

Father's Day is about more than just a card

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Contrary to popular opinion, Father's Day was not established as a holiday in order to help greeting card manufacturers sell more cards, but rather as a day set aside to honor all father figures for the tireless, and most of the time thankless, work they do in raising their children. Mrs. John B. Dodd of Washington first proposed the idea of a "father's day" in 1909 because she wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. Smart, a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife died in childbirth with their sixth child. Smart was left to raise the newborn and his other five children on a rural farm. It was only after Mrs. Dodd became an adult that she realized the strength and selflessness her father had shown in raising his children as a single parent.

The first Father's Day was observed on June 19, 1910 in Spokane Washington, but at about the same time in various towns and cities across America, other people were beginning to celebrate a "father's day." In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day, and finally in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day. Today, Father's Day has become a day to not only honor your father, but all men who act as a father figure: stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, and adult male friends.

If anyone doubts the impact a father can play in pointing his child in the right direction, think of where we would be if Albert Einstein's father wasn't there to guide the "father of relativity." When Albert was just 4 years old and sick in bed, his father gave him a magnetic compass to keep him occupied. Albert practiced turning the compass every which way and soon became fascinated by his new toy. No matter which way he turned it, the needle would always point in the same direction. This initial curiosity paved the way to Einstein's genius and fascination with nature and pointed him towards a life of scientific discovery.

We also need to acknowledge the born leaders that just couldn't help but pass down their

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“It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was.”

— Anne Sexton

political aspirations to their sons: George Bush and George W. Bush and John Adams and John Quincy Adams. And

let's not forget the Hollywood twosomes of Kirk and Michael Douglas or Martin and Charlie Sheen who have brought us terrific action-packed and thought-provoking movies.

Sports-wise, fathers have also played a dynamic role in including their sons during the high point of their careers and carrying their offspring on to victory. For example, Mark McGwire broke the homerun record with his son, Matt, as batboy, and Jack Nicklaus won the 1986 Masters with son, Jackie, as his caddy. Jim Redmond, on the other hand, took it a step further and helped his son achieve victory. During the 1992 Olympics, his son, Derek, had torn his hamstring in the 400 meters, collapsed to the ground, picked himself up and began hopping in pain to the finish line. Jim forced his way through the crowd and told Derek he didn't need to finish the race, that he was proud of him no matter what. But Derek insisted that he did need to finish and Jim nodded and immediately understood. So, right next to Derek, keeping pace with him as he hopped, they crossed the finish line together.

Aside from the famous father anecdotes cited above, many everyday fathers seem to think they get a bad rap. With divorce so prevalent in

today's American culture, fathers tend to feel as though the only time they're needed is the first of the month - when hands are outstretched and child support payments are automatically deducted from their paychecks. What's even more depressing is the change in order of child-bearing in today's society. No one seems to get married first and then decide to have a baby any longer. Couples now seem to be having babies first and then deciding whether they really like each other enough to want to get married at all. Not only that, but many young women have three or four children, all with different fathers, and the only ones who seem to be benefiting this state of affairs is the laboratories where paternity tests are being conducted.

Yes, I know. A biological father isn't necessarily a father in the truest sense of the word. It's the father figure who nurtures a child who is the true father to be celebrated on Father's Day. Take for instance the plight of the stepfather who is perhaps the most understood of all and plays the most distressing role of any father figure. Not only has he inherited an instant family to love and take care of, but he's expected to immediately do everything right! Whereas new parents can sometimes blame stupidity and/or just plain innocence, the poor stepfather has had to instantly become the wizard of parental authority, and if he does make a mistake, he must face tyrannical blame no matter how much involvement he had in the first place. He knows that if he had a dollar for every time he heard, "I don't have to listen to you. You're not my real father," he could retire on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean.

My father, like most fathers after World War II, faced a job shortage and the rigors of taking care of a family. He worked nights building airplane parts to get the night differential pay, and weekends were mostly spent catching up on sleep or doing odds and ends around the house. He was strict, but never raised his hand to me or my siblings. All it took was a look and the words, "I'm disappointed in you," to bring tears to my eyes and determination to do things dif-

ferently or better.

Unfortunately, there's no hardcover textbook issued to every new father showing the right way and the wrong way to do things. Most of the time, fathers use something they call gut instinct, prayer, and finally the trial and error theory — try it on the firstborn, see if it works, and then if it does, pass it down to the next in line.

Having been the first of four children, I'm inclined to think that there was some passing, but much of it was either amended or thrown out altogether. As my sister so eloquently puts it, "You got Dad when he was young and fun. Lou and I got him when he was old and mellow."

That's probably true, but we were all lucky to have gotten the very best part of him no matter where we were on the family birth ladder.

While visiting www.fathers.com (yes, there is a site!), I came across some tips for new fathers that were terrific and wanted to pass them along:

1. Set aside some time every day just to be silly with your kids, whether your activities are planned or spontaneous.
2. When you're with your kids, really be there. Forget your busy schedule for a while. Turn off the cell phone and really focus on enjoying your children.
3. Talk with another dad whom you trust about your greatest struggles or fears related to being a father -- and offer your support for the issues he's facing.
4. Reflect on some important questions about your fathering: Is it getting crowded out by other activities? Do you hesitate to interact with your kids? What new developments have you seen in your children during the past six months? What do you need to prepare them for in the coming months?
5. Talk to your wife about a situation with one of your children where you could apply some "tenacious tenderness." (Then do it.)

Happy Father's Day to all you fathers out there!