

Fathers become disciplinarians in much the same way that mothers do. The more we are exposed to both well behaved and poorly behaved children, we realize that fathers don't start becoming disciplinarians early enough.

1. Start early. Spending time with your baby will pay off as the years go by. Get connected to your baby, and discipline will naturally follow.

2. Start at the bottom. Most men who climb the corporate ladder work their way into a position of authority by beginning at the bottom. Fathering works the same way. "But what has diapering to do with discipline?" you may wonder. Babycare helps you learn more about your baby. Change baby, bathe baby, dress baby, play with baby. Every interaction with your baby helps you learn to read your baby. Here's some male math: over the first two to three years your baby will need around 5,000 diaper changes. If you change diapers twenty percent of the time, that's a thousand chances to interact with your baby. Initially, managing a squirmy body and smelly bottom was not my thing. Eventually, I discovered that diapering could be a learning experience for my baby and me. I was starting "at the bottom." I had to come up with connecting ways to hold baby's attention and learn to softly convey a "father in charge" message.

FATHER TO FATHER

Dads, here's a tip for easier living – with your children and your wife. Your children are watching television after dinner. You sit down next to them and offer a suggestion: "Mom needs a break, so she's going for a walk. How about we all work together and clean up the kitchen? If everyone helps, we can finish quickly and surprise her." Everybody benefits from this plan: Your wife gets a clean kitchen, and the kids and you get a chance to spend some time together and share the fun of pleasing mom.

2. Be trustworthy. In giving talks on discipline, I have noticed that dads seem to have more concerns and more problems with discipline than do moms. One evening I was giving a talk on discipline to a group of new dads. When I asked what they most wanted to learn about discipline they responded, "I want to be an authority figure in our home. I want my child to look up to me with respect and obey me." I agree that fathers should be authority figures, but just because you're the man of the house doesn't automatically mean you are going to get the respect you want. Some dads believe that a child must obey simply because, "I am the dad, you're the child, and that's that." It's not that simple. A child will obey people he trusts. Trust doesn't come automatically with the title of father. It has to be earned. True authority means a child obeys because he wants to, not just because he has to. Authority based on fear disappears when the child leaves the parent's presence. True authority leaves a more lasting impression. For whom would you do better work, the boss you trust or the boss you fear? So how do you get a child to trust you as an authority figure? It took me several kids to learn this basic principle of discipline. Before I could become an authority figure, my children first had to regard me as a comfort figure. This means I had to be available to them—touch their needs, share their triumphs. By becoming a nurturing father you begin teaching your baby to trust you.

4. Provide structure. From nine months to two years babies' drive to explore exceeds their mental ability to contain themselves. Impulsive behaviors, such as yanking lamp cords, darting into streets in pursuit of a ball and climbing up on counters to explore cabinets are all part of the normal behavior of growing toddlers. Father helps provide the framework that contains a child's impulsive behavior. Children want and need limits set by a person whom they trust, one in authority. When you provide structure in a child's life, the child feels more secure because you channel her energies in a meaningful direction. As coach of St. Louis Rams—the Superbowl champs—Dick Vermeil once said, "Coaching begins at home."

5. Give positive messages. Kandis was a high-need baby from birth. She cried a lot, was hard to console, became irritated at the slightest setback and withdrew from cuddling by arching her back. She was a restless and unpredictable sleeper, and she resisted any attempts at scheduling. Not only was she a tense baby, but her irritability affected her parents' marriage so that they became increasingly irritated at each other. Mark, the father, would make comments such as, "Yeah, she sure isn't my favorite child." Or he would call her "cry baby." He seldom held her, would never kiss her, or even talk to her in a positive manner. It was all negative attention. Mark never smiled or laughed with her, and when exasperated he would sit her on the couch and angrily tell her to "shut up." By the time Kandis was two, she was a difficult child, yet her nurturing and patient mother had hung in with her the whole time.

I met with Mark for a father-to-father rap session and impressed upon him how high-need babies are ultra sensitive and pick up the prevailing vibrations coming from their parents. Because Mark interpreted Kandis's behavior as negative, he reflected this back to her, and she became more negative in his presence. I suggested that for the next two weeks he should try giving her nothing but positive attention. Mark was skeptical, but he agreed that something had to change. Here is the progress report I received from his wife: "His efforts were strained at first. I could tell it wasn't easy for him. But Kandis picked up on it right away and returned the positive attention. Believe me, the change in her happened almost overnight—from whining, lethargic and sickly, to happy, bubbly, laughing, silly, and healthy. She gained almost three pounds in one month. People would say things like, 'Does she do anything else besides smile all day?' or 'She sure is a happy kid.' The good feelings snowballed. The more Kandis smiled at daddy, the more sincere and affectionate daddy became. Kandis sure loves her daddy and daddy definitely loves her. Mark thought he was doing the right thing by being tough. He doesn't like to admit he was wrong, but now he knows the loving approach is better."

6. Be a role model. Dads, remember, you are bringing up someone else's future husband or wife, mother or father. The attitudes you instill in your baby and child are the building blocks for that adult person. Children learn by example. The best way to build character is to model the qualities you want to see in your children. I found it helpful to list those qualities that I wanted to model for my children. When I made such a list, I realized that there were flaws in the model I presented to my children. I couldn't model what I didn't do. As I went down the list of values and related these to an average day with my children, I realized how often I didn't reflect these attitudes myself. This realization taught me a valuable lesson: ***In order to discipline my children, I had to discipline myself.***

7. Become involved in your child's activities. Dads, to know and enjoy your child, join your child's team. Don't be a distant dad. Volunteer to coach your child's favorite sport, or try a stint as a scoutmaster. "But sports are not my thing," you say "and I don't know anything about scouting." You don't have to be an expert; you just have to be there. Besides, you're guaranteed to be smarter and more skilled than the kids (well, most of them). Through my experiences as Little League baseball coach and scoutmaster, I've learned more about kids in general, and my child in particular, than I did in all the psychology lectures in medical school.

Consider what your child learns in a team sport: success and failure, strikeouts and home runs, pulling up a mate, pulling himself up after a putdown (or put-out), teamwork, starting at the bottom and working his way up the batting order, how to deal with his own and someone else's mistakes, how to win and lose gracefully, and how to get along in a group. That's sports! That's life!

8. Model healthy sexuality. Dads, the first male your son or daughter meets is you. In fact studies suggest that fathers, more than mothers, affect a child's attitudes towards sexuality. Babies and young children identify readily with mother from birth, but how they experience their relationship to father is crucial to the development of sexual identity.

Boys need a father who is nurturing in order to value their own masculinity. A father who is available and who enjoys being a man gives his son a healthy sexual role model to follow. Studies show that a boy needs to perceive his father as an active disciplinarian and family decision-maker in order to develop a strong male identity. Paternal behavior that is macho without tenderness is associated with non-masculine behavior in sons. And remember, dads, it isn't how masculine or how nurturing you feel—it's how your son perceives you that counts. You have to show and tell them you love them.

Paternal nurturance is also important for daughters. It contributes to her enjoying being a woman. Fathers give daughters their first experiences relating to the opposite sex. When father is "out of the loop," passive, non-nurturing, uninvolved in family life, the daughter misses out on early lessons about balanced male-female relationships. She won't feel comfortable talking with boys or, later, young men, and they will sense her discomfort. She is at risk for problems in relationships with men. In her search for love, the result may be promiscuity, abusive relationships, or an unhappy marriage. Dads, remember, your daughter will at some time in her life seek out a male model. Be that model for her.

One of the most [powerful](#) influences on children's sexual identity is the way they perceive the relationship between their parents. If a man is loving toward his wife, supportive, and available, the daughter is more likely to value her own femininity and the mothering role. She feels, "Dad respects mom for being a woman and a mother." Dad's attitude toward his wife also shapes his son's attitude toward women. As one woman

whose marriage was disintegrating said bitterly, "Our marriage is failing because my husband's father didn't do his job."

9. Keep connected while apart. If you travel a lot, keep in touch. Parenting is a two-person job. Single parents survive by having a support system in place. In a two-parent family children often misbehave when one parent is away. Because the family equilibrium is upset, children will tend to be defiant, show mood swings, and experience sleep disturbances. Poor behavior occurs because the parent in charge is unsupported and the children pick up on the anxiety. Children who are the most sensitive to change are the ones most likely to misbehave when dad (or mom) is away. To help your children thrive and the at-home mate survive, have a contingency plan for these times. Give "special" responsibilities for which there will be special rewards. If you have a strong-willed child, capitalize on this trait by putting him in charge of extra daily duties. The traveling parent can phone home each day to monitor the children's behavior. To help the at-home parent cope, plan ahead for fun things to do—time at the park and other out-of-home activities. Inviting friends over provides adult companionship for the at-home parent, easing the stress of overload.

10. Be a father and a provider. For most men, being a good provider is crucial to their masculinity and feelings about themselves as dads. This is what drives them to work long hours, even if their families would be happier with more of them and less of things. (A note to wives: It may help bring your husband home more if you tell him this in a tactful, loving way.) Men who are the sole wage earners in the family may feel heavy pressure, especially when double-income families are the neighborhood norm. (This may be changing. A 1994 study showed that for the first time in thirty-three years, the single income household is the fastest growing group in the U.S. population. There is a growing realization that it makes a difference to have one parent at home full-time.) If you must work long hours, try to incorporate your fathering into your work. Do some of your work at home. Take your child to work. It's healthy for her to learn about your work, and when she understands what you're doing while he's away from home, it's easier for her to accept your absence.

The media has portrayed fathers as economic providers, but around the house and family they have been depicted as bumbling and optional. Even though some of these images are still around, I now see television commercials and cartoon strips showing fathers bathing babies and taking charge of households. The media are updating dad's image in the new millennium. I believe that fathers finally are realizing the rewards of investing themselves in their children.