

What American Fathers Need to Learn from *Antarctica Penguins*

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What kind of father would stand outside in 75 degrees below zero blizzards and 100 mile per hour winds—for four months, and with no food? The male Emperor penguins in Antarctica do. And they repeat this test of endurance every year in order to protect and hatch their offspring. They must be the most committed fathers in the world.

After walking 70 miles inland to nesting grounds in order to be far away from any sea lions, the male penguin plays a unique and critical role in caring for his unborn chick. After the mother lays her one and only egg, she *very carefully* transfers it to the father's feet (if he let the egg touch the ground, the chick inside would immediately freeze and die). The mothers then leave all the fathers behind and go back to the ocean to eat and relax for a few months.

The father stands there and waits, with the egg on top of his feet, for four months straight. He will lose half of his body weight. And he will stay there, in the worst blizzards on planet earth, through twelve weeks of darkness (the sun rarely shines in Antarctica during those months). All for the sake of his unborn baby. Finally, after the chick hatches on his feet, the fattened up mothers return with food for their new offspring, allowing the starving fathers to finally leave to get some food. Tired, hungry, and freezing, they have to walk 70 miles back to the ocean.

When the fathers later return to retrieve their families amongst the thousands of noisy moms and babies, they find their chicks not by sight, but by the *sound* of their chick's voice. They can pick out their own chick's voice out of one *thousand* other chick's cries! These fathers must also have the greatest listening skills in the world.

I have never heard of fathers who cared for their young as much as these Antarctica penguins. While watching the movie, *March of the Penguins*, with my two kids, I was challenged as never before in my own commitment as a dad. Challenged by penguins! Few human fathers would suffer even half as much for their own kids. In fact, many human fathers don't even wait around for their children to be born. They literally leave.

Today in America, more than one in three babies come into this world with no dad in the delivery room or waiting for them at home. They have no father's arms to hold them. When added with fathers divorced from their wives, nearly 40% of all children will go to bed tonight without their dads in the house. And by the time they are teenagers, nearly half of these kids will no longer have *any* regular contact with their dads.

What does it do to children when their fathers leave and never come back? The loss and hardship is profound, like being dropped on frozen ground. Studies show that when fathers are absent from their children, there is a sharp increase in youth violence, crime, educational failure, teenage pregnancies, and child poverty. Kids feel unloved, rejected, depressed and angry. Boys raised by single mothers will often take on a hyper-masculinity in order to separate from her and her femininity. They demean and rage against women. The lyrics in rap music are full of this anger. “Beat the B**** with a Bat” is one lyrical example among many. These boys are angry at women and angry at male authority figures. And they can stay like angry boys for decades—never growing into men.

Studies show that children with involved fathers are more confident, self-controlled, socially skilled, responsible, law abiding, and in a word, happier people. Boys with involved fathers can relate more confidently and decently to women. Daughters with involved fathers are less likely to be sexually active as teens because they don’t feel so desperate for a boy’s attention and giving their bodies to get it. They have higher standards for the character qualities of the boys they eventually date. Boys with responsible fathers are more likely to grow up to be responsible men, husbands and fathers themselves. Like father—like son.

So how can Antarctica penguins show more commitment to their kids than millions of American men? To start with, let’s be honest about our penguin counterparts. Their “commitment” comes more from instinct than from a conscious choice. While caring for one’s babies should also be a human instinct for fathers, it is obvious that human free-will overrules that instinct. Commitment is a choice for fathers. Commitment to a sport, career, money or singlehood is also a choice. A man chooses his commitments.

I recently spoke with a father whose primary commitment was to be the greatest sailor in the world. Dennis Conner is a living legend in the world of America’s Cup and grand-prix sailboat racing. He not only lives out his commitment, he demands that his crews be just as committed to their sport—above God and family. As he explains in one of his books,

“What we required of everyone was a total commitment to the commitment. No one would make the team unless he or she put winning the Cup ahead of everything else in their lives: families, social lives, money, sex, religion, friendships. It had to be give all or nothing at all. I have a family of my own and I guess it could be argued that I have not been the best father or husband in the world. I chose, for better or worse, to commit myself to a particular goal. My insistence on the commitment to the commitment has led me to believe I may be a bit abnormal... and no doubt some people view me as insane.” (Comeback, p. 66)

Two years after demanding this highest level of commitment, Conner and his team won back the America’s Cup from Australia. But he lost his wife and family.

I have a lot of respect for Dennis and other men like him who are completely committed to be the best in the world at their craft, sport or career. After visiting him at his marina office in San Diego (it is full of trophies), I began to wonder what it would be like to be world-class at something—at anything? And then it hit me. Why not be world-class in the most important craft in the world—being a father? Driving up the coast to

my wife and kids, I decided that I would be as committed as Dennis to be a world-class father to my kids and husband to my wife. What if all fathers committed themselves to be world-class—at fathering?

Whether we follow the example of world-class athletes or Antarctica penguins, successful fathering demands the best out of a man. Here are seven ways for dads to be committed to their kids.

1. Love and care for your wife. Parenting ideally takes two people. Family life can sour quickly if the mother is left alone with all the childcare. Ask what your wife needs regularly, and do it for her. As you care for her, even the kids will feel your care.

Remember how the penguin fathers waited four months for the mothers to eat and come back? You won't want to give your wife four months off, but encourage her to go out sometimes while you stay home with the kids. Your wife needs breaks too. (And when you stay home with the kids—don't *ever* call it baby-sitting! You are **never** baby-sitting your kids—you are fathering them).

2. Commitment means sacrifice

Many men imagine that their lives don't need to change after they become dads. They continue to spend the same amount of hours playing fantasy football or golf as they did before fatherhood. They refuse to trade in the two-seat sports car for a mini-van. That last one was personally hard for me, but I chose to embrace fatherhood for all it's worth!

Unless you are wealthy enough to own an extra sports car, men need to postpone some of these possessions or past-times for a season. Remember, these sacrifices are usually temporary (ranging from three to eighteen years. Yet even I will have a two-seat coupe again someday). But the personal sacrifices for the sake of kids and family gives a father far more satisfaction than driving a Mercedes Benz 500SL AMG ever will. I swear to it (even though I've never owned one, but I'd still swear it's true).

3. Spend as much time as possible with your kids.

American fathers (who live at home) spend an average of six hours a *week* with their kids. That would make a penguin just shake his head. Play and have fun with your kids. If for some reason you don't know how to do this, your kids will show you how—they're experts at it! Loosen up and take off the tie. Ride bikes, make mud pies, play catch, wrestle in the grass, and read to them. Get them into sports. Don't hide from the family behind a newspaper. Every old father I know says the same thing as he looks back, "I really miss those times with the kids. And now...they're gone."

4. Tell your kids that you love them (for dad's that are away from home—use the phone). I know hundreds of people who never *once* heard their fathers say they loved them. Is this asking too much from fathers? And why not also say the second most desired words that children want to hear; "I'm proud of you." Say both of these as often as you can. Don't make your kids have to guess how you feel about them. Even if you're Norwegian or from another culture that makes it feel "unnatural" to you—do it anyway!

5. Teach them values.

You are responsible to give your kids direction in their lives and relationships. Values give direction. Consider the most important values in your life, and talk about them and model them as best as you can. Choose your favorite three values and ask your kids to choose their favorite three. Post them on your refrigerator. My son's are framed and posted on his bedroom wall. Teach your kids gratitude and they will find happiness no matter what happens in life. Values like patience, kindness, generosity, compassion, courage, honesty and respect will enrich their relationships. Values will guide their choices in life. What values guide yours?

6. Let your kids know you.

Your kids can live with you for eighteen years and still not know you. I know many people who say they never really knew their fathers because their fathers never let them know anything about themselves. These dads are like ghosts. They don't really show themselves to anyone.

Even if you had hardships or flunked third grade as a kid, you can still let your child know how you felt and overcame difficult times. Children love to hear your stories and know about your life. Not only can you learn from your past, but they can learn from your past. Don't be a ghost story.

7. Don't be a Lone Ranger Father

Men need other men to inspire and support them as fathers. During the Antarctica winter, all of the penguin fathers huddled together to stay warm during those four brutally cold months--all with eggs on their feet. Just as they relied on each other, get together often with other committed dads. You won't feel so alone, and you can learn from each other as well.

Commitment is not just for penguin fathers. It is the hallmark of world-class dads. It is the most admired and wanted quality in men according to women. As in the motto of the Marines, "Semper Fi" (Always Faithful), it is the key to success in the military, sports, business, marriage and fatherhood.

As more American fathers are known for this kind of commitment, I have the odd dream that someday a new documentary is made, called *March of the Dads*. And if the penguins in Antarctica could watch it, they would be impressed with *us!*

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