



by Karen Stephens

## A Father's Example Shows How to Be a Good Parent

Let me tell you about Jenny and Jeff, a couple I've watched parent for six years. For reasons you'll understand, I'll talk more about Jeff's parenting than Jenny's. But make no mistake, each is inseparable to the story.

As a young woman dating, Jenny was one smart cookie. When Jeff proposed, Jenny didn't giggle and jump head-over-heels to accept an engagement ring. Nope, Jenny took her time to seriously ponder Jeff's offer to love and cherish 'til death would they part.

When Jenny did give Jeff her heart in marriage, she told him she had three reasons. First, Jeff made her laugh. (See, I said she was smart. Humor goes a long way in smoothing the inevitable bumps along the marital road.)

Second, Jenny knew Jeff would make a good father. What an immeasurable kindness to her future children, that she'd consider so closely the person who would become the most influential man in their lives.

And Jenny's third reason, one that bears on any man's ability to father, was that Jenny knew Jeff loved her. At first blush, loving a spouse may seem irrelevant to parenting. But one of the most important things parents can do for children is to consistently love each other — in word and deed. Their daily example of a respectful, caring commitment to each other, and their family life, gives children a deep sense of security, self esteem, and well-being.

So that's how it began for Jenny and Jeff. And life unfolded, as fate dictates. They created a fulfilling life together, which includes two daughters. Georgia is now age eight and Audrey is six. Due to Jenny's good judge of character, the girls have an exceptional father. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that Jeff is the type of father who will cast a loving glow on them for the rest of their days.

I saw Jeff daily for five years as he dropped off and picked up his girls at our early childhood program. Getting the girls to and from child care was a handful, especially when you consider Georgia and Audrey. They were full of energy, and so enthralled with dad that they always wanted to tell him "one more thing." In other words, they would keep dad at child care all day if they could.

Our staff couldn't blame them. Jeff always brightened our day, too. At morning drop off, he'd stay a while, sometimes sitting at the art table making pictures with the kids. Other times, he'd read a story to the girls and whoever else wanted to listen. He always took time to give them a smooth transition from home to child care.

At late afternoon pick-up, he'd enthusiastically greet the girls, bending to pick them up for hugs. The girls would take him around the room, showing him what they had worked on. He patiently followed. Invariably, he "oohed" and "ahhed" in all the right places. I never saw him throw a piece of their art work away, even the big easel papers dripping with paint.

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Jeff proved to be one of our most involved, supportive parents. He always had a good word for the staff, thanking them every day for the “great job!” they were doing with his girls.

Because he had the gift of music, Jeff volunteered to play his guitar and sing with the kids. Every Thursday morning for a whole semester, Jeff came to child care to take us on a magic carpet ride. It was joyful. Some days Georgia didn’t sing along: you know how kids can be with a parent present. Instead, she’d scan her circle of friends as they gazed up at her papa. She was always so proud.

Jeff continued the tradition when the girls went to elementary school. A photo I love shows Georgia, wearing a dreamy eyes-closed smile, as she leans into guitar-playing dad’s shoulder.

This family was always doing something fun. Memorable yearly vacations were the rule. And I’d frequently see them together at local events. When our child care had a float in a Homecoming Parade, Jeff rode along. He’d sit on a hay bale, one or both girls on his lap, all the while grinning ear to ear, like a kid himself.

But Jeff wasn’t just involved in the fun side of raising kids. He and Jenny made it to our parent-teacher conferences, too. And when a position opened on our parent advisory board, Jeff volunteered to fill it, no urging necessary. He was elected and served for three years. He never missed a meeting.

One of Jeff’s favorite James Taylor song lyrics goes, “The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time.” It’s ironic that Jeff loved it so much. You see, a brain tumor took Jeff from his wife, his girls, and from all of us, on August 30th, 2001. He was just 46 years old.

I can’t begin to describe the sadness that Jeff’s passing brought to all who knew him. But I’ll tell you one thing I know for sure. Jeff could leave Earth without one regret about the time he spent with his family. His life priorities were crystal clear. Jeff made the most of the time he had. It just wasn’t long enough.

Jeff is gone, but his spirit sings on in Jenny and his girls. If we’re smart, we’ll make sure his parenting lessons live on in our own families, too.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.