

TIPS FOR DADS: RE-CONNECTING WITH YOUR KIDS AFTER A LONG ABSENCE

You didn't get into this mess overnight:
You're not going to get out of it overnight.

Getting back into regular contact with your kids after a long absence is a special challenge. Many men feel defeated by the past or discouraged because they haven't kept up with their kids. However, fathers matter a lot to kids, even if they have been absent. Knowing who your father is and that he cares for you is crucial. Kids get part of their identity from their fathers. If the only thing they have is absence, they can imagine it's their fault or that they didn't measure up in some way. **As the father, you can do things for your child that no one else can.** Here are some things to keep in mind:

- ◆ **Patience is key.** Things are not going to change overnight. Maybe you'll be stood up a few times. Maybe visits will get interrupted sometimes. Maybe getting together will bring back unpleasant memories of the child's mother for you. It will be essential for you to persist and show you care by showing up again and again.
- ◆ **Expect a lot of feelings.** It is not unusual for kids to feel angry, abandoned and distrustful. They may also have heard bad stories about you from others. This is normal. Children need to be able to express their feelings and they need to feel that you can hear them and try to understand them. You don't have to agree with their feelings or agree with what they say about you: just show you care by listening and trying to understand. Their feelings will change if you are consistent and caring.
- ◆ **Expect some mistrust.** Remember, a lot of feelings aren't going to go away just because you show up. If you can be consistent, show you care and tolerate some "testing", you should be able to move toward some trust.
- ◆ **Focus on them.** Take one step at a time. Does it make sense to start with phone calls and move on to some activities they like? Something to do is particularly important with younger children. Being able to draw, play a board game, eat a snack or play cards can break the ice and ease the way to more comfortable conversations.
- ◆ **You don't have to be a big wallet dad.** Some men think they have to impress children with expensive activities or gifts. Playing with them in parks, taking them out to eat a simple meal, going to a library, and watching a movie they have picked out are all low cost and simple activities that you can engage in without high costs. The point is that they have an opportunity to spend time with you and get to know you.

Remember mom is the primary caretaker. Maybe you and the mother do not get along. No matter how you feel about her, please remember, *for the sake of your kids*, that usually you have to have her agreement in order to see the kids. Here are some things that help: remain cordial, compliment her when you can, treat her with respect, and speak about her respectfully in front of the kids. Acknowledge all that she's done for them if you can. Be on time for pick ups and drop offs. And give it time. If you can be consistent, it should help. Remember: *You didn't get into this mess overnight!*