



## The Crucial Role of Fathers

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On many occasions, the Bible portrays God as a loving father. Psalm 103:13 states, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.” The New Testament refers to God as Father at least 275 times. Unfortunately, one of the effects of man’s fallen condition is that the image of God has become distorted by dysfunctional models of fatherhood. Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father which art in heaven . . .” (Matthew 6:9), but this can be problematic for those who have had a negative experience of male parenting.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther once said, “I have difficulty praying the Lord’s Prayer because whenever I say ‘Our Father’, I think of my own father who was hard, unyielding and relentless. I cannot help but think of God in that way” (Gregorovius, VIIIa, 249). Dr Ronald Levant, in his book *Masculinity Reconstructed*, states, “men are supposed to be sensitive, caring, enlightened dads who are really there for and involved with their kids . . . The only problem is many men don’t know how to be that kind of father, for the simple reason that their own dads weren’t that kind of father to them (107).

One of the sad realities of modern-day families is the tragedy of absent fathers. Former American president Barak Obama commented, “Too many fathers are MIA [missing in action], too many fathers are AWOL [absent without leave], missing from too many lives and too many homes” (New York Times, 16 June 2008). According to a report by the Centre for Social Justice, there is a “tsunami of family breakdown battering the UK”. The research indicated that children from fatherless homes were 50 per cent more likely to fail at school, likely to experience low self-esteem, struggle to make friends and suffer from anxiety or depression (Fractured Families, 2013).



The crucial role of fathers cannot be overstated. Ellen White observed, “I saw that but few fathers realise their responsibility” (The Adventist Home, 211). Research indicates that the father’s role is one of the greatest predictors of the child’s failure or success with school and social relationships. The effect of absent fathers on boys includes, psychological maladjustment; academic/school underperformance; antisocial behaviour; difficulty establishing and continuing intimate relationships (ACT CIC [actcic.org.uk/fatherless-home](http://actcic.org.uk/fatherless-home)).

The unavailability of fathers necessitates the consistent presence of positive male role-models to mitigate their absence. Regarding girls, Melodie Mack of Healing Hearts and Family Counselling, says “Sometimes dads don’t realise how important they are to their growing young ladies, and if they did, it may shock them”. Girls with emotionally available fathers tend to have higher self-esteem; be more likely to get on with others; more likely to be more successful in education; more self-nurturing and socially independent; less likely to have abusive relationships; less likely to experience depression; less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; less likely to be truant or delinquent; less likely to experience body image problems and less likely to become sexually active at a young age.

When it comes to effective parenting, not just any dad will do. Children need fathers who are spiritually mature, emotionally available and sensitively responsive. God Himself sets the example. He assures us, “It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). It is also highly significant that the Bible states that one of the effects of the last-day message to be given to the world will be to, “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers . . .” (Malachi 4:6).



Fathers must be intentional about spending time with their children. However, clocking hours with children is less important than how we relate to them when we are together. Fathers are counselled, “associate with them in their work and in their sports, and win their confidence. Cultivate friendship with them, especially with your sons” (The Adventist Home, 222).

Again, dads are encouraged to “combine affection with authority, kindness and sympathy with firm restraint. Give some of your leisure hours to your children; become acquainted with them (Ministry of Healing, 392). It is vitally important that fathers cultivate a balance between work life and home life. Mrs White goes so far as to suggest that “If he [father] is engaged in business which almost wholly closes the door of usefulness to his family, he should seek other employment which will not prevent him from devoting some time to his children” (The Adventist Home, 221).

Successful fathering is about accepting a vital role in the growth of a human being. The primary role of fathers is to successfully reflect the image of God to their children so that through his example, they may become acquainted with the character of God. Fathers are called upon to pass on a spiritual heritage to their children to prepare their hearts for eternity. To this end, God states, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him” (Genesis 18:19, NIV). As fallible people, we cannot perfectly reflect the character of God, but it has been said that children do not need perfect parents. They need 'good enough parents.' However, even when such parents are lacking, the psalmist identifies God as a "father to the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5).