Forming a Lifelong Bond

KEN CANFIELD
and the National Center for Fathering
Welcome to the fathering journey!

This e-book is part of our continuing efforts here at fathers.com to inspire and equip dads in many different situations and challenges related to fathering—to help them be the dads their children need.

As you’ll soon discover in chapter 2, there are 5 more stages in the fathering life course, each of which is addressed in a separate volume. My good friend Dr. Ken Canfield, founder of the National Center for Fathering, wrote these some years ago, and we’ve updated them and put them in e-book form so many more dads can benefit.

As you read this e-book, more than anything I want you to keep two things in mind:

1 - Your children really do need you.

It’s clear from the research: Children thrive when they have an involved father, and they often don’t do so well when their dad isn’t around.
You can do something about that for your own children and other kids around you. I hope you’ll take that attitude with you as you read and after you finish this short book.

2 - You can be part of a championship team.

It probably isn’t news to you that you will likely never play in the Super Bowl. Even if you're very good—among the best athletes to ever play in your high school—you're not going to be in the NBA Finals or World Series. Very few athletes ever get a ring for winning a championship on a high level.

But you can become a world-class dad, get a wristband and be part of the Championship Fathering team! That's right. No longer will you sit around wondering, What team can I be on? or Where can I make my mark in the world? Dad ... you can be on our team—an amazing group of guys who love, coach, and model for our children.

I have to tell you, I'm fired up! Because we're calling men to one of their highest purposes—investing in the next generation. This is a big league team with big league dreams.
In the course of our fathering season, some of us will come up against big challenges, but we're going to face them head-on and find solutions that work for our children. If other people around us are suspicious of fathers, we're going to prove them wrong. We're creating a culture where fathers are honored and encouraged, because so many dads are doing the job right.

And let me tell you, that's one of the highest callings there is. You might not get champagne dumped on you in a locker room or be interviewed on national TV. Chances are, it will be more like baby spit up on your clothes, and you'll probably never get the recognition you deserve for your dedication—at least not in this life.

But that's okay, because in sports fame is fleeting; there's a new champion every year, and the old ones are soon forgotten. Not so with fathering. Our hard work will pay off for many years as we see our children and grandchildren benefit from what we've done.

So, dad, even when things get hard and it's tough to be a father, there are good reasons to be excited about being a dad.
Hang in there, do your best, and don’t give up.

Keep up the good work!

Carey Casey
Chief Encouragement Officer
National Center for Fathering / fathers.com

P.S. Be sure to get regular reminders of your important role as a dad. Sign up for our weekly email here, or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.
A Guide

To help emphasize some “big ideas” and action points throughout the book, we’ve placed five logos in the text to get your attention.

Take Action – We’re pretty sure you get this one. As you read through the book, stop and make note of the things you can do now.

Talk About It – Don’t go silent! We suggest several topics to discuss with your child’s mother and/or other dads.

Caution – Like orange barrels on the highway, we’re suggesting that there is potential danger and opportunity here. Take note!

Mutual Support – No reason to go it alone. The dad adventure is enriched by trusting other dads to coach and encourage you. Reach out!

Think About It – Admit it ... sometimes just getting through a book becomes the mission. “The Thinker” reminds dads to take a moment and ponder what you’re reading.
The wheels of my car crackled in the gravel as I pulled up in front of our house. I turned off the ignition and listened to the engine sputter to a stop. I was exhausted. My whole head throbbed with a need for sleep. It was three o’clock in the afternoon. I had become a father.

Just twenty-four hours earlier, Dee had started contractions, so I took her to the hospital. The doctor examined Dee and sent us home. But the contractions became more intense and regular, and by 8:00 that evening we were back in the hospital.

I spent a sleepless night beside Dee’s bed. It was one of those marathon labors—unlike anything our optimistic Lamaze instructor had mentioned. At 7:10 the next morning, the doctor began to administer Pitocin to stimulate Dee’s labor; finally heavy labor began, and at 10:45, Hannah was born.

We were parents! I was a father!

I stayed at the hospital with Dee and Hannah through most of the afternoon. I was absolutely amazed: Hannah cried for just a moment; the
nurse wrapped a blanket around her and she quieted. Her eyes were open and she looked around. Best of all, she took her mother’s breast and began suckling immediately. What a wonderful little human being!

After a sleepless night and the emotional drama of Hannah’s delivery, I was badly in need of a shower. I drove home, pulled into the driveway, and a strange thing happened. I was sitting there, exhausted, leaning heavily over the steering wheel and staring out through the windshield at the wooden steps leading up into our house. One board was a little rotten on one end, and the rusty nails had gouged their way to the surface. Another board had warped up off the supports. I had never given any thought to those steps before, but now it occurred to me that in less than 48 hours, a new mother carrying a new baby would be climbing those rickety stairs.

Exhausted as I was, with bloodshot eyes and the aroma of my sleepless hospital visit about me, I got out the power saw, some wood, a handful of nails, a square, and a hammer. And for the next three hours, I built steps. When I was done, I went in, took a shower, and then headed right back to the hospital.

I was now a father on the first stage of the marathon – Attachment.
chapter 2 all a dad can be

Once a father, always a father.

That simple truth reveals that fathering is a process beginning the moment you welcome a child into your family and extending to the day you die. As a father, the length and breadth of your commitment is lifelong.

The best big-picture statement I have for the life course of a father is this: Fathering is more than a sprint; it’s a marathon. The marathon is a great way to describe the challenges and adventures facing all fathers: a race of 26 miles, 385 yards. For most runners, it isn’t so much a race against the other runners as it is an inner struggle—a test of commitment, endurance, and mental toughness.

One of the primary marks of an effective father is that he commits himself to doing all that a father is supposed to do. In generations gone by, fathers have worked with a limited job description. They have looked at the range of tasks that a father does and said, Here, I’ll do these two things—usually providing finances and enforcing discipline—but don’t
expect me to talk to my kids about sex, help them with their homework or go all-out to express love to their mother.

Some dads start too slowly in the marathon of fathering. Maybe they’re looking at the tests they know are ahead, and they’re “pacing themselves,” thinking they’ll kick in strong later in the race.

Maybe they think babies are best left to their mothers: Let that baby get a little less fragile and a little less messy; let him learn to talk and hold a fishing rod, and then I’ll be able to relate to him. These fathers often miss out on the first years of their child’s life, and fall way behind in the race.

It’s more common for runners to give up later on in the race—what runners call “hitting the wall”—when all their energy reserves are depleted and their muscles have begun to cramp up and ache with intense pain. Some of us saw our fathers pull back or even drop out when we hit adolescence.

I also encounter fathers who run a good race for most of the course, then feel satisfied and coast or even walk to the finish line. Since their children have all grown up and left the house for college and careers, marriage and parenthood, they naively assume their fathering has come to an end.
Granted, there is a sense that the urgency of fathering is diminished once the kids have left the nest. But their fathering has not ended; it has simply changed. Dads still play an important role in the lives of their adult children, and in the lives of those talented and brilliant grandchildren.

There are other significant ways in which fathering is like a marathon: the endurance required; the strategy involved; the mid-course adjustments; the assistance and encouragement from others; the reference points to help gauge progress.

*Being a dad really is an incredible adventure.*

Some years ago at the National Center for Fathering, we proposed the hypothesis that there is a life course for fathers, that there are distinct differences in the stages a father goes through as he and his children grow and change.

We tested this idea by dividing our list of fathers into groups based on the age of their oldest child. Our test showed that each group differed significantly in terms of what a father does.
For instance, during the first three periods of a father’s life (before his children have reached adolescence), a man’s nurturing scores were significantly higher.

During the child’s adolescence, the category “dealing with crisis” rose higher than all the other factors. We also found that a father’s satisfaction levels follow a discernible pattern throughout the six stages.

**Our conclusion: there is a six-stage life course that a father typically follows.**

We then named these six stages according to their chief characteristics.

**Attachment** is the period that begins when you learn you will soon become a father and extends through the first two years of your child’s life. During your first two years as a father, you adjust to your new roles and responsibilities, and begin to grasp the awesome privilege and responsibility of being a dad.

**Idealism** occurs during your child’s pre-school years, when his needs are largely physical and his relationships are being planted. That’s when fathers tend to be highly motivated and place a high priority on their fathering tasks.
Understanding occurs as your child enters formal education. The child’s circle of relationships widens and physical dexterity increases, making him more competitive.

The teenage years bring on Enlightenment, which is marked by the lowest level of fathering satisfaction. Your child is looking for her place in the world and expressing independence. Other influences begin to crowd you, the father, out of the picture. If you are also in your own mid-life adjustment, it gets even tougher.

Reflection occurs when your child leaves home for college, work or marriage. As your child chooses his own lifestyle in the world, you begin to reflect on the influence you’ve had and the ways in which you may have failed.

The last stage is Generativity. As a grandfather, your relationship with your child has matured into more of a friendship. You are very aware of how you have influenced your child, and you’re very intentional about participating in your grandchildren’s lives. If you haven’t realized it before, you now know that your role as a father is one of the most significant roles you ever played.

Why is it important to be aware of the fathering life course?
Primarily, we fathers need to anticipate and prepare for what’s ahead.

We need to be aware of the changes that are coming, head into each stage of the life course with eyes open, and rise up to meet the challenges of each particular period.

We need to be aware of what our children need at each stage of our fathering. For example, I can remember when my oldest daughter Hannah entered adolescence, which put me in the stage of Enlightenment. Hannah’s verbal skills took a quantum leap as she enjoyed stating her opinion, giving direction to others, and discussing the subtle nuances of relationships. It forced my wife, Dee, and me to carry a greater load of talking’s companion: listening.

I knew from older dads and from what I’d read in books that Hannah needed opportunities for free expression at this stage, so I was prepared for her “brainstorming” about life. I knew that it was important for her to be able to throw out ideas to see which ones rang true. Happily, I was prepared.

Understanding the life course also helps us prepare for the particular challenges that come at each stage. We can’t always prevent them, but we can do the next best thing: prepare for them.
If you don’t devote yourself to scouting out the territory ahead of your child, you may spend much of the fathering journey walking backwards, surveying what you’ve traveled and muttering, “If I had to do it over again, I’d do it differently,” or “If I only knew then what I know now,” or “Boy, I really missed out.” It doesn’t have to be that way.

This book is not designed to tell you everything you need to know. Instead, my purpose is to introduce some key issues and to give some guidelines about how you can win with your child during this stage.

**Reaching Farther**

In some cases, you may feel that I’ve opened up a topic and not dealt with it sufficiently. I plead guilty right from the start. But at the very least, I hope to steer you in the right direction. If you identify topics that you’d like to study in more depth, you may have already noticed that I’ve included links to additional articles scattered throughout this book, such as [this one](#), which takes you to articles on our website for dads of infants. Also, there are recommendations for further reading at the back, and you’re always welcome to contact us at the National Center for Fathering at 1-800-593-
DADS or dads@fathers.com. We’ll do our best to provide the help you need.

I’ve also included a self-scoring survey which will help you examine yourself in areas of fathering that are especially pertinent during this phase. You might take the survey before you read further in the book, then go back to it periodically to remind yourself how you scored in a particular area.

Another useful idea is to use the survey questions as points of discussion between you and other dads who may be facing the same issues. If you’re really brave, you can have your wife or another close friend or relative score you on the same questions, then compare the results.

Most of all, be easy on yourself. This survey is limited. It cannot assess your heart or your desire. It can only give you a reference point about your relationship with your children, and assist you in evaluating your fathering so you can modify and strengthen those areas as you desire. I hope this survey tool will help you notice a strength, or identify a weakness, so you can train yourself to be stronger in that area.

*Fathering is more than a sprint; it’s a marathon.*
Use the fathering life course as a kind of map. The six stages will serve as mile markers, laying out the course before you, giving you direction. You can assess yourself at each stage along the way, in the same way a runner looks at his time splits or checks his heart rate. And be alert to the “water stations” along the route. There are fathering resources which can help you to finish the race strong!

Finishing the race is the goal, and anyone who does finish may or may not ever get a crown of laurels on his head or a gold medallion around his chest, but will have the satisfaction of knowing he’s given his all for the next generation.
Chapter 3  a sense of responsibility

I’ll never forget the evening of my first child’s birth, building new steps for our home. My imagination had been totally ignited when Dee gave birth: “Oh no, Dee will be walking up and down those steps. She’ll be carrying Hannah. She might slip. Hannah is so fragile….” But I had a power saw, fresh lumber and a new purpose: I will protect my family!

Dee was overwhelmed: she interpreted the steps as a mark of my love for her and our newborn. I used to tell people, “We have a new baby,” and then Dee would add, “...and, new steps!” We moved from that house just over a year later, and my daughter’s feet never touched those stairs—she wasn’t walking yet. Her voice never thanked me for them—she wasn’t talking yet. But I did it for her anyway.

Building those steps was an early and obvious sign that I felt a new sense of responsibility. Dads who adopt a baby or marry a woman with an infant will feel it, too. Men who enter fatherhood become aware of an irreversible and startling new truth: there is a very
small person completely dependent on her father and mother for survival. It’s a daunting thought!
There are a myriad of ways this new sense of responsibility can be expressed. One man tells of driving more safely, even when alone, and of wearing his seat belt for the first time in his life. “I became aware, when Mary was pregnant, that I no longer had any right to die. I was now important to this little thing, and I couldn’t die because he needed me.”

As fathers, we care for and protect our families, and perhaps at no time do we feel the sense of responsibility more profoundly than during these early months, when our children are small and helpless, and our child-bearing wives are subjects of awe and wonder.

**Responsibility: The Potential of a Newborn**
A newborn child is a wonder in and of herself. But what makes for a great deal of the wonder is the amount of potential wrapped up in that little bundle.

If you had the opportunity to join your wife in the delivery room, then you recall how your newborn took in that first breath of air and let out a wail, full and healthy. One day, that same child may sing a song where she hits a note so perfectly that all who hear her will be moved and inspired.
Or perhaps you remember your infant son in the delivery room opening his eyes for the first time and blinking in discovery. The images were faint and blurry images, but he saw something: a light, a face, a table. Years later, that same child may open his eyes and suddenly see something he’s never seen before. He may have insight into the way one chemical compound affects another and suddenly he knows: this is it, this is the cure for cancer.

*Your great job as a father is to nurture your child in such a way that he can grow and thrive.*

As a plant needs light and water, your child needs your love and affirmation. These early years are of immense importance: make the most of them. Your child needs to be stimulated intellectually, challenged physically, and guided socially. There is much to do!

During this first stage of fathering, your child will be very busy. He’ll learn to crawl, to pull up to a standing position, and he’ll begin taking a few first steps. He’ll cut teeth, start eating solid food, and learn to feed himself by hand.
In the first year, his weight will triple. He’ll learn hundreds of new objects; comprehend gestures and words. “You won’t see such rapid progress at any other stage,” writes Paul Heidebrecht. “The helpless infant you held at birth will quickly become a mobile, talkative, curious, demanding and lovable toddler.”

So take an active role in learning about your growing child. What is she going through? What are her mental and sensory capacities? What does she need most from you? What makes her laugh? Too many dads leave all the research to the mother and never figure out answers to these kinds of questions.

Many of the resources available today for new dads will be very helpful as you seek to understand your baby and learn how to relate to her more effectively. See some of our recommendations here. Make a commitment to read at least one of them now, for the sake of your child. It’s a great habit to start, because you’ll need to be prepared for the growth and changes your child goes through—from now, up and into adulthood.

**Responsibility: A Sense of the Cost**

There is cost involved in fathering. You may not yet have a full grasp of the time, energy, and emotional costs of fathering, but you are likely to calculate the monetary costs.
Preparing for and having a new child brings additional expense to the family. The brunt of that added expense—since it is likely that the mother will take maternity leave for a while or perhaps indefinitely—usually falls on the father.

I’ve talked to men whose voices have actually modulated between the enthusiasm of the first sentence—“Mary’s pregnant!”—and the worry of the next sentence—“I sure hope we can afford it.” These men are sometimes accused of being cold and unfeeling, seeing children like a budgetary line item, but I’m more often encouraged that they take the financial provision for their families seriously. They are concerned. They want to be able to give their children what they need.

Beyond the immediate expenses and bills you have to pay, take time to also do some financial planning. Maybe you’ll want to start a savings program for your child’s education; maybe you’ve never looked seriously into life insurance, and now you feel the importance of providing for your wife and child if something should happen to you. Maybe it will be nothing more than a re-evaluation of your budget to factor in the added expenses that a
baby brings; maybe you’ll need to make hard decisions about your spending habits.

I also suggest that you discuss with your wife your feelings about providing adequately for your family and your career aspirations. How much of a priority is your career? Will you sacrifice time at home to advance in the workplace? Would you consider turning down a promotion or transfer to protect your time with your children?

There are a significant number of fathers for whom the act of drawing a paycheck induces guilt, because that’s time away from their family. To those dads, I need to say, certainly, if you never come home from work, you should feel guilty. But otherwise, be proud that you’re dutifully meeting many of the basic physical needs of your children.

Does this mean that the more money a man makes, the more effective he is as a father? Not at all. The level of income isn’t as important as having a steady income that provides for the basic needs of the family. Does it mean that a father has to be the only provider for his family? Again, not at all.
Your attitudes about work and family are worth examining now. If your heart is always at home, that isn’t necessarily bad, as long as you give your employer your best effort. And it’s good that you’re concerned about not letting work take you away from your children completely.

But also realize that your work is an important part of your fathering. Even though your mind may be involved in some important project, it doesn’t mean you’re no longer a father. Remind yourself that you’re doing this for the ones you love.

Responsibility: A Term of Engrossment

Many fathers describe a lack of natural bonding to their babies right at birth. You’ve just met! How can you feel that deep connection so soon? It can take hours, days, or even weeks to adjust to the idea that you’re a father and this little one is now a part of your family.

But soon, that baby consumes your every conscious thought; life becomes larger than life. You will love this child and care for him because he is so precious. Perhaps you have a desire to break family cycles: you will give your son or daughter what your father never gave you. At any rate, life is full; you are deeply delighting in your child.
This early phase of fatherhood is particularly engrossing. It is fuel to your tank. It enables you to enter the realm of fatherhood responsibilities with joy. Martin Greenberg describes this phase of “engrossment”:

The word *engrossment* refers to a father’s sense of absorption, preoccupation, and interest in his baby. He feels gripped and held by this feeling. He has an intense desire to look at his baby, to touch and hold him. It is as if he is hooked, drawn to his newborn child by some involuntary force over which he has no control.

But engrossment means more than involvement. The term engross, from which it is derived, means to “make large.” When a father feels engrossed in his baby, the infant has become larger than life for him. Not only that, but fathers suddenly feel as if they themselves have grown. They feel bigger, stronger, older, more powerful.

Greenberg lists seven experiences that make up engrossment:

1. An intense visual awareness of the baby. You are overwhelmed by the baby’s beauty, individuality, and personality.
2. An intense tactile awareness of the baby. You are captivated with touching the baby: holding him, touching his skin, and playing with him.

3. The baby appears distinctly different from other babies. You are very much in tune with the details of your baby’s appearance and the ways she is unique. You have probably also picked up on her resemblance to yourself.

4. The baby seems perfect. Despite some awkwardness and unsightly aspects, you couldn’t imagine a better child.

5. A strong attraction to the baby. You feel a magnetic pull to focus all your attention on your new child.

6. Exhilaration. It’s almost like being on a high. You feel stunned, off the ground, ten feet tall, taken outside of yourself.

7. Increased self-esteem. You have a sense that you’re prouder, bigger, and more mature than you were before.³

For men who are still adjusting to being a dad, it is a fresh and invigorating experience; your child is endlessly fascinating, and you’re completely preoccupied with your new role.
Whether you have an immediate, deep response to your newborn, or a slow-growing, quiet sense of connection, I encourage you to revel in the joy! When you experience engrossment, feed off those feelings and seek to build a bond with your child. That is, after all, the primary purpose of the stage of Attachment. We’ll get more specific about bonding in a later chapter.

**Action:** The Attachment portion of your marathon is the one stage that your child will not remember, and yet, it is so terribly important to both of you. Consider journaling, blogging, or creating a video and photo scrapbook to preserve your memories and emotions during this stage. You child will treasure it later in life.

Also, talk with dads of older children about what you’re experiencing and what welcoming a newborn into their life was like.
“You can’t be a father until you’re first a son.” Of course it makes sense on the surface, but it goes so much deeper.

Over the last couple of decades, some experts have voiced an observation that many men arrive at adulthood “wounded.” There are differing opinions about the cause of this wound, but the research I’ve seen confirms that the most common source for this wound is a man’s father—most often, a hostile or indifferent father. I’ve heard story after story of men who were provoked, embittered, exasperated or even abused by hostile or indifferent fathers. When these sons become fathers themselves, the experiences of fatherhood bring back so many memories, pain, and heated emotions that they’re unprepared to relate responsibly to their own kids.

They’re hindered as fathers, and typically handle their pain in one of two ways. Some men carry years of anger around with them. It just sits there, waiting for the right time—or, more accurately, the wrong time—to erupt and splatter everyone around them. The
other men live in confusion: a paralysis of the soul. A man in this confusion lives his life without confidence, refusing to trust anyone, emotionally shut down. He has the attitude: don’t talk; don’t feel; don’t trust. His kids can’t get in, and he can’t or doesn’t want to come out.

Your experience as a son informs your fathering inheritance. As dads, we need to realize that our ability to be good fathers is directly related to our relationship with our own dads. As dads, we have an inheritance. It is what we got from our own fathers, and it’s what we’ll give to our children unless we choose to do differently. But first we need to know it’s there.

**Realize Your Fathering Inheritance**

One morning several years ago, my wife Dee called my office to tell me our son Micah, five at the time, had cut a hole in his great aunt’s quilt. If that wasn’t bad enough, he then lied about it. I told Dee I’d be home for lunch.

Part of the fathering inheritance I received from my dad is an extreme hatred of lying. My dad once took me to my grade school after hours, convinced the janitor to let us in, and then rummaged through my desk to find an unfinished homework assignment that I had lied about losing. Sometimes when I catch my kids lying, my backside still tingles from my father’s “inheritance.”
This was Micah’s first premeditated lie, and I wanted to be sure he didn’t start a bad habit. When we stepped into his bedroom, he was so ready to confess that I didn’t even have to pull my KGB routine. “Micah,” I said, “did you lie to your mom about cutting that quilt?”

“Yes,” he burst forth in a sputter of tears.

I was compelled by my inheritance to teach him just how horrible lying is, so I pressed the point: “Micah, do you know who the father of lies is?” (In the Bible, the devil is described as the father of lies.)

“Yes,” he said.

“Who?” I continued. “Who is the father of lies?”

Micah took a deep breath. His lower lip quivered. “Saddam Hussein,” he muttered. (Do you know what a challenge it is to discipline your child when you want to laugh hysterically and hug him instead?)

This reaction to my son’s lie was influenced by my experiences with my dad. I want my fathering to recognize my father’s inheritance, but more
importantly, I want to accurately reflect my own values. I value truth, but I don’t want to be overly hostile toward my children in truth’s defense.

As we mature, we must learn to sort the wheat from the chaff. Our fathering inheritance must be either embraced or resolved before we can effectively communicate with, discipline, or sometimes even love our own children.

To help you work through reconciling your relationship with your father—or, at least, reconciling your feelings toward him—I have a three-step process that many men have found helpful: Recognize, Resolve, and Relate.

Recognize

For some people, taking an inventory of the past can be a complicated process. If your father abused you as a child, then you may be wise to find a professional counselor who can more thoroughly and personally lead you through this process. For most men, however, the inventory process is a lot less complicated. Memories will come back, and with those memories, emotions.

“Tell me about your dad.” That’s really all I’m asking. All of us will find our inheritances lacking to some degree. I trust that whatever “lack” we
identify will motivate us to work on the next step: resolving our feelings, attitudes, and actions as sons.

**Understanding your father as a man is an important step.**

It is our desire, however, to focus the perspective a little tighter: What kind of a dad was your father? Perhaps the first—and maybe the most critical—aspect that you need to understand about your father was that he, too, was a son. This can be a powerful revelation, allowing you great insight into your father.

By viewing your father as a son, you can make comparisons to your own experience as a son, and you may discover in yourself a well of empathy to help you reconcile with your father.

We tend to picture our fathers as all-powerful beings because that’s how they appeared in our childhood perspective, but we never stop to realize that they too were once boys, and sons of a father. Many of the wounds we have suffered as sons were handed down from our fathers and their fathers, and their fathers before.

So I encourage you to be gentle with your dad as you go through this, but you do need to identify his impact on you. Ask yourself questions like these:
• How has my dad affected the way I show affection to my child?

• How did my father discipline me? What was his attitude or tone?

• How did my dad communicate his values and principles to me? Which ones took root, and why?

• Did my father teach me about necessary “facts of life” such as sexuality, dishonesty, racism, and jealousy? How did he do it? Was it easy and natural to talk about these kinds of concerns?

If you spend time answering questions about your father as a man and a dad, and work through how you are both like him and different from him, you can begin to understand how those factors affect your life.

For example, maybe a man’s father never said “I love you.” It would be common for him to react to this deficit in one of two extremes. He could continue his father’s tradition of rarely affirming his child, or he could overcompensate and smother his child with affection. Either way, he has avoided dealing constructively with his father wound.
As you recognize areas where your father may have been deficient, you can make a firm commitment to change the way you will respond and behave as a parent. With an awareness of what your issues are and a desire to address those issues, you’re ready to move on to the next step.

Resolve

Now comes the hard part. You need to have an experience with your father that acts as the signpost for a new direction. Either face-to-face, by visiting his grave site, or through an objective third party, express your feelings to him, sharing what you’ve learned in the first step of recognition. If you need to confess anything as a son, be bold and own up to it. But more critical, if you need to forgive him for any words or actions, be bold and extend him your forgiveness. All along, honor your father and state your commitment to a renewed relationship with him.

I know it’s a frightening step, but it is necessary. What is the use of dredging up emotions, patterns, and psychological and spiritual damage if we don’t intend to resolve these stirred-up feelings and wounds? It would be like walking into a field of beehives without knowledge of the pathway out. If you don’t move on to the next step,
with the goal of a new relationship with your father, you are likely to be left feeling stung by regret or anger.

There is no one magic method for resolving your relationship with your father, but I do believe that the process will include all or parts of the following five elements:

1. **Meet to exchange your thoughts.** Such an exchange for most men represents a deep conversation, something they can hardly imagine with their fathers, much less accomplish. More than likely, you will have to take the initiative for setting up a face-to-face exchange with your father. With so much on the line, it isn’t wrong to hope for the best, but there are no guarantees. Your father may not welcome such an open exchange.

   *You must always remember to concentrate on elements of resolution that are under your control.*

Your immediate goal is to resolve your feelings, attitudes, and actions as a son. You can accomplish this even in the face of your father’s opposition.

But what if you never knew your dad, or he refuses to see you, or you cannot locate him, or **he is deceased**? You can still go to his
cemetery or talk with a friend or support group, where you can come to terms with whatever inheritance he has left you, and bury the pain, resentment, and bitterness that may have bound you.

2. Express your feelings. Often you can begin the conversation by asking, “What was your childhood like, Dad?” or, “What was your father like?” Those questions will often lead directly into a meaningful conversation, where you can express your feelings about the past. Your feelings may be directly related to something your father did, but don’t let that get you sidetracked onto a list of what your father did wrong.

There is a very important difference between sharing your feelings in a slow, controlled manner and exploding in anger and bitterness. Seek to avoid shaming your father with blame and highly emotional accusations. Try to recall positives that you can share as well, even if they seem pretty insignificant. Your effort to say something affirming will be significant.

*Remember, this is about breaking cycles.*

You may be justified in listing page after page of what he did wrong, or engaging him in a heated
confrontation, but that will only continue the cycle. You can share negative feelings and still show him honor as your dad.

3. Confess your own faults. Be careful here that you don’t assume responsibility or blame yourself for something your father did. It wasn’t your fault that he abandoned you, or abused you, or shut you out emotionally. But you may have some genuine issues to confess—words you said, pain you caused him, regrets you have about the relationship.

Through confession, we claim ownership of the relationship. We admit that just as our father influenced us, so we influenced him. We are doing more than just reconciling our feelings; we are also reconciling our actions which harmed the relationship.

4. Forgive your father. Understand that in asking you to forgive your father, I am not asking you to condone his behavior or nonchalantly pretend like nothing happened. Forgiveness resolutely faces the facts (with all their pain) and then consciously decides not to hold those actions against the person. It cuts the tie between past action and present relationship.
You can’t change the past, but you can control your will to forgive your father—it doesn’t rest on whether he repents of his actions or responds positively to you. When you forgive him, you move on with your life and devote your energy to more pressing matters—like raising your own children. You no longer demand that he give you what he has proven he is incapable or unwilling to give.

5. Commit to the relationship. By this point in the process, you know whether the door has been opened for a new relationship with your father. That’s a direction that’s worth your effort. “Dad, I know some things have not been very good between us, but with the years that you and I have left together, I’m going to do my part to make things better. I’ll always be your son, and you’ll always be my father.”

If you have not already done so, and if you are able, you need to speak the three words which are rarely spoken between father and son: “I love you.” “Dad, I love you.”

Relate

The heart of a father, once healed, must find deeply significant ways to reconnect itself with the past. By relating in new and healthy ways to your father, you anchor yourself in the past and provide a crucial bridge of perspective for your children. You
connect them through vital and living relationships to history, tradition, and legacy.

In relating anew to your father, you are trying to recapture the original design for fathers and sons, but doing so in the context of what is true now, not what should have been true when you were a child. You are an adult, a competent adult. Previously, you may have felt that “pleasing your father” was somehow your main task in life, but now you must devote yourself to your wife and children.

And, of course, having worked through your past, you have discovered some things about your dad (and yourself) which you perhaps never allowed yourself to admit. Your new relationship will have to make allowances for these factors.

*It may not be easy.*

You may find yourself having to initiate all the contact with your father; there may be more issues to deal with in the future; you may have to invest a lot of hard work to maintain the relationship at all.

But there are rewards. You get to share new experiences and express your appreciation and love for your dad in a way that perhaps you never could before. Your children get the privilege of knowing their grandfather,
and you get to give your dad the joy of spending time with his grandchildren.

If he refuses. It may be that you can’t reconcile with your father, or your efforts to connect with him haven’t met with success. I hope you’re still able to reconcile your feelings toward him, knowing that you’ve done all you can as a son, and now you’re free to move on.

But move on where? The answer is to find a father figure and relate to him. Whether your father is deceased, or distant, or just lives several hours away, you will benefit from having an older man whom you can confide in, and who will provide you with wise, thoughtful advice from his years of experience as a father.

Action: Make a conscious choice to find a man who’s willing to invest himself in you and your children, and commit to some time together—maybe lunch once a month. Ask for his perspective on what you’re going through. Ask about what happened with his kids when they were young. I don’t know where I’d be without some of the men who came alongside me as a young father, and I’m glad we have stayed in touch through the years as my children have grown.
Now that you have reconciled your past by exploring your relationship with your father, there is one more key relationship to consider. Your wife has as a significant vested interest in your fathering skills and styles. If you worked through the previous section on reconciling your past, then it’s likely you’ve already identified the ways that your father’s fathering has affected the ideals you have for fathering. If that’s the case, your wife’s expectations may be the only remaining ones to bring into the open.

Ideally, the most important man in your wife’s life as she was growing up was her father. When she thinks of the job title “father,” her mind may return to him. The expectations that she has for you as the father of her children may be based upon the responsibilities which were fulfilled by her dad, or the ways in which she feels that her father failed her or, more likely, some combination of the two.

*Sons aren’t the only ones who have unreconciled relationships with their dads.*
For example, Maureen had a lousy relationship with her dad. He was away from home often and not too pleasant when he was there. Maureen determined that things would be different between her daughter, Jessie, and her husband, Ted. So she wrote her husband a job description, but she never considered whether her expectations were realistic. Even if they were, Ted reacted to the pressure of having to march to the beat of someone else’s drum. He often bailed out by going hunting or fishing, or else he “punished” Maureen by withholding emotion or communication. It hurt their marriage and it has affected Jessie, who senses the tension even at her young age.

Some of your wife’s expectations may be the result of male-female gender differences. Your wife, consumed as she is with the task of mothering, may assume that parenting equals mothering. In other words, she may not know that there are distinctive ways in which men interact with children. Young mothers are quick to give immediate support. When a child cries, they respond. A child’s hungry cry will even make a mother’s milk move toward her breast.

Maureen expected Ted to have a similar response. But like Ted, most men will keep some distance. They assess the situation and come to their own conclusions about what is appropriate.
Your wife’s expectations could cover any aspect of your fathering job description, and the only way to deal with them is to bring them out in the open, where you can analyze them and make a conscious judgment about them. You need to be able to ask your wife, “Honey, what is it that you expect me to do as a father?”

This parenting business is probably new for both of you, and it brings changes in many aspects of your lives. So get specific. Talk about the schedule of diaper changes, or the amount of time spent with the kids, or expectations about discipline, or childrearing values in general.

You’d be wise to also discuss the changes in your marriage. Has she changed? Have your feelings toward her changed? Do you have concerns about your social life, your relationship, or your sex life? (Many women find childbirth to be physically traumatic to their bodies. Talk with your wife about how she feels and about expectations about sex in the months and years after childbirth.)

Remember that talking also includes listening to your wife’s expectations for you. Primarily, you’re listening for your own good. Author and speaker Gary Smalley claims, “What most men don’t realize is that they have the
world’s greatest instructors in relationships living right under their roofs. A wife is a gold mine of relational skills.”⁶ I know Dee is. She has taught me more about good parenting than I can thank her for. We men need to learn from our wives.

Some of the expectations your wife voices may appear unrealistic to you, or you may simply disagree about your fathering job description. You do have the right (as the one expected to do the job) to reject bad or improper expectations. The only stipulation is that you have to be able to defend your choice.

**Talk with your wife**: tell her why you don’t think you can do what she expects. Once we make a point of looking at and dealing with expectations, we place ourselves in the position of being instructed by good expectations, not driven by bad ones.
Chapter 6 Create a Job Description

What does fatherhood mean to you? Your answer to that question will depend on many factors, and we’ve already discussed an important one - your father. Your ideas about what a father is and does will be greatly influenced by your own dad.

But it may surprise you to learn that, in our research at the National Center for Fathering, we discovered that a man’s relationship with his father is not the most significant predictor of his current relationship with his children. Your past is certainly an influence, but not a primary predictor. Your commitment to be a good father can be greater than any negative effects resulting from a poor relationship with your dad.

The humorist Erma Bombeck told the following story from her childhood:

[My father] was just someone who left and came home and seemed glad to see everyone at night. He opened the jar of pickles when no one else could. He was the only one in the house who wasn’t afraid to go into the basement by himself.
He cut himself shaving, but no one kissed it or got excited about it. It was understood when it rained, he got the car and brought it around to the door. When anyone was sick, he went out to get the prescription filled. He took lots of pictures... but he was never in them.

Whenever I played house, the mother doll had a lot to do. I never knew what to do with the daddy doll, so I had him say, “I’m going off to work now,” and threw him under the bed.⁴

What is our official job description? At no time do we feel the need for a fathering job description more than when we first become fathers. We hold our little son in our arms and ask, “Now what do I do?” Conceiving the little tyke was one thing, but where do we go from here?

When a man becomes a father, he takes his past, his desires, and his aspirations and turns them into workable goals and ideals.

It’s true that few men received any training in how to be an effective father before they actually became one, but these first years provide a man with a window of opportunity to think through the issues of fathering, plan his fathering
strategy, and begin to put it into place. (That’s really the whole purpose behind this book.)

Unfortunately, there are men who don’t think it’s necessary to work on a fathering job description at all during this period, because they don’t think it’s necessary to father at all during this period. These are the men who are content to leave the kids with Mom until they are old enough for some “real” interaction.

So much of a young child’s obvious needs are physical: some food, a new diaper, a nap, being strapped into his car seat, etc. A father who learns by rote that a child’s only needs are physical ones may develop into a dad who fulfills the role of financial provider and little else.

I suppose the ways to be involved in an infant’s life are basic. But as your child grows and her interests diversify and she begins to spend a large portion of her day outside your reach (e.g., at school), then the demands on your involvement become greater. Only the father who has thought about involvement as part of his job description will be able to make the adjustment.

It’s the same with a father’s awareness. What’s there to know about a three-month-old baby? (Actually, we’d be surprised how much!) A father of teenagers, however, has
much more data—and more complex data—to process about his children and their world. Making awareness a part of the fathering job description will help foster healthy habits of relating even now, though your child may still be an infant.

The demands placed on fathers of infants are relatively few when compared with the demands of fathers of older children. But this is not “free time” for a dad; this is what school teachers call a “planning period.”

*Use this time to define a job description for yourself as a dad.*

The issues of fathering are only going to get more complicated as your child grows.

**Deal With Expectations**

One major complicating factor as you work on your job description is learning to deal with expectations. Our culture places both high and low expectations on how we should father. Most likely, your colleagues at work also communicate expectations. One study found that most men don’t take extended paternity leave because they fear the “wimp factor.”
Ellen Galinsky of the Families and Work Institute claimed that a man taking paternity leave “is not seen as a young lion. He’s not seen as serious and committed [to his career].”

You may wish to place a greater priority on fathering than what your ambitious co-workers think proper. You’ll even find that your parents and your in-laws have expectations for you as a father. After all, you are raising their grandchildren!

**Defining Fatherhood**

Recent nationally publicized court cases have raised the question, “What makes a father?” Today’s society has literally redefined fatherhood. There are unwed parents, extramarital affairs, anonymous artificial inseminations, and even infants who are accidentally switched at birth. Out of the confusion comes the clarity of defining fathering as a verb, not a noun.

The position of father is an honorable one in and of itself; we can take pride and gain motivation simply because we are fathers, and that office carries great power. But *sitting in an office of honor doesn’t always mean we’re acting honorably*. In other words, biology doesn’t always provide the best fathers. And, in the same way, the most devoted fathers are not necessarily biological ones.
In some cases, courts have recognized a child’s “psychological father” as more legitimate than the biological father. Many men are—as the US Supreme Court called it—“grasping the opportunity” of fatherhood. They’re claiming ownership of their kids not on a biological basis, but on a practical one—a day-to-day living out of their commitment to the children they love. That’s the kind of resolve I would urge you to add to your job description.

And then, from a larger perspective, I encourage you to join the growing movement of effective fathers who, as a group, are trying to change the negative ideas some people have about fathers. This really gets me excited. Never before have there been so many dads who’ve desired to be the good dads that we see: dads who change diapers, show up at ball games, take kids to doctor’s appointments, attend PTA meetings, and have a real concern to emotionally and spiritually connect with their children throughout their lives. “Good dads” pump me up.

But thinking about the “bad dad” side motivates me even more. Those are the dads who abuse, who take away, and who exasperate and embitter their children. I once received a letter from a woman who read one of my
articles in her newspaper. The series of articles used the running column heading: Today’s Father.

Here’s what she wrote:

_To Whom it May Concern:_

_My name is Jane. I am 26 and have three boys. This article was not on today’s father. It was on yesterday’s father. Today’s father isn’t anywhere to be found. He isn’t around for his children, he doesn’t do things or take his children anyplace._

Jane sent along an article about a man who stabbed his four-year-old daughter to death, and she described another newspaper article about a man who did similar violence to his son. “Some ‘today’s father,’” she writes.

I mourn these tragedies, and it also grieves me that Jane has clearly never had a positive male role model in her life—in childhood or adulthood. I wonder how many men Jane came into contact with who could have changed her view of men and fathers.
Or, put yourself in the picture. How many “Janes” do you know—inside and outside of your home—who need what only a father or father figure can give?

As you come up with your job description, add one more item: commit yourself to being a caring, consistent father for your own kids, but don’t stop there. **Reach out to other children in your community who need you. We can redeem the bad side of fatherhood.**

**Action:** So, let’s actually write a Dad’s Job Description. Look at what’s included on your work job description—hours, expectations, specific responsibilities, team members, etc. Those are all good ideas to start the description of the most important job you’ll ever have.
Chapter 7 Learn about your emotions

Being a good father is primarily a heart activity, not a head activity.

We don’t run our children (like we do a riding lawn mower); we don’t raise our children (like we do sweet corn); instead, we relate to our children. And relationships require a set of tools which men do not often employ. Relating to our kids means learning to identify our emotions, and then learning to express them in a fatherly manner to our children. We need to get out of our heads and into our hearts.

George grew up with an emotionally distant father. He never remembered hearing “I love you” from his dad until the two men went through a reconciliation exchange in George’s early adulthood. George is now married and has two young boys of his own. One day he was over at his father’s and the kids were with him. The boys were down on the carpet and Grandpa was leaning over them, tickling them and poking at them playfully. George watched for a while, listening to his dad’s growls and his boys’ squeals of delight. Then a sense of sadness came over George. He thought: Why didn’t he do that with me when I was a kid?
But he recalled the reconciliation he and his father had been through, and the grief passed in a moment. The sadness was replaced by an insight: *Dad is only expressing what I feel toward those kids too. In fact, if I don’t express my affection now, I’ll become like Dad was—emotionally distant and having to wait for grandchildren for a second chance.*

**Young children naturally bring out emotion in men.**

We can’t help ourselves. Remember Dr. Greenberg’s description of a father’s engrossment: “It is as if he is hooked, drawn to his newborn child by some involuntary force over which he has no control. He doesn’t will it to happen, it just does.”

Certainly it defies explanation; it’s reserved for the realm of mystery. Maybe it’s their innocence, maybe it’s their helplessness, but there is a power which young children exert over men. In fact, it’s been a theme in literature. The novel Silas Marner is just one example of the age-old story of a young child reforming the affections of the crustiest old man. We tease our friends and say, “That kid of yours has you wrapped around her little finger.”
As men, our emotions are close to the surface during the stage of *Attachment*. That is one of the purposes of this stage in the original design: we men, wrapped up in our world of logic and action, get a chance to experience and identify the emotional side of life. We get a chance to claim those emotions as our own, and then lay the groundwork for an emotional intimacy with our children which will last throughout the life course.

Most men I have met who are emotionally distant from their children somehow managed to skip out on the first few years of their kids’ lives. That was true of George’s father, and it was true of my father, who assumed that infants and toddlers were a mother’s domain. Having missed his window of emotional opportunity, he has never yet quite caught up with enjoying and expressing what is in his heart.

*Learning about our emotions means identifying them.*

We will have emotions. You’ll be surprised how deep and profound they are. It’s simply part of our make-up—we can no more stop having emotions than we can stop having thoughts or making decisions. But the effective father identifies his emotions when they come to the surface.

What is that feeling that wells up inside you when you kneel next to your child’s bed?

*Call it love.*
What is that feeling that wells up inside you when you kneel next to your child’s bed in the glow of the night light and stare at his soft head as he sleeps? Call it love. Your child’s first accident will also arouse a flood of emotion: fear, love, pain, protectiveness, guilt. I felt them all when a small, plastic fan caught fire next to my daughter Rachel’s bed in the middle of the night. Fortunately, I was able to get it out of the house before any major damage took place.

The best way to identify your emotions is to speak about them. Talk to your wife: “Honey, this may sound silly, but I’m really proud of the way Jill is learning things so quickly. It’s really amazing.” Talk to another father: “You don’t know what it did to me seeing Josh fall out of that chair. I was so afraid he might be injured for life.”

Most importantly, talk to your children. Lean over your little baby and if it’s love you feel in your heart, then tell him: “Son, I love you.” If you don’t find the courage to say “I love you” to an infant who will gurgle and smile and reach for your nose, then it will really be difficult to say those same words to a teenager who may respond, “Oh yeah?” or, “C’mon Dad, you’re embarrassing
me.” These early years allow us to establish an emotional track record.

Enthusiasm

Every father can probably recall a sense of enthusiasm which accompanied his wife’s words, “Honey, I think I’m pregnant.” That same enthusiasm probably returned at the hospital. The father stands there, holding his new child to show relatives, close friends and maybe his church pastor. As he comes closer, they notice that his eyes are misty. He can hardly speak. “It’s … a girl,” he chokes out. A nurse who happened to walk in is wiping away her tears. “Here I am crying,” she laughs, “and I don’t even know these people.”

“I can’t tell you the excitement of what it felt like to be there at the delivery,” writes my colleague Brian Newman about the birth of his kids.

“Both times, I just cried. It’s exhilarating. Breathtaking.”

This sense of enthusiasm is fairly easy to sustain throughout the first two years in particular. During the first six months, the experience is still fresh and the novelty is still invigorating. You keep running into family and
friends who haven’t yet been given the “birth announcement,” and you get to retell the delightful story.

Granted, after a while, the sleepless nights will begin to drain you, but look for a fresh shot of adrenaline when your child first begins to walk, and then later when she says her first words. We could say that enthusiasm is cyclical. It’s great to be a dad!

**Jealousy / Feeling Left Out**

While many of the emotions of early fatherhood are positive, there are some common negatives that you need to be aware of and handle carefully. In the midst of all the changes your wife has gone through with pregnancy, having the baby, and now adjusting to motherhood, it’s easy to get a bit disillusioned.

She’s getting most of the attention, she has a natural bond with the child after carrying him for nine months and now possibly breast-feeding him, and she probably handles most of the child care duties. She has a deep connection with the child that you can never quite understand or participate in, and it’s likely that you’ll feel jealous from time to time.

You may feel jealous of the baby, who’s getting all of your wife’s best attention and energy. You may feel jealous of your wife, who has bonded easily with the child and is, in a
sense, a “gatekeeper” for your fathering activities—she probably knows more about what the child needs and how to satisfy him, and more or less “calls the shots” concerning what you do with the child.

Many fathers get discouraged and decide to sit out the first few years of their baby’s life, hoping to build a relationship later on, when the child can talk, and play ball, and go on outings. That may seem like the easiest approach, but it isn’t the best, for you or your child. Being involved with your child during these early stages will greatly enhance your fathering satisfaction throughout the life course, and your marriage will benefit as well.

*If you feel angry or discouraged, the best approach is not to withdraw.*

You need to talk about it, preferably with your wife. Ask her what she’s going through, and communicate your concerns.

If that sounds impossible at the moment, try talking to another father who’s been through this life stage. He can share insights about how he got through it, and show you that it’s really a common experience for new dads.
Eventually, you should discuss your feelings with your wife if you want any real resolution and improvement in this area. Work through these issues together, and start healthy habits that will help you deal with potential conflicts down the road.

**Frustration**

This is another emotion that may sneak up on you before you expect it. Let’s say you have committed to being highly involved in caring for your child, and one evening you take over so your wife can run some errands and get out of the house. Your child wakes up from his nap and begins to cry for no apparent reason, and you can’t turn it off. Every logical remedy fails; you just can’t appease the child. He keeps right on crying, only now it’s more like screaming.

*Frustration is inevitable. Don’t feel like a failure!*

Depending on the specific circumstances—such as your tolerance level, the other tasks you had hoped to accomplish, other issues that are on your mind, and how much fatigue you feel after a long day—that frustration could drive you over the edge. You may feel like yelling at your baby, or even hitting him.
Clearly, those are things you should never do, but unfortunately, clear thinking isn’t your strong suit at the moment. As Martin Greenberg points out, there is a difference between feeling out of control and being out of control, but rising emotions like frustration and anger tend to make that distinction much more blurry.  

Let’s be clear about this: **never yell at or strike your baby for any reason, especially when you’re out of control.** If those thoughts start coming into your mind, find a way to express the emotion in a harmless way, directed away from the child. Set him in his crib for a minute while he’s screaming, and do push-ups or jumping jacks to let off steam. Turn on some soothing music. Open the window shades. Say a prayer.

**Do whatever it takes to protect your child** from the possible dangers that can result from intense emotions. Identify chains of events or certain situations that could make you susceptible to outbursts. Learn to expect your baby’s fussiness, and plan ways to handle it calmly.

Ask a friend if you can call and talk—at any hour—when you feel yourself nearing the edge. Consider counseling if you just can’t shake it.
It’s vital that you learn to control your emotions. Right now, your baby’s physical safety is at stake, and that’s serious.

If you don’t conquer this now, you could easily settle into negative habits of relating to your children that, through the years, will do lifelong damage to their emotional and spiritual well-being as well.

These emotions also highlight the importance of the parenting teamwork in a marriage. When strong emotions arise, you can check each other, draw strength from one another, or step in and provide relief. If your wife stays home with the baby during the day, knowing you’ll be walking in the door soon may be her greatest hope. You can take over for a while and give her a chance to get away, rest and/or gain her composure. And new dads caring for their babies alone for the first time know what a welcome sight it can be when Mom comes back home.

**Action:** At the end of Chapter 3, I suggested journaling or blogging about your new experiences as a dad. Be sure that you are honest with yourself as you write. Talk about the emotions you are feeling. These thoughts will be a wonderful gift to your children and grandchildren. Sharing what you experience as a father will be a blessing to them.
The first few years of a child’s life can be relatively “low maintenance” for a father. Mothers, particularly if they are breast-feeding, are as busy as they’ll ever be, but fathers are not quite so taxed in their roles. Involvement at this stage means changing a dirty diaper and other childcare tasks (including feeding for dads of bottle-fed babies); “reading” simple, colorful books together; and lots of talking, cooing, playing, and other various ways of relating positively to your infant.

Your child will start to assert his will during this stage, but discipline is still relatively simple. At this point, you won’t yet experience, to any great extent, the hard work of negotiating roles in the relationship. One father of school-age children told the National Center, “It isn’t as simple as it used to be,” implying that a child’s needs during the early stages of fathering are pretty easy to figure out and supply.

*Fathering may seem relatively uncomplicated during this time, but you play a vital role in your child’s life.*
Your most important task is found in the word that defines this stage: *attachment*. You need to **form close bonds with your child**.

One of the several positive effects of bonding is the strengthened self-concept of your children. That may sound like so much psychobabble, but there are very real, far-reaching implications. **Bonding will ultimately influence how they handle future relationships.**

For example, for a woman to properly bond in marriage, it is very helpful for her to have bonded as a child with a significant male, usually her father. Boys also need to unite with their father. In a study of 34 prison inmates in Minnesota, we found that only one inmate had a healthy, bonded relationship to his father, where he and his dad shared positive physical and verbal interactions while growing up.

Young children experience security and protection when they have a healthy bond with their fathers, and those seemingly small positives now will translate into much more tangible benefits later in life.

Bonding is really something that happens more than something you do. It is, however, a wonderful by-product of the things you do. Not surprisingly, simply spending time with a child is one of the greatest contributors to bonding.
For many fathers, being involved with their infant is a natural next step based on the overwhelming emotions—the “engrossment”—that they feel. They cherish every chance they have to hold, kiss, rock, coo, touch, and sing to their baby.

Some dads don’t feel an immediate closeness to their babies. After all, this is a brand new relationship—a brand new person—and it may take time to get used to each other. If you don’t feel that bond right away, don’t pressure yourself. Give it time. You can still become just as caring and loving and close to your child as any other father is to his child.

**Involvement During Attachment**

I hope you understand from the very beginning of your life as a dad that your involvement with your children is unique. Your involvement with your baby will be—and should be—different from that of your wife.

Norma Radin, professor of social work at the University of Michigan, describes a father’s involvement as: “playful,” “physical” and “exciting,” which is a necessary complement to your wife’s “more verbal, soothing style.”

\footnote{11}
Pediatrician and author T. Berry Brazelton also notes that at three weeks, a baby will show different reactions to his mother as compared with his father: when his father approaches, the baby will hunch his shoulders and lift his eyebrows as though in anticipation of playtime.\(^\text{12}\)

I want to give you permission to defend your unique, “manly” approach to parenting. You don’t have to be a mother, or even some kind of generic “parent.” Be a father. Take some initiative; dive in, learn about what your child needs, and gain the experience and confidence you need.

But I also want to caution you. In many cases, the mother may have a better feel for what’s best for the baby, from her months of reading and her keen intuition. If she fears that you’re not being careful enough in playing with your baby, she may have a good point. And you may get frustrated when it seems your wife keeps correcting you in how you’re handling your child. Much of her advice may be justified, and some of it may not.

If you do find it necessary to defend your way of doing things, stay committed to what’s best for the child, whether you “win” or not. And even if you have to swallow your pride every now and then, consider it a small sacrifice for the benefit of a harmonious household atmosphere at a time of great adjustment.
Playtime!

Playing seems to come naturally to most dads. Whenever I see a father and child playing and laughing together, I wonder who’s having more fun. Usually, it’s a toss-up.

But more than just being “fun,” playtime is good for children. Even at this young age, play encourages their imagination, physical and mental prowess, and a healthy spirit of competition. They are exposed to risk taking and problem solving in a safe environment.

In the book The Expectant Father, Armin Brott and Jennifer Ash list some helpful reminders for fathers playing with infants:

• Use moderation. Especially with very young babies, restrict play sessions to around five minutes. Too much play can make them fussy or irritable.

• Take cues from the baby. Adjust what you’re doing based on the baby’s crying, boredom, or discomfort.

• Schedule your fun. Choose a time when the baby is alert and when you can give him your full attention. Be careful about playing immediately after a feeding.
• Be patient. Don’t expect too much too soon.

• Be encouraging. Use lots of facial and verbal encouragement, smiles and laughter. The baby can’t yet understand the words, but she can definitely understand the feelings. At just a few days old, she will want to please you, and your encouragement will build her self-confidence. This is at the heart of bonding.

• Be gentle—especially with the baby’s head. His neck muscles will take time to develop, so be sure to support his head from behind. Avoid sudden or jerky motions, and never shake your child. Also, be very careful about throwing him up in the air.

Dads and Skills

My childhood friend Doug was phenomenal on the basketball court. He was quick and graceful, all over the court, sinking double-pump scoop shots. Watching him play, you would think of him as gifted.

But then I remember watching Doug on water skis. Suddenly he seemed awkward, and a slow learner, especially since we’d just seen another boy do a one-ski slalom run. Doug suddenly lacked confidence. His entire demeanor seemed to droop, and the next time he didn’t want to come along unless we played basketball.
I think that’s how many fathers are when it comes to parenting skills. Some dads seem more naturally gifted with personalities that come to life around children. Others shy away from fathering because they lack confidence and just haven’t had the practice.

Maybe they never had the opportunity to be around children much, and never learned how to do things “right.” They get uncomfortable, then self-conscious, and give the little ones back to their wives. And, it isn’t really about ability—it’s about comfort. As one father told me: “I just don’t really like to be around children.”

If you’re unsure about your fathering skills, immerse yourself in fathering resources—books, seminars, online resources and, most importantly, the support of others. Moms depend on each other all the time to learn these kinds of things. It’s time we dads start depending on each other in the same way and, together, learn the skills of parenting.

Dads and Child Care

How do you deal with a crying child? How do you give a baby a bath? How do you change a diaper? Here are our “Top Ten Tips for Fathers on Changing Diapers”:
10. Always use protective eye wear.
9. If you need a third hand, use your teeth.
8. Avoid changing baby on new white sofa.
7. Never reach your finger down back of diaper to see if there’s a “doodie.”
6. When you run out of baby oil, use Old Spice.
5. Ensure proper ventilation; avoid open flames.
4. Always feed baby lots of apricots three to four hours prior.
3. Never scratch and sniff.
2. Careful with high-pressure spray nozzles.
1. Recycle! Recycle! Recycle!

Part of the reason these are funny is that many of us dads will readily admit that we feel out of our element when it comes to child care. We get in an unfamiliar situation with our child, freeze up, and give the child back to her mother A.S.A.P. We can stand up to an angry boss or muster the courage to land an important client, but we cower in fear at the sight of a one-year-old in need.

New fathers must become comfortable with the everyday care of children.
Committed fathers are willing to brave screams and tears, messy faces and, yes, even “atomic bomb” diapers. The best way to master child care is to dive right in, make mistakes, learn from experience, and gain confidence for the next time.

We can’t afford to skip out during this stage, because these everyday forms of involvement play a large role in our ability to bond with our babies.

Whether you’re dealing with a messy diaper, a crying baby, or the challenges of bath time, do your best to keep a couple important principles in mind:

When your baby is unhappy, **focus on the cause of the behavior**. Babies generally cry to let us know they are uncomfortable, in pain, hungry, wet, needing to burp, sick, too hot, too cold, overstimulated, or missing their caretakers. They have a limited number of ways to express themselves, so we must **be sensitive** to facial expressions, subtle differences between cries, and other conditions that might clue us in to the problem.

*View child care as bonding time.*
You’re doing more than just changing a diaper or giving a bottle or a bath. You’re relating to your son or daughter. Try to make these positive experiences for both of you, not just daily (or hourly) chores. If you’re frustrated and tense, your infant will sense that, and it will only make things harder.

The more you hold, massage, sing, laugh, cradle, play, and talk lovingly to your child as part of meeting his everyday needs, the better.

Looking at the larger picture, this approach can create patterns of behavior that develop trust in your baby. He will know that, no matter what is happening, you can be counted on to restore a sense of security, support and love.¹⁴
There’s an important structure you’ll want to put in place early on in your fathering career so that you can draw on it richly during the following stages of the life course: a network of supportive friends. These are people who are dedicated to you and to your children, and who are ready to offer advice and assistance when you need it most.

We don’t hear much about “godparents” anymore. It used to be most children had someone who was designated to care for them if the biological father and mother died. And it was also quite an honor. Your best friend or your brother would come up to you and ask, “Would you be our child’s godfather? If anything happens to me, I’d want to know that I’ve left him in good hands.”

Godparents were a necessity because life was so tenuous. Much more often than today, our ancestors occasionally died young, before the children were old enough to care for themselves. The amazing thing about godparents, however, was that they rarely waited until their charges were orphaned before beginning their duties. They were sources of support to the parents as the children were being raised.
Our need for this type of constant support has not diminished with the increase in our generation’s life expectancy. A father still needs to surround himself with others who will assist him in being a dad.

First, be particularly attentive to the fact that your primary colleague on your “fathering team” is your child’s mother. She will be your most valuable asset throughout your fathering life course, whether in her parenting knowledge, her complementary perspective, or her womanly comfort. But during these early years of parenthood, it is likely that you will need to be more supportive of her than she of you.

Young kids make for exhausted mothers. Do all you can to make her pregnancy as comfortable as possible. Do your share of the childcare chores. Give her some refreshing time away from the kids. Work at keeping romance alive in your marriage: a bouquet of flowers, a sweetheart note in the mailbox, or an offer to help with the dishes!

Second, make a conscious effort to establish a support network. Keep in mind that we tend to become like the people with whom we surround ourselves; we can’t help but compare notes and discuss issues. So look for good fathering models. This may mean taking the initiative. In the same way that you once might have gone up and asked a trusted
friend to be a godfather for your child, now go up to that same friend and ask, “I’m having a little trouble figuring something out about my daughter. Could you give me some advice?”

I also recommend spending time with other young fathers and comparing notes about the issues you’re facing. Even if you don’t have all the answers yet, it helps to know you’re not alone in this. You’ll realize that your present struggles are common to many dads during this stage.

Eventually, when one of you does come upon a solution to a problem, you can share it, help each other, and move on together. These dads can be friends who already have kids or are expecting, or you may have to be more creative and post signs at children’s or baby supply stores, talk to your pediatrician or childbirth class instructor, or start your own group at your church or community center. That may sound like a lot of work, but many men will tell you, a fathering support group is well worth it.

Finally, **spend time interacting with other families**. You may be tempted to work on your fathering just by meeting with other fathers or sticking your nose in a good parenting book. Young families need interaction with other families. Otherwise you’ll tend to get isolated, and you’ll miss out on opportunities to watch how other families solve problems.
One day my friend Danny was visiting our house with his son Ryan. While Danny and I were talking on the couch, we witnessed Ryan take a non-injuring swipe at my daughter Rachel. Actually, I felt more sorry for Danny, who launched into a profuse apology. “Relax, Danny,” I told him. “If Ryan hadn’t hit Rachel, it wouldn’t have been long before Rachel hit him.”

Ryan is Danny’s only child, so he’s had no one else to compare the boy to as he tries to determine what’s “normal.” But by visiting our home and comparing notes with me, Danny managed to avoid the isolation which makes a father feel “hung out to dry” in his fathering.
**Chapter 10  The Virtue of Patience**

When mothers leave the hospital after a delivery, it’s common for the hospital to send them home with a few articles of childcare paraphernalia—perhaps a diaper bag and a few basic supplies. If I could send new fathers home with anything, I’d send them home with a good dose of patience.

I could state this negatively: “Let me tell you, Dad, you’ll really pay if you’re not patient in these first few years.” But I prefer to state it positively: “Dads, patience is the virtue which will allow you to bond with your child and mesh together your schedules, ideals, and personalities. It will become the basis for building your relationship together. Patience allows you to make the sacrifices you need for the sake of your children.”

Patience is crucial because your child moves at a different pace and operates at a different size than you. Kids are going to slow you down and load you up with burdens to carry, obstacles to avoid, and diversions to manage. The accoutrements surrounding a diaper change alone make packing for a trip across town a prolonged procedure.
The cultivation of a father’s patience begins during the wife’s pregnancy. I kept a journal of Hannah’s birth, which I addressed to her. She was born July 11. Here are excerpts from the preceding days:

**July 3** We are ready and waiting—you just let us know when you’re ready.

**July 4** We are anxious to see you soon.

**July 7** This is your predicted birthday, however you didn’t come out to celebrate, so we continue to wait.

On **July 7**, I also wrote: There is an old wives’ tale which says if your mother takes some castor oil, you would come. (Apparently, my patience was wearing thin enough to make me believe that tale.)

**July 8** And now we are waiting—learning the importance of patience...

**July 10** Dee took four tablespoons of castor in hopes of helping you out today.

Those nine months of gestation are the first training grounds for a father’s patience. You will also sense the need for patience when it comes to sexual relations with your wife. Sex will have to be curtailed
during the last part of her pregnancy and for a time after the delivery of your child for physical reasons—your doctor can advise you on that. But you’ll also have to be sexually patient for a few years for other reasons.

During this stage in the mothering life course, your wife is the most exhausted and the least responsive she’ll likely ever be. Mothering is very physically demanding: her body will be tired; her emotions will need a rest.

It takes a lot of work to bring a new person into the world, and a whole lot more to keep him here. Learn to love her during this phase by asking her what she needs. Take care of the body that is giving so much to nurture your young child. Offer to rub her feet or massage her back. Offer to make her favorite snack or beverage. Tell her she is beautiful and is doing such a fine job of being a terrific mom.

_Trust me—you will never forget your patience and kindness to her during this time._

The list of things which require patience is a long one. There will be numerous 2:00 a.m. feedings. There will be occasions when your child is ill, but she can’t tell you or the pediatrician where she hurts.

_Fathering a young child involves sacrifice._
You’ll be asked to change or put on hold some of the things you have enjoyed in the past—eight hours of sleep, speedy arrivals, sex with your wife, spending money on yourself, fulfilling certain dreams. (And you’ll soon realize that none of these are sacrifices at all; they’re wise investments of your time and energy.)

**Patience allows you to do all of this** with a heroic resolve, but it’s more than just the quiet resignation that you have responsibilities now. Patience nurtures every relationship. It is a vital component in any situation where two people must learn to mesh together their personalities, paces, and priorities. In other words, patience is the character quality which surrounds and facilitates bonding. Through patience, you are laying the groundwork for a lifetime of intimacy with your kids.

**Action:** You may put some of your preferences on hold at this stage of parenting, but they’re not gone forever. Look into the future and consider how you can involve your child someday in your favorite activities. Also discuss with your wife some activities that you two can count on in another season of parenting.
CHAPTER II STRONG OFF THE BLOCKS

It’s fairly easy to make the case that the beginning of something is always the most important part. But the message of the fathering life course is that the whole process is a marathon where each leg is important. We need to run the race with endurance.

As a father just starting out on this adventurous journey, come out strong off the blocks. Use the natural enthusiasm and sense of responsibility of this period to propel yourself miles down the course to fathering success.

Now is the time to think ahead and to plan. (Maybe that’s what those sleepless nights are for!) One obvious thing you can start preparing for now is ... the next stage! Once you’ve worked through the issues in this first stage, be diligent about learning what to expect in the next stretch of your life course. The whole point is to be prepared, so you can run the race with skill and grace.

On your mark ... get set ... go! Be a father!
FEEDBACK ON YOUR FATHERING

Instructions

On the following page, rate yourself on each of the statements related to your fathering and total your score in the space provided. You may want to seek the input of another person who knows you well (your wife or a close friend) and compare your responses.

NOTE: There are some limitations to self-reporting measures, but they can still provide a useful reference point for us to gain feedback on our role as a dad. The following statements were selected on the basis of how they correlated to “fathering satisfaction” at this period in the Fathering Life Course. Your scores are compared to a large sample gathered by the National Center for Fathering.

(The characteristics of the larger sample are outlined in “Measuring the Dimensions of Effective Fathering,” Educational and Psychological Measurement 54 (Spring 1994): 212-217.)
**New Fathers Index**

Scoring Guide
5 - Mostly True
4 - Somewhat True
3 - Undecided
2 - Somewhat False
1 - Mostly False

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mostly False</td>
<td>1. I am knowledgeable about what my child is able to do.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Somewhat False</td>
<td>2. I have someone to talk to about problems in fathering.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>3. I am building a close, intimate bond with my child.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Somewhat True</td>
<td>4. I take responsibility for some of the household chores.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mostly True</td>
<td>5. I keep my poise during stressful times.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6. I discuss my child’s development with my wife.</td>
<td></td>
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**TOTAL**

Make a mark indicating your total on the graph below.
(The scale is not uniform because it is based on norms from a study of 1,515 fathers.)

6
<table>
<thead>
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<th>15</th>
<th>18</th>
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<tr>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>FAIR</td>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>GOOD</td>
<td>VERY GOOD</td>
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Understanding the Results

This feedback survey has been designed to provide feedback on your fathering. Recognize that fathering is a creative, complex and challenging occupation. It requires different approaches for different circumstances and conditions.

Be easy on yourself as you review your results. The survey is limited; it cannot assess your heart, your desire. It can give you a reference point about your relationship with your children and help you plan ways to modify and strengthen areas of your fathering as you desire.

Remember, this is a snapshot of where you are today. With a firm commitment and a good plan, you can improve your fathering and become the dad you want to be.

For more feedback on your fathering, go to fathers.com/profile.
End Notes

About the

**Championship Fathering Commitment**

At the National Center for Fathering, our vision is that every child will have an involved father or father figure—that *no child* will go unfathered.

That vision begins with the conviction that **every child needs a dad he or she can count on**. We know that children thrive when they have an involved father—someone who loves them, knows them, guides them, and helps them achieve their destiny.

Motivated by this heartfelt conviction and encompassing vision, the Center’s board, employees, and volunteers work to inspire and equip men to make and live out a commitment to Championship Fathering.

You can join this movement by making your [Championship Fathering Commitment](http://fathers.com).

Even if you are an involved dad, your children and grandchildren will grow up in a world full of unfathered kids, and they will be affected by a culture that places too little significance on the role of strong fathers.
Dads are a critical part of the solution, and we have to get involved. For the sake of our children and grandchildren and millions of other kids, we need to stand up and be counted.

So please join me in making the [Championship Fathering Commitment](#).

**The Championship Fathering Commitment**

I will **love** my children.
I will **coach** my children.
I will **model** for my children.
I will **encourage** other children.
I will **enlist** other dads as members of the Championship Fathering team.
About the **National Center for Fathering**

The National Center for Fathering (Fathers.com) is a nonprofit educational organization that provides research-based training and resources so that men are equipped to address their children’s needs. Our goal is to reverse the cultural trend toward fatherlessness by helping every dad learn how to be a father.

Our goal is to enlist 6.5 million who are committed to reversing the cultural trend toward fatherlessness. The Center reaches more than one million dads through seminars, small-group training, our WATCH D.O.G.S (Dads of Great Students) program, our daily radio program, and our weekly e-mail tips for dads.
We’ve selected some resources that we think will be of great assistance to you in your fatherhood journey. Please visit the fathers.com Amazon Store.

Please visit fathers.com to discover more about the National Center for Fathering and to access additional resources that can help you become all a dad can be—including:

* Championship Fathering by Carey Casey
* The 21-Day Dad’s Challenge, Carey Casey, General Editor
* The 7 Secrets of Effective Fathers by Ken R. Canfield, Ph.D.
  Also available in Spanish.
* They Call Me Dad by Ken R. Canfield, Ph.D.
* 5 Things Every Kid MUST Get from Dad – free ebook

*Each of these books has small-group questions either included in the book or available for free download.

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