

Better off Dad : Parenting Morsels from a Stay-At-Home Daddio

by: Will Culp

review by: Ellen Gurley



I went to high school in the nineties with a Will Culp. He was a smart guy, not necessarily a nerd. And when I knew him, I watched him grow up from a tie-dye clad long-hair to a button-down rocking honor roll student, who worked part-time at Heroes Aren't Hard to Find for Shelton Drum selling comic books. We all have to find ourselves. And making A's and reading about superheroes was not a bad place to be found. Now he's found himself as a stay-at-home dad. He likes to refer to himself as 'daddio', as do many of his Facebook friends.

Before I became a parent myself, I admittedly was not someone who respected stay-at-home moms (much less these new fangled dad ones), as my experience with them (stay-at-home moms) meant that they didn't work but weren't necessarily present in the home. I imagined them as lunch-date-making, clothing shopping, husband's-money-spending socialites. Having been one myself (a stay-at-home mom, not a socialite), that perception changed drastically. But I'd never met a stay-at-home dad. I read Better off Dad by Will Culp and I got to know one instantly.

I started off thinking that this must be the most emasculating 'job' that anyone could have been 'forced' into. This is, apparently, a choice. A choice that not only Will made, but that many men across America have made. So many that there are actual groups of these men, who publicly admit that this is what they are doing. One would think that they would be embarrassed. (For shame, man in apron, for shame!) Not only is Will not ashamed of his decision, he's proud of himself. How can this be? I may have to learn to respect this choice

of his. Maybe I'll write it one hundred times "Stay at home dads are rad".

I knew that parents I see around my kids' classrooms weren't as role-rigid as were my parents' peers. I've seen dads bottle-feeding in public (gasp) and walking around with snack bowls clipped to their pants (the ones that are designed not to spill but are spilling all over this man's person and he pays no mind). And if you've been to a baby store lately, you've seen all the gear that is geared toward men. I bought my ex a diaper bag. It was dope. It's a camouflaged shoulder bag made by a company called Diaper Dude (banking on this muddying of roles). The bag was sweet. And the price tag was high. He carries drum sticks to shows, water bottles and headphones in it. And so it goes.

The book never states what his wife does for a living but it is evidently enough to support a family of four (at the time of the book). I have recently caught up with Will who is still doing the daddio thing and has a new addition. As a parent to two boys myself, reading his stories of princess parties and Disney films made me cringe. Though I am a 'godmother' to a wonderful girl and aunt to some too, I haven't really been raising girls at all. I'm raising all boys. That means dirt, Doctor Octopus, heavy metal and every sport there is. Not Sleeping Beauty, tea parties and magic wands wafting in my face. But Will Culp was a stay-at-home dad to two teeny tiny princesses. The pictures he recently sent me include a NEW addition, a Liam, a boy. And although Will is still outnumbered, this was a relief to me. Now he can buy army men and toy tool sets. Eureka. I may even send him some of my boys' hand-me-down comic books or Venom action figures. Who knows?

Will's tales of engaging in these female activities (not just the dishes but the fairy dancing) was very endearing to me, eventually. I enjoyed his stories. I could associate with some of them (sans donning the tiaras). My favourite was of him spiking his egg nog dressed as Santa on a Christmas Eve, wherein he fell in a box (intended to be returned to the attic, as per his wife's instructions) and found himself sleeping there until the sun came up. Ha. What the heck? Luckily his elf (dog) woke him up just moments before the girls came down the stairs in that all too familiar rumble to the tree and bounty.

My fears of "the Emasculation of William Culp" are just that, my fears. Will is not scared. In fact, he loves what he does. He indulges them at attempting ballet, he decorates the house in pink and still he gets to wake up beside one of the most beautiful women in Chicago (he also sent me a picture with her in it). But I am not the only one on the planet who has said to themselves, "dudes staying at home is emasculating". I can't be, right? Will has encountered many-a naysayer, but he just kept on truckin'. That's manly, where I come from ... not giving a care.

Will is a columnist in his town in Chicago, though he grew up here and began his marriage in a modest home in NoDa. He has found a new home and new friends. He talks about going to church in his jeans and forming groups with other dads (fantasy football with working fathers and stay-at-home groups with his kind). He doesn't complain about washing dishes or folding clothes. As a matter of fact, I don't think he even mentions it - he just does it - that is mind-blowing.

Will has taken his cache of daddio stories and contributes them to the Mahomet Citizen which I imagine, in my special hometown-of-Charlotte-mind, that is looks like our Observer.

He then took a bunch of his columns and put them in this book, *Better of Dad*. It is not sequential. Sometimes you're reading it and he has two kids, sometimes he has just the one, but no matter the order, while I was reading this, he seemed like a really happy guy. He gives advice, offers up ideas and passes their time with educational and fun activities - all with no bitching. I wonder if it happens, but that it's just left out of the columns and the book (though he seems pretty transparent and genuinely happy). Disgustingly so. (I kid.)

With this new addition and a few more years behind him, he has plans to bring all of his new adventures and experiences and put them in a new book. I wonder if he will call it *Better off Daddio Part 2*. And maybe he's got more additions on the way. Either way, I will buy it. I purchased my first autographed copy at Park Road Bookstore.

Next up he will be in Denver, CO in October promoting his published book *Better off Dad* at a (get this) National At Home Convention. Holy crap. This stuff is real. How real? So real. I know this is a dad who left Charlotte and maybe you're thinking "they just make these stay-at-home types in Chicago right?" But NO. Two Charlotte dads, a Richard Jones and a Barry Robert Ozer, just wrote *A Dude's Guide to Babies : the New Dad's Playbook* (Sellers Pub.) What the what? They make these types in Charlotte, too? Charlotte's *Little Ones Magazine* just wrote an article wherein one of the above aforementioned dads was quoted saying that even a trip to the mailbox can bring on an adventure. (Sometimes, I think, that's a bad thing. But I digress.) These dads offer up some of their helpful tips. One of which is wearing cargo pants. Another is wearing absorbent clothing and also clothing their children in it. They sound like they're planning for an adventure, all right. How emasculating. (I chuckle.)

In a recent article in Myrtle Beach's *Grand Strand and Healthy Living*, Armin Brott cites the beneficial side effects of being a stay-at-home dad as things like increasing patience and humour, allowing for more flexible thinking, returning to your childhood and empathy (which, by the by, marriage alone does not incite or trigger the selflessness attached to this new empathy created only through having a kid).

But what will come of the stay-at-home anyone whose children are all school-aged or, worse, have moved out? Will they remain at home? Will they be able to venture out there into the job market with so many years without any "real" work experience? That was my fear as a stay-at-home someone. I began to tighten up my resume once my kids were five and three as the hustle was calling me back. That is how I started my own magazine. Perhaps these stay-at-home types will do the same (begin a start up of their passion).

Will noticed a dwindling in the numbers in his dad groups once kids began entering school and they were no longer at home. No matter what they elect to do once encountering their near, half or all empty nests, I am sure that these stay-at-home dads will have no regrets of laying out of "real" work. Because the time, the real quality time that you get to spend with your children in the early years, is gold - real gold. And if I had to bet, I'd guess that Will wouldn't trade that in for anything in the world. Cheers, Santa, you glitter covered fairy daddio, you are the man. A real man doing real work, in my book, after all.