



By Paul Johnson

DAD'S EXPERTISE

Lessons That Only Fathers Can Teach

Growing up, I couldn't imagine anyone smarter than my dad. He had the answers to every childhood question: 'Why is the sky blue?' and 'Where do babies come from?' and 'What time is dinner?'

Sometimes when I had trouble following basic instructions he'd say, 'It's not rocket science.' I didn't know this was a popular saying and assumed it meant my dad had some expertise in rocket science. It was many years before I realized he didn't work in the rocket science industry, which came as a great relief after the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion.

Rocket scientist or not, how did my dad know all the answers? When my sons Paul and Luke were young, I heard Paul shout to his brother from the top floor of our Gubei townhouse, 'Luke, can you bring me some toilet paper?'

Luke shouted back, 'Where are you?'

I added my shout to the mix: 'Luke, here's a rule of thumb you can use the rest of your life: If someone shouts for you to bring toilet paper, it's a pretty safe bet that person is on the toilet.'

“If I didn’t have life figured out, what business did I have teaching it to someone else?”



I hope he wrote that down: ‘Dad Life Lesson #342 – A person yelling for toilet paper is likely to be found on the toilet.’

As a dad it’s a tremendous relief to have answers, to possess such an abundance of wisdom. Indeed, I confess I spent the months leading up to my first son’s birth feeling woefully under-qualified to take on this ‘Dad’ job title and the resulting designation of smartest man in the world.

There is no written test to become a father, though I suspect moms get some secret training they don’t tell us about. In America, if you want to become a hairstylist, you need a license requiring 1,500 hours of practice. I repeat: It takes a 1,500-hour certification to perm hair, but zero hours to be in charge of a human. What if my bad fathering created the human equivalent of a mullet?

These kids were going to have questions about how the world worked, and the older I got the more I realized life is full of complicated questions that are impossible to answer. For example, ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ and ‘Why is Vin Diesel famous?’ If I didn’t have life figured out, what business did I have teaching it to someone else?

But fortunately the kids came along and didn’t start with the hard questions. They made me feel smart by asking questions with easy answers: ‘How do planes stay up?’ and ‘Is the kitchen supposed to be on fire?’

Sure, I still get tough questions from my boss or the IRS, but the sheer volume of childhood curiosity means I answer nine of their questions to every one from an adult, and at the end of the day, nine out of 10 correct is a passing grade. Maybe I’m ready to take that dad certification exam.

But what would the curriculum even cover since the role of dads keeps changing? Fathers are in the midst of a confusing evolution in our job description, and it seems every couple defines this role differently. If there’s no common definition, how do I know if I’m doing a good job?

Through most of human history the dad business card read ‘Protector/Provider.’ Perhaps Dad still helped around the house or did some part-time nurturing work, but when he applied for the position, the ability to fend off rabid wolves and pirates and bring home mastodon ribs were bullet points at the top of the resume. ‘Hugs’ were at the bottom under ‘special skills.’

Maybe we no longer live in a society that requires dads to keep bears away or be the sole provider of mammoth filets, but I do think that remembering traditional roles is important. If mom was traditionally more nurturing and dad was tougher because he dealt with the dangers of the world, perhaps this is because it’s valuable to have the counterbalance of two contrasting viewpoints on how the world works.

Mom taught me the world is loving and fair. Dad taught me to be tough and have a

backup plan just in case the world isn’t. Mom taught me I was special. Dad taught me to keep going even if some people don’t see what Mom saw.

Some things I can protect them from. ‘Can I be sucked down a bathtub drain?’ my son asks. ‘No. I will protect you from all bathtub drains.’

I once took apart a bathtub drain to show him he would never fit, but I no longer consider it my job to answer every question – that’s been outsourced to Wikipedia. Now I answer their questions with questions that will help them start thinking through challenges and form their own way of looking at the world. Let common sense be your GPS and you’ll always know where to find that figurative person who needs toilet paper.

Q: ‘Why are some people jerks?’
A: ‘Why are some people nice?’

(Dad Life Lesson #303: You’ll always find jerks and bullies, but if you can figure out what makes people nice maybe you can get enough of them on your side to stand up against those bullies.)

Q: ‘What if they all laugh at me?’
A: ‘And then what would happen?’

(Dad Life Lesson #242: Don’t take yourself too seriously. Nobody else does. Also, thanks to the Internet, attention spans are shorter than ever. Everyone will have forgotten by tomorrow.)

Q: ‘What should I be when I grow up?’
A: ‘What would you want to be even if you didn’t get paid?’

(Dad Life Lesson #116: Find something that makes your eyes light up when you talk about it. But not rocket science. That’s really hard.)

I hope I’ll always be there to protect them from danger and discouragement, but I hope they’ll be prepared for life when I’m no longer around...because I’m stuck in the bathroom waiting for someone to bring me toilet paper.

Paul Johnson is a writer and father of two.