

How Fathers Can Build a Close Bond With Their Kids

In a recent blog, I highlighted some recent research about the *most important factor* when it comes to passing our faith and values on to our children. It isn't regular teaching sessions, or setting the right example, or involving kids in larger communities that promote those values, like a church.

All those things are important, but *the biggest key is a warm, close connection between the child and his or her father*. I have kept thinking about this groundbreaking insight, and I believe there's more I can do to help you apply this in practical ways with your children.

For example, what is a "warm" relationship with your child? What does it look like? How can you tell if you have one?

I was talking with another dad on our staff about this, and our discussion led to questions like, *What's the atmosphere when you're together? Are you approachable as a dad? Is there a general feeling of easiness and acceptance, or tension and distance?*

All relationships go through seasons where we feel more distant or more comfortable being together. But I think you probably know the overriding mood between you and your kids.

I think this is a real challenge for dads—based on my own experiences as a father and conversations I've had with other guys. We too easily get caught up in the daily schedule and the challenges of life, or we get distracted by our gadgets, or there's some other factor that makes us impatient or snippy with our kids. We get into negative patterns that we don't think we can change, and so we settle in and just get through the days. If our children aren't getting our very best, well at least we're providing the basic things they need.

That's understandable, but *it isn't our best as fathers*, and it isn't ideal for children as they go through life. They need us to be fully engaged, creating the kind of bond that gives them confidence and security. They don't need to be worrying with questions like, *What's up with Dad? Or, Why can't I ever do enough to please him?*

So, how do we create the kind of warmth that brings the other great benefits? Every relationship is different, and I'd be foolish if I said there was a four-step formula. But I also want to share what seems to work for me, and I hope these will be helpful for you:

1. Make your kids a high priority, *and let it show*. I know you love your kids, but I also know they can tell when you'd rather be doing something besides hanging out with them. Just imagine what they're thinking and feeling when you're willing to put aside what you're doing because you really do enjoy being with them. That's when they start trusting you more, opening up about what's going on in their lives and seeking you out to do things. Sure, it takes a lot of effort and energy, but it's worth it.

2. Enter their world. Your children probably have hobbies and interests that are not what you naturally enjoy. The kids can do things for hours that would bore you in five minutes.

This is a real challenge for me, but the times when I really invest myself in finding out more about what my son enjoys and why he enjoys it, pretty soon it becomes interesting and fun for me, too. And I often see a side of him that I hadn't noticed before. I can tell that my effort to enter his world is affirming for him, and it adds a sense of greater understanding and comfort to our friendship. I'm less likely to talk down to him as a silly, immature kid, and I'm more likely to show respect for who he is.

3. Push things deeper and risk discomfort. There are some

situations that are easier to avoid or let someone else handle. But if you're going to have that close connection with your children, you can't sit on the sidelines or assume they will get the wisdom they need on their own. You have to be willing to push beyond the everyday, ordinary interactions and address the tough issues.

Maybe it's having an involved discussion about your beliefs or about dangerous behaviors that other kids are getting into. Maybe it's taking a stand and holding your child accountable with hard consequences.

On the other side, maybe it means expressing love and appreciation for your children *from your heart*, even though, based on your personality or your upbringing, it might feel unnatural or "unmanly" to say, "I love you" or give your kids hugs and kisses. Don't assume they know how much you love them. Go deeper and speak those words they need to hear. Or start with fist bumps and squeezes on the shoulder as you work up to bear hugs.

4. Maintain a steady demeanor—not too high or low. My dad really had this one down. He didn't get overly excited when I did something well, and he didn't go crazy when I messed up. I definitely knew when he was happy or disappointed with me, but nothing really changed the overall mood of our relationship.

This is also important because your kids will go through a lot of changes and adjustments. Your five-year-old might think you're the coolest guy on the planet, and then your teenager might want nothing to do with you. Stay *consistent* and keep doing what you know is best through all the ups and downs. The relationship may change through the years, and it will probably feel different, but your child doesn't need you any less.

Dads, what have I missed here? What is your secret for building that close bond with your kids? Please give me some

feedback below.

Action Points for Dads on the Journey

Take genuine interest in something your child enjoys, especially if it isn't something that naturally appeals to you. Spend a good half-hour checking it out and asking your child about it, what appeals to her, etc.

Ask someone who knows your family well—your child's mom or another close friend—"Would you say my kids and I are close?" "What makes you say that?"

Make plans for a one-on-one outing with each of your kids in the next few weeks—something they enjoy, where you can just have fun and laugh together.

Initiate a discussion with your child—in terms appropriate for his/her age—about a topic that's important to you or a lesson you learned the hard way.

Get feedback on 13 specific areas of your fathering—and action plans for the ones you may need to address—using our Championship Fathering Profile (CFP).

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