



**Boys' Learning**  
Research group on men and their families.



**ARTICLE**



LEARNING HAS NEVER  
**BEEN SO EASY**



SCHOOL MADE EASY  
**ARTICLES**

## **FATHERS: OUR MOST UNDER-USED RESOURCE**

**PETER WEST\***

## **FATHERS: OUR MOST UNDER-USED RESOURCE**

Child protection is a very big issue today. Of course every thinking parent wants to keep his or her children away from predators and child abusers. I am glad that people are trying to gather up all the resources of the community in order to protect our kids. There is one resource that is sadly under-used: fathers.

Some years ago, I wrote *Fathers, Sons and Lovers* about the roles of men since the 1930s. Men had three key roles: perform, protect, provide. *Perform* meant to get out there, get a good job and keep it. *Protect* meant to do everything in their power to protect women and children. *Provide* meant they were expected to bring home the means to feed their families. Sadly, some men did not do enough either to support their families or to protect them from harm. Nevertheless, from an early age, men had the idea of duty towards their loved ones.

Today there are many men who are striving their hardest to continue to fulfil the role of father in a time of change and uncertainty in gender. I see lots of dads at the beach, playing with their kids, having fun with them ; and just being around as their kids grow up. Fathers talk to kids about the world of work. They play more games with kids, including more rough-and-tumble games, more video games and more games in which the father pretends to be a monster and the kids pretend to be scared. Many kids enjoy having two parents who act in different ways and treat kids with a different emphasis.

It's harder for single mothers. Some find ways of getting men into their boys' lives by encouraging them to play football or basketball or some other sport. Role models are important, we are told. Yet boys can learn many useful things from women, as well as men. Better a good, thinking woman than a thoughtless man. This is a complex issue and there aren't many easy answers.

So dads are useful people for kids growing up. Still, there are problems. Studies have shown that many fathers won't talk to their own sons about sex for fear of being accused of something obnoxious. Many of the men I speak to have a nagging fear that they will be accused of inappropriate behaviour doing such ordinary things as taking kids for a swim or giving them a bath.

Somehow we have to give fathers some helpful guidelines. We should encourage dads to be confident that kids want their dads to hug them. When I give workshops, mothers and fathers alike welcome some suggestions about great ways of spending positive time with kids. This could include just playing games, or playing sport (Dad, be careful not to be too eager to defeat your kids!). Take your kids to a favourite restaurant, or go to the beach. These are favourite memories for many adults.

Kids love to hear dad tell funny stories. Enjoy this when the kids are young. Because when they get into their mid- teens, we hear “Oh God Dad, not that again!”

We should work hard to include other men in helping to protect kids. My teacher education students, both male and female, say kids want to hug and touch them. We shouldn't be giving teachers the message to treat kids as cold objects. We have to find that appropriate warmth between teachers and kids. And somehow give kids some affection. Teachers tell me kids like getting a “high-five”. It seems to work well as a reward.

There are too many messages in the media that men are idiots, clowns and fools. Here's an ad in which a wife hits a man on the head with a hammer. Here's another in which the man sprays pumpkin all over the kitchen. We can't expect men to be good fathers, husbands and lovers if we keep telling them they are idiots, fools or people who can't be trusted. The women who come to my workshops are happy to encourage men to be thoughtful, involved fathers.

It takes a whole community to raise a child. Let's make sure that we include the males. And that means, first of all, fathers.



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