

Learning to Be a Father: How Do We Do It? Isn't there a Manual Somewhere?¹

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Overview

Learning to be a good father is not for wimps. It takes time, energy, interest, and responsibility. Most of all, it takes you loving your child. When raising a child, no two days are the same, each day brings new questions and new challenges. It often leaves us asking ourselves: "Where and how do we learn to become a good father?"

The bad news is there's no manual to teach us how to be good dads. (No, they didn't forget to hand it to you before you brought your baby home.) Where is the information? Were we out of the room when it was all explained? We know the new mother gets help, by talking to her mother, friends, or professionals about breast feeding, changing diapers, or what to expect in caring for her infant. Not much of this education was directed at us—despite the fact that it is just as important for the child to have a father learn to be a good dad as it is for the mother to learn to be a good mom.

Why is it important?

It's important for fathers to learn about parenting because dads play unique roles in their child's life. Research shows that children who grow up with fathers who stay involved in their lives tend to enjoy all kinds of benefits:

- better school performance,
- less trouble with the law,
- better jobs and careers, and
- better relationships with others.¹

Until recently, it has been hard to get good information on becoming a good father. The following are the traditional ways we have learned to be fathers.

Watching our Fathers

If our dad was involved in raising us, or even if he wasn't, many of us recall this and imitate much of what he did. We may recall how he taught us to swing a bat, do long division, to tell the truth, or to

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pick someone up after they fall down. Sometimes, when we scold, lecture, or praise our own child, we may find ourselves sounding a lot like him.

Our own fathers are one of the strongest influences on how we raise our own children. Through our connections with our fathers, we build a sense of identity for the family. And we may pass on family traditions, values, and opinions that continue for generations.

Today, times have changed and so have the roles of fathers in families. And we may find that we want to do things differently from our fathers. This attitude is normal and healthy: it's important to add your own values and your own traditions to your family.

TV, Movies, and Media

If you've watched any episodes of *Father Knows Best*, *The Cosby Show*, *Home Improvement* or *The George Lopez Show*, you may have picked up some ideas for how fathers stay involved in their families. In less than 30 minutes, these TV "fathers" seem to solve problems—serious ones and not so serious ones. These TV "dads" are accessible, communicate well with their children, and always seem to work it out in the end. Television shows and films such as *Roseanne*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, and *Bringing Down the House* have shown fathers dealing with serious issues: drug use, sexual behavior, separation, and divorce. Sometimes, we even see fathers portrayed in the media who don't cope well or who drop out.

We have lots of media examples of fathers, and it's all fantasy entertainment. Our life experience shows us that important issues don't get solved quickly in real life. And that being a good father is a lot harder, and a lot more rewarding, than it looks on TV, where the script and screenwriters control the situations.

What's the Other Guy Doing?

Probably one of the best sources of information on how to be a father is watching friends, brothers, and even strangers parenting. We can learn a lot about being a parent by watching how others do it. We can see if their strategies are successful. We can get new ideas for how to handle situations. If we're

faced with a similar situation and we've observed that a certain strategy didn't work out so well, we can choose to use a different strategy.

Watching other dads is good—talking about being a dad can be even better. Unfortunately, we don't typically talk about being dads. When we get together, we're more likely to talk about sports, something in the news, our jobs, etc. This is changing.

As we become more involved in our children's lives, we're finding that we're interested in talking to other dads about parenting. That makes sense. What we get deeply involved with becomes important to us. We seek tips and techniques. And these dad-to-dad talks can help break down our sense of isolation as parents. They can help make us more comfortable being a continuing part of our child's life. And, for some of us, more comfortable being different from our own fathers.

Videos, Magazines, Books

These educational materials are great sources of factual information and advice for being a father. Through these, we learn from experts who have studied fathers for years and can give us many of the tried-and-true strategies for being effective. On educational videos, we can watch other dads in action, learning by example. Even though there is no manual for being a good father to your child, there certainly are increasing amounts of information in or on:

- your local library,
- the internet,
- bookstores,
- video stores,
- your County Cooperative Extension Office or State Cooperative Extension Service,
- your local mental health or
- child development center.

Parenting Classes

Parenting classes are often useful for learning how to be an effective father. Folks used to go to parenting classes when they were having a specific problem. Now, parents find these classes valuable even before any real problems show up.

Parenting classes are useful because they get parents (from various backgrounds) talking about what works and what doesn't work. They are helpful for practicing new strategies and for getting advice on child-raising issues or problems you may be facing. Research shows that when fathers participate in parent training for dealing with children's problem behavior, the positive effects of the training last longer (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003). Many classes now focus on specific groups: divorced parents, single mothers, children with behavioral problems, and, yes, even dads.

While a good parenting class can be an investment in time and energy (meeting weekly for five to 12 weeks), they can be well worth it if you need some specific guidance in handling certain situations with your child.

The Bottom Line

The simplest, and most important, message about learning to be a good father is *to just do it*. Your interest in learning to be the best dad you can be is an indicator that you are going to become just that.

You will find that some of the resources and strategies mentioned here may work better for you than others. That's fine. There's no one way to learn to be a better father. In the end, don't put pressure on yourself to be the "perfect father." The fact is, he doesn't exist.

Keep your mind open to the possibilities of learning new ideas and strategies. Don't con yourself into thinking that you've got it all figured out. Learning to be a parent is a constant process. It doesn't end at a certain age (yours or theirs) – it just changes form again. What keeps it going and growing? Knowing that your mutual efforts and energy will pay off in a richer and more satisfying relationship between you and your child.

Recommended Resources

Internet Sources, Florida

<http://www.floridafathers.org/>

Internet Sources, National

Fatherhood Project / Families and Work Institute

(212) 465-2044, <http://www.familiesandwork.org/>

National Center for Fathering

(800) 593-DADS, <http://www.fathers.com/>

National Fatherhood Initiative

(800) 790-DADS, <http://www.fatherhood.org/>

National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute

(323) 728-7770, <http://www.nlffi.org/>

Stay at Home Dads

(850) 434-2626, <http://www.slowlane.com/>

Washington States Fathers Network

(425) 747-4004 ext. 218,
<http://www.fathersnetwork.org/>

Books

Adventures in Fatherhood. (1998). K. Canfield.

Between Father and Child. (1991). R. Levant & J. Kelly

The Fathers Almanac: From Pregnancy to Preschool, Baby Care to Behavior: The Complete and Indispensable Book of Practical Advice and

Ideas for Every Man Discovering the Fun and Challenge of Fatherhood. (1992). S. Adams Sullivan.

The New Father Book: What Every Man Needs to Know to be a Good Dad. (1998). W. Horn & A. Feinstein

The Role of the Father in Child Development. (1997). M. Lamb

Wisdom of Our Fathers: Inspiring Life Lessons from Men Who Have Had Time to Learn Them. (1999). J. Kita

Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family. J. Levine & T. Pittinsky.

Endnotes

1. If you want to know more about the benefits of fathers staying involved in their child's life, check out the University of Florida Cooperative Extension publication FCS 2137 "The Hidden Benefits of Being an Involved Father" (Evans and Fogarty, 2005). <http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE137>

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Bagner, D.M., & Eyberg, S.M. (2003). Father involvement in parent training: When does it matter? *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 32, 599-605.

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King, V. (1994). Nonresident father involvement and child well- being: Can dads make a difference? *Journal of Family Issues* 15, 78-96.