What Fathers Should Teach Their Sons

Glenn Brooke  July 31, 2009

Boys can learn from almost anyone, but there are some things which fathers teach best to sons. There is a generational call of fathers to help boys become men. I’ve compiled here a list of the things which sons learn best from their fathers. If their biological father is not available, then our faithful Lord will raise up other men to instruct them.

Jesus is our model for manhood. Despite how He has been portrayed at times, Jesus was a manly man. (See my article “Reaching Manly Men.”) He is the perfect combination of toughness and tenderness, boldness and gentleness.

As I grow older and prayerfully observe what’s going on, my conviction grows stronger that we fathers need to sharpen our fathering. Our boys are staying boys too long. We aren’t giving them the kinds of training that produces both toughness and tenderness. We’ve abdicated far too much training to school teachers and youth pastors and sports coaches. One unexpected consequence: sons think less of their fathers because their fathers aren’t the ones guiding them.

I wish someone had explained this more clearly to me when I was a younger father. I have not been a perfect father to my son, nor have I yet successfully taught him everything I identify below. Therefore I write with a deep spirit of humility.

Here I focus on that which I believe fathers should teach their sons. In no way do I wish to diminish the value of what mothers are best qualified to teach their sons, or what fathers best teach daughters, but those are for another time.

I’ve grouped the items into three categories: Mindsets, Relationships with Others, and Specific Skills and Experiences. Some things might take only a few minutes for a boy to master. For others, mastery requires practice over several years. Some may be “caught” from our modeling rather than specifically “taught.” All are important. Each boy will need a custom-tailored approach to learn what they need to learn. (That’s why God put you in place, dad!)

There is intentionally little guidance about how to teach and train your sons. The Lord will give you guidance as you ask for wisdom (James 1:5), and other fathers can help as well. Where your father or other men were successful teaching you, apply that experience as you train your son.

I’d like to hear your thoughts on this important subject as well. Do you agree with what I’ve written? Have I missed something important? After you read this list, comment below and help us all.

For the next generations,

Glenn Brooke
Mindsets

Every man is a created being who must honor His Creator. Despite all our limitations, men have extraordinary potential, creative power, imagination, and passion – because he is created in the image of God. Each man has been endowed with these gifts to serve God and others.

Tell the truth, and keep promises as commitments (even when it hurts in the short-run). Nothing will destroy a man more quickly and completely than lies and broken commitments. God will provide opportunities when your son is smaller to correct him when he lies. Do not allow him to become a good liar. Train him to keep promises as commitments, even when you are tempted to “rescue” him. A man makes promises carefully, then fulfills them – and not only to the mere letter of the contract.

Be Self-controlled. It’s instructive that Titus was advised to mentor young men to develop self-control. (Titus 2:6) Self-control is not in-born. It is a spiritual gift (Galatians 5:23) but must be cultivated. Every son has to learn self-control – of his body and his mouth. Some of this is modeled, and some can be explained, but in the end all self-control is learned through practice and corrective feedback. Men master themselves in order to achieve greater purposes. Exercising self-control quashes selfishness.

Death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. Some of the worst things that men give in to are because they feared death more than anything else. Some of the most beautiful legacies of history were granted because men loved their life less than honor and freedom and righteousness. Teach your son that death is not the end for a godly man. God is sovereign over his life, and he was bought at a price for a purpose (see 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 1 Corinthians 7:23).

Men are made for dangerous things. Boys will hear plenty of voices telling them to be careful, to stay safe. I’m not advocating stupidity, but a life that seeks to avoid all risk will never fulfill God’s purposes, and would be joyless. Men are wired for adventure and pushing boundaries, for building and for breaking. A healthy attitude of “I’m made for dangerous things” will keep soul-stifling fear in check.

Delayed gratification is sweeter. Work comes before pleasure. Doing the hard things first gives you satisfaction, and you’ll sleep better at night. Save money to buy something you need or want. Instant gratification weakens a man.

Distinguish needs and wants. We like many things, but need few. A man distinguishes needs from wants. When we would take our son to the store as a little guy, he’d see some shiny thingamajig,
stretch out a grabbing hand and say “I want that!” We trained him to say instead, “I like that.” It’s ok to like shiny things, but not to think you need them.

**You can do three to ten times what you first think you can.** There are both internal and external voices urging boys to be satisfied with lesser accomplishments, to quit early, to stop with the first feelings of pain or discomfort. Boys learn mental toughness as they push their bodies to the next level of performance. (I first heard the expression, “You can do three to ten times what you first think you can” from a candidate Navy Seal. He did 1400 sequential pushups on his first day of selection, though he’d never done more than 200 in a row before.)

**Steady progress over a long time yields man-sized results.** We overestimate what we can do in a day and underestimate what we can do in a year, or five years. Diligent work, a little at a time, honors the Lord and yields lasting results.

**Dream big dreams.** Boys need their fathers to encourage them to dream big dreams (and then follow-through with work towards them), not drape them with discouragement. Real men have big imaginations of what’s possible, and what would be worthwhile.

**Not everywhere in the world looks like where you grew up, but men should be men everywhere.** Your son needs you to help him learn about different parts of the world, and understand what’s special about his homeland. The principles of being a man are true for men everywhere.

**You can either lead or abdicate leadership, but you can’t outsource it.** No single man is a leader in every situation, but men are often called upon to lead, and real men respond to that calling. Failure to exercise leadership causes more grief than will be apparent from the outset.
Relationships with Others

Learn how to be with other men. Your son needs to learn to authentically enjoy relationships with other men; he'll take his cues from you. He needs to learn how to be comfortable as his own man in the company of men the world would call great or small. You should model godly friendships – the fun and the mutual sacrifices – and how to learn from older men and from peers.

Honoring women. Sons who learn how to honor women make better husbands and fathers themselves one day, and will instinctively protect women rather than harm them. Specifically, your son should know how to hold a woman's arm, and open doors for her. He should be coached on where it is ok to touch a woman, and where not. He should speak to women with a proper address of Miss and Ma’am. We unfortunately lost what once was a standard practice of standing when a woman enters or leaves a room, and taking off our hat. (It is a sobering reminder that in just two generations we can lose healthy, respectful practices like this.) Your son should learn how to control his eyes when looking at a woman (i.e., focus on her smile, son, not her other attributes). Help your son understand that there are only three categories of women on this planet: His mother, his future wife, and every other woman he should treat as a sister.

The high calling of marriage. Help your son look forward to the future day of marriage, and preserve his purity until then. Explain the attributes in a godly woman that he should look for. Take steps to ensure your son understand the importance of the marriage covenant as a reflection of the covenant Christ has with His bride, the Church. He will want to know how you came to be with his mother; tell him what is appropriate for him to know, always speaking graciously about your bride. Help your son understand that a marriage relationship rooted in the love of Christ still requires work.

Live in gratitude for blessings and opportunities. We abound in gifts from our heavenly Father and from others around us, and the proper response is gratitude in faith. The Lord has prepared in advance good works for us to do (Ephesians 2:10), as we have eyes to see service opportunities and willingness to obey. Putting others first is the path to lasting joy and peace.

Give thoughtful gifts. Any jerk can buy something at the last moment. A man gives gifts (be they made, purchased, or service provided) that are meaningful. He plans ahead. He knows why he selected a gift.

How to work for someone else. You should be your son’s first employer, but arrange for him to have opportunities to work for someone else at least once. Instruct him in how to respect an employer. Remind your son to work hard and diligently, and not only when someone is watching him.

Appreciate men and women serving in police, firefighters, and military roles. Your son will learn how to respect authority figures from you. Teach him to express appreciation for these men and women, and to understand that they have very hard jobs in difficult situations, for your family's benefit.
How to shake hands firmly with men, appropriately with women, and look everyone in the eye respectfully. Men don’t have limp handshakes. Men have focused eyes in conversations.

How to deal appropriately with his anger. Anger is the natural emotion that floods into a perceived gap between what should be and what is. Anger has destroyed many a man, and if sons don’t learn how to deal with anger they will suffer more in life. There is righteous anger that can galvanize a man into action that helps the world. It is not as common or easily perverted as anger that comes from selfishness, impatience, and wrong-headed thoughts about justice and fairness. Teach your son to discern the causes of anger in himself, and how to deal constructively with it – repentance included.
Specific Skills and Experiences

**Be a Spiritual leader.** Men are called to be spiritual leaders. Following Jesus is a lifelong endeavor – that’s what you model through your own life. But your son needs training so he can do these things (and continue to learn on his own) without someone holding his hand. Teach your son how to study the Bible for himself, lead a family devotion, lead a group in prayer, and have a firm foundation in Christian truth. Help him apply what he learned each week from the sermon or Sunday School. As he grow older, explain things about selecting a good church home.

**Put things away and pick up trash.** For most boys, an item becomes invisible when they’re done with it. Train them to put things away correctly. Train them to pick up trash. A son who picks up trash and takes care of it properly will handle bigger tasks well, too.

**Handling money.** Your son needs be trained to tithe to the Lord, and to save money for future needs. He should learn to manage a checking account and later, a credit card. He needs to learn the basics about loans for cars and houses, and how compound interest can work for or against him. None of these things are understood fully without practical experience. When he is old enough, show him your budget and your tax returns so he understands the cash flow of your home.

**How to plan a project.** Projects have a desired end point, multiple steps in a particular sequence to getting there, and require specific tools and materials. Help him understand how you have planned projects. Give your son practical experience in planning projects you work on together.

**How to Build, Repair, and Maintain things.** Sons need to learn the basics of woodworking, plumbing, electricity, and painting – someday they will need to care for a dwelling place. Teach your son about tools and their proper use and storage. Challenge him to find creative solutions to problems. He needs to know how to get advice on a project when he’s not sure what to do. He should know how to mow a yard and raise a simple garden. Your son will need training on basic car care and keeping things cleaned up.

**Understand basic economics.** Your son needs your help to understand how the economic world really works. Do not rely upon what he may learn in school or from friends. There are basic truths about supply, demand, investments, interest, the role of small businesses and large corporations and government controls. Thomas Sowell’s book, *Basic Economics*, will be helpful for you.

**To be a contributing citizen.** Your son needs to learn how to follow the news about civic matters and think through issues. How to be prepared to vote in elections. How to communicate with elected officials, and with non-elected officials with authority over matters. Explain to your son what is expected of a jury panel. Make sure you son understands the basics of the structure of government,
and his rights and responsibilities living under that government. You dare not assume this will be covered well in schools or newspapers or news broadcasts.

**To be discerning about news stories, and to take a long perspective on events.** Typical news stories are inherently shallow and lack broad perspective. Train your son how to ask questions about what is presented, how to think about complicated and complex issues with multiple stakeholders, and to not live in dependence on the lastest fashionable sound-bite for truth. Model for your son a willingness to see the sovereign hand of the Lord at work in current events, and an understanding of how to fit today’s news into the long stream of history. Men should not be manipulated by the presentation of a story, but by examining the facts.

**To read, listen and view in a discerning way.** Today more than ever our sons are growing up in a media-saturated environment with an overwhelming array of choices. Train your son to be discerning about what he lets into his mind, because it greatly affects his thinking and his behavior. Your son needs to be able to read for information and for pleasure. He needs coaching to make good choices with his time.

**Outdoor physical skills and experiences.** Here’s a suggested list: Swim, bike, hike, run, climb, fish and hunt (and cook what you catch), read a map and navigate cross-country or cross-town, build a fire, basic first aid and CPR, spend a night alone in the woods, avoid poison ivy, sharpen a knife, use an axe and saw, participate in one solo sport and at least one team sport.

**Warrior skills.** Shoot a gun. Shoot a bow. Use a staff. Wrestling. Basic boxing. How to fight back against a bully. Basic self-defense and how to get out of common holds. Teach your son what to do if someone is threatening innocent people or those whom you love – he must pre-decide how he will act when that situation arises. The world needs men who know how to fight, for the right reasons, and how to end fights. We might wish the world were not a violent place, but it is, and men are especially called to protect women, the weak, and innocents against evil. Give your son an education from history – examples from war and peacemaking – and help him learn from the best and worst of previous generations of men have done.
There is a lot our sons need to learn from us! It won’t happen by osmosis, and they’ll be gone from our direct influence much sooner than expected. You might not have some of these skills and experiences yourself. In that situation, it’s an opportunity for you and your son to learn together! Or perhaps learn something a little ahead of when you need to teach it to them.

You might have some thoughts about what’s missing or could be improved about this list – please share them and help others.

The most important step for you now is to prayerfully review this list, consider each son in your sphere of influence, and decide what you will DO to help further that young man’s training and development.

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