

FIRST 5 S H A S T A

Nurturing Warrior, Nurturing Father

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The nurturing father is a nurturing warrior, a champion of his child's well-being.

Rick Crowley, a *Chukchansi Yokuts* California American Indian, believes every child deserves to have a warrior in his/her life. "Warrior" describes a person of great courage and vigor, someone who feels strongly, even intensely, the way a father feels for his son or daughter. A father who shares emotion and affection with his child, who learns to be gentle and patient, and encourages empathy in his child. This is the nurturing warrior, the nurturing father.

Whether changing diapers, helping with homework, or accepting his child's invitation to play, a father can play a vital role in his child's healthy growth and development. Studies have shown that having a present father involved in the child's routine care from birth to age five can make a powerful difference. It can contribute to the child's success in school, making friends, regulating emotions and behavior, solving problems, and growing into an empathetic, compassionate adult. Studies have also shown the negative impact for children with an absent father. They are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of high school, receive welfare, get married at a young age, divorce, commit crimes, and abuse drugs and alcohol. Although mothers have been traditionally associated with the role of nurturer, fathers are simply a different kind of nurturing parent – a nurturing *male* parent. Ideally, a child will have a balance of both.

Erick wakes about 5:00 am and sleepily calls "Mama?" Mama responds, "Yes Erick." He asks to climb into bed with his parents. She says it's too early. He lays silent, realizing he will have to wait. He wakes again around 8:00 am. This time he cuddles with Mama until she gets up to start her day. Papa is home this morning and that means one thing: they get to wrestle! Erick's mother listens with a smile as father and son roll around the bed, pushing and pulling each other. Papa is careful not to be too rough and Erick responds in kind as they express affection with a morning wrestle.

As today's family dynamic continues to change, children benefit when fathers and mothers work together as parenting partners, whether they are married or live separately. The nurturing father is not only gentle and patient with his child, but flexible with his parenting partner. Although each parent may have different parenting styles, these differences can form a broader base for solving problems and supporting growth and development in young children. Nurturing parents also strive to be flexible parents.

Men learn to father by following models. With a high rate of family breakups in our culture, there is a generation of fathers today who grew up without their fathers. If fathers were not physically absent, they might have been emotionally distant or even abusive. Having an inadequate fathering model can make it difficult for today's father to know how to be a nurturing father. However, they can choose to be the father they want to be, regardless of the type of fathering they received during childhood.

Erick's father knows he is fortunate. He has a second chance at becoming a nurturing warrior, nurturing father. He has a thirty-two year old daughter from

a previous marriage and three grandsons. Without a good role model for fathering, he made his share of mistakes with his daughter. He believes there were consequences from his lack of connection or effective listening and his eventual absence from her young life. Remarried to a loving, supportive wife, he is a partner, raising a son filled with a caring heart, a curious mind, and a spirit of empathy toward others. As Erick's father, he is present, nurturing and protective of his son and his wife. He chose to learn to be a nurturing warrior, nurturing father.

Children provide fathers with opportunities every day to improve their fathering and build a spirit of empathy in their children. Fathers can learn to be gentle and patient even while being firm. They can assure their child he/she is loved by accepting an invite to wrestle, play dress-up, or read a story, even after a challenging temper tantrum or potty training accident. The nurturing father is a nurturing warrior, a champion of his child's well-being.

Erick shares a good night ritual with Papa. It begins with Erick sitting facing Papa on his lap. He kisses his father on the right cheek, then on the left. He kisses his father's forehead and then rubs his chin with his own. They lean in together, forehead to forehead, and whisper together "I love you." They ask each other about their favorite part of the day. Of course, Erick's usual reply is "wrestling." Erick and Papa say good night and Erick climbs in bed satisfied. He knows he is protected and, most importantly, loved.

The nurturing warrior, the nurturing father, experiences rewards as he sees his son develop character, his daughter grow to choose healthy relationships, and his grandchildren be born to nurturing fathers. The nurturing warrior is rewarded for his efforts by having close relationships with his children. Like the *Chukchansi*, he can deepen that reward if he envisions the greater reward stretching forward as far as the seventh generation.

Men are turning to other men to find encouragement and strength. There is a fathering movement afoot! All fathers are invited to learn from each other by coming to a Nurturing Fathers Group sponsored by the North State Fatherhood Taskforce. Scheduling information is available at www.greathelpsource.com, or call Rick Crowley at 530-406-9678.

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Deborah Peel is the Marketing and Communications Coordinator at First 5 Shasta, supporting the vision that all children are safe, healthy, and live in nurturing environments where they play, learn, and grow to reach their potential. She has a teenage daughter and two grown sons.