

Father to Father

by Michael Grose

As a father and father-in-law to three young dads, it's great to see each of them embracing the life-changing nature of fatherhood and becoming fully involved in their children's lives.

I see myself in these young fathers, and in doing so I'd like to guide them away from making the same fathering mistakes I did. However, knowing that young dads are loathe to take fathering advice from a member of the previous generation, I'll give the following advice to my younger self instead:

1. Play to your strengths

Men generally parent differently to women, based on their biology. Fathers often parent in a more active or action-oriented way than mothers so games, play and physical activity become important parts of a man's parenting repertoire. Your partner may not always appreciate your more active approach, particularly if you play with kids just before bedtime then leave it to her to calm them down.

Practical advice: Be yourself, but be smart about it!

2. Lighten up – don't take yourself too seriously

It's easy to get caught up in your own importance, taking yourself and your work too seriously. For many men a bad day at work translates into poor or, at best, distracted experiences when they're with their families. Consider putting a strategy in place, such as exercise, that will help you leave work and the moods it engenders behind.

Practical advice: Be present in mind as well as in body when you're with your kids.

3. Have something in common with each child

It would be wonderful to say that you can always connect with your kids, but family life is not that straightforward. There'll always be a child who we struggle to connect with or a developmental stage during which a child seems alien to us. In these cases and times it helps if you share a common interest (such as a love of sport or music) with a child so that you always have something that will bring you together, even though you may not always see eye to eye.

Practical advice: Be prepared to take an interest in your child's interests.



4. Take it easy on your son

Many dads are tough on their boys and have expectations way above their son's interest and ability levels. It helps to remember that it takes a little longer for a boy to mature. Resist the temptation to turn every game and

every joint activity into a lesson and avoid giving advice when all your son wants is some understanding.

Practical advice: See the boy as he is now, not the future man, when you spend time with him.

5. Enjoy the outdoors with your daughter

The biological nature of fathering causes most men to be very protective of their daughters. But that doesn't mean you should put your daughter on a pedestal and treat her like a little princess. Expect a lot from her. Play with her, and get her outside into nature as it will do wonders for her confidence levels.

Practical advice: Enjoy spending time with your daughters on a daily basis.

6. Be ready for kids to knock you off your pedestal

Most children in the pre-school and middle- to late-primary school years look up to their dads. "My dad is better/bigger than your dad" is a type of mantra that's familiar to many parents. Make the most of it as this Superman Syndrome doesn't last. Young children soon become adolescents and will go to great lengths to prove that you're Clark Kent after all. Expect that they will stop laughing at your jokes, raise an eyebrow at your well-intentioned advice and even stop being friendly to you in public. Ouch! It can be hurtful to a man who just wants to be the best dad he can be.

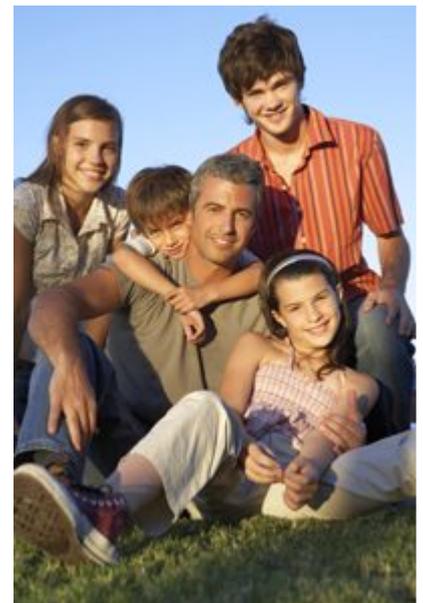
Practical advice: See number 2 above: don't take yourself too seriously.

7. Give your kids a compass and a map

One day your children will become independent of you. Don't worry! You won't be irrelevant, just redundant in a practical and managerial sense. There are two things you can do to help your kids safely navigate the world when you're not around. First, help them develop a set of positive values including integrity, honesty and respect that will act as their moral compass when they have difficult decisions to make. Second, reveal your personal story over time as this narrative will become a personal map that will reassure them when life gets tough. It's good to know that they are not in uncharted territory when they finally strike out on their own.

Practical advice: Tell kids your story – don't make them guess it or learn it from someone else.

Father's Day is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the contribution that men make to the lives of their children. It's a very personal reflection as each man's experience of fathering is as unique as the children they are raising. I invite you to reflect on your own fathering as well as the contribution that fathers – whether your own dad or someone else's – have made to your own life.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including Thriving! and the best-selling Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It, and his latest release Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children.