

The Men They Will Become

If there is a measure of good parenthood, it could be when our children exceed our own achievements.

~Tom Haggai

I had become a father, and I had no idea what I was doing. As the nurse prepared our newborn son, David, to go home with us, I said, “I can’t believe you’re so irresponsible as to send this defenseless baby home with us.”

She laughed. “You’ll be fine. Besides, he knows how to tell you what he needs.”

It was the beginning of a lifelong journey that, two years later, would include a sidekick when David’s little brother, Mark, joined the mix.

I remember wondering if I was up to my new role and how I could raise the boys to become great men—not men of stature or prominence, but men of character, integrity and positive influence. At six pounds, thirteen ounces, David was, in effect, like a lump of clay—clay that Karen and I could, to some degree, shape. There was only one problem: Instructions were not included.

A few years later, when our sons were toddlers, I stumbled across a piece of advice that served as a guiding principle to help us raise them. It was a simple yet powerful twelve-word adage: “Always treat your children like the adults they are capable of becoming.” As the father of two sons, I modified it to: “Always treat your sons like the men they are capable of becoming.”

This advice spoke volumes to Karen and me about what really matters in life and about being intentional in the way we raised David and Mark. We asked ourselves: “Do we have a plan to build values into their lives instead of assuming it will happen through osmosis? What are the most important values to teach them?” So, in addition to our church life, we began having daily devotionals and used biblical role models in addition to positive sports figures.

As the boys grew, we strived to have meaningful daily dialogue with them. On warm summer nights, we walked around the neighborhood on what we called, “Night Walks, Night Talks.” We talked about everything on their young minds. And the darkness served a purpose. It was a calming catalyst that encouraged discussion, eliminated distractions and created teachable moments to bond us.

We also wanted our home to be a place for their friends to gather. So, Grandpa Larson built a sandbox and bolted a basketball hoop to an old oak tree in the back yard. In just a few days, my grass had been turned into a dirt court by running, jumping feet. Dirt patches and tree stumps marked the bases for our baseball diamond while the north end zone of our football field was just beyond the willow tree. The south end zone was past the evergreen near the chain-link fence. In one corner was the swing set, a place for the plastic pool, and space for a tent or to build a fort. Our yard served as the “go-to” playground for the neighborhood kids for nearly a decade.

One night, when I was reading my sons a bedtime story, I realized something: Just as the story reached the climax, I glanced at the expression on their faces. I saw wonder in their eyes and awe on their faces. I realized I often missed those expressions by reading to them.

I stopped reading stories to them. Instead, I started telling them stories I created so I could watch their faces. I made up my own recurring characters with a good boy and bad boy

facing a moral dilemma. Near the end of each story, I asked, “Now, what would you do?” Then we discussed the right thing to do before I revealed how the character handled the situation.

This full-eye-contact storytelling kept them fully engaged in the story and kept me fully engaged in them. It’s astonishing what you see, and how connected you feel, when you gaze into your child’s eyes.

There is perhaps no better way to reach and teach kids than to literally climb into their world. David and Mark lived in the world of sports, particularly football. So, I joined them there as we played backyard football every summer and fall.

I played steady quarterback and pitted my sons against each other on offense and defense. Thus, one son would win the game, and the other would lose. They hated losing, particularly Mark. When he was ten and lost to his older brother, he shed a few tears. I wondered how to teach him a life lesson through loss. After the game, when he regained his composure, we sat on the floor in my bedroom, our backs leaning against the wall. With a Cherry Coke and a chocolate-covered strawberry in hand, we talked.

I learned Mark was upset about more than his loss; he was disappointed with his attitude toward losing.

“Dad, I hate losing—and the way I act when I lose,” he confided.

“I know, Mark. What can you do about that?” I asked, sipping my Coke.

“I need a better attitude, I guess.”

“Yeah? So, how can you develop a better attitude?”

“I don’t know.” He took a bite of his chocolate-covered strawberry.

“We all love to win, Mark. But sometimes we need to care more about others than ourselves. When you’re angry about losing, you steal your brother’s joy of winning. Why not be happy for him?”

The light went on. It was a moving moment to see him willing to celebrate his brother’s victory—at his expense. When you climb into your kid’s world, it’s remarkable what you’ll witness.

Many years later, I was playing golf with my co-workers. My sons were away at college. On the tenth green, two colleagues approached me with a question I didn’t see coming.

“Jim, what is your greatest achievement?” Lisa asked.

I paused. “You mean greatest career achievement?”

Michelle clarified. “No, what is your greatest achievement in life?”

I thought for a moment. “My greatest achievement in life is that my sons embrace the values Karen and I hold most dear.”

For me, this encounter was another precious moment. It was the moment I realized that the random advice I had stumbled upon years ago, and practiced so often, paid big dividends.

Looking back, Karen and I attempted to treat our young sons like the men they were capable of becoming. Today, at thirty-four and thirty-two, we believe our sons became those great men. And then some.

—James C. Magruder—