



Trainers and participants

Fathering

Let's Journey Together

Text and photos by Dr Theodric Lee

"Okay, I hope your kid gets well soon," I wrapped up an acute paediatric consultation as I ushered the parents and child out of the consultation room. But they were not exiting the room, I realised. "By the way, doctor, our toddler keeps throwing tantrums; how should we manage this?" A thought bubble formed: "Another one of those by-the-way parenting questions." Nevertheless, as a seasoned practitioner, I continued smiling and employed my exit strategy: "Try using time-outs. Here is a pamphlet from a parenting resource." I said as I reached for the door. Don't get me wrong – the question the parents asked is relevant and profound. Unfortunately, the appropriate avenue to address it is not a busy acute paediatric clinic. Parenting is a journey and not a series of quick fixes.

My own journey

I did not start off in a good place myself. My firstborn son was born in 2012 and second-born daughter in 2014 – both when I was a registrar in paediatric medicine. My teacher in fathering was not paediatrics; rather, my wife was the first to tutor me: "You need to discipline that two-year-old son of yours. He keeps throwing tantrums, especially when grandma is around." I put up a muted defence that "our son is not that bad",

but I soon realised that she was right and I had to discipline the little guy, otherwise he would be well on the way to becoming *spoilt*.

I believe many doctor-parents can identify with this crazy phase. Calls were tough and frequent, and I often felt like a zombie at the dinner table post-call. "Your body is around but not your soul," my wife would lament, then add that she needed a doctor's wife support group. On the work front, I had to contend with clinical duties, subspecialty training, research, teaching junior trainees and medical students, attending medical conferences, clearing the exit examinations, etc. In the pursuit of work, my role at home gave way. Fathering duties were subcontracted to grandparents. However, a father's role is not easily replaceable, and as grandparents tend to be more permissive, conflicts inevitably occurred, and you can bet my kids were smart enough to maximise our daily battles for control to their advantage. When I reflect on this period, I am amazed that our family survived, mainly through the grace of God and the love of the extended family.

I left for private practice relatively early in my career, but it is not the career choice that makes a father – it is a "whole-of-life" approach. I carried my workaholic attitude into private practice,

and still often relegated my fathering duties to my wife and the grandparents. Things were not too pretty at home and came to a head in 2017 when I had to re-order the priorities of my life. My wife wisely said, "Your patients can have other doctors; your children only have one **father**." I began to grasp that parenting is not about fixing the kids – it is about starting with myself first. It is about our relationship, not merely about rules. It is about intimacy, time, laughter and so much more.

Learning to be a good father

Wise men have said that "the best thing a man can do for his children is to love their mother", and that is what I had to relearn. With the help of a counsellor, I apologised to my wife and repented of the times I had been absent in my children's early years. Thankfully, the parenting journey is filled with grace and do-overs. I began to willingly pay the **cost** of being an active father, which translated into making decisions big and small: taking leave for their first day in a new school (yes, there were many other fathers there too!); cutting down on night clinics even though it could mean a drop in revenue; politely turning down A&E call-backs on Sundays because that is protected family time, etc. A miracle happened – I not only enjoyed my family more, I also enjoyed

my work more, for I no longer lived for busyness' sake.

Things were not always smooth sailing. When my eldest child started primary school in 2019, there were upper primary students in the school bus verbally bullying him and others regularly with a sexual vocabulary so colourful it would make a seasoned army *encik* blush! When he told me about it only months later, I had a rush of emotions swell within me – guilt, anger and grief. Although the school did mete out appropriate discipline to the perpetrators eventually, we still went through a grieving and regrouping process as we transited from the pre-school to primary school ages. But such “valley experiences” (or times of difficulties) have made us more resilient as a family. We welcomed our youngest son in 2020 during the COVID-19 years. It is with a mix of healthy fear and excitement that we approach our older children's teenage years.

DADs for Life

A passion for fathering stirred in my heart when I heard Mr Yuen Chee Onn from the DADs for Life movement speak at one of the National University Hospital paediatrics Zoom continuing medical education events in November 2022. His aim was to get us paediatricians to promote fathering workshops to our patients' fathers. I met up with him for lunch one day and shared that doctors too are at risk of neglecting our fathering duties due to work. We decided that it

was good for doctor-fathers to attend the ICAN Fathering workshop ourselves, which would also serve as a support group in our fathering journeys. What better way to teach our patients than to first experience transformation ourselves?

I am so privileged to work with the Centre for Fathering and DADs for Life in organising and attending the first doctor-oriented ICAN Fathering workshop on 13 May 2023. It was a light-hearted session, and our trainers Mr Edwin Choy and Mr Stephen Say set the tone by sharing candidly about their own struggles and successes. It was a safe space to share the challenges we faced, and I appreciate that the trainers motivated us to share our own little success stories. There was content to be learnt, but we soon realised that the heartbeat of DADs for Life was not only content, but a movement – dads sharing with other dads about fathering and journeying with each other.

By the end of the session, our trainers had helped us narrow our discussions into practical steps. One of mine was simply to read more to my youngest son – there is evidence that fathers reading to children improve their cognitive outcomes.¹ In fact, since the 1990s, there has been growing evidence that fathers' involvement in their children's lives predicts better developmental outcomes for the children.² I certainly hope that SMA can partner DADs for Life to organise future workshops as well. In fact, several participants have already

expressed interest in the Parenting: The Teen Years workshop. Perhaps we can even organise father-child adventure activities (such as rock climbing, navigating a dark maze and traversing a high elements rope course) at the Dads Adventure Hub in Woodlands! ♦

PS: This article was reviewed by my children!

“Very heartfelt and meaningful. Feels like it is taken out of a book.”
– ZH Lee, age 11

“Very interesting and well written. I like reading it.”
– ZW Lee, age nine

References

1. Quach J, Sarkadi A, Napiza N, et al. Do Fathers' Home Reading Practices at Age 2 Predict Child Language and Literacy at Age 4? *Acad Paediatr* 2018; 18(2):179-87.
2. Sarkadi A, Kristiansson R, Oberklaid F, Bremberg S. Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acad Paediatr* 2008; 97(2):153-8.

Dr Lee is a paediatrician in private practice. His wife, Jas, is a dentist in private practice. ZH is 11 years old and wishes to be a doctor like Papa. ZW is nine years old and wishes to be a dentist like Mama. ZS is two years old and knows how to make us laugh.



Group discussions

