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Here's What Your Kids Can Learn If You Let Them Use Power Tools

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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I have fond memories of working with my dad. He would drag me out of bed on a Saturday and enlist my help around the house: caulking an eavestrough; building a fence; painting the living room.

I didn't enjoy it at the time. Especially when my age hit double digits, I remember thinking how boring it all was, passing my dad a screwdriver or holding the base of a ladder as he climbed. He got to do all the fun stuff.

But slowly, he let me use the tools. First, with his hand over mine, then a tentative solo attempt and, finally, full autonomy (always, though, under his strict foreman's eye for quality). I still remember my nervous exhilaration the first time he stepped back and let me use the chain-saw.

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When my girls first suggested building a treehouse in the backyard, I decided I would pass on my (fairly basic) knowledge of tools to them, an unbroken chain of handiwork oral history. My dad died a few years back and my girls were always asking about the grandad they'd never met. So, this lesson was a message from grandad.

The first thing we did was sit down and sketch out plans. Where would the windows be? How would the ladder be attached? Would it only be tall enough for children or were adults welcome? (Answer: Adults were welcome, but they needed to duck a little.) When I suggested a trap door their eyes went wide.

"It could have a slide," said Elizabeth. "Or an alarm!"

"We shouldn't put a handle on it," said Sonia.

"Why?" I asked. "You won't be able to open it."

"But then everyone will see it and it won't be a surprise," she said. She was right. I needed to figure out a way to make an invisible handle.

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I loaded up a rental car full of 2x4s and deck screws and lugged them into our backyard. Then I introduced my daughters to the tools we'd be using — my late father's tools, some of them made with his own hands during his apprenticeship in post-war England.

I took them through the basic rules: measure twice, cut once; always wear safety glasses; don't use a tool unless dad says it's OK; put your shoes on (no, not those, those are sandals). At this point, they already looked bored. We measured a few 2x4s and I showed them the circular saw at a safe distance. They just covered their ears and turned up their noses. "It stinks!" said Sonia.

The saw was a bust, so I showed them the power drill. I saw Sonia's eyes go wide as she felt the power of the drill as we locked a screw into a piece of wood — with my hands as a guide, of course, and her eyes protected behind safety glasses. Elizabeth was less sure, but she wanted to compete with her big sister.

Then the inevitable question: "Is it almost done?" they asked.

"The saw was a bust, so I showed them
the power drill."

I

looked at the two beams we had screwed to the tree.

“No,” I said. “This is going to take, like, a month.”

“Ugghh,” said Sonia. “I’m going to read.” Perhaps I should have tried harder to encourage her to stay, but I was a little relieved. I could now actually get some work done.

The next day, before their school bus arrived, I prepared some studs and panels they could bang together without much prep. It went well for about 15 minutes, but then they started to drift off again.

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I realized that I wasn’t doing them any favours by trying to make it less boring, by making it less frustrating. I didn’t want them growing up thinking handiwork was all hammering nails and using power tools. They needed to do the boring stuff, too: measuring; planning; sweeping up sawdust; fiddling with one goddamn screw for 20 minutes until it finally went in. Sometimes you just needed someone to hold the ladder.

And sometimes, working with your hands hurts. Elizabeth was the first to get an "injury" (a microscopic sliver in her finger), and later, Sonia pinched her finger with the drill. I was outwardly concerned but inwardly proud. The next day, Sonia held the drill a little straighter and Elizabeth came to understand that a piece of lumber has a grain.

Bit by bit, my dad’s lessons trickle down. There’s empowerment in that drill. My kids will be makers rather than consumers; fixers rather than thrower-outers. And they will come to realize that making something with your hands requires perseverance and patience.

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