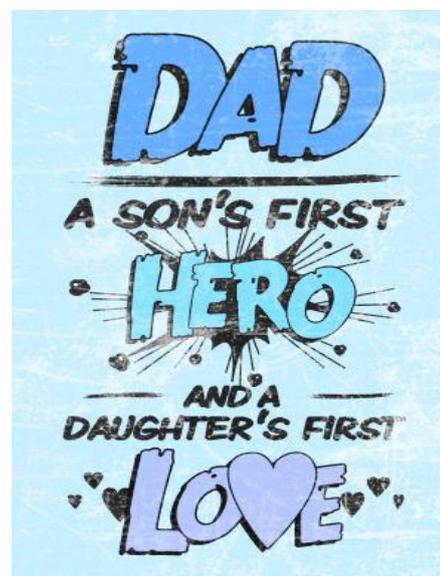


THE REAL JOB OF DADS

By Tim Sanford



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A Dad's primary, underlying job isn't control. It's to **validate** every one of his children.

To validate means to let your child know over and over and over, through words and actions, that the following are true:

- "Hey, you exist and you matter to me."
- "You're good enough."
- "You're an okay kid."

Psychotherapists sometimes talk about the **looking-glass-self principle**. It's the idea that children get their earliest, most lasting impressions of who they are from what's reflected back to them by their parents. These impressions become those "records" in the jukebox of your child's brain.

Let's say four-year-old Johnny walks into the room where his Dad is reading the newspaper, and Dad doesn't confirm Johnny's presence. Dad doesn't say, "Good to see you, son!" He doesn't even say, "Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm trying to read?" Johnny may begin to doubt his own existence.

It's like the old, philosophical question: If a tree falls in the forest and there's nobody around to hear it, did it make a noise?

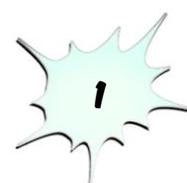
In Johnny's case, the answer is no. His existence hasn't been validated by any response. He interprets that to mean, *I'm not an okay person*. This may be a totally wrong interpretation; his Dad may not believe this for a second about his son, but this is how Johnny — and most children — will interpret this scenario. That's the way children's brains operate.

That's often why children do bad things, as in these cases:

- Sixteen-year-old Jenny barely saw her Dad, thanks to his 12-hour days and golfing habit. He did give her a new computer, though, and thought that would be enough to show her he loved her. She used it to post suggestive photos of herself on MySpace. When her Mom found out and tipped off Dad, he went ballistic and banned Jenny from using the computer for the rest of the year.
- Fifteen-year-old Ace saw his math grade going down the tubes, so he figured out a way to cheat on the final. He was desperate for a good grade because his Dad only seemed proud of him when he did well in school. His cheating technique wasn't very practiced, though; he was caught and flunked the test and the course. As a result, Dad ruled that Ace would have to wait a whole year to take the driving lessons needed to get a license.
- Thirteen-year-old Bob remembered the fun he used to have playing chess with his Dad. These days, though, Dad travelled all the time and buried himself in televised sports when he was home. Without asking, Bob borrowed his father's expensive chess set and took it to school for chess club. Somewhere along the way, he lost a few pieces. When he confessed, Dad yelled at him for being a "careless idiot." After that, Bob didn't think there was much chance the two would ever play chess again.

In all these cases, a failure to do his job led a father to "clamp down" and substitute control for validation. That's a substitution that doesn't work.

Note, too, that by misbehaving these kids got **some** response — even if it was negative. By acting out, teenagers can affirm they exist and that their existence has impact on the world around them. Their lives have made "ripples in the water," so to speak. They get **something** from their parents, even if it's punishment.



To avoid that kind of acting out, remember: **A teenager needs as much of your time and attention as a toddler does.** In fact, a Dad's validation is so critical to a child's emotional health that he or she will go to any length — and I do mean any — to get it, whether it's real or artificial.

What Validation Isn't

What do you think of the following example? Does it fall under the definition of validation or not?

Jason wanted to play basketball, but he was no star athlete. In fact, he never shot baskets at home and barely dragged himself to practice for the YMCA team, frequently skipping at the slightest excuse. At home he whined to his Dad about how hard the coach made the players work, demanding extra running drills.

When games started and Jason spent most of his time on the bench, he got frustrated and decided to quit. His Dad felt sorry for the boy and told him it was all right to drop off the team.

"Some people just don't recognize natural talent," Dad assured Jason.

Is that validation?

And the answer is . . . no.

Validation doesn't mean lying. It doesn't mean telling me, "Great game, son!" when I really played poorly.

Many parents have so bought into the self-esteem movement that no matter who wins or loses the baseball tournament, everybody deserves a trophy. In a feeble attempt to "validate" every player (and assuming the only way to do that is with a shiny cup), we end up extracting the genuine power and intention of true validation.

Just as validation has nothing to do with control, it has no relation to being a "softie" as a parent. You can be firm and strong and still validate your child. It means acknowledging your son or daughter, certifying his or her **existence**, affirming the person apart from the not-so-good performance.

Some fathers go to the opposite extreme, withholding validation when kids don't "measure up." Our culture is so conditional in its validation — affirming only those who've won fame or fortune, or been born (or surgically assisted) with "good" looks — that the same approach often creeps into our parenting. It's easy for a man to validate a good performance; it takes a lot more time and energy to see and value the human being in the absence of any performance and put it into words.

In a way, these forms of "invalid validation" are another attempt to control the way our kids turn out. We want them to grow up full of confidence, so we give even mediocre performances rave reviews. Or we want them to achieve, so we skip the praise so they'll try harder to earn it.

A Dad's biggest job is to relinquish that kind of control and affirm that the existence of each of his children, with or without any great (or poor) performance, is acceptable. If you're a father, recognize that each of your children is worthy of being alive. **You** may know that, but each of your children needs to hear it from you.

Value that child as a person, even when disciplining an action or attitude. Make sure your child knows he or she is good enough for you.

Otherwise, when that tree falls in the forest, the silence will be deafening.

The best time to begin validating is the day you bring your baby home from the hospital. Parenting a teenager begins when he or she is born.

When he or she is **born**. Really.

But it's never too late to start. Do it often enough to cut a record in your teen's jukebox that says, "I'm okay. I'm good enough." If you can do that, trying to compensate with control won't be such a temptation.

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