



By Gordon Dalbey

www.abbafather.com

Effective Single Dads: Overcoming Popular Myths

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It's hard enough being a father when your wife is around to help, but being single makes it even harder. If you're willing to look honestly at your situation, however, and avoid the many popular misconceptions today about being a single dad, you can be a successful father.

In fact, the world rarely includes fathering ability as a standard of success, and you don't often see a man portrayed as a hero for being a dad. Somehow Superman wouldn't look so self-assured with baby spit-up all over his cape!

Let's take a look at some of these myths, and the truth that sets us free to be the dads we—and our children—want us to be.

MYTH # 1 : "Single dads don't matter."

At 41, Steve had been divorced a year and his children were living several hundred miles away with their mother. "My ex-wife and I argue all the time," he told me. "Every time I call, my daughter jumps on the bandwagon and lashes out at me." Wounded, and wondering if his input really mattered, Steve had decided not to call the girl anymore, "until things settle down."

But being a man means taking risks, and following Jesus means being willing to risk pain unto death in order for God to accomplish His purposes in and through you. I therefore encouraged Steve to write a letter to his daughter every Wednesday--nothing too heavy, but being sure to say 'I love you' and showing an interest in her school, friends, and activities.

He balked. "But what if I do that and she's still angry at me?"

"Don't be misled by a child's anger," I told Steve. "Every child longs to be close to Daddy." I also explained that his daughter's anger was a common cover-up for her hurt feelings—which would fade as she found him trustworthy through this painful time. In fact,

the Bible describes Father God's heart for us, His children, with the Hebrew word *hesed*, meaning "persevering love" (Psalm 118:14).

Finally, Steve agreed to follow his heart for the sake of his daughter. After months of weekly letters, she began to open up to him. Steve is now a pastor, and recently—years later--enjoyed the deep satisfaction of performing his daughter's wedding. That's the influence of a loving single father.

Dare to remember as a boy how much you wanted and needed your own dad. Your children want and need you just as much. Get prayer and counseling to resolve any anger or hurt feelings about their mother, and determine to stay connected to your child.

MYTH # 2: "Solo fathers are on their own."

Among men with children under 18 years old, over 9 million fathers do not live with their children and over 2 million live with their children but without a wife, according to director Dr. Ken Canfield of the National Center for Fathering. That's a lot of company for single dads—and a large pool of resources you can draw from.

Many men in your own church are likely single dads. Why not call some of them and get together to talk things over? Feeling like you're the odd man out breeds shame—which goes away when you realize you're all in the same boat. You may want to include married fathers in your discussion to broaden your range of resources.

Sure, reaching out to other men like that takes courage—but isn't that part of being a man? You may hear a voice inside you saying, "But men don't do such things!" And that, of course, is precisely why we get stuck on our own!

MYTH #3: "Single dads can't be real fathers—or real men."

The first step in being an effective dad is to be a real man.

My definition of a "real man" is simple: A real man is a man who's real. He wants to face himself honestly and get on with what God put him on earth to do. As King David cried out, "Search my heart, O God, and find out what wickedness there is within me and lead me in the everlasting way. (Ps. 139: 23,24)"

Unlike David, the media's tough, cool macho character is no real man, but only a fantasy designed to cover up the shame we feel for not measuring up as men. Ultimately, that deception keeps us from facing our need to get real with God and other men.

Almost ten years ago, my wife told me she was pregnant. I was both thrilled and terrified. At my next conference I asked 350 Christian dads, “When you first became a dad, how many of your fathers encouraged and gave you helpful advice with a phone call, visit, or letter?”

Only five hands went up.

I rib skittish new dads by asking, “You got the *How to be a Perfect Father* book at the hospital, didn’t you?” I always get an immediate panicky face—and then, a good laugh together.

If you’re uneasy about being a father, welcome. We’re in this together, and together we can go through it—even enjoy it--if we decide to get real.

Talk with other dads and ask them what they’ve learned. Why waste time and energy reinventing the wheel, when other men have struggled through the same issues and can share with you what they’ve learned? My book, *Healing the Masculine Soul*, can help you to be real. For practical tips, check out S. Adams Sullivan’s *The Father’s Almanac* and The National Center for Fathering website at www.fathers.com.

MYTH # 4: “Being a father is just responsibility and duty.”

Self-doubt seems to come along with fatherhood. *Can I make enough money? With everything else on my schedule, how can I spend enough time with my child? Can I meet my child’s needs?*

First and foremost, Father God wants to overwhelm you with the joy in being a dad. Listen to how He introduced Jesus to the world in Eugene H. Peterson’s translation *The Message* (NavPress):

“This is my son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life” (Matt. 3:17). Father God delights in His child. Do you?

Granted, since a child looks up to you almost as God Himself, the role can seem intimidating. I balked at first. At times, I still do. Amid the pressing duties of fatherhood I need refreshment from life’s Source. God provides just that in our children. *The humble, open child restores our innocence, making us able to receive.* That’s why, for Jesus, the child is the very gateway to the Kingdom of God (Matt. 18:13).

Out in the living room, when I shut down my computer after writing these words, a boy with a twinkle in his eye is waiting to pounce on me like a lion. We’ll roll around on the floor, roaring and

wrestling, tickling each other and laughing ourselves silly. No matter how much the world may dismiss me, to my child I'm the King of the Universe.

The joy of fatherhood is the fountainhead of its tasks. Men who have forgotten this were not enjoyed by their dads.

To not be enjoyed by your father is a terrible loss, perhaps worse than any punishment he could mete out. When a man doesn't enjoy his child, he not only deprives himself of one of life's greatest pleasures, but he communicates to the child, "You're not enjoyable. You're nothing to get excited about, so there's no use in your trying to do anything special or exciting with your life."

Instead of dwelling only on duties and responsibilities, have fun with your kids. Take them to the beach, to an amusement park, the zoo, a natural history museum. Wrestle and fly toy planes with your son; dance and play puppets with your daughter. Let the child restore your joy in life—and let that father's joy in you lead you into knowing how much your Father God delights in you as His child!

MYTH # 5: "Quality time counts more than quantity time."

Of course, for non-custodial dads, not living with your children makes it hard to spend extended time together. And our fast-paced, High-energy society often snuffs out life's simple pleasures and deepest connections. Just as a farmer can't rush fruit to harvest, so real relationships take time to root and grow.

While the popular talk about "quality time" may make you feel better, it won't secure your kids' bond with you. Sure, Disneyland weekends together can be fun. But Mickey Mouse can't heal the hurt from not being with each other during the week.

Don't worry if you can't come up with an exciting plan for the weekend. Whenever possible, spend unstructured, slow-paced time just hanging out with your kids. Go for a walk or read a book together. Sit in front of the fireplace and tell stories about your childhood days. Let your kids help you wash the car or do other everyday tasks. Relaxed quantity times such as these will open your heart to your children, and their hearts to you.

Single dads, you can become effective fathers by not buying into society's self-defeating myths. You matter to your kids. To keep that truth in sight, spend time with your Father "from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth derives its true name" (Ephes. 3:15 NIV footnote). You'll be glad you did. And so will your children.