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Dads, Take your Kids' Perspective

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

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"As a child, the critical eye of my father seemed to follow me around wherever I went." (Arthur C. Clarke)

It's quite easy for most fathers to look at their kids with a critical eye. And why not? There's a lot riding on the outcome of your kids' development. There's the nagging worry that you're not doing your job well enough and that your child will develop "problems." There's also the fear of being judged as an incompetent or uninvolved father by others. And there is the relentless presence of your children, making mistakes by the truckload while you watch.

They do make mistakes. Lots of them. And you have a number of choices about how you respond to those mistakes and how critical you are of your kids. Let's consider some different ways of looking at this issue to see if we can get some perspective:

A Different Angle

If you're a father who's really honest with yourself, you'll acknowledge that much of the judgement and criticism that you have towards your kids is really your own critical judgement about yourself. It's usually easier to be critical of your kids than to turn the spotlight on yourself, isn't it? If you're not careful as a father, you may run the risk of "teaching" your kids low self-esteem through your criticism and judgement of them.

Doesn't seem fair, does it?

Fathers who see their kids as capable and whole, on the other hand, will find far fewer opportunities to be critical of their kids.

There are other reasons why you should be more understanding with your kids. One reason is to consider what it's really like to be a child. For instance, can you imagine the formidable combination of having a brain that's not yet able to exhibit emotional control and living in a house where you're constantly told what to do by your parents?

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Think about it for a minute. How many times do our kids get told what to do each day? How do you handle getting told what to do all the time? It's a wonder that kids respond as well as they do.

How About Teenagers?

How about your teens at home? They certainly should be able to respond better to parents based on their experience, right? Not according to a recent study by the National Institute of Health.

A large study of teenagers found that as the brain develops, it trims away excess cells so that what's left is more efficient. One of the last parts of the brain to complete this process is the prefrontal cortex, which controls planning, judgement, and self-control. Many teen-agers have not experienced the

"maturation" of this part of their brain.

"[Adolescents] are capable of very strong emotions and very strong passions, but their prefrontal cortex hasn't caught up with them yet. It's as though they don't have the brakes that allow them to slow those emotions down," said Charles Nelson, a child psychologist at the University of Minnesota.

Researchers say this may help explain the often irrational behavior of teenagers: the mood swings, and the risks they're often too willing to take.

"If I walk into a class of kids who are 14 or 15," said Nelson, "those kids have a level of brain maturity that just does not map onto the kinds of emotional decision-making that a lot of those kids are being asked to make by teachers and parents. Added Nelson: "The more teachers and the more parents that understand that there is a biological limitation to the child's ability to control and regulate emotion, [the more] they might be able to back off a little and be a bit more understanding."

It can be quite easy for us to judge our kids harshly. But when you can begin to enter your child's world and consider the developmental limitations that exist, the call to a kinder and gentler way is undeniable.

Your kids will continue to make mistakes.

Your job is to stay calm, love them, and gently show them a different way.

And to be thankful that your kids are here to challenge you to become a more patient person.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" (http://www.markbrandenburg.com/e_book.htm#secrets. For more great tips and action steps for fathers, sign up for his FREE bi-weekly newsletter, "Dads, Don't Fix Your Kids," at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com>.

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My Dad's Secrets

By Gary E. Anderson

From the book *Spider's Night on the Boom*
Gary Anderson

I've only begun to understand my dad since I became a father myself, and it's amazing to me how I'm constantly being reminded of lessons he taught me 40 years ago—lessons that I never even knew I was learning.

As a kid, my life was like a black-and-white kid's adventure movie, composed of disjointed, but sometimes very exciting scenes. My parents played the parts of supporting actors in the movie of my life, and although my dad would have rated large letters in the opening credits, his character would have been reviewed by a critic "needing to be fleshed out."

Even so, I saw my father as supremely confident. He could fix anything, he always seemed to know exactly where he was going, and knew the most efficient route to get there. I never saw a look of worry on his face, never heard him express any doubts, and I certainly never saw him cry. His air of confidence made our home a safe place to my brothers, sister, and I—a place to grow with total loving support.

But since the mantle of "Daddery" has been passed to me, I've come to realize that my dad must have had moments of genuine doubt and confusion, just as I do. But I never really knew how he felt, deep inside. It never showed, and we never talked about it.

When I became a father, I suddenly began to appreciate my own father's sacrifices as he worked tirelessly to provide for his family. I began to get a glimpse of the precarious balancing act he faced every day: wife, children and family vs. the dampened fires of his own soul.

It was only after I left home that I began to hear stories about my dad's dreams—sacrificed in the name of being a "father." I heard about a young man who gave up a promising baseball career to become my dad. There was no long debate; that's what dads did. They set aside their personal dreams to pursue what was considered a higher calling—that of giving the next generation an opportunity to pursue their dreams.

My father understood those rules clearly. Dads worked hard and stayed employed, regardless of how menial or mundane the job. Dads spent time with their kids. But most importantly, dads offered glimpses into what it meant to be a man and a father—in the purest sense of both terms.

In what seems to me to be a smaller way than my dad, I walk the precarious tightrope that is "Dad" vs. "Me," always trying to maintain a balance between the two. And although my circumstances are very different, the importance of the task remains unchanged.

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Like my father, I try to let my kids know how much I believe in the sanctity of this special time in their lives. By offering them my love and support, I hope to give them the gift my father gave me—the greatest gift a father can give, really—warm, gentle memories of their childhood. And no matter how difficult their lives may become later on, they'll always be able to take comfort in those sweet memories, and no one can ever take that gift away.

So here's to my dad, to your dad, and to all dads—men who gave up or postponed their own dreams so that we might reach for ours. Men in whose footprints we tried to step as we struggled through the deep snowdrifts of our childhood, marveling at how long a man's stride could be.

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Gary Anderson is a freelance writer, editor, ghostwriter, and manuscript analyst, living on a small Iowa farm. He's published more than 500 articles and four books. He's also ghosted a dozen books, edited more than 30 full-length manuscripts, produced seven newsletters, and has done more than 800 manuscript reviews for various publishers around the nation. If you need writing or editing help, visit Gary's website at

My Dad's Secrets

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The Importance of Fathers

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