

Characteristics of Growing Dads

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Howard, who grew up without a father, is a 37-year-old father of five. He became a father in his teens and has struggled for years with the demands of raising five children, especially since he never had a male role model. Working two jobs, he was always too tired for his kids and made excuses instead of spending time with them.

When Howard got into trouble for substance abuse, his rehabilitation program included a fathering class, where signs of a life change began to show. His wife Rita said, "I've seen a lot of changes in Howard.... He's a different man." As Howard said, "It takes work. I'm trying to learn how to be more consistent with my kids. I just want to love them more."

Randy also deserves a lot of credit. He had the courage to stand up in a group of men from his church and confess, "I'm struggling with my stepson, who I'm trying to love, but he just will not respond. It's brought tension to the whole family. I've done everything I can think of." He continued, "Will someone pray for me?" The men did, and Randy gained strength to keep trying. A week later, he had a major breakthrough with his stepson.

These are growing fathers.

James was approached by his young adult daughter about what she hadn't received from him growing up. She knew he cared for her, but she sensed that he was always too busy for her. She felt a gnawing lack of love and attention; something was still unresolved, she said.

James' responded with, "You're right, honey, those things were missing. I'm sorry, and I want to make sure they're not missing now." That day was the start of a change in their relationship.

These growing fathers took the initiative to restore and rebuild relationships with their children. Each of them has realized that fathering is an adventure in humility, where honesty and the support of others is as important as having the right answers. They are able to learn from mistakes and grow through the tough times.

GROWING FATHERS HAVE:

A Steadfast Commitment

How do you assess your commitment to your children? Many times, it isn't so much what you're doing, but what you're not doing-what you're willing to give up in order to gain in the eyes of your kids. Being a good father takes sacrifice.

Some of the best stories of fathering sacrifice come from extraordinary situations. Men have altered the course of their careers and their entire lives to take care of their special-needs

children-children facing unusual physical or mental challenges. Those men should inspire us, but we should also recognize that all kids, to some extent, have special needs.

You may have to make adjustments for the sake of your family, sacrificing job advancement, activities you enjoy, or even extra service in your community or church. As a committed dad, sometimes you have to sacrifice what is good for what is best.

Maybe you stay up late to help your son with a speech that he's nervous about-when you also have a presentation to give the next day. Or you give up your Saturday round of golf to go bicycle riding with your daughter.

Committed dads recognize that difficult circumstances aren't an excuse to bow out on their responsibilities. Fathers father. Growing fathers find ways to be effective even in the face of adversity and discouragement.

It may seem like no one notices all you do, but the fruit of committed fathering-a close bond with your children-is its own reward. And there are few satisfactions in life that can compare.

A Long-Range Perspective

Growing dads know that their actions today have an impact on tomorrow. They see beyond the immediate temptations of recognition, power and achievement that the world offers and strive to succeed first with their families. Steven Covey's advice, "begin with the end in mind" has almost become a cliché, but it's an important concept for good fathers.

Fathering from a long-range perspective means that, when your son acts up at the dinner table, you don't simply assert your authority and threaten or punish him to get your way. That may be a quick-fix solution, meeting your immediate desire to restore order and quiet to your household, but you may ultimately be driving him toward bitterness.

If you are truly motivated to act in your child's best interest, you'll step back, consider the long-term effects on the relationship, and then act in a way that results in both you and your son winning. And you may still see fit to discipline the child; or you might decide that a good talk would better deal with the behavior problem and reinforce your relationship with him. However you handle it, the important thing is that your motivation is right, because you considered the long-range implications.

Ten or twenty years from now, these daily battles aren't likely to be important to you, but your relationships with your children will matter, and realizing that can make a huge difference in how you father today.

Sources of Ongoing Encouragement and Equipping

Your Children's Mother. The most valuable resource available to help you grow as a father is the mother of your children. Of all your "secret weapons," she's at the top of the list.

You gain confidence when you have support from someone with the same goals and purpose. She provides another perspective on what your children need and reminds you of commitments you've made to them. You compare notes, get feedback on how you're doing, and gather the strength to love your kids through whatever struggles tomorrow may bring.

Fathering Education. When men come together to learn about being better fathers, good things almost always happen. Besides the practical insights you may learn, it can be invigorating to see other men who share your desire to be there for your children-and some who share your struggles. You'll hear stories that move and inspire you; you'll meet people who change the way you look at fathering; you'll join a room full, church full, or stadium full of men who are committing to be the fathers that their children need.

Other Resources. There are more quality resources available for today's fathers than our dads ever dreamed of: books, tapes, magazines, radio programs, feedback surveys, Internet sites, seminars, and ongoing training curricula. (Other pages of this issue of will point you to some of these resources.)

Accountability Partners. When moms get together for coffee or talk on the phone, one of them will say, "Guess how I finally got Abbie to stop sucking her thumb," or, "You should have seen what that kid of mine did last Friday." They naturally relate experiences and share about their joys and struggles. They are swapping tips and telling each other, "Be encouraged; you're not alone." As men, we need to do the same.

There are men on your block, in your church, and at work who are growing in their fathering, just like you, and you'd benefit from meeting regularly with them. Some of them have kids who are hard to handle. Some have kids who strayed from the path they intended. When you bring up a recent problem with your daughter, one dad says, "Boy, I know how tough that is." He tells you how he handled it and what he'd do differently if it came up again. These men could have a dramatic impact on your fathering, and you may have some insights to share with them.

They should also have permission to confront you about some destructive habit in your fathering. It's uncomfortable, but you know they're only looking out for you. And, with their continued concern and encouragement, you'll find motivation to make changes for the better.

A Willingness to Adjust

Our kids need us to be consistent-predictable in our moods and habits. At the same time, we need to adjust our behavior to the ever-changing demands that come with life-long fathering.

We need to be aware of our children's development as they move through various stages. Ask any father of a teenager if he has adjusted the way he relates to his child. We need to alter our approach according to each child's unique personality and life dreams. One child is embarrassed easily in public; another thrives on that attention. Each child is unique, and we need to adapt our fathering accordingly.

There are other good reasons to make adjustments. Maybe your father was emotionally distant, and you're just now learning about the deep satisfaction of connecting to your children emotionally. As you grow in this or other ways, that should show up in your fathering.

We also want to change when we recognize our own unhealthy behavior patterns-like an explosive anger, avoiding conflict, or some overbearing personality trait. We need to take whatever steps are necessary to improve in those areas, for our kids' sake.

We need to be consistent and rock solid as fathers, while leaving room for creativity, spontaneity and change.

Humility precedes hope. Even "good dads" struggle to meet the many challenges of fathering. Some of us have made many mistakes, and we're trying to win back our children's trust. Others have spent years frustrated with work schedules that have kept us apart from our children. Some had success early, but lost touch as our compliant son or daughter turned into a distant teenager.

But there is always hope for growing dads. We trust that things will get better, not worse, and that prevailing optimism affects the way we think, talk, and live our lives. It restores our larger purpose and provides a sense of confidence and enthusiasm. There are no guarantees that everything will turn out fine, but the best predictor of the future is the present. What we do today will make a difference tomorrow, the next day, and the next.

Each one of us must face our past and our shortcomings, and then step up to be the everyday heroes our children need.

ACTION POINTS

- Read a book that addresses an area of personal development for you: communication, self-discipline, anger management, etc.
- Develop long-range goals for your fathering. Write them down; verbalize them to someone; review them periodically.
- Talk with your spouse about each of your children's specific needs-including what you'll need to discuss with each one in the next six months.
- Commit yourself to a lifelong learning plan for your fathering.
- Buy breakfast or lunch for a dad or two with older kids. Ask them what they would do again, and what they'd do differently.
- Sit down with your family and write a mission statement where you define or reaffirm your important life values.
- Form or join a group of fathers who meet regularly to share encouragement, accountability, and fathering insight.
- Tell your family, "I want to be a growing dad." Ask them for suggestions or ideas.