

A Day at the Beach

written by

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When thinking about fathers and their sons my mind pondered two lurking questions. What is it that makes a “good” father? Are there any specific qualities that are the same in every father-son relationship that help that relationship to flourish? I had often thought and sometimes told Jackson, my husband, that he seemed reluctant to spend quality time with our boys. He always had total faith in unschooling and believed it to be the way our children should learn, through life. Yet, don’t they need more? Don’t children need actively involved parents? Parents available to offer assistance, and guidance?

Jackson worked ten to twelve hours a day and what I observed each night as he returned home was a father who was not involved with his children. I could understand his lack of quantity time for our boys but didn’t quality count for something? I felt this area was lacking in their relationship. He didn’t play blocks or help with puzzles. Working on the deck, hitting golf balls or challenging monsters on some computer game seemed to be more important to him than participation in his children’s lives. I automatically categorized him as selfish and uninvolved.

Our recent family vacation to the coast changed my thinking altogether. This experience presented me a new perspective on his parenting and his relationship with our boys. My eyes were opened concerning exactly what Jackson had to offer these boys and what made him a “good” father.

On the beach the first day, Phillip, our six year old son, asked his father to help build a sand castle. A resounding “let’s go” was Jackson’s response and the two of them paraded off, tools in hand, without another word. After searching the beach, Phillip located a suitable spot. He and Jackson, together commenced digging. Realizing that the sand was too dry, Phillip inched closer to the ocean, not saying a word for he knew his dad would follow. The construction process began again.

The next hour found me watching, with amazement, as they went about the task of building a gigantic sand castle, complete with moat, tower and retaining wall. Neither Phillip nor Jackson uttered a word. Not one “try this” or “do it this way and the wall will not fall” from Jackson. Not a single “dad how do you do this” or “dad, that isn’t the way I want it” passed between Phillip’s lips. They sat side by side and worked together. Jackson did not criticize or complain when the castle fell over. Phillip was not discouraged by Jackson’s slow methodical attention to detail. I watched Phillip experiment with many ideas, some successful and some not.

Dallen, our eight year old son, found them on the beach and decided to join in. He was not invited nor was he pushed away. Other children also enjoyed this activity. No one was told the intended outcome of the project or how to help. They just started to build, tear down and rebuild what was important to each individual child. Some children were guided away by well meaning parents, not

wanting their children to disturb this creation process. Other parents stood and watched as their child added his important piece to this intricate puzzle.

As time passed, Phillip would occasionally run into the water to cool down, never looking back, he knew his dad would still be there when he returned. Other children would leave and return again later. They all seemed to be so happy, contributing what they could. No directions, no suggestions, just learning from trial and error. Working side by side. No one was a leader, no one was a follower, yet, a wonderful creation was built.

Later that evening the boys and their father peered off of the balcony to see what wave would be the destructive force to demolish their creation. Watching it fade, wave by wave into memory. The next day the process started fresh.

I gained a new respect for my husband, their father, that day. His relationship with his children was not the fairy tale I had pictured in my mind. Fairy tales were often far from reality. Yet, it was loving and real, far from selfish and uninvolved.

Never again would I think any less of Jackson as a father when I saw him working on the deck and the boys walking along the joists, or saw the boys running around the living room making odd noises while he sat playing a computer game. For I realized that he gives them the most precious gift a father can give, space to do their own thing, time for trial and error, room to live and learn. Always knowing that dad would be there, full of love and respect, waiting to venture out on many more journeys, side by side.