



# Reinventing Dad

*By Dennis Helming*

Booklet

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## Reinventing Dad

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# CONTENTS

*Introduction 1*  
*Good is not Good Enough 2*  
*Dad = Educator 4*  
*God as Accomplice 5*  
*Joy of Serving – The New Model 6*  
*An Eye on God 8*

## ***Ten Ways to Reinvent Dad:***

*Lavish Love on Your Wife 10*  
*Benignly Neglect Your Children 11*  
*Good Fathers Should be Seen and not Heard 11*  
*Act – Don't React 12*  
*Good Reasons – Not Good Behavior 12*  
*Help Them Face Debts 13*  
*Transmit the Legacy 14*  
*Be A Reader 15*  
*Share Those Dreams 16*  
*Just a Steward 17*

## INTRODUCTION

I'm not a fan of how-to-do-it kits for parents, especially those catalogs bulging with 9,731 tips for today's dad. What are needed today are not more suggestions; today's dads are already drowning in a myriad of sins of fatherly omission—and they're well aware of it. They don't need their consciousness raised—they need their hopes and spirits raised. They need a new theory, a new vision to inspire them.

## GOOD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

It used to be that good parents raised good children: like father, like son; like mother, like daughter. Things were more settled and predictable back in the days when "father knew best." Not so today—the undertow is just too fierce. Gone forever—and good riddance—are the days when Christian parents could just coast, improvising all the way and relying on apparently sound institutions such as church, school, and community. A bit of common sense here, a veneer of virtue there; a shot of folk wisdom here, a tad of discipline there (“there” being out behind the woodshed). Our parents (or their parents) assumed they knew how to raise children, since they themselves had been raised more or less well....

But merely good parents today, if lucky, tend to have children that leave a trail of disappointments. That may be why so many contemporary couples are afraid to have children: they've seen how others' children turn out.

The solution is self-evident, but not easy: if they want good children today, parents need to be two or three notches better than how they want their children to turn out. Very good isn't good enough today. Ultra good might even fall short. Probably nothing less than a personal commitment to full-fledged holiness and uncommon virtue will do the trick.

Some parents try to shield their children from today's problems by moving to a "safe" suburban area, but moving doesn't work because the real threat is not external but a product of the internal seeds of disorder that come with human nature. Yes, even their darling child's.

There is a way to immunize your children against all the sex, booze, drugs, and other kinds of self destructive ideas and behavior out there. But that way has nothing to do with blaming nasty circumstances, or trying futilely to turn the clock back, or keeping them away from wayward occasions as long as possible. The only way to immunize them is to raise children in such a way that they themselves see what's wrong, see what boomerangs, and personally, freely, choose not to gyp themselves. And they won't see and do the right things very much, or not for very long, unless they're really sold on doing the right things with their lives for the right reasons. And those right

reasons have a lot to do with their getting personally acquainted with God and themselves, so they can love both parties the way they ought.

But isn't loving both God and themselves a tall order—impossible, in fact? Indeed it is impossible unless you do everything you can to raise them to be mature and responsible, and free and self possessed, and reasonable and religious. And so you must be at least trying to be a saint, for the kind of parent your children desperately need comes from nothing less than striving for holiness. Anything less and you just defraud your children, your wife, and yourself.

## DAD = EDUCATOR

But why pick on husbands? Aren't wives also called to be holy—something they're more suited for than we men? Yes, I'm targeting you fathers ... for these reasons:

First, you might have overlooked it, but your wives are already saints—and that's still not enough.

Secondly, you're supposed to be the head of the family; that means to lead, to set and implement the strategy—and that largely by infectious example.

Thirdly, to bring about a higher level of maturity in your children as soon as possible, there's going to have to be a lot more real educating and forming going on at home, most of it private and personal. And that's a job for which you dads are uniquely qualified and a job you've been shirking all too long.

There you have the gist of what I want to say. I know you fathers have good excuses: too little time and energy; not enough encouragement or role models, and so on. But all those excuses really prove is your need to get extra time, energy, and motivation. And where will you get them except from God? If he could multiply bread and fish, surely he can multiply your goodwill.

## GOD AS ACCOMPLICE

We used to think that taking God seriously was only for a select few, for priests, nuns, monks. The rest of us could supposedly coast and sneak our way in the back door of purgatory. But God, contemporary circumstances, Vatican II, and Opus Dei, have ripped up that cockeyed scheme of a two-tiered Christianity. Each and every one of us, single or married, is called to be intimate with God, to partake of his joyful life, and thereby let that life overflow onto others. There's no other way today; nothing else will work. But don't take my word for it; just look around you at the mess the godless are making of their lives. The only people who will survive, let alone thrive, into the third millennium are those who are cultivating a growing relationship with God. Only they will be able—have the oomph and drive—to straighten out their earthly relationships (and how they need straightening!). Why do you think our Father God has allowed circumstances and morality to degenerate so much, except to leave us no out, no refuge, but his lovingly strong embrace?

## JOY OF SERVING – THE NEW MODEL

All of us are equally called to love and serve others as an echo of God's love for us and ours for him— there's the mission, the vocation, of every man, woman, and child. Now those who are single might sometimes wonder who exactly are their neighbors, the ones they're supposed to love and serve. But those who are married should have no doubts. Your call to love and serve has been specified, particularized, by your decision to marry and bring children into the world. Parents are called, first, to love and serve each other; then, their children; then, relatives; and, finally, other people. No easy task In fact, it's so demanding and difficult that God made matrimony a sacrament, pledging thereby to help the couple bear their often heroic burdens.

What, more specifically, do we mean when we say that marriage is both a vocation and sacrament? At least this much: that married and family life is a cram course in holiness—or at least should be.

Parental love and service is to be patterned after Christ's. Jesus in effect was married to the Jewish people. What he did for his spouse, the Chosen People, you're called on to do for yours. He lavished kindness, time, sweat, high hopes, tiredness, tears, big and little favors on his people; he held nothing back. Often, however, his extended family didn't respond or even understand; they twisted his motives, while using him for their own purposes. More often than not, his saving message went unheeded and was soon mocked and scorned. And how did Jesus react to their reactions? He kept on lavishing himself on his people, regardless. He'd come to love and serve them, and their negative response, if anything, spurred him on to outdo himself. He even let his "family" kill him rather than desist from loving them. In other words, Christ's love was unconditional, irrevocable, totally disinterested, with no strings attached, with no expectation of nor need for correspondence or requital.

What's wrong with bad parenting today? A grade-school teacher recently told me, "Parents' love gives out when their kids starting sassing back." In other words, there's too much conditional, revocable love: no good behavior, no continued parental allegiance. And today, when there are so many chances for misbehavior, and consequently much more misbehavior,

children are correspondingly loved less, if at all. Yet misbehavior is the time when they need to be loved much more, given their befuddled, sorry state—loved with no strings attached, just as Christ did in taking, accepting, and welcoming whatever ungrateful, unfair, misguided people he met.

Moreover, what you need as people, Christians, spouses, and parents, is exactly what your children need. They need unconditional love, and you're called by God and your God-given nature to love unconditionally. You will never see your own self bloom and ripen into fruit unless you forget and sacrifice yourself. And God has given you an excellent, concrete opportunity for free self-giving in your misbehaving, ungrateful, unloving children! Christ did forewarn us, didn't he, with all his talk about the cross and dying to ourselves? You'll never be supremely happy as you're supposed to be, until you overcome selfishness and self-pity and truly become a willing servant of others, starting with your family, with no expectation of rewards. Parenthood is truly martyrdom on the installment plan. But what truly sours and spoils family life is to wear a martyr's mask or to display a victim's complex: nobody loves me; nobody listens; nobody does what I say; nobody appreciates all the troubles and travails your mom and I have been put through....

Love is fine in theory but hard in practice, especially when initial positive feelings are replaced by negative ones. We go out of our way to be nice, to do favors for others, to please them, to sacrifice our interests and likes for their benefit—and when they don't respond? When they don't even acknowledge our efforts and thoughtlessly take us for granted? How do we react then? Well, for one thing, we never forget. Then, we start rationing our little favors and services. We also harbor grudges and resentments. Then come the snide comments, the put-downs, the barbs, the outbursts, the quarrels, etc. Yet love never reaches maturity unless we keep on loving anyhow, even when all liking has disappeared—whether of wife or children. We can never say we love until we're ready to put up with everything our wives and children do and with infinite patience and understanding. That's what “unrequited love” means. That's the way our Father God loves us; and our love must echo his, for we've been made in his image and likeness. And we can't hope to love so disinterestedly until we see God mercifully forgiving us and overlooking so much—and that every day, every hour. If we don't live thus habitually in God's presence, becoming a conscious and delighted object of God's infinite love for us, there's no way we can begin to love and serve others with no strings attached.

## AN EYE ON GOD

Here too we see confirmed the truth of Christ's utterance, "Pray, lest you enter into temptation"—the temptation to say "Enough, I've had it; this is too much." Now do you see how trying to do the right thing needed at home drives us, willy-nilly, into God's arms? Contemplating God's relationship with us, who so seldom and stingily respond to divine love, is the only way we'll have enough energy to be selflessly generous with offspring and spouse.

You see, children who don't experience totally gratuitous, unconditional love at home find it almost impossible to discover such one-sided, infinite love in God. Is there any other reason for tens of millions of people today, aged 20 to 40, to have given up on God and religion? Is there any other reason for the self-defeating behavior and immorality that develops into mental illness and other psychic hells? When children don't catch glimpses and echoes of God's absolute love in people around them, it's almost impossible for them to have a true image of God. What they end up rejecting is just a very resistible, dismissible caricature of God.

With all this insistence on unreserved parental love for their children, I can imagine some of you are beginning to squirm, thinking that you've landed in the clutches of a preacher of the gospel of permissiveness. Aren't parents supposed to be the primary educators of their children, to teach them right from wrong, to correct, discipline, and punish them when they get out of hand? Yes, they are, very much so. I'm not denying that parents as authority figures need to and ought to intervene, that they should be practitioners of "tough love" and all the rest. But in all their educating and forming, parents must make sure that it is love they are manifesting and acting on—not frustration, not disappointment, not spite, not resentment, not deep-seated anger. Now, as you well know, that's much easier said than done. Consequently parents can never assume that theirs are the best of motives; they must go back time and again to God for their model and for what they're lacking.

We've just been looking at parenting's "why" (love) and "what" (educating); now it's about time for us to consider the "how" of parenting. As we would expect, at this point there's bound to be a lot of flexibility and

change in parental style as compared to past times. The prudential challenge consists in applying unchanging perennial principles to ever-changing circumstances. In this regard fathers today seem to be at a big disadvantage as opposed to mothers, whose role is more biologically and instinctively determined. Mothers' role hasn't changed very much. Most contemporary fathers recognize the unsuitability of the old "father-knows-best" model. But what's to take its place? The bungling, superfluous, misguided dad of television sitcoms? Hardly. It may be very presumptuous of me to define how a father is to discharge his irreplaceable role in the new millennium. Yet so urgent is this business of defining the dad's role that each of us has to pitch in and make his contribution. So, to begin with, let me suggest ten possible ways to rejuvenate and reinvent fatherhood in Christianity's third millennium.

## ***TEN WAYS TO REINVENT DAD***

1. ***Lavish love on your wife.*** One of the best and highest gifts you can give your children is for them to see how much and how persistently you love and serve your spouse. You must keep very much alive by dint of virtue and willpower all those things—gifts, considerations, services, surprises, displays of affection—that came so easily during courtship, on the honeymoon, and in the early days of marriage. Now that most of the emotional facilities and incentives to woo her have diminished and even disappeared, more deliberate and voluntary virtue must take over to generate the same pitch of romance, if not greater. Don't be surprised that the bubbly feelings are gone; that's the way things are meant to happen. Don't be surprised even negative feelings have replaced positive.

Give your wife your undivided attention. Anticipate her needs and even whims. Linger over that second cup of coffee. Sympathize, sympathize, sympathize: women need understanding more than expert male problem-solving. Lighten her burdens, preferably behind her back. Surprise her with little notes, phone calls, a bouquet of the first dandelions of the season....

If your children see how much you respect and revere your wife, how grateful you are for her many thankless household and child-rearing chores, how attentive and accommodating you are to her moods and tiredness, how you value her opinion, how graciously you overlook her defects and digs, how considerately you back her up, then nine-tenths of the problems involved in raising children will take care of themselves. They'll not only learn how to esteem their mother, but also will get unmistakable whiffs of what both human and divine love are all about. And that's an invaluable lesson, for now and later.

2. ***Benignly neglect your children.*** If you're wrapped up in your wife, this recommendation should come easy. Insecure Americans tend to smother their too-few children. As someone once said, America is the only country where parents implicitly obey their offspring. There's far too much parental emotional attachment and dependence on their children's approval. Fathers especially must keep their balance and perspective and deliberate detachment. All fathers should pray fervently for the gift of unflappability. If fathers are to be the voice of reason (thereby letting their wives be the voice of heart), somehow they must stay above the fray. They must at least come across as disengaged and uninvolved. Otherwise it will be very difficult for them to remain objective and fair, to see and understand what's really going on beneath the surface. Fathers should be quick to observe and slow to act, react, and intervene; theirs is the job to reflect and to see what steps, if any, should be taken. If anybody, fathers should have a congenital preference for delay, for letting time pass and prove its curative powers
  
3. ***Good fathers should be seen and not heard.*** This piece of advice is obviously linked to the preceding one. It represents a considerable departure from the olden view of father as authoritative patriarch. By it I mean, positively, that fathers should be very busy and quite vocal—but behind the scenes, not throwing their weight around in public. Only half in jest, I've been known to suggest that the best service to the family that Congress could enact would be to offer a tax break to families who add a den for dad onto their homes. If our reinvented father is to do a better job on the home front, it really would help for him to have a room of his own, with a door and a minimum of privacy. In any case, our new father should have many more reasons and occasions for talking alone with each of his children. That's just another way of saying that much of what a father usually does in public—correcting, directing traffic, laying down law and order—could better be handled later and more calmly behind closed doors.

But these huddles should be much more than punishment summits. Fathers should use them, for example, to suggest to children positive things they might do to enliven family life, to celebrate a birthday, to please their mother, to apologize, to show appreciation to a grandmother... such private talks also come in handy to spark and review

performance in chores, studies, hobbies; to recount the father's own youth, especially his escapades and peccadilloes; to share a newly heard joke or two, even slightly off-color ones, with his boys; to offer feedback, compliments, and encouragement; to dissolve tensions by helping individual family members better understand each other.

4. **Act—don't react.** In a nutshell the problem with most fathers is that in parenting they feel inferior to their wives, who operate more naturally on the basis of intuition and instinct. That liability, coupled with a shortage of time and updated role models, produces interior complications and exterior hesitations, when and if the father gets around to asking himself what he's supposed to be doing on the home front. The worst thing to do is the most frequent: waiting behind the newspaper for trouble to break out. Here as most everywhere, the best defense is a good offense. Have your own agenda and priorities—and act on them. Plan and plot your evenings and weekends, even your personal hobbies and recreations, lest they just happen. If every day you were to generate at least one specific profamily deed (helping Sue with math homework, working on the washer with Steve, running an errand with Butch, having a personal chat with Maribeth, discussing the children with your wife, and so on), your conscience would be much clearer, and the family would largely take care of itself. Because if you don't act deliberately, with generous forethought, with each of your children, one on one, you'll find yourself reacting in ways that undermine the family, as you well know and soon enough regret.
  
5. **Good reasons—not good behavior.** Fathers especially should be attuned to the danger of children doing right things for wrong reasons. Such inadequate reasons as: "Because I said so," or "That's the way we do things around here, kiddo," or "Tough, that's life," or "What will the neighbors think?" and dozens more of the same ilk. External compliance, especially in nonessentials, is not the goal, especially as the children grow older and admit reasonable appeals to their "better angels." So explain, explain, explain, going as deep as you both can, again as privately as possible. It may seem a lot simpler and easier to just bark, but here too a stitch in time saves nine headaches and heartaches. Help them to see that their unthinking actions and omissions have consequences that impinge on others and even on themselves, not to mention family finances. Help

them to see how easily we all can be ambushed and deflected by pleasures, fears, selfishness, and thoughtlessness. Curbing these self-defeating tendencies is the task of such basic virtues as moderation, fortitude, fairness, and prudence. Trying to acquire good habits is therefore in their own best interests: something they owe above all to themselves. Virtuous good behavior should never be authoritatively imposed from without, nor seem merely like an onerous price for domestic tranquility.

6. ***Help them face debts.*** As you've probably noticed by now, selfishness infects children too. Consequently much of the parents' educational challenge is to convert the sow's ear of self-centeredness into the silk purse of recognizing justly and realistically what a child has received from others; we deal here with the substance of the fourth of the Ten Commandments, which is just another way of saying children should be fair to their parents. Again, the father has a special role to play in helping children overcome the tendency to take others for granted, to convert gifts and privileges into entitlements, to bend all of reality to their shortsighted whims and wishes. Good disinterested parents may not need or want to be recognized or thanked for their family efforts. Yet they still are bound to help Junior and Sis acknowledge the many benefits they've received so one-sidedly. Why? Because parents need a pat on the back? Not primarily. Rather, because children who don't straighten out this most basic and obvious relationship become practically incapable of any healthy relationships, even with God. Each remains trapped in an endless orbit around himself or herself, maybe forever.

Now of course it isn't easy for a father to point out to his children all that he's done for them without appearing to fish for praise. The same is true in reference to mothers. But a father can point out to children the countless services their mother has generously done for them, while still being and seeming disinterested. So can a mother, each for the other and for their children's sake. What is so painfully obvious to the parents themselves can be almost hidden from the children's viewpoint. Children can unthinkingly assume that their parents are naturally masochists that derive secret kicks from never forgetting to cook dinner or to the laundry or from the ulcer born of wearing themselves out in a fiercely competitive marketplace. That's why without melodrama they must be told gently, firmly, and persistently about the blood, sweat, and tears; the sleepless nights and zillions of dirty diapers; the anxieties, fears, and

disappointments; the tiredness and boredom overcome; the huge emotional and financial investment; the years of unstinting, unrequited giving; the great expectations and high hopes; the interests, friends, hobbies and wishes not pursued, the books unread, the dress not bought, the concerts or ball games unattended; the scrimping and saving.... They must be helped to see also the exalted beauty and heroic goals of the marital calling whereby two people freely, lovingly, and permanently pledge to sacrifice themselves in a joint venture of making a family with very uncertain prospects.

7. ***Transmit the legacy.*** If children are to understand what makes their parents tick and to interiorize the truths and principles that should make themselves tick, too, as free and responsible individuals, then educating and explaining are called for. I refer to the religious truths, moral principles, and family policies and customs that good parents want to bequeath to their children (though, let's hope, long before the will is read). Granted, all these treasures are best seen in practice and picked up through osmosis. But even the best of examples isn't completely self-explanatory, and therefore parents can't excuse themselves from verbally telling their children the way things should be, how they get that way and, above all, why. Again, fathers seem better suited than mothers for this somewhat formal instruction.

It would be great if every father were to huddle once a week for 10 to 15 minutes with each of his children while in grades five to eight. In most cases "a session every Wednesday at 7:15 in the den" might not work, or might even backfire. It shouldn't come across as too artificial, smelling of indoctrination. Where father and son or daughter are truly good and close friends an obvious program might work. Otherwise something more oblique, casual, and unstructured probably would be desirable. Selected videos or books might spark discussions, or the father's commenting on incidents at home or school might provide an ice-breaker or conversation starter.

8. ***Be a reader.*** Many of your parental worries would disappear if your children got hooked on books. And for that to happen, parents should be hooked on them, especially the father (otherwise boys at least get the impression that books and schooling and all that is for sissies). C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have explained why good books are not only an antidote but a treasure besides. We suffer, they tell us, from an impoverished moral imagination that makes it almost impossible for us to glimpse, and to desire to commune with, a superior, intangible, spiritual world and its inhabitants, especially God. The notion of God that children eventually discover in Aslan, from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is rich, attractive, and illuminating. But that notion may not dawn on them until their third or fourth reading—or even better, the third or fourth time their mother or father reads it to them. Let's never forget why the incarnation was necessary: to help us to see in concrete and reduced form what lies beyond our perception. See good literature as many little incarnations wherein goodness and beauty and truth and romance attractively appear beckoning us on to our true homeland.

About the only way that children get hooked on books is that they see their parents benefiting from them. For parents, reading is enlightening and relaxing; it shows the children that parents have other interests; it helps parents keep their sanity; and it justifies proper distance and detachment from the children. But make sure your books and theirs are truly good books giving off signals of a higher, better world—not just exciting escape entertainment. And try your best to make sure your children never see reading as a chore or punishment; if anything, they should see it as a privilege and reward, because they enjoyed it so much when you read to them when they were young.

9. ***Share those dreams.*** A father's greatest educational mission—the real reason for fathering them in the first place—is to get his children to know and love our heavenly Father as he really is. The father is happy indeed who somehow gets his children, sooner or later, to seek God eagerly, hungrily, and rewardingly. He must speak from the heart, from personal experience, gratitude, and excitement. He must show his children how to pray, how to live and work and play in God's loving and provident presence. Thereby their father makes them his children twice over: not only biologically but above all spiritually, apostolically. It is in this communicating the truly Good News to wide-eyed children where the true

parental calling comes to life, becomes an adventure and a never-ending thrill. It makes all of the hardships very much worthwhile, like nothing compared with the gift of God's transforming love.

The absence of this apostolic dimension to parenting leaves raising children flat and unrewarding. Its absence also defeats much parental insistence on good comportment, on behavioral do's and don'ts (the heart of what most parents understand by "raising" children). When the Good News is equated with morality alone, it comes off looking like "Bad Olds". As the contemporary scene has so clearly shown: morality doesn't sell itself; it doesn't stand alone; knowing and practicing what's right and wrong is only secondary, a response to something bigger. Truth is primary: the truth about man and God, especially the latter.

10. ***Just a steward.*** Keep in mind your children are not yours—they're God's above all. Aren't children also supposed to be their own man or woman—and that as soon as possible? Here's the good news and the bad: parents are only divine stewards, stand-ins. Now this rightful perspective and deliberate distancing doesn't come easily, nor is it automatic. The problem is always how can you treat children like free and responsible people when they're obviously not? Aren't parents with their superior wisdom and experience obliged in justice and charity to make their children's decisions? I think the only good way through childhood is for parents, as early and often as possible, to treat their children as if they were reasonable, free, and responsible, providing them with elements and criteria whereby they can decide for themselves—and then for both parties to suffer the consequences and reap the rewards. The more you treat them not the way they are, but the way you want them to become, the faster they'll grow into maturity. Trust them: it's a manifestation of your unconditional love. And then trust them again and again, however many times they take advantage of you. What misbehaving children need above all is to know that their parents are lovingly in their corner always, regardless.

Now this program of reinventing fathers has gone on much too long. I've come up with an almost impossible list of do's and don'ts for the father and for the children too. In fact, if your children are ten years old or more, implementing these suggestions must proceed with lots of tact and flexibility, lest you come on too strongly. If all else fails, however, let me offer our quaking new father a good, practical way to turn over a new leaf: start having breakfast every Saturday with each of your children on a rotating basis, even without an agenda. Throwing yourselves together in this fashion will help both parties to get better acquainted. And then—who knows?—can friendship be far behind? In any case, your wife will be grateful that you're finally giving her a hand in rearing the rascals.

And now to finish: the current Pope is pleading with us to build a new civilization of love, a fit human and Christian habitat for the third millennium, much better and greater than anything the world has ever witnessed. And we'll build it? We'll build it on a multitude of once-prodigious sons and daughters who, try as they might, can't forget how much and how unrequitedly and how wisely their parents loved and reared them. Even their fathers. Especially their fathers.



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