

PRIORITY THREE/CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

PARENTING: PROTECTION

Much has been written on the subject of parenting. Most of the information is valuable but usually more than a parent can remember, especially the next time the child throws a fit and Mom or Dad is trying to remember what principle to apply. But we cannot escape this issue if we have a commitment to **Priority 3, A Personal Progressive Commitment to Relationships**. So, we have boiled down the most important issues to three gifts that every parent can give to his or her children.

This concept is not original and is shared through the permission of Dave Veerman and Chuck Aycock who presented the material in their book, *From Dad With Love*—later reprinted by The Gathering/USA, Inc. under the title, *Dads That Make A Difference*.

Before we look at the first gift, *protection*, we need understand the critical role our fathers played in our development. For good or bad, our fathers had a tremendous influence in shaping us. According to Eddie Staub, the founder of Eagle Ranch near Gainesville, Georgia, who has provided group homes for troubled children for many years, “*The impact of mothers on a child is essential, but the impact of fathers is magical.*” When the father is not around, all kinds of problems stack up. One shocking yet revealing statistic is that 85% of men in prison grew up in fatherless homes.

Most men and women carry the imprint of an absentee father into their own parenting arena. This imprint was created by a dad who was either present or absent; engaged or detached; loving, abusive or indifferent; accommodating or domineering. Like it or not, parents cannot be ultimately effective if they do not come to terms with the expressed or unexpressed feelings toward their fathers. The pain can run deep and the scars forever obvious.

No dad is perfect, but if he hurt you, healing will not take place unless you have the courage to live with the loss of an “idealized” father, and grieving may be a natural part of the process.

One cold January morning, a video production crew flew to Atlanta and then traveled to Gainesville to interview some children who were living in a group home at the Eagle Ranch. All of them had riveting stories about their past and gripping ways of expressing how they felt about their fathers.

One boy, his blond hair shining with all the production lighting, looked like a poster child for white suburban America. The interviewer posed a question that caused the child’s countenance to drop. “*If you could tell your father anything, what would it be?*” asked the host. The boy’s eyes gazed at the floor and for 6 or 7 seconds, he said nothing. Then he looked up with a blank stare and responded, “*I’d tell him . . . (he paused again) . . . I’d tell him never to come back.*”

His father would come and go in his life and tease him with *what could be*, but break his heart with *what was*. So how does the child who has grown up deal with this reality? It’s not easy, but four steps can help.

Step 1: Express Your Feelings

If your father is no longer available, then this conversation still needs to take place—you and an empty chair, visualizing that he is sitting across from you.

You might start with a question that shows interest in his childhood: “*What was life like when you were a kid, Dad?*” You don’t want to make accusations about how you were raised, but how you felt when he behaved in certain ways. No matter how bad the relationship, find something good that he did that is worth a compliment.

Step 2: Confess Your Faults

Everyone is guilty of hurting his or her dad, so admit it—and be specific, if possible. Even if he does not remember the occasion, the lines of communication will be opened, and he will not feel as threatened to recognize his own failures.

Step 3: Forgive Your Father

This does not mean to condone his behavior or lack of involvement in your life, but forgiveness will help free you from the chains of resentment. It may take several meetings before all the cards are on the table, but it can be liberating to finally deal with it and to get on with life.

Step 4: Commit to the Relationship Going Forward

Over time, both of you have changed. As a son or daughter you can honor your father by forgetting the past and charting a new course for your relationship. In doing so, you also will be saying that you will not carry these feelings into your parenting role because they are now resolved.

A relationship will have no focus without an intentional effort. Once you have made the necessary steps to settle unresolved issues with your father, you can make a commitment to your own children and the priority they play in your life.

No one expressed this commitment better than astronaut Rick Husband in a recorded video he made the night before his fatal flight on the space shuttle Columbia. It was played during the February 2nd, 2002 service at Grace Community Church in Houston. *“If I ended up at the end of my life having been an astronaut, but having sacrificed my family along the way, or living my life in a way that didn’t glorify God, then I would look back on it with great regret . . . What really meant the most to me was to try and live my life the way God wanted me to, and to try and be a good husband to Evelyn, and to be a good father to my children.”*

With that kind of commitment in mind, we proceed to the first gift that all parents can give their children, *protection*. Protection usually implies keeping children from playing in the street, sticking fingers in electrical outlets, or having access to porn sites on the Internet. There are obvious ways to protect a child physically and morally, but protection emotionally and spiritually is also important. To protect means to create an environment in which the child can thrive without external threats. This occurs most productively in a home that is open, loving, communicative, fun, and interesting and that emphasizes personal growth and redemption. Such an environment provides protection in four ways.

Provide a feeling of belonging.

Every child develops a sense of home. You did. Think of the memories that come flooding back into your mind as you describe the sounds and aromas. Hopefully, there are good memories: the smell of cookies baking in the oven when you came home from school, the squeak and creak of a rocking chair, the laughter over a child's sharp wit, or a shared joke.

The feeling of belonging also comes when there is a sense of family heritage. This could include telling family stories, creating traditions and rituals by taking family vacations, or having special meals at different points on the calendar. For some, it might have been Mom's egg casserole on Christmas morning or a predictable snack food during the Super Bowl. This heritage might include family projects like delivering food to the underprivileged during the holidays, going on a mission trip, or creating a family video.

This protects the child from the agony of being unimportant, feeling unloved, and not developing a healthy sense of worth.

It protects the child from the fear late that they are without a solid core of people who will be there for them and will do whatever they can to prove their love.

Provide Appropriate Boundaries

Paul told the Ephesians, *“Fathers do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4).

A child without boundaries is a frustrated child. Some parents don't want to stifle their children's creativity by having a bunch of rules that need to be obeyed. What they don't realize is that those rules are like fences, and there is no freedom without fences. Many years ago, a young man walked with his family across a bridge over the Royal Gorge in Colorado. The boy was frightened by the height of the canyon and his perception that no barrier stood on either side of the road sufficient to protect him from a fall. Had the barrier been there, he could have enjoyed the walk and the view, instead of staying safely in the center of the bridge.

Boundaries provide reasonable discipline and rules. These rules deal with chores, homework, manners, curfews, and respect. Though a child may not admit it, he or she wants those boundaries, and deep inside, the child feels special that his or her parents care enough to have expectations.

Parents must, however, distinguish between a careless act and an act of defiance. Not every wrong behavior is a deliberate act of disobedience. A kid needs to be able to breathe without fear that every step he takes will merit punishment. The parents also will realize that they have to pick the right battles to fight and when to fight them. Children entering adolescence will test the boundaries, probing to see where they can find gaps with things like hairstyle, language, music, lies, body piercing, alcohol or drugs, messy room, TV use, internet use, household chores, spending habits, friends, curfews, church attendance, clothes, R-rated movies, car use, telephone use, sibling relationships, homework, grades, and so forth. At some point, a parent will have to draw a line in the sand for those non-negotiable issues and say, *“beyond here you do not go.”*

Wise parents will also let their children experience the natural consequences of some of their actions. Linda, a 14-year-old with an attitude, was upset with her father one day and stormed into her room, slammed the door, and locked it. Her father went to the garage, picked up a hammer and screwdriver, walked back in the home, released the lock, took the door off its hinges, and took it to the basement. The mortified teenager now had no privacy. Having suffered the consequences of her indiscretion, she learned her lesson. The good thing about this approach is the punishment fit the “crime.” It was appropriate, had a certain humor to it, and didn’t involve an outburst that could be regretted later. Counselors report that as many as 30% of 20-year-old adults are estranged from their parents because of excessive punishment during their childhood. They are the exasperated ones, who don’t want to hear anything of the Lord’s instruction from their parents.

Though traditionally we think of boundaries or rules in a negative sense, there can also be positive boundaries or guidelines for kids. Parents may have books they want their children to read, camps to attend, and journeys they will take together. Parents know that these experiences will shape the minds and hearts of their children and point them in a direction that will guide the rest of their lives.

Provide a Moral Framework

Famous UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden says, *“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation . . . because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”*

Children who grow up without character or a moral framework will be victimized. They will become the victims of any guiding principles that appeal to their self-interests or prurient interests. Without a moral framework, how do they decide what priorities are essential for living? Parents know that these don’t just fall in one’s lap but come through

constant emphasis and reinforcement. Parents who abdicate their role in the moral area release to the world more lost souls to wreak havoc on others.

In Deltona, Florida, four young men decided that they wanted revenge because some students refused to return an X Box console. When the police arrived the next day, they found the bodies of four men and two women, along with a family dog, beaten beyond recognition.

How does someone murder another person so brutally that it takes dental records to determine the victim's identity? The reasons are complex, but how things would have been different if, as children, the murderers would have received the protection of a moral and spiritual framework. How things would have been different if their parents had read, believed, and embraced the truth of Psalm 78.

¹ O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
² I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old-
³ what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.
⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
⁵ He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,
⁶ so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
⁷ Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
⁸ They would not be like their forefathers-
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.

This passage predicts generational spiritual health. You are a part of a five-generation pattern of thought, lifestyle, habits, values, and spirituality. You were directly influenced by your grandparents through your parents, and you will impact your grandkids by the way you raise your children. That totals five generations.

The moral framework also determines attitudes about money, how to treat people, and what is ultimately spiritually important. Morality is more than just a casual thought about what is appropriate or inappropriate. It is often the difference between life and death.

Provide an Emotional Connection

In the research done by psychologists after the mass murders on high school campuses, one common denominator appeared. Neither of the parents or a meaningful adult ever bonded with the kids who performed those horrendous acts. They had no emotional connection. The children often grew up in middle to upper middle class neighborhoods. They had the good “stuff” of life but not the really important stuff.

So, what does a parent do, especially in the earliest and most formative years, to create this emotional connection? You start by being available.

1. **Be there at bedtime.** Tell stories, pray together, read together, and laugh together. Let the children go to sleep with the emotional warmth of the last 15 minutes of the day.
2. **Be there when they hurt.** When they are sad, be aware of their countenance and take them aside for a conversation. Your genuine concern will speak volumes about their importance to you.
3. **Be there when they make mistakes.** Don't cover for them when they blow it, but let them know that we are all flawed and that we can all recover from our stupidity and our sin.
4. **Be there when they have special activities.** Dad and Mom on the sidelines, in the grandstand, in the audience, is a nutrient to emotional health.
5. And finally, **listen with understanding** to either their pain, their joys, or their overly long narrative about some mundane subject that is important to them but is boring to you. And do so while resisting the temptation to yawn, look away, or glance at your watch.

And what is to be gained by providing this kind of protection for your kids? How about **ROI**—Return On Investment. Maybe, one day, you will enjoy the emotional and spiritual health of your grandchildren and will reflect back on how you arrived where you are, and the truth of Psalm 78 will come home with new and satisfying clarity.