

BUILDING CASTLES IN THE SAND

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

Resources (at least the kind we tally up) are, by their very definition, scarce. Perhaps the most precious of all finite assets is our time, since none of us knows with certainty how much (or little) of it we really have. This important point was reinforced for me just a few days ago by way of the most ephemeral of activities, the building of a sandcastle. All four of my children are big fans of digging in the extra large pile of sand at Frankie Carter Randolph Park in far southeastern Harris County. The kids (my two teenagers included) begin each time with a master plan for their construction, and never fail to create something elaborate and wonderful to behold. As chauffeur and chaperone for the expeditions, I bring along my own parental goals and objectives, though I don't share these with my charges. More about this later. Meanwhile, let's briefly examine the state of parenting in America.

A recent report by the independent, nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based think tank "Child Trends" is entitled "Charting Parenthood: A Statistical Portrait of Fathers and Mothers in America". For the purposes of this whitepaper, a parent is defined either genetically (ever having produced an offspring) and practically (currently living with a child under age 18, whether a biological parent or not). The report provides basic demographic information, e.g. that by age 45 approximately 85 % of us (men and women) will have produced one or more biological children. Gaps in biological parenting appear between males and females, however, when subgroups of the population are considered. Women in poverty are much more likely to be biological parents than are men, as are unmarried women, women under the age of 24 years, women with less than a

high school education, and women who are unemployed. It is much more frequent for married adults than for singles to be living with children under 18 years of age. Men more commonly live with their own children if they have graduated from college than if they did not finish high school; this difference does not apply to mothers.

What are the implications of these facts? The Child Trends study also showed that if a father lives with his children he will regularly participate with them in leisure or play activities. Moreover, greater than six in ten of these dads report being involved in setting limits on their children's activities. Among fathers who do not live with their progeny, four out ten have no contact with their kids. Another recent report, this one from the National Center for Education Statistics, clearly demonstrates that both poverty and the absence of one or both parents strongly correlate with decreased academic achievement, and therefore with lesser success later in life. The bottom line is that having an involved father in the home matters very much to children.

This past Saturday morning dawned sunny and reasonably warm, a combination sure to bring my six year old bounding down the stairs bright and early, and with a bounty of ideas for outdoor activities. It did. I, on the other hand, had visions of an extra hour or two of sleep, given that Zack's mom was off to her annual PTA convention. My little buddy, together with his ten-year-old henchman (i.e. his brother) made their case and I agreed; it was indeed a nice day and a good idea. A quick round of rousing the dead (i.e. the teens) and we were off to the park. The main goal of these sand-rearranging forays is to turn the entire roughly 75 square feet of box into a single, contiguous "world" as they refer to it. Such a feat requires agreement on a vision for the finished product, coordinated action, abundant goodwill (for those times when the inevitable misstep

knocks over a bridge or a tower), and roughly two of those precious hours I referred to above. Our rules are that only sand, sticks, and leaves can be used as building materials, and that nothing other than hands or plastic beach toys can be used for digging and shaping. How did we do? It depends on your perspective. The kids were well pleased with their creation of an island city (complete with a suspension bridge and watch towers at each promontory) surrounded by two branches of a mighty river flowing from one end of the enclosure to the other. My point of view was slightly different; objectively, I measured the success of the outing by the fact that four children of different ages and cognitive and fine motor development collaborated to accomplish a shared goal. Oh yes, I also achieved a fabulous return on the investment of two hours of my time; not one paid in dollars, or even in educational achievement, but rather in lasting memories of what truly is for me life's greatest joy--raising children.