

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Dads have a special and important role in their children's lives. Children are lucky if they have a dad who is involved in their lives, who knows their friends and is interested in how they spend their day. It really helps if children know they are loved and cared for by both parents.

In the past, fathers were often responsible for discipline and setting rules and mothers did most of the caring. There's now much more flexibility in what each parent does and more sharing of the parenting role.

There are lots of different kinds of dads. You may be in a two-parent family, in a stepfamily, be a full-time single parent, or have your children with you for some of the time. While parenting can be done by either parent, children have unique experiences with both their fathers and their mothers.

What does it mean to be a dad?

Sometimes fathers feel unsure about what is expected of them. This is partly because there is no clear difference between 'men's work' and 'women's work' any more. You may know what kind of dad you want to be, or don't want to be based on memories of your own childhood. There is no one right way and no recipe for being a dad. What is important is to think about what is going to work for you.

That will depend on:

- what you expect to do as a dad
- what your children's mother expects
- what your partner expects if she is not your children's mother
- whether you are living with your children all of the time or some of the time, or whether they live with their mother and visit you
- the way you and your partner balance work and family responsibilities
- the good things that you want to do for your own children
- what your father did with you
- the things that you see other fathers do
- what your own children want and need.

The most important gift that you can give to your children is your love. This means getting to know them and being involved in their lives so they also get to know you. It means spending time with your children and making the most of the time you spend with them.

Some things that all dads can do

What children say they want from fathers: 'Do things together', 'Sit and talk', 'Don't work so much'.

- Talk about your feelings so that your children learn that it is okay for men to talk about feelings. Talk about when you feel sad and happy.
- Spend time with your daughters. You are the first man that your daughters really know. It will help them to feel good about being female if they see that you enjoy your time with them and you respect women. You are helping them to learn how to expect men to treat them when they grow up.
- Show your sons how you would like them to be when they are men. To learn this boys need to spend time with you and with other men. They will learn much more from what you do than from what you say.
- Show that you enjoy your children's company—get involved, read, play, have fun, do things together.
- Take your children to work with you sometimes if you can. It's a great experience for them. Let them get to know how you spend your days when they are not with you.
- Being out of work and having money worries can make problems for parents, but it may also mean that you have time to give to your children. Special times with you often become powerful memories.
- Comfort them. Children, even tiny babies, often get a special feeling of security from being hugged by their dads. From this, children learn they are special.
- Read to your children—starting from birth. It really helps to create a strong bond with them. Reading books can simply be looking at pictures, or enjoying being together. Bedtime is a great time for stories.



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THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

Some things that all dads can do *cont*

- Play with your children as it supports their normal development. Fathers often enjoy active play and children can learn a lot from this. They learn that you can be strong and have fun while being gentle. Being sensitive and knowing when to stop play helps children learn to regulate their feelings.
- Help your children with their sport or hobbies by attending their games and maybe even coaching or helping out with their team.
- Share your own interests and hobbies with them by involving them in what you do.
- Share your child's life. Go to school and preschool parent nights, to the doctor, to the park and shopping.
- Encourage your children to explore the world and find out about new things to do and try.
- Teach your children about rules and laws. Show them values through what you do. Sticking to what you believe is right communicates commitment and supports a sense of security for your children. Being fair and kind helps your children to learn fairness and kindness.
- Encourage your children to stick at a problem even if it is hard.
- Expect your children to do their best and be proud of them when they do. Show pride in their efforts whether they succeed or not is important to their sense of value.
- Don't push your children into doing things you wanted to do and missed out on. They need to live their own lives. Support your children's interests even though they may be different to your own.
- Show your love in different ways. Telling children you love them is powerful and doing things together can communicate love. Some suggestions are to:
 - take your children fishing
 - help them with their homework
 - go for a walk in the park
 - cheer at a school football or netball match.

The way you approach being a dad is what matters most for your children. Though you may have limited time with them, your children need to know that you care about them and you will be there when they need you.

Dads in nuclear families

Being a dad in a nuclear family means making sure that your relationship with your partner/spouse is working well. One of the things that will help your children most is for their parents to get on well together. Children usually love both parents and it hurts them to see parents fighting or putting each other down. It does not teach them how to make good relationships with others as they get older.

What you can do

- Make regular time to be together as a couple without the children.
- Discuss your feelings right from the start. When you have your first baby it may bring some changes to your relationship with your partner. She may feel tired and sometimes overwhelmed by coping with body changes and with new responsibilities. You may feel left out or even jealous. Focusing on your relationship with your baby will help you to adjust to changes and to make your transition to fatherhood smoother. Set a pattern of working things out together for the sake of your new family.
- Talk to your partner about the pressures you feel such as finances, your sense of responsibility for the family and your feelings about the baby. This can help prevent the build-up of stress. Listening to your partner's feelings about this as well can bring you closer as understanding grows.
- Talk about what you each expect of each other in relation to caring for the children. Work out how you will share things like:
 - getting up at night
 - bathing and feeding
 - arranging a babysitter when you go out
 - taking the children to school and activities
 - managing behaviour and discipline
 - arranging some free time for each of you
 - taking time off work when the children are sick (find out what your work offers in parenting leave for fathers).
- Try to sort out any relationship problems away from the children.
- Treat your children's mother (and all women) with respect and care. This shows your daughters the value being a woman, and shows your sons how to treat and value women.
- If you don't agree with the way their mother handles something discuss it with her in private. If you still can't agree remember—children can learn to cope with parents being different. What they can't cope with is parents putting each other down.

Single dads

There are lots of different ways to be a single dad. You might be a dad with sole responsibility for the children, a dad who sees your children some of the time or a dad who hardly sees your children at all. You might be a single dad through divorce or through death.

What you can do

If you are separated from your children's mother, being a dad may be hard, but you are still their parent and there are some very important things that you can do for your children.

- Make sure that your children feel safe and secure with you by caring for them well.
- Try not to let hurts or anger about your children's mother spoil your relationship with your children. Avoid negative exchanges with your ex-partner at handover time or when you have been on the phone to your children. Parents fighting is one of the most damaging things that can happen for children and really distresses them. If you can't work something positive out with your ex-partner, get some help for the sake of the children.
- Keep in touch with your children even if it is painful to have to keep saying goodbye after you see them. Your children need your love and care even though goodbyes are hard.
- Sometimes you might feel it would be easier for your children if you did not see them. Children need a caring dad and even if the comings and goings are difficult, your children will feel the value of your efforts.
- Pay child support. It is an important contribution to the welfare of your children. Thought you may feel upset or angry it doesn't have to affect your responsibility to, or relationships with, your children. Whatever has been arranged by adults is not your children's fault. They still need your care.
- Be positive (or don't say anything) when you talk to the children about their mother. Children want to feel connected and loyal to both parents.
- If there are bitter court disputes and you are very upset, try not to weigh the children down with your feelings. None of it was their making. They need you to care about what they need. They are not old enough to worry about what you need. Talking to your friends or professionals about your concerns regarding your ex-partner is a better way of dealing with your feelings and worries. This is one way to protect your children from emotional harm.

- Make the effort to learn to do things with your children.
- Children will get more out of just being with you than expensive presents and always going on exciting outings (although they may ask).
- Be prepared to be flexible and to give and take when it comes to making arrangements about your children. As they grow and develop their needs change and fixed arrangements don't always work so well.
- Avoid using your children to give messages to their mother. Try to deal directly with her either verbally or some other means. Children don't need to know about your issues with their mother.
- Keep in touch with your children often. Phone and write and remember birthdays and special occasions. Contact them when there are important school events such as exams, or going for a job.
- It is okay to have different rules and ways of doing things at your house. Children can learn to understand that households work differently. Being consistent and caring when they are with you promotes their confidence and sense of security.
- As children get older, give permission for them to choose to stay with their mother or at a friend's place instead of staying with you. They need to know that it is okay with you so they don't feel guilty.
- Try not to show that you are upset if your children's mother gets another partner, even if it is tough. Relationships change with time but you will always be your children's father.
- All children have worries at some stage. Be open and make it easy for your children to talk to you. Encourage them to share their worries as well as their successes.
- Parents have the right to separate from their partner but they still have the responsibility to be a parent. Children have the right to be cared for by both parents, even if you are not together.

Dads in stepfamilies

Being a stepfather can be difficult, especially if the children are older when you join the family. You may also have your own children who will still want your time. Children who have had time alone with their mother often feel sad or cross about having someone else take some of her time. Some children do not want anyone else to replace their own dad's place in the family.

What you can do

- Spend time getting to know your partner's children.
- Give the children time. You cannot take their dad's place, but you can still build a close relationship with them.
- Be a friend but don't crowd them.
- Plan household rules together with your partner and include the children. The rules you decide on may be very different from what the children are used to.
- Be wary about disciplining the children even if their mother asks you to. It is usually better if parents discipline their own children, especially at first.
- Talk with your partner about problems and work out together how you will deal with them.
- Let the children still have some time on their own with their mother without you around.
- Offer to do some things with the children yourself. Choose things they enjoy.
- Make sure that you have some special time with your own children, too. It can be tricky making a place in your life for everyone, but it is important to them that you are involved in their lives.
- Support your stepchildren in keeping contact with their dad if this is what they want.
- Children in stepfamilies often come and go between houses. You need to be flexible to allow for this and be understanding of their feelings as well as the behaviours that they might show before and after visits.

- Children are lucky if they have two parents who give them love and security—especially if the parents aren't together.
- With two caring parents there is not one right way and one wrong way, but two different ways.
- How you act when you are with your children teaches them how to act when they grow up.
- Share your ideas about parenting with your children's mother if possible. Listen to her ideas.
- Fathers can show their sons how to grow up to be loving and caring and able to get on well with others.
- Girls and boys both need time with their fathers.
- Show your children that men can be gentle in a tough world.
- Fathers have an important role in teaching their children that it is all right for men to cry or to ask for help.
- When fathers are involved in daily care of their babies it builds special bonds that are important to children.
- As they get older children need to know that you like them, even if they choose different ways of doing things from you.
- Even if you don't see your children a lot, you can still build happy memories in the time you have with them.
- Children need love—love to children means time and attention.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Mensline (support for men and their families)	24-hour	1300 789 987
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.menslineaus.org.au	Information and support for men and their families
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including After the breakup, Being a parent, Family break-up, Single parenting
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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