



by Karen Stephens

Dads: It's the Little Things That Last a Lifetime

We turn and look expectantly down the aisle. There, escorting a bride proudly snuggled onto his arm is good ol' Dad. This is often considered a father's crowning glory, the presentation of a well-raised daughter to become the bride of another man. The moment is captured in wedding albums for posterity in hopes that children and grandchildren might re-celebrate the occasion. This public rite of passage is one of the few times fathers are so conspicuously placed in the center stage of family life.

Despite this moment of glory, rarely do I hear of dads' wedding day celebrity mentioned as a favorite "dad memory" — by women or men. When I hear people reflecting on their father's influence, I'm told of much quieter, intimate, and spontaneous moments of childhood. They illustrate how some of the most seemingly insignificant experiences can weave parents securely, and poignantly, into the fabric of our most cherished memories.

I'd like to tell you some of the "dad memories" that have been shared with me. They always reassure me and reaffirm that there are good dads out there! (It seems we hear more often about are "deadbeat dads.") So here are examples of dads who brought joy, pride, and unabashed love to the lives of their children. These are facts about dads to savor.

On a crystal sunny day I was sitting on a grassy courthouse lawn with an affable 20-something man. We were watching school kids attempt to fly kites. He reflected out loud about his family being poor when he was a child. You know, not much extra money in the budget for luxuries like store-bought kites. Regardless, without fail, each windy March he participated in the spring ritual of kite flying. His father always took time to hand-fashion him a personalized kite out of newspaper.

The trick of making the kite wasn't what made this snippet of my friend's life memorable for me. It was his look of pride when he told me about his dad. The knowledge that his father genuinely liked him played gratefully on his face. The time and interest his resourceful father took in him meant far more than any pricey kite ever could. The message that his father enjoyed his company — and was eager to delight him with his ingenuity — was the true gift. A rich child couldn't have asked for more.

A teenager told me about her life being raised by a single father. She fondly remembers people chuckling when she'd call her father "mommy-daddy." To this day she appreciates his willingness to take on the role most easily assumed by two.

A college student remembers hours of summer evenings spent practicing for Little League with his father. More poignantly, his memories also include that same 30-ish father sitting on gray, wooden porch steps with newborn kittens, two and three at a time, nestled in the crook of his arm. Awkwardly he would hold tiny, milk-filled, doll baby bottles up to the kittens' mouths, trying desperately to

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keep them alive so he could put off, if just for one more day, his young son having to come face to face with the death of such tiny animals.

A daughter remembers at age 8 being pushed endlessly on the swing seat at twilight. One night during a swinging session her dad was finally able to explain to her the true cause of thunder. (“Ah,” she thought, “so it isn’t God bowling in heaven after all!”)

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“Whistling — that’s what my dad did for me. He taught me to whistle out in the driveway of the first house we lived in.” A chuckle sneaks out as she muses that she must have driven her parents crazy with her constant whistling for weeks after that. I bet she’s right.

Two siblings remember their father as stern and being at work a lot. They say they understood what the term “moonlighting” meant before they were six. A break in the pattern stands out in their dad memories. Their father was washing the car and one of them ran past and tripped over the watering hose. This sent the hose spiraling out of the father’s hand spraying him, the car, the side of the house, etc. To the sibling’s relief, rather than reacting with anger, the father succumbed to the temptation of a playful moment. He grabbed the runaway hose and began a rip-roaring water fight. Apparently they all ended up drenched, bent over with laughter, as the mother looked out the kitchen window yelling, “What in the world is going on?”

Have you noticed a common theme in these memories? The fondest “dad memories” are about shared experiences, not material gifts. They are about small moments in time stolen from the ho-hum daily grind of trying to meet work and household responsibilities.

Weddings are certainly wonderful moments to remember. And they’re not a bad way to honor a father’s role in family life. But it’s reassuring that the smaller things have greater weight in children’s memories. Weddings or not, dads do make a tremendous family contribution — emotionally as well as materially. Dads can make children feel loved, appreciated, proud, and cherished. All gifts that last a lifetime.

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*.