

Learning to Be a Father: How is it done? 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 fathers asking themselves, where and how do we learn to become a good father?

The bad news is there's no manual to teach men how to be good dads. (No, they didn't forget to hand it to you before you brought your baby home.) You may be thinking, well, where is the information? Were we out of the room when it was all explained? We all 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. But less of this education is directed at fathers—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. Moms can help be a part of the father's learning process by being aware of their behavior and encouraging fathers' involvement in their children's lives from

infancy. Knowing, too, how mothers' attitudes toward fathering affect how dads father their children, may also be beneficial (Cannon et al., 2008).

Why is it important to learn about parenting?

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 (Lamb & Lewis, 2004; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004):

- less chance of developmental delays in infancy
- less problem behavior in childhood and adolescence
- enhanced social development and maturity
- better school performance
- less trouble with the law in adolescence

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- protection from negative influences such as financial hardship and maternal depression
- better mental health in adulthood
- better jobs and adult careers
- better relationships with others³

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 was only marginally involved, many of us recall and even imitate much of what he did. We may recall how he taught us to swing a bat, do long division, to tell the truth, not to quit things we've invested in, or to 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 families raise their 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. Due to generational influences and things we didn't like about our childhoods, 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 *George Lopez*, 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*, *Seventh Heaven*, and *Growing Pains* 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; however, it's mostly fantasy entertainment. Our life experience shows us that important issues don't get solved quickly in real life. And 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 see if their strategies are successful. We can get new ideas on how to handle situations successfully. 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. For example, more schools are working towards systematic involvement of fathers in parent-teacher organizations beyond one-shot yearly efforts of "Donuts for Dads" or the like. This gives fathers a chance to commune together to discuss the welfare of their children in the school and community, and demonstrates community change to include the voice of fathers as parents (Doucet, 2006).

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. And parenting programs that include fathers, as compared to those which only include mothers, show better evaluation results and benefits for child and parents' behavior change.

Videos, magazines, books

These educational materials are often great sources of factual information and advice for being a father. Through these, we can learn from experts who have studied fathers for years and who 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 County or State Cooperative Extension Office or Service (Family and Consumer Sciences education and parenting classes),
- your local library,
- the internet,
- bookstores,
- video stores,
- your local mental health/counseling center, or
- child development center.

Parenting classes

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. In light of the greater impact on families' positive behavior changes when fathers are included in parent education (Lundahl et al., 2008), evaluations indicate that when fathers participate in parent training to deal with children's problem behavior, the positive effects of the training last longer (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003). More 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 5–12 weeks), they can be well worth it for specific guidance in handling typical situations with your child.

The Bottom Line

The simplest—and most important—message about learning to be a good father: 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 your child's)—it just changes form through your child's developmental stage. Also, your relationship with your child's mother sets the tone for your relationship with your child. Working in partnership toward positive goals for your child is key (Cannon et al., 2008). Ultimately, your mutual efforts and energy will pay off in a richer and more satisfying relationship between you, your child, and the other parent.

Recommended Resources

Florida Resources for Fathers

- About.com
http://fatherhood.about.com/od/florida/Resources_for_Fathers_in_Florida.htm

Resources in Spanish

- Fathers Network (425) 747-4004 ext. 218
<http://www.fathersnetwork.org>
- National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute (323) 728-7770 <http://www.nlffi.org>

Books

- *Adventures in Fatherhood*. (1998). K. Canfield.
- *Between Father and Child*. (1991). R. Levant & J. Kelly
- *The Father's 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 Joy of Fatherhood: The First 12 Months (Expanded 2nd Edition)*. (2000). M. J. Goldman. New York: Random House.
- *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
- *Why Fathers Count: The Importance of Fathers and Their Involvement with Children*. (2007). S.E. Brotherson & J.M. White (Editors). Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press.
- *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.

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3. For more about the benefits of fathers staying involved in their child's
life, see FCS2137, *The Hidden Benefits of Being an Involved Father*
(Fogarty and Evans, 2009) at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE137>.