



There's just something about the love of a father that keeps Mike Hall going...

DAD MAN

BY EDWIN NEWTON

Mike Hall has seen the miracle take place on numerous occasions.

A dad – playing the role of a jungle animal, a pooh bear or a giant peach – reads to his kids. It's dad at his animated, interactive best. Almost on cue, his child's eyes light up with glee and anticipation.

A father's role in the family structure cannot be overvalued, especially when divorce and disinterest have reached epidemic proportions, Hall said. It's one of the main reasons he founded Strong Fathers-Strong Families eight years ago.

"I had watched many kids go through the pain of divorce – including my own wife," he said. "I knew that fatherhood and manhood were in need of repair."

The Springtown High School graduate has always been around kids.

He started out teaching – including a stint in Azle ISD – then became a principal in Boyd for a year and in Joshua for three years more.

But even though this young educator was on his way up the career ladder, something was missing. For one thing, while overseeing the care of other kids he was missing out on spending time with his own.

After returning to the classroom for one year, he started working for a fatherhood organization based out of Austin. The idea to start his own dad-oriented program was born.

Hall's organization, Strong Fathers-Strong Families, trains, provides technical assistance and facilitates programs that connect children with their fathers.

Strong Fathers-Strong Families spends much of its time working with schools and Head Start programs. In fact, the program has become a frequent guest on several Springtown and Azle campuses over the years.

About 100,000 involved dads later, Hall said the program seems to be working. But statistics can't really quantify the benefit of a program that has touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of children and dads.

Hall said it all begins with better communication between student and father. That means spending quality time together – something Strong Fathers-Strong Families encourages at every turn.

"We listen to the dads and listen to the schools and find ways to accommodate and collaborate with both," he said. "We are kind of a middle man for schools and parents – advocating for parent involvement in schools and promoting to parents what great work public schools do. Again, when parents do what they do well, and schools do what they do well and we work together, kids are VERY successful."

There is a sort of magic involved in the relationship between father and child, Hall said.

While mothers are inherently nurturing, dads offer a more engaging, "rough and tumble" way of relating to their kids.

And it seems to work. "Researchers say that this rough play can have a powerful positive impact on children, fostering curiosity and teaching them to regulate emotion and enjoy surprises," Hall said in an article he wrote titled "Strengthening Children's Literacy."

In fact, a recent study conducted by the University of North Carolina found that dads who used their special brand of communication – "varied vocabulary" as Hall calls it – were able to advance their two-year-olds' academic career further and faster than their mothers – especially when it came to reading.



Mike Hall, executive director for Strong Fathers-Strong Families, is a frequent after-dinner speaker in this area and all over Texas. He spoke to an Azle Optimist Club youth banquet last year (left) and recently told a Springtown Chamber of Commerce luncheon audience (above) about the pivotal role fathers play in the household – including getting everyone to church.

Photos by Edwin Newton

One particular researcher, skeptical at first, finally concluded that dad had more success advancing his daughter's reading skills than did mom, Hall wrote.

There is no denying the impact a father can have

as a whole.

The challenge is getting that relationship started, Hall said.

"Most of us see, every day, where fathers are not involved with their children," Hall said.

Eight years into his program, Hall still enjoys seeing dads discover the joy of spending time with their kids, and kids blossoming when

they just become dad.

"An awful lot of dads love their kids."

He remembers a little girl whose dad had been away in Iraq or some other overseas engagement. He was just one of 160 dads crowded into the school cafeteria that day, but to his daughter, they were the only two people in the room. She heard his voice – she jumped – and he melted.

Hall said children need both their mom and dad to be completely healthy.

"Each parent brings something different to the table," he said. "Those differences matter to those kids."

For more information about Strong Fathers-Strong Families, go to www.strongfathers/strongfamilies.com.

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Mike Hall, Strong Fathers-Strong Families

on his son or daughter – and his family, Hall said.

During a recent Springtown Chamber of Commerce luncheon, Hall talked about how dad's influence carried far more weight than his often more socially adept spouse. For example, fathers who go to church are more likely to bring the whole family along. When mom and children go, dad often stays home.

The same thing can be said for the community. If dad is involved, so usually is the rest of the family.

In short, getting fathers involved with their children not only helps the home, but society

they get some attention from their dad. The miracle doesn't take much – Strong Fathers-Strong Families just provides the initial push.

Fathers and their children provide the rest.

"To be honest, I have seen a lot of scary-looking guys," he said. "But when they see their child, well,

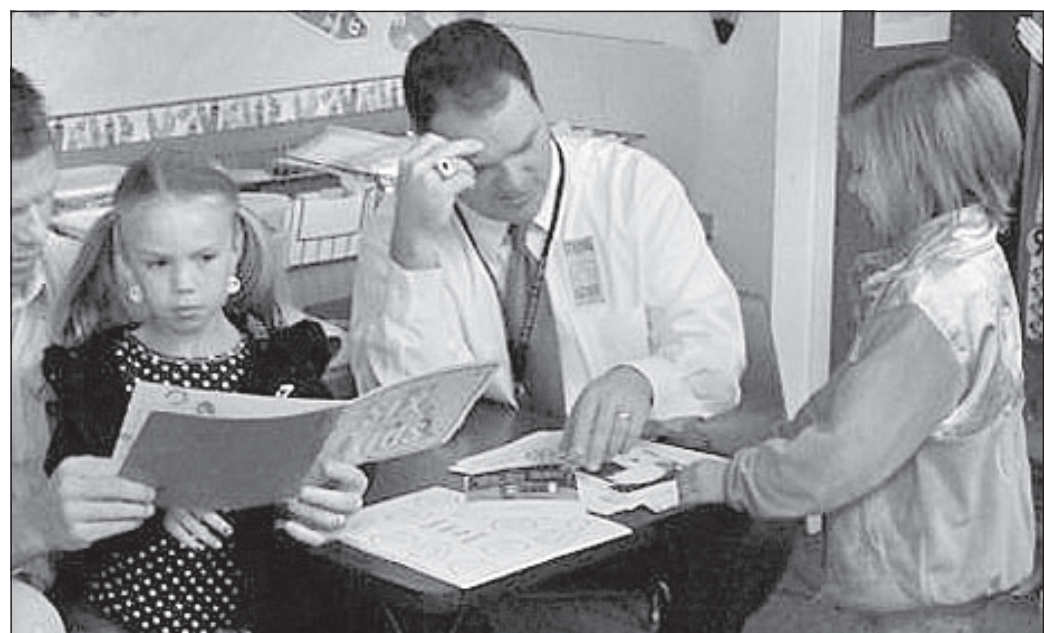


Hall, a Springtown boy if there ever was one, hugs Roxy Comyford, director of Springtown's Neighbor to Neighbors food pantry and the chamber's Woman of the Year.



Hall, who could probably make a living as a stand-up comedian if he wasn't training dads to be stand-up guys, received a special "baby boot" as a gift from the Azle Optimist Club, presented by Tim Carpenter, during a speaking engagement recently. The banquet honors youth from each of Azle ISD's 10 campuses.

Photo by Edwin Newton



Above, Springtown High School principal Mike Kelley spends time with his daughter. At left, Rusty Brawner reads to his little girl during a Strong Fathers presentation at her school.