



U.S. Department of Health
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Administration for Children
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Office of Family Assistance

NRFC Spotlight on Dads

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www.fatherhood.gov

Unbreakable Bond The Strength of a Father's Love

"I realize that you don't know me and I'm only a face in a crowd of teenagers...Why don't I have a father like you? You made me cry today when you talked about the relationship you have with your daughter and how you show her you love her. I never cry. You learn not to in my family...I wish I had a father. I wish someone loved me like you love your family. You don't know how badly I want to understand things, how much I want a chance to, and it may sound stupid but if someone would just hold me for one minute, no strings, no games, well, I really can't explain it."

This letter from a teenager named Lori to popular author Josh McDowell is similar to the hundreds of letters he receives each year when he speaks at high school campuses. The letters from lonely, scared, or hurting teens reflect a common theme: the longing and need for a father's love.

Research has shown that a father's love is just as important as—or sometimes even more important than—a mother's love. Unfortunately, some men believe they are not supposed to show their emotions, which can affect their relationships with their children and others. Some fathers have trouble developing and maintaining loving relationships with their children in part because they never had an affectionate relationship with their own fathers. When they were growing up, their fathers might not even have been around very much. But fatherless fathers, or dads whose fathers showed them very little love, are not doomed to repeat their childhood experiences.

Fathers who enjoy a loving, nurturing relationship with their children have important opportunities to influence the direction children take in life. Studies have demonstrated that young people whose fathers are actively involved in their lives have greater self-confidence, perform better in school, and are better able to avoid risky behaviors.

But being a loving father is not an easy task. It requires additional commitment and extra time, no matter what your children's ages. Fathers must learn about the different stages of child development and become familiar with the strengths, weaknesses, personalities, and specific needs of their children as individuals. Dads also must build their listening and communication skills and determine the best ways to co-parent with the children's mother.

Most dads recognize that young children thrive on attention and affection. However, many fathers do not realize that these needs do not change as a child grows. Older children and teenagers crave acceptance, especially from their parents.

Teens, in particular, often act as if they do not need or want love and attention from their fathers, but they actually do. Teens might look like adults but their physical maturity might not be matched by their thinking and emotional abilities. Today's teens report that their parents are

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

their number one choice for support and information. Teens want their fathers to be available, set clear rules, and help them if they stumble or be there when they succeed. Providing physical or financial support is not enough; fathers also give emotional support, act as role models, and guide their children. A father's love creates a healthy relationship that allows children to accept your guidance.

Start building a more loving connection with your children by responding to several important needs.

- **Children need an involved father.** Simply spend time with your children. Pay attention to them, together and individually, and share conversation. Talking about their favorite television shows, music, friends, school activities, and other interests is a good start. Involved fathers often make sacrifices, such as giving up some of their own favorite activities, to devote more time to interacting with their children. Together, make memories your children will keep for a lifetime.
- **Children need an accepting father.** Make your children understand that you love them for who they are rather than for what they do. Although you will hold them accountable for their decisions and behaviors, you will love them no matter what. Teenagers who feel accepted by their fathers are more likely to trust them and open up about their thoughts, fears, and dreams.
- **Children need an affectionate father.** Fathers can show affection in a variety of ways. Tell your children often that you love them. Gentle, encouraging words or a simple hug, especially when they are not expected, can strengthen family relationships tremendously, compared to the actual effort they took. When a father shows affection to his children, they understand they are loved and worthy of that love.
- **Children need a consistent father.** When fathers maintain steady parenting habits, children know what to expect and what is expected of them. Constant support, as well as fair rules and their regular enforcement, give children certainty in their lives to help them grow and thrive. Fathers should aim to show their children consistent behavior, even when it is difficult to do so.
- **Children need an available father.** A father who is routinely unavailable to his children or teenagers, despite saying he loves them, can make them believe that other aspects of his life take priority. When a dad is available, he proves to his children that they are important. Being available can be as simple as clearing the dinner table with a young child, helping a middle schooler with homework, or chatting with a high school student's friends.

Staying connected with older children can be a big challenge. A lot of bridges may need to be repaired. But remember that it is never too late to tell and show your children you love them! Both you and your children will benefit from a stronger, more caring bond.

Discussion Tool

When you were growing up, how did your father or the men in your life express relationships?

In light of what you learned in this lesson about a father's love, do you think differently about yourself?

What grade would you give yourself in the following three areas: personal growth, commitment, and sacrifice? Explain why.

What is your reaction to the statement made by Danny: "Sometimes I feel so alone, like no one cares. My folks live in their own world and I live in mine. It didn't always seem to be this way. I know it sounds crazy, but I want them to leave me alone and yet I want to be part of their lives. Most of the time they do leave me alone and it gets pretty lonely."

Check your local public library for these recommended movies on video or DVD

Books

The First Love Languages of Children
Daddy, I Got Chicken Pots
They Call Me Dad
Freaky Friday
The 7 Secrets of Effective Fathers

Movies

The Wild Thornberrys Movie
Harry and the Hendersons
Jack Frost
The Fox and the Hound
Homeward Bound

