

# Dads Matter

I like to think that I am connected with my children; however I never really understood what it meant and how to effectively do it till we grew our family. With our first child we were full of awe and wonder at what she did and took tons of pictures. We could because we outnumbered her, we still had lots of patience and we could spell each other off in relief. Lots of people would visit and someone would always want to handle her when we went out. Connecting was easy, feeding, diapering (the basics) and of course playing. You could act silly and no one worried, you were first time parents of a child.

I am not sure if it's because we had a second and then a third, or the fact that children inevitably grow up and discover life outside of their parent's bubble. But, staying connected as they grow up and as the family grows is interesting. I became a stay at home dad when the eldest was 3 and middle was 1. I always wanted to be a large part of their lives so this was my chance. Like a lot of today's stay at home dads, we can't look to the previous generation for advice. Actually, when I looked around I didn't see anyone like me to turn to for ideas and support (this is an evil word for men, we can do it on our own, but deep down it's always nice to know you are not the only one!). So as a man I figured I would have to do it myself, I believed in me. I reverted back to being a kid. Days consisted of playing and getting down to the kid's level. What I quickly learned was that

everything is new to them and needs explaining. Life became a game of asking: "What is new today? How can I explain it in an easy to understand way? How can I make it fun?" We picked up and inspected snails and worms, we planted and grew a garden and we walked everywhere. I was known as the dad that walked everywhere in the neighborhood, regardless of the weather. When the kids were afraid of thunderstorms we played ACDC loud on the stereo and danced on the porch to Thunderstruck!

As I evolved as a dad, I realized staying connected meant having an open mind and looking for ideas wherever I could. So I discovered our local OEY, St. Mary's Family Learning Centre at Gilles and Marentette. Here I discovered a group of dedicated, caring and encouraging individuals. By participating in group play and parenting classes I learned the subtle differences between parenting as a mom and parenting as a dad and I learned that we were both equally committed to parenting our kids the best way we could. Sure we did things differently, but above all the children were number 1. As we

shared (another evil man word) we could compare stories, tricks and tips. I learned that parents learn from other parents whether they were family or not, because someone has been there and done that at one time or another.

I've learned and continue to learn that commitment evolves as the children grow. When my middle child was 5 and in SK, he wanted to know what were those neat helicopter things falling from the maple trees. I explained to him they were seeds and could grow into a tree. He was amazed and wondered how it would work. So, we found some buckets in our garage (guys always have stuff in their garage that they will use one day!), filled them with soil and planted about a dozen "keys." Well, after a year, we had several 12" little saplings. They were ready for planting so we gave several to friends of ours to plant. We kept one and planted it in front of our house. The smile on our son's face is ear to ear whenever we talk about the tree and how it came to be in our front yard. That tree will be there as long as we have our house and the pride our son has will be endless. It doesn't take a lot to be connected with your children, it takes time, patience and recognizing the small opportunities!

One of the neat and unexpected side effects of being a connected dad is the societal implications. Having been an involved dad and having a thirst for knowledge on dads issues, I was eventually approached by staff at St. Mary's about facilitating a dads group for dads. I am proud to say that this group has been meeting for over 3 years, talking about parenting issues from a dad's view, by dads.

We just recently had our second 1 day Dads Matter Conference, where we had several speakers talking about dads issues and of course food (anything worth attending offers free food). As well one of the dads from this group has been very involved with another group "Dads on the Move." They are dads who

get together for field trips with their children throughout Windsor & Essex County. You can register through Great Beginnings OEY.

Dads are important in the lives of their children! Staying connected means listening and responding at their level. Try it, its fun. The benefits for yourself, spouse/partner, other family members and society as a whole make it worth your effort.

*Doug Krystia is the father of 3 children, almost 9 (girl), 7 (boy) and 4 (boy). I was a stay at home dad for 5 years and have just reentered the workforce in the past year. Staying at home was a conscious decision, as was going back to work. My training is what I would call baptism by fire.*