

The Art of Fatherhood

After years of having my kids grown and looking back, I see so many places of really being a complete failure of being an effective father of two young boys. After teaching fathering for the past seven years across the country and world, I am beginning to understand that fatherhood really is an art. Among other things I learned that as much as I seem to rule with anger and stress that once ruled my home, I wished it had been a bit more democratic. I had to think that my two sons must have had regime changes in mind and was thinking less and less about being receptive to "because I said so" and more inclined toward a participatory form of parenting and decision-making—one that sometimes stretches the limits of my imagination as well as my patience and put everything I thought I knew to the test.

I remember that explanations were required for all but the most insignificant of decisions and the reasoning behind the way we did things was questioned at every step. I wanted to become less and less "Dad the authoritarian rule maker and enforcer" and more and more "Dad the elected official" who needs to maintain high approval ratings for his re-election bid.

I could, as some did, maintain that I was the parent and he is the child and therefore whatever I say goes, but that isn't the type of father I wanted to be. The "good old days" of daddy knows best are over, thanks to the Internet, video games and I suppose a certain amount of social evolution. This is a new world; perhaps one that our fathers knew nothing about. It is a world where dads are in limited supply, dangers lurk around every corner and communication is less personal and more distanced than it ever was in the past. Fathers today face tougher challenges and often have to compete for the attention of their children.

So how do we impart to our kids the values, advice and guidelines we hope they will use to direct their lives as they grow? How do we include them in our decisions while they are still in our charge? And how can we be effective role models, and influences in their lives?

JUST BEING THERE HELPS - We need to reevaluate our time. Between work, golf, and social lives we need to find the time to reemphasize the presence of dad in the home. In the end, nothing can compete with a father spending time with his children. Activities together cement the bond between fathers and kids. Show an interest in their interests, eat a meal together daily, ask about school and friends; your kids will remember these moments.

TALK ABOUT YOUR VALUES OFTEN - No matter your background, we all have a set of values we want to pass on to our children. These values are a large part of who we are as people and as families. We need to relate these important lessons to our progeny and live them out so that what we have learned, what we believe and how we live become visible and accessible to them and useful for their own lives. Don't be afraid of the tougher subjects either, like sex and drugs and alcohol. Share your views on these subjects as directly as you can, and as often as you can without sounding like a broken record. Be open to questions, and if you don't know the correct answer consult someone or something that does.

BE HUMBLE - Men especially have problems with this one. However we can learn to become more humble in our approach to life and fatherhood. Understand that we are not an encyclopedia; some answers need experts and we should recognize when that is true. Accept advice from others; I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have become defensive when someone offers me parenting advice; I am just beginning to learn to let my guard down and be more receptive. Finally, don't avoid the "I am sorry" moments with your kids. If you've made a parenting mistake, apologize to your kids and ask for their forgiveness.

START A DEMOCRACY - Growing up, my father's word was law and the rules were dictated without explanation. Times, however, have changed and as fathers we need to find ways that support our responsibility to set and enforce the rules while including the opinions of our children. Families can be viable forms of micro-democracy. I believe it is important to explain to our children why we create the types of rules we expect them to follow. It is also important that we not encourage rules that apply to kids but not to parents; if they can't eat in the living room then we can't, and they will point this out.

ACCEPT "THE OKAYS" - Finally, as some of us were raised to believe that there are some things men just do not do, I feel I must encourage each of you reading this that as fathers we must strive to accept "the Okays" of life. It is indeed okay for a man to get involved in a community of support, regardless of whether this community is religious or social. It is okay for a man to express his emotions even if this means crying once in a while. It is okay for a man to admit he is wrong or to admit he needs help. It is okay for a man to hug and kiss his children and fully express his feelings for those he loves and (gasp) yes, it is okay for a man to stop and ask for directions. After all, last I checked there was no high school or college course on how to be an effective father.