



# One on One with Dad

**A Covenant pastor connects fathers and their children through an annual retreat. | DOUG BIXBY**

In decades past, a “good father” might have been described as a sufficient breadwinner or an effective disciplinarian. But those definitions have long since ceased to satisfy either parents or children. Today fathers are more actively involved in their children’s lives than ever before; research indicates that 68 percent of fathers engage in sports or some other outdoor activity with their children at least once a week.

Still, fathers and mothers do not statistically spend equal time on child rearing. Fathers trail mothers, spending only 65 percent as much time with their children on weekdays and 87 percent as much time on weekends. Yet the understanding that fathers play an integral role in their children’s lives is supported again and again by research studies. W. Jean Yeung from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research states specifically that a father’s involvement has a “unique impact on children’s outcome, including cognitive development, achievement, math and reading scores, as well as behavioral problems.”

That positive impact is one of the primary reasons I helped organize the annual One-On-One Father/Child Retreat at Pilgrim Pines Conference Center in southern New Hampshire.

It started in 1996, the year I became a parent. My daughter was not eligible to attend until she was in second grade, but becoming a father was clearly part of the inspiration for the idea. I had also read an article in a Christian magazine about a similar retreat and liked the idea so much that I recommended it to the leaders at Pilgrim Pines, and they encouraged me to run with it. Being new to fatherhood, I was unsure of my qualifications, but I came to realize that the retreat isn’t about being an expert parent; rather, it’s about creating space for fathers and their children to have meaningful experiences together.

I will never forget sitting around a campfire that first year and asking the kids to reflect on the day they had just spent playing with their fathers. One nine-year-old boy stood up and said he and his father had always talked about canoeing and fishing together, but until this retreat, they had never

actually done it. Many children leave the weekend talking about doing things with their fathers they have never done before—from playing tennis to rowing a boat. At the retreat, fathers go hiking, catch frogs, play four-square, do archery, go fishing, and take long canoe rides with their children. They play tetherball, swim, golf, go down the water slide, sit around campfires, and sing songs together.

While some of these activities are done with the whole group, the program emphasizes one-on-one time between fathers and children. I particularly enjoy the mornings when we have devotions. The fathers and their children find a quiet space around the lake or on a rock in the woods, and they read a devotional together and pray. It always inspires me to see fathers with their children scattered around the camp praying together.

The retreat is open to churches in the East Coast Conference and anyone else who wants to attend. The kids range in age from second to eighth grade, and both boys and girls are welcome. We schedule the weekend at the end

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of the summer camping season before the kids go back to school, so we are able to take advantage of the camp facilities and keep the cost of the retreat reasonable for most families.

Each father brings only one child at a time, thus fostering a unique, special relationship with that child for the weekend. Bringing more than one child would, of course, put the fathers in the position of playing referee.

Some men come back more than once with the same child, but others return with other children. My two daughters alternate years. Katie comes with me one year, and Kiersten comes the next. One father has brought each of his four children. Some fathers have attended six or seven years in a row. The one constant is the high level of appreciation the children express about being able to spend this kind of time with their fathers. For some reason the fathers really loosen up with their kids and have fun with them on this weekend.

David Taylor is a father who regularly attends the retreat, and he has brought each of his sons with him. When I ask him about his experience, he compares it to the times when his children were young and he would kneel down on the floor to speak with them. Getting down to their level and playing with them is incarnational.

It is the difference between standing above your children and telling them what to do and lying on the floor after dinner and allowing them to jump on you. I am convinced that children need both of these things from their fathers. I am also confident that the retreat is a great place to do incarnational parenting.

David said he experienced something last year that subtly changed the way he and one of his sons relate to one another. This child is a good listener. When his parents tell him not to do something, he is obedient. But his mother said he always wanted something more from his father. David in-

formed me that last year at the retreat he and his son mischievously went swimming after dark. Nighttime swimming is not permitted at the camp, and that night there was even some lightning in the sky. But it was hot and humid, and they snuck off to swim in the lake anyway. The next day they were repre-



**Doug Bixby and his daughter Katie**

formed by the executive director of the camp; however, what changed in their relationship was the level of playfulness between them. On that weekend David gave his son more of himself, and their relationship grew.

The children on the retreat also bond with each other and develop lasting friendships. We always seem to have an equal number of father/son and father/daughter pairs, and we strive to include at least one male and one female youth worker on the retreat. Many of the fathers with daughters express a deep appreciation for the opportunity to have such an intentional weekend with their daughters.

During the retreat, there is a short period of time when the dads join together without their children. This gives the men an opportunity to reflect on their past and present relationships with their own fathers, current situations with their families, the challenges of being a father in today's world, and what they want their future relationships with their children to look like. One of the things the fathers always talk about is the challenge of finding the kind of time they want to have with their children. We also talk about how fast our kids grow up and about how we need to seize every opportunity to spend one-on-one time with them. This father time concludes with the men taking time to pray with a prayer partner.

This August will be my twelfth year running the Father/Child Retreat. Many Covenant clergy and youth workers have participated, and we have also received active support from the leaders at Pilgrim Pines. Through this ministry I have learned to cherish the one-on-one experiences I have with my own kids. My hope is that lasting memories are formed and that new beginnings happen for the fathers and their children.

The most heartwarming part of this retreat for me in recent years has been the drive home. Although my children are now old enough to sit in the front seat of the car, they usually sit in the back seat for logistical and safety reasons. But each of my daughters has independently asked to sit in the front with me on the way home from the retreat. Such a bond is formed over the weekend that they each instinctively want our physical proximity to reflect what we have just experienced. It is the kind of closeness that you always want with your children, but sometimes it can be elusive. The One-on-One Father/Child Retreat inevitably seems to make that happen. □

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