

That Sinking Feeling of Failure

Contributed by Chris Spicer
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Have your best intentions as a father ever ended in disaster? Have you ever fallen flat on your face with your kids? I certainly have. But when faced with that sinking feeling of failure, I always remember a story my dad used to tell me about his days in the Royal Air Force as a boat builder.

To complete his training and begin work on air/sea rescue launches, Dad had to pass a final test that involved building and successfully launching a small wooden sail boat. Being the perfectionist he was, he would have undoubtedly read every available book, listened to every piece of advice and followed the plans down to the last detail. But like many areas of life, the real test came when he put theory into practice!

With his classmates watching, expectations were running high as the order was given to launch the boat. Believing he'd done everything right, Dad was fully expecting his creation to slide effortlessly into the sea to the cheers of the on-looking crowd. Imagine then his shock and horror when his boat began to behave in a manner more suited to a submarine than a sailboat. With water filling the boat at an alarming rate, Dad looked on as his best efforts began to sink.

With some amusement, the instructor simply told my father to retrieve the vessel and try again! He didn't know that this was normal for that particular kind of boat build. Once the planking was thoroughly soaked, it would then swell and close any remaining gaps. Sure enough, a second launch proved to be successful, as his boat-building efforts took to the ocean like a proverbial duck to water.

How often in our attempts to be good fathers have we suffered a similar fate? Working hard to piece together the various components that make up the role and responsibility of fatherhood, we watch in amazement as our best attempts end in disaster. Having listened to the advice of others and put in considerable effort, we're embarrassed by our failure to launch and feel like giving up. At times like these, we need to copy Airman Thomas Rudolf Spicer's response: retrieve what's lost and try again. Sometimes it takes the experiences of everyday life to highlight the gaps in our theories and give us the opportunity to become a better dad.

If time travel were possible, I'd love to go back and talk to myself as a twenty-four-year-old kid about to make the first of four visits to the delivery suite. I'd tell him that he's going to experience moments where he will feel a failure as a father. I'd help him see that the idea of a "perfect dad" is a myth, and all that life asks is that we be the very best we possibly can be. Then I'd share with him what I've learned from those gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, soul-destroying moments that all dads inevitably experience when they realize they've messed up or missed out on life's one opportunity to be there for their kids. Because -- make no mistake about it -- mistakes will be made.

However, rather than letting our mistakes label us, just like my dad with his wooden sailboat, we need to learn how to salvage what's been lost and start over. When handled correctly, most obstacles can become opportunities to grow and become a better person.

Here are some things I've learned about managing mistakes and how I try to counteract that sinking feeling that failure inevitably brings:

- **Say Sorry.** Whenever we make a blunder, our number one response should be to apologize -- not merely muttering "sorry," hoping that our lame response will make the problem go away. By showing our children that a real apology involves saying things like, "I'm sorry for …," "It was wrong of me to …," "Please, will you forgive me?" In this way we help both the offender and the offended to retrieve what's been lost. And by being pro-active and paying attention to the problem, we take responsibility for our role as fathers and avoid frustrating our kids.

- **Be Response-Able.** When we choose to respond rather than react to our failures, we take the first step toward retrieving what's been lost and position ourselves for a fresh start. When we allow past failures or present circumstances to rule our feelings, a stressful day makes us edgy and a needy or careless or irresponsible child can push us over the edge. But just as a light bulb responds to electricity and a human reacts to it, a father who takes responsibility for his actions allows his inner convictions, rather than his circumstances, to rule his day. In this way he teaches his children how to handle difficult circumstances and respond appropriately.

- **Look for Lures.** Taking a prominent place on my office desk is a vintage fishing lure. Yes, I love to fish, but it's there not to remind me of my favorite pastime, but to remind me of my priorities as a husband, father and grandfather.

Work, leisure and even church can be a distraction from my number one responsibility and nothing is more likely to hinder a child's development than a home where the dad is socially and emotionally distant.

No matter how attractive that promotion might seem -- or how alluring that new toy for which we're working extra hours to purchase may be -- we need to ask, "Are they luring us away from that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to care for those precious, God-given gifts of our children?"

• **Build a Buddy System.** To be the best we possibly can be, every father needs to institute a personal buddy system. When a friend of mine learned to swim, his instructor's first step was to institute a buddy system. With a proficient swimmer by his side at all times, my friend felt empowered to succeed in what for him was a whole new learning experience.

Every father needs a friend who has successfully navigated his way through the turbulent waters of raising children. This buddy is a mentor who's only a call away; he's someone you can ask for advice or bounce ideas off whenever you're struggling. He's a cheerleader who celebrates the wins and a true companion who encourages you in the losses. He's a confidante who knows your strengths and weaknesses, someone with whom you feel totally safe to be honest and real.

Deciding not to make the same mistake twice is never enough. We all need accountability partners who will journey with us through the ups and downs of implementing change in our lives. We need a buddy who asks the hard questions and, more than anything else, makes sure we never ever give up.

• **Never Ever Give In.** In the fall of 1941, the Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill, visited a school to listen to traditional songs and deliver a speech that would resonate in the minds of parents and pupils alike for years to come. The essence of Winston's talk was simply, "Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never -- in nothing great or small, large or petty -- never give in."

For all those who find themselves being called "dad," Churchill's motto is good advice. When faced with failure and struggling with that horrible sinking feeling, let those words echo in your heart: "Never, never, never give in."

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