

When we go camping, we go for a walk every night and I talk to them about the universe, the wonders of nature, what's out there and the mysteries of life.

I teach them respect for education, knowledge and discovery all the time.

Peter LeSouef – Professor of Paediatrics, Subiaco

Chapter 6

Helping a Girl become interested in Learning

“A daughter’s attitude to learning is strongly influenced by her father”

CHAPTER TOPICS

- Why it is important for dads and father-figures to be involved in a girl’s learning
- How to encourage a girl’s interest in learning
- Stimulating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Teaching and discussing values and beliefs

Why it is important for dads and father-figures to be involved in a girl's learning

Failure to learn can possibly lead to unemployment and a life lacking in self-confidence. It is important to create an atmosphere of interest in and support of a child's learning and curiosity.

Kids today will enter a tough world where there are many applicants for every job and mum or dad won't be able to get them that job. The youth unemployment rates for Australia, the European Union and the USA are all around 15-20%¹⁻³ and there may be 20 applicants, sometimes hundreds, for each job.⁴ Educational failure leading to unemployment puts our children at the mercy of the down side of unemployment, e.g. loss of self esteem, depression, income failure and long term loss of employability.⁵

A father or father-figure can stimulate a girl's interest in learning, whether that is learning at school or about life, people and values.^{1,2} If she lacks interest in learning it could affect her chances of getting a job. A lack of curiosity and basic problem-solving skills could make life boring and render her reliant upon others in life.

Girls do better at school if they have a supportive father.⁸⁻¹³ In a study of over 1500 families, girls with fathers who were engaged in their lives achieved higher levels of education.¹⁴

This does not just apply to talented children but to children with learning difficulties as well – they do better in their learning and attain higher achievement levels if fathers are involved in their learning.²⁵

One-on-one teaching is almost always more effective than teaching that occurs in traditional classrooms. Therefore, even if you are working long hours, you will have many more hours to teach her one-on-one than her schoolteachers. This is probably true even if you don't live in the same house as her – her schoolteachers just don't have that much time for individual teaching.

Some tips for fathers and father-figures to encourage a girl's learning

Maintain a positive attitude to her school

- show her that you place a high value on her education
- value, respect and *thank* her teachers and the school
- don't condone disrespect for the buildings of the school
- attend events like orientation days and busy bees
- volunteer for canteen duties
- don't condone school bullying (girls can be bullies too!)
- encourage other dads at the school to become involved in activities



Recently I helped organise a father-daughter camp for her class and 40 of the 60 dads joined in. It was terrific.

Rocky Zamin – company director, Cottesloe



Maintain a positive attitude to her learning

- focus on her attitude to learning, and the progress she is making, not just results
- don't compare her to other girls
- if she is not academically gifted, show her you believe in her; she will be talented in something and you can find out what that is and encourage her accordingly
- appreciate that there are different intelligences⁴ and acknowledge her intelligence(s)
- overcome the inner urge to see your children as potentially fulfilling your needs for affirmation
- remember that she is not studying just to become *your* ticket to 'bragging rights'

Be willing to help her learn

- help her with her homework
- help her set regular homework periods
- assist her when she is struggling
- help her develop good study habits - don't just nag (a list of helpful study habits is included on the book's website)

Stimulating her curiosity

I often hear complaints from parents that their children seem bored and lack any curiosity. Developing curiosity is not the same as doing schoolwork and learning facts. Kids can learn facts at school without being particularly curious.

Part of this lack of curiosity relates to modern culture where our children seem to be given little encouragement in life to develop curiosity. Children need freedom and encouragement to develop curiosity.



Kids are naturally curious and you have to be careful not to squash that. You've got to learn to draw their thoughts out.

The key is to not have all the answers but to stimulate questions.

*Gay Crooks – paediatric cancer specialist & scientist,
Los Angeles*



Fathers and father-figures can really help stimulate a girl's curiosity, even just by the way they play with her.¹¹⁻¹³

Some specific tips to stimulate curiosity*Some things to do*

- take her to the museum
- take her to the local community library
- help her to become interested in nature, world events and interesting people

- help her with school projects
- help her think 'out of the box' with those projects
- involve her in what you are reading, watching or doing
- explore the internet with her
- encourage reading, e.g. 'FART time' = 'Family Altogether Reading Time'

Some things not to do

- don't over-organise her life
- don't just complain about lack of curiosity, take her on 'journeys of curiosity' with you
- don't let her watch unrestricted television – it limits imagination

Responding during everyday life

- encourage imagination
- stimulate new ways of thinking whilst travelling, watching the news or performing tasks
- don't provide the answers to questions but encourage her to find the answers
- direct her to the place where answers might be found
- encourage open-mindedness and life-long learning
- teach her to question dogmatic statements
- teach her how to be a problem solver

Learning about values and beliefs

Our values in life (such as honesty, community service) are different from what we believe (e.g. Christianity, atheism, Islam) but together they provide us with most of our sense of meaning and confidence in life.¹⁹⁻²¹

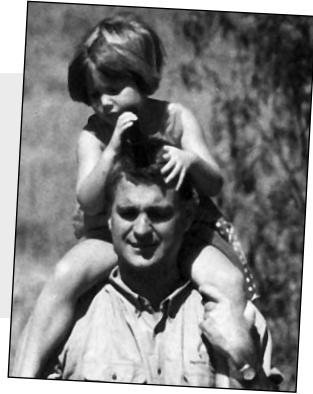
Values and beliefs are generally 'taught and caught' from adults, especially parents. Fathers and father-figures are some of the strongest voices in establishing values and beliefs.²²

Fathers and father-figures are some of the strongest voices in establishing values and beliefs

Values

It's okay to push your world view on the kids - there are so many competing views out there and everyone is pushing their world views strongly so you've got to get in there and have the first shot.

John Anderson – farmer, Deputy Prime Minister of Australia



Having a solid set of values is a great foundation in life – kids who do not have them are often a bit lost, drifting around in a sea without solid islands as reference points.

There is ample evidence that the media has a powerful effect on children's values and attitudes, particularly adolescents.²³ But it has also been shown that parents can be powerful modulators of the effects of media, even by something as simple as sitting and watching the media with children.²³

Fathers are strong influencers of values.²² For example, fathers can be effective at balancing the media portrayal of gender roles, racism, attitudes to the poor, performance-driven and novel first encounter sex,^{24,25} and the peer reinforcement of such values.²⁶ And we need to be intentional about trying to balance those forces.

If you want your daughter to have strong values such as honesty, kindness, care for the helpless, integrity and compassion you will have to choose to be involved in teaching her those values. Don't assume that the school will teach values to your children. Lack of values can lead to unfulfilling and risky behaviour and, in its worst form, to crime and jail.

Parents need to share the responsibility of helping teach social values and morality. You can't abdicate your responsibility and expect schoolteachers to do it all.

Kuan Tang – nurse, Leederville

Here are some tips on teaching values:

- be *specific* about values like trust, honesty, integrity, respect and racism
- don't rely on TV, movies, internet, magazines or peers to teach her values
- be generous and kind yourself to those in need
- teach them to accept people who are different, e.g. kids who are disabled, obese or 'uncool'
- develop their conscience about issues like bullying and abusers
- don't leave them in a 'values vacuum'
- look for incidental, teachable moments



If the other person isn't laughing then it isn't funny.

Dorothy Tribe – teacher, Nedlands

An example of how values are powerfully taught by modelling comes from my late father. A key example of this is not one of his higher profile community activities but a project he started 'to get kids off the streets'.

He formed a committee of young people from our working class neighbourhood to run a dance in a local community hall and to learn responsibility and leadership skills. It was a great success. It epitomised my dad's desire to undertake community service to help young people.

One night a carload of drunken young men tried to force their way into the dance hall. They tried to pull Dad outside to beat him up but he put his hands on each side of the door and dug his heels in. They tore his shirt to pieces. My sister was screaming.

He was not a churchgoer and had some problems in life at times with alcohol, illness and depression. I am intrigued to think of where his values came from. But he certainly modelled plenty of strong values for his three children. I probably wouldn't be writing this book but for him and I thank him for his example.

Beliefs

Beliefs, can be a touchy subject and I do not wish to offend anyone. But we do need to discuss beliefs with our kids because a) beliefs are important components of all aspects of society such as law, social services, moral values and education²⁷ and b) beliefs can have either positive or negative effects on life.

We all believe in something (atheism is a belief too), and our beliefs determine what we personally think is the nature and purpose of life and what we think is right or wrong. This is sometimes referred to as the 'spirituality' that we all have. We therefore shouldn't leave a vacuum in our kids' thinking when it comes to belief.

Beliefs in children have been shown to be powerfully influenced by fathers,²⁸⁻³⁰ including the interpretation of media portrayals of beliefs.³¹ Fathers can also turn kids off belief systems altogether.³²

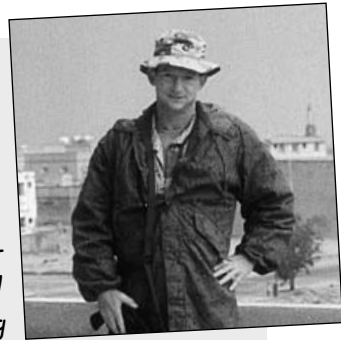
Beliefs in children have been shown to be powerfully influenced by fathers

Failure to discuss beliefs and religion can leave kids feeling like they have been let down.

My father rejected his Catholicism and remained indifferent to spiritual things and I ended up the same.

There are times when I should have sought spiritual insight, but it never crossed my mind. I think I missed out and I think also that I missed out on developing that part of my own child's thinking.

Fathers should encourage their children to develop their own spirituality. If not, it leaves a void. They should encourage them to at least think about it.



Jimmy Hart – US marine, Gulf War veteran, New York

A strong belief system can be a platform for early life. Kids might change their views as they mature, but a foundation is important.

Children need a platform of spirituality in their life. They can then grow from that platform and develop their own spirituality, their own beliefs and values in their own time.

But without that platform it is really hard for them - they don't have anything to build on.

Keith McAdam – tropical medicine researcher, Kampala

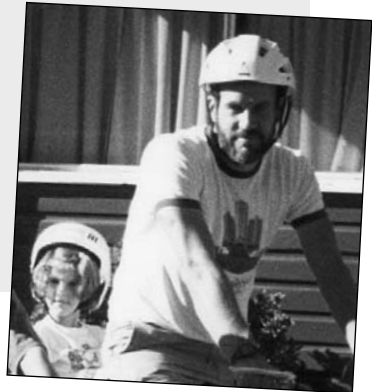
As with values, young children will tend to pick up aspects of their parents own particular belief system. Atheists tend to beget atheists, Baptists beget Baptists and Hindus beget Hindus.

This doesn't always happen, but most commonly it occurs because parents are powerful forces in shaping a child's early beliefs. And children's opinions will be strongly influenced by what you say and how you live out your beliefs.

I am an atheist, although recently Tim has challenged me on that - he thinks my position should be agnostic.

I guess I've passed that atheism on to the kids a bit because kids always tend to follow their parent's beliefs.

*Peter LeSouef – Professor of Paediatrics,
Subiaco*



I used to go hunting with my father. We always talked on those trips.

He was a different man out there when we hunted. There was a closeness, a oneness and a comradeship that wasn't quite the same at home.

These experiences were so powerful that it made me want to be like him.

I wanted his thoughts to be mine, his values to be mine and his God to be mine.

James Dobson – psychologist, author, founder of Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs

Potential positive effects of faith in families

Religion in a family can have measurable positive outcomes. There are beneficial effects of a religious culture on girls, both because of the values taught and the close community in which they are taught and feel they belong. A study of 30 000 girls demonstrated that if they are in religious environments they have reduced risk of suicide, delinquency, drugs and risky sexual activity.³³ Of course these beneficial effects are found in several religious traditions and therefore they cannot define those religions as being true, just as being helpful. A lot of those benefits are derived from the promotion of strong values and a lot from the believing community.

When we lived in Philadelphia we had a lot of exposure to Jewish communities and we noticed how cohesive that type of community was for families.

We are not Jewish, so we decided to attend an Anglican Church in Philadelphia and this for a while did provide just the sort of community that our children needed.



Peter Doherty – Nobel Laureate, Memphis and Melbourne

Understanding the potential effects of religion on families is relevant to those with and without a faith. They are presented here so that the reader can be aware of them, ask if they apply to his or her life and avoid the negative ones.

Some of the potential positive effects of beliefs in a family can be:

- a strong community to share the load of bringing up children and providing a sense of belonging
- a practised openness to admitting mistakes ('confession')
- a practised openness to change ('repentance')
- exposure to lots of educational information and workshops on relationships and family life
- strong values and morality passed on to daughters
- a sense of purpose in life
- frequent reminders about the importance of unconditional love and specialness
- servant leadership, rather than authoritarian leadership, by fathers
- marriage enrichment opportunities
- the potential to use God as a role model of a loving father, especially in the absence of any other role model



I had no strong father role models myself so I learnt by reading the Bible to find out what was required of me.

I learnt about what a loving father is by learning about God's character, particularly his unconditional love for me.

Harley Hayward – Aboriginal pastor, Balga

This is only a *potential* list - not all beliefs embrace all of these things, especially unconditional love, specialness and servanthood.

Potential negative things about faith in families

Religion in a family can also produce negative effects on children, ranging from excessive guilt to racism. It all depends upon what is taught and how that is worked out in the life of that family.

Some of those negative effects could be:

- oppressive rules of behaviour that can induce rebellion
- a heavy burden of expectation that restricts the personal freedom of children to grow into responsible individuals
- use of religious laws to discipline children, which can induce excessive guilt and fear
- inappropriate use of faith as an avoidance strategy by fathers and father-figures (e.g. having faith that God will protect a girl from absent fathering instead of just spending time with her)
- dogmatism and fanaticism that can be absorbed by daughters
- using God as an excuse to be a judgemental, policeman-type father or father-figure
- excessive focus on trivial issues
- restricted roles for women in some situations
- a closed community, which makes kids scared of the 'real world' and vulnerable when they enter it
- rigid feelings of authoritative certainty producing inflexible fathering
- an unnecessary fear of psychology and science
- absentee fathers who are busy working for a 'higher calling'



This is a difficult subject for me to write about. I was too busy preaching all over the world. Only Ruth and the children can tell what those extended times of separation meant to them.

I missed so much by not being home to see the children grow and develop.

Billy Graham – Evangelist³⁴



He was our daddy. I was glad to let him go. We knew he was working for God.

But we were raised by a single parent.

When your daddy spends more time with his secretary or reporters than he does with you, that hurts.

Ann Graham Lotz – daughter of Billy Graham³⁵

My approach

I am a scientist who is trained to always examine the evidence and arguments with an open mind. This creates a conflict in my mind and possibly in yours, when it comes to what we want our children to believe. I know many parents who agonise over their children's beliefs, and how to influence those beliefs.

Because it is easier for kids to rebel against dogmatic parental views than against rational, fair arguments from an open-minded parent, I encourage my kids to think things through for themselves. For example my son Simon once asked me, when he was about eight years old, "Dad, our school is going to hear the Dalai Lama speak today. Is he on our side,

It is easier for kids to rebel against dogmatic parental views than against rational, fair arguments

Dad?" I told him that it was up to him to decide what he thought after he heard him speak, and that he had to make up his own mind about the Dalai Lama, and everything else, not have me make up his mind for him. I said I would talk to him afterwards about it. He pestered me about it but I kept telling him the same thing. And he has made up his own mind about what he thinks in life.

I think my own personal beliefs are built on a strong and defensible position that does not need to retreat behind a wall of dogma, so I have tried to talk with my children in a way that encourages them to not be afraid to examine other views for themselves. This is not a postmodern view that all other views are equally valid, it is an encouragement to examine all views with an open mind and decide which views they consider to be true.

This idea won't please some parents because it will create a fear that their children, having examined other ways of thinking, might choose one of them. But I think the opposite generally applies – many children of dogmatic parents have rejected utterly and permanently the belief system of their parents because those beliefs have been pushed on them without a rational basis and without them feeling that they have any real choice (i.e. 'believe, or else'). In contrast, where children see that their parents beliefs are based on a solid foundation and that their parents live out those beliefs congruently, and that their lives are enriched by it, it is harder to reject them.

I know that if I don't encourage my children to find things out for themselves they might either cling resolutely to dogma or spend their lives living in reaction to it, neither of which is healthy, intellectually honest or a solid foundation for life.

Kids might either cling resolutely to dogma or spend their lives living in reaction to it

That is just my approach and that of some of my friends, but I know others will have other approaches to this issue.

My own Christian faith has certainly helped me by exposing me to fathering information, helping me overcome my reluctance to admit my mistakes and to apologise for them. It has also exposed me to great dads who have become close friends and taught me how to be a better dad by words and actions. I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge that. I hate to think where my personal drive and selfishness could otherwise have taken me.

But this discussion is not about a dad's beliefs, mine or yours, it is only really about our kids. I am suggesting that we ought not to encourage dogmatic views about religious beliefs, for or against them, but reasoned views based on evidence and rationality. That is a much stronger foundation for life than dogma.

Given that everyone believes something, we owe it to our children to help them to keep a genuine open mind in their search for what it is that they consider is true and thus worth believing in, regardless of what we think as their parents.

A daughter and her learning – some things to consider

Dads

- try spending at least one hour each week finding out what your daughter is learning about and encouraging her to find creative ways to learn new things
- help her develop good study habits – don't just nag (check the book's website for a list of tips)
- thank each of her teachers for teaching your daughter
- attend the next orientation day, canteen duty or busy bee
- take her to a museum or a nature walk
- reduce any over-organisation in her life
- discuss values and beliefs with her with an open mind after you have next watched TV together

Adult daughters

- how much was your attitude to learning new things and your level of curiosity influenced by your father?
 - have you developed problem-solving abilities?
 - did you learn your values 'at your fathers feet'?
 - do you live in reaction to your parents' beliefs?
 - encourage your husband to discuss learning, values and beliefs with his daughter
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Husbands

- be aware of the effects of your wife's father on her sense of her own capacity to learn
- encourage your wife's curiosity
- respect your wife's ideas and beliefs
- consider how your wife's father has affected her values and beliefs, positively or negatively

Father-figures

- you are ideally placed to encourage a girl's learning – she will watch and listen to you
- sometimes you will be more effective than her own dad because you are an 'outsider'
- help stimulate a girl's curiosity
- work with her through problems to develop problem-solving skills
- encourage open mindedness to different values and beliefs



Quiz Question

Who said: "Live so that when your children think of fairness, caring and integrity, they think of you."?

Answer: H. Jackson Brown Jr - author, b. 1941