

CIRCUMCISION TO “LOOK LIKE DADDY”?

Michael Copeland
American Academy of Pediatrics
141 Northwest Point Blvd.
P.O. Box 927
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927

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Dear Dr. Copeland:

The following quote has been called to my attention in a newspaper article connected with the April 2 JAMA article on circumcision:

“If Dad is circumcised and junior is not,” said Michael Copeland, spokesman for the American Academy of Pediatrics, the son “may have some psychosocial issues in that he looks different from Dad.”

As a psychologist and the author of *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma*, I have done a thorough search of the literature to investigate this belief. There is no published evidence whatsoever to support your statement.

This myth is the product of a psychological defense mechanism called projection, the process of attributing feelings to others that belong to oneself. It is the circumcised father who may have some psychosocial issues if he looks different from his son. The fear of confronting these issues in themselves motivates circumcised men to cling to the myth that uncircumcised sons will have such issues. Furthermore, when the first generation of American boys was circumcised, they looked different from their uncircumcised fathers. This myth was not prevalent then because uncircumcised men had no repressed feelings about how their penis looked.

As part of the research for my book, I interviewed uncircumcised men about their feelings. Their statements and other pertinent information lead me to the following inferences regarding the decision to circumcise for social or “matching” reasons:

The circumcision status of the father is not necessarily known or important to a male child.

A circumcised boy who “matches” others may nevertheless have negative feelings about being circumcised. These feelings can last a lifetime.(1)

It is not possible to predict prior to circumcision how a boy will feel about it later.

Even though [in the United States] uncircumcised men are in the minority, there is some indication that most uncircumcised men are happy to be that way.

An uncircumcised man who is unhappy about it can choose to be circumcised, but this is rarely done. The estimated rate of adult circumcision in the United States is 3 in 1000.(2)

An uncircumcised man who is unhappy about his status may feel different after learning more about circumcision and the important functions of the foreskin.

The social factor is much less of an issue for boys born today because of the lower circumcision rate (approximately 60 percent nationally, under 40 percent in some states (3)). These two accounts from mothers of uncircumcised sons add another perspective to the discussion of choosing circumcision for social reasons.

“My youngest son [seven years old] is completely content at being ‘different’ from his father and [three] older brothers. When I explained circumcision to him, his face took on a frightened expression as he cupped his hands over his genitals and loudly declared, ‘That is never going to happen to me!’ “(4)

“When my eight-year-old son was five, he noticed a difference in the appearance of the other boys’ penises. I told him that’s because they had their foreskins cut off. He said, ‘That’s horrible.’ He’s very adamant about it.”(5)

I asked the second mother if I could talk with her son, Michael. Because he lives in an area with a very high circumcision rate, he is the only boy in his class who is not circumcised.

RG: How did you first learn about circumcision?

Michael: My mom told me when I was little, and she didn’t want that to happen to me.

RG: How do you feel about her not wanting to let it happen to you?

Michael: I’m glad ‘cause it’s scary. It’s scary for a little baby.

RG: At school, do the other kids have foreskins, or are they circumcised?

Michael: They’re circumcised.

RG: How does it make you feel when you see that they’re circumcised?

Michael: Kind of sad, because they had it cut off.

RG: Do the other boys notice that you have a foreskin and they don’t?

Michael: Uh huh. And they say my penis looks weird.

RG: What do you think when they say that?

Michael: I say, “No it doesn’t. Yours looks weird.” Then I tell them why there is still skin over mine and not over theirs.

RG: Then what do they say?

Michael: Some say they don’t believe it. Some just walk away.(6)

It appears that if an uncircumcised boy is given proper information, it is possible to prevent a negative impact from extreme minority status in a group of circumcised boys.

I hope you now understand that by perpetuating the “matching” myth, you do a great disservice to the American public and undermine the credibility of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The public is understandably confused about circumcision. Your statement only serves to increase the confusion. It would certainly help if the AAP issued a news release to correct your mistake.

As you know, the AAP will be reporting on circumcision in the near future. Many people who care deeply about circumcision are looking for the AAP to report accurate, factual information about this complex issue. If, for whatever reason, you cannot resist the temptation to express your personal beliefs when you talk to the media about circumcision, then perhaps someone else should take over this responsibility. Reporting to the public about circumcision is too important to risk this mistake being made again.

Sincerely,

Ronald Goldman, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Circumcision Resource Center, Boston, MA
www.circumcision.org

(1) Goldman, R., *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma* (Boston: Vanguard Publications, 1997), 103–115.

(2) Wallerstein, E., *Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1980), 48.

(3) National Centre for Health Statistics, telephone conversation with author 1997. Rate is for 1994.

(4) Romberg, R., “Circumcision Feedback” (letter to the editor), *Mensa Bulletin*, May 1993.

(5) Huggins, R., telephone conversation with author, February 1996.

(6) Huggins, M., telephone conversation with author, February 1996.