

It's Time for All Fathers to Step Up Their Game

Last week I stood in front of 50 inmates inside a prison in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, and shared a message about the prodigal son from Luke's Gospel. The men ranged in age from early 20s to late 70s. When I talked about how much the generous father loved his prodigal son—in spite of his disappointing behavior—the guys began wiping away tears.

When I called one of the prisoners to walk toward me from the back of the room so I could demonstrate how the father ran to his son and hugged him, all the men wanted a hug. I didn't take a poll, but I could tell that many of the guys didn't grow up with healthy dads. They were starved for a father's love and affirmation.

I asked one of the younger guys why he was incarcerated, and he lowered his head in shame and told me he had killed a man. When I embraced him (it was the first time I've ever hugged a murderer), I had no fear because he had been so obviously transformed by the love of Jesus.

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You don't have to visit a prison to see evidence of today's crisis of fatherlessness. Good dads are a rare commodity these days. It's time for all fathers to step up their game. As we celebrate Father's Day 2024, here's a reminder of the qualities every dad needs:

1. A dad is present. One out of four American children have no father in the home, according to 2022 statistics. This number has been climbing steadily for decades. Divorce and out-of-wedlock births have made fatherlessness normal. But it's not healthy. A good father does not abandon his kids. He is

physically present in the home and emotionally available to support and nurture his children. Psalm 46:1b (NASB 1995) says our heavenly Father is “a very present help in trouble.” If you want to model the love of God to your kids, be there for them. (And if your marriage ended in divorce and you share custody, make every effort to connect with your kids often.)

2. A dad is protective. A good dad draws clear boundaries. He teaches his kids that choices have consequences, and he warns his children about the dangers of sin. Successful dads teach their sons and daughters the rules of life from Scripture. Good dads say: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction And do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). Successful fathers don’t let their kids run wild; they instill discipline, with appropriate punishment, to instill character. And good dads don’t shy away from talking about sexual boundaries.

3. A dad is affectionate. God created us with a need for affection. Scientists have proven that human beings cannot thrive without receiving several expressions of meaningful touch every day. Yet I cannot tell you how many people I’ve met around the world who tell me their fathers never hugged them or said, “I love you.” If you want healthy kids, hug them often. Bounce them on your knee when they are small and keep pouring on the affection when they are teens. Physical affection strengthens the bond between you and your kids and makes them feel secure and affirmed.

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4. A dad is encouraging. Your words have the power to make or break your children. In the Bible we see that a father’s blessing has the power to propel a child into his or her destiny. Don’t withhold the blessing. Don’t remind your kids of their failures; don’t withhold your love when they don’t

perform according to your expectations. A successful father knows how to see the best in his kids even when they disappoint him. Your words provide the fertilizer that will cause your children to grow.

5. A dad is gentle. I've ministered to countless people over the years who struggle in life because their fathers were either physically or verbally abusive. Many Christian fathers discipline their kids in anger or lash out at them with threats and put-downs. Yet Colossians 3:21 tells us: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart." Get a grip on your anger before it tears your family apart. Parents who rule their kids with an iron fist will not be able to maintain the bond with their kids once they become teens.

6. A dad is stable. Children who grow up in alcoholic homes develop an inability to trust. If your father was normal one day and then drunk or high on drugs the next day, it's hard to know who he is. This creates instability in a child. Your kids need a father who is steady and consistent. Don't allow any form of addiction to control you. Instead, let your character be as solid as a rock. Let your kids draw security from your consistent behavior.

7. A dad is faithful to God. More than anything else, your kids need to know you have a personal relationship with Jesus. They need to hear you pray. They need to see you worship—both at church and at home. They need to see you reading the Bible and living it out. And they need to hear you sharing your faith with others. No dad is perfect—and I am sure you are as aware of your fatherly failures as I am of mine. But if you seek to honor God in front of your kids, they will want to follow your example.

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