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Should Dads Tell their Kids the Truth?

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

Some day, you'll be sitting with your child, listening to the radio or watching a program on TV.

Somebody will be talking about premarital sex, illegal drug use, breaking the law, or some other highly charged issue. And then, your child will start to ask questions. What did you do when you were younger? How often?

While some fathers might consider leaving the room, the best idea is to have a plan to address these kinds of questions.

So how should you handle this?

Do you just tell them everything, and hope they don't do the same things you did, or do you avoid telling the truth? For a while, psychologists were suggesting to parents that the best strategy to use was telling the truth about your past. If you experimented with or used drugs, just let your kids know. Being honest with your kids was more important than any other consideration.

The problem with this strategy is that it doesn't take into account your child's maturity level. It doesn't consider their readiness to hear this kind of information. Some kids just aren't ready to handle the fact that Dad smoked pot when he was younger, or that he had sex with other women before he was married.

If you're telling your kids this kind of information just to feel better, and "get it off your chest," you're guilty of trying to make yourself feel better at the expense of your kids. This may not only shatter an image your kids have of you, it may seem like an endorsement for them to have the same kinds of experiences.

Kids often have an idealized vision of their parents (although their comments and behavior may belie this), and information about a parent's prior transgressions can be very difficult for them to handle. It adds confusion to an already complex and difficult relationship.

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While honesty with your kids is important, one should also consider timing, and a child's readiness to hear. All of these factors should be considered when fathers decide on a strategy to use with their kids. And when a strategy is used, it should be consistent. Here are a few of the strategies that can be used with your kids, with a few of the advantages and disadvantages:

. Only speak about your past if asked. This strategy will work for almost everyone. There's no need to go into your past transgressions if it's not necessary. In this case, "What they don't know won't hurt them." However, it's important to be ready with your responses, because the questions can come at any time.

. Tell your child that you'll talk about these things at a later date. If you don't feel your child is ready for this kind of information, there's no need to lie to them. It's far better to be honest, and let them know you'll fill them in at some later time. They may howl and accuse you of being guilty, so you'll have to handle it.

. If you do feel your child is ready to hear about your past transgressions, make sure you tell them as little as they need to know. They don't need to know the specific details of what you did, or exactly how many times. If they ask for this information, you can tell them you're not quite sure (Which I believe for most fathers would be true). And by all means, don't give them the message that, "I did these things, and look how well I'm doing now!" This is a clear message to your kids that doing these things can work for them, too.

. Gather the "lessons learned" from your experiences, and relay that to your child. If you had negative experiences, be very clear with your child concerning what these negative experiences were. Be careful not to preach to them. The "lessons learned" can be lost in a flash if your child feels "lectured to." Just let them hear what you have to say, and make their own decisions. Your negative experiences will speak loudly enough. Whether you speak about your own experiences, or just talk about the perspective you now have as an adult, let them know the risks associated with the behaviors.

. When your child asks about your past, find out the reason they're asking. Is it something they're experiencing at school, or do they want to find out some "secrets" about their parents? It's important to make this issue about your child, and the reason for the questions, not about your past, and whether you did the "right" things. More often than not, your child is seeking some guidance on this issue, and would like to share your experience. Ask them directly about what's going on, but ask in a way that shows concern, not in a way that accuses them.

This doesn't have to be a huge dilemma for fathers to face. Being prepared is the best way to turn this process into a learning experience for both sides. Fathers who want to remain "perfect" in their children's eyes will struggle mightily with this issue. But your kids don't need perfect fathers. They do need a father who's willing to keep growing with them.

So tell them the truth.

Just tell them as little as possible, and tell them when they're ready.

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Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, coaches busy parents by phone to balance their life and improve their family relationships. For a FREE twenty minute sample session by phone; ebooks, courses, articles, and a FREE newsletter, go to

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My Dad's Secrets

By Gary E. Anderson

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

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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

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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.

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

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My Dad's Secrets

Dads, Take your Kids' Perspective

Top Ten Ways to be a Better Father

The Importance of Fathers

Dad, Give Your Kids the "N" Word

The Alphabet of Birds

Understanding Acne: Causes, Cures and Myths
Scams Exposed
Real Estate Investment for Beginners
Control your Headache!



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