

# Being a Dad



**Being a dad is one of the most rewarding and important roles you can have in life. These days there is greater flexibility in what each parent does and more sharing of the parenting role. While parenting can be done by either parent, children have unique experiences with their dad and their mum. Children benefit when dads are warm, loving and involved in their lives.**

## Becoming a dad

Becoming a dad changes your life. You can feel happy and excited, but you might also feel overwhelmed or unsure about what is expected of you. You may know the kind of dad you want to be or don't want to be from memories of your own childhood. You may want to do things the same way your own father did, or do things differently. It's up to you. There is no one right way to be a dad, and it is never too late to become the kind of dad you want to be.

This is a good time to consider:

- what was positive about how you were raised
- the values that are important to you, eg kindness, respect, sharing
- what you expect to do as a dad
- what your partner expects
- how you can balance work and family
- how you can take care of yourself and be your best as a dad.

The way you go about being a dad will be influenced by whether you are in a two-parent home, are a single dad, a stay-at-home dad, a step-dad, same-sex parent, separated from your children's mother or away from home a lot. The most important thing is that children know you love them. This means spending time with children, getting to know and understand them and being involved in their lives.



**The most important gift you can give children is your love.**

## Some things all dads can do

### Start early

While either parent can provide loving care for a child, dads have an important role in children's development.

When dads are hands-on with their new baby and respond warmly and gently to their needs, it has a positive effect on baby's development. The way dad sounds, talks, feels and plays is different to mum. When baby adapts to these differences it helps them learn, build trust and develop social skills.

- Be involved in soothing baby, bathing, feeding, changing nappies from the start.
- Don't worry if you feel unsure at first; all parents gain confidence with practice.
- Have skin-to-skin time with baby. It helps them feel safe and builds your bond.

- Look into baby's eyes, smile, talk gently and copy their sounds back to them.

When you connect with baby in these ways, they learn to feel safe and secure with you. They might recognise your voice from their time in the womb.

**Even tiny babies get a special feeling of security from being held by their dad.**

### Show your love

Some dads feel uncomfortable showing their feelings, even towards their children. They might have grown up being taught it is 'unmanly' or that it will make children 'soft'. It is important to know that:

- both boys and girls need to feel loved, safe and secure
- when children feel safe and secure, they can focus on learning and exploring their world
- the more you comfort children, the better they get at calming themselves.

Show your love in different ways:

- tell children often that you love them, give hugs and cuddles
- show you genuinely enjoy spending time with them
- talk and listen - try to understand the feelings and ideas behind what children say
- do things they like to do
- be interested in their learning; help with homework
- show you are proud of them. Cheer at their sports or other events, regardless of whether they win or lose. Positive encouragement builds positive children.

Keep showing your love as children get older. Teenagers need to know you love them too.

**Children equate love with the time you give them. Turn off the TV and other devices and give them your full attention. Make this a regular thing. This helps strengthen your connection.**

### Play and have fun together

- Playing with children builds your connection and supports their learning and development. The active 'rough and tumble' play that dads often do (although either parent can do this) is a great way for children to have fun and try out their strength and skills.
- Show them how to play without becoming aggressive or hurting others. Being sensitive and knowing when to stop helps children learn to manage their feelings.
- Take them to the park, kick or throw a ball around, go to the beach, for walks, explore and be active.
- For children who enjoy quieter activities spend time doing these too, eg arts and crafts, reading.
- Walking and talking is a great way to stimulate minds (and appetites!). You may find your child will want to share what they see, hear and learn. Listen and ask questions.

**When dads read with children for even a short time each day, it helps their learning, strengthens your bond and can create memories that last a lifetime.**

### Be involved

- Being involved in everyday routines such as bathing, feeding and bedtime is a great way to regularly connect with children.
- Going to their health appointments helps you learn about their development, and you can share your observations and insights.
- Help children have a go at a range of things and develop their interests and skills.
- Take them to activity groups or sports. Let them work alongside you in the garden or kitchen. Involve them in your hobbies.
- Going to children's school events or sports builds their self-esteem and confidence. Show them you are proud of their efforts.
- Taking children to your work from time to time if appropriate and safe can be a great experience. They get to know how you spend your days when they are not with you. If you can't take them to your workplace, tell them about it, show pictures.



- Help children to have friends and get to know them and their parents or caregivers. This shows you're interested in their lives, and it helps keep them safe if you know who they spend time with.

**Your child may have different interests to the ones you had as a child. This is OK. The important thing is that you're doing things together. Encourage their interests and support them to participate.**

### Guide and set limits

- Children need to know what is OK and what is not OK. Set reasonable limits and boundaries for behaviour that suit a child's age and development.
- Praise and encourage children when they do what is expected. It works better than punishment and children are more likely to learn the behaviour you want.
- Be patient and kind. Young children are not able to manage their impulses and emotions. This will change as they develop. Give them time to learn and practise.
- Show you understand children's feelings, eg 'I see you're upset because you really want that toy'. When they feel understood, children are more likely to listen to your guidance. It helps build your connection and respect for each other.
- Help children express strong feelings in safe ways. Talking, outdoor play, sport, drama, music, writing can all be helpful.

### Be a positive role model

- Children learn from what they see you doing. Behave in ways you want your children to behave. Live by your values.
- Talk about your feelings. Talk about times you feel sad and happy. Children learn that men have feelings too, and it is OK to express them in safe and appropriate ways.

- Manage your feelings. Pausing and taking a deep breath if you are angry or upset can be really helpful. You are also helping your child learn an important life skill.

## Sons and daughters

It is important to show warmth and love to both sons and daughters. Some dads find it easier to bond with sons, but it is just as important for girls to feel loved and valued by their dad. It builds their confidence and self-esteem.

- Girls and boys both need time with their dad.
- Behave in ways you would like your sons to act when they are adults. Show them how men can be loving and caring and get on well with others. To learn this, boys need to spend time with you and other men. Show them you value and respect women.
- Calling out any bullying or teasing behaviour teaches children they deserve respect and to respect others.
- Spend time with your daughters. You are the first man they get to know. Showing you value and respect them teaches them to expect men to treat them this way when they grow up.

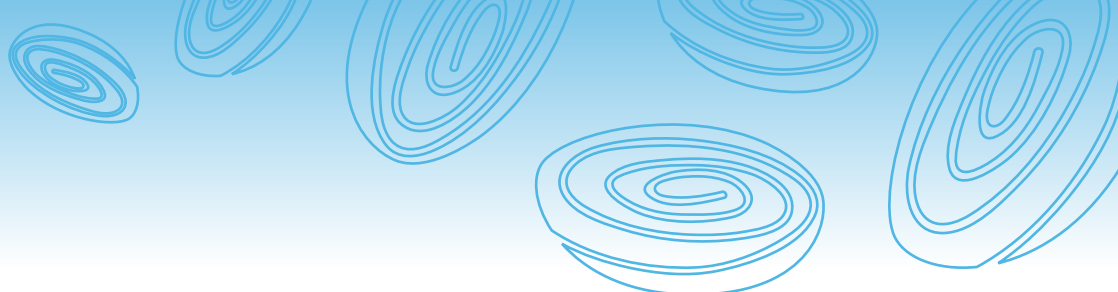
**How you treat your children's mother shows your sons and daughters what to expect in their future relationships. There is so much we can do in families to develop healthy attitudes towards each other, particularly to women and girls.**

## Work as a team

Work out your parenting with your children's mother right from the start, even if you don't live together. Share your ideas and listen to hers. You don't have to parent in the same way, but it is important not to undermine each other. If you don't agree with something your partner does, work it out away from the children. If you still can't agree, remember children can learn to cope with parents being different, but they can't cope with parents fighting or putting each other down.

Talk about how you will share the load and what each of you will do. Each partner needs to feel things are fair and





their other responsibilities are taken into account. You could discuss:

- getting up at night, bathing, feeding, bedtime routines
- household chores, shopping, cooking
- taking children to appointments, childcare, school and activities
- how you can arrange some free time for each of you, and to spend time together as a couple
- what will happen when children are sick or plans have to change. Find out what your workplace offers in parenting leave for fathers.

## Single dads

If you have sole care of your children try to create a supportive network around you. There may be friends or family you can call on. Find out about services in your area. Try to spend some time on your own without the children to relax and do things you enjoy (see Parent Easy Guide 'Single parenting').

## Dads who are separated or away a lot

Being a dad may be especially hard if you are separated from your children's mother or spend a lot of time away. Remember you are still a parent, and the most important thing is that children know you love them.

- Be in regular contact with children. When you can't be with them, use things like phones or other devices, or write letters or cards. Remember birthdays, special occasions and events such as exams or sports days.
- Caring well for children, even from afar, will support them to feel safe and secure.
- Be reliable and flexible about care arrangements.
- Don't let hurt or anger about their mother affect your relationship with your children. When you talk about their mother, be positive or don't say anything at all. Keep handover times calm and pleasant.

- When you are with your children let them share your life, your memories and your dreams. Let them see you cook (it doesn't have to be fancy) and do other household tasks. They will learn a lot about being a dad by seeing what you do.
- Be relaxed and open and make it easy for children to talk to you. Encourage them to share their worries as well as their successes.

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**Even if you don't see your children a lot, you can still have a strong connection and build happy memories together.**  
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## Step-dads

Being a step-dad can be both rewarding and challenging, especially if the children are older when you join the family. Blended families can work very well but they need time and attention. Children can feel sad or angry about someone taking up their mother's time or taking their own dad's place in the family.

- Spend time getting to know your partner's children. Be a friend but don't crowd them. You cannot take their dad's place but you can still build a close relationship.
- Let the children have some time with their mother without you around. Have special time with your own children too.
- Creating an open environment for talking and listening to their views can help build trust and respect.
- Support your step-children to keep up contact with their dad if this is what they want (see Parent Easy Guide 'Blended families').
- Relationships take time to develop. Give yourself and your step-children time to adapt. Be realistic, patient and kind.

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**Be wary about guiding your step-children's behaviour even if their mother asks you to. It is usually better if parents do this for their own children, especially at first.**  
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## Taking care of your relationship

Having children may bring changes to your relationship. A new baby often deepens the relationship and brings parents closer together. However, the demands on time and energy can take their toll. You may both be getting less sleep and juggling care and work responsibilities. There can be changes in intimacy as your partner copes with body changes and new roles and responsibilities.

- It is important to talk about your feelings from the start to avoid a build-up of stress.
- Listening to your partner's feelings can bring you closer as understanding grows.
- Talk about any pressures you feel such as your sense of responsibility for the family, finances, and your feelings about the baby. Dads may feel left out or resentful.
- Plan regular time to be together as a couple, without the children.
- Look for ways to support your partner. Provide chances for them to rest and relax. Surprise them with something you know they will enjoy. If you aren't sure, ask them.

## Taking care of yourself

When you look after yourself you are better able to look after your family. Your needs are important too!

- See your doctor for a check-up. Dads can feel exhausted and run-down too.
- Be realistic about what you can do and when you need a break. Some dads want to be able to do everything.
- Find someone you can really talk to about how you feel. Joining a dads' group and sharing ideas can be a great support.

Just as mums can have symptoms of anxiety and depression, so can dads. If you feel anxious or unhappy a lot of the time, or find yourself being angry or frustrated, drinking more or using drugs, get help early. This can help you be the dad you want to be, even if it's hard to admit things are tough.

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**Dads can feel stress too. If you are having trouble with your feelings talk with your doctor or other health professional.**  
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## Finding helpful information

When you are a dad, information and advice comes from everywhere - friends, family, the media, the internet and professionals. It is important to be open to ideas but to base your decisions on trustworthy information.

- If you find information online, check the facts to make sure it's reliable.
- Social media can be a great way to share experiences with family and friends and find encouragement and support. It can also be a place where parents feel judged and criticised. If it doesn't feel helpful, you may not want to continue. If your concerns continue, seek help.
- If you don't know something don't be afraid to ask for information and advice. If the first place you try doesn't have what you need, keep looking until you find someone or something that helps.
- Every stage of a child's development is different. Your knowledge will grow along the way as you find out about how you can best meet their needs.

## Creating a safe home

Violence in your home harms everyone. It is never OK. Children are hurt even if they are not the direct victim.

- Stay calm and model respect towards others.
- Don't allow yelling, name calling, put downs, hitting or other violence.
- Listen to others and talk things through when there are disagreements. If it gets heated, take a break and agree to talk later when things are calm.

Seek help immediately if there is violence. It rarely stops by itself.





**If there is violence or you think you might harm your family or yourself, get help immediately. Call 000 in an emergency.**

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

## Want more information?

### Mensline Australia

Phone 1300 789 978, 24 hours

A telephone and online support and information service for men and their families  
[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

### 1800 Respect

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours

National domestic, family and sexual violence counselling service [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100 for advice on child health and parenting

### Elm Place

Phone 1800 800 098, 24 hours

Support for anyone affected by institutional and out-of-home care as a child  
[www.elmplace.org.au](http://www.elmplace.org.au)

### Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636, 24 hours

Mental health information and support [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Phone 1800 010 630 for the NewAccess Coaching program to help you through the tough times, including new parenthood

Information for new and expectant dads <https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads>

### ForWhen Helpline SA

Phone 1300 242 322, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri

Connecting new and expecting parents struggling with their mental health to services that are right for them from conception to 12 months after birth

### Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia (PANDA)

Phone 1300 726 306, 9am-7.30pm (AEST), Mon-Fri

Information, support and counselling for new parents and families during pregnancy and the first year of parenthood. You don't need a diagnosis of depression to use this service [www.panda.org.au](http://www.panda.org.au)

Information and support for new dads <https://panda.org.au/get-support/support-dads>

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment with a child health nurse  
[www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au)

### Nature Play SA

Resources to help make outdoor play an everyday part of children's lives [www.natureplaysa.org.au](http://www.natureplaysa.org.au)

### Raising Children Network

Information and videos for dads in 'Fathers' section  
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/fathers>

### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Being a mum', 'Being a parent', 'New parents', 'What is your parenting style?', 'Single parenting', 'Blended families', 'Family break-up' and 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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