
Four Steps Towards Being a Better Father

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Before having children, we fanaticized about what it would be like to be a father. For some, it was peanuts, popcorn and baseball games. For others it was placing their chair and table in their upright positions and flying away to far-off places. But one thing's for sure. The fantasy never entailed working long hours, stressing about finances or career obligations or fighting with a wife over how to raise the kids. Life is tough. And the limited time life provides us with our children makes our previous fathering fantasy seem like just that: a fantasy.

As a father of three, I decided that I was not going to settle for being the absent father who accepted the reality that, "being a good father means being a provider. And being a good provider means limited time with my kids." I wanted to be the father I fanaticized about and I was willing to do whatever it took. Not too long ago, I was forced to do just that. About five years ago, I was "a good financial provider" who wasn't living up to my fatherly fantasy. In addition to being a father of three wonderful boys, I am also a child and family psychologist with a very busy practice in Encino, CA. (www.SwansonContiAndAssociates.com). It was during this time that I was in my office approximately 50 to 60 hours per week.

My success in private practice came very quickly. I was able to establish relationships with a number of very friendly, well-established pediatricians, psychiatrists and psychologists. They were all very helpful and to this day I am grateful that they remain the same. My practice grew and grew until I was working 6 days a week, most days until 9 at night. I wanted to cut back because I wanted to be at home with my children. They wanted me home. But I was afraid that if I cut back on my hours, people would assume that my practice was full and they would stop referring to me. This would mean potentially losing our home and my practice.

A very smart and kind pediatrician, as well as a psychologist who has been a mentor to me (*and if you're reading, you know who you are*), encouraged me to take the risk. "*You need to be at home with your kids,*" they advised me. "*If you don't have any available times after school, people will take their kids out of school to see you,*" I was told. After hearing my oldest son complain of my absence, I became determined to take my colleagues' advice and reduce my hours. I decided that I would leave the office by 6 pm and I would not work on the weekends. A very scary time indeed. But I knew the father I wanted to be. And being "present" was a huge part of that fantasy.

This was an incredibly stressful time. But fortunately the advice my colleagues gave me was correct. People did bring their children in during school hours. We didn't lose our home. To this day, I believe it was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Sure we had to take a step down in lifestyle but, I don't think my kids care. I don't know if they really even noticed.

Today, I coach their sports teams, we jump in the trampoline, we have Nerf gun wars at home (“*Yes, in the house!*”) and we just got back from the Leo Carrillo Tide Pools where we hunted for starfish. I am the father in my fantasy.

In my practice, I am often visited by fathers who wish they could be the father in their fantasy. These fathers often ask the question, “Where do I start?” When we evaluate their “father fantasy,” we usually come up with four core areas on which they choose to focus. I have laid out these four areas below.

Time

Tim Russert, former host of NBC’s Meet the Press and author of Wisdom of Our Fathers, said “*You can shower a child with presents or money, but what do they really mean, compared to the most valuable gift of all – your time? Vacations and special events are nice, but so often the best moments are the spontaneous ones. Being there. Every moment you spend with your child could be the one that really matters.*”

How well put... The fact of the matter is that you are either a ‘present’ father or a father who is ‘absent.’ You cannot plan for life. You will never know when your child will utter his first word. You will never know when he will take his first steps. And you will never know when his first girlfriend will break up with him. Life happens and it is not subject to a plan. You are either there or you’re not. Planning vacations and special time are very important in moving closer to your family. Your child will always remember the Disneyland trips, the skiing vacations and snorkeling in Hawaii. But will you be there when he is forced to deal with the pains of life?

As if I haven’t drilled the point home, I will conclude this section with a quote taken from Raising Boys, a book written by Steve Biddulph. He says, “*Listen closely – for fathers this is the most important sentence in this whole book: **If you routinely work a fifty-five or sixty-hour week, including travel times, you just won’t cut it as a dad.** Your sons will have problems in life, and it will be due to you. Fathers need to get home in time to play, laugh, teach and tickle their children.*”

Wow!

Discipline

“*Boys want to know three things,*” says seventy-two-year-old Lew Powers, a twenty-year veteran Boy Scout Director. “*One, who’s the boss? Two, what are the rules? And three, are you going to enforce ‘em? To have a strong relationship with a boy, you have to be the boss, and a very kind one. Only set rules that you can enforce, and always enforce them. Then you have the basis for a relationship. From here comes respect and more importantly, trust. Then you can be kind, he’ll listen, and he knows you are on his side.* (Don Elium and Jeane Elium, Raising a Son (3rd edition)).”

The Eliums make two points regarding boys (and I would propose girls as well). Being a good father means that you discipline from a plan, not from emotion. Most fathers tend to shy away from traditional behavior systems, relying heavily on their ability to ‘discipline in the moment.’ I have found in my practice that this is not a good way to go. In fact, to be perfectly honest, I find that it is one of our male weaknesses such as failing to ask for directions when we know we are lost. In both cases, we need to use a map. And a behavioral map entails you sitting down and plotting your course. What are your rules? Are you willing to enforce them in the same way every time? What will you do when you become aware that your child has left you

severely frustrated? Will you yell? Will you say hurtful things that you'll later apologize for? Make your map and chart your course.

Some brief notes on discipline:

Discipline strategies used by mother and father should be the same.

- 3 strikes you're out
- 2 warnings

Consequences and rewards used by mother and father should be the same

- Time out
- Restriction

Raising your voice is not a problem if it is used to get your child's attention and:

- You are not out of control
- It doesn't shame your child
- It doesn't put your child in a position to care for you

Raising your voice does have its risks. Your children will meet the bar that you set:

- If you yell, they will yell
- If you shut down, they will shut down
- If you keep your poise, they will keep theirs

DON'T HIT!!! DAMAGING TO SELF-ESTEEM / ATTACHMENT

Modeling

What does it mean to be a father? What does it mean to be a man? How should one handle anger or frustration? How should a boy treat a girl? Is it okay to smoke? Is it okay to swear? You can tell our child whatever you want. But studies have shown that up to 70% of what we hear and believe in a conversation is non-verbal. That's right, 70%! You can't put out your cigarette as you tell your child not to smoke and think your message is believable. You can hit your child for hitting his brother and expect him to see the logic in that. But if your actions do not model your message, your child is more likely to do what you do – not what you say.

Be the father you want your child to grow up to be. Treat your wife the way you want him to treat women. And by the way, if you have a daughter, treat your wife the way you want your daughter to demand being treated by a boy. Handle anger in the manner in which you wish your child to handle their own. Modeling has a deep impact on your child.

Here are a few tips I've come across:

1. Value their mother: Children value themselves and others more when they feel that their mother and father value one another.
2. Perspective-taking (seeing things through someone else's eyes): Show your children the importance of respecting the perspectives of people they love, even when they disagree with them.

3. Cooperation: Show how to participate willingly in work, problem-solving, or task-accomplishment.
4. Negotiation: Show your children how to work out solutions to problems that respect one another's perspectives.
5. Resourcefulness: Never stop trying to make things better.
6. Motivation to improve: Approach disagreements with the attitude of making them better, not worse.
7. Compassion: This gut-level reaction to your wife's pain, discomfort, or anxiety includes sympathy, protectiveness, and willingness to help but not control. It recognizes that your wife is different from you, with her own temperament, set of experiences, beliefs, values, and preferences.
8. Good Will: Learning a positive attitude toward the people they love will greatly improve your children's chances of having good relationships. Think good thoughts about your wife, and always give her the benefit of a doubt.
9. Affection: Showing affection toward their mother makes children feel more secure.
10. Relationship investment: Successful relationships require that people care about and occasionally do nice things for one another

Affection

Affection, affection, affection. What better feeling can there be than getting a hug and a kiss from your child? In short, your affection goes a long way in building confidence and a sense of value in your child. I have added a few quotes from authors on the topic of affection below:

“Findings of a long-term study conducted by Harvard University psychologist Carol Franz and others encouraged parents to hug, kiss and cuddle both girls and boys throughout their childhoods. The study began in 1951 with 379 five-year-olds and followed up on ninety-four of them Thirty-six years later. Those children who had been “babied,” that is, who had received affection regularly from at least one parent, developed a stronger sense of internal security. This self-confidence enabled them to develop closer marriages and friendships, have better mental health, and enjoy more success in their chosen careers.”

- Don Elium and Jeane Elium, *Authors of Raising a Son (3rd edition)*

“Be demonstrative. Hugging, holding and playing tickling and wrestling games can take place right through to adulthood! And do gentler things too – kids respond to quiet storytelling, sitting together, singing or playing music. Tell your kids how great, beautiful, creative and intelligent they are (often, and with feeling). If your parents were not demonstrative, you will just have to learn. Some men fear that cuddling their son will make him a ‘sissy’ (for which you can read ‘gay’). It won’t. In fact, the opposite may be true. Many gay or bisexual men I have spoken to say that a lack of fatherly affection was part of what made male affection more important to them.”

- Steve Biddulph, Author of Raising Boys

Sometimes affection is expressed, not by touch, but by honest, open vulnerable communication with your child. Granted, it was put out for the entire world to see, but Barack Obama gives us a prime example of affectionate communication with his daughters in a letter he wrote which was posted in Parade Magazine:

(Jan. 15) -- In an open letter to his daughters just days ahead of his inauguration, President-elect Barack Obama acknowledged that he has missed a lot in their lives over the past two years, and explains to them why he ran for the nation's highest office. "I realized that my own life wouldn't count for much unless I was able to ensure that you had every opportunity for happiness and fulfillment in yours. In the end, girls, that's why I ran for President: because of what I want for you and for every child in this nation," he wrote in the letter. Obama gets a bit sentimental at times, saying that becoming a father changed him. "I soon found that the greatest joy in my life was the joy I saw in yours."

Hugs, kisses, cuddles, tickles, wrestling and vulnerable open communication are all forms of affection.

All in all, I hope that if you are a father reading this article, you take away 3 things:

1. Time with our children is brief. We should make the most of it.
2. You can be the father you fanaticized about.
3. Although tough decisions may be required, developing a plan of action to become to father you wish to be is a must.

I hope that the information I have provided to you will allow you to move closer to being that father that you fanaticized about being before life and all of its demands became present in your life.
