

Even though most Christian dads would say they want their children to turn out well, many of them are on "autopilot." They just hope and pray that somehow, some way, by the grace of God, their children will live for Christ. They love their kids, but let the kids have too much say (ask any kindergarten teacher and you will learn discipline is the #1 problem).

More diligent dads think work hard at getting their children to live up to a set of expectations. But they don't focus on what is going on in their children's hearts. That's why so many "moral" children grow up to reject Christ. They say, "All dad cared about was getting me to obey, but he didn't really care about me—not personally."

Biblical Christianity gives us a fathering "system" perfectly designed to disciple our children to love God and others from the heart. When we bring our children into the presence of Jesus, He transforms them from the inside out. When we help our children ask "Why?" instead of "What?", God can help them see where their hearts are not fully set on Him. When we demonstrate our love for Christ, our children learn that their deepest joy will only be found in loving God and others. Father your children's hearts for their good and the glory of God.

APPLICATION

1. What system did your father use? How has that influenced you?
2. What is one way you could father the hearts of your children this week? What will you do?

1. *This table is based in part on the work of Dr. Rod Cooper*
2. *Compiled statistics from Howard Hendricks, Jay Strack and Barna reports.*
3. *Paul Schervish, "The New Philanthropists."*

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Fathering the Heart

Adapted from *The Dad in the Mirror* (Zondervan, 2003)

Pat Morley and David Delk

To know what something *is*, sometimes you have to know what *it's not*.

WRONG: FATHERING FOR PERFORMANCE

"My son is getting straight A's," boasted John's dad. "He's a starter on the football team, and, best of all, he isn't into earrings, tattoos, and all that weirdness. He's not like so many kids today."

What's wrong with this picture? Maybe nothing, but maybe a lot.

Too many Christian dads concern themselves primarily with how their children perform. As long as their children perform well—doing okay in school, looking clean-cut, saying "please" and "thank you"—these fathers believe everything's fine. Yet the Bible says, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7).

When we father for performance, our discipline becomes a way to get our children to stop doing something we don't want them to do. We establish rules and punishments to get our children to conform.

Fathering for performance means to focus on getting rid of unwanted behavior and replacing it with acceptable behavior. It may work for a while, but it stinks as a long-term solution.

Six-year-old Collin wouldn't stop punching his sister. "Collin," his dad warned, "if you punch your sister you're going to be restricted to your room for twenty-four hours—no TV, no music, just reading. Do you understand me?" Collin loved TV and music, so he resolved not to hit his sister. And he didn't—for two days. But when she irritated him again, he let his fist fly.

With enough *promise of reward* or *threat of punishment*, most children can exercise the self-control they need to perform for a period of time. The greater the promise or threat, the longer the child can hold out. But a deeper problem exists. Despite how cute and cuddly he seems, left to his own nature (the flesh), Collin is not a nice, pleasant, self-controlled child. Collin didn't become "different" because of his behavior. His father attempted to control his behavior, but he didn't help Collin deal with the beliefs of his heart.

As a dad, you can get your children to behave for a while if you make a big enough promise or offer a big enough threat. Sooner or later, though, their true natures will come through. Eventually, they'll reject this performance approach and act out of what's really in their hearts. That's why we have to grasp this difference between *performance* and *heart*. They have to be molded by Christ to love God and others from the heart.

RIGHT: FATHERING THE HEART

By contrast, when we father the heart, we seek to go beyond *what* our children do to *why* they do it. Rewards and punishment have a place, but only as they focus on changing the core affections of a child's heart.

One day, when the Morley children were young, Pat's wife was talking to a friend. This woman wondered what she could do to make sure her children never messed around with drugs. Patsy said, "For me, I'm not primarily concerned with their behavior. I'm interested first in what's going on with their heart." And that's the difference between fathering for performance and fathering the heart. Fathering for performance gets children to behave right. Fathering the heart helps children believe right.

The following table contrasts these two systems:¹

Fathering for Performance	Fathering the Heart
Emphasis on conformity	Emphasis on transformation
Atmosphere of fear	Atmosphere of safety
Parental control	Freedom within boundaries
Focus on present performance	Focus on future development
Playing a role	Being authentic
Coming down on our children	Coming alongside our children
Surface interaction	True communication
Assumes the worst	Believes the best
Status quo	Growth and change
Pronouncements from on high	Questions and discussion
Uses people, "business relationship"	Intimacy and vulnerability

FATHERING THE HEART IS GOD'S PLAN

From the very beginning, God's plan has been that the family would pass his message on to future generations (Deuteronomy 6; Psalm 78).

Picture yourself in your church on a Sunday morning. Let your mind wander around the congregation. Take a look at the teenagers around you. There's Jeff who works at the grocery store. Becky from down the street is sitting with her parents. Luis sits beside his girlfriend Tammy.

Now with the faces of those young people still in your mind, consider this: there is significant evidence that *eight* of these children will drop out of the church by the end of their senior year in high school and only *four* of those will come back.² Why is that? What's going on? What can we do about it?

According to two Boston College professors, we have entered into a period of the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in history. They predict that an astonishing \$40.6 trillion dollars will be passed down from parents to children during the years 1998 to 2052.³

Yet at the same time, we are squandering a great spiritual heritage—so much so that, in many cases, there is very little spiritual wealth available to transfer to the next generation. As we see more and more young people drift away from Christ and his church, one cannot help but wonder, "What will become of us? Will the church be a viable force in the world in 40 more years?" There are dozens of other equally chilling questions.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN DADS DON'T FATHER THE HEART

The Bible shows that this decline starts when a generation of dads doesn't "deliver the goods" to the next generation.

Judges 2:10 says, "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up who neither knew the LORD nor what he had done for Israel." And what happened to them? The verses that follow show that this new generation "did evil, forsook the LORD, followed and worshipped other gods, and provoked the LORD to anger."

And what did God do to them? Judges 2:14-15 tells us they were "handed over to raiders" and "plundered." They were given over to "their enemies whom they could no longer resist" (at this point think alcohol, drugs, pornography, unwed mothers, STD, materialism, etc.). God was against them for a season. They were in great distress.

...go beyond *what* our children do to *why* they do it.

None of us dads, after even a moment's reflection, would knowingly "transfer" this kind of tragedy to our kids. Yet for many of us, that's what we received from our dads, and now we are repeating the cycle. Unless God intervenes to turn the hearts of this generation of fathers toward their children, we're going to lose this generation of kids to the gospel of Jesus.

Frederick Taylor, the father of Scientific Management, said, "Your system is perfectly designed to produce the results you are getting." What he meant, of course, was that if you are manufacturing bicycles and every third bicycle assembled is missing the front tire, your system is perfectly designed to produce that result. But it works for the family too. Many Christian parents have a system perfectly designed to get mediocre and devastating results.