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Interview with A Coach Who Helps Men Become Better Fathers

By Susan Dunn

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Personal and Professional Development Coach

"He's disobeyed me again," Bill fumed as he walked in the door at night. The kitchen was a mess and his teenage son was playing "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" on the computer with rap music blaring at 106 dB, known to cause permanent damage in less than 4 minutes, and homework nowhere in sight; all things Bill had fought with his son about before.

Bill's heart started pounding and he shook with rage. "Why does he defy me?" he thought. "I don't need this tonight."

A hard day at the office can be followed by a hard day at home, and today's fathers often work 60–70 hours a week.

Nobody said parenting was easy, and many of today's fathers didn't have much of a role model. It's likely they had fathers who were distant; providing, but not involved.

If you decide you want to be a better father than you are now, or better than the one you had, where do you begin?

We decided to talk with Fathering Coach, Mark Brandenburg, MA, CPPC, (<http://www.markbrandenburg.com>) a therapist who is now coaching, and specializes in helping men balance the important things in their lives.

SD: "What's new on the fathering scene, Mark? Have things changed?"

Mark: In the sense that fathering is always something we can improve on, there are a lot of men who'd like to but aren't sure where to start. Not feeling close to their own fathers, they aren't sure what it looks like. They go to a baseball game with their Dad, and sit side-by-side and talk about the players and don't even look at one another.

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SD: Isn't that how men bond?

Mark: Traditionally yes. Men tend to bond by doing things together, not by talking together or going into depth, and that's something, but it's not fulfilling.

SD: How so?

Mark: I don't think it satisfies that deep need that children have to be accepted by their fathers. We need to be accepted by our fathers.

SD: How do you show that to a child?

Mark: By spending quality time with your kids. Doing more around the house. Men today want to be better fathers at the same time work demands are higher than ever, so it's a stressful situation.

SD: So if a man wants to become a more effective father, what's the first thing he should do?

Mark: Start with what I call "the conversation". In it you talk to your child about the changes you'd like to make. Perhaps it's about spending more time together. But if you just try to get more involved, your kid is likely to say, "What's going on with you?" I recommend my clients say something like, "I've not been involved enough and I'm not happy with that and I hope it's okay if we try something different. What do you think?"

If you have a previously uninvolved father, you're going to have some resistant kids who will test you to see if you really mean it. You'll definitely get some resistance. Change scares a lot of people.

SD: But isn't the client going to change his way of parenting?

Mark: Yes, and that's why coaching works. Change is never easy. It always involves risk. It takes courage. If a client makes the commitment to change, I can make the process easier, with practical how-to tips and also an understanding of what it's like, because it requires emotional intelligence, too.

SD: So what does getting involved with your kids look like in real life?

Mark: It varies. Talking to them and knowing what their life is about. You have to ask questions. Find out who their friends are. What subjects they like. Basic things. I had one client, gosh he knew everything. Current events, sports scores, all the emperors of Rome, two languages, but he didn't know the name of his son's best friend. He didn't know what his daughter liked to eat.

SD: So where do you start?

Mark: Spend some time and get to know their world a little bit. Do something with them, or do nothing. One thing I recommend is leaving notes to your kids. Make your home a sacred place, a place where special things happen. Get involved in setting the table and having a nice family dinner. Leave little notes for your daughter and ask her to leave some for you. Pop it in her school lunch, under her pillow,

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or in her Barbie chest. You want your children to perceive that you love them and that they have value. Children think this way: If my dad doesn't ask questions, and doesn't spend time with me, he doesn't care about me.

SD: Can you recommend any books?

Mark: I have two ebooks that are helpful, "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers," and "60 Tips for Fathers to Create Happy, Connected, and Responsible Kids."

http://www.markbrandenburg.com/e_book.htm

SD: How does coaching fit in?

Mark: Because these things have to be put into practice, which requires change, and change involves risk, and it's helpful to have an expert who can guide the process. Someone who knows where you're going when you can't quite see it yet, who knows these things work. Ultimately it's all about having better relationships, passion, a more meaningful life, and better health, with and through your family.

SD: I can't help but think -What's it like to work 10–12 hours and then come home and be the warm attentive father?

Mark: Paradoxically it can help. More effective fathers are more effective workers, and vice versa. It's about personal development, about who you're becoming. Okay here's an example, let's call him Ted, a coaching client of mine. He has three boys and is a pretty reserved, analytical kind of fellow, a scientist. In his case, when he saw college on the horizon for the oldest son, he realized he wasn't as close to his boys as he'd like. In the coaching, it turned out he hadn't told his kids much about himself. He didn't tell his stories, talk about what he was really about. It was an "ah hah" moment for him when he realized if he wasn't willing to share with his kids, they weren't going to with him. I gave him some suggestions for getting started."

SD: One more thing before we part. Can you give me an example of how it works changing the work situation first?

Mark: Sure. I had another client who wanted coaching because he had a dilemma. He had to work with some co-workers he didn't get along with, and he couldn't transfer and he didn't want to leave the company. In coaching, he discovered he was having the same sort of power struggles at home he was having at work. It centered around emotional intelligence competencies he needed to develop. He liked to control things at work, and also his wife and kids at home, but it wasn't getting him what he wanted.

SD: So the coaching work made him a more effective co-worker and also a more effective husband and parent?

Mark: He did a lot of work and the outcome was very favorable. He achieved his goals.

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has worked with individuals, teams, and businesses for 16+ years. Mark was a world-ranked competitive tennis player and has coached and trained other elite athletes. Mark's interest has always been high performance. <mailto:markbrandenburg@markbrandenburg.com> for free ezine.

Fathers and Sons

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

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As a personal coach for men and the publisher of a newsletter, I'm sometimes blessed with personal stories from readers that touch my heart. This story sent in from a father helped me to remember why I'm doing what I do. I'd like to share it with you:

"As a father of two teens, I've enjoyed your insight on fatherhood. I was raised in a loving family environment, but just as you indicated, my father was the primary breadwinner and the "backbone" of the family, not an emotional type. As a child, I never saw him cry or appear weak, nor did he ever utter the words "I love you". It was just not in his vocabulary, though I never doubted his love for any of us.

It was not until his last hours on this earth, nearly 9 years ago, that I saw him cry for the first time. Suffering from the side effects of leukemia, I was visiting him in his hospital room.

As I sat on the side of his bed feeding him ice chips and jello cubes by spoon, it occurred to me that we had reversed roles. He was no longer caring for my needs, but I was there to help him with a basic need.

We talked about things that we'd never discussed previously and as I was preparing to return home to my family for the night, I turned to him and said "I love you". He smiled and nodded his approval as I exited his room for the last time.

Unfortunately, he'd been experiencing internal

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bleeding, though he never complained or mentioned it to me, and he expired some three hours after I left.

I feel fortunate to have spent those last hours with him and that I could express my love to him, though I

felt out of character in doing it. I only wish that it had occurred years earlier.

As a father myself, I've broken the male mold. I freely express my love not only for my wife but for each of my children. Rarely does a day pass that I don't talk with my kids, always ending the conversation with an "I love you".

I'll be the first to admit that life is not always a bed of roses, and that developing strong family ties requires patience and perseverance. But I'm incredibly proud of the family relationships that we've developed and nurtured in our children."

Millions of today's fathers grew up with fathers who were unable to express their love directly. And yet so many of these fathers have been able to express their love to their own children.

They've done it because they know the pain of not receiving that love. They know how absolutely vital their expression of love and acceptance is for their kids. And they've moved past the discomfort of expressing their love for their kids so that they may thrive.

This is an acknowledgement to the courage of all the fathers who have "broken the mold."

If our world is to change, it won't be without love from our fathers.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, coaches men to be better fathers and husbands. He is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" <http://www.markbrandenburg.com/father.htm> 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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