

# On Fatherhood

## The Lifelong Lessons of Being a Dad

by Ben Greenman



**W**hat is being a father? It's, at least in part, about beginning. It is rejuvenating to locate oneself near the start of a child's life. There are so many chances to get it right. The thought that we might also get it wrong flits across our mind, but it's gone before we can even shiver at its presence. It's also about returning to that question again and again, each time failing to acquire additional insight.

"What isn't being a father?" is a better question. Being a father isn't indifference, but neither is it a steady stream of calm wisdom or a place of consistent self-control or a clearly delineated set of exercises engineered to help produce self-knowledge in offspring. Bridges are engineered. We stare into our little one's eyes, beaming thoughts that we hope are received, translated and appreciated, waiting for a beam to come back to us. Child rearing is worked toward, clumsily, imperfectly, with a deep and near religious faith in trial and error. Children are refined over time with the assistance

of many imperfect philosophies.

When our second child opted in, my wife and I compared baby pictures of the two boys. "They look different," I said.

"That's not why I'm looking at them," she said. "I want to remember this." I remember looking at the pictures with her only because she has told me about it.

If, in part, fatherhood is remembering things that did not exactly happen, it is also forgetting things that did happen,

some transformative to a degree that I could not have imagined five seconds before they occurred. Afterwards, I knew I would never be the same again. But I was.

As children grow, they are not the same again. Parenting boys instead of babies is already a grand departure from everything I have learned up until now and I am just coming to see that it will always be this way. Recently, in trying to figure out when a man that is not a father becomes a man that is a father, I remarked to my sons, "Even though I know being a father has changed me forever, I remember certain things that happened, but not as many as I would have thought."

My older son explained, "Maybe it's because you are thinking of us more than yourself. Maybe you want time to pass so we can get to the next thing in our lives."

My younger son zeroed in, "The problem is that you think it's parenting when really it's childing."

He's right. What is being a father? It's letting someone else be a child. It's suffering through certain kinds of abstract pain so that they don't. It's bearing the brunt of disappointments so that they can go on feeling invincible. It's teaching how to forget as much as it is teaching how to remember... but it is still very near the beginning.

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