

being dad

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Indianapolis, Indiana

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To Max, Karina, and Lauren. I pray I'll be
a double portion of this for you.

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Of course the rest of this book could be considered one big thank you to my father. Thank you, Dad, for all that follows in this little book which adds to your large legacy.

introduction

being dads together

We were standing by one of those high-top tables at a bar in Boston telling stories. Bill and Jared were good storytellers. We laughed hard. We started to tell stories about our fathers. Some were funny, others intense. Many times, when I started sharing stories about my father, my friends would say, “I wish I had a dad like that.” Both Bill and Jared said that a few times this night.

After one of my final stories, Bill stared at me for a long, uncomfortable moment. Jared and I both knew that Bill’s CEO-father was largely absent in his life. He knew

a lot *about* him, but he felt like he never really *knew* him. In many ways, Bill represented so many guys from my generation. We wanted to be good dads some day, but we were usually trying to do it completely *different* than our own dads. Many of our fathers didn't leave enough to imitate.

I am a part of the generation of self-taught men. We learned manhood from our peers or heard about it secondhand from our mothers. Because of this, we often abandoned notions of manhood and fatherhood. We are a generation of men who taught ourselves to tie a tie, or rather, ditched them altogether. We are the ones who taught ourselves to shave—or just grew haphazard beards instead. Our mothers taught us to ride bikes. Our sisters taught us to be manly. Our girlfriends taught us to make out. And some of us have even had to learn fatherhood from our wives. I am in that generation, but I am not of that generation. Thus, the stories.

Bill finally broke the silence: “Dave, you should write a book that tells stories about your dad. I’d love to read that and learn what it’s like to be a good dad. I don’t have any idea what it will mean to be a good dad, and I need someone like you to share what your dad did and why he did it.” Bill was dead serious. He told me to

write a book about fatherhood from the perspective of a son with an intentional father.

So I wrote this book.

I hope that by hearing the stories of what my father did and drawing principles from them, you and I can make the ideas our own—and we can become better fathers together. You see, when I started this book I wasn't yet a father myself. I am not some experienced super-dad who does it all right and wrote this book to make you feel guilty. You may have seen books like that—where the author peers from the back cover in his tailored suit and tilts his chiseled chin just so in a way that says, “I can make you a man like me.”

This is not that book. I am an untested and incomplete father. My kids are still very young now, and when I wrote most of these words, my wife was pregnant with our first child—so I hadn't done anything worth preaching to you about. This is not a book about how awesome I am. I am not the hero of these stories.

I do, however, write these ideas on fatherhood with the best experience on being a dad one could have. I have a dad. In that sense, all men can be experts on being dad. The journey toward intentional fatherhood starts with learning from what our fathers did or did not do.

I risk that oversimplification because it is crucial to start there and not miss out on what we can learn. This is a book about being dad on purpose. Our own childhoods can be the canvas on which we paint our own intentional fatherhoods.

There are a few things you should know from the start.

we are on this trip toward better fatherhood together

Two of the greatest barriers to becoming a better person are guilt and fear. We should not feel overly guilty about the past or fearful about the future in this process. I don't write these pages as a "successful" father. I write them as a largely inexperienced young man who desires to be a successful father, much like most men want to be, whether in our dreams of our future or because of a very present reality (such as a pregnant wife who looks ready to give birth to triplets). We can override guilt with a new hope as dads. Let's face our fears with the courage to pass on a strong legacy to our children.

being a dad is also about manhood

This book is not necessarily for women. If you're a woman, feel free to read this to better understand and support the fathers you know—or to process your own childhood and your own father-experience. But hopefully you will give it to the father of your children for him to read. (He's the guy over on the recliner watching the game.)

As for you men, understand that part of being a better dad also means becoming a better man. Much of being a dad on purpose involves tapping into our instinctual manhood and the stories we experience or hear that teach us about it, things that sound a little bizarre to women. That's because, believe it or not, some men on hunting trips can actually get a little teary-eyed if they think about these things long enough. This is even more likely if he is sitting alone with his dog in a pickup truck.

you are not your dad

While we can all learn from our dads, we are not trying to imitate them. Part of being a dad is starting new

traditions and creating new realities for the next generation. What I'm saying is that if your dad was more like Homer Simpson than Bill Cosby, don't worry. You can break the cycle for your own kids and start fresh. In the same light, those of us with exceptionally good fathers must also seek out our own type of fatherhood without just rehashing what our daddies did.

i'm a Christian and i see being a dad through that perspective

I'm an ordained minister. Think of it this way: What father wouldn't be proud to have his son grow up to be a "man of the cloth." We ministers don't have the credibility or status we used to have in this world, but it's still a more preferred career path than motorcycle gang member. Regardless, you should know from the start that while I don't come off like a religious zealot and over-spiritualize everything, I do believe that we can never become the dads we really want to be without the help of God in our lives (see chapter 5). So while few chapters touch on the idea, there is a crucial spiritual factor to being a dad like you want to be.

my dad was not perfect — no dad is

I'm not writing a book about being a nice person. If so, I would write about my mother. She's a much better *person* than my dad. If you met them both you'd probably like her a lot more than him—most people do. In fact, if I was born a girl, I would be writing a book right now called *Being Mom*. But I'm not a woman, and I can't become a mother. So I'm not struggling with how to be a mom. I'm wondering how to be a good dad. If you're a man, I bet you are too. Even if you don't have kids, this subject is probably important to you as you seek to intentionally invest in the next generation. My dad was a great dad, but he made a lot of mistakes, and he's still making them. I don't agree with all he did or does today. There are a lot of things about him I'd rather not adopt into who I am. Making those kinds of decisions is all a part of becoming your “own” man. The reality is that you don't have to be a superhero to be a good dad. Intentionality is 99 percent of successful fatherhood, and apathy is the reason for every father who fails at the job. It's not about your skills, education, or upbringing. It's about being a dad on purpose.

**“dad” is the most important name
you’ll read in this book**

I never mention my dad’s name in these pages. I don’t need to. To those who don’t know him, the stories and ideas found here stand on their own and could be applied to your own father, or the way you would like to be as a father. To those who do know him, these stories and ideas only add to the remarkable figure you have heard of or know well. To me, he is simply, and incredibly, Dad.



part 1

the early years

The presence of a father in the early years is not only important for practical reasons, but also for the way a child will see the world for years to come. As fathers, we have the opportunity to shape the way our sons will understand their own masculinity, how our daughters will understand the opposite sex, and how both will approach God. Young children are so very moldable, and more often than not they match the mold their fathers make for them. Here are some stories about how my father molded me, and how you and I can intentionally do the same for our kids.

dad on tape

making the extra effort

My dad often traveled for his job when I was young. His work required a lot of speaking and out-of-town meetings. As a kid, though, I just knew Dad was gone and didn't really know the reason why. Along the way, Dad decided that enough was enough, and put a yearly limit on his overnight trips. Once he reached a hundred scheduled nights away from home in one year, he capped it, and people would have to schedule things for the following years. As a national and even international speaker and writer, this was a great career restriction not

many would make, when the average for his peers was 150 or more nights away.

Even with that travel cap, I would miss Dad when he was gone. Mom was always there, rarely leaving town without me, but as a kid, it was hard to see why Dad would have to leave. It was hard to go to bed without him reading a story at night.

Being a nice, little, church kid, my favorite book to have Dad read was *Bible Stories for Little Eyes*. Dad knew this, and one day before a trip, he gave me a tape. It had stories he had read from that book and recorded for me to listen to. Each night when he was away, I would pop in the tape and listen to Dad read my favorite stories as I followed along in the book.

Now, I wasn't a completely stupid kid, I knew Dad wasn't there. And it wasn't better to have Dad-on-tape than Dad-in-the-flesh. Why did this mean so much to me as a child? As most parents know, kids can occupy themselves without our help. Even if we cancelled some business trip to L.A. to spend time with them, they might spend the whole weekend playing with what we can clearly see as senseless and exponentially expensive toys. Don't they know that we sacrificed for this quality time?

The principle is one of *effort*. Kids want to know that Dad is making the effort to be with them, love on them, and be proud of them. Children can read a dad's effort long before they can read words. There are three common problems that hurt our effort reputation with our kids. We need to make sure they don't read these on us.

earning a good-effort reputation

teaching instead of ignoring

Many times we think that if we ignore our kids long enough they'll "get the picture" and let us read the paper, watch TV, or talk to a friend on the phone in peace. As you may have discovered, not only does this not really work, but more importantly, kids read right through it. We don't want to teach our kids to interrupt for petty reasons, but the first few times a kid says "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy" while we're reading might be a good time to quietly teach them not to interrupt, rather than just ignoring them, or worse, telling them to shut up.

explaining rather than excusing

This is a huge trap for us busy dads. The worst part is that often times we do have a good excuse: Life is busy, and the kids should know that sometimes they don't always get what they want. The problem is that this response teaches our kids that we're not able to manage our lives and that "circumstances beyond our control" make it impossible for us to be with them. This frustrates kids, and it's also not entirely true. And looking at it from the kid-perspective, it makes a dad out to be a wimp—a man who just can't control his life and schedule to do what he *really* wants to do. We should tell them the truth and explain life rather than excusing it away.

being present rather than making promises

It's not just empty promises that are harmful. It is true that nothing breaks trust like a promise that becomes a lie. But all promises, even those kept by a dad, can be harmful. The problem resides in the need to make promises in the first place, not in whether we can keep our word or not. If we are making promises to our kids, then we are trying to placate them because of some frustration, fear, or desire they have. It is better to figure out

just what that frustration, fear, or desire is in them and talk about that directly. The tough part about figuring out what those are is that their real problems are often with us, and deep down we know it, and thus avoid it. We need to suck it up and love them, not just promise to love them at a future date.

In my home, I honestly never felt like one of the things Dad had scheduled around. I knew I was the priority. Even when he was gone I knew he had made the effort to be my dad all the time.

I still have that tape of Dad reading my favorite stories. I wouldn't trade it now for its weight in gold. It's a priceless souvenir of his effort to make me the priority of his life. Your intentional effort—no matter how seemingly small—can create a priceless “I'm the priority” feeling in your children.

dad think:

questions to ask yourself or a group of other dads

This chapter says, “Children can read a dad's effort long before they can read words.” What extra effort are you already making as a dad that is making a difference?

What were the most common excuses you heard from your parents growing up? Do you use some common excuses?

What kinds of things do your kids do that you'd rather just ignore?

What excuses do you think you use the most? How can you rephrase these in the future?

Do you agree that promises can be a problem as a parent? How can you help your kids feel like they are the priority?

the dirty glass

loving like the Father

When I was a child, few things were so essential to the identity of being a dad than mowing the yard on Saturday. For a little boy emulating his father, this manly pursuit came behind driving a truck and shaving with a razor. Seeing my dad mow the lawn one hot Saturday when I was only a toddler inspired awe in me. To see him working so hard, likely clad in the 1970s Saturday uniform of cut-off jeans and a sweaty red T-shirt, made me want to do something special for him. A drink of water to quench his thirst seemed to be perfect.

This may well have been my first attempt at retrieving a glass and filling it with water from the faucet. Having come straight from playing in the mud by the garden, I childishly forgot to wash my little hands before grabbing a milk-blemished glass from the dirty dish pile our house, like every house, had by the sink. Flipping the one-armed bandit of a faucet distinctly to the hot side of lukewarm, I filled that glass to overflowing for Daddy. Wobbling out to him at the mower, shouting, I suppose, for him to stop and have a drink, I held up that rare present to him as if it were a cup full of diamonds. At that point, Dad had a decision to make.

response vs. reaction

A father must daily make decisions on what a child's actions deserve in response. Teaching, stern advice, correction, pride, encouraging words, praise, laughter, punishment—these and hordes of others run the gamut of parental response options. But when our children take certain actions, we often respond too quickly. Perhaps we as fathers should not think as much about what *we* need to do in the situation, but rather, what our *kids* need from us.

Every action of a child is deserving of the right response rather than the flippant reaction we often choose to make. Let's be straight with each other: When our kids do stupid things, it ticks us off, and we immediately think, "I need to pass along some sense to this kid." But, as we intuitively know, when our kids *do* something, it often means they *need* something. Reading what kids need is the greatest skill any dad can develop. And giving them what they need in response is the greatest gift any dad can offer. We must respond to them rather than simply reacting to them. When we are tempted to react too quickly, we should first "read what they need," and then respond as we know we can.

the big gulp

Looking down at his earnest son holding up that milky, dirt-floatie-filled, distinctly warm and cloudy mess of a drink, my father had one of these reaction/response decisions to make. In a moment that is telling of more than just the moment, Dad seemed to not even notice the glass. What he saw was his boy extending flawless kindness to his father. What he saw was his child's desire

to thank his dad for his hard work and his son's great hopes of making his dad proud by bringing him a drink without any help in getting it or in knowing he needed it. What he saw was not what he needed to quench his own thirst, but what I needed to satisfy the daddy's pride-shaped hole in my little chest. Dad grabbed that glass and knocked it back like only dads seem able to do. Whether he remained thirsty, was gagging, or was grossed out I don't know. What I do know is that experience explains what a father can be to his child.

our Father

But that is also what God can be to us. We as the children of God long to thank him for his work. And I believe the desire is in us all—no matter how religious we are. We want to do our best somehow. We extend our milky, dirt-floatie-filled, lukewarm lives to him because of who he is. When we do that, he doesn't even see the dirty glass of our lives; he sees in our eyes the love my dad saw in mine. God sees what we need, not what he deserves.

Living that example of God's nature is one of the greatest treasures a father stores up while raising his

children. Kids always seem to tie their view of a Father in heaven with their fathers here on earth. This is a huge responsibility, but a relatively simple one. We don't need to be perfect as dads, but we can extend our own dirty glasses to God and to our kids. My bet is they won't even notice our dirty glasses. They'll be looking into our eyes just like we're looking into theirs.

dad think:

questions to ask yourself or a group of other dads

Do you have high expectations of yourself that you have trouble living up to?

What kinds of things do your kids do that you have trouble reacting too quickly to?

How could you respond to them instead?

Do you have a cute story of something your kid did for you that made you proud? Explain.

How are you connecting with God these days? Do you think he'll accept you as you are?