

52 THINGS
SONS NEED
FROM THEIR
DADS

JAY PAYLEITNER



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*To the finest four men I know.
Alec Jay, Randall Jay, Maximilian Jay, and Isaac Jay.*

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First, of course, to our heavenly Father. Above all.

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To my first grandchild, Jackson David Payleitner. Wow.

And, finally to my four sons—Alec, Randall, Max, and Isaac—who every day prove that fatherhood is a blessing beyond anything I could imagine or deserve.

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Foreword

by *Jerry Jenkins*

One of the oldest clichés is that kids don't come with instruction manuals. So what do we parents do? We go looking for one.

If only we could find some Dr. Spock or Dr. Dobson or Dr. Phil with a short list of keys, rules, handy shortcuts. Just give me the steps I need to follow to raise a son...

Has my friend Jay Payleitner done that? Has he distilled parenting sons into 52 bullet points?

You might be wincing, wishing the list were shorter still... "Yet if you're telling me that if I can accomplish these..."

Meanwhile, Jay and I are chuckling. We've been there. We know the truth. He's raised four. I've raised three. And the fact is, there is no blueprint. There are no shortcuts. We hope you've picked up this book because you're eager for all the help you can get.

And while there is no magic formula, you have come to the right place for come-alongside expert help from someone who learned early the all-in, 24/7 (if I may employ the second-oldest cliché) nature of the parenting task.

For years dads have scoured the landscape for easier ways to manage this assignment. The old quality time vs. quantity time gambit sounded attractive. It went like this: if you don't have a lot of time to spend with your boys, make sure the time you *do* spend with them is...wait for it (add a drumroll if you can)...*quality time*.

In other words, don't just sit around playing games or watching TV. Discuss—what, let's see—the meaning of the cosmos?

If I've learned anything from my three sons it's that they hear what you say, but they believe what you do. You tell them they are your top priority. You prove that with love. And love is spelled T-I-M-E. Quantities of time.

I agreed on a policy with my wife even before our first came along, and that was that I would do no work from the office and no writing from the time I got home from work until the time the kids went to bed. That gave me several hours a day devoted to them alone.

This was not necessarily structured time. We could talk. We could sit. We could play. They could climb me. Ignore me. Whatever they wanted. Putting them to bed every night, teaching them Bible verses, singing with them, praying with them, and hearing each of them put their faith in Christ are treasures I would trade for nothing on earth.

As my sons grew up they naturally grew more independent, and we didn't always agree on everything. But they did not rebel, and they were never disrespectful. Neither did they ever doubt my motives. My devotion to them convinced them of my love, and they are my best friends to this day.

Something else to be aware of: parenting never ends. Our eldest two, who are married and have kids, have both recently added more children via adoption. I could not be more proud. Our youngest, who had a brush with death before our eyes after a routine operation (he's back to full health), reminded us that regardless of their age, your kids are always your children.

So—sorry, it's not easy, and it never ends. But nothing else you ever do will be as rewarding.

You'll discover rich benefits in Jay's 52 suggestions, and I pray that before you reach the end, you will begin adding at least 52 more of your own.

—*Jerry Jenkins*

Jerry B. Jenkins is a novelist and biographer whose more than 180 books have sold over 70 million copies.

The Father–Son Staredown

When you look at him, you see yourself. But in raw form. When he looks at you—if he’s around kindergarten age—he sees a hero.

To maintain that title, all you have to do is show up and follow your instincts. Goof with him. Toss him around. Play Rock/Scissors/Paper. Read picture books. Marvel with him about bugs, dandelions, and shiny rocks. Get down on his level and really talk to him. *Shazam!* You’re an instant superhero. I recommend you bask in that title as long as possible.

As he approaches the teenage years, some of that is going to change. A maturing son should look at his father and still see a hero. But now in human form. Blue jeans instead of tights. Car keys instead of telekinesis. A steady income instead of superhuman strength.

You’re still a champion of sorts, but your relationship shifts from fiction to fact. You offer stability. You’re a reliable resource, someone he can trust.

To keep that hero status, you need to be honest, respectful, and even vulnerable.

Your teenage son’s admiration for you has nothing to do with your being invincible. You’re a hero every time you listen, show appreciation, exhibit patience, solve problems, overcome challenges, and even admit when you don’t have all the answers. The result is a relationship built on shared consideration. You respect him. He respects you.

Too many parents buy into the myth that raising boys is one frustrating confrontation after another. Some look at a teenage boy and see nothing but trouble waiting to happen. Don’t believe that lie.

Next time your son enters the room, don’t say a word. Just look at him. Notice his slight swagger. His clear, curious eyes. His mischievous smile. His jawline. His strong shoulders. If you don’t see it all, that’s okay. It’ll come.

Keep your eyes steady until he says, “Whatcha lookin’ at?” Then respond, “You. Just thinking about how awesome you are. Wondering what your life is going to be like in ten years. I’m looking forward to it.”

I don’t know how your son will respond. My four sons, who are all out of college, would probably shake their heads and say something like, “Crazy old man.” And they wouldn’t be wrong.

My friend, I implore you to enjoy every minute of the great father–son staredown. Don’t blink. It’ll be over before you know it.

A SON NEEDS HIS DAD...

To Be a Student of His Growing Son

For the first few years of his life, you know all the things he knows. And he knows you know.

You are his world. When you play “peek-a-boo,” you are teaching him that Daddy might leave for a certain length of time, but he will always come back.

When he starts to crawl, you put a stuffed doggy just out of his reach. He scoots after it and you pull it farther away. He scoots again and you pull it farther. That’s not mean. (Unless you never let him catch it.) You’re teaching him tenacity. When he finally grabs it after three (or four) times, he learns the value of perseverance.

You are right there to watch his face light up the first time he has a taste of ice cream. You roll a ball to him and his reflexes evoke the poise of a major-league shortstop. He stares at a goldfish or studies a trail of ants on the sidewalk. When he looks up with that wonderful wide-eyed expression of new discovery, you share the moment.

When you play “guess which hand” or hide-and-seek you are teaching him about spatial relationships and body awareness. When you sit together and watch a sunrise or you point out constellations in the night sky, you are helping him discover an order to the universe that didn’t happen by accident.

That’s why quantity time is so important. It builds security in you. It builds security in him. You feel some control. You feel like you can stay a step ahead of your son. Every discovery he makes is one you have already made. When he shares a new insight with you, you are making lifelong connections. He runs to bring you a shiny rock or a dirty penny and you reward him with an “ooh” and an “aah.” He hears a boom of thunder or a tire squeal, but it’s not scary because he looks up and you’re not far away.

Safe and secure is a good feeling. It's a result of shared knowledge and shared experience.

Even when your little guy spends a day at Grandma's, the security is still there. If your son tastes grapefruit or sees an opossum for the first time, she's going to tell you about it. For a finite length of time, you have a firm handle on who he is and everything he knows.

And then suddenly you don't.

Your son's acquisition of knowledge—without Mom or Dad around—begins in earnest when he goes off to preschool or kindergarten. Then it accelerates through elementary school. He spends hours every day learning things that you can't possibly know about. Some of it is taught to him quite intentionally in textbooks and lesson plans. As much as you would like them to, teachers, coaches, and other parents won't run their worldview or life philosophies past you for your approval before presenting them to your son. Other kids bring all kinds of information and misinformation into your son's world.

Scary? Yes. But don't give up now.

For one thing, you need to remind yourself regularly that the goal is for junior to eventually head out on his own and learn things you can't possibly teach him. All his knowledge and skill building should *not* come from you. Yes, you're awesome. But don't you want your son to be even awesomer?

At the same time, you also need to remind yourself that he still has a dozen more years under your care. But instead of being his sole teacher, your role has expanded. You have begun the season of fatherhood in which you are also a student of your son. Your in-depth study includes noticing and evaluating his gifts and talents. His struggles and shortcomings. His goals and fears. What excites him or frustrates him, and how he interacts with others.

Much of this is simply observation. So you'll want to continue to enter his world as often as possible. Visiting classrooms, coaching his teams, volunteering at church, leading a scout troop, playing street football with his buddies, and shopping for blue jeans and school supplies. Invite him into your world as well. Let him know about a challenging project you're facing at work, walk together down the aisles of Home Depot looking for the right door hinge or can of spray paint, take him to the driving range, or sign up for a father-son shift at a soup kitchen or shelter.

With intentionality, study your growing son. You'll know when to challenge him and when to back off. You'll know when the time is right to place new opportunities in front of him that may lead to self-discovery and growth.

You'll know when to push him to the edge of his comfort zone and beyond. You'll know when to rescue him so he can try something else. You'll know when to let him fail so he discovers that he can survive setbacks. And maybe even learn from them.

Years from now when you're no longer right beside him, he'll still hear your voice encouraging him to move forward with courage and conviction.

TAKEAWAY

Your son may very well follow your exact career path. Someday you may even paint the words "And Son" on the side of your delivery van. That would be so cool. But chances are your gifted son will pursue a career that you can't even imagine. Still, you can take some of the credit. Because you were the one who challenged him to extend his vision, try new things, and pursue God's very best call on his life.

"Too many parents make life hard for their children by trying, too zealously, to make it easy for them."

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE (1759–1832)

A SON NEEDS HIS DAD...

To Not Kill the Creepy Centipede Right Away

Our first house had a minor bug infestation. Creepy crawlies commonly referred to as centipedes. One day—instead of smashing one of the fast-moving bugs—I trapped the critter under a clear water glass. As Rita cringed, I called my preschool-age son, Alec, over and told him I had captured a centipede, and then asked him if he had any ideas on how it got such a silly-sounding name. The discussion unleashed a barrage of knowledge acquisition both entomological and etymological. With a dash of math thrown in.

Entomology, of course, came in as Alec and I attempted to decide whether or not the creature was an insect. This was before the Internet, so we only had my limited biological training to guide us. I recalled that insects have three body parts and six legs, so this definitely did not qualify. Spiders have eight legs. Worms have no legs. In the end, we decided it was probably tasty to birds, but had no other use except for the pleasure that comes from squashing it.

Of greater interest was the name itself. The etymologist in me came out and I told Alec how words can often be broken down in parts. *Centi* + *pede*. I reminded him that there are 100 cents in a dollar and 100 years in a century. Also, you pedal a bike with your feet and people who walk down the street are called pedestrians. So centipede means “100 feet.” Alec thought that was a pretty good name. We could have expanded the lesson to talk about how the octopus got its name or what happens when Mom goes for a pedicure, but we saved that for another day.

That investment of a few minutes and a dash of creative brainpower yielded a little science, a little English, a little math, and one young curious mind made even curiouser. (Remember now, all the while Rita is on the

other side of the kitchen saying, “Just kill it.” Which we did. With a satisfying crunch.)

That in a nutshell is a pretty good example of the difference between a mom and a dad. Around the house, Mom has a list of things that need to get done—in the next decade, later this year, later this week, later today, or immediately. She’s got a family to run and only so many hours in the day. There’s just no time to get sidetracked by identifying bugs, counting legs, or discerning the Latin derivation of a word that sends shivers down her spine.

But Dad has a perspective that sees into the future. Dads do things moms typically don’t. Catching bugs, snakes, and chipmunks. Counting the rings in tree stumps. Pausing a leaf-raking project to consider the reason geese fly south in a V-formation. Waking kids to see a lunar eclipse at 2 a.m. Slowing down at a construction site to note the different types of Caterpillar earth-movers: backhoes that scoop, front loaders that lift, bulldozers that push.

Moms want sons to fold their napkins in their laps at dinner. Dads want sons to get their hands dirty, create mild explosions, climb to the next branch, and somersault down sand dunes.

When she looks at a growing son, Mom envisions a charming daughter-in-law and a few grandkids, and she hopes he makes his home not too far from home. Dads see a future career in biology, engineering, horticulture, literature, law, medicine, or big business. He may also see a son destined for the NBA, PGA tour, or Olympic gold. (Don’t push too hard there, Dad.)

All of the above, obviously, is why God designed families with a mom and a dad to balance priorities and possibilities in the life of a growing boy. So yes, eventually you do need to honor Mom’s request and squash the centipede. Don’t forget to clean up the bug-goo residue. And then, Dad, look for the next exciting, unforgettable teachable moment.

TAKEAWAY

Take the lead in establishing your son’s worldview. In those serendipitous moments of life, sprinkle in truths about how the universe was formed by a Creator God who loves us and how we can live by standards of right and wrong. Conversely, moral relativism suggests that there are no absolute truths or moral standards, so any law can be passed for any reason. If that’s the case, the bug-protection police

could break down your door and arrest you for squashing the centipede. And who wants that?

“A single swallow, it is said, devours ten millions of insects every year. The supplying of these insects I take to be a signal instance of the Creator’s bounty in providing for the lives of His creatures.”

—HENRY WARD BEECHER (1813–1887)

A SON NEEDS HIS DAD...

To Know He Is Not a Clone

It took a while, but I finally came to realize my four sons are not my clones. I have my strengths and weaknesses. They have theirs. Of course, there's some overlap. But when I think of their accomplishments and convictions, I am proud to say each of them are far better human beings than their old man will ever be.

This chapter will serve as an introduction to those boys and a confession from me. From oldest to youngest, allow me to list four real-life examples of specific things they have done that I would never do.

Alec spent almost a decade as the front man for a working rock band. Maybe you were one of the many fans of “Fool’s Crow” in Champaign-Urbana or “The Bandages” in Chicago. I still have many of their original songs running through my mind. I cherish the evenings spent watching Alec and his bandmates perform. No way could I have done that.

After Randall graduated with a double major from the University of Illinois, he planned an extended trip to Europe with some pals. The plan was for Randall and Jake to spend a week in Ireland and meet up with Stephen later in Italy. A couple days before the trip, Jake came down with meningitis. My 22-year-old son took his knapsack and slept in hostels and cheap motels exploring Ireland on his own. Kind of romantic, but not something I would have ever done.

Junior year of high school, Max blew out his knee in football, had surgery, and was told that involvement with winter sports was out of the question, but with intense therapy he might be healthy for the spring baseball season. He wrote five words on a sheet of paper and stuck it to his bedroom wall: “JANUARY 18—GET IT DONE.” Max attacked rehab with that goal. Beginning January 12, he won 14 straight wrestling matches to earn a conference

championship, regional championship, and a trip to the state finals. By comparison, my senior year of high school, I jammed a knuckle on my left hand and sat out wrestling for two weeks.

Without any previous exposure to farming, Isaac graduated with a degree in financial planning from the University of Illinois's famed agricultural department. Then he took a great job 150 miles from home. I know nothing about farming and have never lived more than 10 miles from where I was born.

That's just a quick flyby of some of the ways Alec, Randall, Max, and Isaac are way different than me. Again, that's a good thing. And it's proof that Rita and I have given them enough room and courage to make their own decisions along the way. As they grew, each of them knew we were always there with a listening ear, regular words of encouragement, occasional words of caution, and specific advice when asked. They also knew we were praying for them earnestly and regularly.

Of course, we weren't sure where Alec's music career would lead. We worried about Randall on his own in Europe. We feared Max was coming back from knee surgery too soon. And we miss Isaac, who now lives in Peoria. Those weren't choices I would have made, but history has proven that each decision was absolutely correct.

And I confess, I'm a little envious. I never got paid to play my guitar. Never slept in a Dublin hostel. Never won a championship medal. And never really moved away from home. But I totally love hearing their stories.

So it's really okay that they are not me. And it's okay that your son is not you.

Thankfully, my four sons have all followed my footsteps in one important area. They each have chosen a fabulous young woman with whom to share their life.

TAKEAWAY

If your son lives your life, what has he achieved?

"Orville Wright didn't have a pilot's license."

—RICHARD TAIT