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Is There Hope for Overwhelmed Fathers?

By Mark Brandenburg MA,, CPCC

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No man can possibly know what life means, what the world means, what anything means, until he has a child and loves it. Then the whole universe changes and nothing will ever again seem exactly as it seemed before.

---Lafcadio Hearn

On this evening things certainly didn't seem to be like they were before. This evening had been difficult. As I was trying to get my kids to bed, my daughter was whining and crying about tomorrow's school clothes while my son flopped around on the floor without a care in the world.

It was well past their bed time and I was simultaneously: upset with myself for getting behind schedule; preoccupied with a project I was late on; angry with my kids for not cooperating; and worried that they'd have another crabby day from back-to-school stress and a lack of sleep.

I could feel the tension envelope my shoulders and jaw. My mind was moving at a dangerous rate.

Then the moment happened.

My four year old son looked up at me as innocently as humanly possible and said, Dad, what do snails eat?

Everything slowed down and relaxed. The drama of the moment disappeared. My worry and concern had been revealed as a hoax. All that seemed to matter now was getting my kids down to bed in a warm

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and caring manner.

After stumbling through a snail diet answer and thanking my son for putting things in perspective for me, I marveled at how quickly my emotions could change. Unfortunately, this shift is not always very rapid or easy for fathers in stressful situations.

The challenge for many fathers is how to deal with the overwhelm that can be a constant in modern family life. In his book, "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail" (1994), John Gottman found that men produced much higher heart rates and raised their blood pressure higher than women during emotional discussions with their wives. These higher rates also tended to stay higher for longer periods of

time.

The result of this sense of overwhelm for men can be any number of reactions, including: disengagement, the silent treatment, angry outbursts, or excessive attention to work. Of course, everyone loses when these reactions become commonplace. And the truth is that these reactions can be improved upon and eventually avoided.

Here are five ideas to help in dealing with overwhelm with your family:

1. Raise your standards: Stop blaming others for your overwhelm, this only makes things worse. Commit yourself to improving your own skills in dealing with overwhelm and realize that it always starts with you.
2. Take time outs. These will help to put some perspective to the situation and they'll also show your kids you're working on it. You can't expect your kids to work on their "stuff" if you don't work on your own.
3. Plan ahead and train your kids. A lot of stressful situations can be avoided by being prepared. Get things ready the night before and be very consistent with routines.
4. Raise the bar for yourself by having your wife or kids (or both) keep you accountable. Tell them to remind you if they see you getting overwhelmed and angry. Then do what's necessary for you to create a healthier response.
5. Use a well-practiced and routine relaxation response for your

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overwhelm. Whether it's deep breathing or counting to ten, have a tool to use when the going gets tough. It beats yelling any day.

Fathers are often the fixers of things in their household. While not an easy task, the flooding that fathers feel during overwhelm is a fixable problem.

The choice is clear: point fingers at your family or deal with your own issues?

What do you think is best for your family?

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>.

Indianapolis Sees Success Involving Fathers

By Stacy Andell

Superintendent Calls for Fathers on the First Day of School

Superintendent Eugene G. White's call to fathers in the Indianapolis schools has met with strong success. Mr. White asked fathers to bring their children to the first day of classes in order to establish a stronger presence on campus and hopefully continue to stay involved with Indianapolis schools throughout the school year. The event was dubbed, "The First Day is Dad's Day," and encouraged fathers to have a more active role on campus.

As Mr. White states: "Mothers are the backbone of IPS, but dads need to know they have a role to play in supporting their children's education, too. I look forward to seeing more dads in schools throughout the school year." Mr. White hopes programs like "The First Day is Dad's Day" will help change the way fathers view their role in their children's education and encourage more fathers to take an active interest in what their children are doing in Indianapolis schools.

Public Reaction to "The First Day is Dad's Day"

News stations across Indianapolis turned out to record "The First Day is Dad's Day" programs. WTLC, WEDJ, WISH-TV, WRTV, WTHR, WXIN, the Indianapolis Star and the Indianapolis Recorder all participated in getting the word out about the event as well as following up with the story later to see how dads, teachers, and students felt about the shift in the role of the father on campus in Indianapolis schools. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many fathers took their children to school for the

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first time and saw the process from a parent perspective that they had not had before. The networks of fathers meeting each other and seeing their children at school should have a positive effect throughout the year as fathers feel more comfortable being involved in the Indianapolis schools.

Reverend Emory Davis watched "The First Day is Dad's Day" proceedings and collected many interesting anecdotes:

"Well, it was a wonderful day. I went to School 55. I got there shortly after 8 a.m. and was greeted by one of the staff members. As I told her what I was doing she got excited that someone was there to help.

"Given the title of 'stand-in' parent, I greeted children and parents as they came into the school, helped them with directions to either check the assignment board or that they were welcome to have breakfast. I met the principal, Mrs. Johnson, and she also thanked me for coming.

"I picked School 55 because one of the young men in our men's group at church attended that school when he was younger.

"One thing, I greeted a young man with I think two children, one of whom was there for kindergarten – although he looked as though in stature to only be about three years old. The parent already had a room assignment for his older child but needed information for the little one. I told the parent to see Mrs. Johnson. As they turned to their left toward the office, the little one came back and looked at me with eyes that would melt the hardest rock and said, 'Hello.' I had to bend down and obviously say

'Hello' right back. And with the he caught up with his dad and brother. That just made the whole day.

"Tell Dr. White 'Let's do it again!' "

Stacy Andell is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on Indianapolis schools visit

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