



FCS-2426

## Dads Making a Difference: Staying Connected in Challenging Times

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### Introduction

Children who have an involved father gain many benefits that can last a lifetime (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). These children tend to have better physical and mental health, are more confident, have better friendships, get better grades in school and are more likely to graduate from college (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Wilcox, 2014). They are also less likely to become involved with drugs, get in trouble with the law, live in poverty and teen daughters are less likely to become pregnant (Chetty et al., 2020; Sarkadi et al., 2008; Sentino et al., 2018). Being involved is great for dads, too! When fathers are active in their kids' lives, they report that they are happier, have better physical and mental health, have a stronger sense of purpose and are more involved with their community. They also are more motivated to find stable jobs and use healthier ways to deal with stress (Kotila & Dush, 2013).

In the past, many in our society, even family researchers, overlooked dads' roles in parenting (Cabrera et al., 2018). Many people in our culture think of mothers as the main caregiver for children and don't see the important role that fathers can play (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Often, dads are seen as a provider rather than a caregiver for their children. This can make them seem less important, less capable or less interested in parenting because of the time they spend working. Negative words that many use to describe dads, like "deadbeat," "absent," or "toxic," and TV shows that depict dads as humorously foolish add to these challenges (Battle, 2018; Scharrer et al., 2021; Vann & Perry, 2022).

Being an involved dad can be hard, especially after a divorce or separation. Some fathers lack confidence in their role as a dad, believe that they aren't as important as their child's other parent and think they are replaceable (Coakley et al., 2014; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2006). Some dads have work schedules that keep them away from home a lot or work shifts that don't overlap with the best times to connect with their kids (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). Others have financial challenges (Roberts et al., 2014) or don't have a great place for their children to stay overnight. Some dads may not have been awarded custody, live far away or are in a challenging co-parenting relationship. Other dads may be incarcerated and have limited options for creating a connection with their kids (Dargis & Mitchell-Somoza, 2021).

Many dads are recognizing the importance of building a good relationship with their kids and are taking active steps to be more engaged (Livingston & Parker, 2019; Wang, 2023). Some say they didn't have a dad around when they were young and are ready to break the cycle. Despite the challenges they might face, even dads who don't live with their kids can make a huge positive impact with their involvement (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013).

### Here are several strategies that you can use to stay connected, even in difficult circumstances:

- Schedule regular connections. Set up regular video or phone calls with your kids, even young ones, with help from another adult if necessary. These consistent check-ins are critical to remind your children that you care about your relationship. Work on the art of listening well and asking open-ended questions. This helps kids tell more about what's important to them. Video calls can be a way to see your child participate in their favorite activity, have them show you their room or have them introduce you to their friends. Remember, it's more about them inviting you into their world, so keep the focus on them more than what is happening in your world.
- Send meaningful messages. You can also send letters, emails or text messages regularly. Ask the child's other parent or another adult who takes care of them to make sure your child gets them. Like a phone or video call, these messages can show your child that you care and want to stay connected. A letter or email can be a way to tell your child how important

they are or how proud you are of them. A text can be a simple “I love you, have a great day” or “I know you will do your best on your spelling test today.” The goal is to create family rituals and traditions that you can be a part of, even from a distance. This will help your children to know that you are still an important part of the family.

- Support the child’s situation. Use what limited contact does exist to express love to your child by supporting their other caregivers. Even if you don’t like the child’s living situation or the custody arrangements, be careful not to say negative things about your child’s other parent/caregiver, and do not withhold child support because of your frustration. Badmouthing and not paying child support sends the wrong message to your child. Children often see a dad who talks badly about their other parent as hurting someone that they also love, and this leads them to pull away. Dads who limit child support send the message that they don’t care about their child when they are with their other parent. You can work to show your child an example of being strong by showing them unconditional love no matter what challenges you face or no matter how much you disagree with how your co-parent manages the child support.
- Maximize your strengths. Dads often engage with their children in unique ways that their other parent might not. They tend to be more physically active with games and rough-and-tumble play. They might encourage exploring, building, taking risks, be animated during storytelling or just have fun being silly. These unique interactions are part of what makes you irreplaceable in your kids’ lives. You can remember these examples and use them to your advantage when engaging with your children. Creating fun experiences with your kids will become memories that will last them a lifetime!
- Deal with the discouragement. Another challenge that dads who are physically distant from their children might face is feeling discouraged or unimportant. They might feel that they are slowly slipping away from involvement. Some dads find it easier to be involved when their kids are young and still think their dad is cool or their hero. As kids grow up, they naturally want to spend less time with their parents, and when this happens, some dads feel less connected. No matter what your situation is, you can benefit from seeking support from others, like visiting a mental health professional or joining a men’s group like Strong Dads or True Dads. Fathers in these groups receive tremendous support from other dads who are going through similar experiences and learn new ways to engage with their kids.
- Regardless of the challenges you might face, remember that you serve an incredibly important role in your children’s lives. It doesn’t matter how old your kids are, whether they think you’re cool or if you live far away. You matter! Holding onto this belief, and seeking professional help when needed, can help you to push through any logistical challenges to stay connected. In this way, even if you live apart from your kids, you can be an invaluable force for wellbeing in your children’s lives.

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