

Advice for Fathers

by James B. Stenson

Sometimes negative guidelines are at least as helpful as positive ones, often more so. It's often useful for a father to know what not to do--that is, what to avoid--in a complicated family situation.

I used to ask veteran fathers (men whose children had grown and gone) what warnings or other "negative know-how" they'd pass on to younger Dads. In paraphrase, here are some bits of hard-earned fatherly wisdom they shared with me....

- Don't neglect your wife. She needs what we all need: understanding, affection, gratitude, support, and appreciation. For sure, she doesn't get these from the kids when they're small. So if she doesn't get them from her husband either, then she doesn't get them at all. You can tell you're neglecting your wife if she starts complaining about small things around the house, one after another, circling around and around the central problem: your apparent unconcern for her. Wake up. Pay attention. Listen to her opinion, help her out, tell her she's great, hug and kiss her from time to time--all this goes a long way.
- Don't underestimate your children. Have high ambitions for their swift, step-by-step growth into maturity. We all tend to become what we think about, and kids tend to become what their parents expect of them. Even when they sometimes let you down and you have to correct them, make them understand that you see this as just a blip along the way. You have no doubt, none whatever, that they'll someday grow into excellent men and women. You're proud of them, confident in them. Always will be.
- Don't treat teenagers like large children. Think of them, and treat them, as near-adults. Pull them up, fine-tune their consciences, welcome them to adult reality. Show them how to balance a checkbook, pursue a job, work professionally, please their bosses, deal respectfully with the opposite sex. Show them how to buy good clothes, take care of their wardrobe, and dress well. When they complain, "Why don't you trust me?" teach them that you distinguish between integrity and judgment. You trust their integrity and sense of family honor, their honesty and good intentions--always have, always will. But what you must have reservations about for now, in good conscience, is their inexperienced judgment; that is, you cannot let them hurt themselves through their naïve blunders. When they start thinking like responsible adults, then you'll trust them right across the board--in judgment as well as integrity.
- Don't ever tell your teens that the high-school years are the best part of their lives. This isn't true. Adolescence is, in fact, one of life's toughest times: teens have to cope with blunders and glandular upheavals, surfing up and down learning curves. Tell your adolescent children, and above all show them, that every stage of life is interesting, challenging, and enjoyable for anyone with a sporting, adventurous spirit. Teens who've been well brought up have a great life ahead of them, like the life they see in you. (Think about it: How many older teens and young adults are tempted to suicide because they believe what they've been told: the best part of life is behind them?)
- Don't let your children weasel out of commitments. Don't let them take back their word on a whim. Before they make promises or otherwise commit themselves to a course of action, press them to think consequences through and understand their terms, because you will hold them to their word.

If they want to buy a pet, make them first commit themselves to feeding and caring for it--then hold them to that. If they accept an invitation to a party (after first checking with you and your wife), they're obligated to be there even if something more alluring turns up. If they want to take guitar lessons, make them promise to persevere, no matter what, for six months or a year or whatever seems reasonable.

- When you're correcting your children and they petulantly ask "Why?"--don't argue with them. If they're looking for an explanation, give it once only. If they persist with "Why?" then they're looking for an argument, not an explanation. Close off the matter. In other words, they must take your "no" as an answer, but you don't take theirs. You can dialogue with your kids about many issues, but there's no "dialogue" about your rights as a father.
- Don't let your kids dress in such a way as to bring shame to the family. Nobody has a right to do this.
- Don't miss small opportunities to talk with your kids. Listen politely and respectfully. You can talk with them while driving, doing dishes and other chores together, walking and biking, working on hobbies you share, tucking them into bed. If you cut down on tube-watching, you'll find slivers and chunks of time here and there in family life. Make the time, and never forget you haven't much of it left--for your kids will grow up with incredible swiftness.
- Don't shout at your kids so often. It's a waste of breath. If one of your children needs a talking to, take him or her out for a walk or a soda--and say what you have to say in a calm, serious way. Don't forget to listen, either--for your kids' view of things, though mostly wrong, may still have a point. A couple of heart-to-heart talks are better than a dozen explosions.
- Don't get trapped into blazing arguments, especially with your teens, and most especially if you have a temper. Words can wound and take a long time to heal. If tempers are flaring, put off the discussion till later--that evening or the next day--when you've both cooled down. If you go too far, be the first to apologize.
- Don't forget to praise your children, and be specific about it. Kids need a pat on the back from time to time. We all do. Give praise for effort, not just success. Teach the kids this adult-life lesson: because success depends on effort, then effort is more important than success. You always appreciate when your children try.
- Come down to your children's level, but don't stay there. Kids are kids, and you have to come down to their level to take them by the hand. But your long-term goal is to bring them up to your own level--to lead them, patiently over time, to think and act like mature grown-ups. So live like a grown-up. Enjoy being an adult on top of life, and let them see what this means. If they see you enjoy living as a confident, productive adult, they'll have a life to look forward to.

[This folio is excerpted from my book *Father, the Family Protector* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 2004.)

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