



by Karen Stephens

Admirable Dads: It's More Than Bringing Home the Bacon

Dad. The title may be ordinary, but the ingredients of being a *good* dad are anything but. Fathering, like mothering, is one intense, never-let-up, high-stress job. It's rewarding, but just as often it can be demoralizing, perplexing, and frustrating!

Thankfully, there are many dads out there doing a great job of living up to the sacred trust they've taken on by raising children. Good fathers go far beyond just bringing home the bacon. They provide emotional support and social guidance. They devote immeasurable time and energy to children's welfare. When parenting, good fathers reach into their hearts, before their checkbook. Bottom line, they give of themselves as people.

I find it heartening that today's fathers take the job so seriously. Daily they talk to me about being the best parent possible. I've reflected on common characteristics of men who lovingly and wisely father their children. I share them hoping they'll reinforce your own efforts.

Admirable Dads

- Do things *with* their kids, not just *for* their kids. They cultivate common interests and hobbies.
- Participate in daily routines and let kids help out, from washing dishes to getting groceries or caring for the lawn.
- Are flexible and spontaneous. They take time to enjoy the little things in life with kids. They limit how often they say: "Not right now, I'm busy." Dads with priorities in order know "right now" is the stuff childhood is made of.
- Participate in child care and school life by attending special events and parent-teacher conferences. Their involvement is endless, from creating butterfly gardens to organizing ice cream socials. They share their talents and skills in classrooms.
- Cherish children and never (hardly ever) take them for granted. A dad dropped in at our child care regularly during naptime. Why? Just to watch his child sleeping. He'd whisper, "Isn't she just an angel." (She was. Aren't they all when they're asleep?)
- Build things their children will enjoy, love, and remember, from sandcastles to folk instruments to bed frames. A friend built his son a cabin and said, "I hope playing in that cabin is something special he'll remember his whole life."
- Build things *with* their children. Yes, even though it takes *much* longer to get the job done! Whether it's planting a garden, making bird feeders, or building a rabbit hutch, dads strengthen bonds by letting children help them out.
- Help children set goals and maintain high expectations. Supportive dads express confidence and trust in children's abilities. They admit children's shortcomings, but view them as targets for development, not as character flaws to be ridiculed.

Dads with priorities in order know "right now" is the stuff childhood is made of.

- Are emotionally responsive and affectionate. Loving dads know little boys, as well as girls, need words of praise and encouragement, hugs, pats on the back, and kissed cheeks. They make sure their kids hear “I love you” often.
- Brag about children in public as well as in private. They let the world know they are excited by their child’s developmental achievements!

Fathering, like mothering, is one intense, never-let-up, high-stress job.

- Provide support and encouragement by cheering kids on from the sidelines. I remember a dad rooting for kids at bat during Little League games. If his child connected for a hit, whoops of celebration ensued. But if it was a swing and a miss, tailgated by the umpire’s “steeeeeerrrrriiiiiike!” Dad’s first words were, “Hang in there! You’ll get ‘em next time! Just keep your eye on the ball.”
- Pass on skills to their children — regardless of gender. Whether the skill is carpentry or gardening, they share their interests.
- Plan for family fun, enrichment, and relaxation.
- Take parenting seriously and hone parenting skills just as they do job skills.
- Consistently maintain communication.
- Role model compassion. From coordinating fund-raisers for children with catastrophic illness to saving a wetland, good dads put caring into action.
- Admit when family problems are getting out of hand. Wise dads, who want to find solutions — rather than cast blame — put pride aside and seek professional help. They focus on prevention and damage control, rather than on denial and delusion.
- Treat their child’s mother with courtesy and respect, whether he is, was, or never was married to her. Mature dads support, not undermine, the mother-child bond. When marital or child-rearing disagreements arise, ethical fathers (and mothers!) keep them between parents and resist bringing children into the foray.
- Treat their child’s mother as they would have their child treated by others — with respect and non-violence.

It seems clear to me that successful fathers do much more than partner with mom to support children financially. Good fathers develop the sensitivity, patience, strength, and courage to share the best of their soul with their kids, too.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007