

Prologue | WHAT THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT

If you are a man with hefty responsibilities in your job and family life, you probably don't have much spare time for reading. You have precious little time to waste on "motivational" pep talks telling you why you should be a good dad or lengthy, sentimental story-telling that belabors the obvious. That's why I've written this book to be straight to the point and smartly practical. This book is based on other men's experience as fathers, and it presents you with real insights into family life as well as thought-provoking ideas that you can put to use right now.

My aim is ambitious: It is to help you become a great father, a great husband, and a great man.

There is a lot at stake here. Your children's later success in life will depend enormously on how well you do your job as their dad.

But first you, like other men today, need a job description. As the great Yogi Berra once supposedly said: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up someplace else."

As you will see, a man's main job in his family is to *protect from harm*. A man protects his wife and children from whatever threatens their welfare and happiness, both now and later in life. If he fails at this great responsibility, his family suffers.

If you succeed in learning from this book and then turn what you learn into manly action, with God's help you will live to see great achievements in your life as a father:

- Your masculine strengths will forge lifelong strengths in your children.
- Your sons will be manly and your daughters feminine.
- Your moral judgment will form the compass of your children's conscience.
- Your life at work and at home will blend into an integrated whole.
- Your family life will become a sporting adventure.
- Your wife and children will esteem you a great man.
- Your youngsters will grow up as competent, responsible men and women who love and honor you all their lives.

This high ideal, living as a great father, is achievable. It can be done. I know this because I have seen it done in the lives of

many fathers. Everything in these pages—the strategy and tactics of fatherly leadership—derives from what I’ve learned in my years of professional experience with many normal, conscientious men like you. I want to teach you what I’ve learned from them. I want to pass on to you their collective experience, the *wisdom of fatherhood*.

Let me back up a bit and explain this, and how I came to write this book.*

For twenty-one years, I worked to help establish two independent secondary schools for boys, one in Washington, D.C., and the other in Chicago—The Heights School and Northridge Preparatory School, respectively. I was director of Northridge for almost a dozen years. By any measure, I’m pleased and proud to say, both of these schools have been hugely successful.

During that time, I made it my business to know hundreds of families intimately. I studied their family lives. I watched children grow into maturity, very often successfully but sometimes not. Over many years I talked with hundreds of fathers and mothers, visited their homes, asked questions, learned a lot.

I did this for two reasons.

First, I believe that a school should serve the whole family, parents as well as children, and so it should see parents, not kids, as the main clients for its services. After all, parents are the principal teachers of children, and youngsters rise or fall in life mostly because of their upbringing at home. A school’s business is to support parents, not replace them, in this hugely important mission.

Second, I wanted to learn how parents succeed or fail with their children.

Let me be clear here. When I say, “succeed or fail,” I do not mean parents’ methods of discipline, or how they keep kids under control, or how they handle hassles in family life. These are short-term achievements but only part of the picture.

Parents really win success only in the long term. *Parents succeed with their children when the kids grow up to become competent, responsible, considerate, and generous men and women who are*

* *Father, the Family Protector* is a companion work to my book *Compass: A Handbook on Parent Leadership* and necessarily has some text material in common with it. *Compass* explains how both parents work as a team in unified dual leadership. This book explores how fathers exercise their powerful, and particularly masculine, contributions to family life. For updated and expanded material on these and other books of mine, please check my Web site: www.parentleadership.com.

committed to live by principles of integrity—adults who bring honor to their parents all their lives through their conduct, conscience, and character. Raising children to become adults like this is what parenthood is all about.

I watched many parents succeed in this, while others failed. Some parents saw their kids mature into excellent men and women. Others, especially as their kids struggled through adolescence and young adulthood, met with disappointment, regret, and even tragedy. Their children suffered from lack of self-confidence and self-control, substance abuse, protracted immaturity, irresponsible and self-destructive behavior, aimlessness in life, troubles with careers or marriages or the law.

Through my countless conversations with fathers and mothers, I tried to account for the differences. I looked for patterns of family life among those parents who triumphed with their children. What did these successful men and women have in common? What did they manage to do right? Most important: What could other parents learn from their experience?

Over the years I paid more and more attention to the powerful role of the father in children's lives—and that's the reason for this book.

Repeatedly, in one family after another, I witnessed how the father has a crucial influence on his children's success in life. A man's success or failure as a protector and leader directs the course of his children's lives for good or for ill. Our national epidemic of "missing fathers" is not simply a problem of single mothers struggling without a husband. It's also that of intact two-parent homes in which the father is morally absent from his children's lives.

Many men, though physically present in the family, simply fail to perform their job as a father. Indeed, it seems they don't even know what that job is. And unfortunately, even tragically, their ongoing neglect damages both their marriage and their children.

Let me tell you one instance of this failure from my professional experience.

One morning, I received a call from a distraught mother of a twelve-year-old boy. Her son was having terrible problems in another school. She wanted him transferred to ours, for she was worried about his worsening depression, lack of self-confidence, and low motivation. The boy's emotional problems were clobbering his academic performance. She asked to set up an appointment for herself and her husband to visit and talk

over the situation, and for her son to come in for testing and an interview.

Though Northridge's entrance requirements were tightly competitive and our school had a policy of declining students with motivational problems, I felt sorry for this mother, and so I agreed to meet with her and her husband. I thought I might at least offer her some advice and refer her to professionals who could help the boy.

But we couldn't meet right away. Unfortunately, her husband was out of town. Over the next couple of weeks, she and I set up and then had to cancel three appointments because one thing or another kept cropping up with her husband's busy schedule. I began to suspect that this boy's problems went beyond poor grades. So many times before, I had seen this same situation. What father, I wondered, faced with a son in serious trouble, couldn't manage to squeeze in a couple of hours to get a handle on this worsening situation? What were this man's attitudes and priorities?

The mother and I finally gave up trying to meet with the father in attendance, and so we arranged for the boy to come in first for an interview. My meeting with Mike confirmed my impressions.

Mike entered my office looking nervous and scared. His eyes scarcely met mine; they flitted around the room as if desperate for escape. I offered an introductory handshake; his hand felt limp and sweaty. As we talked, he stared out my window. Our conversation was mostly one-sided and limped along like this:

"What does your father do for a living, Mike?" I asked him.

Mike murmured, "He's an engineer."

"Where does he work?" He told me the name of the company.

"What sort of engineer is he—mechanical, electrical, civil?"

He murmured, "I don't know."

"Where did he study, and when did he graduate?" He told me the name of the university. He didn't know the year of graduation.

"Where did he meet your mother—in college?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure."

"How long were they engaged before they married?"

"I don't know."

"When your Dad was your age, what hobbies and sports did he enjoy?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Does he like his work?"

"I guess so. He doesn't talk about it much."

"What do you and he do together?"

He reflected. "Sometimes we play ball or do video games. Usually he's too tired and just watches TV or reads."

"Does he ever check over your homework?"

He paused again. "Not much . . . Sometimes he gets mad at me."

Another gambit: "When he was your age, how well did he do in school?"

"I don't know."

On and on this went: "I don't know . . . I'm not sure. . . ." Even as Mike relaxed a bit and opened up more with me, he revealed a glaring fact. Mike knew almost nothing about his father's past and present life, nothing about his dad's thinking and interests. He knew little about his father that would win his respect. Fear, maybe, but not respect. Just as clearly, this bothered Mike deeply. At the age of life when boys start to search for a masculine figure as a pattern for their lives, this boy looked to his father and saw—what? An enigma . . . a mysterious near stranger. . . . a "virtual father."

I wish I could say that this story had a happy ending. Truth to tell, I don't know how it turned out—that is, how Mike turned out. I referred his mother to professional help, for under the circumstances this was all I could do. As you might suspect, I never did get to meet the father. He was too busy.

Mike's eventual fate was probably like that of so many other boys from "virtual father" families. Lacking approval from his dad, he would likely seek it among his peers and so become a pushover for the rock-drugs-sex culture. With no confident leadership and encouragement from his father, he would lack confidence in himself and seek escape from his free-floating dread through the pleasures of pills and alcohol. Dominated by shapeless fears, he would follow his dad later as a workaholic or simply drift rudderless through a pointless succession of jobs. With no memory of fatherly advice and wisdom to lead him, he would spend years seeking guidance from father substitutes: doctors, mental health specialists, clergy, and marriage counselors. His marriage, if any, would be built on sand, and his wife and children (if he had any) would suffer.

Was Mike's peculiar situation unusual? Unfortunately, no. This distance between fathers and children—whereby kids hardly know their fathers and thus fail to respect them—is commonplace in our society.

In many American families, the gap between fathers and children is papered over by pick-up games of sports and other “buddy” activities. In many children’s eyes, their father appears as a kind of amiable older sibling or part-time second mother. This is not enough. Sports and games are not the same as fatherly leadership. On a broad basis in our society, something is *not* happening between fathers and children—and it is damaging our kids.



Mike’s story is one of fatherly failure. His experience with his “virtual dad” stood out in my mind because it contrasted so sharply with the successes I witnessed among so many fathers of children in my school.

Through a kind of natural selection, Northridge attracted a great many parents with their heads on straight. I saw that these fathers and mothers were doing a fine job, often an outstanding job, in raising their children.

Parents and visitors complimented us on our students’ confident cheerfulness and good manners, their powers of producing high-quality work, their developing sense of professionalism, their personal integrity. Of drug problems, we had none—that’s none, as in “zero.” Certainly our kids had sporadic bouts of wackiness and glandular ups and downs, as most normal teens do. But our young people were, in the main, fine adolescents who grew quickly into excellent young adults. Eventually they entered good careers and married well. We teachers and parents were proud of them, and still are.

I tried to find out how their parents managed to pull this off. Frankly, I was often struck by their widely different temperaments and ways of raising kids. I carefully took notes on odd scraps of paper and filed them away until I had several mulch-pile folders. Gradually, some patterns—some common *approaches* to children’s upbringing—came into focus, and these lessons I passed on to other parents by way of advice and encouragement.

Certainly, one common element was this: the best among these well brought-up young people respected their dads and learned from them. At home, both parents, father and mother, were doing a great job, but the father’s role seemed to be critical. He was *doing* something smart in family life, something important that won his children’s respect, and I focused on finding out what that was.

I began talking with the teenage children of these men. I

asked them to relate an incident that would pinpoint or illustrate why they respected their dad. Sometime later, I also asked this of the most effective fathers I knew—to relate something from the memory of their own dads. These are some of the things they told me: *

“When we were kids, we knew Dad was strong. Whenever we all tried and failed to open the top of a jar that was stuck, we’d take it to Dad. He was the only one who could open it—every time!”

“When I was about three or four years old, I was out walking in a park with my dad. I lagged behind him a bit and stopped to look at something on the ground. Suddenly a huge Irish setter dog ran toward me and leaped on me, knocking me to the ground. The dog stood over me, panting and sniffing at my face. Of course he was simply being playful, but I didn’t know this. I was absolutely terrified, screaming in horror as I thought the dog would eat me. My dad ran back fast, shooed the dog away, and swept me up in his arms. He held me tight, dried my tears with his hanky, and smiled while telling me everything was okay. I held on tight to his neck and felt safe with him.”

“After we were a certain age, our dad wouldn’t do things for us much. He’d show us how to do it ourselves and then tell us to do it on our own. He always said we had to learn to handle our own affairs.”

“Dad had a temper and sometimes he’d lose it with us. But he always came back later to apologize. He was sometimes tough with us, but he was always fair.”

“Our family had to live with the fact that Dad was super-busy in his job. Sometimes he had to work late or on Saturdays. But all of us knew somehow that he was always available. If any of us really needed him badly, we knew he’d drop whatever he was doing and be there.”

“Dad and Mom always stuck up for each other. Always. When we’d ask Mom for permission to spend a night over someone’s house, she’d say to wait until she checked with Dad. And if we went to him, he’d say the same thing: to wait and let him first check with Mom. They made decisions together.”

“Dad always said that Mom was number one in his life—and we kids had better treat her right, or else . . . We knew he meant it, too.”

* Nearly all the quotations in this book are approximate because they are reconstructed from memory, often from many years ago. The quotation marks used are only a literary device. Moreover, I have usually changed names and personal circumstances of persons quoted in order to preserve their privacy.

“One summer evening when I was thirteen, my friend and I, merely as a joke, took all the air valves off tires from cars parked at a local VFW hall, and rode our bikes to my house. Dad overheard the two of us laughing about it and went into a cold rage. He drove us back there and made us replace all the valves, then took us inside to apologize to the cars’ owners. I almost died of shame but really learned a lesson.”

“I’ll never forget Dad’s taking me to his office when I was small. Everyone was nice to me, and I watched him writing and working with people all day. I was sort of proud of him.”

“When we were planning vacations, Dad and Mom would ask us for suggestions. They let us have our say: what we’d like to do, where we’d like to go. And they did this for other things, too—listen to our input. But then they made the final decisions.”

“When my sister was in high school, she was going to go out to a dance dressed in a new skirt that she’d just bought. It was a short—I mean really short—miniskirt. Dad saw her and hit the roof. He was very upset. He said no daughter of his was going to leave the house looking like that. Even though she was pleading and crying, he made her go upstairs and change. Next weekend, he made her return the skirt for a refund.”

“Our dad was pretty easygoing about things. He’d respect our freedom of opinion and let us disagree with him on most things. But in some matters—like staying out late, or the way we’d dress—he’d put his foot down. We knew that when he took a stand like this, he considered the matter really important for us, for our welfare as he put it—and so the matter was closed, period.”

So, what were the words and terms that kept bobbing up to describe these effective fathers? You see them here: *strong, directive, just, available, lovingly united with his wife, competent, protective, respectful of his children’s freedom, a good listener, a leader who teaches right from wrong.* Not a bad thumbnail sketch of fatherhood, a good beginning.

Over the years, I kept questioning fathers in particular, rummaging through their stories, pulling thoughts together, and arranging them into patterns. I frequently passed on what I had learned in public lectures I gave, first to our school’s parents, then to other groups in the Midwest, and eventually throughout the country. I wrote some small works that were privately pub-

lished and, much to my surprise, widely read and appreciated. Occasionally I was interviewed on radio and television.

I began to suspect that I was on to something important when some incidents took place—events that eventually prompted me to step down from my school and devote myself full-time to teaching and encouraging young parents.

People started calling from around the country asking me to come speak to their parenting groups. Then I began receiving invitations from England, the Philippines, Ireland, Singapore, and Australia.

I had handouts for my talks run off at a print shop, and when I dropped by to pick them up, the owner asked if she could keep a few copies to give to her married siblings and friends.

Sometimes older men, grandfathers, attended my talks. Several of them approached me afterwards and said, “I wish I’d heard all this twenty-five years ago! It would have saved me a lot of trouble. . . .”

Lectures of mine were videotaped for later showing on television. On three separate occasions—in Milwaukee, Washington, and Sydney—camera operators came up afterwards to shake my hand and thank me. One technician told me, “I learned a lot here, and I’m sure glad *someone* is saying these things!”

One man approached me during an intermission and said he’d heard me speak three years before. He warmly thanked me and said, “There’s definitely a before and an after in my life. Your advice was the turning point. You showed me what I need to do as a father, and gave me the push I needed.”

In all my years as headmaster and later as lecturer, I faced a problem. Many men would ask, “Can you recommend some books I could read about fatherhood?” Here I found myself stumped.

For many years, I searched hard for books to recommend, works specifically written for men and from a masculine point of view. It was a disappointing and frustrating chore. While there was no shortage of so-called “parenting” books on the market, I found that nearly all of these works were written for women. Most focused on the crucially important role of wives and mothers, but they ignored or minimized the father’s special role at home—a dimension of family life that my experience showed me was extremely important.

Starting in the mid-1980s, my hopes perked up when some books on fatherhood as such finally showed up in bookstores.

But these, too, were mostly a letdown. Some were sociological and abstract in their approach: long on discussion lamenting the “missing father” but short on practical solutions. Most belabored the woes of dysfunctional families but had little to say about common problems among normal families. (After all, normal families have problems, too.)

Other books offered “quick fixes” and unhelpful bromides (“Play more often with your kids”) or stressed fatherly behavior in nitty-gritty detail but without a larger philosophical framework—not merely what a father *does*, but what a father *is*.

These books all had the same flaw: They paid practically no attention to a father’s masculinity, his inherent male strengths, and how these powers direct children’s growth in judgment, competence, and character. So many of these works seemed to view the ideal father as little more than a large-scale pal or playmate to his children or as a kind of second mother. None of these views squared with my experience.

The book I wanted would have an entirely different approach. It would sum up, as it were, the *collective wisdom of fatherhood* as men learned it from their own dads up until, say, the end of World War II—when societal and family forces began to erode and even cut off this manly intergenerational teaching.

The book I wanted would explain the importance of a father’s long-term strategic foresight and commitment. It would tell how a father’s own powerful and passionate vision can serve as an empowering ideal for his children’s later lives as men and women. It would describe how a father’s special, most critical responsibility is to teach and form *character* in his growing children. It would explain the main obstacles in today’s society that undercut a father’s teaching role, and tell men what they could do to overcome them. Then, within this framework, the book would spell out experienced, practical advice on how successful fathers deal with their children in the most crucial areas: family rules, discipline, schooling, sports, recreation, the media, and ongoing teamwork with one’s wife.

To put it another way, the book I was looking for would provide what any man needs to carry out a serious responsibility, whether at home or in the workplace—that is, a clear job description, a long-term realistic goal, a warning about potential obstacles, and the experienced know-how of others who have tackled the job and succeeded.

Because I couldn't find this book anywhere, I wrote it myself.
It's the one you are now holding.
So, let's move on to the job description of fatherhood.