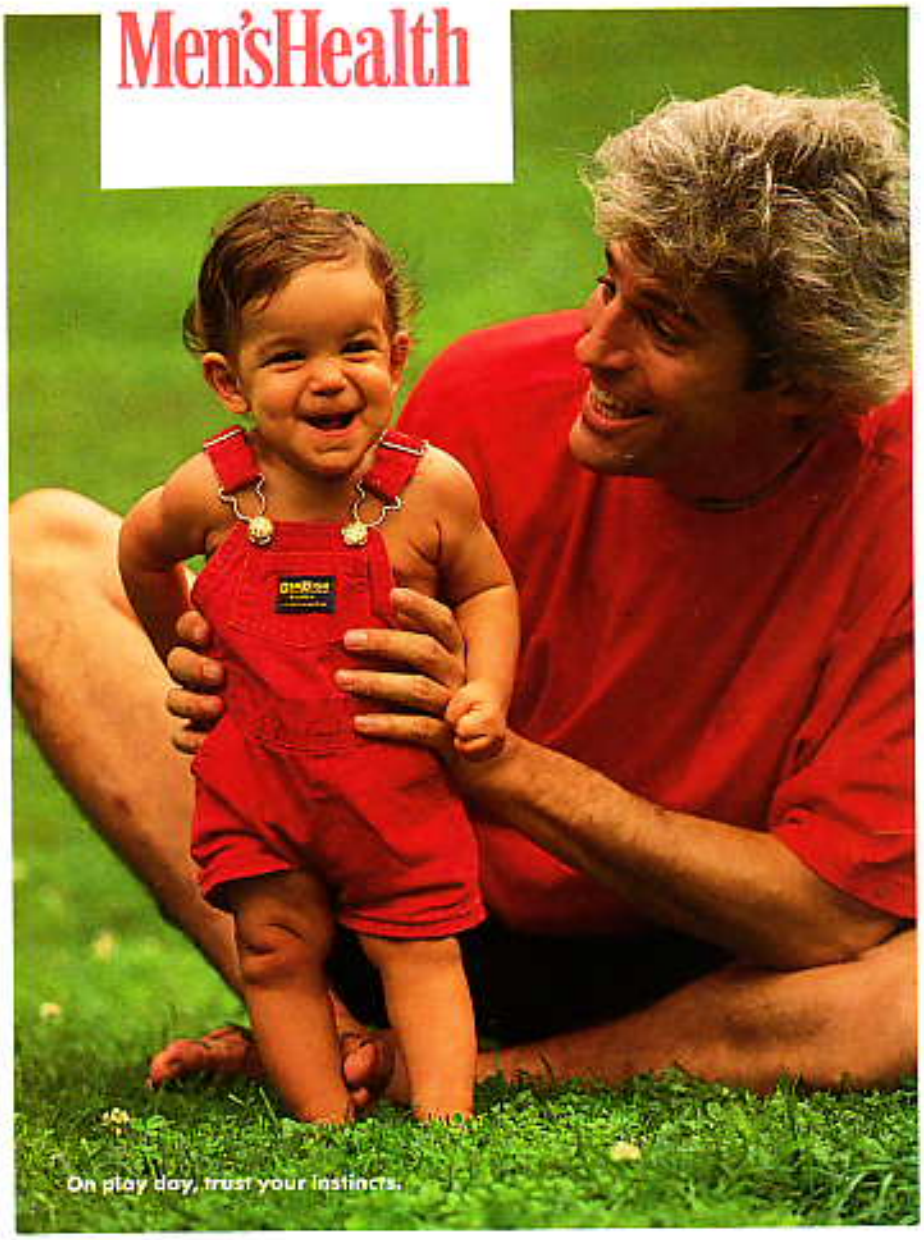
Men's Health

MR. DAD

by Paul Ciotti


On play day, trust your instincts.

How to raise kids like a man

When my oldest son was two years old, he developed a touchingly absurd, endlessly endearing infatuation with garbage trucks. When he would hear the truck lumbering up our little street in Los Angeles, he would literally tremble with excitement. So I'd pick him up and we'd go stand at the curb and the engine would roar and the dumper would clank and the compactor would whine and sometimes it was so exciting my son couldn't bear either to look or to look away.

At the time, I just assumed that in the case of my son this was just the way the DNA had fallen into the gene pool, and gave it no more thought. But then two years later when my second son reached two, he went through the same wild anticipation at the arrival of the garbage truck. Of course, part of the attraction was the personality of the garbage man himself—he was young and handsome with an impressive black mustache and he always smiled and waved at the kids. But how much more there was to it I never realized until I recently talked to Mark Gerzon, a trained family therapist and author from Santa Monica. There's a reason so many suburban kids see the garbage man as a hero, Gerzon told me: "He's one of the few men that they see working."

Then the light went on. But of course. We fathers, for the most part, are away working in offices. We talk on telephones or sit behind computer terminals. The result is that nowadays what most fathers do for a living is incomprehensible to their sons. And because of that, something important has been lost.

It's hard to put your finger on, says Ken Druck, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist who gives workshops on the father-son relationship. "But I see men walking around in mid-life with a sense of yearning for things that they can't get from their jobs and can't pull from inside themselves. And having listened to thousands of stories in workshops around the world, I'm convinced what the men are missing is a sense of their own identity: a very primitive and deep sense of validation that passes from father to son."

Such validation was easier to come by in times past, when boys could learn what it was to be a man by following their fathers' footsteps in a craft or on a farm. And when finally, at age 12 or 13, after years of apprenticeship, the boy had earned his chance, the father would climb down from the tractor and say, "Okay, son, it's your turn to plow."

But nowadays the world is too complex. A father can't turn over a Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet to his 12-year-old son—the work is too abstract for the kid to imitate usefully (and a lot less fun than driving a tractor). That's one reason why, says Asa Baber, a columnist for *Playboy*, it's so important for boys to have a strong, nurturing, physically active father. "A boy wants his dad to be a man. It's the basic plea of the male child: 'Dad, show me how to be a man.' "

It used to be thought that a father's primary contribution was more financial than emotional. But now it seems the truth may be otherwise. Researchers have discovered that at five months of age, boys who had more contact with their fathers were friendlier with adult strangers than those who had less pater-

nal contact. The infants made more sounds, better liked to be picked up and got more fun out of playing. Two Dallas psychologists, John W. Santrock, Ph.D., and R. A. Warshak, Ph.D., have further found that boys who live with their fathers after divorce have more warmth, self-esteem, maturity and independence than boys who live with their mothers.

Basically, says Norma Radin, Ph.D., a University of Michigan professor writing in *Social Work In Education*, "The more time they spend with their fathers, the more socially competent the boys are."

In contrast, when the father is physically or emotionally absent, boys tend to be much more dependent and aggressive and much less compliant. They have more problems in school and in relationships with their friends. They tend to play alone more.

"Boys need role models," says Baber. "Boys need fathers. And when they don't get them they are terrified and embittered."

In an age when so many families are headed by a single parent, it is tempting to believe that fathers and mothers are interchangeable. But it's not true, says Radin. "Fathers don't mother; they father." Mothers tend to have a verbal, slow-paced style while fathers have a physical, robust approach.

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Furthermore, fathers tend to teach different values than mothers—courage, self-confidence and a willingness to take risks. Sociologists who have studied fathers and mothers in playgrounds have found that fathers consistently allow their children to roam farther afield, climb higher and run more risks. "Mothers are wonderful and they provide a safe, secure role model, but boys need someone who is going to encourage them to take risks," says Rick Porter, executive director of the Rainbow River Child Care Centers in Manhattan Beach, California.

The problem for some fathers is that fear of criticism from their wives, political activists and self-righteous child psychologists has led them to mistrust their own instincts. So they tone things down around their children. They don't toss them as high, laugh as loud or even tickle them so wildly. The result, says Druck, is that many fathers "have given up their natural exuberance and vitality. And that's a tragedy."

The bond between fathers and sons is stronger than the bond between fathers and daughters, says Radin. "Fathers tend to see their sons' achievements and failures as their own." Everyone knows the bad side of this. That's when you see the fathers with the veins in their necks at a Little League game screaming at their sons for striking out.

But in a good relationship, the bond between father and son is a two-way street. "Fathers relive their own experience of growing up through their sons," says James A. Levine, director of the Fatherhood Project at Manhattan's Bank Street College. They get to play with Lincoln Logs again, electric trains, play catch and otherwise act like a kid again. Except this time the fathers get to do it right.

At the same time, says Druck, the father teaches his son something he can't learn the same way anywhere else: "What it means to be a man." ■