

MARITAL INTERACTION

One of the best things a father can do for his kids is love their mother and build a strong marriage. The effort you put into your marriage is worth it to your children.

To prove that, I'm going right to the source. Just listen to this sixth grade girl who wrote about her father for one of our national fatherhood essay contests. She writes:

"Everybody in my family has had to put up a lot with all the things that have gone wrong. One thing about this divorce is that when I go over to my friends' house to spend the night or something, their fathers usually come in and say, "good-night," not "good-bye." When my father comes over to get something and he is about to leave, he always comes over and kisses me on the cheek and then says "good-bye," and walks out. And it hurts a lot. Sometimes I want to just cry. I wish this never happened. . . "

This girl feels the pain so deeply that she is tuned in to subtle nuances like the difference between "good-night" and "good-bye." Her father may see her regularly and show her physical affection, but still the dominant images of her father will always bring her pain.

Compare that to what another youngster, a fourth grader, wrote in her essay: *"He treats my mom very nicely, which makes me feel wanted."*

A strong marriage breeds security. The child with two parents who are still in love—and show it—does not need to fear that the foundation of her life is suddenly going to shake and buckle and split apart. Even more than that, your marriage relationship is a model for your children's future relationships—dating and marriage.

I can hear a lot of folks saying to this article, "Hey! Get real. This is the world and life isn't all that it is made up to be. You don't know the person I live with and have put up with in all the mood swings, inconsistencies, one day one way and the next day who is the man (or woman) walking in the door? And 55% of all marriages end in divorce (whatever figure you want to hang onto and it is about the same in Christian marriages) and Yes! By golly it is just easier to get divorced or have an affair to muffle the pain of discouragement and disappointment. Let's just move on with life and surely it has to be better than what I am dealing with and I bet I can be happier. Or let's stay married for the kid's sake!"

All I can say to these comments is that I understand many of those experiences are real. I know that I have chosen to forgive and extend grace and mercy. I know that I have messed up and my wife has messed up but when I realized that change must come from me first as the father and husband, accepting my role as the "head of my household" and being the priest Christ has called me to be, then none of these "outs" are options for me. When I changed, it gave my wife hope, but not after a long time of pain living with me. She was not perfect and she acted out some bad

things that hurt me but in the end, we love each other and we realized that our basic foundation is love. Has it been all fun and romantic and a marriage fairy-tale? In some cases, yes, and others, no...if we are both honest. But, at the end of the day, we choose love not hate and we choose life not death. We made a decision when we said, "Yes" with our marriage vows that for better or worse, we would never depart from one another. Yes, we have experienced for better and for worse. I bet you have too. Is it worth a bumpy ride with detours and also some beautiful landscapes that take your breath away? Absolutely.

Your kids...where do you stand with them in this entire picture?

There are many lessons to be learned, but perhaps vitally important is our children learning that healthy relationships involve learning how to love in the midst of life. Conflict is as real as harmony. Marriage involves both, but takes a commitment to make it work. What a lesson for our children!

Your sons are taking subconscious notes. They're asking: What does it mean to be a husband? How should I treat women? Your daughters also have their eye on you. Giving themselves to a man in marriage can be a fearful thing; they're asking themselves how well their mother fared in the deal.

One of the greatest legacies you can leave your children (and your yet-unborn grandchildren) is the firm belief that marriage is not to be taken lightly. It's worth committing to. It's worth sticking it out through the tough times. Your marriage is worth every ounce of effort you can put into it.