

Present Tense Parenting

Being a father is one of the biggest challenges that any man will face. Having that kind of influence over another human being can be daunting. Yet, even with all the hard work and long days, the job is not without its rewards. In fact, the rewards far outweigh the responsibilities.

Too often though, we tend to lose focus of the present. We look back and relive the great moments when our kids were younger, sweeter, and cuter. Or, we look ahead, longing for a day when our kids will be more independent, less needy, and not as annoying.[1. Don't roll your eyes. Your kids annoy you sometimes. I'm just willing to admit it publicly.] We romanticize the past, and we idealize the future. The present is when all the hard work happens. This makes it feel worse than what has come before, lost in the haze of the past, or not as blissfully idyllic as the far-off future. It can be so easy to overlook the great stuff that is happening right in front of us.

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When they are young, your children think you are hilarious. I can make my eleven-year-old son laugh at any moment.[2. My wife can say or do the exact same thing and it might produce a smile.] My jokes cause uncontrolled laughter, falling down on the floor giggling fits, and pleas for me to say or do that funny thing again. As they get older, your children will find you less funny. Your hilarious jokes become "Dad" jokes. You might even get an eye roll or two. Don't let that discourage you. Embrace each stage. Be the comedian when they are laughing. Be the embarrassing dad when they are not. The most important ingredient here is you. Even if your kids are too

old and “sophisticated” to laugh at your jokes, they will see your heart and feel your love for them simply because you are present.

On the flip side, your kids will make you laugh. A lot. My kids are hilarious. Sometimes, when they are attempting to be funny, it falls flat. Particularly my youngest child who just turned seven. But when he is simply himself, he makes me laugh more than almost any person I know. My eleven year old son makes me smile more than laugh. He is funny, but his honest and pure love of life comes through often, and it is infectious. And my oldest son, all of thirteen years, is developing a great, sarcastic sense of humor. His mother and I are extremely proud. Take time to enjoy it all. Enjoy the awful jokes your younger children will tell.[3. Trust me. It gets better. But you are going to have to perfect the fake smile and laugh. Work on those in private when your children are sleeping.] Enjoy the early, faltering attempts at sarcasm and wit your middle-school aged kids will attempt. Enjoy laughing at every little thing your little ones do when they aren't even trying to be funny. But don't get stuck looking back on those great times, wishing you could relive them. And don't look ahead during those awkward phases when their sense of humor seems to have taken 10 steps back. Appreciate each one for what it is: a chance to watch your children develop their personalities.

Your kids are asking questions and pushing back because they are trying to form their identity. They are looking for answers. Guide them to those answers. Don't get frustrated because they don't accept everything at face value.

Your children will look to you as the ultimate authority in all matters when they are little. That will seem like heaven when they are older and are questioning EVERY THING YOU SAY. Take a step back and you might see how irrational it is of you

to long for those days of total trust. You know you don't know everything. You know you make mistakes. You know you are wrong from time to time. As your children grow and mature, they are going to realize that as well. If they don't, you are doing something wrong. Accept that. Use that. If your children are asking you questions, that is a wonderful opportunity to engage with them on a deeper level than usual. You will have the opportunity to explain what you believe, why you parent the way you do, and why you live the way you live. Your kids are asking questions and pushing back because they are trying to form their identity. They are looking for answers. Guide them to those answers. Help them find their identity. Don't get frustrated because they don't accept everything at face value.

And even when it doesn't feel like your children love you very much, you just need to trust that the love and hard work you poured into them will win out.

Perhaps the most difficult area to truly live in the present is in how your children show you love. It's not hard to see their love when they are young. They hug, they kiss, and they hold your hand. They say "I love you" all the time. Brace yourselves. That phase will end. You might go months between "I love yous" from your teenage son. It might be even longer. That's okay. They will show how much they love you in other ways. Those ways will vary depending on your child, but keep your eyes open for them. And even when it doesn't feel like your children love you very much, you just need to trust that the love and hard work you poured into them will win out. They will come around. My seven year old tells me he loves me every day, usually unprompted. My eleven year old tells me he loves me most days, but usually after I have said it first.[4. Yes, I am one of those weird dads that say "I love you" to my kids every day.] My thirteen year old rarely says it. Not even when I say it first. I could let that break my heart. But that

would be suffering for no reason. I see how my son behaves. I see how he interacts with me and with his family. I see his heart at home, church, and everywhere else. I KNOW he loves me. He uses everything but words to say it. And that is just fine with me.

When is the best time to be a dad? Right now. Don't miss the joys of today. Don't get stuck in your past, wishing you could somehow go back. Don't look ahead to when things will be "easier." Be here now. That is the most important thing.