on brothers and male friends (Floyd, 1995, 1996; Floyd & Morman, 1997; Morman & Floyd, 1998), we found the within-subjects mean differences among the three forms of affectionate communication. Yet, we did not expect to find those differences in Study 2. That finding reflects a tendency, not generally found in female-female or male-female relationships, for male-male pairs to express positive feelings for the other through instrumental forms of support rather than direct verbal statements or nonverbal cues. Several scholars have suggested that men tend to hide their affection for other men in such instrumental expressions for fear of being seen as effeminate (see, e.g., Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993).

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study adds to a small but important body of knowledge regarding the expression of affection in men's relationships with their sons. A deeper understanding of the father-son relationship, and specifically of the communicative processes that characterize it, is important because of the relationship's significance in the male experience and because of the many benefits it can yield for both fathers and sons.

Guided by AET, we found that the biological nature of the father-son relationship influences how much affection is exchanged through verbal, nonverbal, and supportive means. Specifically, fathers tend not to be as affectionate with nonbiological sons as they are with biological sons. That finding follows the premise that humans' long-term procreative success is, in part, a function of the resources that they give to their biological offspring. Stepsons and adopted sons cannot contribute to their step- or adoptive parents' long-term procreative efforts because they do not carry their genes. Therefore, as we predicted, stepsons and adopted sons tend to receive less affection from their fathers than do biological sons.

In a future test of that prediction, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether the total number of children a father has moderates the effect. That is, do fathers with multiple children (especially if some are biological) curtail their affection toward nonbiological children more than do fathers with fewer children? That possibility might be the case because fathers with more children have more options for selectively distributing their resources to maximize their own long-term procreative success. Those with one or few children might not dis-

criminate as greatly because their options are more limited. Of course, the question is an empirical one that must be deferred to a later study.

The dyadic nature of Study 2 enabled us to compare how much affection fathers communicate to their sons with how much the sons communicate back. Guided by AET, we reasoned that men would communicate more affection to their sons than the sons would to them, and the results confirmed that inference for all three forms of affection measured. That finding follows the observation that whereas sons' affection to their fathers serves the sons' survival motivation, the fathers' affection to their sons serves both the fathers' survival motivation and their long-term procreation motivation. Thus, fathers have more to gain by expressing affection to their sons than the sons have to gain by expressing affection to their fathers.

Most important, however, AET makes that assertion only for biological relationships. That limitation is why we did not include stepfather and adoptive-father relationships in Study 2. As noted above, children cannot contribute to their nonbiological parents' long-term procreative efforts, effectively eliminating the additional advantage that fathers gain by expressing affection to their sons.

Collectively, those findings add to our knowledge about communication in both biological and nonbiological father-son relationships. In addition, they provide empirical support for AET and suggest that additional testing and refinement of the theory is warranted.

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