

June, 2000

Why Dads are So Important!

Happy Fathers Day! As we pause to celebrate the Dads in our lives the third Sunday of this month, it seems an appropriate time to remind all of us of the important role fathers play in the lives of their children. Despite the recent trend toward more single mothers raising children, research bears out the notion that kids who have active, “hands-on” dads in their lives reap the benefit.

It starts with day one! Dads who attend their child’s birth feel a strong emotional connection to their baby. Being there from the beginning helps him to feel more confident in caring for a newborn and carries him through the months until he gets that first incredible “I Love You” smile from his baby. As baby continues to touch dad’s face and listen to dad’s voice, he learns that there is this person different from Mom - information that helps them enjoy rich relationships with both genders later in life.

Some of the differences fathers make in the lives of their children include:

Dads are creative playmates. Dads have quick, playful “tickle and tease” interactions that kids enjoy and even learn to initiate when Dad is around.

Dads cheer babies on. As babies begin to crawl and toddle, fathers tend to let them roam a bit farther and take more chances than mothers. This cheerleading boosts a baby’s confidence in trying new things.

Dads make great jungle gyms. Kids grapple and grasp at Dad’s arms, hair, ears, scratchy face. This type of exploring is fun for kids and can be an important building block for self esteem.

Dads promote persistence. Dads tend to have a higher tolerance for the uncertainty kids feel as they try to figure things out. They encourage problem solving, which combined with active play promotes a quality of “sticking with it” that serves children well in school and the workplace.

Dads add a “world-view”. Dads are more likely than moms to remind children of the social implications of their behavior - “nobody will want to play with you if you keep that up.”

Dads help sons to be nurturing. A boy who has a “hands-on” dad knows that nurturing is something dads do, and when it’s his turn, he’ll see nurturing as part of his masculine identity.

Dads help daughters feel competent. A daughter who has been helped to feel both feminine and powerful by a loving father knows that the world is a place she can contribute to and enjoy.

But as powerful an effect as men have on their kids, the reverse may be truer. When a man becomes a father he often softens around the edges and becomes more protective than he has ever been

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before.

Dads & Kids in the Kitchen

I was amazed that what my grown niece remembers most about her visits to my home was not the movies and shopping expeditions, but making pizza with her uncle! Growing up with a single mom, my niece enjoyed spending time with her uncle, and especially when they cooked.

Cooking with kids provides dads with a great opportunity to entertain, and teach life skills at the same time. Children like working side by side with dad. It's generally during menial tasks, with little eye contact,

that kids and parents talk the most about important topics.

The key is to match the food preparation task with the skill level of the child. Preschoolers can help scrub carrots and potatoes, tear lettuce for salad, form hamburger patties or shape meatballs, help measure rice, or set the table. Older children can help assemble simple recipes, or follow instructions on box mixes. Close supervision is needed when using knives, baking or cooking on the stove. Always make teaching safety a number one priority.

No matter the task, begin by

defining and demonstrating what you want each child to do. Then turn over responsibility and let your child go to work. Monitor the results, but don't take over the chore. Even when children become more adept at cooking, don't wander away. To keep cooking interesting and fun, you need to share in the cooking jobs. Make meal preparation safe and fun by providing a sturdy stool for the kids to stand on. Keep their clothes clean with a homemade apron, just cut the sleeves out of a big old shirt, and button it on backward.

Balancing Act is published monthly by University Extension and area Extension Specialists to help busy people balance their many responsibilities. It is provided by your local extension council.


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Eating Supper Together: Why It's so Important

"How many of you eat supper with your family at least twice a week?" I asked seventh grade students as I conducted a program in all Henry County schools this past year. Usually about 25% of the students raised their hands; the response was not surprising. "Okay, how many of you eat supper with your family without the TV on?" Nearly all the hands were quickly retracted. The informal, hand-counted results showed that a mere 22 students out of 443 ate supper with their families, without television, at least twice a week!

What are the implications of this informal survey? I can sum it up in two words: Communication and Commitment.

- **Communication is essential.** Families spend an amazingly small amount of sharing and communicating. If you don't sit and eat as a family when do you discuss things "as a family?"
- **Commitment to family.** A strong sense of commitment keeps the family together through good times and bad. If you don't sit together as a group for meals, how do you know what other family members need and how you can help?

We are all busy with ball games, work, church and extended family responsibilities. Set a goal to be more consistent than the seventh graders in my survey. Plan to have dinner with your family at least twice a week without the TV. You'll all benefit from the fellowship and 2 C's.

Coparenting Your Children

Dad thinks 5-year-old Sara needs to take swimming lessons so she gets over her fear of the water. Mom feels Sara can wait until she's older. Sara cries and pleads not to go to swimming lessons. Should Sara go to swimming lessons?

This is a critical "coparenting" moment. Coparenting is simply the idea that both moms and dads *share* responsibility for the care and decisions of the children. To better understand why research is being conducted around coparenting, you must recognize that moms and dads parent differently because of our gender differences. And, as a parent, I say, "Thank goodness!" However, there are times when life would be much easier if we both parented alike!

My husband is stricter, plays rougher, and is more demanding of our daughter. However, he is also more patient, calm and adult-like with her. These gender differences can interfere with effective co-parenting. Mothers complain that men don't spend enough time with the children, fathers don't know the kids, men are insensitive and they have different styles of parenting. Fathers have their own set of complaints--their partners' expectations are too high, mothers are not strict enough, women don't give men the respect they deserve and mothers think they are the only ones who know how to parent. These complaints are both

normal and predictable. Often, just acknowledging the differences helps couples coparent better.

Supportive coparenting occurs when moms and dads agree on parenting decisions. Children are better off when they receive the same message from both parents and when they observe their parents supporting each other's parenting efforts.

Unsupportive coparenting takes place when mothers and fathers disagree about parenting issues. When children hear different messages and observe parents arguing about issues related to them, it is confusing for children. Research shows that children who see and hear coparenting disagreements feel bad about themselves and experience guilt, stress and anxiety. Poor coparenting relationships weaken the partnership between husbands and wives, and may cause children to worry about their parents' relationship. Parental

disagreements and arguments about child rearing create a no-win situation for children. They don't know which parent to listen to, are unsure of how to behave, and feel responsible for their mother's and father's problems.

Children are especially affected by unsupportive coparenting that includes negative emotions. When one parent is sarcastic or shows disapproval of the other parent, children feel the "sting" of these exchanges.

When parents work through disagreements about parenting, children feel confident that their parents can work together. An added bonus is that children see adults negotiate. Every one benefits from supportive coparenting. For more information on coparenting, ask for this free publication from your local Extension Center: "*Parenting: Success Requires a Team Effort*" (GH6129) or is available on the Internet at <http://muextension.missouri.edu>

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Q: My children's father is not involved in their lives. What should I do to try to fill the gap?

A: Try to enlist an uncle or grandfather to add that male influence. If that's not possible, look for one of your child's friends whose father might be willing to include them in activities. A coach or Big Brother might also be a source of friendship to your child. Resist the urge to bad-mouth your child's father. Kids have their own feelings about Dad's absence. They deserve an image of men that is not destructive.

Dad Too Can Cook Meals in Minutes

Busy schedules often leave little time for food preparation. But studies show that kids really benefit from family meals around the dinner table. Kids benefit emotionally as well as nutritionally. The solution, carry-out-meals that you can eat at home. Homestyle meals-to-go are the fastest growing segment of the restaurant industry. Even some supermarket chains are offering “meals” in their delis.

The best way to utilize the “carry out” is to purchase the meat entree, but generally skip the side dishes. Side dishes are often more pricey and laden with added fat. Instead, opt for the salad bar or salad-in-a-bag,

then cruise the frozen food aisle for a vegetable or two. Grab some fresh or canned fruit, and round out your meal with hearty bread. You have the makings of a quick, well-balanced meal.

If carry-out is not an option, think microwave oven and canned pasta sauce, red or white, for meals in minutes. Use red sauce alone over spaghetti, or add precooked frozen meatballs. The white Alfredo sauce can be combined with canned chicken and microwaved vegetables (mini carrots & broccoli). Serve over the pasta of your choice. Add a salad, a crunchy hard roll, and your meal is complete. Dad can prepare dinner while the kids put salad in bowls and set the table.

A favorite “grab-and-dump”

meal is macaroni & cheese box mix. Create your own casserole by adding canned tuna and frozen peas. Or simply stir in slices of lowfat hot dogs, and serve green beans on the side. Don’t forget ice cream and cookies for dessert!

For variety, turn the day around, and serve breakfast for supper. Throw frozen waffles in the toaster, scramble a few eggs, slice some oranges, and pour up a big glass of milk. Maybe your crew prefers pancakes. Grab a box of complete pancake mix at the supermarket, and you’ll have hot cakes in a flash! Heat *brown&serve* sausage and include juicy cantaloupe chunks on the side.