



PRACTICING
FATHERHOOD

20 Lessons From a Young Dad

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A SEEDBED SHORT

“PRACTICING FATHERHOOD:
20 LESSONS FROM A YOUNG DAD”

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Father. This single word has the power to inspire feelings of pride, fear, longing, regret, anger, and hope in the most stoic of individuals. It is a title that cannot be understood outside of the relationship of parent and child, and yet for so many in our culture it is the root of family brokenness.

I have been blessed with the gift and responsibility of fatherhood to my two wonderful children, and as I have watched them grow over the years I have come to recognize the very tangible effects that my everyday interactions with them have both on their daily lives and their ongoing development. Even my very presence or absence has far-reaching consequences for their present happiness and long-term sense of self-worth. Through my actions and words, I can choose to be a father who lavishes them with a love that points the way to my Father in Heaven, or I can choose to yoke them with the burden of the unloved and fatherless.

Some of the simplest lessons I have learned about being a father have been the most important for my children, and I have come to discover things that challenged what I previously thought about what it means to be a loving father. I have compiled this short list of lessons that I have learned over my years as a father in the hope that it might encourage others as they seek to live into that most precious gift they will ever receive and most important job title they will ever hold.

1. After feeding, clothing, and sheltering my children, there is no more important task that I have in life than to introduce them to Jesus. Why don't I follow the Sunday school answer to everything and put Jesus first here? Because God has given my children to my care, and caring for their needs in a loving, self-sacrificial way is one of the most prominent ways that I can show

my children who God is and how much He loves them. This, in turn, helps me to communicate with them how Jesus is the ultimate image of God's love.

2. Play is the great bridge that crosses all other barriers between a father and a child. There have been times, especially with my son, where the kids don't want much to do with Daddy. This most often happens when I am researching and working long hours or after I have taken a long trip. There are some hurt feelings upon my return, because I wasn't there when they wanted me to be. There are also those times following discipline, or hurt feelings, or booboos when it is especially hard to talk with a child. It is at these times, in particular, that the act of playing can bring a child out of gloominess and into the joy of life. More than that, play is one of the greatest ways to bond with your children. It shows them that they are important, that their daddy (or mommy) wants to spend time with them, that their imaginations are good and wonderful, and that family time is some of the most enjoyable time of our lives. There have been many times when I did not play with my children, because I was distracted or feeling unwell. I regret every missed opportunity to play with them, and pray that God will give me the energy and "fun-lovingness" to play with them at every future opportunity.

3. Being right is less important than being real. I am an "answer man." I like to figure out why things work, how they came to be, and why it matters. It's what makes me enjoy my research. However, I have found that when it comes to my children there are times when an answer man is needed (like when my son asks me what various animals eat), and there are times when I should keep my mouth shut, even when my urge is to correct something that is wrong. For a child who is growing and learning, it is more important for them to know their daddy is listening to them and learning with them than it is for daddy to have all the right answers.

4. Discipline should always be conducted out of love, and never in anger. Discipline administered in anger damages relationships. It is often too harsh (and uncontrolled), too swift, and too dismissive of your child. Loving discipline has at its heart the well-being of your child. Discipline doled out in anger is more often seeking retribution.

5. Saying sorry isn't just for kids. I tell my kids when I am wrong, and I ask their forgiveness when I have wronged them. I had a talk with my daughter recently about the wrong way and right way to deal with disappointment; one way can lead us to sin in anger, while the other leads us to patience and contentment. I openly used an example of my own sin of losing my temper as a way to talk about what God would have us do, and what we can and should do when we have taken the wrong direction. You are your child's most important role model. How can they model you well if you don't ever talk about your failures?

6. Say "I love you" often, and mean it every time. You simply cannot say "I love you" too much to your children. They will have many voices vying for their attention as they grow. Let the dominant voice be your voice, echoing our heavenly Father: "You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased."

7. It is okay to let your daughter paint your nails and brush your hair. Dads, get over yourselves. If letting your little girl paint your nails makes you question your masculinity, you have much bigger problems to deal with. Let your daughter lavish you with her love the best way she knows how.

8. Answer every question your children ask with utmost seriousness. One sure way to tear down a child is to treat them as though they are not important. If your child asks you a question, do everything in your power not only to answer it, but to answer

it well. This shows your kids that they are important to you, that the things they have to say are worthy of your attention, and you might just learn something along the way.

9. Don't shy away from talking about "big things" with your kids. Some of the most challenging conversations I have ever had with any person (adult or child) I have had with my daughter and son. We have talked about death, heaven and the resurrection of the dead, the Trinity, the Crucifixion, you name it. Don't underestimate your child's capacity for understanding. Talking to your children about important things will challenge you to communicate well, using language that is accessible without diluting the content. And who would you rather they hear this stuff from? Society is already telling your child what they should think about big questions. Are you?

10. Be your child's biggest fan. I am unashamed in my overwhelming support of everything my kids do. We try to praise all of our kids' accomplishments, big or small. I've heard the argument that this makes praise cheap. I disagree. I think it makes praise a precious commodity. When we praise our children often, we not only instill in them a sense of confidence, but we show them the proper source of affirmation is the family. They will be less likely to seek that affirmation elsewhere in destructive relationships or behaviors if they receive it adequately at home. There is a caution that comes with this, though. Praising your kids for their accomplishments does not mean giving empty praise. That leads to the phenomenon of the "American Idol generation" where people with no talent whatsoever can't understand their failure, because their mom has always told them they were the best at whatever they pursued.

11. Embarrass yourself often. My kids will come to loathe this, I am sure, but I have no qualms whatsoever about embarrassing myself

for their sake. If I can do something ludicrous (but safe and legal) that will get a smile out of them and endear me to them in any way, you better believe I will do it.

12. Fight for your kids (and their mother). Never allow anyone or anything to come between you and your family. If there are other things vying for their attention that cause stress in your relationships to one another, fight with all your might against those things. Part of fighting for your family is loving them extravagantly. Part of this fight is also waging war against those things that can tear a family apart. Dads (in particular) this means workaholism, sexual misconduct (including pornography), friendships with the opposite sex, sports fanaticism, etc. If what you do threatens your family in any way, flee from it!

13. Be present for what matters to your kids (i.e., birthday parties, concerts at school, etc.). I have had to learn this lesson the hard way. At the end of my life, my children will not remember or care all that much about the things I have accomplished. They will not care how much money I made, how many letters I have after my name, what my research focus was, or how good my golf game was. They will care about and remember the time I spent with them. Be present for every important event in your child's life, if at all possible. And when you miss such an event, make it up to them by spending extra time with them, doing something you both love. There were times growing up when I told my parents I didn't care if they came to this or that event. No matter what your kids tell you, they notice and care if you aren't there.

14. Learn to dance, especially if you have a daughter. For many Dads (myself included), this goes hand-in-hand with #11 above. I don't know why this is so, but believe me when I tell you that your daughter (and probably your son) loves to dance with you. Dancing always leads to joy and laughter.

15. It is okay to cry in front of your kids. If you never cry in front of your kids, they won't think you are strong and powerful, they will think you are careless and cold. Teach your children that there are things so important to you that they bring you to tears. But make sure those things are really worth it.

16. Don't hold on too tight, but don't let go too quickly. This is the catch-22 of parenthood. Work hard to raise your kids in such a way that they can make good choices on their own and live healthy lives dependent on God. But never, under any circumstances, let them think that they are no longer your baby girl or boy. I want my children to always feel safe when they return home.

17. Learn about your children's favorite things. Want to really strengthen your relationships with your kids? Get to know what they love and learn to love it too. This is not in any way disingenuous; rather, it shows how important they are to you. I don't feign interest in the things my kids like. Instead, I cultivate genuine interest in those things by spending time doing them. For example, my daughter loves to play board games. At her age, most of these games don't pose a huge challenge to parents. But, because I love her, I spend time playing those games with her, and have done so enough that I now love to play them with her.

18. Splurge on your kids to teach them responsibility. Don't be a tight wad! Not all fun things cost money, thank goodness. But sometimes they do, and you should occasionally splurge on your kids, even if it means putting off the purchase of something else you think you need. Doing this teaches them that they are important to you; that good behavior should be rewarded; and that God has called us to lives of generosity. Along with the occasional splurge, if you are going to eat out at restaurants, make sure you tip well. Few things damage our witness for Christ (for our families and others) more consistently than stinginess, and

believe me, when you go out to eat after church and leave a ten-cent tip on a fifty dollar total, the servers are equating your tight-wadiness with your Christianity.

19. Being a daddy is more important than anything else you will ever do in life. If you think your main legacy should be anything other than raising your kids to love Jesus and experience confidence in who He created them to be, then you are wrong.

20. Pray with and over your children. If you have any hope of all these other things, then your first step should be to pray regularly with and for your children. Commit their care to God, ask Him to guide you as a parent to be Christ to them, and teach them to speak with their heavenly Father often and intimately. God will answer these prayers and will bless your family abundantly for the asking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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