

How to Be A Good Dad by John Richmond

The other day my 5 year-old son came to me with a serious question. His voice was low, clear, and calm. I could tell he had something on his mind. He said,

“Dad, will you teach me how to be a dad?”

“Of course,” I told him. “I love who you are becoming and you will make a great dad one day.” Still looking concerned and apparently disregarding my encouragement, he said, “but will you teach me?” He was looking for something more than generalized reassurance.

He wanted specifics. He wanted a mentor.

Holding him close and matching his tone, I answered him directly, “I will teach you how to be a dad.” With that he smiled, left the room, and returned to the jigsaw puzzle he had been working on.

My beaming wife had been watching this exchange.

She smiled and told me that he had been waiting all day to ask me that question. We laughed at the simplicity of his earnest question and we were struck by the deep meaning of that moment.

The truth is that we strategically think about teaching our kids to read, solve math problems, fix engines, and ace college entrance exams.

But where do kids learn how to be an adult?

Where do they learn to be a dad or mom, a husband or wife?

After all, those are some of life’s most important roles.

The reality is that most of us pick up our patterns for these roles by default from those around us. Some of us have had good examples and others have had bad examples.

None of us have had perfect examples.

Regardless of what was modeled for us or whether someone intentionally mentored us, we get to decide afresh each day how we will serve in these roles.

Over the next several weeks, my son asked me the same question over and over again: “Will you teach me how to be a dad?”

I shifted my language with him.

We began to have “Dad Lessons” where we would talk about how dads love their families:

We washed dishes together—not just to clean plates but also to love and appreciate the cook. We paused the game we were playing to listen to his sister’s story—not because we were tired of the game but to give her our undivided attention.

We got up early to buy donuts on Saturday morning—not just because we wanted a treat but to delight the family with a surprise.

We dealt with conflict—not because conflict energizes us but to honor truth and peace.

I would tell him, “This is what dads do.”

These “Dad Lessons” didn’t cause our family rhythms to change much. We just began to talk differently about them. We began to infuse the ordinary and simple aspects of family life with the labels that allowed them to be processed by our youngest.

My failures and mistakes also provided opportunities for me to let him know what dads shouldn’t do.

On one occasion when I apologized for being insensitive and told him that dads should be more aware.

He told me, “That is okay. You are still a good dad.”

The truth is that my kids will not have a perfect example of how to be a parent. In fact, I hope they will be far better at parenting than I am. But for this season . . . for these years . . . I have the sacred trust of being their mentor.

Over time I found the “Dad Lessons” having an impact on me.

In the most unanticipated way, my son’s questions about wanting to learn to be a dad were making me a better dad.

In life’s most important roles, we are not limited by the good or bad training we received growing up.

Our default patterns may exist, but we have agency to choose which ones are worth expressing and which ones should be jettisoned.

Regardless of our age or position, I wonder how we might change if we begin to intentionally think about the ways we are mentoring those around us.