

Coming down the home stretch!

Fathers Forming Their Sons, Ages 11 – 16.

The main part of the father's job with his boys begins when they enter adolescence. A father acts in two significant ways:¹

1. He protects his wife from his sons' tendencies toward occasional aggression and disobedience; she needs him, more than ever, to step in and keep the teenage boys in line.

2. He protects his sons by strengthening them – *in their conscience, judgment and character* – so they can later protect themselves and their own loved ones.

A father treats his teenage boys as near-adults (in everything but experience) and teaches what they need to know in order to succeed in life as honorable, competent men, especially in the workplace. In other words, he teaches them to leave behind their childhood and enter confidently into the world of men.

Pre-teen and adolescent boys need a manly father, not a second mother or a sibling-like *pal* or a laid-back shadowy figure around the house. Experience has shown this: If boys this age do not respect their father as a manly moral leader, then they follow after other figures, mostly professional athletes, entertainers and celebrities.

Many men find that they get along very well with their children as they grow through adolescence, more than ever before, in fact. Since men are generally more comfortable with adults than children, they enjoy dealing with their nearly-grown offspring, and they are often highly effective at it. If they take the trouble to step in and seriously give adult-level guidance to their adolescent kids, talking adult to adult – an attitude that most adolescents like – they do an excellent job in giving final finish to their children's upbringing. Their leadership is critical at this juncture in the kids' lives; in fact, it

turns out to be at least as important as whatever playfulness might have been missing earlier when their boys were in grammar school.

Eyes on the finish line!

It has been said, "Children will tend to grow up to our expectations, or down to them." The first task of a father as leader, therefore, is to set a high, realistic ideal for the adult life of each of his sons, regardless of what they later do for a living. Briefly put, the ideal is this: By the time my son is in college, he should be a competent, responsible, considerate, generous man who is committed to live by Christian principles all his life no matter what the cost. My son should grow to be realistically self-confident, learned and cultured, tough-minded and assertive, shrewd and savvy (street-smart), able and willing to serve others with his abilities, self-starting and self-reliant, nobody's fool or pushover.

At the same time, in his heart he should still have the same great loves he had as a child: love for God, his family, for life itself, and for truth. A father should want his sons to have all the powers of adult life, while retaining the hearts they had as children – or as Christ put it, they should grow to be "wise as serpents, and innocent as doves."

Crossing the finish line!

Remember this principle: If the *why* is strong enough, we can find the *how*. If we are moved by the passionate ideal of forming our sons to become great men, we will – with God's help – find the way.

Your children will not remember the specific details of what you taught them, but all their lives they will remember what was important to you. The first step toward improving your sons is, therefore, working to improve yourself. If you want your sons to become readers, you must become one yourself. If you want them to love God and

¹ Excerpted and adapted from an essay by James B. Stenson, *Coming Down the Home Stretch: How Fathers Form Their Sons* (ages 11 - 16).

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practice their faith, you need to do so yourself. If you want them to go beyond mediocrity, you must try to let them see in you a manly excellence and a life moved by passionate love – a life that gives glory to God! If you want to be a great father, you must first work at becoming a great man.

As the founder of *Opus Dei* put it: 90% of the job of forming your children is done at home. The schools and centers of formation are meant to assist you and build on the solid base that is already there, adding the finishing touches.

Don't count overmuch on sports to form character. Boys need development of their minds as well. Encourage their learning and culture, their sense of responsibility and professionalism.

Catechism lessons alone will not build lifelong religious commitment. Knowing doctrine well is only part of building an interior life; piety must be practiced too. Your daily habits of prayer will set the standard for your children. Try to pray the family rosary together at least once a week; you'll soon see how much it helps. In addition to the rosary, take a few minutes occasionally to pray with them in silence, such as at perpetual adoration or in visiting the Blessed Sacrament. Ideally, your piety and theirs should include frequent confession, communion, and daily habits of prayer and scripture reading.

Whatever difficulties you may have in communicating with your teens, it is precisely now – as they rapidly approach adulthood – that they need your experienced leadership. What's more, they want your guidance, in spite of any appearances to the contrary. Their friends, coaches and teachers may seem to understand them better at the moment, but in truth, you know your sons in greater depth than any of them. Only you know them as their father, in their unique and unrepeatable identity. You have much experience and wisdom to pass on to them.

How? – Through friendship! Not the friendship of *pals*, but that of a father who takes the time to give undivided attention to his children, to show them his interest and affection, to respect them as near-adults (remember, they *crave* respect).

Within the context of fatherly friendship you can work effectively to form your sons in the ideals we have been discussing. Ask yourself these questions: Based on my own experience (good and bad) and what I've seen in others' lives, what can I teach my sons about responsible adult life? What do I know now that I wish I had known when I was thirteen or fourteen?

Looking forward to my son's teen years, can I begin now to help him on any of the following points?

1. *Making the most of studies, turning out excellent work, planning and meeting goals, setting priorities, balancing studies with school activities and sports;*
2. *Discovering and pursuing his talents, cultivating possible career interests;*
3. *Social graces, dealing with adults as well as other teens, sizing up people;*
4. *Respect for the dignity of women, patient long-term training in what it means to be a loving and supportive husband;*
5. *Thinking critically about and acting independently from the media, entertainment and teen culture;*
6. *Staying informed about public affairs, living as a responsible & engaged citizen.*
7. *Managing finances, shopping intelligently, knowing malarkey when he sees it; and*
8. *Frequent confession and communion, daily habits of prayer and scripture reading.*