

A Father Remains a Father For All Time

A while back I got a phone call from a man named Paul. Paul's son Matthew is married and working for a grocery broker in Wichita. His daughter Linda is in her senior year at Baylor. Paul was helping to organize one of our seminars in his city, and actively encouraged all the young fathers by saying, "You guys need to hear this stuff. Trial and error is no way to learn how to father. Let me tell you, I know."

But the reason Paul called me was to see whether he was "allowed" to attend the seminar. "Are you still a father?" I asked.

"Well, yes."

"Are you still fathering your children?"

"They're all grown and out of the home," he replied, almost like an apology. Paul sounded like a man who'd been working at a job that he enjoyed for many years, but through circumstances beyond his control, was laid off or forced to retire.

He can still put in 40 good hours a week—in fact, he's probably more skilled and knowledgeable than these young bucks on the job. But now whenever he goes to the shop, he feels a little out of place. He's a father who no longer gets to father—at least, that's what he thinks.

Frankly, I told him he had to attend our seminar. All those younger fathers he had invited desperately need his wisdom and experience.

You see, our fathering roles and responsibilities certainly change, but they never cease. Fathers in the stage of

Reflection are no less important than before; they're simply important in different ways.

Think of yourself as a seasoned veteran. You saw your wife through pregnancy and paced the floor during delivery. You changed a diaper. You spoon-fed, you spanked and you helped with long division. You taught your son to drive and your daughter to waltz. You watched your son win some blow outs and lose some close ones. You saw your daughter pick a husband and paced the floor—once again—the day of the wedding.

You've seen it all, and you may think you're done. But I think that before long you'll miss all the goings on. In your now-quiet home, you'll become more reflective about your fathering role. You'll be proud of some things, and you'll have some regrets.

But the great thing about this stage of fathering is that it's like another chance. You're still a father. That will never change. But now your role has developed into more of a *friendship* than the constant struggle for control that you went through when the kids were young.

Fathering from across town or long distance takes other forms: like verbally affirming over the phone or sending a newspaper clipping. Offer your help on a building project or minor repair. You may have bought a couple homes and a dozen cars. That kind of experience comes in handy to first-time buyers like your kids.

This latent father power possessed by older men has great potential. And remember, no child ever outgrows the need to hear, "I love you," or "I've been thinking about you."

And, one last thing. There are many dads out there, like me, who are struggling through the everyday challenge of fathering. We're too proud to ask for your help, but we really could benefit from your wisdom, your experience, and even your friendship. Ask a dad for coffee, and in the course of your

conversation, ask him about his kids. I'm certain good things will happen.

When your children are young adults, they're just starting to find their way in society. One researcher has listed eight developmental tasks faced by each early-adult child:

- Selecting a mate.
- Learning to live with a marriage partner.
- Starting a family.
- Rearing children.
- Managing a home.
- Getting started in an occupation.
- Taking on civic responsibilities.
- Finding a compatible social group.

In case you didn't notice, there's a place for a father in each of these tasks.

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