

DAD,

Use your **relationship**

to gain **influence**

with your **children**

They need it more than you know

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A few weeks ago, I was listening to my car radio during my morning commute to the office when I heard an advertisement for a tape series that guaranteed to cure virtually any child of all emotional and behavioral maladies from ADHD to OCD to behavior problems. As a psychologist, I am dubious of any “program” that makes sweeping claims unless it is supported by a plethora of empirical research. Seventeen years of clinical work with families have taught me that there are few panaceas for children and teen problems.

However, there is one thing that does seem to have a positive impact on child and teen development in a number of areas. For example, children who are exposed to this one variable are far less likely to engage in delinquent behavior, they perform significantly better in school, they turn out to be more empathic adults, and they are less likely to develop emotional problems and to use mental health services to name a few benefits. The one thing that can boast such positive results *is the consistent presence of a loving and hands-on father in the life of a child.*

These claims are backed by a host of research studies that are summarized in the publication, *Father Facts—Fourth Edition (2002)* by Wade Horn, Ph.D and Tom Sylvester. It is a proven fact—children who grow up with a father in the home who does such basic things as eat dinner with the family, read to young children, and set and enforce limits have a far greater chance of maturing into emotionally healthy adults than those who do not have this influence in their lives.

In order to be an effective father, it is important to realize that you have two very important tools in your parenting toolbox: *rank* and *relationship*. Rank means establishing who is in charge in the home and enforcing rules and limits. The purpose of establishing rank is to gain control. Relationship refers to making sure your children know you care about them by investing time and energy in their lives. Relationship is used for gaining influence in your child's life. Think about your own life for a moment. The people who influence you most are those with whom you have a good relationship.

Most dads are pretty good at establishing rank, but could use some work on establishing relationship. In my experience working with children, and especially teenagers, you can only rely on control as a parenting tool for a short time in your child's life. However, influence lasts a lifetime. If you are not working diligently to establish and maintain a relationship with your child, you risk losing what your children need most: a father's influence. Here are a few tips for establishing and maintaining your relationship with your son or daughter.

Spend time with your child. Our priorities are revealed by the amount of time we invest in them. Our children know this. Do not deceive yourself by rationalizing that a little "quality time" is sufficient to establish and maintain, a relationship with your child. You also have to have enough "quantity time" as well. Imagine how it would feel if your wife told you, "Honey, I am not going to be spending much time with

you from now on, but when I do, it is going to be good, quality time.”
The relationship would obviously start to suffer

Allow your child to be his or her own person. One of the biggest complaints I hear from teenagers is that they feel their parents are always trying to make them into little “mini-me’s.” You would not be very interested in being in a friendship with someone who was constantly trying to change your identity, and neither will your children. Your children need to feel that you love and accept them for who they are. This is not the same thing as approving of every action or behavior. However, your child needs to feel that you accept him/her, even if he/she is different from you.

Learn to listen to your children. Avoid using every conversation as an opportunity to lecture or teach an object lesson to them. Men are notorious for feeling like they need to give advice or “fix” things. We do it with our wives as well as our children. Try and practice more listening—ears open, nonjudgmental, non-advice-giving listening---and you will probably find your children talking with you more often.

Be consistent and tireless in your effort to maintain your relationship with your child. As your child grows older, it is normal for him or her to pull away from you. Do not be discouraged or dismayed by this—it is part of growing up. Instead, let your child know how important your relationship with him or her is, and keep the door open.

Being a father is a blessing and a calling from God. It is both an honor and a privilege to be entrusted with the care and responsibility of raising a child. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus to “live a life worthy of the *calling* you have received.” Begin to see your role as dad as your calling, and live a life worthy of this sacred role—it is one investment you will never regret.