



FCS-2253

The Power of Father Engagement with Kids

October 2024

Family scientists have long known that when parents are warm, involved, and consistent their children have a better chance of thriving in life. This is true for both moms and dads. Sometimes, however, dads might feel like they aren't as important as other parents. This could be because they don't spend as much time with kids as other parents, because they don't feel valued by society, or because they don't feel like they know how to be good enough parents (McGill, 2014; Schmitz, 2016). When children have involved dads, they often do better in school, behave better, get along with friends, and feel mentally and emotionally healthy (Barker & Ramchandani, 2017; Diniz et al., 2021). This is true for teenagers, who are also less likely to have unprotected sex and have fewer delinquent behaviors (McElwain et al., 2018; Yoder et al., 2016). Engaging more as a father now, puts children on a clear path for success and leads to a lifetime of benefits for both dads and their children.

These benefits for children happen for many ordinary dads, from those who parent full-time to those who are employed full-time. In many arrangements, simple ways of staying connected and staying close to their kids can make a meaningful difference. The most important things dads can do are show children that they care about them, to be consistent, and to make time to be with them (Brumariu et al., 2022; Lippold et al., 2016). If dads aren't sure how to be more involved or want to try new ways to build relationships, they can consider trying one (or all) of the following:

- Be involved with kid's interests. Even when they don't show it, kids often want their parents' approval. When dads take the time to learn about what their kids enjoy, it can help to build a better relationship with them. It shows that they value their child and want to be a part of their lives. Even simple things like asking a child about their favorite game or team or going to watch their extracurricular activities can be meaningful.
- Dads can build special bonds with their kids by exploring the world together and trying out new hobbies like cooking, hunting, hiking, or painting. Even simple activities like these can create memorable experiences. Taking the time to try new things with each child can make them feel unique and valued.
- Participate in a child's school activities. Sometimes, dads can have a hard time balancing everything they have going on, but when dads show up for things like school performances and parent-teacher conferences, it can make a difference. When children see their dads taking an interest in school events, it can make them feel proud and more motivated to do well.
- Having a special day where dads say "yes" to their kids' requests (within reason). Parents often say "no" to their children's requests, but it's important for kids to understand that this doesn't mean that parents don't care. Finding time to say "yes" helps show that their children matter. It could be playing games together, going out for ice cream, or just spending time doing whatever that child likes. Saying "yes" like this shows that parents really care about their kids and want to spend time with them.
- Dads can make their kids feel loved and connected by saying "I love you" when they leave home, when dropping kids off to school, before ending a phone call at bedtime or during many other moments. This may be difficult if it wasn't something a dad heard a lot growing up. This helps break the cycle of feeling disconnected emotionally. Dads can also reassure their kids that even if they struggle with showing emotions, they're still trying their best to care for them, which helps kids feel their dads' love even if it's not always expressed perfectly.
- Dads can make mornings and bedtime special by joining in with their kids' routines. Some ways to join in can include playing silly games, sharing "dad jokes," telling stories, and showing leadership by being an example of kindness, hard work, and consistency. They can bond by cooking breakfast, helping pick out clothes, and creating a safe space for hugs, reading, or snuggling before bedtime.

These are just a few examples of the many ways dads can be involved with their kids to make a lifelong difference. While it might be difficult to start turning these or other ideas into habits, being involved in simple ways now can have a big impact on their kids' happiness and success. If a dad would like help engaging more with his kids in Oklahoma, he can join the Strong Dads program offered through Oklahoma State University Extension in nine counties across Oklahoma. This program, and others like it across the nation, can help dads start where they are and develop beautiful, powerful relationships with their children for a lifetime.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy.