

Father's Day Presence

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We were surfing the Internet recently, looking at sites devoted to Father's Day. They all focused on presents the kids and Mom could give Dad, ranging from hand painted ties to new cars, and most everything else in between. But none of them dealt with what we like to call Dad's Presence: the wonderful gift a truly present father gives his family.

The typical working father spends just 12 minutes a weekday in one-on-one conversation with his children according to a recent study by the National Fatherhood Initiative, a nonprofit organization devoted to "increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers."

This means that by the time most children reach six, they will have spent more time watching television than they will spend during their entire lifetimes talking to their father! Believe it or not, 12 minutes is actually an improvement.

A 1993 national survey conducted by Parents magazine found that 84 percent of men reported that they are spending more time with their children than their fathers did with them. Most fathers would never intentionally fail to provide their family with food, shelter and clothing. But they may be unintentionally shortchanging their children when it comes to their own time. Being a father is not easy. It's not something men know how to do instinctively. Stephan Poulter, Ph.D., author of *Father Your Son; The Extraordinary Process of Becoming the Father You Always Wanted*, compares fatherhood to golfing; being a father "is a learned art that requires an acute awareness of all the little things that go into the process."

And what goes into being a father changes as your children grow. The young child needs a father who is willing to devote the time to be a loving and compassionate parent. The rebellious teenager who is trying to define his own personality needs a father who is both patient and sensitive. And your grown child needs a father who will relate to him or her as an equal.

Although the process may change as your children grow up, one thing doesn't change. Your kids need their father to be there. They need Dad's active presence. Poulter makes the point that this goes far beyond simply participating in their activities, like going to little league games and taking family vacations. Children need their father's support, guidance and, most importantly of all, their approval. Children need their fathers to value them. Studies of successful women show that they generally had fathers who expected high achievements from them when they were young and who reinforced their belief in their own competency. The bond a father establishes with his son or

daughter is an important influence on their self-concept and affects how they will relate to others in later life.

Forging these bonds takes honest communication, in which you talk to your children about your feelings and listen to them express their feelings.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, it's important for fathers to share some of their reverses and disappointments with their children. Many children grow up with an idealized vision of their parents, especially their fathers. They believe their fathers never encounter problems they cannot overcome, and when the children suffer disappointments and reverses, they think that there is something wrong with them. The world tends to be unfair on occasions and fathers can provide wonderful role models for their children when dealing with disappointments.

So, how does this relate to Father's Day? Rather than getting presents from your children, give your presence to your children for Father's Day. Use Father's Day to be there for your children. Here are some ways you can go about establishing meaningful Father's Day family rituals and creating memories for your children that you can record in a Father's Day Memory Book.

On Father's Day teach your children something you know how to do, whether it is how to fish, how to cook a favorite dish, how to bowl or how to use a tool.

On Father's Day, have a news conference and let your children be newspaper reporters who are interviewing you. Let them ask you about your favorite sport, your favorite color, food or TV show. Talk about what it was like when you were growing up, your chores at home and what it was like in school. Then turn the tables and interview them. Each of you should then write articles for the newspaper and save them in your Father's Day Memory Book. Repeat the news conferences every few years and see how the articles change.

On Father's Day, make a ritual of planting something together: vegetables, flowers or maybe even a tree. Take a Father's Day bike ride or hike and record where you went and what you did. Remember to take photos of each other and your activities for the Memory Book.

A father's presence in his children's lives is the greatest present any father can ever give or receive.