

Connecting With Your Kids: A Survival Guide for Dads

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“It would be so much easier if kids came with an instruction manual”. I have to admit that I have heard this from most of the fathers that I have worked with. Fathers who are married or living common-law, fathers who are divorced and have limited custody, or full-time single Dads. They all say it. Most of the fathers say this in a joking manner, but I really don’t believe they are joking. It is seriously a difficult job to be a father, and to do it well. There are generally 2 questions that my clients ask of being a father. The first is what exactly is their role as a father, and secondly how do they fulfill it with the limited amount of time and resources that are available to them? If this sounds familiar to you, read on.

First of all, what is the role of “Dad”? There seems to be this stigma about what a father is in the news and in the literature. Terms like “Deadbeat Dad”, “uncaring” and “unavailable” are everywhere, from the local coffee shop right up to the latest episode of Oprah. Then there are the age-old stereotypical roles of man of providing for the physical needs of the family, leaving all the emotional stuff and raising the kids left for Mom. But are Dad’s really that bad and unable to work with their kids? Sean Brotherson, Allan Hawkins, and David Dollahite don’t think so. These men have described an ethic of fathering that they term “Generative Fathering” based on the idea that fathers have an ethical and moral responsibility to connect and care for their children that goes beyond the bounds of “because I have to”. They call this connection “work” because frankly it is hard work to be an effective dad, but it is not impossible.

Brotherson et al (2005) did a study where they interviewed a group of men regarding what they thought were the most effective ways of connecting with their children, and they found some interesting patterns in the topics discussed. They found that dads believed that the most effective ways to connect with their children were through (a) personal involvement in shared activities with children; (b) expression of support and care to ill or anxious children; (c) interaction with children at birth (or adoption); (d) shared exchanges of time and affection with children; and (e) participation in spiritual activities with children.

Shared Activities

There is a father I work with who has a cabin about an hour away from his home. On weekends he takes his son on ATV trips around a certain area. They have done it so often that they now have a code word to describe what they will be doing. Fathers who spend time in recreational activities, learning activities like crossword puzzles, board games, or watching the ballet production their child is involved in find connections with their children.

Expression of support for ill or anxious children

Often, when a child gets sick or anxious about something, the father will allow the mother step in to help, and will take a back seat role in the care of the child. There may be different reasons for this, but when a father actively participates in this care, there is a deep connection to the child through empathy and compassion. Simply rubbing their back while they are feeling sick, getting a cool cloth to break a fever, or rocking them to

sleep to save them from the monsters in the closet is a great way to connect. This does wonders not only for the health of the child, but the health of the relationship with their father.

Interaction with children at birth (or adoption)

“Newborn babies are mother’s territory”. How unfortunate that many people believe this...including mothers. Yes, it is true that newborns recognize the sound of the mother’s voice, they can also recognize the voice of the father. Dad’s need to be involved in every step of the way, from diapers, burping, bathing, singing, and holding. Connections to the environment start early, so make sure that you are part of that connection.

Shared exchanges of time and affection with children

There is a distinct difference between this and Shared activities mentioned above. Activities are physical things that are done together. Exchanges of time are very different. I have a client that really dislikes rugby. He thinks that it is a waste of time, and thinks it is really annoying watching athletes who can’t decide if they are playing football or soccer. Others may disagree with his analysis, but it is what he feels. His son on the other hand absolutely loves the sport. This father has found that he doesn’t have to watch the games, but if he just asks his son how his favorite teams did on the weekend, there is a really unique opportunity for him to connect with his son. Taking the time to talk about things and showing appropriate levels of affection for your child does wonders for your relationship.

Participation in spiritual activities with children.

Whether “spiritual activities” to you means going to an organized religious service or sitting in the mountains looking at the beauty of the world, connecting on a deeper level with your children is key in a healthy relationship.

Regardless of what you have heard, Dad’s really do have the ability to connect with their children. It takes time and “work”, but the rewards outweigh any paycheck.

For more information on upcoming workshops on fathering, or to book Jay as a presenter at your function, email Jay Timms at jay@bestmarriages.com, or visit <http://fatherwork.byu.edu> to learn how you can start connecting more effectively with your children today.

References

Brotherson, S. E., Dollahite, D. C., & Hawkins, A. J. (2005). Generative fathering and the dynamics of connection between fathers and their children. *Fathering*, 3(1), 1-28.