

A SYSTEM FOR FATHERING

The Father's Field Guide

Five decisions, four age brackets, and a grid that tells you the truth.

There is a great deal of printable material for Christian fathers and almost all of it is wall art. A verse about a father's legacy, in a nice typeface, framed in a hallway. This is the other thing: five decisions with times attached, a page for each stage of a child's life, a structure for the one-on-one, and twelve weeks of tracking so that at the end you have a number rather than an impression.

- Five fathering decisions, each with a WHEN, an ACTION and an EVIDENCE line
- A written failure condition for each, set before you are emotional about it
- Four age pages: under 5, 6 to 11, 12 to 17, and 18 and over
- A one-page structure for the one-on-one, per child
- Twelve weeks of tracking, and a page on getting it wrong in front of them

Print one per child for the tracking pages.

Break the cycle. Build the system. Be the man.

bethemansystem.com

For personal and small-group use.

Read this part first.

A goal says what. A system says when.

Almost every father intends to be present, patient and involved. Intention is not the scarce resource here - time-shaped structure is. "Be more present" cannot be scheduled, cannot be kept, and cannot be broken, so twelve months later you will have no idea whether you were more present, and neither will they.

What follows is five decisions, each attached to a slot in a week that already exists. None of them require you to be a different kind of man. All of them require a calendar.

The line under every decision

Each decision ends with what your children will be able to say about it in twenty years. That is the only real measure available to a father, and it is brutal because it is lagging - you get the result long after the window to change it has closed. Which is exactly why the mechanism has to be built now, while the evidence is not yet in.

What this is honest about

I am inside this, not past it. Decision 3 is the one that slides first in my house whenever a month gets heavy, and it has slid twice this year. A fathering resource written by a man reporting from the finish line is either written by someone whose children are grown, or it is not being honest about the part you actually need.

The five decisions

1 BE IN THE ROOM

Physically present, in the same room, with nothing in your hands. Not in the house. Not available if needed. In the room, doing nothing else, for a stated length of time.

WHEN	Same window most days. Ours is the half hour before the youngest goes down.
ACTION	Phone in another room. Not face down - another room. Then be there and let them come to you rather than organising them.
EVIDENCE	Days it held, out of seven.
FAILS AT	<i>two weeks running under four days. That is not a busy season, that is the window closing quietly.</i>

WHAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SAY IN TWENTY YEARS

That you were around, rather than that you provided. Children do not remember a father's schedule. They remember whether he was reachable in the ordinary hours, and being in the room is what reachable actually looks like at that age.

2 GO FIRST WHEN YOU ARE WRONG

You apologise to your child, out loud, without the explanation attached and without requiring them to apologise back. This is the single hardest one for most men and it is the one with the longest reach.

WHEN	Same day. Not at bedtime as a wrap-up - the same day, as soon as you have cooled.
ACTION	Name what you did, name that it was not their fault, say what you will do differently. Then stop. Do not ask them if it is alright.
EVIDENCE	What you apologised for, and the date.
FAILS AT	<i>a month with nothing in it. Either you had a perfect month or you stopped noticing, and only one of those has ever happened.</i>

WHAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SAY IN TWENTY YEARS

Whether it was possible to be wrong in your house. A child who never once saw his father repair something will either think fathers are never wrong, or that being wrong is unsurvivable - and both of those cost him something in his twenties.

3 ONE-ON-ONE, ON A SCHEDULE

Each child, alone, on a repeating slot. Not a big trip once a year. Twenty minutes on a fixed day, which is harder to arrange and worth considerably more.

WHEN	A named day per child, repeating. Written in the calendar with their name on it.
ACTION	Alone. No siblings, no phone, and no agenda you have prepared. Their choice of what you do, within reason.
EVIDENCE	The date, per child. Which is why you track each child separately.
FAILS AT	<i>any child going three weeks without one. Three weeks is the point at which the child stops expecting it, and expectation is the whole asset.</i>

WHAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SAY IN TWENTY YEARS

Whether they were known individually or managed as a group. In houses with three or more children this is the decision that determines whether one of them grows up believing they were the easy one nobody had to bother with.

4 SAY WHAT YOU ACTUALLY SEE

Specific observation rather than general praise. "You kept going when it got hard" rather than "good job" - and the harder version, saying the thing you have noticed about their character rather than their performance.

WHEN	Once a day, minimum, per child. Attach it to a moment that already exists - the school run, the meal, the door at bedtime.
ACTION	Name the specific thing. It has to be true, it has to be something they did, and it must not be about the result.
EVIDENCE	One line a week: the most specific thing you said.
FAILS AT	<i>a week where everything you said to them was instruction or correction. Count it for one day if you want to find out where you actually are.</i>

WHAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SAY IN TWENTY YEARS

What they believe about themselves. A child assembles that almost entirely out of sentences said casually by adults, and the ones from a father are weighted far beyond what he intends when he says them.

5 LET THEM SEE THE WORK

They watch you do the thing rather than hear you describe it. Money handled, prayer prayed, apology made, a mistake owned in front of them instead of explained afterwards.

WHEN	Whenever it occurs. The rule is to do it in front of them rather than privately.
ACTION	Pray out loud where they can hear it. Let them see a budget being worked. Let them watch you say sorry to their mother.
EVIDENCE	One line a week: what they watched you do.
FAILS AT	<i>realising you have taught something entirely by explanation for a month. What is explained is remembered as a rule. What is watched is remembered as normal.</i>

WHAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SAY IN TWENTY YEARS

What normal looked like. Almost nothing you tell them survives. What they saw a man do twice a week for ten years becomes their unexamined baseline, and they will not know they got it from you.

AGE BRACKET

Under 5

Presence and predictability

At this age you are not building a relationship so much as installing a nervous system. What is being learned is whether the world is reliable, whether a large man's mood can be predicted, and whether being upset gets met or gets managed. None of that is taught. All of it is absorbed.

The practical consequence is that consistency beats quality. Twenty ordinary minutes at the same time every day does more than a memorable Saturday, because what is being encoded is the pattern rather than the event.

WHAT TO ACTUALLY DO

- Be the one who does a repeating physical routine - the bath, the bedtime, the Saturday breakfast. Same one, every time, so it becomes yours.
- Get on the floor. Physically down at their level, for a length of time that feels slightly too long to you.
- Let them see you be gentle with their mother. This is the age it is being wired.
- Say their name warmly at least once a day for no reason at all.

THE TRAP AT THIS AGE

The trap: treating this stage as the one before fathering starts. It is the stage with the highest ratio of effect to effort, and it is largely over by six.

MY CHILD IN THIS BRACKET, AND THE ONE THING I AM CHANGING

AGE BRACKET

6 to 11

Competence and being seen

The question underneath most behaviour at this age is whether they are any good at anything, and whether you noticed. This is the window where a child forms a working theory of what they are - and the theory is assembled from offhand sentences said by adults who were not concentrating.

It is also the last stage where they will straightforwardly want your time. Fathers who wait for the relationship to become easier find that eleven was the peak, and nobody tells you at the time that it was.

WHAT TO ACTUALLY DO

- Teach one hard skill properly - a tool, an instrument, a sport, a repair. The content matters less than being taught something by you.
- Watch the thing they are into, properly, once. Ask two real questions about it.
- Let them fail at something without rescuing it, and be there afterwards.
- Start the one-on-one now if you have not. Starting it at fourteen is a different and much harder conversation.

THE TRAP AT THIS AGE

The trap: correcting more than you observe. Count a single day - instructions versus observations. Most fathers are shocked by the ratio.

MY CHILD IN THIS BRACKET, AND THE ONE THING I AM CHANGING

AGE BRACKET

12 to 17

Autonomy and the open door

The job changes here and most fathers do not change with it. They are no longer trying to find out what you think - they are trying to find out whether they can tell you things. Every reaction you have is being priced, and they are deciding in real time what is safe to bring you.

The two-second rule matters most in this window. When they tell you something hard, whatever your face does in the first two seconds determines whether there is a next time. There is time to respond later. There is no second attempt at the first two seconds.

WHAT TO ACTUALLY DO

- Keep the slot even when it is unwanted. Especially then. Attendance is the message.
- Ask sideways. In a car, on a walk, doing something. Not across a table.
- Answer their questions honestly, including about your own past, at a level that is true without being a confession they have to carry.
- Let them argue with you and lose fairly. A teenager who has never won an argument with his father on the merits will stop bringing them.

THE TRAP AT THIS AGE

The trap: reacting to the tone instead of the content. The tone at fifteen is weather. The content is the actual thing, and it only comes once.

MY CHILD IN THIS BRACKET, AND THE ONE THING I AM CHANGING

AGE BRACKET

18 and over

Invitation, not authority

Your authority ended and the relationship did not. Fathers who do not notice the handover keep issuing instructions into a situation where they now only have influence, and influence is spent every time it is used as if it were authority.

What they need now is a man who is glad to hear from them and does not audit the call. That is much harder than it sounds, particularly when you can see something going wrong and have been right about this kind of thing before.

WHAT TO ACTUALLY DO

- Call without a reason and without a question that needs answering.
- Give advice only when asked, and once. Repeating it converts it into pressure.
- Say the thing you are proud of specifically, out loud, more than once. They are not too old and you are not finished saying it.
- Apologise for the thing from their childhood you know about. Do not wait to be asked, do not explain the circumstances, and do not require them to reassure you.

THE TRAP AT THIS AGE

The trap: assuming the account is closed. Most of the repair work available to a father is available in this stage, and most of it never gets attempted.

MY CHILD IN THIS BRACKET, AND THE ONE THING I AM CHANGING

The one-on-one

Twenty minutes, one child, on a repeating day. This is decision 3, and it is the one that produces the most and gets cut the soonest. Fill one of these in per child and put the day in the calendar with their name on it.

CHILD 1

NAME _____

THE DAY, EVERY WEEK _____

WHAT WE DO (THEIR CHOICE) _____

IT HAS FAILED WHEN _____

CHILD 2

NAME _____

THE DAY, EVERY WEEK _____

WHAT WE DO (THEIR CHOICE) _____

IT HAS FAILED WHEN _____

CHILD 3

NAME _____

THE DAY, EVERY WEEK _____

WHAT WE DO (THEIR CHOICE) _____

IT HAS FAILED WHEN _____

Three rules for the twenty minutes

- No siblings, no phone, no errand attached. The moment it is combined with a trip to the shop it becomes a lift, and they can tell.
- You do not raise anything. If there is something to discuss, it goes somewhere else. A slot that sometimes contains a correction becomes a slot they dread.
- It survives a bad week. The point is that it is not conditional on their behaviour or your mood, and the first time you cancel it as a consequence you have taught them what it actually was.

Twelve weeks

One row a week. In the room and Said what I saw go in as days out of seven. One-on-one is a date per child. Fill it in on the day.

WK	IN THE ROOM /7	ONE-ON-ONE DATES	SAID WHAT I SAW /7	REPAIRS MADE
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				

THE COUNT

Add the two /7 columns and divide by one hundred and sixty-eight. Above 70% you are running it. Below, cut the scope - a fifteen-minute window that holds beats a thirty-minute one that does not, and your children are measuring reliability rather than duration.

Getting it wrong in front of them

You will lose your temper in front of your children. Not as a risk to be managed - as an event that has already been priced into this guide. What determines the damage is not the incident. It is whether it gets repaired, how quickly, and whether the repair is real or is actually a request for reassurance.

The four-part repair

- NAME IT. "I shouted at you and that was not right." No context, no because.
- TAKE IT OFF THEM. "That was not your fault." Children default to assuming it was, and they will carry it silently for years if you do not say this part.
- SAY WHAT CHANGES. One specific thing, with a time if it has one.
- STOP TALKING. Do not ask whether they forgive you, do not explain how tired you were, do not describe how badly you feel. The moment they start comforting you, the repair has become another thing they are carrying for you.

The one that is overdue

Most fathers have one. Something from years back that they know about, that has never been named, and that has quietly become a thing not discussed. It does not expire. And the child - now fifteen, or twenty-five - is not waiting for an explanation. They are waiting to find out whether you know.

THE ONE THAT IS OVERDUE

THE DATE I WILL SAY IT

Break the cycle. Build the system. Be the man.

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