

101 Things Great Dads Do

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*To my dad,
my sons,
and my grandsons*

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Preface

I wrote this book just for you.

Of course, no two dads are alike. We all have different talents, experiences, foibles, and frustrations. But without a doubt, quite a few of these 101 ideas and strategies will apply *exactly* to your current life situation.

Especially if you're a dad with more than one kid, because each child is different and requires a unique combination of love, comfort, nudges, and connecting points.

Especially if you're a dad with pretty good kids, because you can't just go on cruise control when they're doing fine. You need to be intentional about pouring into their lives.

Especially if you're having a tough time connecting as a dad. These pages just might hold a single secret that makes all the difference in the world for your son or daughter.

Especially if you're a new dad. For obvious reasons, the earlier you start thinking about your role as a dad, the better.

Especially if you're an across-town dad, because you need to make the most of every minute you have with those kids you love so much.

Especially if you're a busy single dad, because there are shortcuts, hacks, and smiles in these pages you can use today. And mercifully, the chapters are short.

Especially if you're a granddad looking back on your days as a young father and wondering if you did okay. The answer is yes. Because all we can do is our best. Plus, you'll be reassured when you come across things you *did* do!

Since I began writing to dads more than a decade ago, several amazing and encouraging things have happened.

Statistically, fathers across the country are spending more time than

ever with their children. Also, more organizations are making new efforts to encourage fathers in their journey.

Personally, I've had the privilege of speaking to thousands of men on the topic of fathering at Iron Sharpens Iron conferences and a variety of events sponsored by churches, businesses, service clubs, prisons, the Salvation Army, the US military, and others.

Beyond live speaking events, I've been interviewed on scores of radio and television programs on the topic of fatherhood and family relationships, including multiple appearances on *Focus on the Family*, *The Harvest Show*, and *100 Huntley Street*.

Perhaps most notably, since the release of my bestselling book *52 Things Kids Need from a Dad*, I've written more than a dozen books on family relationships with sales of more than half a million books.

Finally, I've watched three of my sons become dads. And that has been one of the most soul-satisfying experiences in my life.

My sons are great dads. In many ways, they don't need me anymore. At the same time, my grandkids have given me more reason than ever to live abundantly. Plus, watching my own sons and daughters-in-law, I am learning new strategies about the whys, hows, and wherefores of parenting.

This book is a culmination of all of the above. Talking with dads across the country during weekend events. Learning from other fathering experts at CoMission rallies. Testifying in Washington, DC at a summit on responsible fathering. Bonus insight from men who have overcome their struggles as fathers. Fresh lessons learned through my own growing family.

In these pages, we'll revisit and expand on some truths previously published. We'll apply some old truths to challenges your parents never faced, especially regarding technology and screen time.

These *101 Things Great Dads Do* are certainly not my last writing on the topic. But the book does cover just about everything I've uncovered over the years. Let's call it "the best of the best."

So. Dad. Get ready to do stuff that only you can do. Like skip rocks, chat over waffles, explain syzygy, be a sparring partner, do prayable moments, make stilts, laugh over spilled milk, splurge, and wake your kid for a lunar eclipse.

Stop and Catch the Fireflies

I thank my God every time I remember you.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3

A friend of mine told me his favorite memory growing up. He was eight or nine. His dad was a hardworking businessman. Three-piece suit. Wingtip shoes. Always coming or going on an important business trip. My friend vividly remembers driving with him on a two-lane country road at twilight. Suddenly, his father pulls off onto the shoulder and jumps out of the car. He opens the trunk, grabs a clean glass jar, and knocks on the passenger window, motioning his son to follow him out into the grassy field. To catch lightning bugs.

They poked some holes in the jar lid and threw in some grass. (Why do we do that?) They captured maybe six or eight of the flashing insects. Ten minutes later that father and son were back in the car with muddy sneakers and wingtips.

Please note, this wasn't a week at Disney World or a ski trip to Aspen. Still, that brief side-of-the-road adventure created a huge, lasting memory for my friend.

These days, entomologists tell us there are fewer fireflies. Conservationists would discourage us from interfering with the mating rituals of insects and, at the very least, practice catch and release. A child psychologist might suggest we not traumatize our children with spontaneous evening activities in unfamiliar locations.

Too bad. Because as we create this list of 101 things for great dads to do, this one might be at the very top. Take it literally. Or take it as a metaphor. Dad...stop and catch the fireflies.

Buy a Unicycle

Test everything; hold fast what is good.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:21 ESV

A unicycle is hanging in my garage. It's never been ridden. And that's okay.

We bought it for Randy's ninth birthday. He tried it. His brothers and sister tried it. Neighbors and friends tried it. It turns out that riding a unicycle is one of those things that requires a significant choice. A potential unicycle rider needs to either invest many, many hours...or not. A dad can't make that kind of decision. It's up to the individual.

Of course, you should never make your child feel bad for not achieving something that may not even be possible. You can't look at a boy or girl and tell whether they have the mental gyroscope required to balance and pedal a unicycle.

As a matter of fact, the chance that your child will master the one-wheeled beast is pretty slim. So why would I make such a suggestion? Because our job as dads is to open doors for our kids. To give them a chance to try new things. Art. Athletics. Music. Astronomy. Physics. Stand-up comedy. Poetry. Chess. Photography. Computer programming. Podcasting. Blogging. Culinary arts. Horseback riding. Spelling. Storytelling. Pyrotechnics. Dance. Filmmaking. Or maybe unicycle riding.

If you see a spark of interest, invest a bit more time and money. Open the door a little wider and let your kids give their new hobby a try under your watchful guidance. Maybe right in your driveway. They may test it and say no thanks. Or they may master a new skill and run off and join the circus. Which, again, is really okay. Right?

Play Kick the Can, Red Rover, Spud, Dodgeball, Capture the Flag, or Hide-and-Seek

The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.

ZECHARIAH 8:5

Want your kids to put down their screens? Well, you could yell at them: “Go outside and play!” That always works, right? You could bribe them with cash or baked goods. That’s also probably not the best habit to get into. You could set up an intricate schedule for iPad, smartphone, and gaming device usage, exchanging chores for minutes and requiring them to be outside in the fresh air for 45 minutes for every hour of screen time. But who’s really going to track that timetable?

A more viable alternative is to stimulate innovative outdoor activities. Anything to get them out into the sunshine, engage their imagination, or elevate their heart rate. Consider bubble wands, hula hoops, sidewalk chalk, a swing set, a wading pool, or a basketball hoop. Frisbees, Wiffle Balls, bikes, trikes, skateboards, street hockey goals and gear. Nerf toys, ring toss, squirt guns, water balloons, wagons, doll strollers, butterfly nets, a playhouse, a tree house, and so on. (Please don’t turn them loose with lawn darts, hoverboards, or firecrackers.)

Toss a fresh can of tennis balls to your couch-potato kids. Sign them up for a charity bike ride or church-sponsored work crew to do chores for the elderly or shut-ins. See what the local park district offers for the upcoming season. Anything to get them to stop staring at screens, right?

Well, how about this? The best replacement for screen time is dad

time. Whatever game you played as a kid, teach it to *your* kids. And the *neighborhood* kids. Join the fun. Just make sure you're on the winning team.

Repeat after me, "Olly olly oxen free!" Or something like that.

Trigger Traditions

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:15 ESV

As kids get older, you'll experience busy seasons of life during which family members head off in all different directions. One of God's great inventions for reuniting scattered families is the tradition.

You can usually count on the youngest members of your family to remember traditions. But it's pretty much up to Dad to keep them. You're the one who sees the bigger picture and has the authority to put everything else on hold and make sure the family comes together to do something "we always do."

Of course, as the calendar turns, holidays bring their own traditions. Easter egg hunts. Your favorite spot for watching fireworks. Visiting the same pumpkin patch year after year. Green bean casserole. Neighborhood caroling.

Then there's an entire array of traditions that are not on your calendar, but happen anyway. You don't even have to think about them, and they require no preparation. You know the triggers:

- The first nice weekend of summer triggers a family bike ride.
- The first snowfall of the year that has "good packing" triggers a family snowman contest. (Or snowball fight.)
- Your local high school presents their annual musical, so you order tickets for the Sunday matinee.
- The park district holds a ribbon cutting at a new

playground, and your kids are first in line to try the new curvy slide and climbing ropes.

- Shamrock Shakes come out at McDonald's, so you make a family dessert run.
- The church across town holds their live nativity scene, so you bundle up the kids and go.
- The zoo announces a new baby giraffe or lion cub, which means your family will be one of the first in line to see the little cutie.

Hot-air balloon launches, classic car shows, harvest festivals, music performances in the park, homecoming football games, and other activities that show up in the local newspaper or social media feed all might fall into this category.

As hard as you might try, I'm not sure even a great dad can orchestrate these kinds of family traditions. True traditions evolve spontaneously. So be warned. To a kid, if you do something just twice, they expect it to become a time-honored, unwritten law set in stone. As my daughter, Rae Anne, said years ago insisting we stop for cones at an ice-cream store near the bike trail, "We have to stop here. It's a tradition!" And, you know what? We had stopped there only two other times, but she was absolutely right.

Give Noogies

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

EPHESIANS 1:5 NLT

One of the great privileges of fatherhood is roughhousing a bit with the kids. The joy of being a dad should overflow into making physical connections with sons and daughters at every age and stage.

When they're babies, burble their tummies and squeeze their toes. Toddlers need to be rassled and tumbled. Horseyback rides work too. During grade school, make sure they get an equal dose of hugs, tickles, and noogies. That leads right into other physical contact as they mature, including dancing with your daughter and modeling a good, firm, respectful handshake. For the record, all kids—if they choose—should be able to sit in their dad's lap anytime.

Noogies, tickles, and tummy burbles can be grand traditions to begin each day, to welcome Daddy home, or at bedtime. Ask four-year-olds if they've had their noogies today. If they say no, then you have the responsibility to rescue them from their noogie-less condition. If they say yes, then you have two choices. Give them an advance dose of noogies for tomorrow. Or simply say, "Thank goodness, because I'm all out. Do you have any noogies you can spare?" Then watch out.

When it comes to noogies, bear hugs, and so on, we're not talking about abuse. Just the opposite! As a matter of fact, healthy physical contact between dads and kids helps build protection against unhealthy physical contact with those who might harm your precious kids.

Teach Stuff Before They Learn It in School

*Walk with the wise and become wise,
for a companion of fools suffers harm.*

PROVERBS 13:20

Want to set your child up for success in the classroom? It's easier than you think. Find out what your school district is teaching your kids a year from now, and *you* teach it to them now.

Suddenly—before anyone else in the class—your son or daughter has a head start on topics like opposites, multiplication, centripetal force, the three states of matter, the seven continents, suffixes and prefixes, adjectives and adverbs, the Magna Carta, the Mason-Dixon Line, photosynthesis, Venn diagrams, and anything else you come up with that might be on the school district syllabus for the upcoming year.

Moms have been doing this for years. They get their preschoolers ready for kindergarten by teaching them numbers, colors, animal names, and even some phonics. But after formal education begins, most parents lose track of what's coming up in the next school year. Rather than anticipating, parents simply respond to the daily homework that the entire class is doing.

I know this idea is a bit of a con game. Your kid may or may not actually be any smarter than the other kids. But really, isn't this just another way of helping your child become a lifelong learner? And it's not a bad thing if their teacher and the classmates look at your son or daughter as a leader and scholar. Everyone in that classroom—including your own child—will have heightened expectations for their performance.

Funny thing about expectations. They tend to come true.