

# The Science of Fatherhood



# The Science of Fatherhood

by

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**Note:** *The Science of Fatherhood* was first published exclusively for members of the Knights of Columbus. To find out more about why you should become a Knight, visit [kofc.org/joinus](http://kofc.org/joinus).

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# THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 1

## SECULAR STUDIES SHOW THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF DADS FOR THE FAMILY

Here's a message you don't hear too often: As a father, you matter a lot. You are needed at home and in the wider world to do things only a dad can do. You can make all the difference in the lives of your children no matter their age. Just show up for them, make the effort to be with them, and offer them a warm, engaged and masculine presence.

Though common sense to most, these simple facts too often don't make it into the mainstream culture amid a sea of negative views on masculinity and family life. But the truth is coming out in all the best secular studies in psychology, social science and family dynamics. The bottom line is that a father is vital to the health and welfare of his children and the family. Yet the sad fact is, about a quarter of U.S. children live apart from their dad in any given year.

If a father is absent, studies indicate that children are:

**7** times more likely to become pregnant as a teen.

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**2** times more likely to suffer obesity.

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**2** times more likely to drop out of high school.

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**M**ore likely to abuse drugs, experience physical or sexual abuse, and run afoul of the law.

In addition:

**90%** of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.

**85%** of all children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes.

Children with involved fathers are **70%** less likely to drop out of school.

With these statistics, we are not trying to make men feel guilty, especially if they are not able to be with their children for reasons beyond their control. We seek not to drag men down but to build them up.

Here are the first two things you need to know:

**You don't have to be a perfect father because there is no such thing.**

**You just have to be a good-enough father who tries his best despite the many imperfections we all have – a father who shows up and makes a positive difference in the life of his family.**

As Knights of Columbus, as committed men of faith, we may take for granted a husband and father's irreplaceable role in the family. Whether it's from the pages of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or a talk at a recent Catholic men's conference, we are familiar with the themes: a father's call to lead spiritually, to be present, pray, instruct and encourage. Yet even with this knowledge, we all face difficulties in family life and can find ourselves questioning our role.

In the six sections of *The Science of Fatherhood*, we will offer all men encouragement and document the importance of fathers from some unexpected sources.

## THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD

In recent decades, a powerful yet quiet revival of sorts has been brewing in the most unlikely of places. In the largely secular academic world, a group of scholars — many of them with no clear link to faith — have been busy exploring the “science of fatherhood.” What difference does a dad make? What happens to his children's future emotional, physical and financial health if he checks out or abandons his family? How do kids turn out when they have a strong relationship with their dad at home?

To answer these questions, these scholars employ the tools of their trade: not the catechism, but research.

Deep within the pages of secular journals and annals of academic conferences, these scholars offer a new and emerging body of “father facts,” a potentially explosive set of insights which can illuminate our daily routines and inspire us to be better dads.

But far more than statistics, **The Science of Fatherhood** will help you as a dad in two unique ways:

At a time when family and marriage are under attack in the media and legislatures, you will learn how to apply to your own life the data which show that children flourish and succeed in stable families.

At a time when our culture has unleashed a multi-pronged offensive to produce a false divide between faith and science, you will learn the facts which allow you to bridge this divide in simple, common-sense ways.

## AN EXPERT'S VIEW

To sort out the issues, we consult first with a leader in the science of fatherhood, University of Virginia professor of sociology W. Bradford Wilcox, who is also director of the National Marriage Project. Cutting through the forest of studies and statistics, he provides a practical approach for men.

“I’d encourage ordinary dads,” Wilcox said, “to think about the ways in which they are doing a good job as protectors, disciplinarians, playmates and coaches to their children.”

Mothers, of course, do these things for their children as much as dads. Yet for the most part, there is a distinctive difference in the ways mothers and fathers interact with their children. Kids need both approaches, with a mom and a dad who work together, for a well-rounded upbringing.

With this in mind, according to Wilcox, here are four areas where you as a dad are well-positioned to show up and lead:



## **PROTECTORS** \_\_\_\_\_

“Dads are much more attentive to protecting their kids both physically and otherwise. So, for instance, dads are more likely to be attentive to the security of their homes, checking locks at night.”

## **DISCIPLINARIANS** \_\_\_\_\_

“Dads play a distinct role when it comes to disciplining their kids,” Wilcox continued. “They’re more likely to be attentive to family rules, to be consistent in applying those rules, and to be more authoritative in their approach to disciplining children. This distinctive style of discipline is important for kids to be exposed to, especially because it prepares them to function well in more authoritative institutions, like the military or college sports.”

## **ROUGH-HOUSERS** \_\_\_\_\_

“Dads play with their children in distinctive ways. They are much more likely to be engaging and exciting with their kids, and kids benefit from the rough-and-tumble play and other forms of exciting play that they have with their dads. We know that kids, for instance, spend more time roughhousing with dads, and this has real benefits for them. Kids who rough-house with their dads a lot, for instance, are more popular and socially confident.”

## **COACHES** \_\_\_\_\_

“Dads typically challenge their kids to embrace life’s opportunities and endure life’s difficulties. They are challenging guides to the outside world.”

Got that, Dad? Here are your four assignments:

**1** Make your home a safe haven.

**2** Man up to your role as a disciplinarian.

**3** Rough-house with your kids.

**4** And next time they whine, challenge them to push through life's difficulties.

With these four simple steps, you can move from good to better and maybe even approach great in the dad department. Make the effort and your kids will see the hero within you.



## **THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 2**

### **MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR ‘FATHERHOOD EDGE’ FOR YOUR CHILDREN**

Let’s make a gutsy assumption. You have no intention of walking out on your wife and children — and never will.

Kudos, Dad!

If this assumption is correct and your marriage is for keeps, you have already given your kids a gift beyond measure. All of the (bleak!) scientific data on fatherless homes does not apply to you. The stability of your marriage has laid the foundation for your kids to achieve a remarkable set of outcomes in their future emotional, physical and financial health.

You really should sleep easier knowing that your kids are in all likelihood on track for success by virtue of your daily, fatherly presence. Whether it's the chance of mental illness, obesity, developmental disorders, substance abuse, addiction, teen pregnancy or juvenile delinquency, your kids live in a world apart from the statistics outlined in our first Science of Fatherhood chapter.

You have given them a statistically valid “stay out of jail” (for life) card as well as better outcomes across a range of social categories, including:

Graduating from high school.

Rate of obesity. Behavior disorders.

Likelihood of committing a crime.

Likelihood of running away from home.

The sociologists even have a name for you. By staying with your family, you are what they call a “good enough” dad: a special class of fathers whose commitment to marriage has placed their children on the road to success.

Mission accomplished?

Not so fast, Dad. There's more to this picture, and after all, you have never been one to do just the minimum.

## FROM 'GOOD ENOUGH' TO 'BETTER'

Let's start with a comparison to put fatherhood in perspective. We know that simply "showing up" to our workplace is the minimum we do for success. The next raise or promotion is tied not just to our presence but to our quality of work. Sure, being there is important, but we know that many specific targets will be met only through effort, grit and persistence. Likewise in our marriages. While "showing up" does put some deposits in the relational bank, we know it's not enough.

To get what's at stake, we need to find a way to understand and measure the quality of our presence as a dad.

We know the familiar yardstick: "Men measure themselves by their success in business or other such area of life," observes Dr. John Cuddeback, a philosopher, dad and farmer. The car, the paycheck, the clothes, the golf membership — we know well these and other metrics of male success.

Yet a "different model of family life" is called for, Cuddeback argues, at the center of which is a "husband and father whose very success in life is fundamentally, though not solely, seen and judged in terms of what he does *in the home*. Indeed, a central measure of his manhood will be the quality of his presence in the home."

Now instead of two tribes of men — "absent" fathers and "good enough" fathers — we can see an entire range of "good enough" dads whose quality of presence varies, who choose to do — or not do — certain things in the home.

Can this quality of presence be measured? Isn't it too difficult to quantify?

## YOUR FATHERHOOD EDGE

In fact, the emerging science of fatherhood is answering these questions with refreshing and authoritative candor. The data point decisively toward what we already know from other sources, including the riches of our Catholic faith. That is, the quality of our presence matters deeply.

Earlier, we noted how dads play a distinctive role in the home in four areas: as protectors, disciplinarians, rough-housers and coaches. Simply put, these are parts of your job description, where you are built to lead, to exert a significant difference and asymmetric impact. Call it your fatherhood edge.

Yet this edge is only a small glimpse of the tremendous impact you make through your involvement in the home. Consider these six positive outcomes in the social, behavioral, emotional and academic lives of your children, courtesy of The Fatherhood Project at Massachusetts General Hospital:

1. “Children who feel greater closeness to their father are twice as likely to enter college or find stable employment after high school.”

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2. “For both boys and girls, positive father engagement is associated with lower levels of impulsivity and higher ratings of self-control.”

3. “Father involvement leads to better problem-solving competence, stress tolerance, greater empathy and moral sensitivity.”

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4. “Children who grow up without an emotionally present father tend to place responsibility for their problems on others and the world.”

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5. “Father engagement reduces psychological problems and rates of depression in young women.”

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6. “High levels of dad involvement are correlated with sociability and confidence in children.”

With these facts, the good-enough dad looks a lot better. Yet when our kids are grown, we don't want to look back and say we did a “good-enough” job. By God's grace, let's give them something more. Let's move from good to great.



## THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 3

**PRAYER HAS A MEASURABLE VALUE THAT CAN BE APPLIED  
TO YOUR LIFE**

There are so many things that you accomplish every day as a husband and father. If you think of your duties in terms of financial markets, you manage a vast, diversified portfolio in always turbulent times. And like a trader, you value some activities more than others. Perhaps doing the dishes is a high priority. Skipping it, after all, could get you quickly downgraded as a husband.

To do your job well, you need reliable data and solid feedback to determine where to invest your limited time, energy and attention. In this context, it may be surprising to find that prayer is proven to give high returns even in secular studies.





46% of American men and

64% of women pray daily.

A clear majority 63% report that prayer is an  
“essential” part of their identity.

Wherever you find yourself in these statistics, there is new data on prayer to suggest that a reevaluation is in order. Of course, you are familiar with religious sources extolling the importance of prayer and of developing your spiritual life. Often these exhortations from your priest, a parish leader or Catholic speaker go into your folder marked “when I get more time.”

## BETTER LIVING THROUGH PRAYER

But consider this data from secular sources in the arena of social science. Daily prayer is being shown scientifically to yield a number of positive outcomes, as outlined in the following quotes:

### **Better moods:**

“Prayer and meditation increase levels of dopamine, which is associated with states of well-being and joy.”

### **Improved physical health:**

“Individuals who prayed daily were shown to be 40 percent less likely to have high blood pressure than those without a regular prayer practice.”

## **Self-control:**

“Having people pray for those in need reduced the amount of aggression they expressed following an anger-inducing experience. In other words, prayer helps you not lose your cool.”

## **Overcoming hardship:**

“People who prayed for others were less vulnerable to the negative physical health effects associated with financial stress... Prayer offsets the negative health effects of stress.”

These outcomes are impressive. They appeal to us at a visceral level — our own physical and psychological well-being — but what about your life as a husband and father? Do your investments in prayer have any discernable impact on your children?

## **A FATHER’S RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**

If you’re like many dads, you have a familiar script about religion that goes something like this: “I’m basically a good person but I leave religion instruction to my wife. She is closer to God and teaches the kids a lot. I pray when I have time, but the day gets away from me. I know I need to do better.”

Well-meaning though these sentiments may be, they need a reality check — a full-scale market revaluation. Consider that recent social science points to how, in the workplace, the mood of the boss sets the tone and is as contagious as the common cold. Employees come to adapt to and even adopt their supervisor’s emotional state.

These realities of the workplace also apply to the home, where your own habits of prayer, or lack thereof, have been proven to be contagious as they spread virally to your children.

A while ago, Swiss researchers measured the handing down of faith from parents to children. They found that the father's attendance at church was the single most important factor affecting a child's future church attendance. Children are keenly focused on mimicking their father. Your prayer life is under a microscope. As Bishop Thomas Olmsted summarized this research in his pastoral letter *Into the Breach*, "If a man's children see him read the Scriptures, they are more likely to remain in the Faith."

Why this outsized influence? Children, especially boys, look to their father for guidance as they move into the world outside the home. If dad brings them to Mass and prays with them at home, kids will feel it is part of their identity as they grow to maturity.

"The leadership of the man within a family is like the law of gravity," concludes one family expert, "you can try to wish it away; you can argue it's unfair. But walk off the edge of a building and you plummet. Likewise with fatherhood — try to ignore it and your civilization collapses."

It's not too late to avoid a major market correction, or worse, in the spiritual life of your children. You can throw away your old script and prioritize prayer in the home going forward. Find that comfortable chair in the living room and let your children catch you reading the Bible. Then, let the viral nature of your spiritual leadership in the home do its work.



## THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 4

### YOUR GOOD FRIENDS ARE KEY TO YOUR LONG, HAPPY LIFE

These are moments you know all too well. You feel the tug to reach out and call an old friend but your day seems so full of obligations that you put it off. You know that your parish men’s group meets early on Saturday but you skip it — again. You remember that a neighbor emailed you a while back about grabbing breakfast but you feel so behind at work that there’s simply no time.

We live in an age so fast-paced that Pope Francis coined a word to describe it: “rapidification.” As a result of the demands on our time, many of us are fast becoming unpracticed in the art of friendship. The statistics tell an alarming story.

In 1984, Americans told social scientists they had an average of three friends with whom they could discuss the most important things. By 2005, that number slipped to about two. Today, even in our hyper-connected age of social media, nearly 25 percent of respondents in one study reported that they have no one to “truly trust,” three-times the proportion from 20 years ago. Something is clearly amiss, but is it any wonder?

From Siri to Alexa and driverless cars, our age of technology has prompted us to do everything now and often alone. But when it comes to friendship, we seem stuck. We may be able to click buttons to amass an average of 155 Facebook “friends” apiece, but nothing has yet been invented that enables us to immediately acquire deep and meaningful friendships.

“Social capital,” explains author Yuval Levin,  
“is built up very, very slowly and  
gradually in people’s lives.”

We struggle with the sheer gradualness of friendship, which like virtue, faith and marriage, resists all technological manipulation. “It’s built up through the building up of habits,” Levin continues, “the building up of patterns of living, of expectations, it’s a matter of building up trust and of being trustworthy, of building up responsibility, of building up the habit of seeking help and offering help.”

Yet there’s no denying it. No matter our state in life — married or single, kids or no kids, working or retired — we face daily pressures that often lead us to sideline our slow and gradual investments in social capital. We know we should, but can we step back from “should” and “ought” to consider what science tells us about friendship?

Social science backs up what you sense to be true in your gut and your conscience: the state of your friendships has a direct and cascading effect on your health, marriage, children and career. A close look at each of these will allow us to reassess our priorities, habits and patterns when it comes to our friends.

## FRIENDS AND HEALTH



Studies agree on something simple: good friends make for a long life. “The absence of social connections,” summarizes one writer on recent scientific research, “carried the same health risk as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” A 2005 Australian study on aging found that “friendship increased life expectancy by as much as 22 percent,” and another study found that lacking social connections “more than doubled the risk of high blood pressure.” Good friends make for a long life.

## FRIENDS AND MARRIAGE



A curious dynamic is afoot when it comes to your friendships and your marriage. On the upside, men are for the most part emotionally closer to their wives today than in decades past. On the other hand, as the quality of our friendships with other men wanes, we tend to “rely too much” on our wives and “expect too much from them,” noted one psychiatrist. As a result, men overburden their wives as they journey through transitions to mid-life, empty nest and retirement. Good friends make for a happier wife.

## FRIENDS AND CHILDREN



How do our friendships as men impact the lives of our children? Particularly when it comes to sons, notes one psychiatrist, “the template for male bonding is set by late adolescence.” This template, he notes, “is probably based on their relationship with their father, and how they viewed their fathers’ friendships.”

Studies show that our children are astute observers of the caliber of our friendships — and that the apple will not fall far from the tree. Good friends result in children who will possess strong friendships through adulthood.

## FRIENDS AND CAREER

The title of a recent *Harvard Business Review* article says it all: “Being too busy for friends won’t help your career.” We justify not spending time with friends by telling ourselves that the next promotion requires longer hours at work — but we couldn’t be more wrong. “Research has shown,” *HBR* continues, “that friends make you better on the job and help you earn more, partly because they provide an emotional buffer that keeps you motivated and focused.” Good friends make for a more effective, focused and highly-compensated man at work.

Those familiar tug-of-war moments — between your friends and your health, marriage, children and career — will never end. But the emerging science demonstrates the clear rewards of having a patient and long view of building your social capital. Sure, Alexa may order your carry-out food and upload your playlist, but her algorithms haven’t mastered on-demand delivery of authentic, loyal and deep friendships.

That’s something you’re going to have to figure out offline, person to person.



## THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 5

### THE THREE POWERS OF AN ATTENTIVE FATHER

Two retired men were golfing when one confided to the other, “If I could just go back and do it all over again, I’d invest more time in my career and less with the kids.”

Not a likely scenario? That’s what we tell ourselves, yet in the scrum of daily life many of us place career above family, even with good intentions.



Yet we know deep down that every hour we invest in our relationships with our young and growing children is important. Ultimately, if given the choice, we wouldn't trade deep, loving and lifelong bonds with our kids for all the promotions the world has to offer.

You probably know older men who struggle with regret for being aloof, too busy or distracted during their children's upbringing. It's a cross they carry (yet one which the Lord can work for the good), particularly if their kids go on in adulthood to experience addictions, a lack of self-confidence or loss of faith. We as dads know that we don't control our children's lives, but given the chance to turn back the clock, the vast majority of us would double down and invest more heavily in our kids.

## THE TICKING CLOCK

"Fathers inevitably change the course of their [children's] lives," writes Dr. Meg Meeker, an expert on parenting, teens and children's health. "From the moment you set eyes on her wet-from-the-womb body until she leaves your home, the clock starts ticking. It's the clock that times your hours with her, your opportunities to influence her, to shape her character, and to help her find herself – and to enjoy living." What Dr. Meeker, a pediatrician, writes about daughters applies also to sons. Kids look to their father for a sense of wonderment, confidence and identity. Lack of fatherly care can leave a wound.

*Gulp.*

At one level, we Catholic men know all about the wonder of fatherhood and that ticking clock. "A man is called upon," St. John Paul II wrote, "to ensure the harmonious and united development of all the members of the family." And yet we hit daily temptations that erode the quality of our presence in our children's lives. "It is

not hard to see,” says Bishop Thomas Olmsted, “how men’s fears of fatherhood find a legion of support in today’s culture of self, encouraging men to flee from this beautiful gift in pursuit of their own desires.”

Our Church’s teaching is one reminder of our calling as fathers: we listen, understand and try to act on this truth. Yet a surprising new source has emerged which underscores many of these same truths. The data is clear and decisive. In study after study, social scientists are arguing that for every hour you invest in making relational deposits to your children’s bank, you will see them reap dividends in three areas: future health, relationships and career.

## HEALTH

You want the best for your children’s health. Well-fathered sons and daughters experience a host of positive emotional and physical health outcomes in the short-term and long-term, including:

Men who described having a strong relationship with their fathers during childhood are “less affected by **stressful events** than those who had poor father-son relationships.”

Sons and daughters who experience their father’s sustained presence are “less dissatisfied with their appearance and their **body weight.**”

Daughters are “less likely to become clinically **depressed** or to develop **eating disorders**” and they exhibit “**less anxiety and withdrawn behaviors**” when they have strong bonds with their dads.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Investing in our relationships with our children sets them up for positive friendships.

Daughters who have “secure, supportive, and communicative relationships” with their fathers are **less likely to become sexually active in their teens and get pregnant**, research shows. Moreover, girls with attentive fathers are “less likely to flaunt themselves to seek male attention.”

Girls with strong father-daughter relationships are equipped with “better emotional and mental health,” and are more likely “to have the kinds of skills and attitudes that lead to more **fulfilling relationships with men**,” according to studies.

Women who do not have good relationships with their fathers respond more acutely to stress and as a result, “describe their relationships with men in stressful terms of **rejection, unpredictability or coercion**,” the research attests.

## CAREER

We all want our children to grow up and be successful. Well-fathered sons and daughters have a leg up for the long-term:

Daughters whose fathers have been engaged in their child's academic and athletic achievements are "more likely to graduate from college and to enter the **higher paying, more demanding jobs** traditionally held by males," according to research.

College and professional athletes "often credit their fathers for helping them to become **tenacious, self-disciplined, ambitious, and successful.**"

Your relationship with your children impacts their future **behavior in their workplace.** "The boss and co-workers," explains psychologist Brian Schwartz, "become stand-ins for the family. People rise to the level of success that their self-esteem can absorb, and the roots of self-esteem are a reflection of our parents."

These studies are the tip of a vast iceberg, but you get the point. You have an outsized, far-reaching influence on your children's lifelong trajectory of health, relationships and career.

"The clock is ticking," but by God's grace, we dads will grasp the immensity of our sacred role and duty while there is still time. No matter where you are in this journey, it's time to renew the quality of your presence. It starts with you and God — and a little appreciation of just how blessed you are.



## THE SCIENCE OF FATHERHOOD – PART 6

A CONCLUDING LOOK AT THE LONG-TERM OUTCOMES OF YOUR  
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

In the pew with your family at Sunday Mass, you suddenly find yourself going over the past week in your head.

A kind of impromptu examination of conscience unfolds. Did I spiritually take the lead last week — *even once*? Did we say grace

before meals...*did we even eat together?* Amid all the busyness, how many times did I lean in and get the family together for prayer? Did we move the ball down the field last week as a Catholic family by learning more about our faith?

We are all familiar with the “should” and “ought” implicit in these questions — and if it was a good week, this self-examination will move us to gratitude. And yet, we often come up short. At our children’s Baptism, we promised as dads to take on the duty to bring up our children “to keep God’s commandments as Christ taught us” and to accept our “responsibility of training [them] in the practice of the faith.”

These promises have eternal impact. In the ultimate sense, you don’t need anything else to be persuaded about how critical these promises are. But did you know that social science data now attests to the power and long-term impact of your spiritual leadership in the home? The data is in. The research increasingly suggests that the caliber of your spiritual leadership has surprisingly outsized results in the life of your children.

## **DON’T OUTSOURCE YOUR INFLUENCE, DAD**

Sadly, many of us are unaware of how decisive our proactive leadership in the household is — and how it sets our children up for remarkable outcomes. Some of us “outsource” our share of the baptismal promise to our wife, or to the “drop-off curbside catechesis” of CCD volunteers or Catholic school teachers. Others have stage fright — unsure of how to lead family prayer or prayer with our wife. What all these variations of passivity have in common, however, is that they are proven to dramatically lessen our children’s chances of holding to their Catholic faith.

“When a dad steps up,” explains sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, president of the Institute for Family Studies, “children notice, and are more likely to learn that faith isn’t just for women.”

Sure, we may tell ourselves that our kids' faith formation is a 50-50 equation with our wife or that our wife's faithfulness compensates for our own lack thereof, but that would run counter to what the science is revealing. Fact: women are more likely to be involved in the life of the church than men. "Moms often take the lead when it comes to faith," Wilcox explains. Fact: absent a dad stepping up to spiritual leadership, children will default to viewing religion as "mom's thing."

Research bears this out. A Swiss study reviewed church attendance across multiple generations, based on the extensive details available in national census questionnaires. In summarizing the study, family expert and editor Robbie Low writes, "If a father does not go to church, no matter how faithful his wife's devotions, only one child in 50 will become a regular worshipper." Then Low delivers the shocking impact of a father's decision to step up: "If a father does go regularly," he writes, "regardless of the practice of the mother, between two-thirds and three-quarters of their children will become churchgoers (regular and irregular). If a father goes but irregularly to church, regardless of his wife's devotion, between a half and two-thirds of their offspring will find themselves coming to church regularly or occasionally."

"The research suggests," Wilcox summarizes, "that having a father (and grandparents!) who take their faith seriously tends to engender higher faith in children." Your wife's contribution — Swiss study notwithstanding — is of course critical, but your spiritual involvement has asymmetrical, long-term consequences. "Basically," Wilcox concludes, "the more family members who are serious about the faith, the more likely it is that children will take their own faith seriously."

## DAD'S POSITIVE GAME-CHANGERS

But we need specifics. What does this look like on a day-to-day basis? I asked Dr. Wilcox about any fatherly actions or behaviors which social scientists suggest as having long-term consequences. He pointed me to three:

1. **“Quietly and consistently praying** in the morning for one’s family.” Perhaps you have childhood memories of seeing your father in prayer or reading the Bible. This exposure to the faith demonstrates that dad is all-in — not just on Sunday mornings — and has long-term impact.
2. **“Leading the rosary.”** Again, we dads need to “step up” and lead, even if this means delegating decades of the rosary to members of the family. The point is that dad is hands-on, to the point of fingering the beads.
3. **“Discussing the implications of the faith,** winsomely, for the issues of the day with one’s children.” As Wilcox notes, you are the coach who “challenges your kids to embrace life’s opportunities and endure life’s difficulties.” What better way to coach than to connect real life to faith — at the dinner table, in the car, in natural ways.



## DAD'S NEGATIVE GAME-CHANGERS

If we know what success looks like, how about its opposite? Does social science suggest any particular patterns or trends to be wary of? Dr. Wilcox particularly warned against three:

1. **“Being domineering on religious matters.”** Jesus taught us to pray “Our Father.” Research suggests that throughout life, your children will see your witness as the “template” for the heavenly Father. If you are domineering, you hand your children an unnecessary impediment to greater faith.

2. **“Being a hypocrite on religious and moral matters.”** Your words and actions must consistently agree. Kids have an antenna for phonies.

3. **“Leaving all religious matters to mom.”** You get the point. If not, consult the Swiss study data firsthand.

Throughout *The Science of Fatherhood* we have examined the long-term social science outcomes tied to your presence in the home; your life of daily prayer; your friendships; and your relationships with your children. Now we conclude where we all began as fathers — the wondrous and miraculous birth of your child, and the privileged duty and responsibility you stepped up to as the priest baptized your child in the saving waters.

The “responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith” to which you said “I do” is not a burden. It’s not a “should,” a box to check or a statistic to prove. It’s a promise we dads affirm daily with all the joy that is in us. For with St. Paul we can say, “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

## SOURCES

### PART 1

Statistics cited from the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#) and the [National Center for Fathering](#).

### PART 3

Kathy Woodard, “Father Knows Best” ([Western Standard](#): April 10, 2006).

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### PART 4

On Loneliness  
Making Friends

On Career  
Keeping Friends

On Health

### PART 5

Dads and Daughters  
The Power of Dads

Dynamic Dads  
Dads and Stress

Dads and Sons  
Dads and Career

### PART 6

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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