

- ✓ Why dads matter
- ✓ Getting a good work/life balance
- ✓ Building a lasting relationship



How to be a more involved **dad**



AT A GLANCE



Getting more involved in your kids' lives

- Being a father is a big job. The more involved you are, the better it is for your children.
- Try and wind down at the end of a day's work by listening to music on the way home. Leave the day's problems behind.
- Check with your employer to see if you can work more flexible hours.
- Support your child's learning at home by talking to your kids, reading them stories, surfing the net, doing homework and just having fun together.
- Get involved in your child's school by attending parents' meetings, school plays and volunteering for school trips.
- One of the most important things in a child's life is the quality of the relationship between their parents – whether they are together or not.
- Stepfathers have a big impact on children, so they have to be careful to encourage and support a child.

Did you know?

When fathers are not there, children are more likely to drop out of school, be unable to make friends and develop mental health problems or eating disorders.

Why dads matter

Being a dad is a big job. You're like a hero to your child and there's no time off. They want you there to steady their bike, help them with homework, play football, read stories and make them laugh.

The more you are there for your kids, the better it is for them. If you're involved, children are more likely to stay out of trouble with the police, leave drugs alone, and do better at school. They're also more likely to get on well with their parents in their teens and end up in a happy relationship when they're older.

So how do you get more involved with your kids? That's what this booklet is about. It's full of advice and will help you to:

- **get a balance between work and family**
- **support your child's learning at home and at school**
- **have a close relationship with your wife or partner**
- **understand the role of stepfather**
- **get through the teenage years**
- **find out more about being a dad.**

'My dad will love me forever, because he's my dad.'

Shauna, aged 4.

The dad quiz

What kind of dad are you? Professor dad? Cool dad? Slack dad? Take our dad exam and find out.

1. The school wants dads to go on a trip. You say:

- A. 'Fantastic! We can spend the whole day at the museum.'
- B. 'What a great chance to learn more about your class!'
- C. 'Fine, as long as the kids aren't coming too.'

2. Your child has not yet started a project that's due tomorrow. You say:

- A. 'I'll do it – then you'll get a good mark.'
- B. 'Shall I come and see the teacher – maybe we can do it together over the weekend?'
- C. 'Take tomorrow off.'

3. Your child's teacher has said your child is 'average'. You say:

- A. 'Would 20 extra hours coaching a week be enough?'
- B. 'Average can mean a lot of things. Which bits of school do you really enjoy?'
- C. 'That's better than I ever expected of you!'

4. Your child has been bunking off school. You say:

- A. 'Shall we have him tagged?'
- B. 'We need to find out what's going on.'
- C. 'That's handy. He can help me paint the bathroom.'

Scoring: Mostly A: Professor (You're a geek dad – calm down!)
 Mostly B: Cool (Every kid needs a dad like you)
 Mostly C: Slack (Go to the back of the class)

'Once a week, I go in and help with classroom reading. I get to be closer to my boy and I find out what makes other kids tick.'

Paul, aged 40

Work and family – how to get a balance

You know how important it is to spend time with your kids. But with a stressful job and long working hours, getting the balance right isn't easy. Here are some typical 'dad' questions.

How do I switch off from work?

Avoid starting stressful jobs in the last half hour at work. Try and wind down at the end of your day, maybe by listening to music or reading the paper on the way home. Make up a 'getting home' routine – a big hug and some time to listen to what has happened to your child during their day.

What if work stresses me out?

Remember that stress can make you angry and distant with your child. Just before you get home, catch yourself, take deep breaths and try to leave the day's difficulties behind so you don't take them home with you. If you can't, walk around the block until you can.

How can I spend more time at home?

See if you can work out more flexible hours with your boss or check your company's policies on flexitime. For example, you may be able to have flexible start and finish times or to work a four-day week with longer hours during each day. You could also think about:

- cutting out work-related activities that you don't need to attend
- reducing your travel time by moving house or job.

What if I'm unemployed?

A study of disadvantaged children found that many who had done well in life had unemployed fathers to care for and support them. Being unemployed and at home all the time can be good for your kids. Being a father is a full-time job already.

'Dear dad, why do you always work? I hate it. On my birthday, please take a day off so we can have fun all day...'

Adam, aged 5

Your child's learning – how to support it

At home

Supporting your child's school learning starts at home.

- Talking about your child's day brings you closer together. Ask them about their friends, their favourite TV programmes and their favourite sports.
- Reading stories to your kids sets up good reading habits and creates a great bedtime routine. A story is much better than TV or a video, which can overstimulate children and keep them up for hours.
- Surf the internet with your kids. Visit kids' sites with your child, eg www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc

- Get involved in their homework. You can be involved without actually doing it for them. It's a good idea to keep in touch with the teachers to understand what's expected.
- Have fun! Doing things that you both enjoy helps develop skills and interests – carpentry, football, cooking, riding bikes and so on.

'I help Sam with his homework, talk about what's bothering him, teach him carpentry, fix his bike. He helps me cook, or does the dishes. I'm now noticing changes in myself – I'm more affectionate when he's hurt, and when he's happy and excited, I sometimes find I get excited, too.'

David, aged 28 and lone father

At school

'Dad, please come and see me in the school play.'

Charlotte, aged 6

Getting involved in your child's school can really benefit your child. Children can become more confident, better behaved and keener to learn.

- Get to know the teachers and see how they work. Arrive early to pick up or drop off your child, and visit the classroom.
- Attend every parents' evening. If there's a school newsletter or website, read it regularly.

- Get involved with the term topic, maybe it's something that reflects your cultural background.
- Volunteer to get involved in school trips, the school play or after-school clubs.

'I am now closer than ever to my children. Their behaviour is unrecognisable. It's amazing that just me being involved in their lessons makes them think of school as fun.'

Robert Davies, father of three

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Choosing a school

If you disliked school, you may be tempted to leave the school choice to mum. Don't. Your own experiences can be an important contribution. Think about how similar, or different, you and your child are, and consider the following when you are making your decision:

- Listen to other parents – which schools do they rate and why?
- Read the most recent Ofsted inspection report (on the school's website) – this will tell you a lot, from class sizes to parent participation.
- Get worried if Ofsted judged the school 'unsatisfactory' (satisfactory means that it's fine).
- Check out school league tables. Beware though, a school may rank high because its pupils knew a lot before starting there, not because it teaches them well.
- Look out for 'value-added' details. This means how good the school has been in improving the children's performance. This can be a real marker of a good school.

- Visit the schools. How engaged, polite and happy are the children? How switched on and liked does the headteacher seem? How good are the facilities?
- Thinking about going private? Just because it is a private school doesn't necessarily mean that it is a good school. Private schools are inspected, but not by Ofsted, so it's even more important to do your research.

Disability and special needs

Up to one in five children, at some point in their lives, has a special educational need. Andy's son, Chris, is autistic: 'We had to fight for schooling, transport, everything. A lot revolves around family centres, but most dads won't go there. I've created my own support group for dads with disabled children. We meet in a pub twice a month. We go bowling or play pool.'

Keeping your relationship close

Looking after your child means looking after your relationship with your child's mother. Arguing with her hurts your child too. If you are separated, it's important to try to get on well together. If you are together then there are many ways to keep your relationship healthy.

- Set aside time to do things that you enjoy together – just the two of you.
- Talk important issues over without blaming or criticising each other. Give each other 10 minutes to talk in turn and listen carefully to the other.
- Seek help for things that make you more stressed – debt, alcohol, depression, anger.
- If you feel your relationship is in trouble, try relationship counselling. A few sessions with a trained professional can help you live together better. See the back cover of this booklet for more help.

One of the most important things in a child's life is the quality of the relationship between their parents – whether they live together or not.

Father figures

Children can never have too many adults who care for and support them. Often a child will have a father figure in their life who is not their real father. They can be stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles and so on. One in seven families contain a stepfather. They may have a bigger impact on the children's self-esteem than their natural fathers or mothers. This means stepfathers have to be particularly careful to help children feel good about themselves.

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Getting through the teenage years

To grow into healthy individuals, teenagers need to push their parents away. This can be especially hard if you've been very close. If you have a good relationship, relax, one day they'll come back to you.

Keep a close eye on your teenager and look out for the following worrying signs:

- disrupting school classes or absence from school
- fast decline in school interest and achievement
- hanging out with kids who cause trouble
- harming themselves or others (including developing eating disorders)
- behaving in an over-sexualised way
- showing signs of depression or low self-esteem
- abusing drugs or alcohol.

The more worrying signs teenagers display – like hanging out with kids who cause trouble, skipping school or becoming depressed – the more they need your help. At this stage, dads usually go for a firmer approach while mums go for a softer one. Neither way is right. A joint strategy with your child's mother is the way forward. To find out where you can get advice on handling teenagers, see the last page of this booklet.

'When I started having serious girlfriends, my dad took me aside and said, "I know you want to have sex and I couldn't stop you even if I wanted to. But just remember, if you want to behave like an adult, you've got to take responsibility like an adult. This is serious. So be careful." I was really impressed. He didn't get on his high horse, or try to be my pal. He treated me like a man. I've never forgotten that.'

Giving them their independence

The best way of letting your child go is to be close to them to start with.

That way you're able to see when they're ready to be independent.

You know who they're mixing with and how vulnerable they are to strangers. Dads who help their children explore the outside world:

- introduce them to their own social and cultural networks
- teach them the Green Cross Code and help them practise crossing the road
- take them on public transport and let them plan their routes
- take them shopping and teach them about money
- take them swimming, skating, boarding or biking
- show them books and videos that teach awareness of 'stranger danger'.

THE GREEN CROSS CODE

1. **THINK FIRST.** Find the safest place to cross then stop.
2. **STOP.** Stand on the pavement near the kerb.
3. **USE YOUR EYES AND EARS.** Look all around for traffic, and listen.
4. **WAIT UNTIL IT'S SAFE TO CROSS.** If traffic is coming, let it pass.
5. **LOOK AND LISTEN.** When it's safe, walk straight across the road.
6. **ARRIVE ALIVE.** Keep looking and listening for traffic while you cross.

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Want to find out more?

If you want to find out more about being a father or find out more parenting tips, go to:

www.fathersdirect.com

(The National Information Centre on Fatherhood)

www.bbc.co.uk/parenting

www.practicalparent.org.uk

www.raisingkids.co.uk

www.tsa.uk.com (It's all about teenagers)

Parentline Plus runs a free confidential service for parents:

☎ 0808 800 2222 or textphone ☎ 0800 783 6783

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Information on couple relationships and counseling:

☎ 01788 573241

www.relate.org.uk

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