

The Atlanta Journal- Constitution

Time with Father Vital for Children

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Published: Thursday, June 20 2002 12:00 a.m. MDT

ATLANTA — Terry Kay remembers what it was like to work side by side with his father when bonding was a term for glue, not relationships.

"My father was a carpenter before he went into the nursery business. He taught me how to saw, how to measure things accurately, how to farm," says Kay, a Georgia writer whose novel "To Dance With the White Dog" was drawn from his father's life. "The worst thing I have done to my children is choosing a profession where they can't work with me."

The tradition of fathers passing on practical skills — and advice about life in the process — has not disappeared completely, but it's become increasingly difficult for dads who work 12-hour days in offices to find the time to bond.

"It's a dilemma that every father faces," says Joe Kelly, executive director of the nonprofit Minnesota organization Dads and Daughters. "We simply have to make time to do it. The women I talked to who were most enthusiastic about their relationships with their fathers fondly remember doing things with them such as working on the car, going fishing or shooting hoops."

One of his friends had a rule for his daughters that they couldn't go for their driver's license test until they had successfully changed the oil and changed a tire. Another made sure his daughter knew how to use a power saw before she went to college.

Operating power tools has been no problem for **Betsy Braddock Palmer**, 30. She recalls her father teaching her to repair her bike and fix things around the house from the time she was 10.

"He taught me how to do everything right, including fishing," she says. "We talked about personal things when we were working. I learned what it meant to be a man, and his perspective on things."

Now she works with him as project manager for **Braddock Built Renovations** in Atlanta.

The only time Braddock remembers feeling close to his father was when they worked on projects such as building a carport and constructing a fence.

While learning practical skills is worthwhile, the most important thing is the actual process of doing things together, says Frank Pittman, an Atlanta psychiatrist and author of "Man Enough: Fathers, Sons and the Search for Masculinity" (Perigee, \$14.95).

"In order for boys to grow up to be a man, or girls to live with a man, they have got to know what men are like," Pittman says. "Most men don't realize how important they are to their children."

According to Dianna Thompson, executive director of the American Coalition for Fathers and Children, "Whatever youth problem you look at — teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, suicide, low self-esteem, school dropouts — is directly linked to family breakdown and the absence of fathers. The presence or absence of a father in the home is a better predictor of these pathologies than any other factor, including income and race."

Thompson notes that roughly two-thirds of high school dropouts, juvenile delinquents and youths who commit suicide are from fatherless homes, as are nearly 90 percent of runaway children and children with behavioral disorders.

While having a father who lies in a recliner and sips a beer is better than no father at all, Pittman says the best dads are the ones who take an active role with their children.

"It's nice to dutifully show up for the kids' soccer game, but they don't learn anything from the fathers from that. It's crucial for boys and girls to go see where fathers work, to see fathers play."

The importance of hard work was a lesson that Michael Russell, 37, also learned at an early age. He was 8 or 9 years old when his father, Herman Russell, made him clean the apartment complexes that the family's company managed. "One of my first jobs was to pick up trash and sweep the breezeways. He taught my brother and sister and me the importance of earning your keep."

Russell, who now helps run H.J. Russell & Co., says his father was always an authority figure, never a buddy. "He worked a lot, often coming home after 8, but he always tried to make it to my basketball and football games. He taught me basic values of hard work that I'm trying to instill in my sons."

One thing his father didn't teach him was how to fix things around the house. "My father was a master plasterer, but he's not a handyman and neither am I. Basically, all I can do is change light bulbs and tighten a few screws."

Whether fathers are handy or not, they need to realize that there are little things they can do as role models, says Harry Harrison, author of "Father to Son" (Workman, \$7.95).

"There are things our dads taught us that kids don't know anymore, such as how to put a ball in a baseball glove and wrapping a belt around it to break it in," says Harrison, 53, the father of two grown sons.

"I remember how excited I was the first time my father let me mow the lawn. And he taught me to drive. It was not so much the projects we did as the fact that I was allowed to be around him," he says. "Every moment a boy spends with his father, the father is teaching him how to be a man, for better or

worse. Whether it's watching him shave, or rake the yard, or doing the dishes, he's seeing what it's like to be a man."

Frank Pittman remembers the rare occasions when his father took him to the cotton mill he managed. "Getting to see my father in his territory, rather than at home, which was my mother's territory, I got to see a side of him I had never seen."

Like many fathers of the World War II generation, Pittman's father was not talkative. He was raised by his quiet father, an undertaker, and he never learned the skill of talking to kids. Most nights he would have three radios tuned to different ballgames so he wouldn't have to carry on a conversation.

"It was my mother who taught me about home repairs and things like that," Pittman says. "I think growing up with a silent father and grandfather is one of the reasons I became a psychiatrist. I wanted to get inside people's heads, to find out what it felt like to be human."

Often the most valuable legacies fathers leave their children have nothing to do with mending fences or repairing a door. Atlanta Magazine editor Lee Walburn's father was a cotton mill worker who did not know how to fix cars or do things like that, but he taught his son the importance of never being too busy to stop and play with your kids. "He was a storyteller and a great athlete," says Walburn, 65. "He did teach me how to box, and he tried to teach me music, but I had no aptitude for it. My father's generation may be the last one that bonded by passing on knowledge."

"I have real distinct memories from the time I was 11 of hearing my dad typing on his typewriter across the hall," says Steve Walburn, 41, who writes for several magazines. "Maybe that sound worked its way into my psyche."

While most of their bonding centered around sports, the younger Walburn recalls one memorable project he and his father tackled.

"We actually built a boat when I was 14. It was one of those things that was a seminal father-son experience. At the same time it brings you closer together, it reminds you of your differences as the pieces of the boat fall to the floor and you want to do it one way and he wants to do it another. We fought over that boat for three months, but we were so proud when we finished."

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