

## *Creating a Strong Family* Appreciation and Affection: The Greatest Gift a Father Can Give His Children

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

What makes a good father? That’s the question that motivated a 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 a colleague’s 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?”

The colleague, a father of three daughters and a fellow who had written a doctoral dissertation on fatherhood many years before and still enormously interested in the question, hazarded a guess.

“Well, Kathy, 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. Since the early 1970s 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 a disconnection between many 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 do not particularly like how our society is designed in this regard. Generally speaking, 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, 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 two-parent family together. Its importance cannot be stressed too much, and the relationship needs to be nurtured ever so carefully.

Before we 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 our own families.

Kathy’s research was a winner in this regard. Erica wanted to know what her father was doing one morning. He said he was writing about the gifts that fathers can give their children. He told her the 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 7-year-old 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.

**Ways to show your wife you care:**

- Turn off the television while eating meals.
- Tell your wife frequently that you love her (and check with her to see what *frequently* means).
- Open the door for her.
- Hold hands once in awhile.

- Hold her tight, especially when you know things aren't going well.
- Verbally empathize with her feelings: "I understand you're upset and I would be too."
- Do something for her that's out of the ordinary. Surprise her.
- Value her opinion when decisions need to be made, big or small.
- Help her when she needs help, without being asked.
- *Show* your kids how much you love their mom.

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