



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

NRFC Spotlight on Dads

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www.fatherhood.gov

Back in Touch: Reconnecting with Your Children

"I learned about the bond between fathers and children by almost breaking it. My daughters were two and four years old during the divorce. They moved with their mother to be near her family, putting four states between us. On my first visit after they moved, we played, shopped, watched cartoons, and plenty more in three and a half days. As I packed to leave, an empty feeling came over me that I could not brush off. I knew my daughters would cry when we hugged and said good-bye, and they did. I tried to convince myself they were too young to understand."

"I walked to my car, fighting back tears and tried to look cheerful as I waved to my girls at the window. I managed a fake smile as I drove away, but about 10 miles into my trip I had to pull off the road because my tears were blinding me. For the first time, I truly understood how much I meant to my little girls and how much they meant to me. At that moment, I vowed to do whatever it took to maintain my relationship with my daughters. I would never let them go! Fourteen years later, I have wonderful relationships with my daughters. But it hasn't been easy. Still, every time we say good-bye, I feel our bond being stretched."

This dad's story confirms that the bond between a father and his children transcends time, distance, and understanding but nevertheless can be broken. And a broken bond can be devastating for both children and fathers.

Too often, dads choose to ignore their shortcomings or inadequate relationship skills. They opt for the easy way out, distancing themselves physically and emotionally from their children. As a result, the children wonder, "What did I do to make him stop hugging me and playing with me? Does he still love me? Are all dads like this?" Children who are out of touch with their fathers might continue to search for that strong bond into adulthood, sometimes by involvement in a series of unhealthy relationships.

Even if dads want to improve their relationship with their children, they might believe that past behaviors and attitudes have burned too many bridges and righting old wrongs is impossible. Fathers should understand that it is never too late to make their relationship with their children better. While moving beyond earlier difficulties is challenging, it also is worthwhile. Those fathers who do not even try to hold on to the bond with their children might be haunted years later by regrets and the question, "What if?"

Rebuilding your relationship with your children begins with you, but you do not need to make the journey alone. Although many dads have trouble admitting they need help, identifying an individual you respect as a good father or grandfather can be an important first step. Ask the person to mentor you toward slowly repairing the broken bond with your children. Request specific tips that will help you be the loving father you aim to be. Also ask your mentor for recommendations on books about fatherhood that will strengthen your relationship and nurturing skills.

Maintaining—or patching up—your connection with your children requires some sacrifice and self-discipline but can start with several easy-to-follow approaches:

Be involved with your children as much as possible, even daily if you can. Although you might not be able to see them in person, use the phone, e-mail, and texting to stay in touch consistently. Answer their messages promptly so they believe you are available when they need you or just want to chat.

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Show acceptance of your children for who they are, rather than only for what they do. Your constant acceptance proves to your children that you love them unconditionally.

Demonstrate your affection through loving words or appropriate touch. Communicate to your children that you value them and they are worth loving.

Be consistent in your personal characteristics and fathering habits. No matter the circumstances, your children should know what to expect from you and that they can count on you.

While separation and divorce can threaten the fragile bond between fathers and children, the challenges they present nevertheless can be opportunities for personal development and growth, by you *and* your children.

For Further Discussion

- Answer honestly—what have you done to strain or break the bond between you and your children?
- What can you do today to begin rebuilding that bond? Are you willing to do whatever it takes, as long as it takes?
- Who might be a good mentor or life coach to help you strengthen your bond with your children?
- Are you mentally and emotionally prepared for how difficult it might be and how much time it might take? If not, how can you better prepare yourself?

Take Action

- Keep a journal in which you write about yourself, your family, your childhood, and the man you have become. Add photos too. Share the journal with your children.
- Become more aware of the developmental needs of your children as they grow. Talk to other dads whose children are the same age as or slightly older than your children to learn more.

Look and Learn

Movies

A River Runs Through It
Flicka
The Little Mermaid
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King
The Shaggy Dog

Books

A Father's Legacy by J. Countryman
1001 Things Your Kids Should See & Do by Harry Harrison
Fathers of Influence: Inspiring Stories of Men Who Made a Difference in Their Children and Their World by Cook Communications (Editor)
Longing for Dad: Father Loss and Its Impact by Beth Erickson