

3 Difficult Seasons You Will Go Through as a Dad

“What’s he doing?” I asked my wife. I squinted against the sunlight glaring off the crystal blue water of the community pool.

My 14-year-old son was sitting on the far side beside a girl. The next thing I knew he had his arm around her. I stood up and locked eyes with him, shocked at what was transpiring.

My son didn’t like girls, right? I mean, he’s into “Star Wars” and Legos and video games, but not girls. When he saw me, he immediately pulled his arm back to his side and looked straight at the water. I had embarrassed him.

Whoops.

In my defense, though, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. This was my first time with a teenager, after all; and I lost my operating manual a long time ago. I’m not sure there’s anything that can prepare us for the seasons of change our children go through.

Sure, we know they are coming—of course, they won’t stay in diapers forever—but we’re never quite ready when the change happens. However, much like the seasons of the year, we can prepare so that when the change inevitably comes, we can do our best to both navigate it well and enjoy it for the gift that it is. Here are three of the most difficult seasons you’ll go through as a dad, and three suggestions for how to engage each one well.

1. **The Beginning.** Prior to becoming parents, a man and woman typically focus their attention on each other. Late nights are generally about social opportunities or cuddling and watching movies together. Sex tends to be

relatively frequent. Money is also largely about the two of you. Any extra money goes to paying down debt, buying big-kid toys (car, furniture, a grill), buying a house and so on. Weekend getaways or impromptu date nights are relatively easy to pull off.

Enter the child.

Suddenly, the primary focal point—of both parents, but particularly the wife—shifts to the child. Late nights are often about caring for a baby who won't stop crying. Social opportunities are much less frequent for a variety of reasons. Sex happens far less frequently. Extra money now goes to college savings, diapers and toys for the child. Impromptu anything becomes very difficult. In short, life changes. So, what do you do?

3 Suggestions

1. **Talk:** with your wife about expectations, with older men who have been there, done that. Don't assume you know what you're doing. You don't.
2. **Read:** whatever you can get your hands on. There are tons of great resources out there. Take advantage of them (this website is a great place to start).
3. **Prioritize:** While you need to be realistic, self-care and cultivating a relationship with your wife are essential to being the best dad you can be. Date nights, regular exercise and having fun are important, even if they can't happen with the frequency they once did.
4. **Teen Years.** Just when you thought you had parenting figured out, suddenly adorable children who love to cuddle become awkward little people who roll their eyes and push you away. They start to smell and grow hair in weird places. They're emotional. They are convinced you're a horrible despot bent on global domination. They're too cool for you. They demand smartphones.

Parenting strategies that you worked hard to perfect are now utterly useless. The more control you try to take, the more things seem to spiral out of control. Not to mention, these are often some of the busiest years with increased responsibilities parents are taking on at work, extracurricular and school activities for the kids plus more. You spend money on kids' clothes, food (wow, can they eat) and entertainment. Oh yeah, and they may want to go to college one day. FYI, that costs money.

And who's that other person who keeps bumping into me in the kitchen? Oh yeah, "Hi, honey." Time with your wife becomes increasingly like a '76ers championship. All the pieces exist for it to happen in theory, but it never quite materializes.

"Make time for things that matter. "

3 Suggestions

1. **Be a Learner:** Don't pretend you know what you're doing. Talk to other parents or, better yet, grandparents. What wisdom can they pass along to you? (It'll probably be something like, 'Relax. No one knows what to do with teens.' But ask anyway.). Read widely.
2. **Get to know your teen:** Don't assume you know who this person is just because you raised him or her. Be curious. Ask questions. Discover what she or he enjoys and do it with them. You might be surprised by what you learn.
3. **Prioritize:** Make time for things that matter. Time with your wife is chief among those, as is time for personal care and development.
4. **Young adult.** Suddenly the young person you've invested so deeply in is now moving out into the world. Whether that's college or employment, you have less control, less influence, and often less contact. Did you do enough? Will they ever call? Will they be OK? Letting go can be painful, but also immensely gratifying.

3 Suggestions

1. **Trust your child:** Were you ready when you left home? Me neither. Remember those challenges you faced and what you learned? Yep, you were pretty resilient. Your kid will be too. Trust them.
2. **Shift gears:** Parenting adults is a whole new ballgame. The good news is that the longer they live, the smarter you'll become. Be generous with your time when they ask for it, but not pushy when they don't.
3. **Don't live through them:** Remember your life doesn't begin and end with your kids. I know it can feel that way sometimes. Re-engage with hobbies you once loved or find a new one. Take a class. Get involved in your community. Your identity is not your role as "dad." Don't forget that.

Sound off: What would you say is the most difficult season of being a dad? Why? {eoa}

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