



Changing Lives, Minds, and
Communities through Jesus Christ

Becoming a Better Father

by Ken Howard

I know what it's like to be fatherless.

At age five I joined the more than 25 million children living in a home without their biological father in the house—that's over 40 percent of America's families. When fathers leave home their children become vulnerable to numerous social, psychological, and legal issues. Children coming from a home with no father are five times more likely to suffer from poverty, get involved in drugs and alcohol, drop out of school, suffer emotional and health problems, commit a crime, get pregnant, or become a teenage father. The negative effects of fatherlessness are real and devastating.

What can be equally devastating is to ignore the effects that your father's fathering has had on you. Many men and women who have come from painful and damaging fathering situations often swear that they will never do to their children what their fathers did to them. But unless that declaration has action to drive it, it is little more than an empty wish.

Teaching all the time

The reality of father/child teaching is that few fathers set out on a daily basis to teach their children—and few children set out to learn new things from their fathers. But teaching and learning are happening all the time. Every time children watch their father talk to a waitress with kindness, yell at or hit their mother in anger, drink to excess because of a "hard day at work," or stand up for someone because it is the right thing to do, they're learning what a man looks like. After a lifetime of this kind of teaching, it defines what they become as adults. And that's not always healthy or good.

As adults we need to take stock of our lives and see what's been coming down those family lines. As grown men, we need to keep the tools that make us good fathers and throw away the bad.

Tools for better fathers

There are several ways to get those new tools. First, prayer. Calling on our Heavenly Father to show us our fathering wounds is a great place to start. He is the perfect Father and loved us with a perfect love before we were even born. Invite Him into this process and watch the Lord respond! Then we can pray for opportunities to talk to others about their mistakes and successes.

Most of us struggle with isolation. We need to be in relationship with older men who can share their years of hard-won wisdom and can save us years of mistakes. We need to be in relationship with men our age to sharpen us and hold us accountable as warriors on this journey of manhood. We need to be in relationship with younger men to offer them our wisdom and perspective. All of this requires that we be open and transparent to the Lord, who is working through people to shape us, and who is working through us to do the same for others.

A personal story

Unfortunately, I was one of those statistics I mentioned. The pain I carried in my heart because my father left became unbearable, and I used drugs and alcohol to temporarily dull that ache. I rushed headlong into that lifestyle to medicate the hurt. No one showed me that there were better ways to deal with pain. I rejected anything requiring me to turn inward and engage myself. The pain was too great. The drug use led to drug deals and three years in prison, which ended my military career, my medical career, and all I'd worked for.

But a guy in county jail shared the Gospel with me and in 30 seconds changed the course of my life. Coming to have a relationship with the Lord changed everything in my life, and I began to see things I'd never seen before. During visitation I noticed how kids waiting for their fathers would

look with excitement as the door opened, hoping each time it would be their father. It was a beautiful thing to see the fathers who lovingly connected with their children. It was tragic to see a father barely notice his child because he was having an argument with the child's mother. It was in those waiting rooms that I began to understand a father's unique power in the life of his child.

Children need their fathers to be Involved, Consistent, Aware, and Nurturing. These are the overarching fathering principals that the National Center for Fathering has developed that we call the ICAN's of fathering. Every man should develop these areas in his life.

There are many ways you can begin to fill in the gaps in your fathering. If you're incarcerated, you may have many books on the subject at your disposal. Encourage friends or family members on the outside to go to www.fathers.com and register for the free weekly e-mail for fathers. Ask them to copy it off every Friday and send it to you. While on the website, they can click on the resource page and consider ordering books that will fit your stage of life.

I know what it's like to be fatherless, but now my father and I have reconciled. I now know the power of having my father in my life. Many would have thought it was too late for a 37-year-old son and a 65-year-old father to grow close, learn to communicate, and forgive each other. God is a God of second chances, not only concerning sin but also in teaching us to be better fathers.

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