

Fastbreak For Fathers

a monthly e-mail to help you be the kind of dad your child needs you to be.

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Colorado State University Cooperative Extension

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In this issue: Nurturing Your Child's Conscience

OBSERVATIONS

Several years ago the popular rock band, *Creed*, had a hit single written and sung by Scott Sapp about becoming a father. The verses of the song include:

*Well I just heard the news today
It seems my life is going to change
I closed my eyes, begin to pray
Then tears of joy stream down my face . . .*

*Well I don't know if I'm ready
To be the man I have to be
I'll take a breath, take her by my side
We stand in awe, we've created life . . .*

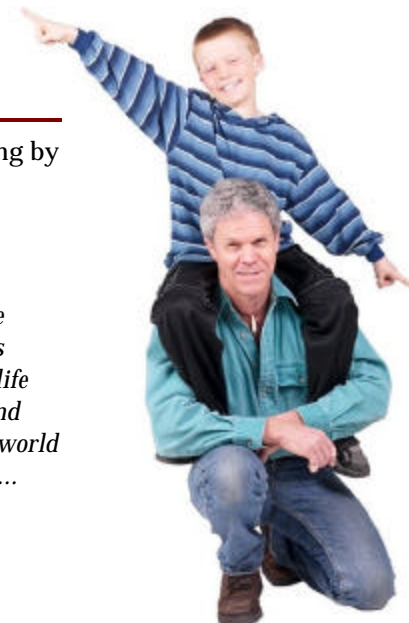
*If I had just one wish
Only one demand
I hope he's not like me
I hope he understands
That he can take this life
And hold it by the hand
And he can greet the world
With arms wide open...*

www.creed.com/video/humanclay.html

If you could wish for one thing for your son or daughter what would you ask for?

Scott Sapp, hopes that his son will embrace life and live it to the fullest at a young age. Charles Shelton, associate professor of psychology at Regis University, wishes that every child under his care would have, above all, "a healthy functioning conscience." Sapp's response may sound more poetic and exciting, but Shelton's response makes good sense.

A healthy conscience was not my first response to the question, but it is foundational to the answer I imagined, and therefore, I've changed my answer! Shelton puts a high priority on nurturing a healthy conscience because he believes it to be the *only* resource any child, adolescent, or adult will *always* have available for resolving moral issues and dilemmas.



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You may not define the issues your child is facing today in terms of morality, but you cannot deny the fact that your child will face moral dilemmas - dilemmas our children are facing at increasingly younger ages.

Charles Smith, professor and extension specialist in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University defines conscience as *an internal voice that obliges us to act in an honorable, caring, and responsible manner and to make things right when we do not.*

Smith believes that each element of his definition emerges during the first years of childhood and that by the time a child begins first grade she can have a conscience appropriate for her age. Barbara Stilwell, lead author of the book, *Right vs. Wrong: Raising a Child with a Conscience*, writes that a child's moral sense surfaces even "before the child has acquired much in the way of language."

More research is needed to understand the links between the parent-child relationship and conscience, however foundational to the development of a healthy conscience is a close relationship with at least one person who by their care, love and attention communicates what it means to love and be loved.

Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich once said, "Morality is not a subject; it is a life put to the test in dozens of moments." For our children, those moments begin sooner than most of us imagine. It is never too early to nurture the development of your child's conscience *and* together embrace life to the fullest!

IDEAS

Smith, in his parent education course, *Nurturing Conscience in Children*, identifies the following skills for parents to practice:

- **Use victim-centered reasoning with your child** – "Look Chloe, see the tears in Pam's eyes? You were upset with her and decided to pinch her. That pinch really hurt her . . ." Victim-centered reasoning confronts children with how their behavior affects others.
- **Make pro-social attributions to your child's behavior** – "Maggie, that was a kind thing to do. You are growing up to be a person who really cares about others. See the smile you put on your brother's face?" Relating your child's kind behavior, for example, to what they think of themselves nurtures a belief in their own kindness.
- **Hold your child accountable for their actions** – Children need to understand that they made a choice that had harmful consequences and that it is important to do their best to make up for this wrong.
- **Show pride in your child's courageous choices** – Celebrating your child's thoughtful and courageous choices strengthens character. Every child needs a champion.
- **Affirm self-worth when focusing on misbehavior** – Express sadness and disappointment with your child's choice while avoiding judgment about his worth as a person.
- **Be an example of integrity and courage** – Honorable parents nurture honorable children.



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- **Make your children a priority** – All children need to experience unconditional bonds of affection.
- **Be in tune with your child emotionally** – Being in synch with your child's emotions communicates understanding.
- **Encourage thinking during strong emotions** – Strong emotions can shut down thinking, yet you can help your child calm himself and think when feeling angry. Children can learn to SAT (Stop And Think) then ACT (Accept, Choose, Take responsibility) by the time they are 5-years-old. This early fundamental learning will become more advanced with age. For this foundation to be built, parents have to gently encourage reflective thinking.



For more insights and resources on parenting from Dr. Smith visit his website at:
www.ksu.edu/wwparent/wondhome.htm

RESOURCES

Charles Shelton, *Achieving Moral Health: An Exercise Plan for Your Conscience* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000) a great resource that will help you nurture not only your child's but also your own moral health.

Barbara Stillwell, Matthew Galvin & Stephen Kopta, *Right vs. Wrong: Raising a Child with a Conscience: How to teach children to pursue goodness in a morally confusing world.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) three child-rearing experts offer useful advice for nurturing a sense of right and wrong in children and adolescents. Written for parents, guardians, and all who work with young people, this book charts the growth of the sense of right and wrong in children from early youth through the teenage years.

Charles A. Smith, *Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2004) Smith shows parents how to nurture the virtue of everyday courage in children. A website specifically designed for the book includes downloadable study guides, an online course, additional handouts and even a game you can play with your children to help bring home the concepts.
www.raisingcourageouskids.com

Harriet Heath, *Using Your Values to Raise Your Child to Be an Adult You Admire* (Seattle: Parenting Press, 2000) Heath has written an excellent resource that helps parents to identify their personal values and then make childrearing decisions based on those values, their child's temperament and learning styles. www.parentingpress.com

RESEARCH

Marvin Berkowitz & John Grych, *Fostering Goodness: Teaching Parents to Facilitate Children's Moral Development.* (Copyright © 1998, Berkowitz and Grych) available online at
<http://tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/articles/berkowitzfostering.html>

Although somewhat dated, this paper provides a helpful overview of the components of a moral child and the parenting behaviors that foster or impede their development. The authors explain the importance of five core parenting strategies for moral development: induction, nurturing and support, demandingness, modeling, and democratic family decision-making and discussion.

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CONNECTIONS (Metro Denver)

Sky Ridge Dads – (Sky Ridge Medical Center) Four-week course for dads of infants up to eight months. Next session begins January 10. Call 720.225.2229 for more information and to register. Downloadable brochure available at: http://www.skyridgemedcenter.com/cpm/SRMC_Dads.pdf

Father Fraternity – (Parker Adventist Hospital) Four-week course for dads of infants up to eight months. Next session begins January 6. Call 303.269.4390 for more information and to register.

Connecting with your Kid: Becoming the father your child needs you to be. – (Douglas County School District) For dads of school age children K – 12. Thursday evenings February 3, 10, 17, 24, 2005

- What impact do you have on your children?
- How do you discover the unique needs of your child?
- How do you become the kind of dad your child needs you to be?

These are the kinds of questions you will find answers to in *Connecting With Your Kids*. Participants will interact with four key practices of fathering and will receive direct feedback on their fathering strengths and weaknesses based on a fathering profile of best practices developed by the National Center for Fathering. Maximum class size: 50, Cost: \$30.00. Register by calling 303.387.0128.

All of the above opportunities are taught and facilitated by Rich Batten. Rich is the father of four and has masters degrees in both family studies and theology. He is a Certified Instructor for the National Center for Fathering and is certified as a Family Life Educator by the National Council on Family Relations.

“You can’t be the kind of dad that you want to be. You can’t be the kind of dad that you wanted to have. You’ve got to be the kind of dad that your child needs you to be.”

- Roland Warren, The National Fatherhood Initiative

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Fastbreak for Fathers is a publication of the *Douglas County FatherWork Connection*, a countywide, research-based, fathering education and advocacy initiative committed to increasing the probability of every child in Douglas County Colorado being intimately connected to an involved, responsible and loving father or father figure.

**The Douglas County FatherWork Connection is facilitated by
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