

WHY DADS MATTER

Psalm 112:1–8

¹ Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, Who delights greatly in His commandments. ² His descendants will be mighty on earth; The generation of the upright will be blessed. ³ Wealth and riches will be in his house, And his righteousness endures forever. ⁴ Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness; He is gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous. ⁵ A good man deals graciously and lends; He will guide his affairs with discretion. ⁶ Surely he will never be shaken; The righteous will be in everlasting remembrance. ⁷ He will not be afraid of evil tidings; His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. ⁸ His heart is established; He will not be afraid.

INTRODUCTION

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, And whose hope is the Lord.
Jeremiah 17:7

A good father exerts a powerful influence on the life of a child. While a child is influenced and shaped by the entire society, there are no two individuals who play a more pivotal role in this than the parents. Both mum and dad have crucial but different responsibilities in parenting.

While the role of the mother in the family has been recognised for many years, intense interest in the influence of the father is relatively new; and this has increased steadily over the past few decades. Observation, accumulating evidence and plausible explanations all point to the fact that the active involvement of fathers in the lives of their children is

vital for healthy cognitive, social and emotional growth. This conclusion lines up with the perspective given in the Bible. A young child naturally looks up to his or her father as a hero: someone who can build treehouses, go swimming, climb mountains, solve any problem, wipe away tears and read bedtime stories. God intended the father of a family to be a pillar of strength, support, love and discipline.

In this booklet, we will give a brief overview of key points in effective fathering. We will look at a range of parenting roles played by the father, and how these may be modified to match the needs of the growing child. Finally, we will consider the Bible illustration of God as a father, and see what insights it offers to earthly fathers.

THE ROLES OF A FATHER

1. Father as a Protector

You have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy. Psalm 61:3.

A child perceives his or her father as a mighty protector who is bigger, stronger and faster than any others. Children naturally look to their father as the pillar in the family: the one who provides a safe space for the family, the one who sets the boundaries and the one who provides support and security in a loving way. When the father sets wise, realistic boundaries in a firm yet loving way, these instil a sense of morality, discipline, and self-control in the children.

It's also important that children learn to protect themselves. Fathers, teach your children how to cope with the disappointments and difficulties of life,

both physical and emotional. Teach them what to do in fights among friends; how to stand firm for what is right without aggression or desire for personal revenge. Teach them what is safe and what is dangerous, and how to be adventurous without sacrificing safety.

2. Father as a Playmate

*Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
so are the children of one's youth.*
Psalm 127:4.

The psychologist Lev Vygotsky was one of the first to recognise the significance of play to children's development. Encouraging play is an especially important and valuable way in which a father can contribute to the life of his child (Majdandzic, 2017). Horse play with a toddler, kicking around a ball with a pre-schooler and adventure sports with

an adolescent are all activities a father can engage in with his child.

Such “rough-and-tumble play” can foster the connection and friendship between father and child. It also increases the child’s physical fitness and sportsmanship. A logical outcome of this is that the child’s self-esteem will be raised, as he/she will be able to participate with confidence in school or group sporting activities.

A father’s rougher play gives the child new situations to cope with. During rough-and-tumble play, a child must watch the father’s moves, read his body language, and balance personal responses. The child must learn how to play without hurting others. He/she will learn how to take calculated risks, a vital skill that will be useful in his/her life. Children are born playful, and will therefore have a natural enthusiasm for games of this sort.

A father should never be too busy to play with his children. By becoming a child with his children, a father can teach the junior members of his family important life lessons, like sharing and dealing with winning and losing. It's also a great time to share feelings, opinions and ideas.

3. Father as a Teacher

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:4.

Another important role for the father is that of teacher. A father is his child's first life coach. Fathers, take the time to teach your children how to ride a bike, play a game of cricket, or read a map while hiking. These memories will last forever. Fathers, if you challenge your children to be better, to get up after a fall and try again, this will help to boost the

resilience and confidence they need to persevere through the tough times in life. One of the most important things a father can teach his child is how to make right choices. Even as a child, an individual must make many decisions, and these will only increase in number and complexity as he or she grows. Even small decisions can have a far-reaching impact on our lives, and there are consequences for every choice we make. For instance, positive choices in eating, exercising and working are vital to physical health and general success in life. By making wise decisions themselves, fathers can model to their children the process and benefits of good decision-making.

Fathers, take the time to analyse your own decision-making process. Are there certain steps that you follow, that you can see result in sound decisions being made? Write down these steps, explaining each

in a few simple words. Then, when your child is faced with a decision, you can use these as pointers to help them make a positive decision. By doing this, you will not only help your children, but you will also refine and strengthen your own decision-making ability.

A father's involvement in his child's education has been shown to boost academic performance (Nord, & West, 2001; Rosenberg, & Wilcox, 2006, p. 12). Children love their fathers to take an interest in what they're studying and to discuss it with them, to answer questions to help them understand their homework and to consistently encourage them to do their best. One of the best ways a father can be involved in his child's education is to read to him or her from an early age. Children with interested fathers are keener to learn at school, develop good learning patterns, have longer attention

spans and perform better in their studies. The children also tend to have better emotional intelligence, verbal and quantitative skills and increased problem-solving capabilities.

By taking an active interest in the education of his child, the father provides priceless emotional support. Children with supportive fathers are more likely to have stronger emotional intelligence, higher self-esteem and greater happiness. These children also demonstrate a greater tolerance for stress or frustration, less hesitation and fear in new situations and an increased ability to resist peer pressure and stand up for themselves.

4. Father as a Companion

Love one another. John 15:17.

Actions speak louder than words; and children will gauge the love of a father

based on the time he spends with them. A good father knows the value of spending quality time with his children. He knows the importance of having fun with his kids: playing games with them, taking an interest in them and supporting their sports, hobbies, or activities. He takes the time to talk with his children, to discuss the expectations and standards of the family and the community. The following story graphically illustrates the desire a child has for a relationship with his or her father:

SON: Daddy, may I ask you a question?

DAD: Yes; what is it?

SON: Daddy, how much do you make an hour?

DAD: That's none of your business. Why do you ask such a thing?

SON: I just want to know. Please tell me, how much do you make an hour?

DAD: If you must know, I make \$100 an hour.

SON: *(with downcast eyes and head)* Oh! *(brightening)* Daddy, may I please borrow \$50?

DAD: *(angry over his son's apparent rudeness and ingratitude)* If the only reason you asked that is to buy a silly toy or some other nonsense, then you can march yourself straight to your room and go to bed! Think about how selfish you are! I work hard every day and I don't deserve such childish behaviour!

Boy goes quietly to his room. Pause.

DAD: *(entering son's room)* Are you asleep, son?

SON: No, Daddy, I'm awake.

DAD: (*holding out \$50*) I've been thinking, maybe I was too hard on you earlier. It's been a long day and I took out my aggression on you. Here's the \$50 you asked for.

SON: (*sitting up*) Oh, thank you daddy! (*reaches under pillow and pulls out some crumpled notes*)

DAD: (*angrily*) Why do you want more money if you already have some?

SON: Because I didn't have enough, but now I do! Now I have \$100! Daddy, can I buy an hour of your time? Please come home early tomorrow. I would like to have dinner with you!

DAD: (*crushed, putting his arms around his son*) Son, I'm so sorry! You shouldn't have to ask me that! Please forgive me!

In the whirl of the twenty-first century, it is all too easy to neglect the most precious

and important parts of life. “Father-time” is very precious in the mind of any child. Special occasions like birthdays, parent-teacher meetings, and sporting events are not the same without Dad’s presence. The father-child bond is unique, but it is not unbreakable. It needs constant maintenance. It must be nourished and strengthened by quality time.

It is widely acknowledged that one of the most essential aspects of any relationship is trust, and this will only develop over time. Fathers, when you spend time with your children, they will be encouraged to share their interests, hopes and dreams. You will find out what they are really interested in. You will discover their concerns and natural abilities. You will then be able to encourage them to follow their passion and make a real success of life. However, if you do not take the time to do ordinary, apparently unrelated

things with them, these opportunities will probably never open to you. Your children will look to others for support and advice; and they may end up taking a wrong direction.

There is only a short period of time to build a child-father relationship. And once that time has passed, it's gone forever.

5. Father as a Role Model

*The righteous man walks in his integrity;
His children are blessed after him.*
Proverbs 20:7.

To a large degree, a father's relationship with his child sets the bar for all future relationships of that child with others (Rosenberg, & Wilcox, 2006, pp. 23–24). Fathers, whether you realise it or not, in every decision you make, in

every word and act, you set an example for your children. You are their ultimate role model.

Daughters depend on their fathers for emotional support and security. A father-daughter relationship serves as a basis for how the girl will relate to other men in her life. A daughter will develop her ideal of a man based on the characteristics she sees in her father. She expects other men to treat her in a similar way to her dad. Often unconsciously, she will tend to look for the same characteristics in her future husband.

Sons model themselves after their father's character. Imagine the long-term influence on society as a son imitates his father's attitude toward women, sense of citizenship, and ways of displaying affection. Sons seek approval from their fathers from a young

age. They pick up subtle, unspoken cues about behavioural expectations. If the father is loving, caring and respectful towards others, the son is likely to follow his example.

Children look to their fathers for love, guidance, and a male role model. When fathers provide this, they help to promote good behaviour. They show their children how to be more compassionate and generous, and develop a strong moral compass.

It is part of God's plan for the husband and father to be the spiritual head of the home. Abraham is a Bible example of this. Wherever he went, he built an altar to God (see, for instance, Genesis 12:8). During Bible times, an altar was the place of prayer. This shows that today, the father is to lead the family in prayer, Bible study and worship of God.

A father's impact on the faith of his children is huge. The religious beliefs of the father determine to a large degree the belief system of the whole family. Tragically, this high and responsible position has often been abused, not infrequently becoming a cloak for the most terrible forms of neglect and mistreatment. But such gross misconduct does not show that God's arrangement is at fault. When God's plan as He intended it is followed, the father's leadership in spiritual things will prove a blessing to all those in the home.

Fathers, if you are concerned about the moral depravity in society today, there is something right in your own home that you can do. Gather your family together and read the Bible with them. Pray with and for your children and lead them to a faith in God.

It cannot be emphasised enough: a good father leads by example. It is the father who sets the priorities and the faith of the family. In turn, the family unit is the basis of society; it is the primary means by which values are taught, morality is established, and individual identity is formed. When children see a strong commitment to God in the home circle, this will support them in their own spiritual journey, and they will be far more likely to make the choice to follow and obey God.

FATHERS AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

As children develop, so too does the role of the father. The following gives a brief overview of how the father can be involved in the life of his child from infancy to adolescence (for more on the following points, see, for instance, Coleman, Garfield, & CCFH, 2004, pp.

1407-1408; Yogman, Garfield, & CCFH, 2016, pp. e3-e5). A good father-child relationship during the early years of a child's life will lay the foundation for a strong bond that will last long after a child leaves the family home to make a home of his or her own.

Infancy

Fathers and mothers both play vital, but different, roles in the life of their child. While the mother tends to provide stability and support, the father tends to encourage exploration and independence. Both of these are vital to healthy child development.

Even before birth, a father can be involved in the life of his unborn child, by attending health care visits and assisting his pregnant partner with housework. This involvement has been linked with better health of a baby at birth.

It is important for both mother and baby that a father actually be present at his child's birth. For example, affectionate touch by the father during the first two hours of life is associated with greater emotional stability of the infant.

By taking an active part in caring for his baby, in routine activities such as bathing and changing nappies, the risk of the father abusing the child is reduced (Rosenberg, & Wilcox, 2006, p. 16).

It is also important that the father take good care of his own health, for the sake of his child. For example, cultivation of positive mental health in fathers during infancy is connected with better emotional development of the child, even into the toddler stage.

Early Childhood

Toddlers are full of energy and are curious about everything around them. Fathers can help their child to explore the world, but it is also important that appropriate limits be set. Fathers often provide challenging scenarios for their children that help the child to develop problem solving skills and deal with conflict.

Father-child communication has been shown to be especially important in toddler language development. While mothers tend to choose words which children already know, fathers often introduce new ones. The involvement of fathers has been associated experimentally with better mental, emotional, and social health into later childhood.

Adolescence

Adolescence is a difficult time for both parent and child. As the child begins to mature into an adult, and fully develop his or her personal identity, it is absolutely vital that the father be committed to maintaining a loving bond with his child, no matter how difficult this may seem at times.

Positive involvement of a father in the life of his adolescent offspring has been associated with reduced likelihood of the adolescent engaging in risky behaviours. Likelihood of depression, behavioural problems, and delinquency are also reduced. On the other hand, cognitive development, social responsiveness, and independence are all enhanced by the active presence of the father during this time. Unless the child chooses otherwise, the efforts made by fathers to support

their child to develop into a mature and responsible adult will produce rich rewards when this difficult time passes.

G O D A S A F A T H E R

Thus far in this booklet, we have seen that the father plays a vital, irreplaceable role in the life of a child. We have looked at various ways in which the father can be involved in the life of his child, and thus promote the physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual development of his child. But real-life examples can be helpful in making these aspirations a reality. Are there any examples that show us practically what a father should do and be?

Actually, there are many Bible examples of fathers, both positive and negative. By looking at the lives of these fathers and their children, we can trace from cause to

effect. We can see the outcomes of their choices. We can compare their lives with the principles of character development revealed in the Bible, and see why these principles are so vital to the happiness of families, communities, and nations. We can copy the good things they did, and avoid their mistakes.

One of the main purposes of the Bible is to reveal to us what God is truly like. And one of the most comforting illustrations that God gives of His love toward us is that of a father. For example, Isaiah speaks of God as the “*everlasting Father*” (Isaiah 9:6). Many of the New Testament letters begin with a greeting of grace and peace from “*God our Father*”. (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians 1:3; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2). And Jesus taught us to pray, “*Our Father which art in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9). The character

of God is the ultimate father figure. Fathers, if you desire to be the best father you can possibly be, study the character of God as revealed in the Bible.

One of the best stories that illustrates God's character as a father is a parable told by Jesus Christ Himself, while He lived on Earth. It is recorded in Luke 15:11–32. This story has been popularly called, "*The Parable of the Prodigal Son*", but today we will look at it from a different perspective: "*The Parable of the Loving Father*". By comparing this story with Biblical principles, and thinking carefully about the inferences of the story details, we can find many practical applications for fathers living today.

The story opens by introducing a wealthy landowner with two sons. This father provided well for his house through honest labour, and trained his sons to be

diligent, careful workers. Yet despite the abundant care of the father, as the younger son grew to manhood, he became tired of his safe, secure home life. Wanting to experience what he saw as the excitement and pleasures offered in a far country, he one day demanded selfishly, “*Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me*” (Luke 15:12).

Making no complaint, the father divided his inheritance between his sons. Though the father had done all he could to raise them to be worthwhile citizens, he saw that the younger must now make a personal decision about how to live his own life. The father desired only the willing service, the deep, devoted love, of his sons. He knew that the lifestyle he had established was the only way to true happiness; but he permitted the youngest to leave, knowing that the son must come to this realisation himself.

Taking his portion of the inheritance, the youngest travelled far away, where he wasted his father's goods in wild, extravagant living. Then, when his last cent was spent, a severe famine engulfed the land, and he felt the pinch of want. In desperation, he obtained a job as a pig farmer. Culturally, this represented the lowest, vilest state possible. And even this job did not provide sufficient funds to buy food; for "*he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything*" (Luke 15:16).

As he sat there amongst the filth of the pigpen, hungry, friendless, and discouraged, the son's thoughts turned at last to his childhood home. Recognising that even his father's servants were in a better condition than himself, he determined at last to return; not to claim

the inheritance of a son, but to plead for a place as a servant.

Meanwhile, back at home, the longing eyes of the father were continually scanning the horizon: watching, waiting, hoping that his long-lost son would return. At last, one day, he caught sight of him “*a great way off*”. Forgetting the dignity of his important position, the father ran to meet his son and hugged and kissed him.

What thoughts must have arisen during those moments in the son’s mind! How guilt must have wrenched his heart! Beginning his much-rehearsed speech, he sobbed, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son—*”

But that was as far as he got. The father called to his servants, “*Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on*

his hand and sandals on his feet.” The only thought of the father was that his once-lost son had returned.

Jesus told this parable to illustrate the character of God, the model for all fathers. Yet, as touching as this story is, it still does not show us the full extent of God’s love. Jeremiah 31:3 says, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.”* Even while we are living apart from God, God is drawing our hearts to Himself, by sending us countless blessings every day. *“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). And God says to each of us, *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). This is the love that God planned for each father to have for his children.

A love like this is beyond the power of any father to produce in his own heart.

Love can only come as a response to other love (1 John 4:19). Only God, who is love (1 John 4:8), can fill the heart of an earthly father with true, devoted love for his children.

If you are reading this booklet as a father, and recognise that you are lacking in love, that you have fallen short of God's ideal, then take courage. Even the best of earthly fathers make mistakes; but in the character of God, we find a flawless example of a father. Through His grace, you can find both forgiveness, and power to live a changed life (Hebrews 4:14–16). If you are convicted of your need to change, go to Him in prayer right now. Ask for His forgiveness. Accept His mercy, and pray for strength to do what is right.

Not only is God a model for all fathers, but He promises to be a father to each

individual. Many people living today have been abused by an earthly father. You may be one of these. If so, there are special Bible promises for you. Psalm 68:5 says that God is “*a father of the fatherless.*” Psalm 27:10 says, “*When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me.*” If you are struggling with hurts and bitterness from a negative relationship with your father, then I would invite you to reach out to God. Weep out your sorrows to Him, your truest friend who understands and empathises with your sufferings (Isaiah 63:9). He will bring hope, comfort and healing to your heart.

A BLESSING FOR ALL FATHERS

The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace. Numbers 6:24–26

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