

# 10 Essential Style (And Survival) Rules For Fathers

## The smart man's guide to making parenthood look easy

A few months back, I awoke early in the morning and began to prepare for a big meeting. I put on my go-to suit, the one I always felt at my best in. In front of the mirror, as I took a mental meander through the day's agenda, I finished the knot on my tie, taking care to caress the dimple to perfection. I made sure to take a lap in front of my wife, just to give her a subtle reminder of what I can look like on one of my best days. Feeling prepared to face the world, I ducked into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

What happened next seemed to transpire in cinematic slow motion. I flinched... too late. And suddenly, as if in one of those anxiety dreams where you show up for the big exam in a bathrobe, my attire had changed. I was now dressed head to toe in imported silk, fine wool, pressed cotton... and pureed vegetables.



As my suit lay in ruins, more Jackson Pollock than American Gigolo, I glanced across the room at the high chair. Sitting there in his furry blue suit, with Ping-Pong eyeballs perched atop his head (a very convincing Cookie Monster), my 1-year-old son, Ronan, howled in hysterical laughter.

For a new father, reconciling one's sense of self, not to mention one's sense of style, with the new responsibilities and epic sloppiness of parenthood is a daunting task. Regrettably, most other fathers aren't much inspiration to fight the good fight. Glancing around the playground, I am usually confronted with a bunch of dads who seem all too content to look like Bill Belichick on game day.

Friends, I recommend adopting the attitude of the Godfather. Many a dapper don, in the course of conducting family business, stained plenty of articles of their prized wardrobes (and no, that wasn't ketchup). Did they try to salvage that favorite shirt? Did they say, "I love this shirt, and after all, it's only a couple of powder burns on the sleeve"? Absolutely not. They culled the weaklings from their wardrobes, and later they walked into that courtroom dressed to the nines, and many a jury smiled kindly upon their natty attire.

Believe me, you face a jury of your peers every day, and your appearance, as much as how you comport

yourself, will determine your success. Remember, your child will love you no matter what you look like. Your boss, colleagues, and clients won't.

1. **Don't eat the left-overs.** A man's risk of becoming obese increases 4 percent with each child he has. The reason is that men, as a gender, are cheap. Buy the kid a hot dog, the kid eats half the hot dog, and what are you gonna do? Same thing with the mac 'n' cheese, ice cream, and applesauce. Throw it down the garbage disposal under the sink, not the one under your nose. (Chances are, you may have also gained weight just waiting for the baby to be born: In one study, 47 percent of expectant fathers gained weight during their wives' third trimester, a phenomenon known as Couvade syndrome.)

2. **Remember, you're in the picture too.** If your wife follows standard operating procedures, your kid has already been photographed more than Britney Spears in a hair salon. Well, guess who else is showing up in those snapshots? Some of my most treasured photos are of me as a child with my parents and grandparents. They looked young, vibrant, and well dressed. Remember, those photos are your legacy too. Do you want to be immortalized looking like you are ready to paint the garage?

3. **Get into leather.** Whether it's your sofa, your car seats, or your jackets, you'll find leather cleans off more easily than most traditional cloth. Microfiber is also an excellent choice. Suede or velvet jackets, on the other hand, should leave your closet only after the last reading of Goodnight Moon.

4. **Barricade the clutter.** Encroachment from plastic toys that flash and break into song can turn your once-serene space into a showroom for chaos. Don't think you can fight the clutter: You are weak, and your child is strong. She knows that doe-eyed glances, whimpers, and begging will result in your bringing home yet another SpongeBob-themed product. Your only solution, then, is to practice containment. What's helped my wife and me keep our sanity is that we've carved up our home into zones that allow us to claim certain areas as our own, where we can lie down without checking first for spit-up, and where walking across a dark room doesn't put us at risk for an unexpected backflip off a toy truck. The best solution, square footage permitting, is the upstairs/downstairs approach, where by anything child-related is quarantined in the domestic equivalent of steerage.

5. **Take the trauma out of coming home.** After a tiring day at work, you stroll through the front door hoping for a moment of calm. Instead, you are greeted by a meteorite of mashed potatoes and mucus screaming your name and racing at you at 100 miles an hour, and then it's yet another trip to the dry cleaner for Dad. Take contraceptive measures. Some guys keep a pair of jeans and sneakers in the garage or mudroom for just such a collision. I have a beat-up trench coat that I keep in the hall closet right next to the front door. When I come home, I reach inside and throw on the coat, so I can receive all the love my son wants to share... without all the slobber.

6. **Lose the logos.** When it comes to casual style, you could do worse than to imitate Brad Pitt.

This guy has so many kids I lost count, but he manages to look pretty at ease whenever he is photographed with them. He plays it safe with denim, T-shirts, and work boots, and he keeps it simple. To emulate his vibe, go for darker denim with a classic straight-leg cut and steer clear of T-shirts emblazoned with slogans. (Do you think the world's greatest dad really needs to advertise that fact? Does Nelson Mandela walk around with a T-shirt that reads world's greatest human rights leader? I don't think so.) Instead, opt for solid T-shirts in white or black when it's time to hit the playground.

**7. Say good-bye to old friends.** The suit you wore to that job interview four years ago? The shirt your wife bought you for Valentine's Day 2002? Toss 'em. As a dad, you're going to be harder on clothes than ever before. Love is a battlefield, and the battle starts in your closet. Be merciless.

**8. X out the XL.** Something in the male psyche whispers that bigger is better, but baggy clothes tend to make you look sloppy and heavier than you are. Worse still, when you bend over at the playground to pick up your child, you may be giving some of the other parents and children an unsolicited anatomy lesson. Learn to downsize. Ask yourself these two questions: When I sit down, do I have enough extra material below my waist to make a second pair of pants? And if I tuck in my shirt, does it look like I'm smuggling a loaf of sourdough? If the answer to either is yes, your clothes are too damn big.

**9. Don't wear running shoes unless you're running.** Don't wear Crocs unless you're working in the garden, don't wear Tevas unless you're whitewater rafting, and don't wear flip-flops unless you're... well, just don't wear flip-flops. You are living in a golden age for casual footwear. Whether it is the Y-3 Yamamoto for Adidas, driving moccasins from Tod's, or a pair of Prada sneakers, there are plenty of options that offer both comfort and style.

**10. Respect rites of passage.** My grandfather was, without a doubt, the most stylish man I've ever known. He was a craftsman, an artist, and a deadly dresser. I was always amazed by how impeccable he looked, even when he had come straight from his work studio. He always made it a point to involve me and expose me to stylish and artistic things. He was very matter-of-fact with me: "This is how you tie a tie," and "When you wear a dress shirt, it is French cuff." As if to say wearing cufflinks was just something you did, just like shaving. Anytime he came through the door, he would hand me his overcoat and fedora, and I would take pride in hanging them neatly in the closet. It was a subtle way of teaching me to respect things and take care of them. In the end, it seems learning to attend to the finer points of style can actually teach the finer points of life.

*Photo by M. Sharkey*