

Involved Fathers

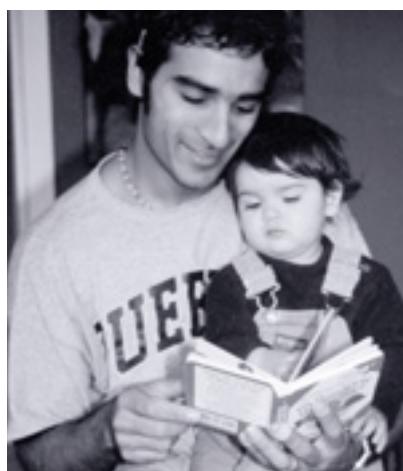
A guide for today's dad



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(second edition)



Research has shown that the positive involvement of fathers is a key factor in the healthy development of children. This booklet is a project of **Father Involvement Initiative - Ontario Network** and is designed to help both parents and professionals better understand how fathers from birth to age six can play a positive and involved role with their families.

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i n t r o d u c t i o n

Why involved fathering matters

When we talk about involved fathers, what do we mean? Any kind of involvement, good or bad? Obviously not. We mean a father who knows and enjoys his kids, one who shares with his partner the work and the play of raising them, one who understands them well and can handle their daily routines. We mean a man who has his own direct, close relationship with his children.

Why Get More Involved?

Involved fathers benefit everyone in the family:

- **It's good for kids.** Studies have shown that children with involved fathers are usually better off, for several reasons. They are less likely to live in poverty and more likely to do better in school. They are more likely to have supportive relationships with both parents, and they are less likely to have a stressed-out mother. All of those things are very good for children.
- **It's good for mothers.** Many things about family life have changed. More women with young children work outside the home. More families live far away from close relatives. And most mothers don't have the kind of female support network that was common 25 or 30 years ago. So today, mothers need their partner's support more than ever before.
- **It's good for fathers.** The rules about what men do and what women do have been changing for some time. That enables men to play a bigger part in one of the great human activities: looking after children and helping them grow. There's a huge satisfaction that goes with it that you can't get from anything else you do, not to mention a boost to your self-esteem.

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c h a p t e r o n e

What's a father for?

Once upon a time, a father's job was to bring home a pay cheque, cut the grass and tell his kids when they were misbehaving. These days, although some fathers are still playing more or less the same role, many others are changing diapers, going to toddler gymnastics, getting kids ready for school and looking after their children while their partners are at work. It seems like a father could be a lot of different things. How do you decide what kind of fatherhood role is best for you? The best way to start is by thinking about what children need.

What Kids Need

Children need many things from their parents, but let's break it down into the main pieces. They need:

- The necessities of life
- Human interaction
- Care and comfort
- Warmth and love
- Guidance and protection
- To be important to someone

All of these relate to the different roles that fathers (and mothers) play.

The Provider Father (for the necessities of life)

This used to be a father's main role, and it's still important. If kids don't get the basics — food, clothing and shelter — some of the other things we're going to talk about won't seem to matter much. And although nowadays many mothers as well as fathers provide for their children, it's still true that kids who don't have a father making a financial contribution are more likely to be poor. So working at a job which contributes to the family's economic well-being is an important part of fatherhood.

The Interactive Father (for human interaction)

A child is a person, of course. And she learns how to be a person through human interaction that begins with parents, and starts at birth. Kids learn communication skills, social rules and values of their culture and/or religion by interacting with their parents and by watching parents interact with others. So they need to be with us as much as possible. They need us to talk to them, play with them and make them a part of our world.

The Nurturing Father (for care and comfort)

We hear a lot these days about how important it is to stimulate growing brains, but being smart doesn't count for much if kids aren't looked after and if they don't feel good on the inside. Nurturing means helping someone or something to grow. In fact, it's been shown that if babies aren't held, stroked and touched, they don't develop normally. When you look after babies — change their diapers, comfort them, feed them and give them baths — in a warm and loving way, you can't help but give them the kind of nurturing touch they need.

The Affectionate Father (for warmth and love)

Another part of parenthood is being in a relationship. Because it is your child's first relationship, it is very important and needs to be filled with love and warmth. Fathers express affection in many ways. Hugs, smiles and kisses are the obvious ones, but this warmth is also expressed in the way you talk to your children, play with them and reassure them when they're upset.

The Responsible Father (for guidance and protection)

Young children need lots of guidance. Fathers need to share the responsibility for protecting and teaching them. We protect our children by providing safe homes, supervising them carefully, ensuring they get proper medical care and making sure they are well cared for when we aren't with them. Parents are also a child's first and most important teachers. We teach kids what to do and what not to do. We also show them the world and how it works, and help them pursue their interests.

The Committed Father (for being important to someone)

Along with everything else, kids need to know that they belong and that they are the most important thing in the world to somebody. That's you. This commitment is something you need to communicate to your children, through your words and also by the way you relate to them when you are with them. It also involves a consciousness that stays with you all the time. You think of your children when you are away from them, you talk about them with your friends. No matter what else you may be doing, on some level you're always aware that you are a father.

Share and Share Alike?

Fathers can play all of these roles. So can mothers. Exactly who does what for the kids will be a little different in every family. It doesn't have to be a perfect 50/50 split. But the point is that children can get what they need from both parents. In the past, dads have tended to concentrate on providing, playing and teaching, leaving nurturing mainly to mothers. And we've tended to think that women are better at that. Well, there may be an instinct to nurture, but it's mostly something that you learn through experience. Men can learn this too, and most who try, discover that it's one of the best parts of being a parent.

The Art of Fathering

It's not just what you do, it's how you do it.

It's not really enough to say, "Teach your children" or "Hug them" or "Play with them," because you can do all these things well or do them in a way that's not right for your child. How do you know what approach will be best for your individual child? The key is to be sensitive.

Watch and wait. Watch for how your child reacts and wait for her to show you what she is interested in. One baby may laugh when you make a silly noise, another may startle and burst into tears. One preschooler may want lots of hugs when he's sad, another may want you close by, but not touching him. Sensitive parenting is not an instinct. It's something you learn, by paying attention to your child. It's an education which never really ends since children keep changing as they grow.

The role *you* play as a father in your family will depend on what your children are like, what you and your partner are like, and the type of work you both do. But it all starts with what your children need. And the more attention you pay to all their needs, the less you'll be asking, "What's my role?"

CHAPTER SUMMARY

What's a father for?

Provider Father

- supports his family financially
- provides food, shelter and clothing
- a father's traditional role

Interactive Father

- spends time with his child
- makes his children part of his world
- models social rules and values

Nurturing Father

- feeds his child
- gives baths and changes diapers
- comforts his child

Affectionate Father

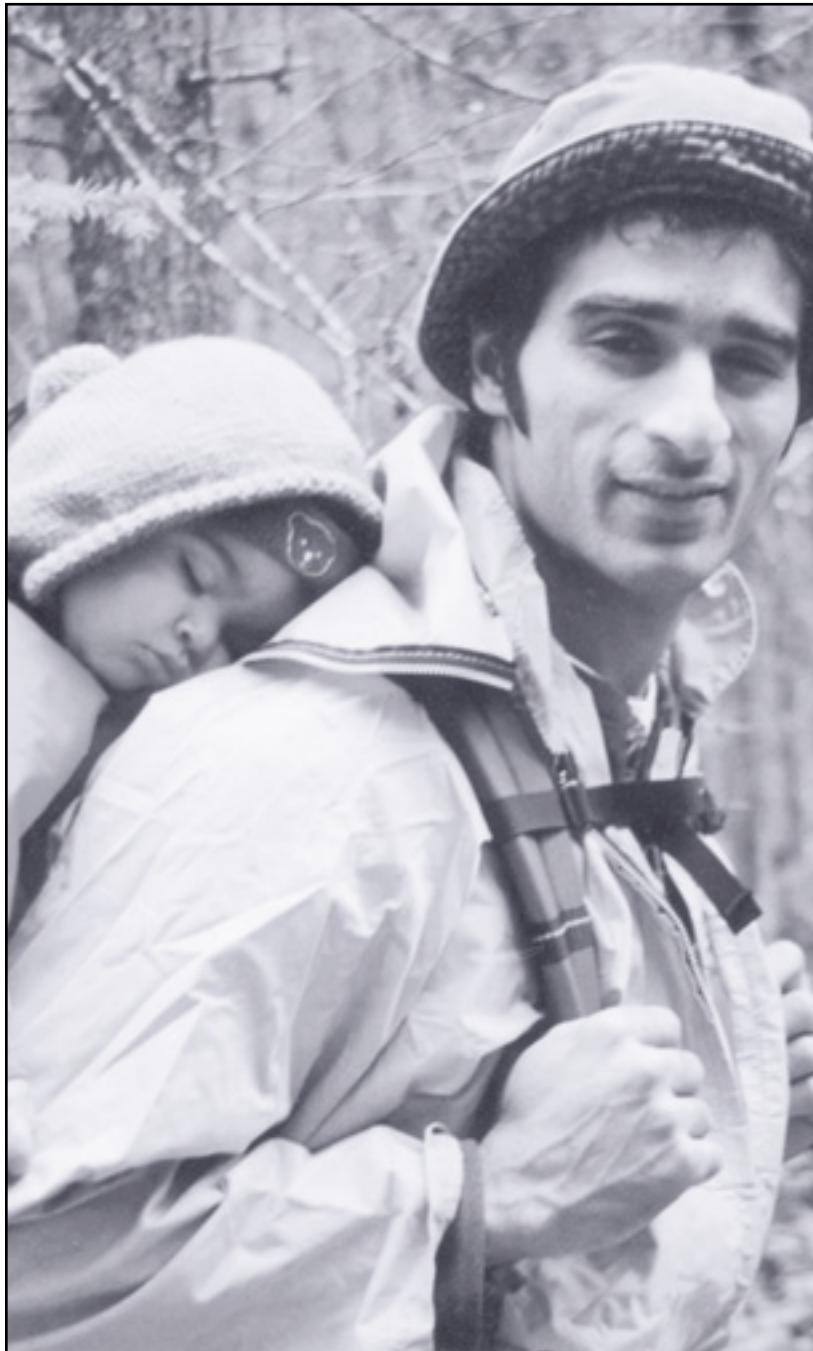
- gives lots of hugs, kisses and smiles
- plays with his child
- reassures his child

Responsible Father

- teaches the rules of behaviour
- helps children pursue their interests
- arranges babysitting and medical care

Committed Father

- feels his children are important
- thinks of his kids when he's not with them
- talks to his friends about his children



c h a p t e r t w o

Overcoming challenges to involved fathering

It's easy to talk about being an involved father, but it's harder to be one because in a way, involved fatherhood breaks the rules. It challenges years and years of social history which say that looking after children is women's work. So while many people say, "Yes, we need a new kind of fatherhood," it's very easy just to slip back into the traditional mother and father roles.

The first step in overcoming challenges is to recognize them. And several factors can get in the way of father involvement.

No Role Model

One of the biggest influences on the way we parent is how we were parented. Some of us had great relationships with our fathers, others may have had fathers who were involved but not in a positive way and some men grew up without a father figure. However, it's likely that most of our dads did not take on the active, involved kind of role we're talking about here. So we can only learn so much from their example. That's not the end of the world, but it does mean that most of us have to learn as we go along. There's no easy answer to this, but the people who can help you are your partner and your children. If you dedicate yourself to them, they can help you find the way.

Fathers Who Work Far Away

Historically, work has always taken men away from their families. In earlier times it was hunters and warriors, now it's travelling sales reps and members of the armed forces. But work still separates fathers and kids. It happens to mothers sometimes as well, but more often, if one parent has to be away a lot, it's Dad.

David runs a one-man trucking operation that takes him all over North America. He's gone from Monday to Friday each week, and once in awhile he has a two or three-week trip. His kids are happy to see him when he gets home, but he still feels like he's missing a lot. So David came up with several ways to stay in touch.

First of all, he tries to make the most of his time at home. Saturdays and Sundays the kids come first. When he's on the road, he calls home almost every night. He's learned that his kids, who are three and five, aren't very talkative on the phone, so David usually calls at bedtime, just to say good night to the kids before he chats with his wife.

He's also made cassette tapes of himself reading some of Jayden and Jessica's favourite stories so they can hear his voice whenever they want. David also sends them letters in the mail. Sometimes, when he's going on a short trip, he mails the letter before he leaves so the kids will get it before he returns. And at least once a week, either at home or by telephone, David and his wife, Lisa, set aside at least a half an hour to talk about what's going on with Jayden and Jessica. That helps him feel in touch.

Work

Even though many mothers now work at jobs outside the home, the world of work still tends to treat fathers differently. On average, dads work longer hours than their partners and they are more likely to work overtime. It's harder for men to get time off for family reasons and they generally experience more peer pressure to put career ahead of family. All of this cuts into the time fathers have to be involved with their kids.

The Shock of Early Parenthood

Another challenge is the overwhelming change that goes with becoming a parent. When you go through something like that it feels out of control sometimes. Taking charge of baby care helps a new mom feel like she's in control of this new situation. Her partner, though, might respond differently. He may be a little freaked out by the helplessness of a newborn. "The baby's so tiny," he thinks, "I'm afraid my big hands will hurt him. And she's so good with him. What if I do something wrong?" He's not sure where he fits in.

Mom's Territory

These days many couples divide housework and other domestic tasks fairly equally before they have kids. But after the first baby is born, they often slide right back into the kind of mom/dad roles their parents played.

Why is that?

Think about how men and women grow into parenthood. To begin with, the way girls are raised gives them a fairly clear idea of what it means to be a good mother. Then, the experience of pregnancy and childbirth help a woman feel like a mother even before she meets her baby. Most moms also get more early experience of hands-on parenting so they usually become good at it before their partners.

That doesn't mean mothers don't have to learn to be parents. They do. But in some ways, women get a head start. In contrast, men enter parenthood without the extra push that mothers get from biology, and the way boys are socialized gives them a less clear idea of what a father is supposed to do.

So in many ways becoming an involved father means moving into a mother's world. Some find it a little hard at first to get comfortable with "female" things like holding babies and changing diapers. And it can also be hard for moms to let fathers into their territory. Giving up part of that control might make her feel like she's not doing her job. Many mothers get caught between wanting their partner's help, which they really need, and not feeling sure how to share the responsibility without losing control. As one mother confessed, "I wanted Jim's help, but I wanted him to do things exactly the way I would do them."

Armand and Sophie: How dads get left out

Armand and Sophie agreed before their baby was born that they both wanted to be active parents. But it was trickier than they expected.

When Armand tried giving the baby a bath, he did it a little differently — you know — like a guy. But Sophie knew that her way worked. She'd had more time with the baby to figure out things like bathing, diapering and dressing. The urge to correct was overwhelming. She really couldn't help it. She didn't mean to be critical, she was trying to help and to make sure her baby was well looked after. But it didn't sound that way to Armand. He found himself thinking, "She thinks I'm no good at this. Why not just let her do it?"

After a few weeks, Sophie was doing everything with the baby. She was exhausted and wondered why Armand never took his turn. And Armand was feeling left out.

It's so tempting to let the more experienced parent do all the work. But before you know it, it becomes a habit – one that may not be best for either of you in the long run. So talk about it. Recognize that these patterns are normal. Changing them will only take place if partners agree to give Dad a chance to do some things with the baby, even if it is less efficient, even if it is a little more work at first.

But at the same time, your partner probably does know more about the baby than you. So it's O.K. to learn from her. Try asking for help before she offers. It's usually easier to take instruction that you asked for than pointers that someone else thought you needed.

What's the Answer?

Nudge your way in there, but do it gently. Like it or not, fair or unfair, being an involved father means moving into a mother's territory. You're looking for the balance between being just a little pushy, and respecting your partner and understanding the pressure she feels to be a good mom. It would be great if she never corrected anything you did. But you know what? She's not always going to be able to do this. And that's O.K. Remember that it says more about how much she cares about her new baby than it says about what she thinks of you.

You need to do two things: try not to take those corrections personally, and remain quietly persistent in your efforts to develop your own ability to look after the baby. You could try saying something like:

"I know you can comfort her more quickly, but next time, if we know she doesn't need to breastfeed, can you let me try for a little longer? I want to learn to do this. And won't it be better for all of us if I become good at comforting her too?"

It can work. And when it does, you've got two parents who are both able to step in and look after the children at any moment. Mom feels good when she leaves her kids because she knows Dad can do it. And Dad feels — and is — a part of things.

For Partners: How you can help

Make room for Daddy. Mothers who want their partners to be involved need to step back a bit sometimes and give Dad a little space to try things out. The only way to learn to look after children is to do it.

Babies and toddlers need lots of help but they're not made of glass. They can survive a certain amount of inexpert handling (by mothers as well as fathers).

But it can still be hard to give fathers this space.

Bill is looking after 18-month-old Cayley while his wife Maria takes a break to watch a video in the rec room. Things are going just great until little Cayley bumps her head. Cry, cry, cry. Wail, wail. Bill's doing his darndest to comfort her, but Cayley isn't calming down quite as quickly as she might have for Maria. Meanwhile, Maria has turned the sound down on the TV and is listening. She's thinking, "I know what to do. Why don't I just do it?"

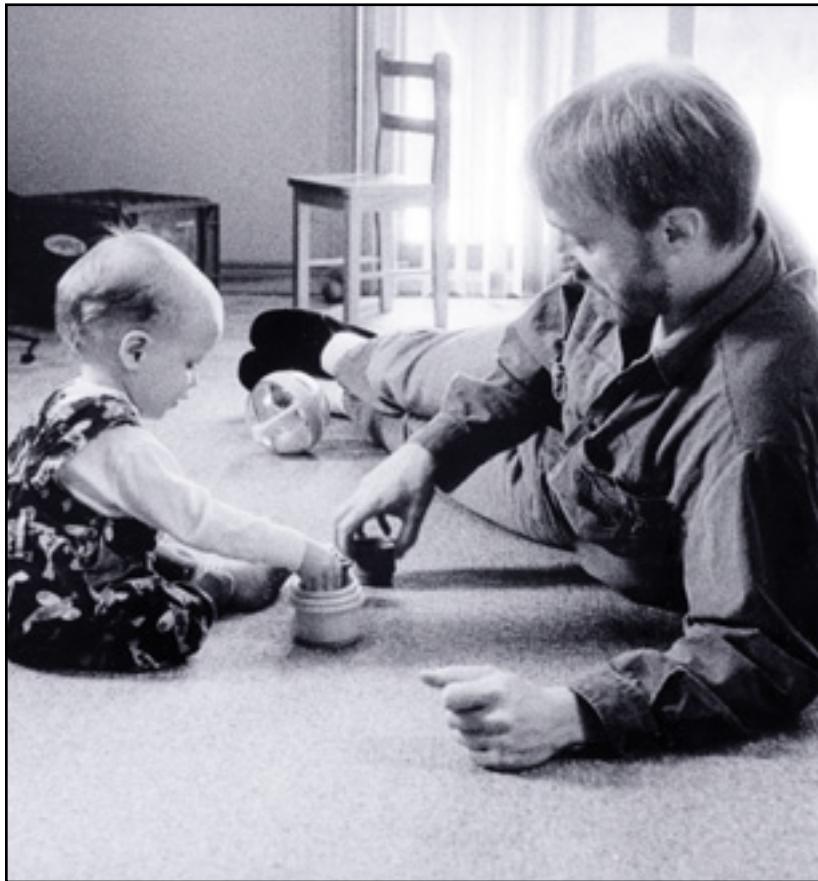
Well, she could. But if Dad always gets rescued, he's never going to figure out his own way of comforting Cayley, and Cayley isn't going to learn that Dad *can* comfort her.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Overcoming challenges to involved fathering

Involved fathering is easier said than done – but it's worth the effort.

- Mothers get a head start at parenting, but with time and practice, fathers can become very skilled.
- Moms sometimes need to give dads a little room to work out their own ways of looking after kids.
- Dads need to gently persist in their efforts to be involved.
- When work takes you away from home, find ways to stay connected.



c h a p t e r t h r e e

Children: That's who we're here for

If there were no children, we wouldn't be fathers, right? So we can talk all we want about how mothers and fathers work things out, or the roles that fathers want to play, but really it all comes down to the kids.

The best way to learn about kids is through experience — spending time with them. Here are a few key ideas that will help you make the most of that time.

Attachment: Feeling Connected

Attachment is a word used to describe the very close bond between parent and child. It mostly means getting to know your child and feeling like you belong together. It doesn't mean that you feel all warm and fuzzy about your child all the time, but that you have a strong feeling of connection that keeps coming back no matter what happens. It also means that your child knows she can depend on you to provide comfort when she needs it.

Why are psychiatrists so interested in attachment? Babies are helpless little creatures. If they're not well looked after, they won't thrive. A good attachment increases the chance that an adult will do whatever it takes to care for and love a child. It also helps a baby learn to trust people and builds the basis for loving relationships in the future.

When people first started talking about attachment they only talked about mothers, because we all thought that looking after babies was something women did. But we now know that, given the chance, fathers and their kids develop a strong attachment too. How do you make that connection? By being with your kids — holding them, talking to them, playing with

them and laughing together. The more time you spend looking after your children – handling their daily routines, comforting them, and responding to their needs and feelings – the better you will be able to understand and connect with them. That builds the foundation for a strong attachment.

Jamal and Fatima had one of those horrible arguments that parents and six-year-olds sometimes have. She didn't want to turn the TV off at suppertime and before you knew it they were both yelling and everybody was upset. Jamal had to go out that night and when he came home around bedtime, he was still feeling badly about it. Luckily they had a way to reconnect. Ever since Fatima was a toddler, Jamal had read her bedtime stories. He went up to Fatima's room. "OK if I read to you tonight?" he asked. "Sure, Daddy." They cuddled up in bed together and read a chapter of "Winnie the Pooh." By the time the light went out, they were friends again.

With attachment we usually talk about babies, because that's where it begins. But it doesn't end there. Although life with older kids is different, attachment is still important and it's built the same way: by looking after them, responding to their emotional needs and giving them your time. This is what will help you maintain that wonderful sense of connection which makes you feel like you belong together.

Play: Follow Your Child's Lead

Have you heard people say, “Children learn through play?” Well they do. When a two-year-old sits in his bath filling up a little cup with water and pouring it out, he’s learning about how liquids work, how they fill up empty spaces. He’s learning that the cup is heavier when it’s full than when it’s empty. And he’s learning that the water makes a different sound when it falls into the bath and when it falls onto his leg.

But you know what? He’s also having fun. He’s feeling good, and that’s important too. Play is how kids enjoy life. So playing with your child is a great way to teach him, but it also helps you to build your relationship.

Here’s the important thing about play. As adults we know all the possibilities, so it’s tempting to try to get children to play in a way that makes sense to us. But it’s better to play in a way that makes sense to them. That means letting the child lead the way. This is another case where the words “watch” and “wait” are important. Wait for your child to do something and watch to see how she reacts.

One-year-old Jason walks up to his Dad and holds out his toy giraffe. Dad says, “Oh, is this for me?” He’s tempted to continue the game by putting it in his pocket or making it walk along the arm of the couch. But instead he just holds it in his open hand and waits. After a moment, Jason takes it back, walks away and brings back his tiger. You see, he didn’t want Dad to play with the giraffe, he wanted to show him his stuff. But Dad wouldn’t have known that if he hadn’t waited for Jason to take the lead.

This doesn't mean you have to sit there doing nothing. It's OK to introduce ideas. "Look what happens when I put this block on top of that one." But then step back and watch how your child responds. He'll enjoy playing with you more and you'll learn a lot more about him.

Discipline: Teaching, Not Punishment

We've all been disciplined. And we know that discipline is one of our jobs as fathers. But we've come a long way from the days of, "Wait 'til your father gets home!" There's no simple, foolproof formula for good discipline. Kids and their parents are too complex for that, but here are a couple of things to keep in mind.

Discipline starts with a relationship: a parent who knows his child well and a child who trusts that the parent wants what's best for him.

Discipline is teaching — teaching children how to behave well, be responsible and get along with others. We often think of discipline as punishment, but it's much more than that. In fact, discipline comes from the Latin word that means "to teach." So it's not just dealing with misbehaviour, it's also helping kids to behave well and setting a good example.

When You Need Help

Parent Help Line 1-888-603-9100

Canada's first national, bilingual telephone service for parents is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Operated by the same people who run Kids Help Phone, Parent Help Line offers confidential support and information and can help you find services in your own area. They also have an extensive message library of recorded messages on common parenting concerns that can be accessed over the phone or on-line at www.parentsinfo.sympatico.ca

Child Development: What's Going On in That Little Head?

Children change constantly as they develop. And that affects just about everything we do with them. You've heard people say, "Oh, he's just going through a stage right now!" Usually they say that when their child's behaviour is troublesome. But some stages are wonderful — when a baby first starts smiling at you, when a child learns to walk or read, it's very exciting and rewarding for parents. It seems like all your hard work is paying off.

But kids do go through difficult stages.

Ted, Stephen and Ravi are trading horror stories. "All Cody (16 months) wants to do these days is climb up on everything," says Ted. "You have to watch him every minute." Stephen nods, "Yeah, I remember Kelsey doing that. Now her thing is that she can't leave her mom's side. Ever!" Ravi puts in, "People say the Terrible Twos are bad. Wait until your kids turn four. Talk about attitude!"

"Bad" behaviour isn't always exactly "bad." A two-year-old who starts saying "No" isn't being defiant in the same way as an eight-year-old who does the same thing. Why? Because she's just acting her age. She's at a stage where she's exploring what "no" means and how she can use it. She'll tend to overdo it until she figures it out. The point is, she'll probably grow out of it all by herself. And when you realize that this annoying behaviour is normal, you handle it differently. You might not feel as angry about it. The idea of "teaching" rather than "punishing" might make more sense. And you might decide that you need to control the environment rather than the child — put breakable things up out of reach for a few years, for example.

There's a lot to learn about child development, and learning even a little can really help you understand your children. Children going through stages still need to be taught, but in many cases they're just acting their age.

Temperament: What Your Child is Born With

You've heard people say, "Oh, boy. Isn't he just like his father?" Often they're referring to a child's temperament. People used to think that parents were completely responsible for what their child was like. Parents do make a difference, but you can tell just by watching different babies in their cribs that some are more quiet or more active by nature. Some are more easily upset. Some are more shy. Some are more persistent. This is part of their temperament.

These temperamental (or personality) traits make a difference in parenting. Depending on the combination of traits your child has, he may be fairly easy or a little more difficult to manage than average. Temperament can affect his behaviour in other ways as well.

Let's say there are two children. One has always thrown himself eagerly into new situations. He just can't wait to explore. The other is very reluctant to try anything new and always wants to watch for awhile first. If both those children are starting daycare for the first time, the experiences of the parents are going to be quite different. The children will respond differently to the change in routine. And the strategies the parents will need to use will be different too.

Your child's temperament interacts with your own temperament, and that affects your relationship. If you are a quiet and orderly person and your child is noisy, it may bother you more than if you were also loud and boisterous by nature. You might need to work a little harder to understand this child, and to find activities you can both enjoy together.

Mood Matters

Many factors affect the way we parent, but one that makes a big difference is how we feel. Have you ever noticed that when you're in a good mood, parenting seems a lot easier? But when you're feeling upset, angry or stressed out it seems like everything you do is wrong. You can't eliminate all bad moods, but the important point is this: sometimes you need to look after how you feel before you can deal with your child. That doesn't mean you let her whack her little brother with a shovel because you're not in the right mood to deal with the situation. But you don't have to deal with the whole thing. Maybe you can stop her, put her into a safe place (like her room) for awhile and give yourself some time to calm down. Then later, when you're both in a better mood, you can talk about what happened.

If you're feeling stressed out or angry most of the time, it may be wise to think about what causes stress in your life and how that affects your relationship with your kids. Some ways of reducing stress are a question of lifestyle — getting enough sleep and exercise, and eating properly. Big-time stress which comes from marriage problems, financial crisis, or drug or alcohol abuse, may require outside help — credit, marriage or personal counselling, or treatment for addiction. Assistance in dealing with those serious stressors can help you to get back to being the kind of parent you want to be.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Children: That's who we're here for

- Build a strong attachment — a sense of belonging with your kids — by spending lots of time together.
- Discipline is more than telling children what they've done wrong. Remember that your job is to teach them and show them the right things to do.
- Remember that almost everything kids do is affected by the way they are constantly developing. Sometimes “bad” behaviour is just a stage.
- Be aware of your child’s temperament or personality. It’s another thing that affects the way we parent.
- Be aware of your moods, because the way you feel influences the way you act with your children.

c h a p t e r f o u r

You and your partner: Teamwork

Parenting has always been a partnership between mothers and fathers. In the past, it was usually one kind of partnership: Dad in charge of making a living and Mom in charge of looking after the house and children. That worked for many years and, for some families, it still works fairly well. But now mothers and fathers are more likely to share many roles.

So we need new ways to think about being a partner.

Keys to Parenting Together

- **Accepting your differences**

In most families, Mom and Dad handle the kids differently. That's not just because one is a man and the other is a woman. We also have differences in personality, cultural background, childhood experiences and our style with kids — even differences in what drives us crazy. You may hardly notice when your kids are noisy while your wife may get upset. She might have endless patience with questions while you tire of them very quickly. It's not always a matter of who's right and who's wrong.

- **Talking about time**

When you have children, time management becomes a whole new ball game and parents should talk about it together. It's important to negotiate things like housework, child care and leisure time. It's also a good idea to be aware of your partner's time-stress and think about how you can support her.



- **Sharing the load**

Being an involved parent means doing your share of the work of raising kids. But it also means a change in the way you think. Someone in the family has to keep track of things: In most families this load falls to one person, usually Mom, and it's there 24 hours a day.

Sacha used to say he was “babysitting” his kids. But once his wife started to work on Saturdays and he was in charge, he began to see things differently. There were a lot of things to keep track of: Who needed to go pee before a car trip? Who would be cranky if he didn’t get a mid-morning snack? Who would need clean clothes tomorrow?

It's hard to share this load equally. It might even be inefficient to have two people worrying about details like when to go shopping and who needs a bath tonight. But when the load is really unequal, mothers and fathers have a harder time understanding each other. They start thinking things like, “Why is this such a big deal to her?” or “Why can’t he understand how I feel?”

There's no easy answer, because families are just learning how to operate in a more equal way, but one key is paying attention to what's going on and how it affects your partner.

Li had noticed that Isabella was becoming exhausted from getting up twice a night with their baby. Li wanted to share the load, so he offered to get Gaby and change her before he brought her to Isabella for nursing. But she was always out of bed before he could even get the covers off. By the time he stumbled in she'd glare at him and say, “Go back to bed. I just want to get this over with.” So after awhile Li gave that up, but he started getting up with Gaby when she woke at 6:00 am. That way Isabella could sleep in for an extra hour and a half. She liked that.

- **Bailing each other out**

We all have our bad moments. And when you do, the greatest thing in the world is a partner who can tell when you're at the end of your rope, or one to whom you can say, "I can't deal with this right now, can you take over?" An involved father who knows his children and understands what they need in all kinds of situations can do this for his partner.

- **Sharing the experience**

When child rearing is a "project" that you share, it can bring you together as a couple. Together you'll experience the ups and downs, the joys and frustrations. You'll understand and appreciate each other better because the same things will be important to each of you. You'll be her partner, rather than another person she has to look after.

Divorced, but Still Mom and Dad

If you have separated from your wife, you're still a father. You're a father if you have joint custody, if you only see the kids every two weekends and even if you're denied access for awhile.

Like it or not, you and your ex will be linked for the rest of your lives through your children. No matter what you think of her, she's still your children's mother. And the best thing for kids after divorce is to have a good relationship with both parents. To achieve this, you will probably still have to work together on some level.

Finding a way to be parenting partners with someone you don't get along with is one of the hardest things in the world. But it's worth any effort you can give it.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

You and your partner: Teamwork

- Parenting requires teamwork. Mom and Dad will probably parent differently, but you can still work together to share the load.
- It's not always possible to divide child rearing tasks completely equally, but look for the ways you can contribute.
- Pay attention to your partner's mood and step in to help when she needs it.
- Sharing the experience of parenting will help you and your partner understand and appreciate each other.
- Even divorced parents need to find a way to work together on some level.



c h a p t e r f i v e

Involved fathering in different family structures

What is a father? We often think, “Well, it’s a guy with kids.” Sure. But if you think about it, it’s clear that men are parenting in many different kinds of family circumstances today. Some situations promote father involvement. For instance, a small but growing group of men stay home while their wives go out to work. Some families do off-shifting — during the day Mom’s home with the kids while Dad works. When he comes home, she goes to work and the roles are reversed.

Other family circumstances make involvement more difficult. Many fathers don’t live with their children. Some men are living with and helping to raise their partner’s children from a previous relationship.

In any of these situations, the main goals of a father don’t change — but there may be special challenges.

Blended Families

Many fathers now live in what we call blended families. Some men instantly become stepfathers when they marry a divorced woman. You could be in a family with your wife’s children from a previous marriage, your children from your previous marriage and/or children that you had together.

If your new partner is the stepparent, your involvement will be very important to your children as they get used to living with her. If you're a stepfather, your first task is to form a relationship with your partner's children. (This also applies to adoptive fathers.) Kids need time to warm up to a stepparent. Don't try to do it all at once. Start from where the children are. Find out what hobbies or activities they enjoy and be interested and supportive, whether it's hockey, gymnastics, dolls or video games. If your stepchildren have a good relationship with their biological dad, it's best to respect and support that relationship.

Getting to Know You

When Albert moved in with Erin he couldn't wait to start acting like a dad. He thought her ex-partner was too easy on the kids and thought he could straighten them out a little. But it wasn't working. When he'd bark at the kids, they'd just cry and run to their mother. And she kept telling him to butt out. "Leave their behaviour to me. They don't really know you yet. I don't want them to be afraid of you."

Albert thought about it and saw that she was right. He left most of the discipline to Erin — backed up her rules, but concentrated on spending time with his stepchildren. They played games, read stories and watched TV together. Albert realized that he had to establish a feeling of trust before he could move on to discipline.

If there is conflict between your wife and her ex-husband you'll have a very fine line to walk. There's no easy answer. As much as you might like to, you can't fix the problem yourself. Your best contributions are these: Try to stay out of the conflict yourself and be prepared to support your partner by offering an understanding shoulder when she's upset or by taking the kids out for awhile when she's had some difficult issues to deal with.

Divorced Fathers

Divorce is never easy. And it's hard to be a parent after divorce, especially if you don't see your children that often. Some fathers gradually drift out of the picture because they say they can't bear the pain of not seeing their children enough. That may ease the pain, but it means that the children lose their father completely. And most children do want a relationship with their father after divorce. Keeping up that relationship can be complicated by conflict with your ex-wife.

- **Reduce conflict**

Even divorced parents have to communicate sometimes. That's hard to do for two people who wish they never had to see each other again. But the place to start is to think less about winning and losing, and more about how everything you do will affect your children. The best chance you have for maintaining your relationship with your kids comes when you can reduce the amount of conflict you have with your ex-wife. If you need help with that (and many people do) community services can help you find professional mediators trained in helping people to resolve conflicts.

Working It Out

After the separation, Pete and Nina could hardly speak without fighting. Pete felt Nina wasn't being fair about his visits with the children and Nina thought his demands were unreasonable. Eventually both realized that their tension was affecting their kids. They went to see a family mediator who acted almost like a referee. The mediator helped them work out a parenting plan that spelled out things like when the children would be at each parent's house and how decisions would be made about their health and education. With the mediator's help they also came up with a schedule that worked a little better with Pete's work hours and agreed on some ground rules about what they would and wouldn't talk about in front of the kids.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Involved fathering in different family structures

Divorce and remarriage present special challenges for fathers who want to be involved:

- For stepfathers, the first task is to get to know your stepchildren, rather than try to step in and become the boss.
- If you're divorced, do your best to keep your children out of the conflict you may have with your ex-spouse.
- Concentrate on what's best for the kids and their relationship with you. Make your home their home.
- If you don't get to spend time with your children very often, look for little ways to stay connected when you're apart.

c o n c l u s i o n

Final Thoughts

It's almost never too late to get involved with your kids. We've talked mostly about babies, toddlers and preschoolers here — and for sure that's the best time to start — but later is absolutely better than never. Lots of men who adopt seven-year-olds become very involved with their kids and have close relationships that last a lifetime. You can become a more involved father starting at just about any age.

As you go along, you'll probably do some things well and other things that aren't so great. Sometimes you'll feel good about your involvement, other times you may feel guilty that you aren't doing enough. That's normal. And since fathering is a long-term occupation, that means lots of chances: chances to learn, chances to do better and many, many opportunities to be a positive force in the lives of our children.



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What is the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network all about?

The Father Involvement Initiative - Ontario Network (FII-ON) is a broad-based coalition of organizations and individuals who have come together to discuss, learn about and encourage the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. The members of the network share the belief that the active involvement of caring, committed and responsible fathers promotes healthy development in children. The FII-ON participants also believe that father involvement promotes the development of resiliency, which is a child's ability to remain healthy and adaptive in the face of adversity.

Thus, within a population health approach, the FII-ON seeks to create partnership among various stakeholders (fathers, mothers, service providers, policy and decision-makers, employers and the business sector, labour organizations, professional associations, community-based coalitions, government and academic institutions, and the media), in pursuit of its ultimate goal: to be a catalyst in society's acknowledgment of and action upon our collective responsibility to involve fathers in development of healthy and resilient children.

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