



## Concerning Fatherhood: One Day at a Time

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There are things you may not be told about fatherhood. For example, no one tells you that if the children's mother leaves, you assume the roles of both mother and father.

When my ex-spouse and I decided our relationship was not going to work, I remained committed to ensuring that I would see my children every day. I refused to be absent from their lives. I wanted to be there to kiss them, to wish them well into dreamland and to spend mornings together before rushing off to start our respective days. In my case, becoming the parent with full custody of the children was relatively easy since their mother agreed with my wishes. I was saddened by this turn of events, but also greatly relieved.

I knew immediately I needed to find my center, to become the parent who had raised me, the parent who would give everything to ensure the well-being of his children. I returned to my parents' home where they welcomed me with open arms. There I felt safe. You see, when you go through something as heartbreaking and as gut wrenching as the loss of your first love, while having children, you do not have the option to wallow. I will not deny it, I had my messy moments. I found strength in them and it only made the journey sweeter.

During this time, I found that it was okay for the children to slip, at times calling me 'mom' instead of 'dad.' For a time there, I was mom. I was willing to do anything to protect my children and to treat them with the tenderness that every child deserves. Becoming a single parent was a transformative experience. At the same, it was almost as though I was finding my way to becoming a super parent. I say this not to boast, but to express my heightened awareness of my children's needs, especially at this difficult time. I have made every effort to raise three well-adjusted, well-mannered, social justice warriors.

The adjustment to single parenthood was very lonely. I had to find myself again, both as a single person, and as a single parent. I never thought this would be my life. Though, from the time I was young, I knew I was different. I knew I wanted to be a hands-on father—whatever that might have meant to me in my adolescence. Do not get me wrong, the male figures in my life were beyond amazing. However, in my family, child rearing was typically left to my mother, my abuelita, and my tias. I always knew I wanted to be an active and engaged parent; what I did not realize was that I would raise my children without their

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mother. In my situation, traditional social expectations about fatherhood were not going to work for my new family. I had to adjust my expectations. I *had* to be more. I had to accept the role bestowed upon me, merge this new identity with everything I knew and become flexible, ready to change at a moment's notice to meet the needs of all. I may not have it all together, but I manage to keep it all together.

Having my first child at the age of twenty showed me the importance of timeliness and reinforced the value of my education. Prior to her birth, I viewed school as a means of completing a path pre-established for me by my parents. It was a goal that was cemented early in my childhood. You could say that I probably did not take my undergraduate years too seriously before her birth. However, after the birth of my daughter, I understood that my education would serve as an important means to build a better life for myself and my children just as previous generations before me have invested their blood, sweat, and tears into raising me. I am technically a first-generation, Mexican-American living the American dream of higher education—although my father had already received his Bachelor's degree prior to my arrival in the world—making the dream, not so much a dream, but a simple reality. I earned my Bachelor's degree my way. I did many things backwards, but I succeeded. As I pursue my education, I have kept the dream alive for another generation. Education has rooted itself as a huge part of our family culture. It is a cornerstone, something that is not an 'if', but rather a 'when'. When my children earn their degrees, they will look back on the support they received, on their hard work, and on the hard work of family members who pursued degrees before them. They will feel proud of the pages they will add to our lineage.

Deciding to go back to school for my Master's degree was not an easy decision. It required lots of planning. Luckily, my two amazing parents, who would do anything for me, made the decision a lot easier. Being one of the only parents in my cohort has not been easy. And, being the only single father proved to be too much at times. I have fallen many times throughout my Master's program. My children give me a reason to continue on and to make better of myself every day.

Fatherhood, like all parenting, is no easy task. Every day there is something new. Every day involves a series of firsts. I am the healer of boo boos, the washer of all, an alarm clock, a post-it reminder – all while working full-time.

I am a single father of three children under the age of 12 years. I am a higher education professional. I am a graduate student and my children are learners in elementary school. I think about some aspect of education almost every minute of every day. I also think about everything else that could happen in a given day. I see infinite possibilities and realities that could exist in every decision I make concerning my children. Despite our unconventional family, I believe my children will be okay. I am father, I am mother. Whatever you want to call me, I am here.

### About the Author

Jesse Paredes is a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Program in the School of Education at CSU Channel Islands. He received his bachelor's degree from CSU Channel Islands, majoring in English with an emphasis in Education Preparation. He currently works at his alma mater as a Student Records Systems Analyst within Enrollment Management. Family and education have been key motivators in Jesse's life. He hopes to continue sharing his passion for both with future thinkers and leaders.