The Big Picture Playbook

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The Big Picture Playbook is a complimentary offering that introduces some key principles and helpful tools for fathers. It brings together threads of exceptional work by varied professionals - experts, educators and psychologists.

It's an ideal starting point for men seeking to engage with useful ideas that will help them generally and with specific challenges.

Thank you for taking this courageous step.

Welcome

Most men do not feel comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities or seeking assistance; particularly when they are unsure how to manage issues surrounding their children and family. Too often mothers are left to lead the way or take the initiative.

For many reasons fathers often don't seek or have access to helpful support when they need it. Some fathers have the benefit of good role models but many do not. Without exposure to good role modeling and support, where can struggling fathers find and learn the skills they need?

Good role models and fathers have strong skills of social and emotional communication. These skills can always be learned and improved - if you know what they are.

abetterdad.org

This book and our site bring together threads of exceptional work by varied professionals – experts, educators and psychologists – to give you tools and skills that will make a big impact. If you would like:

- to improve yourself as a dad?
- a better relationship with your kids?
- access to step-by-step strategies that work?
- assistance that is discrete, immediate and useful?
- professional insights without reading all the books?

…then abetterdad.org is for you.

There are many things to consider as a father and often it can be overwhelming. With the competing roles, demands and stresses of the modern day it is easy to feel unsure or lose your way. abetterdad.org is designed to guide and assist you.

When life is going well we tend to have positive momentum that cascades into all parts of our life. Conversely, when things aren't working for us, it's hard to know where to start. Often one issue can lead to many others. Sometimes we can be taken by surprise by an unforeseen hardship or challenge that puts us in a spin.

At these times, it's important to have a clear pathway for action. When considering a challenge or opportunity there are personal, social and environmental factors to consider.

In any given situation a shift in any of these ingredients can affect the others. How you behave is influenced by how you think and feel, who you are with and where you are. Your ability to teach your children and respond to situations effectively depends on how you handle yourself personally - the quality of your social and emotional skills and an understanding of how you think.

What you focus on becomes your reality. You cannot always control the world around you but you can, with practice, productively focus your thinking and behavior with great benefit.

The Playbook

Like any playbook, there are foundation principles that underpin everything. These principles help keep it simple when it seems complicated.

1) It all starts with you – Role Modeling

Your children will learn most by your example. From the moment they can comprehend they will be mimicking and emulating your behavior. You will lay the framework that will shape the way they relate to others and the world around them. There will be many other contributing factors to the shaping of your child but your input as a role model cannot be underestimated. This fact is a daunting privilege for all parents.

As a dad you want to protect and teach your children how to be independent. To provide them with the skills they will need in life, you will need to display and teach them. If your child is having challenges, as they invariably will, you need to assist them by explaining, guiding and showing them the way through. If you are having challenges, as you invariably will, abetterdad.org will provide you with techniques that are useful and effective for navigating, managing and flourishing. In all contexts at all times your example will be noted consciously and subconsciously by your child. The best way to be a better dad is to consistently model what you seek in yourself and others. It all starts with you.

Who is a role model that you admire? What do they do well?

2) Small Changes Yield Big Results – Effective Change

Men often want to solve the problem, right away! In the modern world the expectation for immediate results and answers is insatiable. The truth is that healthy changes and positive growth tend to occur gradually. Often it is one small change managed consistently that helps us arrive. One change instituted consistently can turn an entire life around. People often seek the quick-fix or solution to a problem, missing the fact that one small change, maintained consistently and with integrity, is the pathway to the fix they are seeking.

Sticking with one small change consistently and with integrity is key. Research shows that grit is an indicator of success. Perseverance and hard-work prevail over talent. It's not so much what you change but how you commit to that change that makes the difference.

When has a small consistent change made a big impact in your life?

3) The Key Skill - Active Listening

Without a doubt active listening is the single most important skill to becoming a better dad. Needs, interest, fears, concerns are being shared all the time and so often go unheard, half heard or misunderstood. Active listening requires focus and discipline. It's how we show presence and provide security to our children. It demonstrates that we value them. It involves comprehending, retaining and responding to what is being said, freed from distraction. It's *hard* not to daydream, judge, butt in, check the phone, look away or watch the clock. Sometimes a listening conversation is not possible too. If this is the case then let that be known and follow it up when it is possible.

Active listening involves more than the ears, it requires attentive body language – appropriate eye contact, posture, tone of voice, gestures and body movement. When your child is concerned, through active listening it is possible to identify more clearly the needs that are being expressed and what they are feeling. If a need continues to be unmet by your child then a cycle of acting out behavior will begin. Fundamental needs can include security, belonging, being valued and having autonomy.

How are your listening skills? When/where do you listen best? Why?

4) Confidence grows through competence – Embrace Struggle

Struggle is as human as opposable thumbs. Without it we would not exist. Without struggle we don't get a true sense of accomplishment. As a Dad there is a temptation to remove all of the roadblocks from our child's path, presenting an unrealistic version of the world. Struggle is to be embraced not denied. Opportunities to experience struggle should be sought not shied away from.

Sometimes we need support when we struggle but that does not mean always relieving or removing the source of the struggle. Your children, as with you, will develop confidence through competence. You develop competence through repeated effort and learning through mistakes. Embrace the struggle.

What's the biggest struggle you have faced? How did it shape you?

5) Know your triggers – Breathe Deeply

Unless you are an MMA fighter, it never hurts to take a moment before you act or respond, particularly in a situation where you are tired, stressed or frustrated. We all have triggers that activate unhelpful responses. Taking a deep breath or a moment to compose yourself can save you hours, days and years of fixing problems that should never have happened. Being mindful and aware of your actions also has massive implications on personal and community health.

Seldom do positive actions come from a place where we are depleted, angry or somehow impaired. Breath, Breath, Breath, compose, respond. Life is 10% what happens and 90% how you react to it. Reacting from a place of anger will eat up a lot of time and energy unnecessarily.

When can deep breathing help you from regrettable behavior?

6) Breaking the cycle – Be Versatile

Unknowingly, often the behavior you despised most in your parents is visited in one extreme or another on your children. “I will never do what my parents did to me” is a catch cry often heard. The opposite of dysfunctional is dysfunctional. In trying to avoid a behavior the tendency is to go to the other extreme. Here are some common examples of extremes that tend to be equally dysfunctional.

Fathers who rage	Fathers who withdraw
Father who always help	Fathers who never help
Fathers who always cry	Fathers who never cry
Fathers who are controlling	Fathers who are too permissive
Fathers who are never present	Fathers who are always present
Fathers with rigid beliefs/boundaries	Fathers with no beliefs/boundaries
Fathers who always need you	Fathers who never need you

It’s a delicate balance that requires constant negotiation. The pain can be equal at both ends of the dysfunctional spectrum. It can be costly to misunderstand that the extreme good intention is just as damaging. This is a phenomenon often seen that short changes everyone. Think mindfully about acting based on what you do want, rather than what you seek to avoid from your parents example. Often moderation and versatility go well together.

With your parents and grandparents, can you notice any patterns?

7) We all need help - Admit it!

Socrates said that “the admission of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom.” And he was pretty switched on. If you are having a tough time or don’t know how to tackle a problem, admit it! Until you admit it you will not change it or get the help you need. Denial or withholding feelings eats away at you and leads to suffering. For men it can lead to all sorts of distracting coping strategies – alcohol, affairs, drugs, over-work etc.

Whether it’s your child, home life, work, a relationship or a combination of them all, stop fantasizing about running away from it all. Seek help and get a plan. If these feelings are not out in the open then whatever isn’t discussed and talked out tends to be acted out. Saying that you feel like running away isn’t the end of the world. Waiting until you SNAP and do run away will inevitably lead to longer term damage. Stop your suffering in silence. Help is always closer than you think. Just ask.

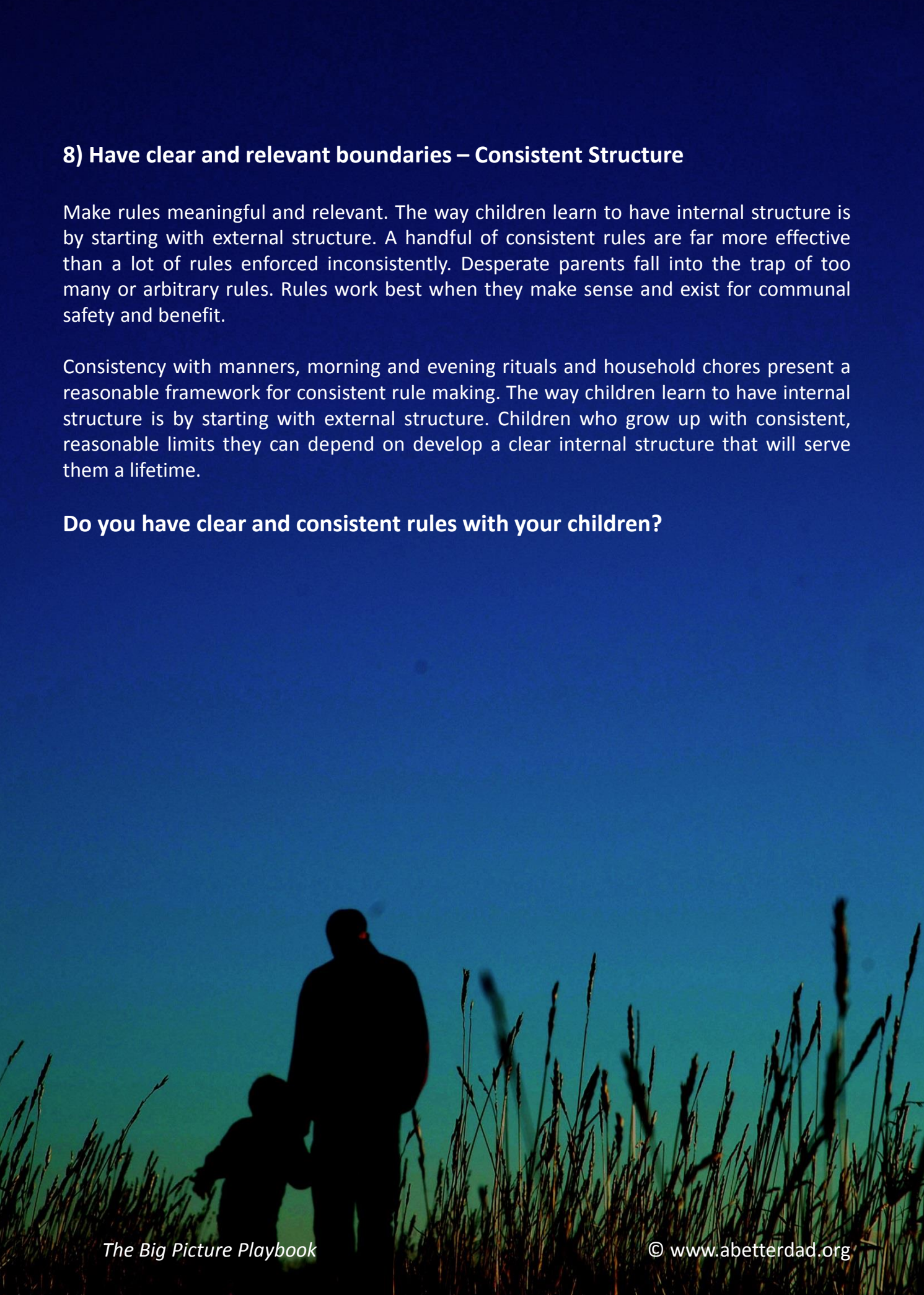
What coping strategies do you use? Are they effective?

8) Have clear and relevant boundaries – Consistent Structure

Make rules meaningful and relevant. The way children learn to have internal structure is by starting with external structure. A handful of consistent rules are far more effective than a lot of rules enforced inconsistently. Desperate parents fall into the trap of too many or arbitrary rules. Rules work best when they make sense and exist for communal safety and benefit.

Consistency with manners, morning and evening rituals and household chores present a reasonable framework for consistent rule making. The way children learn to have internal structure is by starting with external structure. Children who grow up with consistent, reasonable limits they can depend on develop a clear internal structure that will serve them a lifetime.

Do you have clear and consistent rules with your children?

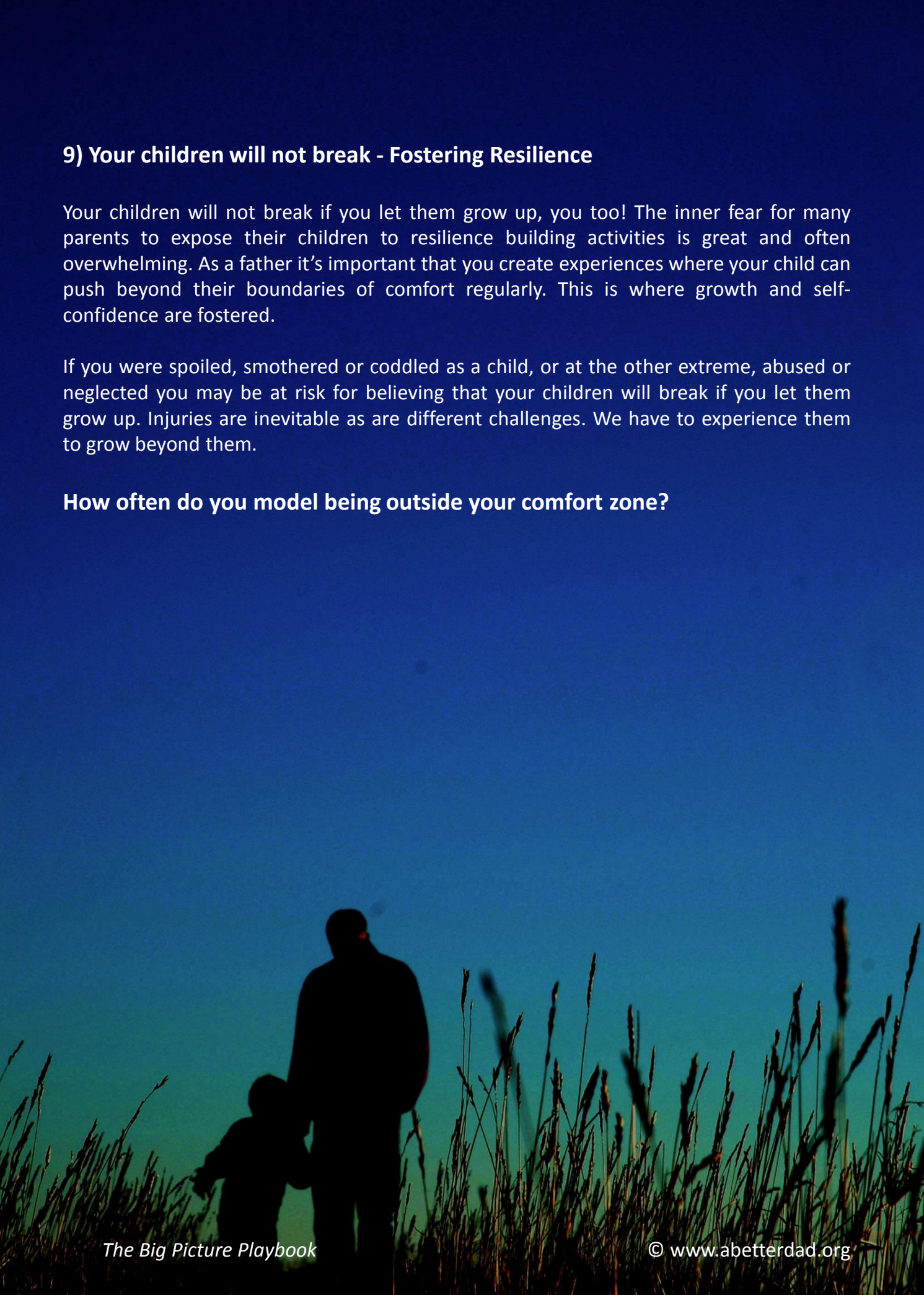


9) Your children will not break - Fostering Resilience

Your children will not break if you let them grow up, you too! The inner fear for many parents to expose their children to resilience building activities is great and often overwhelming. As a father it's important that you create experiences where your child can push beyond their boundaries of comfort regularly. This is where growth and self-confidence are fostered.

If you were spoiled, smothered or coddled as a child, or at the other extreme, abused or neglected you may be at risk for believing that your children will break if you let them grow up. Injuries are inevitable as are different challenges. We have to experience them to grow beyond them.

How often do you model being outside your comfort zone?



10) The praise malaise – Praise Properly

You grow through competence not incompetence. You also grow healthily through knowing the truth, not by receiving praise that is not realistic or accurate. Praise itself is not a bad thing but praising properly is important. Focusing on the ingredients that deliver a result is more helpful than focusing on the result. This way children can understand how specific actions (not talents or innate qualities) influenced the outcome.

Accurate praise allows young people to better understand the causal relationship between controllable actions (eg. perseverance, concentration, forgiveness, teamwork, courage) and outcomes. Praising a child generally and inaccurately can both confuse and de-motivate them. Praise values in action.

How do your children respond to your praise? Is your praise specific?

11) Know your role – Father Figure

All human behavior is motivated by something. Why would someone let their kids do what they want rather than enforcing a consistent boundary? Why would parents cave in to please or pacify children with junk food, inappropriate movies or treats consistently? Wanting to be liked is natural but the path of least resistance as “the good guy” sets in motion dangerous patterns of behavior.

Often enforcing boundaries is challenging. The initial guilt can seem more painful than caving in; in the short term. There can be many friends to your child but only one father. Boundaries demonstrate love and provide security. Negotiating boundaries is the place where you learn so much about yourself and your child. Don’t miss the opportunity to share and demonstrate your values and love.

How often do your kids get their way? Are you friend or father first?

12) Change is a process, not an event – Be Effective

Persisting with a poor strategy is nonsense, unless you want to be a broken down martyr. It's not a matter of right and wrong but what works more or less effectively. All children, families and parents are different and no one fills any of these roles perfectly. Everyone is learning and evolving.

There will be mistakes causing pain but this is necessary and part of living life. Be willing to keep tinkering and learning. That's where so much of the joy lies as well. Nobody gets to be a Dad without some pain. Accept this truth and you will find being a better Dad much easier.

Are you willing to change tack when things aren't working?

Insights

The Power Of A Hug

Hugging is good for your health and a lot of men don't do it enough. Research at North Carolina has shown that a hug increases oxytocin and reduces cortisol, leading to a healthier heart and lowering blood pressure – a great stress reliever. Cuddling increases feelings of safety, security, trust, strength, healing, self worth, belonging, happiness and appreciation. Studies show that IQ development is delayed in children who don't receive hugs. Those that lack hugs start walking, talking and reading later. Are you getting enough hugs? Are your children?

Neuroplasticity

Ground breaking research in the area of Neuroplasticity has confirmed that our thoughts can change the structure and function of our brains even into old age. The view that our brain is "set in its ways" or that you "can't teach an old dog new tricks" is false. As Norman Doidge, author of the *The Brain that Changes itself* said, "[nature] has given us a brain that survives in a changing world by changing itself." Do your thoughts reflect the brain you want?

Gratitude

Research at UC Davis has shown that gratitude can be cultivated with huge benefits. Gratitude increases energy levels, optimism, well-being, empathy and overall resilience. A key discovery is that the person who expresses gratitude, not the recipient, is often the greatest beneficiary. Embedding gratitude as a fundamental feature of daily or weekly practise results in a range of scientifically established benefits. Are you regularly practising gratitude in your home?

Hijack

In our brain we regulate our emotions and impulses largely through the interaction between the prefrontal cortex and the circuitry around the amygdala. The role of the amygdala is to sense threat. If a threat is detected, then the amygdala can take over the rest of the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex, in what's called an amygdala hijack. This is the classic fight, flight or freeze response where the amygdala has set off a flood of stress hormones, primarily adrenaline and cortisol. The big problem is the amygdala often makes mistakes and in the modern day most 'dangers' are symbolic, not physical threats. In a state of hijack we can't innovate, be flexible and often make poor, if any, decisions. Learning to recognise a hijack as it's happening is the first step to managing it well. Often a feeling that "I'm over reacting" or "I'm really upset now" are key signs. Cognitive (talk yourself out of it or apply empathy) or biological (meditation or deep breathing) interventions can help you. What do you do when you experience a hijack?

Strategies

Here are four different strategies to help you with:

Connecting Keeping your cool Reframing Consequences

Connecting – 5 tips

Have Rituals
Have regular compulsory rituals to provide structure and meaningful connection. eg. daily breakfasts, family dinner de-briefs, weekly walks, game nights, reading

Teach them Skills
Teach your children useful skills eg. Using tools, cooking, using a BBQ, gardening, simple renovations, skimming stones, lighting fires, navigation etc.

Be Active
Find activities that you both can enjoy regularly together. Sharing time is showing love. eg. Bike riding, walking, paper airplanes, crafts, sports, hiking, camping etc.

Play games
Find non-electronic games that you can enjoy at anytime, indoors or outdoors. eg. Hide and seek, celebrity head, eye spy, charades, throwing at targets, races, fort building, master chef etc.

Date night
Have a regular monthly date with your child. It does not need to be lavish or cost anything. Set aside a regular time each month where you spend uninterrupted time together.

Keeping your cool – 4 tips

Know yourself
We all get angry, it's natural. Good anger management requires self awareness prior to the point of no return. To do this you need to know your triggers, symptoms and have a strategy.

Know your triggers
We all have different triggers that can send us over the edge. Some relate to situations (eg. Shopping, lining up, driving, automated messages etc.), to behavior (eg. Annoying habits, disrespect, being challenged etc.) and impairment (eg. Lack of sleep, frustrating day, alcohol etc.). When a trigger is likely have your anger management strategy ready.

Know your anger
Knowing your 'angry' symptoms will help you manage effectively. (eg. Increased heart rate, adrenaline rush, body tension, agitation etc.). When this occurs go to your anger management strategy before you lash out.

Know your strategy
Some people breathe deeply, some write down their concerns, some involve a third party. Find a simple strategy that works best for you. If you are unsure then breathe three times. Attend to the situation. Be explicit, use language that is non-confrontational, and stay focused on reason, not emotion. If need be, breathe three more times and resume. If you can't, remove yourself.

Reframing - Acknowledging feelings

As a bloke we want to solve things. Often this is not helpful. The quickest way to help your child (or wife) when they are expressing emotion is to acknowledge their feeling. Don't try and judge or solve their problem, communicate understanding by acknowledging their feeling. This requires certain skills and using specific language.

Skills

Proportionally Participate
Don't minimize of magnify a situation but meet the excitement, solemnity or distress that is being displayed. Allow feeling to be expressed and resist the temptation to DENY, JUDGE or SOLVE the problem.

Actively Listen
Show you are listening with appropriate body language. Listen for what feeling is being expressed underneath the words (eg. Anger, frustration, fear, reluctance etc.). Don't DENY, JUDGE or SOLVE the problem.

Empathically Respond
Show you are listening and involved in what is being said by non-verbal (nod head, eye contact) and verbal ('Ok', 'I see', 'Mmmm.') encouragers. Don't DENY, JUDGE or SOLVE the problem.

Reframing - Acknowledging feelings

Language

Label the feeling – Verbally demonstrate you understand how they are feeling.

"I can see that you are…excited / sad / angry / worried etc."
"You feel …ignored / frustrated / irritated etc."

Clarify / State the reason for the feeling – Pinpoint what's going on.

"Are you sad because you have to go to bed now?"
"You are frustrated because you don't want to leave the party."

Give them their wish in fantasy – Show that you understand what they want (but it can't happen).

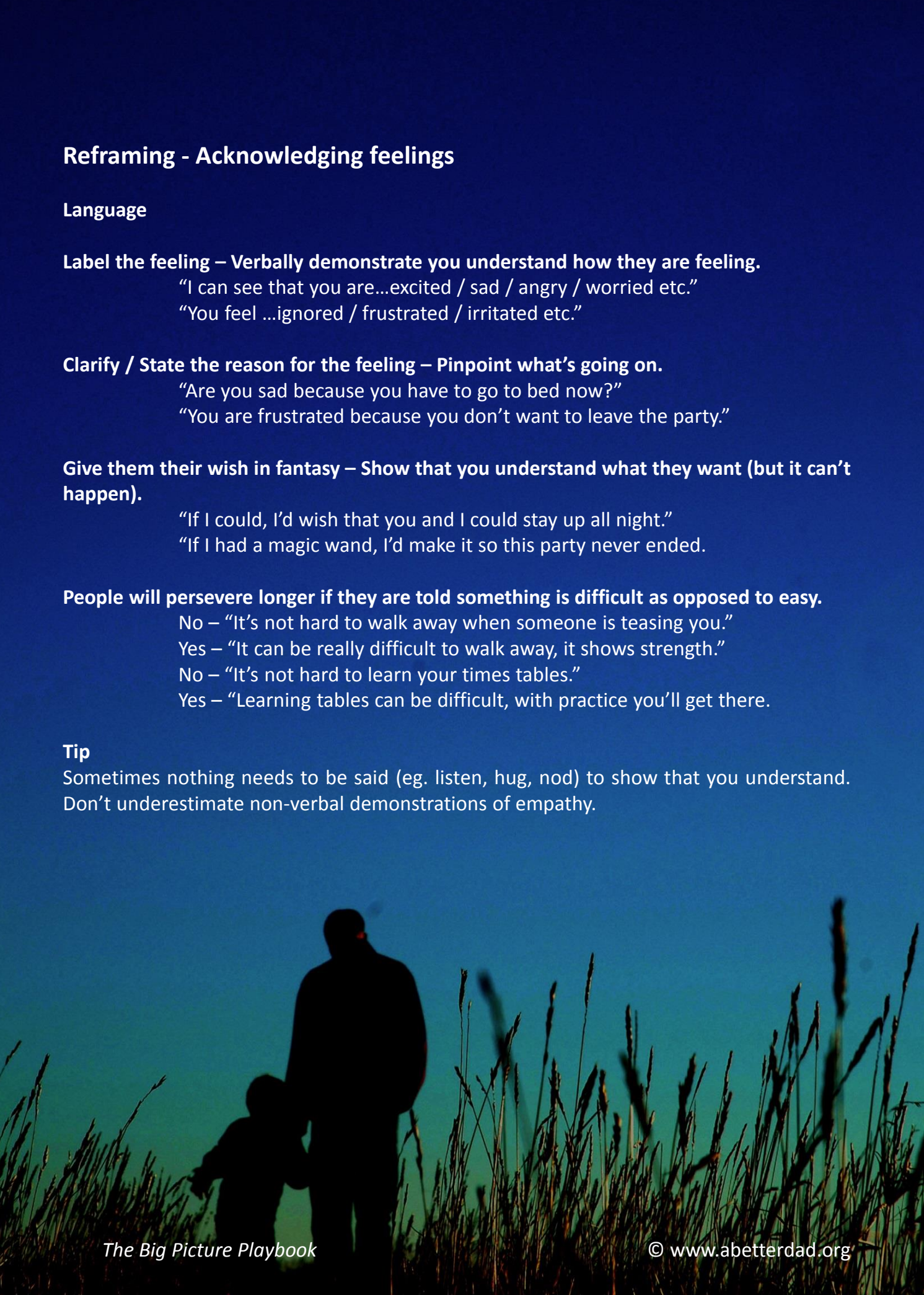
"If I could, I'd wish that you and I could stay up all night."
"If I had a magic wand, I'd make it so this party never ended.

People will persevere longer if they are told something is difficult as opposed to easy.

No – "It's not hard to walk away when someone is teasing you."
Yes – "It can be really difficult to walk away, it shows strength."
No – "It's not hard to learn your times tables."
Yes – "Learning tables can be difficult, with practice you'll get there.

Tip

Sometimes nothing needs to be said (eg. listen, hug, nod) to show that you understand. Don't underestimate non-verbal demonstrations of empathy.



Consequences

Consequences work best when they are appropriate, relevant and timely. Often natural consequences of behavior along with a verbal explanation can provide an ample lesson. Always remember the purpose is to teach/learn acceptable behavior. Ultimately you want your children, as they grow, to act based on what they know is right. Draw on your own experiences of times when you learned your most powerful lessons. How did this happen? What sticks in your mind?

Effective consequences tend to:

- Provide time for reflection
- Highlight impact of misbehavior
- Have verbal and non-verbal elements
- Result in a clear understanding of what is expected

A consequence can involve either making your child **do** something or **do without** something to stimulate learning. For all children, particularly the recalcitrant, withholding a privilege can involve less of a power struggle than forcing behavior. It's critical that conversation takes place so that a child understands the positive and negative consequences of their behavior.

"What did you do?“
"How did your actions impact others?“
"What will you do differently next time?

The Playbook is not designed to be exhaustive but a sampler of key principles and helpful strategies. We bring together exceptional work by varied professionals – experts, educators and psychologists – to give you tools and skills that will help if you are seeking:

- to improve yourself as a dad?
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Visit the *Toolbox* for free resources that cover different topics, including:

Activities	Anger	Behavior
Communication	Conflict	Discipline
Gratitude	Mindfulness	Pitfalls
Primers	Reframing	…and more

Or, become a *Member* for exclusive access to all our content, resources and insights.

Wishing you all the best on your heroic journey into fatherhood.

"If everyone was satisfied there would be no heroes."

Mark Twain