

AS 'TOXIC MASCULINITY' MYTH BUSTED

The importance of being Dad

By TOBY YOUNG

FATHERS get a bad rap these days. We're portrayed as deadbeats in adverts, incompetent clowns in Hollywood movies and unreliable morons in sitcoms and cartoons.

Even in Peppa Pig, a TV show aimed at young children, Daddy Pig is a good-humoured punch bag, smiling contentedly as his wife and children relentlessly take the Mickey out of him.

The point is clear: Fathers are a waste of space.

And that message was given scientific authority recently when the American Psychological Association declared that traditional masculine qualities such as bravery, independence, competitiveness, stoicism and a love of adventure are "psychologically harmful".

You have to work at it

Based on this, you'd think kids would be better off without being exposed to any of that "toxic" masculinity.

But, incredibly, you'd be wrong. Turns out, kids with fathers in their lives are better off. Who would have believed it?

A study by King's College, London, has found that children who don't have a secure, loving relationship with their fathers cost the state ten times more than those who do in terms of extra lessons, counselling and social care.

Needless to say, almost every study of the subject has reached the same conclusion.

Boys with a father in their lives are less likely to fail exams, drop out of school, get in trouble with the police, go to prison, get addicted to alcohol and drugs, while girls are less likely to

engage in early sexual activity, suffer eating disorders, anxiety and depression.

Merely being present isn't enough.

To make sure your kids get the full benefit of having a loving and supportive man in their lives, you have to work at



it – something I've learned the hard way. I judder with horror when I recall some of the mistakes I've made.

For instance, there was the time my wife Caroline and I were supposed to be going to a play in the West End. Our daughter Sasha was one and Caroline was eight-and-a-half months pregnant.

Just as we were about to leave, entrusting Sasha to the care of Amber, our beautiful, 18-year-old au pair, Caroline had a change of heart.

She didn't feel up to sitting in a small theatre seat for three hours in her present state. Would I mind terribly if she didn't come? "Not at all," I said. Then, turning to the au pair, I said: "Amber, would you like to come?"

As it happened, she would, and she skipped upstairs to change into the smallest mini skirt I've ever seen.

It wasn't until I returned from the theatre with Amber later that evening that I realised what a mistake I'd made. Caroline had made up a bed for me on the sofa.

Fast forward 16 years, add two more children, and I'm a bit better than I was. Not Father Of The Year, but I do my fair share of cooking and cleaning, make sure the homework is done on time and get the kids into bed at a reasonable hour.

I can pass on a few useful tips from the past decade-and-a-half.

For instance, one reliable way to get your kids to behave at mealtimes is to tell them that the motion detector in the kitchen linked

to the burglar alarm is "Santa's CCTV". "You never know when he might be watching," I told them.

"If you don't want to find a lump of coal in your stockings next Christmas, you'd better eat your greens."

More seriously, it's critical to understand the difference between being a father and being a friend.

By all means play football with them in the local park, even take an occasional turn on Fortnite.

But don't think of yourself as one of their mates.

The rewards are huge

Your most important job is to model good behaviour, which means not being impatient, never losing your temper and always being kind and considerate.

But when necessary, you've also got to punish bad behaviour.

A lot of your time, particularly as they get older, will be spent telling them what they can't do, whether it's playing on the Xbox all weekend or staying out late, and if you're a giggling buddy one minute and a stern authority figure the next, you'll just confuse them.

But the rewards are huge – happy, well-adjusted children, ready for anything the world can throw at them.

Peppa Pig is great, but in real life pigs don't talk and dads aren't surplus to requirements.

Think of fatherhood as a job, only you don't get paid and can never retire. The most important job in the world.



