

## **Comparing Father and Son Relationships in France and America**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between father and son is one that is complex and nuanced. With different families comes many different dynamics, values, and bonds, which are accentuated by the differences in culture in France and the United States. With a topic as broad as father and son relationships, it is hard to draw any stark contrasts, but throughout research, the humanity of fatherhood is evident. At the heart of family relations lies many of the same core values and beliefs, but it was easy to see many similarities between the different father and son pairs in Amiens. In Amiens, fathers place an emphasis on shared interests and experiences and strive to be present in the lives of their children. This is aided by the cultural prominence of family time.

### **FRANCE**

One of the biggest aspects of father and son relationships in France is the overall shared interests between father and sons. Through interviews and my time with my 2nd host family, I was able to observe firsthand the impact and prevalence of shared interests. With my host family, the Sarasins, the father, Laurent, and the son, Thibaut, were linked by many interests, the most prominent of which being their love of motorbikes and music. I spent multiple nights watching the MotoGP (a motorbike race) on the Sarasin couch, and was able to easily see the passion the two shared. They spent those nights discussing the finer points of racing, their favorite drivers, and the skills required for success. Furthermore, I was able to spend time in the family's garage and see the love and care that the father and son poured into the four motorcycles they owned.

On my first day with the family, Thibaut and Laurent even took me in the sidecar of a motorcycle around the countryside and to a battlefield memorial. As mentioned before, another shared interest was a love of music, which was, interestingly enough, often American music. They loved bands like 21 Pilots, the Foo Fighters, and Linkin Park, to name a few. It was evident that this bond brought them together on car rides to school, and at night after dinner when they would listen to, and discuss, all kinds of music. While immersing myself in the family, it was clear that both shared loves were crucial to the maintenance of the relationship between father and son. Time in which these interests were shared were times in which the father and son got to spend time together, talk through their days and life developments, and overall relate to one another, opening pathways to better communication and a deeper bond.

In the interviews I conducted with French teachers, it was equally apparent the importance of shared interests between the father and son. The first interviewee was a history teacher named M. Chapolard, who had an adopted seven-year-old son named Paul. With Chapolard and his son, gardening was the common thread. They spent their afternoons on warm days gardening and talking, though admittedly Paul is often merely playing nearby. The second teacher I interviewed was a science teacher named M. Delaviere, who had a 17-year-old son. With his son, he shared a love of being outdoors, and, in particular, being on the water. They often spent their free days sailing in a small sailboat, kayaking, or going on walks. Again, with both of these father-son duos, shared interests gave an opportunity for time spent together and created a link between father and son. Both fathers recognized the importance of this time together to their relationship because it gave a time in which they could talk things through and be emotionally present with one another. Shared times and experiences are crucial to maintaining

a healthy bond between father and son, and give the fathers a pathway in which to relate to their sons.

Another common tendency I noticed was the way in which sons emulate their fathers. To best introduce the concept is an anecdote from my first day at Le Lycée Robert de Luzarches in Amiens. I was with my first host, a girl named Tessa, and while we were waiting in line for lunch in the canteen, some of her friends tried making conversation with me. One friend in particular, a girl named Haya, spoke fluent English so naturally I gravitated toward her. Through the course of the conversation, we ended up talking about my research project and my second host family, the Sarasins. Interestingly enough, when we started talking about Thibaut and his father, Haya's first remark was that Thibaut was a "carbon copy" of his father. This comment really sparked a different way of thinking for me and when I was finally staying with the Sarasins the following week, I couldn't help but notice the validity of Haya's statement. And as I explored and furthered my research, I began to have this notion corroborated by many other sources. In almost every survey I gave out, interview I conducted, and observation I made, it became evident that this was not an isolated trend. As most French boys age and mature, they naturally pick up on the tendencies and behaviors of their father, which builds as time goes on. This is not to say the children do not have their own individual traits; rather, the children share enough traits that it is obvious their upbringing and their father's influence.

Furthermore, most adolescent French boys express a desire to be like their fathers. In the survey I handed out, one of the questions I posed was as follows: If you become a father, do you wish to become a father like your own? In response to this question, I received an overwhelming amount of "Oui's". When asked to explain their reasoning, students gave a variety of answers, but most of which was the time spent together with their fathers and the effort that their fathers

put into their life. This was an interesting development that I was not fully expecting. I was coming to France fully expecting the relationship between father and son to be a rocky one, messy and fragmented like is common in America. But diving into this question shifted my perspective.

A final tendency I noticed was the true and genuine desire and love of spending time together. To better understand this topic, one needs a background knowledge of French family culture. The French as a whole are a very family-oriented people. They have strong convictions about family time and strong beliefs about the importance of time spent together, especially around the dinner table. I spent almost every night of my time with my two host families spending an hour or two around the table before, during, and after dinner, discussing our days, pop culture, and everything in between. This is common among the French, and long meals are just one way in which they engage in increased family time. In Amiens, many families do not live in the city, instead opting for a cheaper and quieter life in nearby villages. Although public transportation is quite advanced in the city, the distance still creates a need for a daily commute to school and back. With the Sarasins, Thibaut was driven by his father every morning. On the morning drive, they were able to take some time, albeit 20ish minutes, to talk, listen to music, and mull over the day to come. This drive was another small thing that was crucial to the relationship between Thibaut and his father. This parallels a development between many French boys and their fathers. The French father-son pair tends to spend a lot of time together, as was reflected in my survey. All students surveyed said that they spend, on average, five to seven hours a week, or more than eight hours a week with their fathers, respectively. Furthermore, for every student surveyed, each said that they wished to spend more time with their fathers. At first, this development seemed strange. How could people who spend so much time with their fathers

want to spend even more time with their fathers? I quickly came to realize it was a product of French culture. As mentioned before, the culture places an emphasis on time spent together. This generates an overall desire to spend time together and further reinforces how shared interests bolster intrafamilial relationships.

## **AMERICA**

Up until this point, I have focused on my research in France because, hey, that was the whole point of the trip. Now, I will shift to a general characterization of American father-son relations, and compare and contrast the American perspective of each point that was made about the French. Throughout my research, I found that father-son relationships are generally quite universal. Behind each small variation is the same core, powered by beliefs that span most Western cultures. To put it simply, most fathers love their sons and have a longing for a close relationship with them. Unfortunately, many fathers feel quite lost, and as a result, often do not know the best ways of going about fatherhood. Through my research, the most important quality that I noticed through the best fathers was an unconditional love for their son and a desire to be the best man they could be for him.

In America, shared interests between father and son are just as important to maintaining a healthy and strong relationship. For Americans, you still see just as much variety in interests. For many, sport is the common denominator between fathers and sons. As an athlete, sports are one of the passions that I share with my father, especially a love for American football. We spend a lot of our time together watching, playing, or talking about sports. For most of my friends this is true as well, although probably because my closest friends are all athletes. While fathers do try

their best to relate to their kids and share passions, it can often be misguided. Keeping with the theme of sports, many fathers want athletic greatness for their sons, which can cause fathers to be overly critical, opting to critique instead of being proud. This is something that is unfortunately somewhat common among athletes, to the point in which the son can lose his passion for the sport. Overall, with shared interests in America, many fathers do their best to put in effort. For most fathers, they want to have shared interests and experiences with their children, but for one reason or another do not do as good of a job. My hypothesis is a combination of the lifestyle and schedule, and of the cultural differences in France. Overall, French fathers place more of an emphasis on being emotionally present in their sons' lives, and seem to know how to do a better job of it. Additionally, work and school schedules are very similar, which leads to greater capacity for time spent together.

A major difference between France and America was in the way in which sons emulate their fathers. As mentioned before, sons in France want to be like their fathers, even to an older age, and sons tend to mimic the mannerisms and characteristics of their fathers. In America, this tends to not be the case. As children grow and mature in America, they tend to develop their own personality and diverge from their upbringing. American culture is one of strong independence, therefore many Americans seek to part from their upbringings and blaze new trails of independence and self-sufficiency. Through this vein, many sons choose to diverge from their fathers, instead forging their own beliefs and convictions. With this being said, many sons still pick up on and retain some of the mannerisms and core values of their fathers, for better or for worse. I, for example, still have many of the same characteristics as my father and pick up on his mannerisms; however, a big part of my upbringing is that I have to find what I am strongly convicted of and that I have to choose an identity for myself. My father does not want me to be

just like him; rather, he wants me to surpass him and spread my wings on my own. I have found this to be a tendency among many other American fathers as well.

My final point of comparison between French and American father-son relationships is the difference in time spent together. Before I get into time spent together, I must make an important note. For most fathers, a lack of time spent together does not reflect a lack of desire. Most fathers want to spend time and be close with their kids, but sometimes, for one reason or another, they are not always. With that being said, let's get into it. First of all, in America, I have noticed a greater amount of fathers completely absent from their kid's life. This creates an obvious impediment to time spent together. I have friends who haven't seen their father in person in years and it is of great detriment to their development. But even with fathers who are completely present in their kids' lives, time spent together seems to be less than that of their French counterparts. This is in part due to the differences in culture, because France has a culture which is much more oriented towards time spent together. Like the French, American fathers and sons often spend time together through their shared interests. I spend a lot of time watching sports and movies with my dad, which are two things we love to do together. Additionally, Americans as a whole are much more independent people. Once most Americans turn 16, they start driving, which eliminates the car rides that the French value. And, with driving comes a greater amount of freedom, and sons begin to spend less time around the house, thus creating less time to be spent with their fathers.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

For a topic like Father and Son relationships, it is hard to get a conclusive look at the intricacies and daily patterns of interaction in such a short time frame. I suspect that some data and observations I obtained from surveys and interviews may be tainted by a bit of idealism by the participants or by an effort to present the best image of themselves. In a 2 week period, it is almost impossible to recognize all the bad and the good parts; that can only come with total immersion. I might seem overly critical of the American father, and I may seem to be placing French fathers in an elevated position. This is unintentional, and only a product of the fact that I live in America and experience the full scope of a father-son relationship daily, as well as the fact that I am better able to interact with my American peers and see their interactions with their fathers.

The relationship between father and son is incredibly diverse, even on two different continents. During my time in Amiens, it was incredibly evident that the father-son relationship was just as important as it is in America. The biggest differences between the two were more cultural than anything, as is usual in societies as different as France and America. In both countries, fathers love their sons. They truly want the best for their sons and have a deep longing for a close relationship with their sons. Through these core values, it is evident that father and son relationships are not so different after all.