

## Fathers and Sons Time and Togetherness

by Erin Mantz

Washington Redskins quarterback Mark Brunell finds success on the football field, but it's his 24/7 job as dad of four that scores him the highest satisfaction. He counts the joys and rewards of fatherhood a true accomplishment — and he's not the only one. This April, Brunell was honored with a 2007 Fatherhood Award by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) in Washington, D.C. Now in its 10th year, the award celebrates men whose devotion to fatherhood transforms the way America views the roles of fathers in children's lives. Like past winners, Brunell serves as a model to inspire and encourage fathers everywhere to be the best dads possible. He has tackled this role full force, as he spends time with sons Jacob, Joseph, Luke and daughter Caitlin. Amazingly, he finds the time.

Like lots of dads across the area, where our culture is defined by long workdays in high-pressure fields like politics and technology, Brunell's time is tight, but doing stuff with his kids is critical. He's not alone. The good news is today's dads *are* finding ways to spend time with their kids, whether they are 2, 12 — or somewhere in between.

### Focus on the Father Factor

When it comes to work-life balance, media reports and word-of-mouth rantings have almost always revolved around moms. People wonder, "How do they juggle it all?" (A good question — one that demands its own article.) But, as we begin to delve into how some DC-area dads are so devoted and involved in their sons' lives, the attention and admiration shift. Many fathers today *are* spending more time with their kids, according to a recent University of Maryland study, which reported that in 1965, dads spent 2.5 hours per week with their kids, compared to 7 hours a week in 2003. In addition, a CareerBuilder.com study released several months ago shows more fathers are resisting business travel in an effort to find greater work/life balance and spend more time with their kids.

It's a good thing this together time is on the rise. More and more studies show just how and why dads significantly impact their kids' emotional and language development, level of self-esteem, cognitive abilities, social competence, academic readiness and overall sense of well-being. One study suggests that fathers have an even greater impact than moms do on the language development of their 2-year-olds. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found the number of different words Dad used when his child was 24 months of age predicted the child's language score at 36 months of age. Sentence length didn't matter, but the type and number of words did. Interestingly, Mom's vocabulary didn't significantly affect the child's language skills. The study applied just to families with two working parents and day care children, but it shows how much father-child interaction matters. Researchers pointed out that while mothers often use nurturing or comforting words, fathers go beyond nurturing terms and talk about other interests.

### Time Well Spent

## What Dads Do

Dads just interact with kids differently than moms do, says National Fatherhood Initiative president Roland Morris. They are spending a large portion of time with their kids in physical play — riling them up when they get home, then trying to settle them down for dinner. No matter what the child's age, the father's role makes a difference, Morris insists. He relays a study of first-grade boys where dads who participated more in child care had kids who were more empathetic.

So, just how are area families spending their father-son time together? Brunell's sons, ages 12, 8 and 5, are actively involved in sports, such as hockey, track, football and baseball, and he's right there with them. They spend lots of their time going to games or playing ball in the front yard. He designates "Boys Trips" where he and his three sons go off to do something fun. Last year, it was a Colorado ski trip. "It's so important to spend time together," Brunell says. "As a dad, your sons are watching your every move and listening to every word. You are their number one role model. As I see my values becoming their values and watch them do hobbies I have always loved, it's very rewarding."

Sports also play a big role for dad Lloyd Malech of Potomac; he often heads to the driving range with 5-year-old Ben. Malech goes because he loves golf, and Ben has fun, but also because he believes if you learn something as a kid, it becomes part of your life. Malech regrets that he didn't take up golf until college; Ben already has a putter in hand. With days staying lighter longer, he loves coming home from the office to teach Ben baseball. Malech has watched Ben's catching and throwing skills improve after just weeks of practicing together. "One of the greatest moments in recent memory was seeing Ben with his mitt and baseball cap on. His huge grin after he made a great catch was priceless!" Malech says.

Before you know it, little boys learning sports are preteens scoring more points than dads. Just ask Barry Lamberman, father of 13-year-old Bart. The two share a passion for basketball and play often. "I try to use our games as an opportunity to build his confidence — not by letting him win, but by forcing him to play tough in order for the game to be competitive," Lamberman explains. "It boosts his confidence to know that even when he loses, he was able to be competitive with someone bigger and who wasn't taking it easy on him. Hopefully, the larger lesson he takes away is to focus on his strengths in whatever he is doing." Lamberman also likes playing because it's an opportunity to shoot the breeze — time alone, which is especially important since Bart is a triplet and the only boy.

Lamberman recalls growing up in a Brooklyn apartment with a father who worked six days a week. There was little time to spend outside with his dad, though he fondly recalls playing a street game called "box baseball" and playing catch at favorite neighborhood spots. As a result, he relishes opportunities to see Bart's games and even coach his basketball team. Above all, he is happy he and his own father share a strong sense of humor — something he hopes he is passing down to Bart. "The way the world is today, he's going to need it," Lamberman says.

Some dads also tailor their time together based on their sons' styles and interests. Four-year-old Ben

Hacker of McLean is astute beyond his years, an early reader with an active imagination and a love of playing pretend. So when he pretends to be a bear cub or builds a "snow tent" out of blankets, he's in good company — with dad Jason. In fact, most days include a chat over breakfast, a talk about the day's events during bath time and a bedtime story. If you're wondering if Jason is a stay-at-home dad, the reality is quite different. This swamped and successful dad runs his own business, Tech Plumber, which provides small businesses with technical solutions and support and is often in demand 24/7. He works hard, but if you want to talk about demanding, needy toddlers and preschoolers need a lot too! Despite a heavy client load, Hacker consistently blocks his schedule for dinner and bath time so he's there for Ben and 2-year-old Owen.

Being a father of two sons demands even more of Dad's time. Guy Perotti of Great Falls carves out time tailored to his sons' different interests. Anthony, 10, enjoys history, so they do trips to historical battlefields and sites. James, 8, is a music-lover, so they end up at local concerts and play guitar. When Perotti was growing up, his dad worked three jobs and didn't get to spend much time with him. He remembers watching "Leave it to Beaver" on television and admiring how dad Ward Cleaver seemed so stress-free while talking to his kids. While the reality of everyday life shatters that completely happy-go-lucky image, Perotti can step back from the daily grind and enjoy being a dad. "I am proud to spend time with them and know I have done all I can to nurture and develop their self-esteem," he says.

In some cases, dads live apart from their sons due to divorce, work in another city or other circumstances but are one-hundred percent devoted to their sons. Joe Gardemal of Rockville sees sons Joseph, 6, and Trevor, 4, at least one weeknight and every other weekend. He is an integral part of their lives, development and activities, and he is present everywhere from tae kwon do to preschool. He often takes the boys hiking and fishing in Great Falls, Maryland. To Gardemal, time with the boys involves scheduling, shuttling and working around lots of their classes, playdates and birthday parties, but he wouldn't have it any other way. "Being a dad is the best thing in the world," he says.

You never know what hobby may spark your child's imagination and grow into a life's much-loved work. As a child, Eric Silberg of Rockville spent hours building models with dad Jay. Today, Silberg is an aerospace engineer for the Navy. He even remembers one specific model rocket that really impressed him, and he plans to build that same one with son Alec someday. Today, Alec is only 10 months old, and fatherhood for Silberg is all about enjoying the little things. He usually gets home from work in time for dinner and a favorite pastime: roughhousing. Alec loves swinging around and riding on Dad's shoulders. "Just seeing him smile and laugh makes me happy," Silberg says. "As he interacts with baby gadgets and toys, he's very curious about how things work. It's rewarding to see him figure things out." To Alec, a world of outdoor adventure awaits. Silberg plans to introduce him to skiing — his favorite sport — early on and rock climbing and scuba diving as soon as he's old enough to enjoy them.

If the fathers in this article are any example, sons are lucky. Their dads are not only around and involved; they're having fun. "The parenting process can be messy," admits Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative. "It is easy for Dad to get sucked into the provider

role and stay at work, where he has control of his environment. But a good father is guiding and nurturing, too." And perhaps Brunell sums it up best: "It's great being a dad!"

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## What Sons Love About Spending Time With Dad

- "I like helping him cook salmon and rice, watching 'Seinfeld' and having him watch my soccer and baseball games." - Max Mantz, 6

- "I like going to hear new bands with my dad. We like going to Jammin' Java in Vienna or The Space in Springfield." - James Perotti, 8

- "I like when we go to interesting museums and parks." - Anthony Perotti, 10

- "We like playing checkers, Connect Four, baseball and golf. He teaches me stuff!" - Ben Malech, 5

- "I love playing X-box with him." - Joseph Gardemal, 6

- "We like to go out to eat at Silver Diner." - Trevor Gardemal, 4

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