

For their first few years, Justin and Jeff were two of the sweetest little fellas any parents could hope to have. But, alas, time marched on. By the time they entered middle school, sweetness had become a rare commodity. By the time they were in high school, they hated my guts. Like most fathers, I decided I could just “wing it” at the most important job I would ever have. When Margene was pregnant the first time, I remember thinking *This business of having a kid is no big deal. I have a dog, and the dog does what I tell it. So will the kid.* Well, that theory didn’t last long at all. Before Justin barely had a full head of hair, it was obvious that inside that tiny little head of his was a mind that would increasingly have its own ideas about how his world should function. From the time he and his brother were five, Margene left the disciplining entirely up to me. If rules were broken, there were consequences. Right



before Justin was born, I bought a paperback book about parenting called *How to Father*. Twenty-five years later, I sold it at a garage sale for 10 cents, having never read beyond the first three pages. The only thing that stuck with me was something on the back cover: *If you can be your child’s friend and father, by all means do it. But if you have to chose between the two, be a father.* That advice made sense to me, so I took it to heart. But I’d be fooling myself if I didn’t admit that I’d have been a lot better parent if I’d read the whole book. I tried being friend and father, but lacked the skills to be both. I was a good dad, but missed the chance to be a great one because I never learned how to deal with obstinate children without losing my patience, and wow did I have obstinate children. Occasionally I’d spank them, something I wouldn’t repeat if I had a do-over. But my biggest failing was to father-by-yelling. When they balked for the umpteenth time at doing what they were told, I screamed at them like they were wild animals, which, come to think of it, is not a totally inaccurate description of the way they often were back then. I never learned the *art* of fathering, so there was a lot more conflict between us than there should have been. In my defense, I did the best I knew how with the limited knowledge I had about parenting. They won a few battles along the way, but in the end I won the war. In spite of my shortcomings, they grew up to be two of the finest men any parents could want. I made mistakes for sure, but I also did a lot of positive fathering along the way. I read to them when they were young, helped with their schoolwork, played games with them, and took them fishing. Most importantly, I told them thousands of times how much I loved them, something I still do. And, not once did it ever enter my mind to commit the unforgiveable sin of doing things like telling them they’d never amount to anything, or disparaging them in any way. Although I was acutely ill during much of the 1980s, I went along on several of their Boy Scout camping trips, and missed showing up for only one of nearly two hundred soccer, basketball & baseball games, tennis matches, swim meets and bike races. I don’t expect accolades for supporting them in their activities. I enjoyed it immensely. What father wouldn’t? When everything is averaged out, I give myself a solid B as a dad. But I sure wish I’d finished reading that book.