



Fathering Journal 3



The Difference

Whether you are present or absent, you will find that each occurrence results in an opportunity to embrace your experience, even if it's painful. The difference between the



pain of presence and that of absence is determined by one fundamental characteristic – when you are present, you are the one who manages the pain. The pain of absence is not just yours to manage, and the pain of separation is passed onto them. I would like all fathers to know that so much of the discomfort of fathering, whether experienced through presence or absence, is due to a momentary, yet profound experience of alienation. You can overcome this. The way to move through your experience of alienation is to simply connect. Reach out, show up, receive, remember, look for, listen to, follow, lead, hold and be held by someone who loves you without question. You don't even need to know how, just show up and participate in what you get.

Search

We gain understanding by going to the depths of darkness, pain, and suffering. To do this, we must be willing to open to the physical experience of our emotions, stopping the struggle against our feelings and taking the risk of actually living in our bodies. We need to find compassion for ourselves.

*Many of us have so much pain that it is difficult for us to touch a flower
or hold the hand of a child*

- Thich Nhat Hanh

The profound simplicity and beauty of a child can unearth a great deal of pain for a father who, as a child, suffered too much disappointment. Even when he is committed and willing to sustain a relational presence, it can be very foreign territory.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that one may first touch peace and joy as a way of healing and strengthening the self. If we have an absent father, we must make a conscious effort to find happiness and peace within our relational experiences. Fortunately, this is made easier because our children are so darn cute. We must recognize that it is necessary to find ways to compensate for our defenses, which, if not put in check, will simply be passed on. There is a simple truth: that which we leave undone in our own psyches, our children inherit. In short, if our suffering is left in the unconscious, it is likely to resurface in our children.

Samsara



Our child is incapable, at the early ages, of defending against sorrow; it remains our responsibility to choose to do something about it. The practice of presence is a process that creates this capacity to take responsibility. When we do the hard work necessary to resolve the conflict within our own psyches, we, at the same time, remove the potential for conflict playing out with and within the psyche our child. In these relatively simple moments rests the potential to remove the conflict for generations to come. Ending this tyranny of the past generations may work to ensure the potential for wellbeing in future generations. Samsara, the circle of suffering, stops in a moment of presence.

The Pain of Absence

Let's think about how painful it is for a father when he cannot be present, whether by choice or circumstance. When we are absent, there is a life not lived. We don't know what we are missing when we are not there for our children. They do not know what they are missing because we don't or can't show up. What happens is that rather than becoming a part of our child's experience, we internalize the experience of non-participation and all that it means. When we are absent, it doesn't mean that we don't have relevance in our child's experience. We have a profound impact in our absence. We pay dearly for our absence in sorrow, remorse, guilt, and lack of a child's joy.

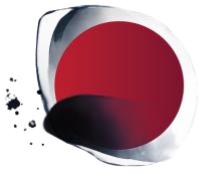
Gifting Emotions

It is a gift for your children to learn, at an early age, that yes, they have feelings, and others do as well. This first-hand experience will make their lives that much easier. Children can learn how to empathize and feel the emotions of others incrementally, one moment at a time. And guess what Dad, you above all people, are the best one suited to teach them.

Being Congruent

The right way to communicate with your children is in any way that they easily understand; your emotions need to complement and shore up their world and not cause undue conflict or concern. Because on some level they are already experiencing what you are feeling, you can, if you try, find a way to communicate your feelings from an honest place and establish a congruency. This congruency allows them to learn the difference between what they feel and the feelings of others.

Why?



The ability to teach empathy requires a generosity of self and a willingness on your part to allow a degree of tragedy in your psyche. This tragedy may be experienced as a loss of control, confusion, high levels of anxiety, frustration, and even despair. You must be willing to be conscious and accountable for your own suffering, both to yourself and to your children, because it is true.

Embedded Trust

Because trust is embedded in my relationship with my child, he does not have to earn it. This is his birthright. How could it be any other way? When he was born and I first looked into his eyes, I knew that this was a being that I would spend a lifetime getting to know. He was here, in this world, as a teacher and if I trusted him fully, I could learn everything I needed to know to father him. So, when he would squeak, I would listen. When he cried, I would go to him. When he fussed, I would hold him. When he was losing control of his behavior, I would intervene and adapt the situation around him so that he could find his way back to balance. And when he crossed boundaries and became too powerful for the situation, I would set limits and help him reclaim the right measure of his own power.

Just Right

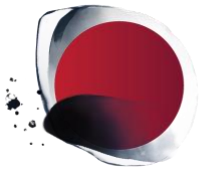
As I sit here writing, my four-year-old son is next to me with an identical pad and a yellow marker, madly creating on page after page. He says, “Look at me, Dad – I am writing to my story just like you.” We smile at each other as we complete our ‘work.’

In my experience as a father, it is rare to have this moment of how I am and what I am doing so closely monitored by my son. I know he observes me, ostensibly picking up my habits, good and bad, but to see this process as it unfolds is both rare and wonderful. It is as though he watches me from the corner of his eye and tries me on for size, little by little. I particularly like the feel of this form of his attention. When I am aware of this connection, I always feel that in this moment, I am doing exactly what I should be doing. I don’t have to understand anything; I just know it is right.

Ping Pong

In every moment of fathering, there will be enough information for you to figure out what your role is. However, interactions and events can happen very quickly

Have you seen the slow-motion video of a room full of mousetraps set with Ping Pong balls, just waiting to spring? As one ball is tossed into the air, a mousetrap is sprung.



Now, two balls fly, drop and release more balls and then within seconds hundreds of Ping Pong balls are flying in every direction. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ2NMD3VWio>

This chain reaction mirrors how quickly things can ignite between parents and children and between our children and the rest of their world. One disappointment, one uncomfortable moment can send the balls of frustration flying. This is not a problem if you, their father, strive to manage and normalize what is unfolding. It is not a problem if you are willing to repair something that is breaking or broken.

Open to the Moments

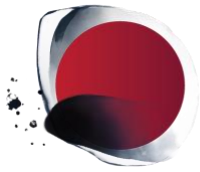
The moments of joy and happiness, woven into the fabric of our fathering, are like golden threads that run throughout our relationships, binding our love. In every moment, we can open to our children and welcome them. We can set our intention to greet them in every possible opportunity. They need to see our joy. They want to experience our happiness and know that it is because of them that we beam our delight.

Try it Your Way

Children, as much as we love them, are a lot of work. Their daily needs are so extensive that we are constantly challenged to maintain our joy and happiness while managing a day full of responsibilities. If your welcome is not perfect – not totally joyous, sincere, or present – do not worry. They will do everything in their power to make it perfect. They want you to see them and for you to express your love. They are designed to ensure that you know that they know you love them. You will not disappoint them if you try. Try your way of loving them, your way of being joyful and happy. They want you to be joyful and happy to be with them. You will notice this as you appreciate, welcome, and express your delight when:

- She has a happy expression as she receives a gift.
- He is excited to sit down at his place for a warm meal.
- She reaches for a gentle hug and a good night kiss.
- You are totally stressed and look over to see him so full of joy and so happy to see you.
- He reviews with you for the tenth time what he plans to do when...
- She tries on most everything in her wardrobe and seeks the solution to being who she needs to be, appearing how she wants to appear and searches for herself in your response.

When we are happy and connected, you can be sure that they are happy. When they are happy and turn to us for our attention, all we must do is stop just long enough to connect. They will do the rest.



Claim Each Moment with Your Child and Practice:

- When he cries because he cannot sleep, go to him.
- When she pushes you away, give her space and idle next to her until she is ready to open again.
- When he wants to talk, stop what you are doing, stop everything you are doing, and listen.
- When there is a celebration ahead, a birthday, holiday or simply a successful study session, be available and recognize her existence in a way that she can see herself in your response.
- Hold your child. When he is a baby, hold him. When he is an infant, hold him. When he is a toddler, hold him, catch him, pick him up when he feels sad. When he is a little boy, hold him. When he is a pre-teen, teenager, young man, adult – by then, you will know how and when he will let you hold him. Hold him then.

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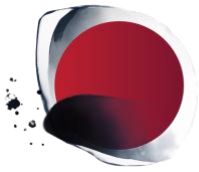
Home

Our true home is in the present moment. To live in the present moment is a miracle. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now. Peace is all around us -- in the world and in nature -- and within us -- in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice. We need only to find ways to bring our body and mind back to the present moment so we can touch what is refreshing, healing, and wondrous.

—Thich Nhat Hanh. (1992). *Touching Peace: Practicing the art of mindful living*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

Strategy for Staying Present

There is a lot of coming and going in and out of your children's world. Children change so quickly that what connects you today may not work tomorrow. I came up with a pre-game strategy that helps to prepare me for the unexpected. Three things that help me empathically position myself in any given moment:



Be the right size for the situation. I try to pay attention to my level of energy and the tone, volume, and quality of my voice. I am also conscious of my physical movements and notice how large or small I feel, imagining how I must appear in my child's experience.

Find the right distance. I notice proximity and adjust how our worlds intersect and move in tandem with the right amount of distance. Not too much but not too little.

Open my heart. While I am at it, I try to notice how open I am to receive. The journey with our children unfolds in increments. Make the adjustments necessary to ensure that you are heading in a direction that you can feel good about. If you are going too far to the left, go right. If you are heading too far to the right, go left. And if you fall, pick yourself up and immediately try again.

Listen

It is in each unfolding moment that, if we listen closely enough, our children will teach us how to be present as fathers.

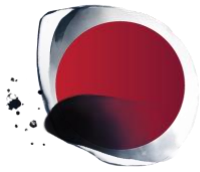
Mirror Mirror

It can take years to realize what we are here to accomplish. Many of us measure these realizations in decades. Can we do better than this for our children? Can we mirror their moments so that each unfolding breath reminds them of who they are and why they are here? Many of us believe we can parent our children so that they can be fully themselves.

Without adequate parenting, children move into adulthood clinging to their childhood need to be in the presence of their father. When this does not occur, they often re-create the very circumstances that caused their early suffering, unconsciously hoping that this time they might find a happier ending.

Good Enough

Imagine that you are a mirror, a vital and indispensable reflection that your children need to clearly see themselves. I am not talking about checking the hair, adjusting the "look." I am talking about really seeing who they are, knowing themselves, and learning the depth of self-acceptance that allows them to find their place in this world! I think it is entirely possible that for our children to reach their full maturation, they must experience a father who is present in a good-enough way so that he can be utilized in the child's moment-to-moment world of self-discovery.



Lights, Camera, Action: Entering the Scene

Our children build an entire library of films resulting from the experiences we have together or apart.

Before I arrive, he is sitting on the kitchen floor, in his world, quietly coloring. A few years later, as I drive him home from school, he sits in the back seat and tells me about his day. Jump ahead a few more years; he is warming-up with his team for a Little-League game, glancing in my direction. These moments are the stories of his life, scenes unfolding, each chapter connecting to the next. Fade in my long day of heavy lifting that is not included in his film...until that moment when our worlds overlap, intersect, and form a new experience for us both. As he makes the transition to my world, I must make my way into his.

Who Am I to Judge?

I am happily working on my computer in the very cool Virgin America terminal at the San Francisco International Airport. A mother, grandfather and two children descend on the seats behind me. Mom is reminding the children in a voice loud enough to get a quarterback's attention from the bleachers, "Practice your travel behavior!" "Always hold hands, speak in a quiet voice, and make sure you are always close to me or grandpa!" Meanwhile, she is opening a game board for them to focus on, feeding them an early lunch and taking a call on her Bluetooth earphone. Grandpa is trying as best he can to hold their attention while the girls are overwhelmed with excitement about their trip, the beautiful red swivel seats, the people dashing about and an elderly lady's escort dog. Mother repeats these messages to her children a dozen times before the airline angels call us to board. As grateful as I am when they walk away, I have to ask myself: Who am I to judge? Families have all sorts of ways of being families, and though I am not comfortable with this way of relating to children, it may work for this family if it is consistent and balanced with other times of being more relational. So much occurs outside of the scrutiny of others, that one really cannot judge.... Though we can try.

Reference

Thich Nhat Hanh. (1992). *Touching Peace: Practicing the art of mindful living*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.



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