

# Being a dad

Being a dad is one of the most important and rewarding roles you can have in life. In the past, dads were often seen as the bread winner and responsible for discipline. Things are changing and there is now more flexibility in what each parent does, and more sharing of the parenting role. While parenting can be done by either parent children have unique experiences with their mum and dad. Children benefit when dads are warm and loving and involved in their lives.

# ParentLink




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## Becoming a dad

Becoming a dad changes your life. You can feel happy and excited, but you might also feel overwhelmed or unsure about what is expected of you. You may know the kind of dad you want to be or don't want to be from memories of your own childhood. You may want to do things the same way your own father did, or do things differently. It's up to you. It can help to know there is no one right way to be a dad, and it is never too late to be the kind of dad you want to be.

This is a good time to consider:

-  what was positive about how you were raised
-  the values that are important to you, e.g. kindness, respect, sharing
-  what you expect to do as a dad

-  what your partner expects
-  how you can balance work and family
-  how you can take care of yourself and be your best as a dad.

Your fathering will be influenced by whether you are in a two-parent home, are a single dad, a stay-at-home dad, a step-dad, same-sex parent, separated from your children's mother or away from home a lot.

The most important thing is that children know you love them. This means spending time with children, getting to know them and being involved in their lives so they get to know you.

The most important gift you can give children is your love.



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## Some things all dads can do

### Start early

While either parent can provide loving care for a child, dads have an important role in children's development.

When dads are hands-on with their new baby and respond warmly and gently to their needs, it has a positive effect on baby's development. The way dad sounds, talks, feels and plays is different to mum. When baby adapts to these differences it helps them learn, build trust and develop social skills.

- Be involved in soothing baby, bathing, feeding, changing nappies from the start.
- Don't worry if you feel unsure at first; all parents gain confidence with practice.
- Have skin-to-skin time with baby. It helps them feel safe and builds your bond.
- Look into baby's eyes, smile, talk gently and copy their sounds back to them.

When you connect with baby in these ways, they learn to feel secure with you. They might recognise your voice from their time in the womb.

Even tiny babies get a special feeling of security from being held by their dad.

### Show your love

Some men feel uncomfortable showing their feelings, even towards their children. They can think it is 'unmanly' or that it will make children 'soft'. It is important to know that:

- both boys and girls need to feel loved, safe and secure
- when children feel safe and secure they can focus their energy on learning and exploring their world. They build self-confidence and resilience.

- the more you comfort children, the better they get at calming themselves. They will cry less in the long run.

Show your love in different ways:

- tell children often that you love them, give hugs and cuddles
- show you genuinely enjoy spending time with them
- talk and listen — try to understand the feelings and ideas behind what children say
- do things they like to do
- be interested in their learning — help with homework
- show you are proud of them — cheer at their sports or other events.

Keep showing your love as children get older. Teenagers need to know you love them too.

Children equate love with the time and attention you give them. Turn off the TV and other electronic devices and give children your full attention.

### Play and have fun together

- Playing with children builds your connection and supports their learning and development. The active 'rough and tumble' play that dads often do (although either parent can do this) is a great way for children to have fun and try out their strength and skills.
- Show them how to play without becoming aggressive or hurting others. Being sensitive and knowing when to stop helps children learn to regulate their feelings.
- Take them to the park, kick or throw a ball around, go to the beach, for walks, explore and be active.

When dads read with children for even a short time each day, it helps children's learning and can create memories that last a lifetime.



### Be involved

- Being involved in everyday routines such as bathing, feeding and bedtime is a great way to regularly connect with children.
- Going to their health appointments helps you learn about their development and you can share your observations and insights.
- Help children have a go at a range of things and develop their interests and skills.
- Take them to activity groups or sports. Let them work alongside you in the shed or garden. Involve them in your hobbies. When they are older, linking them with safe adult mentors can expand their experiences.
- Go to children's school events or sports. This builds their self-esteem and confidence. Show them you are proud of their efforts.



- Take children to work with you sometimes, if appropriate and safe. It's a great experience for them. This shows you're interested in their lives, and it helps keep them safe if you know who they spend time with.

Don't push children into doing things you wanted to do and missed out on. They need to live their own lives. Support their interests even if they are different to yours.

### Guide and set limits

- Children need to know what is OK and not OK. Set reasonable limits and boundaries for behaviour that suit a child's age and development.
- Praise and encourage children when they do what is expected. It works better than punishment and children are more likely to learn the behaviour you want.

- Be patient and kind. Young children are yet to develop mastery over their impulses and emotions. They need time to learn and practice.
- Show you understand children's feelings, e.g. 'I see you're upset because you really want that toy'. When they feel understood children are more likely to listen to your guidance. It helps build your connection with them.

- Help children express strong feelings in safe ways, e.g. talking, outdoor play, sport, drama, music, writing.

### Be a positive role model

- Children learn from what they see you doing. Behave in ways you want your children to behave. Live by your values.

- Talk about your feelings. Talk about times you feel sad and happy. Children learn that men have feelings and it is OK to express them in safe and appropriate ways.
- Manage your feelings. Stop and take a deep breath if you are angry or upset. Calm down before you react to a situation.

### Letting go

The relationship between children and fathers changes as children grow up and become independent adults. How and when this happens is different for every dad and child. The changes can take time to get used to.

## Sons and daughters

It is important to show warmth and love to both sons and daughters.

Some dads find it easier to bond with sons but it is just as important for girls to feel loved and valued by their dad. It builds their confidence and self-esteem.

- Girls and boys both need time with their father.
- Behave in ways you would like your sons to act when they are men. Show them how men can be loving and caring and get on well with others. To learn this boys need to spend time with you and other men. Show them that you value and respect women.
- Spend time with your daughters. You are the first man they get to know. It will help them feel good about being female if they see that you enjoy your time with them and you respect and value women. They learn to expect men to treat them with respect when they grow up.

How you treat your children's mother shows your sons and daughters what to expect in their future relationships.

## Work as a team

Work out your parenting with your children's mother right from the start, even if you don't live together. Share your ideas and listen to hers. You don't have to parent in the same way but it is important not to undermine each other. If you don't agree with something your partners does, work it out away from the children. If you still can't agree, remember children can learn to cope with parents being different, but they can't cope with parents fighting or putting each other down.

Talk about how you will share the load and what each of you will do. Each partner needs to feel that things are fair and their other responsibilities are taken into account. You could discuss:

- getting up at night, bathing, feeding, bedtime routines
- household chores, shopping, cooking
- taking children to appointments, child care, school and activities
- how you can arrange some free time for each of you, and to spend together as a couple
- what will happen when children are sick or plans have to change. Find out what your work offers in parenting leave for fathers.

## Dads who are separated or away a lot

Being a dad may be hard if you are separated from your children's mother or spend a lot of time away. Remember you are still a parent and the most important thing is that children know you love them.

- Be in regular contact with children. When you can't be with them, use things like phones, messaging, email, Skype, or write letters and cards. Remember birthdays, special occasions and events such as exams or sports days.
- Make sure children feel safe and secure with you by caring for them well.
- Be reliable and flexible about care arrangements.
- Don't let hurt or anger about their mother affect your relationship with your children. When you talk about their mother, be positive or don't say anything at all. Keep handover times calm and pleasant.
- When you are with your children let them share your life, your memories and your dreams. Let them see you cook (it doesn't have to be fancy) and take care of them. They will learn a lot about being a father by seeing what you do.
- Be relaxed and open and make it easy for children to talk to you. Encourage them to share their worries as well as their successes.





Even if you don't see  
your children a lot, you  
can still build happy  
memories in the time  
you have with them.

## Single dads

If you have sole care of your children try to create a supportive network around you. There may be friends or family you can call on. Find out about services in your area. Try to spend some time on your own without the children to relax and do things you enjoy (see ParentLink Guide 'Single parenting').

## Step-dads

Being a step-dad can be hard especially if the children are older when you join the family. Blended families can work very well but they need time and attention. Children can feel sad or cross about someone taking up their mother's time or taking their own dad's place in the family.

- Spend time getting to know your partner's children. Be a friend but don't crowd them. You cannot take their dad's place but you can still build a close relationship with them.
- Let the children have some time on their own with their mother without you around. Have special time with your own children too.
- Support you step-children to keep up contact with their dad if this is what they want (see ParentLink Guide 'Blended families').

Be wary about disciplining step-children even if their mother asks you to. It is usually better if parents discipline their own children, especially at first.



## Taking care of your relationship

Having children may bring changes to your relationship. A new baby often deepens the relationship and brings parents closer together. However, the demands on time and energy can take their toll. You may both be getting less sleep and juggling care and work responsibilities. There can be changes in intimacy as your partner copes with body changes and new roles and responsibilities.

- It is important to talk about your feelings from the start to avoid a build-up of stress.
- Listening to your partner's feelings can bring you closer as understanding grows.
- Talk about any pressures you feel such as finances, your sense of responsibility for the family and your feelings about the baby. Dads can feel left out or even jealous.
- Make regular time to be together as a couple without the children.
- Look for ways to support your partner. Provide chances for her to rest and relax. Run a bath for her or surprise her with something you know she enjoys.





## Taking care of yourself

Your needs are important too. When you look after yourself you are better able to look after your family.

- See your doctor for a check up. Dads can feel exhausted and run-down too.
- Be realistic about what you can do and when you need a break. Some dads want to be able to do everything.
- Find someone you can really talk to about how you feel. Joining a dads' group and sharing ideas can be a great support.

Just as mums can have symptoms of anxiety and depression, dads can experience 'dad stress'. If you feel anxious or low much of the time, or find yourself being angry or frustrated, drinking more or using drugs, get help early. Dealing with concerns early can help you be the dad you want to be, even if it is hard to admit things are tough.

Dads can feel stress too. If you are having trouble with your feelings talk to your doctor or other health professional.

## Creating a safe home

Violence in your home harms everyone. It is never OK.

- Stay calm and model respect towards others.
- Don't allow yelling, hitting or other violence in your home.
- Listen to others and talk things through when there are disagreements. If it gets heated, take a break and agree to talk later when things are calm.

Seek help immediately if there is violence. It rarely stops by itself.

If there is violence or you think you might harm your family or yourself, get help immediately. Call 000 or go to a hospital emergency department.

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This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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