EMPOWERING DADS

A Devotional Especially for You

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
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ENCOURAGEMENT FOR DADS

SHORT ARTICLES TO INSPIRE DADS
THE LOOK OF A FATHER
BY JIM DALY

In late 1999, my wife, Jean, and I learned that we were expecting our first child. The news came at a hectic time in my career, and I suppose I didn’t truly weigh its significance. I certainly didn’t feel like a father yet—it felt abstract and theoretical.

Several months later, things become more real. Jean’s been in labor for 27 hours. The baby’s vitals don’t look good. The doctors prepare for a C-section, but they give Jean just one last chance, and on that last effort, she pushes Trent out into the world. The nurses bring him to us, all swaddled and clean. While Jean sleeps, I take Trent and sit with him in the rocking chair throughout that first night.

I’m a dad, I say to myself. And it seems that the realities of fatherhood hit me for the first time. And it scares me. Growing up, I never had a reliable dad to learn from. My heart aches at the thought of not having a dad in all the moments I needed one.

As I rock Trent, I pray. And I whisper to him. “I hope I can be a good father to you—the father I never had.”

A changing world

“It is much easier to become a father than to be one,” wrote author Kent Nerburn. It’s true. Even for men who really want the job, it feels intimidating. We can master a sport or a career. But it’s hard to control much of anything in fatherhood. When our baby starts wailing, we can’t make him stop. When our son starts failing algebra, we can’t make him pass. Fatherhood is much slower work.

And what does it mean to be a father today?

Today’s “traditional” family looks very different than in previous generations. The father’s traditional roles of provider and protector have seen great change. Often, both parents work outside the home. The dangers we face are the more subtle and insidious attacks from a culture hostile to families. While we still have a need for a nurturing, care-giving mother inside the home, a father’s traditional duties have undergone a transformation. His role as a provider has been split between parents. His role as a protector has grown less obvious.

Fathers today face a greater expectation to be far more engaged. With more moms pitching in as “providers,” we expect dads to be better caregivers. We change diapers and cook and kiss boo-boos. And that’s great. As fathers, we should rejoice in the fact that we can take a greater role in raising our kids. But men still feel wired a certain way, and often, modern fatherhood doesn’t seem like it fits who we think we are. Yet God is always at work, pushing against our impulses and helping us grow ever closer to His plan. Our flesh and fears may try to slow us, but our Lord gives us a spirit of “power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7).

A father’s love

Love is the key to everything. If you love your kids and show them that you love them, the rest naturally develops.

We often consider Mom to be the heart of the family. But Dad has just as critical a role to play in the lives of his children, beyond just carrying the mantle of leadership. A picture comes to mind of a big, strong tree in the backyard, that old oak that spreads its branches across the
sky like open arms, the place that kids run to in the morning to play near or sit for comfort. Can we build that same sense of unshakable security? Can we be the father who says to his kids, “Come, come sit on my lap. What did you do today? Did you make a mistake? What did you learn?” It’s a reflection of how I see our heavenly Father. Someone who’s always ready to share a laugh or wipe a tear. That father can be stern, yes, but always in a loving way. Consequences and correction may come, but he never speaks out of condemnation. His children feel safe.

Fatherhood is about being engaged with your kids, talking and playing with them, holding them when they need to be held. It’s about always aiming to be present, not fleeing into a “man cave” or escaping to work. Those diversions are short, flighty things compared to your relationship with your kids.

A father’s power

Being a safe, welcoming father doesn’t sound all that heroic. Playing dolls with your daughter doesn’t seem very manly. But Scripture tells us that love—that secret of fatherhood—is explicitly tied to sacrifice. It “bears all things” and “endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Is manliness just brute power and strength? Or does it say, “I’m going to lay down my life”? Sacrifice can feel weak and powerless, but as Christ demonstrated, sacrifice is powerful. We are at our strongest when we lay down our lives, even in small ways, for our families—maybe especially in small ways, because those are the most difficult sacrifices to make.

In healthy families, men demonstrate a common characteristic: sacrifice. These men spend time with their kids even when they’d rather do something else. They talk with their kids when part of them just wants to watch the football game. They deal patiently with their kids when they’ve just spilled milk on the floor—again.

We won’t always do it well. But we must continually challenge ourselves to not only tell our kids that we love them, but also show them in real ways how important they are to us. That might sometimes lead us to make radical choices. But being a dad has always been a pretty radical experience.

A father’s instruction

My sons, Trent and Troy, are entering their teen years now, into a new stage of growth and learning. And I believe that I’m arriving at a bigger role as a teacher. In years past, Jean was the center of our family, nurturing and instructing the boys in what they needed. I helped reinforce those lessons and taught a few of my own. Jean ensured that our kids had the best of foundations, but as the boys have grown, I’ve taken on a bigger role. I feel that responsibility keenly now. I’m the one who has to teach my boys and tell them what it means to be a man. What it means to be an adult, to find their own way and still follow God.

If Mom makes the boat, then Dad hoists the sail. We help our kids catch the wind, teach them how to use it and, when they’re ready, to push off toward the sunrise.

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I’ve seen burly men tear up like 8-year-old boys when asked, “What kind of a relationship did you have with your father?” A father’s love is powerful. And dads can use this extraordinary influence to speak into their sons’ lives. There are three messages in particular that our sons need to hear from us. Each of these will help prepare our sons to live the life that God has designed for them.

*These three essential messages are:*

**“I love you—even when I’m disappointed with your choices.”**

When my sons fail or struggle, I want to show them that I love them. They need to know, whether in a moment of commendation or chastisement, that my words come from my desire for their best. And my greatest hope is that my unconditional love will help them understand the depth of their heavenly Father’s love for them.

**“Get comfortable in your own skin.”**

So many men spend a lifetime trying to discover who they’re supposed to be. A major part of a dad’s job is to help his son create a healthy self-awareness. As a young man begins to appreciate how God made him, he wastes less time searching for who he should be and spends more time pursuing God’s purpose for his life.

I want to help my sons understand their skills, gifts and personality. I’ve often told my oldest son, “You have such natural leadership skills. That’s a great gift.” But I’ve also tried to shape the potentially negative side of that trait by saying, “Son, you need to be patient with people. Be gentle.” I can see the connection between the two sides of this trait, and I want him to understand it, too. His capacity to excel in one depends on his ability to restrain the other.

**“Sex is not evil.”**

Most boys enter their young adult years utterly confused about sex. Usually, they are caught between the extremes of overt promiscuity and secret lust. Young men may come to believe that sex is evil and decent people don’t discuss or desire sex. This confusion sets them up for lifelong struggles with pornography.

To clear up this confusion, dads must have several conversations with their sons. These discussions should include the truths that make sense of sex—God, the Gospel and the purpose for marriage.

If we take time and have the courage to share these three messages, our sons will be well on their way to becoming confident men who are well-equipped for life.

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THE DADDY-DAUGHTER DAZE

BY BOB SMITHouser

It started as an ordinary business call. Quick. Efficient. But then a casual “So how’s the family?” became a 30-minute therapy session between Rick and Jim, two overwhelmed fathers of teenage girls. They discussed their inability to connect. They pondered parenting strategies. They discussed everything from their daughters’ attitudes and makeup to whether sighs and eye-rolling qualify as conversation.

“We used to have tea parties, and I’d get hugs around the neck,” Rick recalled. “Now all she wants to do is mope, paint her nails and text her friends. I don’t know how to connect anymore.”

Even loving, intentional dads can get blindsided by the paradigm shift of adolescence. We can feel like the football coach who spent three glorious quarters moving the ball and scoring at will, only to enter the fourth quarter unable to move the ball at all. Now we have to adjust. And the clock’s ticking.

Although the task can feel overwhelming, preserving a strong relationship with “Daddy’s little girl” becomes more manageable when we focus on a few key areas. Here are three big ones for me:

Communication.

Our daughters still need us to affirm their value and remind them that they’re beautiful—even if the opinion of some boy seems more important. And instead of lecturing, I try counseling—asking questions, expressing faith in my daughter’s ability to make good decisions.

Connection.

As our daughters mature, we struggle to find activities to share. Rather than mourn the piggyback rides my daughter has outgrown, I look for new bonding opportunities, such as cooking, serving at church or watching movies that let us explore deeper issues together.

Spiritual growth.

Family Bible reading is important. By high school, however, most girls will probably transition to more independent study. That’s healthy, though it may feel like we’re losing a platform for sharing with them. I think that even more vital than opening God’s Word with our daughters is living it for them. Modeling an authentic faith helps us maintain our daughters’ respect and gives us an opportunity to speak into our daughters’ lives when we need to.

Tall order? No question. But we don’t need to be perfect. In any big game, a few key plays can make all the difference.

Bob Smithouser is the co-author of The One Year Father-Daughter Devotions, designed to help dads build stronger relationships with their 10- to 14-year-old girls.

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OUR ROLES AS DAD

DEVOTIONS TO SUPPORT THE MANY ROLES OF DADS
DADS AS PROTECTORS
OUR ROLES AS DAD

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.” —1 CORINTHIANS 16:13-14

We may be tempted to think that modern society has erased the need for a father’s role as protectors of his family. Not many of us build our own houses to shelter our families from harsh weather, stand guard as wolves circles our home, or fire arrows from castle walls as enemies advance on our kingdom. But we are still designed to be a protector. God built men with certain attributes—speed, strength, aggression—to enable us to fulfill that role. And so we protect the things that God gives us responsibility over.

While the world has changed, our role as protector is no less important. And today’s dangers are no less dangerous; they’re just different. While we can’t—and perhaps sometimes shouldn’t—protect our kids from every poor choice and risky endeavor, we have opportunities to protect our families every day:

■ Lead a family “fire ready” night.
Talk about what the procedure would be if a fire ever broke out in your home. Practice “escaping” through the different doors and even windows of your home, depending on where you choose the imaginary fire to take place. If you live in an area prone to other natural disasters (floods, tornadoes, etc.), practice preparing for those scenarios.

■ Invite your kids to help as you carry out small home repairs—or big ones, if you have the expertise.
Help them understand how roofs protect us from rain, how insulated walls keep the temperature comfortable and how your home’s foundation is its strength against a shifting world.

■ Commit to knowing your child’s friends and their parents so you’re familiar with their outside-the-home activities.
Make it a regular part of your conversation to talk about what your kids do with these other children, and whether they feel like they are building meaningful relationships with these friends.

■ Set up a “safety shelf” in your garage or house, available for whenever your kids need to find the proper gear needed for their outdoor activities, be it bicycle helmets and tire pump, sunscreen and hats, first aid kit, etc.
■ Become the hang-out home.
Welcome your kids’ friends to your house, supporting them all while they work on science projects, shoot hoops in the driveway or just need a basement to invade for Friday night pizza and video games.

■ Move the family computer to a high-visibility area of your home.
Make sure your computer time is set up so that your kids just use the few sites they need for school or whatever light Internet activity you allow. Be especially involved as your kids graduate to owning their own mobile devices and are able to have a continuous pipeline to all the dangers.

■ Take walks with your children at night.
Bundle up and arm yourselves with hot chocolate and flashlights. Talk about how the dark doesn’t seem so bad when you stick together, and when you have a good source of light to make your path clear.

■ Become the family expert on media targeted at children.
See the movie, read up on the video game. As the dad, you have the right and the responsibility to protect your child from harmful ideas and dangerous content. Invite your kids into this role, helping them to discern and develop clear standards about what goes into their mind. Make sure your kids always recognize that this is all done out of love.

■ Know when to scale back the protection a few notches.
Yes, we always want to protect our kids, but occasionally it’s best to let them wrestle with a problem and learn to find their own way out. A big part of our protection is preparation for a future when we won’t always be there.

NOTES:
“Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” —1 Timothy 5:8

It’s easy to limit our understanding of “provider” to financial terms. But these days men aren’t the only parent to work outside the home, and our role as provider has always included more than just bringing home the bread and the bacon, anyway. As dads, we provide for kids in ways that go beyond finances—including spiritual, emotional, mental and physical needs. Being a provider is about the home we create, not just the one we may pay for. We build a safe, loving environment, one where each child’s emotional, spiritual and relational needs are provided for. And we bring that environment along with us wherever we take our family.

We are a provider when we:

- **Play a little rough.**
  As dads, we tickle more, wrestle and throw our children in the air. Experts say that children who roughhouse with their fathers learn that biting, kicking and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable. This provides for our kids a healthy understanding of self control, and an understanding of the necessary balance between timidity and aggression.

- **Fix their toys.**
  Your role as Mr. Fixit may not always take the most glamorous route. Keep the kitchen junk drawer well-stocked with small screwdrivers, extra batteries, Super Glue and whatever spare wheels and doll limbs you need to get your child’s favorite toys up and running again.

- **Take the lead in developing a family Bible study time.**
  Look at character traits you want to build in your family and find people in the Bible who have exhibited those strengths. Afterwards, discuss the weaknesses. Try an online Bible plan at: https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/331-gods-ultimate-casting-call

- **Model kindness.**
  It’s one thing to teach your children how they should treat others, but to say one thing and do the opposite vaporizes the message. The real lesson kids learn is what you, as Dad, do. Be the person you want your kids to become, when you have visitors, when you’re out in public or whenever you interact with others.
Give our kids an environment for risk-taking.

Dads tend to worry less than moms. We’re more likely to encourage our kids to swing or climb just a little higher, ride their bike just a little faster, throw just a little harder. This provides important benefits for our kids: These little risks build confidence and encourage our kids to continually push the limits of what they can do.

Demonstrate what mature manhood looks like.

Like it or not, our kids see us as a role model for what adult manhood looks like. They witness how we treat others, how we manage stress, how we follow up on promises, how we treat their mother. Your sons will aim to become like you, and your daughters will look for a guy that is like you.

Get a little messy.

As dads, we are more likely to get messy—we stomp around in the mud with our kids, let them help paint the spare bedroom or get bruised and a bit bloody learning to ride their bicycle. This provides a safe environment for learning the basics of our physical world.
DADS AS NURTURERS
OUR ROLES AS DAD

“Fathers, do not provoke your children, less they become discouraged.” — COLOSSIANS 3:21

If there’s one area of parenting that seems to scream “mom’s job,” it’s the task of nurturing our children. Due to some obvious fundamentals in God’s design, moms naturally have a strong physical bond with their child. From their earliest days, our children recognize that mom is the caregiver. It’s no coincidence that “nurturing” sounds a lot like “nursing”!

Yet, numerous studies show that children who develop a strong bond with their fathers enjoy significant benefits. These babies gain a stronger sense of safety and security when both parents are responsive to their basic needs. That sense of security continues to help these children throughout the rest of their lives: they develop more confidence, have a healthier self-esteem, perform better academically and tend to develop healthier friendships. Children just plain turn out better when dads are involved in their care from the beginning. Here are a few ways we can partner with our wife to raise healthy, resilient children:

- **Respond quickly.**
  Sometimes, it’s hard to respond before mom to the cries of a child. But aim to get up to meet your little one’s needs at least as much as your wife does. Even if you think you know what they want (or perhaps don’t have a clue), the important thing is to respond quickly and with the gentle care your child needs. This doesn’t actually spoil your baby; it sends the response that you are there for your child and that they can trust you.

- **Move them around.**
  Kids love motion—and need it. Babies loved to be bounced; kids loved to be swung around or go for a ride on Daddy’s shoulders. This all helps children from their brains to their sense of balance. Aim to be the dad with the magic touch that can calm a fretting child.

- **Ask your child what skill he or she would like to learn.**
  Commit to working together to develop that area of your child’s life over the next several months.

- **Take a lead role in meal planning and preparation.**
  Let your kids help as you write lists and shop for groceries. Be the Saturday lunch king, or the artist who can turn leftovers into gourmet dinners.

- **Read to your children.**
  Tell them funny stories from your childhood. Tell stories about how you and their mother met and grew to love each other.
When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” — PROVERBS 10:19

As fathers, we get the reputation for speaking less to our kids than mothers do. While there may be some truth found in that stereotype, the greater difference lies in how dads communicate. Fewer words doesn’t necessarily mean less communication—we just do it differently.

Dads are problem-solvers and fixers, fixing our words on concrete matters that require a solution. We like to do things with our kids rather than just carrying on a conversation. Our words tend to be more directive, and we generally expect more of our kids when it comes to language than mothers. Whining doesn’t work with us as much, and we avoid dialing down our vocabulary and syntax to a child’s level. Experts believe that having higher verbal expectations better prepares children for the world outside the home, and it challenges them to work harder at articulating their needs and desires more clearly.

We fulfill our role as a communicator when we:

- **Show interest in their media choices.**
  Spend time with your teenager listening to their favorite music. Ask them why they relate to it. If you hear that artist when away from them, shoot them a text to show you were really listening.

- **Involves your kids in the tasks of life.**
  Sitting down planning to “talk about” something often isn’t as effective as doing something together, and letting conversation just happen. Activity together loosens tongues. Let your child be your helper as you change the oil on the minivan, fix that hole in the bathroom ceiling or clean the leaves out of your gutters.

- **Play the bedtime game (at least a little bit).**
  You’ve probably noticed that kids are often in the mood for conversation just after you’ve tucked them in for the night—if only so they can delay bedtime a few more minutes. Humor them whenever possible. Your fondest memories of fatherhood may come from those nightly periods of minutes of talking in the dark.

- **Take a drive together.**
  Pick that ice-cream shop on the other side of town—or in the next town down the road. As you drive, talk about the mundane details of the world outside your car, letting your conversation drift toward more meaningful topics. (Leave the phones at home.)
Reflect your child’s feelings.
Particularly for younger children, it can be helpful to just echo what you hear, translating your child’s feelings into words. You might say, “You weren’t happy that sister took that toy away, were you?” These statements acknowledge and give words to your child’s feelings.

Dream together about the future.
Ask your kids about dream jobs, hobbies and other areas of their future life. Ask them to describe the person they would like to marry someday!

Be the first to open up.
Over dinner, tell a story from your day. A good idea, a disagreement, a problem. Your kids will interrupt, of course, but your stories will spark memories of their own days.

Take a break from the advice.
You’re already learning this trick with your wife. It’s the same with your kids. Sometimes your child just needs to talk, without the pressure of hearing “You should have” every two minutes.
DADS ARE ENCOURAGERS
OUR ROLES AS DAD

“Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.” —1 THESALONIANS 5:11

As dads, we have a natural role as encouragers. Words have true power in family life—power for both life and death (Proverbs 18:21). Every day, we can choose to become the lead cheerleaders in our family, knowing that our words build our kids up and remind them that their lives have significance. We recognize that our kids have within them the potential to do great and mighty things—just as they are now.

We are an encourager when we:

■ Tell our kids that we are praying for them.
When they face life challenges, pray for them. Find Bible verses that can help that situation and use a search engine for key words such as; “Lord is my protection”. Keep a family prayer journal when prayers are answered and then celebrate them.

■ Mark their milestones.
Plan special celebrations to mark when your child reaches milestone ages like 10, 13 and 16. Make them both silly and serious, and take lots of pictures.

■ Point out how and when we observe growth and maturity in their life.
We often see change in our children, be it over the last few weeks, months or years. When you notice this growth, let your kids hear it. “You know, not long ago this situation would have really made you mad. But today you responded with patience and maturity.”

■ Help our kids develop perseverance.
Practice developing perseverance together by tackling a difficult hiking trail, learning a new sport or hobby, or playing a difficult musical piece.
Give them a little freedom to make decisions—and mistakes.
Kids enjoy choices. As Dad, you can give them this freedom, but within sensible boundaries. When discussing various decisions—small ones and sometimes even big ones—give your children two reasonable options, and let them make the final call.

Celebrate accomplishments, the big ones and the little ones.
Be the dad who stands on a chair to announce, for all to hear, how your daughter blocked 13 shots on goal and still got her trumpet solo mastered for the school concert, or how your son aced this week’s science test while keeping his bedroom the cleanest room in the house.

Recognize our role as a teammate.
As fathers, we develop a team atmosphere for family life. “We’re in this together” is your mantra. This isn’t the same as being our kids’ best friend. We’re like a companion, a trusted guide to turn to as they navigate the difficulties of life.

Encourage our kids in the talents and gifts they have.
Be on the sideline or in the audience whenever possible. Talk about how those gifts have blessed you.

Give them hope.
Begin mornings giving your kids encouraging comments or lessons from Scripture. Here’s a good one to start with: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Notice when our kids help out around the house or at church without being asked to.
Verbalize your gratitude and ask them how it felt to serve others.

Stay present in their inbox.
Tuck a note in their lunch. Shoot a quick text message or an email. Call them on your drive home. Sometimes, “Great job!” is all you need to say.