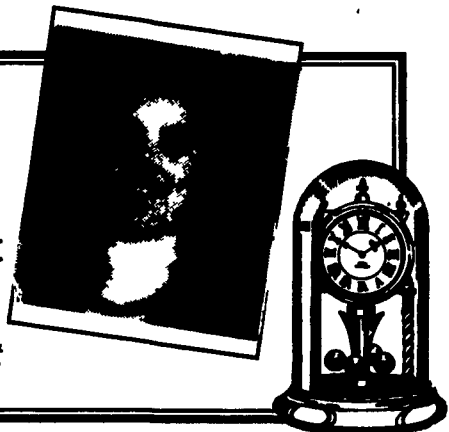


Taking Time

by
Lehigh Co.
Extension Agent

Rebecca Escott



As I set up my nativity pieces this year, I was really excited. Last year my Dad made me a stable from pieces of old barn wood, and then for my birthday, my parents gave me an angel and camels to supplement the few figurines that I had before. It was wonderful. I kept saying to my husband, "I really like my nativity set." In fact, I think I said it at least one too many times.

That stable is just one of the wonderful gifts that my Dad has given me over the years. He made me a picture frame for a Renoir print, gave me a toolbox and tools when I moved into my first apartment, bought me jumper cables when I took a car to college, gave me a key to our family's hunting cabin, and more. Each of these was a special gift — a gift selected with me specifically in mind.

As special as these were, these were not the most important gifts my Dad gave to me. The most

important things he gave me were his time when he came to track meets and voice recitals, his affection, his belief in my ability to succeed, his example of being responsible and true to his word, his integrity and ethics as an example to me, his attention in individual conversations.

Dads, you have so many important gifts to give your children! After the bicycles, video games, puzzles, and dolls are unwrapped, and the holiday fervor starts to disappear, take some time to think about the "free" gifts you can give your kids throughout the year.

Here's a "shopping list" to get you started:

Time — Psychiatrists - Comer and Poussaint talk about the role of a father in a child's life, "You should try to be present during important occasions, such as birthdays, meetings with teachers...Setting aside certain times for doing things together, such as attending

ball games or picnics is important...more important than being an ever-present 'dud'."

Affection — Hugs and other healthy affection are critical for every child's development of self-esteem and identity. Both sons and daughters need this gift throughout the year. If a child does not receive healthy affection in her home, she may seek other ways of gaining that attention and acceptance.

Structure and Limits—Comer and Poussaint also encourage fathers to listen to their kids, to be reliable, warm, firm but flexible, confident, and reasonable. Research has shown that parents need to balance warmth and nurturing with structure and limits. Without structure and limits, children tend to be selfish and self-centered. Dads play a role in providing both nurturing and limits. Structure and limits should change as children mature. But even in the teen years, structure and limits are gifts you can give your children. (They may not thank you, but know that they are gifts just the same.)

Permission to Grow Up at Their Own Rate — By pushing kids to "hurry and grow up," parents often force kids to shut out feelings. Children who are rushed may act out in anger. They usually stay very busy. Dads, encourage your children to be unique. Tell them, "I like you just the way you are. You're you and you're special to me."

The Example of Being a Loving Husband—Children learn much of

what they know by observing. Your example to them of how to love a partner and how to be respectful of that relationship gives an example that your sons and daughters will carry with them and model as they develop their own relationships. Robert Bly explains that if boys don't spend enough time with their dads or other male role models, they won't have a clear idea about what it means to be a male parent/husband. In a day when relationships are fragile, give your children the gift of a healthy marriage. Ask yourself, "What are the important lessons about being a man and a dad that I want to pass on to my children?"

Skills and Hobbies — At a recent workshop, the presenter asked, "Who likes to hunt or fish?" As people raised their hands, he asked who taught them that skill. The replies—my dad, my grand-

dad, my neighbor, my uncle. Dads, share your interests with your kids. Years from now they will treasure that gift from you.

Love of Life — Give your kids an enthusiasm for life. Laugh, play, enjoy the days as they present themselves.

Remember, not just during the holidays, but all year long, dads have an important role to play in a child's life. Be proud of the gifts you give your kids each day. They are gifts that will last long after the tinsel and paper are gone.

Rebecca Escott is a Home Economist with Penn State Cooperative Extension in Lehigh County. Cooperative Extension provides practical information designed to improve the quality of life for local residents. We work in partnership with Penn State and county government.



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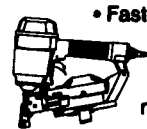
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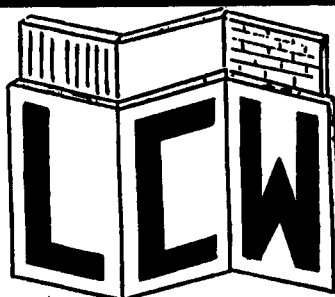
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