



Being an Involved Father



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Much has been written about the pressure that boys and men feel to measure up to the somewhat nebulous standard of “being a man” but most of it has focused on what not to say to young men and boys to protect their self esteem, mental health and emotional well being. It seems as if more often than not, statements “man up” or “be a man” are situational and used to manipulate or shame a male into behaving in a way that the person using them wants them to. Since there has been so much said on the subject, we won’t spend much time with it here and will instead focus on some genuine behaviors, that most will agree, really are characteristics of a “real man”.

In an article in Esquire Magazine, Michael Kimmel, who is the founder and director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University, is asked, “How has being a man changed?”. He points out that the definition of masculinity has expanded to include traditionally feminine virtues such as being nurturing and a hands-on parent.

Kimmel believes society could benefit from a better understanding of men. “Take millennial men, who aspire to “have it all,” but face career-ending stigmas when it comes to taking time off for family obligations. Then consider the fact that men are in the news for all the wrong reasons: mental illness, campus sexual assault, terrorism, mass shootings, and violence against black men. If we can begin to discern what drives this behavior, could we possibly find ways to stop it?” Kimmel says that's the hope. “My father's world was like Don Draper's: Everybody knew their place. The men smoked in elevators and drank hard liquor during the weekday. And I grew up thinking that my world would look like that, and it looks nothing like that. But my son has no such expectations, and he knows it and he's fine with that. Young men say being nurturing, caring, and being a great dad is what being a man is about. Guys want support to balance work and family—that's not my grandfather's world. If you're clinging tenaciously to this idea that the world is a locker room, you're going to have a harder time navigating this new world. We're more gender equal than we've ever been, and that's especially good for women and children.

So what brought about this change in attitude and perceptions? Some point to the proliferation of women in the workplace. Men now fully expect their wives to work outside the home and conversely, feel the urgency to be great dads to their children to balance the new equation. Men view women more as peers now rather than as a different social class and they feel the importance of learning and adopting skillsets that have primarily been held by women just as women have done with so many aspects of the career world. It makes sense from a logical standpoint just as taking on the role of an active parent to share the workload with wives does.

With this shift in cultural attitudes. Being an involved and active father is now a standard to be lived up to by the men in our culture. Not living up to the standard can cause loss of self respect, identity issues and a distancing of oneself from societal norms.

In the book, “Freakanomics”, economist Stephen D. Levitt, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago and writer Stephen J. Dubner use numbers and statistics to pose the theory that the dramatic rise in violent crime that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century was attributable to the rise in children born into families where they were not necessarily wanted and thus not raised with with the parental love and guidance afforded to children born into more traditional families with the positive influence of both mothers and fathers. The book drew a somewhat controversial conclusion but did not necessarily endorse the solution that they say ultimately led to the drop in crime that began in the mid 1990s.



Since economics is driven by numbers and data, it is fair to say that the data gathered by these writers fully supported the notion that a child raised by loving parents was far less likely to fall into a criminal lifestyle and far more likely to be successful. There are many cloying platitudes aimed at encouraging people to consider the needs of children and it is also fair to say that despite many jokes at the expense of these platitudes, they hold a great amount of truth. This is not to say that just because a child doesn't have the love and support of both parents that they will somehow fall into some sort of "Lord of the Flies" scenario in life. It comes down to probability and likelihood.

Look at it like this; let's say that you really like tortilla chicken soup and you would like to be able to make your own rather than pay for it at a restaurant. You have two options; you can either obtain a recipe from a friend or a website like allrecipes.com or you can wing it. While it is entirely possible to create a great batch of tortilla chicken soup by winging it based upon what ingredients you can easily discern through taste and staring into your soup bowl, you are far more likely to achieve first time success through the guidance of someone who has done it successfully themselves. Whether you go with a person or with a written recipe, it is also safe to assume that the knowledge shared probably came through trial and error and the mentoring/guidance of someone in their world or with the help of some other useful resource.

Let's go ahead and translate this into parenting. Many of us were raised by fathers who were great role models. A common statement that our kids hear from us is "I made mistakes so you don't have to." Remember that time when you were a kid and you embarrassed yourself with a bodily noise in front of your class at school because no one had mentioned to you that it wasn't appropriate to do that in public around other people? We're guessing that you made a point of teaching your children the importance of doing that in the proper place to spare them the embarrassment that you experienced. Your kids are going to experience their own scars of learning in areas that you have no experience or context for but as a loving parent, don't you want to spare them as much pain and embarrassment as possible? With each progressing generation, more experience is added to the knowledge base of important social things you can't really learn in school but can be readily learned from a father or mother.

We all have friends and/or acquaintances who grew up without fathers who were present or involved. Think about the conversations you had with these people about their fathers. What was the typical tone? Were these people missing experiences that might have altered the course of their lives in some way? Did they go into their own relationships not fully equipped to be a spouse or parent because they never had a role model to demonstrate how to do it through their example?

An article written by Dr. Gail Gross in the Huffington Post explores the importance of the role of father in a child's life. Dr. Gross states:

"Your child's primary relationship with his/her father can affect all of your child's relationships from birth to death, including those with friends, lovers, and spouses. Those early patterns of interaction with father are the very patterns that will be projected forward into all relationships...forever more: not only your child's intrinsic idea of who he/she is as he/she relates to others, but also, the range of what your child considers acceptable and loving.



Girls will look for men who hold the patterns of good old dad, for after all, they know how "to do that." Therefore, if father was kind, loving, and gentle, they will reach for those characteristics in men. Girls will look for, in others, what they have experienced and become familiar with in childhood. Because they've gotten used to those familial and historic behavioral patterns, they think that they can handle them in relationships. Boys on the other hand, will model themselves after their fathers. They will look for their father's approval in everything they do, and copy those behaviors that they recognize as both successful and familiar.

Dr. Gross goes on to say;

Human beings are social animals and we learn by modeling behavior. In fact, all primates learn how to survive and function successfully in the world through social imitation. Those early patterns of interaction are all children know, and it is those patterns that affect how they feel about themselves, and how they develop. Your child is vulnerable to those early patterns and incorporates those behavioral qualities in his/her repertoire of social exchange.

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of dad. For example, girls who have good relationships with their fathers tend to do better in math, and boys who have actively involved fathers tend to have better grades and perform better on achievement tests. And well-bonded boys develop securely with a stable and sustained sense of self. Who we are and who we are to be, we are becoming, and fathers are central to that outcome."

Dr. Edward Kruk, Ph.D. went so far as to say in an article he penned in Psychology Today, "Whereas parents in general are not supported as parents by our social institutions, divorced fathers in particular are devalued, disparaged, and forcefully disengaged from their children's lives. Researchers have found that for children, the results are nothing short of disastrous".

All of this information is widely known by now so it would be accurate to say that a father who willfully shirks his parental duties and responsibilities is very likely to experience some level of societal backlash that is also likely to lead to feelings of inadequacy, depression and despair. In short, nobody comes out well when a father is not involved, including the father in question.

So what do you do if you realize that you are sliding toward un-involvement in your children's lives? There's no set formula and many correct answers. Remember, we're making this up as we go along. What works for others may not work for you and vice versa. The one sure answer is to be present and give of your time. Those of us who had fathers who were present in our lives all have unique stories of shared experiences, how our fathers taught us things and showed us that we were loved. What Michael Corleone learned in the Godfather is that if your children see you doing the wrong thing or not being a good person, they will lose respect for you very quickly. Whether that means that you are doing something illegal/immoral or just not measuring up to your responsibilities as a father, that will have an impact on their level of respect for you.

It doesn't take as much effort as you might think. Are you interested in cars? Like to fish? Love Jazz? Football? The ballet? Stamp collecting? Watching Masterpiece Theater or the evening news? You share DNA with your kids and it's extremely likely and even probable that you will share some interests and be passionate about similar hobbies. Maybe you'll find something new



that you both love while spending time together. There are many different theories about how to find happiness in life but one of the most consistent themes you will encounter when reading on the subject is the joy derived from parenting and watching your children grow and develop. If you are an involved parent, their success is your success. No it's not always easy and there are hard days but most, when reflecting on the end result, will acknowledge that it brings meaning and happiness to their own lives as well as their kids. Being a good father is a very big part of what it truly means to "Be a Man".

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