

Growing Parent

AUGUST, 2008

Practicing the fine art of good fathering

By Victor M. Parachin

Although Kris Kristofferson is a well-known singer-songwriter and actor who enjoys the company of many important individuals, it is his father who had the greatest impact on his life.

Among the many important life lessons Kristofferson learned from his dad, the one which stands out was his father's hidden acts of kindness.

When Kristofferson was a teenager, he and a friend got in trouble with the law over some stolen hubcaps. They were forbidden by the police from being together.

Years later, Kristofferson's friend wrote him a letter saying that ... "whenever my dad was in San Francisco, where my old friend was working, my dad would stop in to see if he was okay. Every trip. He did that for years."

Although fatherhood does not get the same attention as motherhood, the reality is that fathers are vital to their children's well-being and emotional development. Consider these insights drawn from various studies:

- The more frequently a father visited the hospital of an infant who is prematurely born, the more rapidly the infant gained weight and the more rapidly the infant was able to leave the hospital.
- "The amount of time a father spends with a child is one of the strongest

predictors of empathy in adulthood," concluded researchers of a twenty-six year study.

- Students coming from father-present families score higher in math and science *even when they come from weaker schools.*



- Lower suicide risk. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, reports that women who commit suicide have one thing in common: a "strong influence exerted by mothers coupled with lack of involvement of fathers in the subjects' lives." In addition, living in mother-only homes contributes more than anything else to suicide for both sexes.

- Children have greater psychological health when fathers are present and active. Sixty-five percent of juveniles and young adults in state-operated institutions come from homes without a father.

In two New Orleans hospitals, eighty percent of preschool children admitted as psychiatric patients came from homes without fathers.

Similar percentages emerge from countries as diverse as Canada, South Africa, and Finland, at ages from preschool through the teenage years.

- There is increased crime when the father is absent. Seventy-three percent of adolescent murderers come from mother-only homes.

These studies ought to reinforce every man's desire to be actively and lovingly engaged with his children. When done properly a good father can emerge as his child's confidant, friend, mentor, counselor, life-coach and role model.

Here are some traits common to good fathers.

- **Good fathers gets involved in parenting.**

Great dads are partners, not helpers, when it comes to parenting. They get involved and stay involved.

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Good fathers don't buy into the various cultural myths about fathering — that men are biologically unfit, that men are not nurturers, that men are bumbling and useless when it comes to parenting.

Men who are strong fathers take the initiative and assume their proper role in childrearing responsibilities.

In fact, Kyle Pruett, MD, author of **Fatherhood: Why Father Care Is As Essential as Mother Care for Your Child**, advises men to:

- Embrace the irreplaceable value of your fatherhood in your life as a man.
- Think long, hard, and often about what you want to give your children besides your money.
- Acknowledge fatherhood as one of the longest, most creative and rewarding adventures of your inner life.
- Leave room for failure and forgiveness in yourself (and, of course, others). There is no perfect father — yours wasn't and neither are you.
- Look hard at your father in you. He's there. Understand what you are doing with your father's parenting style in the raising of your own child — modeling, overcoming, repairing, emulating? — or a quilt of all of these.
- Ask yourself: *How do I want the mother of my child to think and feel about me as a father?*

Something New!

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For men who may feel slightly hesitant or who are intimidated because they lack experience in parenting, authors Ross D. Parke and Armin A. Brott offer this advice in their book, **Throwaway Dads: The Myths and Barriers That Keep Men From Being The Fathers They**



Want To Be: "Don't assume that your partner magically knows more than you do. Whatever she knows about raising kids, she learned by doing — just like anything else. And the way you're going to get better is by doing things too."

• Good fathers nurture their child's dreams.

This was the experience Marjorie Parker had with her dad. The Wichita, Texas resident tells of announcing to her parents and grandmother, "When I grow up, I'm going to be in the circus!" The women did not seem impressed.

In fact, her mother responded: "Lot of children think that. The circus is exciting. But when you grow up, you won't think circus life is so wonderful."

Her father, however, listened and said:

"Well, if you're going to be in the circus, you'll need good balance. I'll get an old barrel for you to practice rolling on."

A few days later, a yellow and orange barrel was in their back yard. Parker and her friends spent hours on it, learning to roll forward and backward, even jumping rope on it.

"We dreamed big-top dreams and put on backyard circuses for our neighbors," she recalls warmly. Of course, her circus phase passed but Parker says she "had hours of fun and ended up with much better balance."

• Good fathers seek help when necessary.

Writing to men who may be new to fatherhood, Parke and Brott wisely advise: "Don't be afraid to get help if you're uncertain or feel ill prepared to be a father. You're not alone. Even among fathers who have taken childbirth education classes, many feel totally unprepared for what comes after. Programs are available to help fathers learn the basics of care giving. And they work."

They cite one study in which fathers viewed a video just after their babies were born. That instructional video provided the men with information about the newborn's perceptual and social competence, about play techniques, and about caretaking skills.

"After three months, these men were more responsive to their infants during feeding and play, and fed and diapered their babies more often than fathers who had not seen the videotape," Brott and Parke report.

• Good fathers find creative ways to connect with their children.

When children enter their teen years, many prefer to spend time with their friends rather than their parents.

Good dads understand and respect

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that need *but* they find creative ways to remain connected to their kids.

John McCain, US Senator from Arizona, is the father of seven children. He stresses the important of “being with your children and doing things together, and showing them examples of courage and the right way to lead their lives, particularly before they become teenagers and other influences dominate their time and attention.”

When it comes to his teenagers, Senator McCain uses a novel approach: “I try to go someplace with them because when they’re home, they sure don’t want to spend time with me. They want to be with their pals. They want to go to the mall. So, if I take them on a trip to the Grand Canyon, they can’t — and we’re together. The important thing is to interact with your kids rather than have them just sit there and think about other things.”

• **Good fathers are not bound by gender stereotypes.** Sadly, there continue to be rigid gender stereotypes for boys and girls.

Good fathers are sensitive to their children’s abilities and talents. They are able

to deny the hold of rigid gender roles by encouraging their children to follow their own interests.

Good example of this can be seen in the life of Dr. Mona Khanna who is a medical doctor and a medical correspondent for a large television station in Dallas,



Texas.

In an interview, she was asked: “How did you get to this place in your career and life?” She gave credit to her father saying she was born in India but that her father

dreamed of raising his family in the United States.

“I’m one of three girls with one brother. My dad knew if he stayed in India, we were destined to get married and have kids and not really make much of ourselves professionally.”

Her father saw that in America she and her sisters would have the “opportunity to set what some people would call ridiculous goals.” Dr. Khanna says her father provided her with a “sense of empowerment. It was very important to my father that his children be well-settled, be self-sufficient, and be in a career that was noble.”

• **Good fathers remain emotionally available to their children.**

Although a time comes when children grow up, move away, and establish their own families, good fathers continue to remain emotionally available to them.

Shortly before he died, famed attorney Johnnie L. Cochran talked about the special bond he and his father enjoyed. “My father, Johnnie L. Cochran Sr. is 89 and still lives with me. I still talk to him every day. He is so wise. He’s my confidant, role model and mentor. He’s a special man and I seek his advice all the time.” ■

Victor M. Parachin is an ordained minister, freelance journalist and the author of several books, including Eastern Wisdom for Western Minds (Orbis Books).

Recommended Reading

Covey, Stephen R., **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families.** New York: Golden Books 1997.

Farrell, Warren, PhD., **Father and Child Reunion: How to Bring the Dads We Need to the Children We Love.** New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001.

Kita, Joe, **Wisdom of our Fathers.** Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1999.

Park, Ross D. and Brott, Arming A. **Throwaway Dads: The Myths and Barriers That Keep Men From Being The Fathers They Want To Be.** New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999.

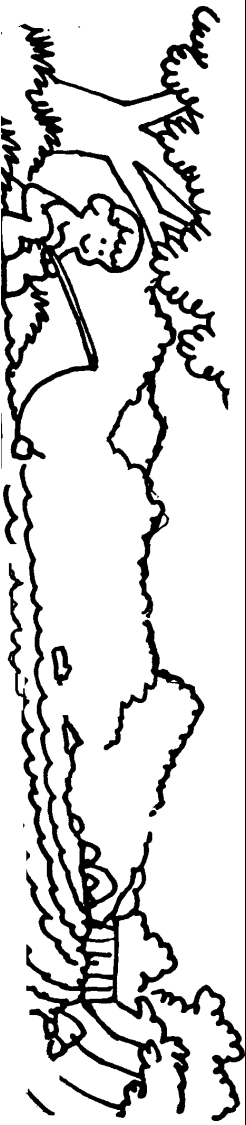






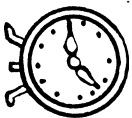



Pruett, Kyle, MD. **Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is As Essential As Mother Care For Your Child.** New York: The Free Press, 2000.

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Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						
<p>3</p> <p>Have a bagel for breakfast.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>Play some music and clap to the beat.</p> 	<p>5</p> <p>What words rhyme with "hat"?</p>	<p>6</p> <p>What is the opposite of:</p> <p>down slow left stop open</p> 	<p>7</p> <p>Look through a magnifying glass at objects inside and outside.</p>	<p>1</p> <p>Go to the library and see what new books are waiting for you..</p> 	<p>2</p> <p>Tape a big piece of paper on preschooler's door to draw on.</p>
<p>10</p> <p>Play: "Which hand is it in?" Take turns.</p> 	<p>11</p> <p>Eat something red.</p>	<p>12</p> <p>Color this calendar.</p> 	<p>13</p> <p>Show Baby how to touch her finger to her nose.</p>	<p>14</p> <p>This is a great time to enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables.</p> 	<p>8</p> <p>Lie on your tummies and make funny faces at each other.</p>	<p>9</p> <p>Sing: "Hickory, Dickory, Dock ..."</p> 
<p>17</p> <p>Davy Crockett's birthday, 1786. Can you describe his hat?</p>	<p>18</p> <p>Take a make-believe ride on a magic carpet.</p>	<p>19</p> <p>Orville Wright's birthday, 1871.</p>  <p>What did Orville and his brother Wilbur accomplish?</p>	<p>20</p> <p>How old you are in:</p> <p>Years _____</p> <p>Months _____</p> <p>Days _____</p>	<p>15</p> <p>Look for square shapes in your house.</p>	<p>22</p> <p>Play outside with a water sprinkler. Adults, please supervise young ones!</p> 	<p>16</p> <p>Tear construction paper into various shapes and glue them on to a piece of paper to make a collage.</p>
<p>24</p> <p>In what month is your birthday? Learn to shake hands.</p>	<p>25</p> <p>Circle all the 2's on this page.</p> <p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">2</p>	<p>26</p> <p>Make ice cubes out of fruit juice. These are yummy on a hot, summer day.</p>	<p>27</p> <p>Do you have the phone number of the local poison control center posted by your telephone?</p>	<p>28</p> <p>Have a family ballgame outside. Make up your own rules.</p> 	<p>29</p> <p>Talk about the safest way to cross a street. Practice looking both ways before crossing.</p>	<p>30</p> <p>Put together a treat jar—slips of paper with your child's favorite activities.</p>
<p>31</p>						