

"The Baby Daddy Survival Guide - Common Sense Co-Parenting" **By Michael Smothers (an excerpt)**

Some nights you'll cry. In your car after a drop-off. Maybe even once you make it back home. But some nights the raw emotion of the love a father has for his child and the feeling of being severed from it (at least physically) will render you defenseless against the tears.

One of my fondest memories of my younger daughter is a night that started off pretty normal, at least for us. I picked her and her sister up from school and took them to Ashley's house for our scheduled visitation, which at the time was a few hours after school until bedtime. So, we knocked out our evening ritual. We ate, finished homework and got prepared for the next day before settling in for the night. While reading a bedtime story, she looked up at me, seemingly no longer interested in the book.

"Daddy, can you please stay with me tonight?" I scrambled to figure out how to begin to explain to a five-year-old the particulars of why that was impossible.

"Well baby, this is mommy's house. She has her house and I have my house. You guys stay with me on the weekends sometimes so that we can have our time at my house, but I can't stay here with you."

As I basked in the moment, feeling like I came up with a pretty good explanation, she looked me in my eyes and delivered words that broke me in a way I had never been broken before. "Is it because you don't have a bed here?...I'll get my sleeping bag and sleep on the floor and you can sleep in my bed." In that moment the full weight of the responsibility I had for that tiny heart crushed me.

Fighting back tears I told her that it was such a sweet, generous offer but that I wanted her to be snug and comfortable so she would sleep well and be rested for the next day. I kissed her and her sister goodnight, we said prayers and I turned off the light as I left the room. I sat on the couch, stunned until a few minutes later, Ashley got home from work. I said goodnight and nothing more for fear that I would break down at any moment.

I got in my car as the tears started to fall; by the time I made it to the end of the block, I was sobbing uncontrollably. I consider myself to be a pretty even-keeled person and not very often do my emotions get the better of me. But the night my daughter told me that she would sleep on the floor just so I could be near her...it broke me to pieces. What had I ever done to deserve to be loved like that?

The majority of what I had offered her up to that point was dysfunction. The guilt of all the times she expected a visit only to be met with the excuse of "Daddy's car broke down," came rushing into my mind. I sobbed even harder. The look of disappointment in her eyes as she accepted that the one thing she wanted most in that night, for her Daddy to be with her...wasn't going to happen.

I punched the steering wheel repeatedly. Sinking my face into my hands, I played her life like a movie in my head. The moments I missed, the times I was too busy on my phone to

give her the attention she was looking for. My despair felt bottomless. And then in the middle of a deep gasp for air I thought of her smile. The way she laughed at my jokes while we ate dinner earlier that night. The joy in her voice as we sang songs during bath time. The way she wrapped her arms around my neck as I gave her one last hug goodnight.

I wasn't the perfect father. I'm still not and will never be. But the love a young child has for a father is a forgiving love. One that says even though you're not perfect, I still want you here, just to be close to me. My tears slowed as I started to think of our first field trip, baking cookies and planting flowers in front of her mom's house. I lifted my head and the last of the tears dropped. I would find a way to make this right. To protect the tiny heart she placed in my hands that night, I'd move heaven and Earth to do it if need be.

Some nights, you're going to cry. You'll cry because the weight is heavy. You'll cry because the pain is indescribable. You'll cry because you miss them, and it feels like there's no one who truly understands what you're going through. You'll look at your phone and try to think of someone to call. Someone who might understand. You are not alone. As men we tend to cry in the dark, for fear that we'll be viewed as weak. You are not weak. It takes a strong man to love this hard. It takes a strong man to look himself in the mirror and face the fact that he can be better. It takes a strong man to carry the weight and responsibility of a child's love. Yes, some nights you'll cry. But then you'll think of the promise held in the life of your child. The smiles and laughs and hugs and kisses you've shared so far and the hope of so many more in the future. You'll wipe your tears away and you'll know exactly what it means to be a father.

©Michael Smothers—all rights reserved.