

Dads Make a Huge Difference In The Lives Of Young Children

■ Patrick Mitchell says that simple message is too often overlooked.

By Ron Karten

"Twenty-four million kids will go to bed in a home with no dad," said Patrick Mitchell, the "Down To Earth Dad" who travels the country with a very simple message: Dads make a huge difference in the lives of children. Those 24 million kids amount to 4 of every ten.

And the future for some of them is clear, said Mitchell. "Ten percent of them will be really, *really* un-OK." Among the possibilities is the dramatically increased likelihood that they will grow up poor, abusing drugs and alcohol, or be a high school dropout. They will have a suicide rate *ten-times higher* than children who grow up with dads in the home.

"I want you to fear what will happen to these kids if there is no man in their life," said Mitchell.

A former journalist, Mitchell came into what appears to be his real vocation when his job prospects seemed dimmest. The publication he worked for folded, and among options for developing new work, he had been investigating newsletters. It was his wife who said, "You're a great father. Why not do one by the Down To Earth Dad?" And so he did.

His first newsletter focused on storytelling, the subject with which he ended his first class in Grand Ronde. And for that newsletter, he went right to what he considered the source of storytelling: the American Indian. His research took him to Nez Perce Elder Otis Half Moon who told him that he "tells stories of his childhood to his children, and that's why we're so close."

He quickly sold subscriptions first to dads, then to childhood and family organizations, and before he knew it, he was invited to do speaking engagements. "It just kind of grew," he said.

Early on, a big success came his way when he was invited onto a nationally syndicated television program called "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," hosted at the time by Cybill Shepherd. "The next thing I know I'm on national TV with Mickey Dolan of the Monkees and his daughter talking about dads," said Mitchell.

In class, Mitchell suggested that each night you tell your child the number of stories that matches his age, so at three, tell three bedtime stories. But his idea of story isn't necessarily long and elaborate.

"I want to tell you about this time I went to the zoo," he said. "And when the child says, 'What happened when you went to the zoo?' you say, 'I'm glad you asked. The answer is in story number two.'"

They should be spontaneous and true," he suggested. "Don't think about them too much." Chil-

said.

He also presented a section on how the roles of men and women had blurred over the years. When he asked if men know their roles today, Education Department assistant teacher Jackie Long replied, "If they have a good strong woman to show them."

Toni Lockwood, another Assistant Teacher said that she was raised "that the father made the money and the mother did everything else, and I did that for awhile," she said, "but not anymore."

The class made room for a lot of fun, including a pillow fight.

He called the Education Department's practice of having community members read and tell stories to pre-schoolers "a trailblazing program."

The fruits of his researching skills came out again and again as he cited the results of different studies.

■ Dads are most important to boys in the Head Start years but most important to girls in early adolescent years.

■ A dad's bottom-line statements carry a lot more weight than a mom's.

■ The average dad enjoys only 8 seconds of direct eye contact with any of his children on any given day.

"I believe strongly in this work. I really feel like I'm doing the work that I need to be doing," said Mitchell, but he has a gentle, non-judgmental way of presenting his information. "I'm no more of a down to earth dad than anyone that tries to do the best for his kids," he said.

Mitchell will give a keynote address to the 9th National American Indian/Alaska Native Children's Conference in San Antonio, Texas on May 7.

To receive his monthly newsletter, contact Mitchell at: 877-282-DADS, or by email at Patrick@downtoearthdad.org, and go see his website at: www.downtoearthdad.org.

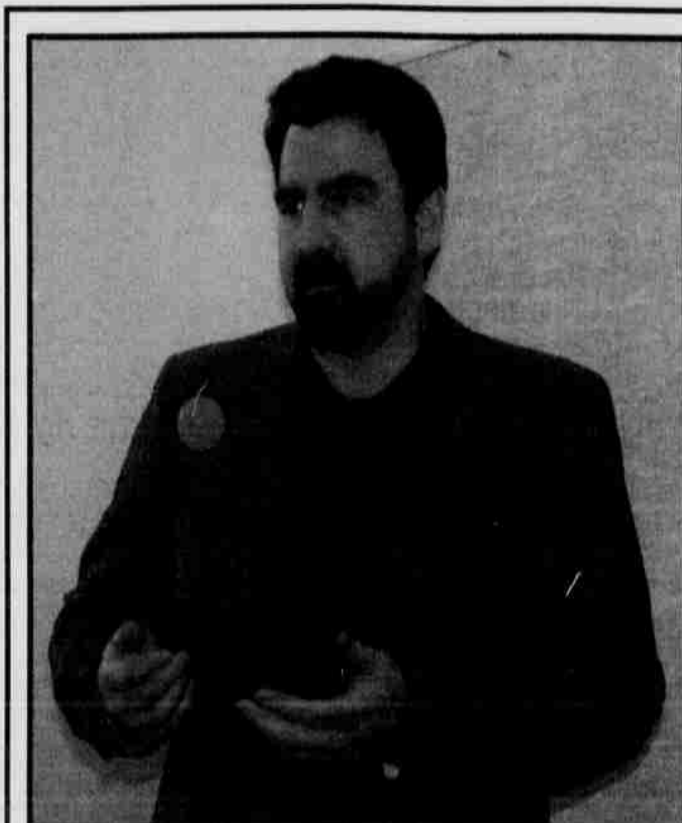


Photo by Ron Karten

"Telling the true stories of your childhood to your kids is the best way to build a bond with them."

~Patrick Mitchell,
"Down To Earth Dad"

dren don't care about them because they're such good stories, he said, but because they're about you.

"Telling the true stories of your childhood to your kids is the best way to build a bond with them," he

"Shame-Free Parenting" Targets Emotional Problems With Wisdom And Patience

■ Shawn Horn returns to give classes in Grand Ronde where she studied with Dr. Joseph Stone.



Photo by Ron Karten

Shawn Horn

By Ron Karten

Shawn Horn maintains that "shame is at the core of most of our emotional dysfunctions."

Her handout at the recent "Shame-Free Parenting" class the Tribal Education Department defined shame as "a soul-deep sense that there is something uniquely wrong

with me that is not wrong with you or anyone else in the world. Because I am not perfect and problem-free, I feel hopelessly, disgustingly different and worth less than other people. I view myself as literally, worthless. It isn't just that I *make* a mistake when I make a mistake; I *am* a mistake when I make a mistake. This is shame's message."

Horn's message first came to light during a class on the subject at a time when she was feeling bad about herself and her own parenting skills. That message now has become her life's work. Her doctoral thesis is titled like the class, *Shame-Free Parenting*, and much of the sharing she does in her

class is a labor of love on a subject very close to her heart.

She has worked in group homes, in child and adolescent psychiatric units, in high schools and as a consultant for the Head Start program in Spokane, where she now resides. Currently, Horn is an intern at Spokane Mental Health. Last year, she spent nine months in the Wellness Clinic doing graduate work under the direction of Behavioral Health Director Joseph B. Stone, Ph.D.

"She did real good work, counseling and assessment," said Stone. "I thought she was particularly good with issues of children."

"Healthy shame," she told the class, "is important and necessary to develop conscience. It gives us information to change our (unwanted) behavior. It becomes unhealthy when you take that outside thing and bring it inside and start thinking that you're a flawed and defective person."

We get the message that we may be flawed from parents, siblings and peers, she said. And while many environments can be devastating to youngsters, "it's never too late" to start learning ways to keep shame out of a child-rearing environment.

You're setting yourself up to be ashamed of yourself, for example, if you think you should be a perfect parent. The result may be that you explode when you make a mistake as a way to hide your shame. The explosion sets in motion behaviors in children that continue to pass the shame around.

Other ways shame-based parents protect them-

selves from facing their "imperfections" are such self-destructive behaviors as compulsive shopping, over-eating, drug and alcohol abuse, and losing control with children's behaviors. These are all "distracting behaviors," said Horn.

"Our worth is not based on our child's behavior," said Horn. She recommended waiting out a child's tantrum rather than fighting it. "It will eventually become one of the child's greatest strengths."

"We plan for a week of hell (when we're going to change our child's behavior)," said Tribal member Kristi Pettit, a Social Services staffer and one of ten attending the class, "but it does work. It really does. Next week, we're going to brush our teeth every night. It's going to be hell."

"Target only one behavior at a time," said Horn, "and plan ahead. Name the behavior you're addressing."

She also suggested using "natural consequences." If a child spills a glass of water, don't yell, just set the ground rules. "If you spill the water, you clean it up."

"Know the difference between a child seeking attention and behaving badly," said Horn.

"Parenting is the most difficult job in the world," said Horn. "Anything that starts with labor can't be easy."

Plenty of advice about what to do and what not to do boiled down to a pretty simple idea, though it may not always be so simple to get there. The goal of a parent, she said, is to "teach children to add goodness to the world."