

it takes many things to be a father

It takes many more things to be a daddy

by Jerry Parr

In the summer of 2005 I had a chance to be both . . . my wife preceded a family move by three months while my daughter and I stayed back in Mississippi and prepared the house for the 'relocation.' Knowing what I know now, I am sure that took more courage and faith on her part than I will ever have. I thought I was not just a father and a husband but a great father and great husband. How lucky my family was to have me. In my mind I was not an unlikely candidate for Father of the Year or, even better; of the decade . . . why stop there . . . if there is an award for Father of the Century, don't hesitate to nominate me, please.

The summer of 2005 was destined to change all that for me. During that summer I learned more about being a father as a family member than I ever dreamed possible, or necessary. I learned that

- ▶ it is possible to be present and absent at the same time. Two parents in the



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house does not always equate to a two-parent family.

- ▶ as busy as I thought I was, my wife was roughly 16,000,000 times busier and more productive.
- ▶ dishwashers can hold more than three plates and two glasses if you put stuff in right.
- ▶ NSF means non-sufficient funds and that happens when you forget to do the banking.
- ▶ there are people paid to call you in the middle of the night to remind you that you owe them money and that happens when you forget to pay the bills.
- ▶ three dogs and a cat had never learned to feed themselves or open a door.
- ▶ dishes don't clean themselves, clothes don't wash themselves, meals don't cook themselves, carpets don't vacuum themselves, beds don't make themselves, and that daughters require hair care.
- ▶ the smoke alarm is not the best way to determine when dinner is done.

- ▶ there are words whispered into your ear late at night when you have nothing left to give that not only rejuvenate you, but stay with you for the rest of your life. For me that gift was given to me by my daughter when at the end of the summer, on a night when I was empty, she cuddled against me and said, "You are a great mommy!"

So here is the point . . . being the second adult in the family doesn't make you a daddy. Being a partner in all things makes you a daddy. And, if you get really good at it, you might even become a mommy.

Lot's of things conspire against you . . . work, play, what kind of father you had, what kind of mother you had, peers, fear, the mystery of children through a male's eyes, lack of role models . . . no end to the list. Doesn't matter; our families need us. Change needs to happen.

Our own profession is a great place to start. Let's be part of that change. Here's the plan: let's put more men in the classrooms as teachers and assistants so fathers can see how incredibly powerful a thing it is to be a caring, nurturing, loving man. Let's put more men in our

classrooms and, as their administrators and peers, believe that they have staying power, believe that they have what it takes if we support them and return their caring, nurturing, and loving. Let's put more men in the classrooms and cherish them for what they can do, rather than worry about what they don't do. What a magnet they become to a father struggling to believe in himself, to a father who needs to see first hand the awe in the eyes of a child who has never before been held by a man, heard a man's voice tell them a story or be silly and laugh with them; to a father who does not understand his place in the family. What a wondrous thing for a child to see a man who respects and cares about the women in his world. Let's put more men in our classrooms so that they have a training ground that prepares them to become a great daddy someday, too.

I recently experienced first hand the skepticism that is part of our very own profession. . . . After my epiphany during my last summer in Mississippi I decided to make a career shift that was made possible by the support of my family: I decided it was time to slow things down and continue the lessons I had learned about being a daddy and being truly integrated into the family. What seemed obvious to me was to reach out to my own profession — early childhood — and find a small center that could use my skills; a chance to give back to the world that had given me so much and at the same time afford me what I really wanted and needed . . . time with my family. In my naiveté I thought that I had identified a simple win-win solution: early childhood gives me what I need and I give a center the treasure trove of early childhood 'stuff' I had been storing up . . . and of all the industries, I happened to be part of the one most suited to understanding a man wanting to find his way back into his family's heart. This was perfection. What a shock I had in store for me.

Our profession is rife with the same issues of gender prejudice, bias, fear, and misunderstanding that have to be challenged and fought everywhere else. The gender has changed but the problem has not.

In every instance the centers I was invited to visit met me with skepticism (at best) . . . the common theme: no way will he stay here; it will be too boring, lack challenge, provide not enough income, there is something here he is not telling us, men don't step *backwards* in their careers. . . . What a thing to be thinking about our profession; how can we imagine that leading a center into excellence, supporting staff, recruiting families, being surrounded by professional peers, establishing a program in the community, helping young children feel safe and loved could ever be boring or lacking in challenge or be a backward step in the journey because I wanted to be a better father. How could achieving satisfaction from such an amazing profession be gender based? The answer is simple: it isn't. It is a profession for people who care regardless of gender. I just had not yet learned that everyone didn't already know that. So I kept looking.

Of all of life's ironies, the center that I got my start in over 30 years ago announced that they were looking for a director. I thought what perfect symmetry to end my career at the very center where I started it. This was the most excited I had ever been about a potential job. I felt absolutely certain that this was an act of Providence. On the night I was to meet the parent board/selection committee I was so excited that I was an hour early; some of which I spent in the car, the rest of which I used to explore the center that launched my career. I looked in windows and tried to remember which ones I had the kids look out of with me as we explored the outdoors from indoors on rainy days. I looked at easels

that seemed old enough to be the same ones from 30 years ago and wondered if any of the paint splashes were from kids I had held and loved.

I looked at a director's cluttered desk and saw the same desk 30 years ago, but without the ashtray that I remembered wishing was not where the kids could see it and smell it. I even saw myself sitting there within a week or two, shuffling the clutter, not to organize it but to personalize it, and most certainly upgrading the computer.

I went out to the playground and wandered around remembering what it was like to be a 19-year-old young man in his outdoor kingdom . . . here is where I had really shined. I looked in the nap area and recalled as though it was yesterday explaining to a three year old why his Down syndrome friend, Jimmy, seemed different than his other friends. I remember as though it was yesterday Jimmy's mom as she tearfully thanked me for so lovingly and honestly negotiating on her son's behalf. I remember as though it was yesterday being puzzled by her reaction; it had never occurred to me to not just tell the child what I knew, in the best way that I could. I hadn't even realized that honesty was optional.

Finally the board was ready; they had been interviewing the candidate before me for over an hour. Time wasted I was sure. Ten minutes later it was apparent that something was not going well. Fifteen minutes later I was thanked for my time and excused. The following day the headhunter that the center had used called and explained that the board felt that I was hiding something; that my *story* of wanting to spend more time with my family, to be a better father, did not ring true. To their credit, they wished me well.

I gave up on something very special that day. I am not sure I am the daddy I

was that summer in Mississippi; once again I have gotten too busy, travel too much.

One thing I know for certain, I am not that mommy that for a brief time my daughter knew me to be.

For fathers to become daddies many things need to happen. We can't do much about many of them, but one thing we can do: if a young man comes through your door, don't be afraid to hire him. He is afraid but courageous; probably alone and unsupported in his desire to work with young children; probably feels very out of place, but wants to feel welcome; is unsure of what he has to offer, but is certain there is something even if he cannot give definition to it. Hire him. Start him on his remarkable journey of discovering what it means to be a man, a father, a daddy. Think of him often after he leaves you to touch the lives of thousands of children, other teachers, and parents. And if he comes back 30 years later feeling exactly the same way — hire him again.