

# Down Home: Listen to the pope, dads; play with your kids

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Pope Francis [recently admonished](#) fathers to “waste time” playing with their children.

Here’s one Baptist grandfather sitting in the cyber-balcony, shouting: “Amen, brother. Preach it.”

Many children today are “orphans, but within the family,” Francis said. Their fathers live in the home with them but are absent, too often because of over-work.

He described conversations he’s had with fathers in his parishes: “I often asked the fathers if they played with their children. And the answer was bad, eh! In the majority of cases (they said), ‘But I can’t because I have so much work ....’ And the father was absent from that child who was growing up. And he did not play with him; he did not spend time with him.”

## **Over-busy, distracted fathers**

Over-busy, distracted fathers “do not behave as fathers; they do not have a dialogue with their children,” he explained. “They do not fulfill their educational task. They do not give to their children—with their example accompanied by words—those principles, those values, those rules of life that they need, just as much as they need bread.”

Wise words. Protestants might ask what a single man knows about parenting. But Francis speaks as a pastor who has walked alongside families for decades. Maybe this single, childless fellow looks at fatherhood with enough distance to offer objectivity.

Let's face it: Fatherhood is a hard job. (So is motherhood. But a dad can't talk about motherhood with credibility.) It's always been hard, and fathers always have failed. If you doubt it, pick up your Bible, turn to Genesis, and start reading.

As a father, I often failed for the reason Francis mentioned. Workaholism. Too often, I let the urgent demands of my job trump the much-more-important need of my daughters for my presence.

### **Fortunately I knew better**

Fortunately for us all, deep down, I knew better. Plus, those little girls' mother, Joanna, wisely reminded me how much they needed my time and attention. And so I resisted the gravitational pull of work. It was a struggle every night, even every weekend. Sometimes, I succeeded, and sometimes, I failed. But by God's grace and their mother's tenacious love, wisdom and patience, we raised two luminous, lively, Jesus-loving daughters who now are mothers themselves.

Several times since Lindsay and Molly have been adults, I've felt stricken by the memories of specific fatherhood failures. And so I have asked forgiveness, years after the misdeed. When this happens, they dispense the most gracious absolution. They roll their eyes.

Many of my best fatherhood memories happened when I did exactly what the pope advised. I "wasted time" with my girls.

My heart soars when I remember lying on the floor, playing with dolls. Staging our made-up-rules version of football, which usually devolved into wrestling, tickles and laughter. Reading books out loud. Playing our made-up-rules version of soccer in the backyard. Playing cards and board games. Hanging out and listening to music.

### **Family meals**

A corollary to Francis' play-with-your-kids advice is taking time for family meals. Most evenings, we sat around our kitchen table and ate dinner together. TV off. (And nowadays, we would declare cell phones off.) Just talking and laughing.

At any given meal, perhaps nothing big happened. We discussed school and work and church and friends. We shared opinions current events and movies and TV shows and music. We told jokes. I asked them what they did that day, and they said, "Nuthin'."

But in the aggregate, when we piled all those dinners and Sunday lunches on top of each other, that's where we knit our lives together. Around the table is where we got to know each other. It's where we made some memories and, through our long talks, solidified others.

So, dads, heed the pope's advice. Waste time with your kids. Play with them. And carve out time for family meals.