Analysis of Cats in the Cradle

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**“Cats in the Cradle”**

Introduced in the 1974 album, *Verities & Balderdash*, “Cats in the Cradle” by Harry Chapin is a captivating song with a catchy tune that many people recognize and sing to. “Cats in the Cradle” is a folk-rock song that describes a distant father-son relationship. Both father and son struggled to make time for each other, so their relationship suffered. This song demonstrates the importance of spending time with your son, as a father.

**Busy People Must Make Sacrifices**

Early on in the song, two lines within the first verse clearly prove how the attribute of being busy may damage a relationship: “but there were planes to catch, bills to pay, he learned to walk when I was away.” The father was occupied with his job and other responsibilities, so he did not have a lot of time to spend with his son. “Can you teach me to throw, I said, not today, I got a lot to do, he said, that’s okay” is found in the second verse and this establishes the effect of being busy had on his relationship with his son.

The father was very busy with all his responsibilities and he chose which obligations he designated his time to. His made work was his first priority which affected the amount of time he spent with his son. One can assume the father had long work hours from the chorus, “when you coming home, Dad?” “I don’t know when.” The father was often at his work and when he did come home, he continued to work. Researchers found in a 2014 study that Men have a common gender role of providing for his family via bringing in the most income. Many high-paying jobs have long hours and require fathers to take their work home.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A 2011 study identified the correlation between high-intensity jobs and a father’s involvement in parenting. Jobs that have high levels of stress, have long hours, abnormal work schedules, have a high amount of pressure, and a low amount of work-place support can all negativity affect the relationship between a father and child.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since the father in “Cats in the Cradle” was constantly busy with his work, he may have had a large quantity of work-stress. Many researchers have concluded that work stress will affect the quality of father’s relationships with his children[[3]](#footnote-3), and from these lyrics in “Cats in the Cradle”, listeners can reach the same conclusion.

**Never Procrastinate**

The chorus restates “When you coming home, dad?” “I don't know when” “But we'll get together then. You know we'll have a good time then.” The father continued to delay spending time with his son and never developed their relationship. Later in the third and fourth choruses, more lyrics describe the father-son relationship when the son is an adult. “But we'll get together then, dad. You know we'll have a good time then.” The son had grown up and procrastinated spending time his father, similar to what his father did to him when he was younger.

Both father and son pushed off spending time together, so they never got any quality father-son bonding time. Throughout the entire song, the son wanted to be like his father: “He'd [son] say “I'm gonna be like you, dad.” “You know I'm gonna be like you.” The son turned out to be just like his father because the son also procrastinated making time for maintaining and building their relationship. The father realized this in the end of the last verse: “and as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me. He'd grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.”

**What is Important to People and What do They Love**

If something is important to someone, they typically spend a large amount of time with that thing. This is true in relationships as well. When someone likes or loves another person, they would demonstrate their affection by spending a lot of time in the other person’s company. Many relationships grow from having shared experiences with the people you care about. Shared experiences can only occur if two or more people do something or witness an event together.

Actions speak louder than words. The father clearly loved his son, but he never made time to be with him. Later in the third verse when the son was an adult, he told his father he wanted to spend time him, but never made time: “he [son] said, I'd love to, dad, if I could find the time.” Another research study discovered that many fathers value the time they spend with their children, but many fathers do not spend as much time with their children as they would like to.[[4]](#footnote-4) In “Cats in the Cradle”, The father had a lot of job responsibilities which didn’t allow a lot of time to spend with his son, which the previous research study identified: the more hours a father worked, the less amount of time he would spend with his children.[[5]](#footnote-5) One excerpt from the second verse: “can you teach me to throw, I [father] said, not today. I got a lot to do.” “He [son] said, that's okay.” The father may have viewed his responsibility as a father as less important than his other obligations because not spending time with his son did not have an immediate consequence like the other responsibilities the father had, which follows a findings where fathers spend different amounts of time working and spending time with their family and this time varies significantly depending on how they perceive their role as a father.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Repeat of Never Being Together**

Throughout “Cat’s In the Cradle”, both father and son never got together. This is proven with a couple excerpts from the chorus: “when you coming home, dad?” “I don't know when. But we'll get together then” and “when you coming home, son?” “I don't know when, but we'll get together then, dad.” They never got together even though they both made promises to meet and “have a good time then.” Several lines in all four verses show how one person made an attempt to spend time together, but the other person was busy. There were too many of these ‘Instances’ for their relationship to grow. Both father and son did not view their relationship as a priority, and as a result, their bond suffered.

**Conclusion**

“Cats in the Cradle” has many elements: the negative effects that being busy has on a father-son relationship, how procrastion affects a family bond, and people spend time with the people who are important to them. This song shows the importance that fathers must spend time with their son to have a strong relationship. Fathers must prioritize the obligations they do, but still make time for the things and people that are important to him. After the father in “Cats in the Cradle” did not reserve time to be with his son, the son grew up and never made himself available to spend time with his father, so they never “had a good time then.” As a father, you must make time to spend with your family among your other responsibilities, or not have a

good relationship with your children and regret this decision for the rest of your life. You decide.

References

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1. Katrina McLaughlin and Orla Muldoon, “Father Identity, Involvement and Work-Family Balance: An In-depth Interview Study”, Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 24 (5), (2014): 439-452 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Jennifer Baxter, “When Dad works long hours: work hours are associated with fathering 4-5-year-old children”, Family Maters 77, (2007): 60-69 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Katrina McLaughlin and Orla Muldoon, “Father Identity, Involvement and Work-Family Balance: An In-depth Interview Study”, Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 24 (5), (2014): 439-452 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)