

Surprisingly Easy Habits Dads Can Do to Protect Their Kids From Future Risks

If you are a father, did you know that you are your child's hero? You may not feel like one, but that doesn't matter. Your child believes you are.

I've spoken with thousands of children and teens over my 30 years in private practice, and one of the things I enjoy talking with them about is their relationships with their parents, particularly with their fathers. I love listening to kids because they are honest and bold when they speak about their dads. They have told me that you are funny, that your eyes twitch when you are angry or that your tummy shakes when you laugh. They tell me when you are on your phone too much or if you yell too much. They don't tell me how much money you make or what kind of car you drive. They describe how happy they are when you take them on errands, go on a bike ride or show them how to mow the lawn. Unlike others you know, they don't want stuff from you—they just want to be with you and to know that you want to be with them too. I have learned a truth from them: in their eyes, you have an unmatched authority. You make them into courageous, compassionate human beings, or you break them. That's the power that you have in their lives. Let me tell you what good studies say about you dads.

Research shows that when you are fully engaged, your child will have a healthier emotional, physical and spiritual life. He will be less likely to do poorly in school, suffer from anxiety or depression and less likely to be involved in risky behaviors like sex, drugs and alcohol as an adolescent. Daughters, especially, will be less likely to engage in sexual activity at a young age.

But if you are distant, cold, abrasive or just absent? Your child is are more likely to grow up with an unbalanced emotional life and struggle in all areas of life. This is a lot of weight and responsibility on a father. But I want you to know that you, Dad, are hard-wired to be exactly what your children need. They already see you as the strongest, bravest and smartest man in their world. They believe that nothing is impossible for you and that you would conquer all evil to protect them and your family.

Your children have already given you this role. All you need to do is step into it.

For mothers who are reading, I want to be clear that this is in no way a slight to you. Mothers are equally important, but our role is different. And if you are a single mother, please understand—you can raise a great child, even if his father isn't involved, but you will need to help find a brother, uncle or grandfather to be a good role model to your son or daughter. Remember, as a single mother, you can only be a great mom—you can't be a great mom and dad. I'm telling you this to make a very important point: children need their fathers, and if their father isn't around, they need a good father substitute. Children want and need their fathers. Children see you, their father, as their hero.

As I wrote in my book, *Hero: Being the Strong Father Your Children Need*:

"Fathers need to see themselves the way their children see them. You are, whether you know it or not, the center of their world, the hub of the wheel that is your family, the hero they depend on. If you're not there or not engaged, they suffer" (see chapter one).

Do you want to know a secret about your kids? They aren't expecting perfection. Kids are full of grace for their parents. If you make a mistake, own up to it. Apologize and

say you were wrong. You will be amazed at your child's response. She will still hold you in a very special place in her heart. She will still see you as her ultimate hero.

So how do you uphold that title, Dad? If you're worried about messing up, that tells me you are already deeply invested in creating a lasting, positive relationship with your child. This is good news. Here are a couple tips to get you started:

1. **Be engaged.**

That's it. Really. Nothing makes a child feel more special than when his father shows up to spend time with him. Merely showing your son or daughter that you want to spend time with them makes a lasting impression. Pro-Tip: These specific times spent with your kids should not be about smoothing things over, talking through problems or arguing. These times should be fun, light and enjoyable. Show your kids that you love being with them. And don't fall into the trap of giving your kids everything but you. Everyday, choose to give your children the gift of your presence.

2. **Lead, don't coach.**

What's the difference, you ask? Where coaches simply teach skills and encourage their execution, leaders bring vision and moral leadership. Your instruction and example are the compass for your child as he grows up. If you show him how to love well, respect others, persevere in hard times and stick to the truth no matter what, you are setting your child up for success in life. Live each day remembering that your child is watching your choices and reactions. Be the leader he believes you are.

Fathers, be encouraged. It is never too late to start showing up for your kids. Whether you are brand new at this dad business or several years in, you can always implement change and improvement in your relationships with your kids. They have adored you since the day they were born, and they believe

in you a lot more than you believe in yourself.

*Pediatrician, mother and best-selling author of six books, **Dr. Meg Meeker** is the country's leading authority on parenting, teens and children's health. Her current book is Hero: Being the Strong Father Your Children Need (Regnery Publishing) is available now. Dr. Meeker is a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, certified by The American Board of Pediatrics and serves on the Advisory Board of The Medical Institute. She is an active part of the NFL's Fatherhood Initiative and is a regular speaker at Dave Ramsey's Smart Conferences.*