

A Father's Guide to Raising Girls

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When it comes to daughters, when do you stop being a dad? Do you ever stop? I'm a father of three daughters. As of this year, they are all married. But that doesn't stop them from being my daughters. We no longer share last names or mailing addresses, but we share a quarter century or so of daily life. Collectively, we share that life together—all those experiences tie into a family story.

But as kids grow up, they start having their own experiences beyond the family—school, work, friendships, romances, trials, and choices that are their own emerging story. You look back on those years in family together and begin to see them from different viewpoints. What began as a family story becomes the genesis of new personal stories. These personal stories stay linked to the family story as well. And in the middle of that family story is . . .

A dad. That's me.

Sometimes dads who know I have three grown daughters ask me for advice about raising girls. I can get the sense that what they're asking for is something akin to what golf swing coaches do for golfers—provide key tips that can be worked into practice with consistent results. But my parenting journey hasn't been like that (and I don't think anyone's is). Parenting for me has been more like a punt returner who catches a ball, looks up the field for a place to run, and sees nothing but a wall of opposition gunning for him. If I've been

able to stay on my feet for any distance, it's because there is help all around me.

What has that help looked like? My wife's investment in both nurture and example has had an incalculable effect on our girls. And throughout the years I've been the beneficiary of much wise counsel from friends and published resources on parenting. But the greatest help has been knowing that my family has a heavenly Father who is beyond their earthly father and is at work for good even when I've stumbled and fumbled all over the place. This is a relationship and resource we can't earn and can't do without. It comes by free grace—our redemption from sin in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has given us a place in God's family as his beloved children. We trust by faith in the Son, and we receive by faith the care of the Father. In order to carry the weight and do the work of fatherhood, we need to know and trust the care of God our Father for us and our families.

Knowing that my heavenly Father is caring for me has given me confidence that I can be the father my girls needed. When I've cried out for wisdom, I know he has given it freely (James 1:5). When I've been face-to-face with my weakness and limits, I have known his all-sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). Fears, doubts, mistakes—they come with the job of being a dad. What I'm going to share below is not a system of parenting, but some lessons learned on the journey of an ordinary dad in the care of an extraordinary heavenly Father.

1. Ready to be a dad? Impossible but for grace.

To be honest, I was not ready to be a dad. I wasn't resistant to it. Jill and I had made a conscious decision to try to start a family. But during the nine months of our first pregnancy, I wasn't exactly enveloped with fatherly feelings. I did the basic expectant father tasks (which are actually pretty minimal) in a dutiful way. But I was quietly panicking over the actual delivery. I just wanted to survive that ordeal and to be some kind of help to my wife as she did all the real work.

It never quite occurred to me that surviving delivery wasn't the end of the story, and that we'd actually bring a person back with us from the hospital—a little person who had been forming for those previous months next to me every day, but always just out of view. And now here she was—a breathing and moving female person who had a name, a name that we had given her. She was mine, but I didn't know her. I vividly remember a time in those first couple of days when I laid her on the bed and just looked at her. I could swear she was looking at me, sizing me up, though I know all she could see at best was a big dark blob. I started to wonder what she was thinking about the big dad-blob standing over her. I imagined something like this:

Okay, so you're up to this, right? It's pretty obvious by the way you handle me that you have no idea what you're doing. I'm kind of helpless here. I have no control over my

extremities, and my head is half my body weight. Do you know who I am? Do you know what I'm becoming? Do you know how to help me? How to protect me and guide me? I hope you're up to this. After all, I'm here to stay.

And I'm looking back at her and thinking, *Did you come with some kind of user's manual?*

The point is this: maybe some guys flow right into parenthood, but most of us don't. And just when we get adjusted to one kid, there is often another coming into the picture, and then another. I learned in that moment of connection with my first daughter that parenting is about limits. Being a dad to daughters will make you something you are not prepared to be. Nothing in our upbringing prepares us for it. None of our guy instincts are to be trusted. I didn't know how to be a father to my daughter—how to lead her onto a good path, how to protect her from harmful things, how to be the man she could look to as the constant in her life. But isn't this what grace is for—the doing of what we cannot do in our own strength (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12)?

When I became a father to my first daughter, I saw clearly how little I knew—how limited I was in what I could do. But that was a good thing. It forced me to turn to my heavenly Father and ask him for the grace to be a good dad to my little girl. Really this is the best place for all dads to start—daily and consciously trusting your heavenly Father to be just that and to give you the wisdom to be a good dad to your little girl.

2. Teach devotions, but know they must be caught.

Having a regular time of reading the Bible and praying in the morning has always been a challenge for me. The reasons are common—love of sleep, lack of discipline, self-trust, and a history of failed effort. For some reason I decided to conquer the devotional mountain when I had three daughters between the ages of one and five. We had a small house and the only place I could have devotions was our basement den area, which doubled as the playroom. So I chose a blue lounge chair to be my devotional spot. I soon learned that no matter how much I tried, I could never get up early enough to beat my kids to the basement. When I got up, they got up. And once they were up, the goal of devotions had to submit to the necessity of child supervision. I can't tell you how many times I felt that I was on the verge of a great spiritual breakthrough or insight only to be interrupted by a five-year-old trying to force a three-year-old to share with a one-year-old.

One morning I was feeling especially frustrated with God for not letting me have the quiet I felt I needed. And that frustration was bleeding out in impatience with my girls. I was effectively teaching my girls that “whenever Dad meets with God, he gets irritable.” That morning I realized I needed a different approach. It occurred to me (with the nudging of the Holy Spirit)