**How Dads Can Educate Tomorrow's Leaders**

**Ken Canfield, Ph.D.**

*April 27, 2007*

Fathers have always played an important role in their children's education. Ancient Egyptian texts, early American writings and other historic sources have placed the primary responsibility for educating a child specifically on his father.

For many of us, it comes naturally. We place schoolwork at a high priority and help our kids by setting a homework schedule and making sure they follow through with assignments on time. Some of us take it a step further: we sharpen a pencil, sit at the dining room table and act like we really do remember all those algebra equations. Some of us even stay in touch with our kids' teachers and get involved in school functions.

**AN EXPANDED DEFINITION**

We can agree that good fathers are involved in the training, rearing and development of their children, and that certainly includes education. The question is, what exactly do we mean when we say education? Do our duties end when we pull up to the curb at school, tousle our kids' hair and say, "Have a good day"?

In seeing to it that your children get good grades and understand the approved curriculum, you are fulfilling an important role. But whether you're the household homework sergeant or their actual instructor, your involvement in your children's education should extend much further than their formal learning.

Don't we all know people whom we consider to be well-educated, but not well-rounded? people with brilliant minds but who are awkward in social settings? or who can grasp elaborate, abstract concepts but can't check the air in their tires?

As we expand the definition of educating our children, we're addressing principles that determine our kids' lifestyle, character and well-being. We can't teach it in one lecture, and our kids can't demonstrate it in one pop-quiz. No, we should view the process of educating our children as a way of life.

The home is where children learn most of their conversational skills, and that's just one area in which they'll benefit from our involvement. Whether it's in the car, on the playing field, at the dinner table or in the garage, we're sharing life skills that will have a positive influence for years to come. We're passing on the legacy of who we are and what we believe. We're putting our own unique stamp on our kids' lives.

**DO WHAT GOOD TEACHERS DO**

Who were your favorite teachers in high school or college? Why did you like them? Maybe they made their particular subject so interesting that you actually enjoyed their class. Maybe they worked extra hard at presenting the material in a way you could understand. Or, perhaps it had nothing to do with the actual teaching at all; maybe they always seemed to know just when you needed a word or two of encouragement.

We'd be wise to follow their example and utilize what we know about teaching and learning. First, we should find ways to engage our kids in what we're teaching them. Instead of lecturing, we tell stories or use word pictures that appeal to them, or we plan "field trips" to expose them to new learning experiences. If we want our kids to remember what we teach them, we have to make it memorable.

Good teachers also know what appeals to their individual students. Likewise, we should learn and appeal to our kids' learning styles. Cheri Fuller describes the three categories of learners: talkers and listeners, doers and touchers, and watchers. Each of our children demonstrate one or a combination of these strengths in their approach to learning. That's why a dad shouldn't expect a "doer and toucher" child to sit still for very long during a lecture or an extended homework session. And that's why auditory "talkers and listeners" learn better from tapes than from books.

But before we categorize our children too fast, it's much more complicated than that. Your child's temperament comes into play: one child will keep trying and trying until she can ride that bicycle; another will give up after one crash and wait a few months or years. And there are other factors: some kids like structure; some thrive with background music and indirect light; some do their best early in the morning; some need to bounce ideas off other students. The point is not that we should let our kids' learning styles rule our lives to the point of disruption, but rather that most of us need to be more sensitive to this aspect of our kids' education.

Third, if we want to teach our children effectively, we must become expert encouragers. Students inevitably fail; it's part of their learning and development. We can help turn setbacks into positive, learning experiences-rather than embarrassments or failures-by being unwavering sources of confidence and support for our kids. They'll begin to recognize and count on that support, the relationship will be strengthened, and they'll be increasingly open to learn from their old man. What's more, we may just inspire in our children a desire, possibly even a love, for learning. Perhaps there's no higher goal in the task of educating our children.

**BE A FAITHFUL MODEL**

A strong relationship makes a child's "teachable" moments much more frequent, but by the same token, few things can close off a child more quickly than a dad whose life doesn't reflect what he teaches. It works in two ways: we need to be consistent, faithful models as teachers and as students.

Our kids notice everything about us-especially when we don't want them to. When you tell your daughter to be honest, realize that she'll be watching how you handle the $50 bill you find in the parking lot. When you tell your son not to hold grudges against his classmates, that makes you accountable to do the same toward that irritable guy at work. It's amazing how quickly a few careless actions can undo years of well-chosen words, or how often adult children still remember their fathers' unfailing example more than their words.

Our responsibility as our children's models doesn't stop there; it includes being students (just when you thought you were through with your education). We demonstrate for our children that education truly is a way of life by continuing to learn, whether we're taking university or community-offered classes, reading books that challenge us or learning a new craft. We become better prepared teachers, but our attitude of "always learning" also shows our kids that we don't know everything after all. And, chances are, somewhere in the learning process we'll stumble upon some common interests with our kids, where we get to learn together with them.

Dad, don't leave your child's education to the school system or book learning. There's so much they don't teach in school: lessons about morals, family relationships, faith, caring for themselves and their possessions, helping others-the list goes on and on. These are lessons that your children need in life and, as their father, you're their uniquely equipped, everyday, lifelong instructor.

**ACTION POINTS**

* Expose your children to other cultures by inviting ethnic and international friends to your home.
* Ask your child what is the one thing you do that he or she would like to learn, and then teach it.
* Put an encouraging note in the textbook of your child's most challenging subject.
* Teach your older children to check and add oil to the car.
* Take your children to the library and give them thirty minutes to browse and check out some books.
* Discuss with your children some goals for the school year-theirs and yours.
* Encourage your children to join various clubs and organizations.
* Help your high schooler research prospective colleges and send off for catalogs.
* Listen to your young children recite their prayers; teach them a simple one.
* Ask your child what he wants to be when he grows up, and then take him to visit such a work place.