

From Father to Daddy

by Allan Shedlin, Jr Connect for Kids

It occurred fifty-four years ago, but the memory remains as vivid to William as if it happened yesterday: When he was four years old, he began carrying a small suitcase around the house whenever his father was gone on one of his frequent business trips. William filled the suitcase with his father's old ties.

Carlos can still feel the warmth of his father's hand as he led Carlos and his younger sister to safety through the rising floodwaters of the Rio Grande River in Albuquerque. That was thirty-two years ago.

Forty-nine years later, Fred is still wondering if his dad really liked the green sourballs he always chose from the bag, or if he just ate them so his kids could have the red ones he knew they preferred.

John remembers asking a friend to remind him to get a vasectomy as soon as he reached puberty. John didn't want to be able to be a father. He didn't want to inflict the same pain on his child that his dad had inflicted on him. That was more than forty years ago.

Henry still marvels, twenty-one years later, about how his father knew precisely what day he was "ready" to ride his two-wheeler. His dad removed the training wheels that day to demonstrate his confidence in his seven-year-old son.

Daddy, the Verb

The scores of men I interviewed for my forthcoming book on lifelong daddying, shared memories like these confirming the importance of fathers—through their presence or absence—in their children's lives. These same men, all fathers, described being a dad as a profound and enriching experience (a finding substantiated by research). Many described feeling a "different" kind of love for their children, a depth of feeling that took many of them by surprise.

In swelling numbers, men are putting their families first. Breaking ranks with their fathers and grandfathers, they are more actively involved in raising their kids than ever before.

Often beginning even before the birth of their child, many men are accompanying their wives to prenatal checkups and attending birthing classes. A generation ago, it was rare for fathers to be present in delivery rooms to witness the life-altering moments of the birth of their children. Today it is unusual for fathers *not* to be there. We aren't quite to the point where we can say, "It's as American as motherhood, fatherhood, and apple pie," but we are getting closer.

Several years ago, believing that the traditional conception of "father" was too limiting, I coined the term "daddy" to describe the commitment and involvement in their kids' lives that many men are choosing today. Daddying occurs when fatherhood and nurturing converge. The biological *act* of fathering requires no commitment - just the contribution of sperm. But the ongoing *process* of daddying requires a lifelong commitment to one's children. The term connotes connection, nurturing, emotional involvement, support, advocacy, and protection. As more men become involved in their children's lives, they are redefining what it means to be manly. And they are discovering that nurturing their children is nourishing to themselves as well.

What Kids Want in a Daddy

Like the fathers mentioned above, the hundreds of kids I interviewed in three countries spoke about the important roles their fathers played in their lives. These youngsters, ages five to twenty-one, identified the qualities they most wanted in their dads. Not surprisingly, the one quality they most desired was that their dads *be there* for them, *really* be there. In their own words, these are the other 16 qualities they most often identified as important:

- ◆ Take us as seriously as we take ourselves
- ◆ Be a passionate advocate for us
- ◆ Show us that you love us and be affectionate
- ◆ Provide us with security and protection
- ◆ Trust us and have faith in us
- ◆ Set clear and firm limits
- ◆ Accept us as the individuals we are
- ◆ Respect our right to our own opinions
- ◆ Show us that you have a sense of humor
- ◆ Convey a sense of hope
- ◆ Be consistent with us
- ◆ Remember what it was like to be a kid
- ◆ Admit your mistakes and don't try to be perfect
- ◆ Let us make our own mistakes
- ◆ Be flexible
- ◆ Don't argue with Mom in front of us.

Good News, Bad News

It is interesting but not very surprising that the dads I interviewed identified these same qualities as those they most wanted to cultivate. It is noteworthy that these are the same qualities child development experts believe children *need* in order to thrive and lead fulfilled lives. So kids, dads, and experts are all on the same page. The good news is twofold: 1) the characteristics kids want in a dad are not as mysterious as may have been thought and 2) most of these qualities are attainable with modest effort.

The bad news is that too many kids still yearn for their dads to be more involved in their lives—much as today's dads yearned for greater involvement from *their* fathers. This unfortunate cycle of yearning can be interrupted.

Although there is no such thing as a "perfect" dad, and kids don't expect perfection, there is much that can be done to bridge the gap between qualities desired and what is practiced. Kids I spoke with identified specific things we can do to improve our parenting. Father's Day (or should it be renamed "Daddy's Day"?) is an opportune time to think about ways we can improve our daddying. Father's Day also provides a golden opportunity to directly ask our children what qualities they want us to develop and to really listen to what they have to say. Using their input, each of us can make an annual "Daddying Resolution" to improve our parenting so we can become the dads we really want to be.

This article is reprinted with permission from the New York Times News Service.

About Allan Shedlin, Jr.

Allan Shedlin is President & CEO of DADS UNLIMITED LLC (www.daddying.com) – a suburban Maryland-based organization dedicated to demystifying parenting and developing a comprehensive range of services and resources that support parents. DADS Unlimited provides practical products, including Parenting Consulting and School-Home Liaison support services.

Before launching DADS Unlimited, Shedlin founded and served for a decade as Executive Director of the New York-based National Elementary School Center. Prior to that, he was principal of New York City's Ethical Culture School for eight years. He has taught in graduate school through nursery school, and worked in a range of urban and suburban institutions, both public and private.

Shedlin is an author who has written numerous articles and commentaries and is currently writing a book entitled *Lifelong DADDYING: What it Takes to Become the Dad You Want to Be*. He is the parent of three and grandparent of four.

