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Defrain, John, "NF01-474 Creating a Strong Family: The Greatest Gift a Father Can Give His Children" (2001). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 301.
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Creating a Strong Family The Greatest Gift a Father Can Give His Children

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

What makes a good father? That's the question that motivated my long-time colleague and friend Kathy Simon to survey more than 700 fathers who felt really good about fatherhood. Kathy wanted to hear about their successes in their own words, so much of her research involved collecting stories and thoughts from dads. She asked them literally scores of questions in a 20-page questionnaire, and then she spent several months studying what the fathers had to say.

She came into my office one morning, glowing. "I asked the fathers what they thought was the greatest gift a father can give his children," Kathy said. "What do you think was the No. 1 thing they told me, John?"

Being a father of three daughters myself and a fellow who had written a doctoral dissertation on fatherhood many years before and still enormously interested in the question, I hazarded a guess, even though I saw the impish smile on Kathy's face. ("I'm being set up," I thought to myself.)

"Well, Kath. Let me think here. I would say that the greatest gift a father can give his children is the gift of time. He can spend a great deal of positive time with them. Listening to them. Sharing his life with them. Enhancing their self-esteem by enjoying their company and doing things with them." "Wrong!" Kathy chortled, following this up with a grating buzzer sound ("ZZZZZ!") straight from a TV game show. "They told me that the *greatest gift a father can give his children is to love their mother.*"

As a mother, Kathy could immediately see the wisdom in the fathers' thinking. As a father, I wanted to think about what the dads were saying very, very carefully because there seemed to be an important lesson to learn.

For the past 25 to 30 years in American society, there has been a great deal of interest in fatherhood and a push toward increasing fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. In many ways we have made progress in this regard, and yet, marital breakdown and a high divorce rate contribute to the

disconnection between fathers and children.

Much is made of the difficulty mothers have in balancing work and family today. Fathers, too, find it challenging to earn a decent living while attending to the togetherness needs of the family. Though as a culture we may have gotten better at encouraging fathers to be good fathers, the fact remains that mothers, in general, still spend more time with children and have more responsibility for their day-to-day care.

Mothers know this. Fathers know this.

Many families, including my own, do not particularly like how our society is designed in this regard. The game is still rigged toward mothers being more responsible for kids, and fathers having more responsibility for earning money, though the game is changing ever so slowly. This is sad to me, because the joy of being with children can be intense.

Since mothers bear more of the childrearing responsibilities, it becomes extremely important for fathers to love and respect mothers for what they do. Of course, one of the important ways Dad can demonstrate his love for Mom is by investing time with the children: time caring for their basic needs, and fun time simply happily being with them.

But Dad can't afford to be so involved in his work and in caring for the children's needs that he forgets Mom's emotional needs and his own need for genuine connection with her. The marital relationship is the glue that holds the family together. Its importance cannot be stressed too much, and the relationship needs to be nurtured ever so carefully.

Before I buy into any particular theory of marriage and family relationships or believe that a research study is sound, it has to pass the validity test in my own family. This may sound a bit odd, but frankly, I don't see how an idea can be of much general utility if it doesn't even make sense in the DeFrain family, the family I know best of all in the world.

Kathy's research was a winner in this regard. While writing this article at home, our youngest daughter Erica, age 22, called. Bear, as I call her fondly, wanted to know what I was doing that morning, and I said I was writing about the gifts that fathers can give their children. When I told her the No. 1 answer to the question was, "Love their mother," Erica said quietly but with emotion, "That's right."

So, take the word of more than 700 successful dads and our baby daughter Erica. Fathers in strong families deeply care for their wives, and they let them know this on a regular basis in a wide variety of ways. These Dads are not afraid to express their love.

***File NF474 under: Family Life
F-27, Relationships
Issued June 2001***

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Interim Dean and Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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