

Stay at Home Dads: Cherish the Moment

Daily life had pulled an unexpected turn at the Wong household. Like an increasing number of men, I found myself, unexpectedly, without a job. Well, that's not exactly right. Actually, while my wife, Debbie, spent her days as a social worker, I suddenly had two jobs: part-time freelance writer and full-time househusband for Derek, our 4-year-old son.

Let's just cut to the chase: This stay-at-home fathering business is difficult stuff! Whenever Debbie or other women used to mention how hard it is to be a housewife, I would always nod my head in sympathy and mouth politically correct statements. But what I really was thinking was, *Aw, c'mon. You should have a real job like mine, with unreasonable deadlines, repetitive tasks and tyrannical bosses.* What I didn't know was:

1. It's the toughest job you'll ever have. Now I know that no deadline is as inflexible as a child's cry for breakfast, lunch or dinner; that the cooking—to say nothing of cleaning and washing—must be done over and over and over; and that a child can be the most demanding tyrant of all.

I never realized how much work it takes to keep a house running. The first few weeks at home, I was amazed that shopping, cooking and cleaning up for three meals could take the whole day. However, the household chores have been the easy part. The heavier burden—by far—has been entertaining, educating and disciplining my son.

Part of that burden is that I can never let my attention wane. I always have to keep up with a boy who has unlocked the mystery of perpetual motion. At any given moment he may be about to eat a spider or throw a book through a window.

Even harder is the emotional toll. I incessantly feel that I'm not doing enough for Derek. Yes, I may be giving him the right things to eat, but am I giving him the educational stimulation he needs? Is he watching too much TV? Am I giving him enough opportunities to play outside? Are his playtimes fostering an active imagination and developing his motor skills? Am I giving him enough time with other kids so that he's learning social skills? Will those friends be a good or bad influence?

And much more crucial than always looking out for Derek is having to look at myself. I am to examine everything I do around him, because he is also studying me and will surely mirror my slightest misbehavior. For instance, I was a TV sports addict until I heard Derek say he couldn't talk to me because he would miss one of his cartoons.

Dealing with all these physical and emotional burdens takes a lot of time, which brings me to my next lesson:

2. "Quality Time" is a myth. If I want a relationship with Derek, I have to put in the hours. If I don't, I miss out on my son's life. One example: While I was still at my old job, I came home late on Friday night after a week with especially long hours.

Derek greeted me at the front door with a detailed account of what he and his mom had done that day. As he told me about the four different places they had gone to and what they had seen, I realized that I did not know my son had developed the sophisticated abilities to remember and relate personal experiences.

More time has given me not just a chance to catch up on the facts of Derek's growth, but it's also given me a deeper, richer relationship with my son.

Derek intentionally misbehaved at a church picnic, and I punished him. In the past, such discipline meant I got at least a few hours—and possibly a half-day—of the cold-shoulder

treatment. This time, after about five minutes, he walked up to me, plopped down on my lap and freely laid his head back on my chest.

I wondered what had opened Derek's heart to me. I hadn't been giving him more presents, as our reduced income eliminated most trips to the toy store. Truth is, I had changed my behavior in only one way: more time with him at home.

Looking back now, I realize I bought into the notion that the *quality* of my time with Derek could make up for the *quantity*. However, I made no such assumption in other areas of my life. When I went out to dinner with Debbie, I made sure we could linger at the restaurant as long as we wanted. When I wanted to become a better jazz pianist, I practiced more. And I never told my boss that I would leave work early because the morning had given me enough "quality time."

Of course, spending more time with Derek leaves less time for other parts of my life, but I don't mind it at all because:

3. Being a househusband is worth it. One of the most demanding jobs in the world is also one of the most rewarding. I've always loved my son, but he has thrown me hopelessly, uncontrollably, head-over-heels in love with him.

Unfortunately, my time at home ended. My family needed the extra money and security that a steady job provides, and I genuinely enjoyed my career.

But for as long as my period of unemployment lasted, I was thankful to God for turning the heart of this father toward his son and giving me more time to play catch with my boy, push him on the swing, read to him, take him to the doctor when he's sick, and pray with him during the day.

Yes, it is hard for a man to be a stay-at-home parent, especially in a society where it goes against the grain. But I wouldn't have traded this experience for anything.

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