



## WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A FATHER TO PROTECT HIS FAMILY?



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I've never been tagged as a macho man. Growing up, I preferred poetry to football, baking to baseball. But when I became a dad 17 years ago, my shirts no longer fit. Not because of a "sympathy belly" for my wife. My shoulders actually grew one inch wider either side.

It wasn't due to a posture change from a prideful puffed-out chest. It was a structural preparation for my new role. I became responsible for something so much bigger than myself, though my daughter fit in the crook of my arm. What weighed on my shoulders most was my duty to protect Eliza—her health, her happiness, her future.

From the dawn of civilization, the man was supposed to be the hunter, the fighter, the protector. I hunt record shops for old vinyl. I fight back tears at some point during every movie. I know I would do anything to keep my daughter from harm, but so much feels out of my control.

When she was around 18 months, her mother and I excitedly gave Eliza her first tiny taste of golden sticky salty peanut butter. Expecting that funny mouth opening and closing thing dogs do when you give them peanut butter, we watched with anticipation as her body became covered in hives. Benadryl and an allergist appointment later, we knew she had a serious allergy.

How could I keep Eliza safe from something as ubiquitous as peanuts? I could stand guard everywhere she went, Epi-pen held like a cowboy's revolver in a high-noon showdown... "This town ain't big enough for both of us, Mr. Peanut..." My ability to control her every morsel, though, is as much a fantasy as me even being in a gunfight.

The lack of control hit full force when Eliza entered Kindergarten. The school helped with the peanut anxiety, with rules about classroom snacks and a separate peanut-free lunch table. The allergy now presented a risk other than the ability to breathe, though. Would her classmates treat her as an outcast for eating at the special table? What about the frustrated parents who don't understand our anxiety? How much anxiety *should* Eliza feel? What tough-guy action on my part could give her both confidence and vigilance?

We never had to draw one of the seven Epi-pens we had in every bag and cupboard. By the time she became a tween, Eliza grew out of the peanut allergy. Her younger brother and sister, Rokes and Amelia, thankfully were not allergic. Feeling that things out of my control could harm them, however, never goes away, especially if something should happen to me. Maybe that's what the shoulders are for.

What can this "king of the castle" do to protect his progeny in an exponentially more uncertain world? There are some things that don't involve arm wrestling:

- Focus what I *can* control. I may not be able to blast away every peanut, insult – or boy – Eliza will encounter, but I can help her feel confident enough to stand up for herself.
- Set them up for success. I can't teach my kids how to box, but I can teach them my values. I can model empathy, flexibility and resiliency.
- Plan for the inevitable. At some point they'll be without me. I get peace of mind knowing that the promises National Life has made me as a policyholder will help them stay stable when I'm gone.

While being responsible for three lives doesn't make me John Wayne, it has changed me physically (add rapidly graying hair to the list). Fatherhood has also helped me realize that, though I'll always be #2 in their hearts behind Mom, how I respond to this crazy world matters to how they will shape it.

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