

Six practical steps to EFFECTIVE FATHERING

**(and one extra step
for separated fathers)**

Prepared by MenTime



www.menstime.com.au

Six Practical Steps *quick summary*

Be there

Nothing is more important than being there for your children. Often. Reliably. In a range of situations. In person as often as possible but also by phone, by email, in writing. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Be involved

Get involved in the activities which are part of your children's lives, especially school, sport, hobbies, chores and friends. Try not to see your children only in certain contexts, especially if you do not live with them. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Show affection and praise

It's easy to get so absorbed in managing day to day behaviour that you forget to *show* affection and *give* praise. Balance discipline and correction with strong, frequent shows of affection and praise. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Structure your parenting role - especially discipline

Children need and want structure, which gives them security and a framework of values. Parenting must be planned and thought through, not just reactive.

Discipline is essential to learning and it's a primary responsibility of parenting. It too must be planned, fair and consistent, not just reactive. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Learn from your own childhood

Our own childhood is a major influence on how we act as parents. Parenting sometimes involves a reawakening of our own forgotten childhood fears and challenges.

Think about whether you want to use your father as a role model for how you are going to father your children, or do you want to change?

[Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Nurture your relationships

Take care of yourself, including time to recharge.

Remember that your relationship with your children is two way: it's a challenge, but can be one of the most rewarding of your life.

Your relationship with your children's mother is important to them – even if you are separated. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Extra step for separated fathers

You may be separated, but your children still need a father.

Your parenting responsibilities are still there. [Click for more](#) including practical tips.

1. Be there

you're their most important person

Parents are the most important people in a child's life.

Children learn most of their life attitudes and expectations, about themselves and their relationships, from their parents. Parents affect children's self esteem, behaviour, learning, emotions, capacity for love and happiness.

When parents are physically absent (or physically there but emotionally absent) it has effects just as powerful as when they are interacting fully with their children.

The most important thing any parent can do for their child is to be there for them.

The amount of time you spend does make a difference.

It will make more difference if it occurs frequently and reliably. Predictability gives children a sense of security.

Of course, if you can give extra, as needed time, that adds value. Of course, that's not always practical, but extra contact can come from telephone, email and mail.

It's often argued that so-called "quality time" can make up for a lack of time overall, but don't let this blind you to the need to spend time with your child across the full spectrum of activities. Time spent doing homework together or even household tasks is more "quality" than time spent watching a movie. It's not the time, it's the interaction.

The emphasis on "quality" time can also increase expectations and add to pressure. Children are not as good as adults at coping with pressure (it's one of the skills we spend a lifetime learning) and this pressure can lead to negative behaviour or outcomes. So time spent lazily together, with no pressing focus or structure, can be just as valuable.

TIPS for being there

- ✓ Allow your child to have a say into when you will spend time together and what you'll do.
- ✓ Set aside certain times suitable for your child, which are committed to them.
- ✓ Allow your children to phone and email you at work and *always respond*, even if you can't take the call immediately – just as you would for an important client.
- ✓ Can you take your children with you to work occasionally? They'll probably get a lot out of learning what you do at work and it may be a refreshing change for your workplace too.
- ✓ Children prefer things which are active and involves physical movement, contact and conversation, rather than passive watching or individual activity.
- ✓ Travelling time spent together can be valuable, especially if you have things planned to talk about. On longer drives or holidays, rotate the family around the car, including the front seat. Share the driving, and sit in the back with the kids. You'll be amazed how it changes the journey, and your perspective.

2. Be involved

it's more rewarding for you too

Parenting is more rewarding when you're actively involved in all the areas of your child's life. And this involvement helps you be a more effective parent.

Treats and outings are great, but they're only a small part of the picture: it's far more important that you get involved across the full spectrum of your child's activities, especially including their education and leisure activities.

Involvement is easier if you learn how to talk *with* your child. Sometimes you have to give instructions, but children need to talk simply to practice conversation and as a way of gathering information and trying out ideas. This requires you to listen to what they are saying and exchange opinions and information – just as you would with an adult, though with less complex concepts according to age. The purpose can be in the exchange – there doesn't have to be a goal, an outcome or a 'lesson'.

Try not to get stressed out or frustrated if they seem to not be as mature as you expect. This is about loving them unconditionally, and not seeing yourself being measured by your children.

You **don't** have to be perfect or infallible to be a great parent and to hold the love and respect of your children throughout their lives. You are likely to be involved in their lives in ways which will inevitably expose your weaknesses as well as your strengths. Exposing your weaknesses does **not** mean you fail as a man.

TIPS for being involved

- ✓ Remember that teacher/guardian is only one of your parental roles. You can also be a friend and confidant – if you don't "cheat" by turning into a superior authority when they reveal something you don't approve of. Talking about things is a way of exploring that can be far safer than doing, so respond with questions, information and opinion, but let the conversation work its way through. If you revert to authority to cut it off, your child may learn not to talk with you.

- ✓ Play games together. Children learn a lot through games. Remember though that in most games you have natural advantages. If you use them, your children may learn the implied life-message that they just can't win. Better than "letting them win" is to invent handicaps for yourself which make it hard for you to win. Like throwing a ball or playing cricket opposite handed. Aim to have everyone win about the same number of times.
- ✓ Help your child with their homework. You won't know all the answers (school has changed so much!) but you can participate in the search for answers, including looking up books, using the internet and asking others. Children don't expect you to know everything or be perfect – unless you set up that expectation. Encourage them to get good marks at school and praise them for any achievement. When parents boast, "I was lousy at school and it never did me any harm," children adopt the same value. Unfortunately, even if this sentiment was once true, modern jobs are education dependent.
- ✓ Attend activities at your child's school. Meet with their teachers. If you can't get there to meet with teachers, telephone them.
- ✓ Ask your children about what they are doing. Don't interrogate: many children (just like adults) don't like being personally quizzed – but they are usually willing to talk about their favourite activities, books or films, what their friends are doing and talking about, what's cool and what isn't, what they plan to do on the weekend and more.
- ✓ Get to know your children's friends. This has the added benefit that it can be an early warning sign of trouble, help ease peer pressure on your child, and reduce the risk of bullying from both within and external to the peer group. If their peers sense an active parent involvement, they will at least be cautious of that implied discipline.
- ✓ Introduce your children to your own hobbies, interests and work – but don't demand that they be interested. Look for hobbies and interests that appeal to both of you.
- ✓ When the play involves physical contact remember to allow for your superior strength, and that your child will probably try to hide being hurt when it gets too rough.

- ✓ Exercise with your children. Early habits of exercise are a lifetime gift of health.
- ✓ Cook meals with your children.
- ✓ Share tasks such as house cleaning with your children. The daily tasks of living are at least as important a part of life as going to the movies. Call them ‘helping out’, rather than ‘chores’.
- ✓ Involve your children in household budgeting, for example entertainment spending and food spending.
- ✓ Watch your child’s diet. Apart from being a good health rule, this is a way to teach self discipline.
- ✓ Give your children responsibility. Tell them they are in charge and allow them to make their own decisions – and mistakes. Teach them about ‘acceptable risks’. If you walk them to school, let them tell you when it is safe to cross the road.
- ✓ Develop intellectual involvement with your children. Discuss with them what they are learning at school and general issues. Try to discuss within their framework of knowledge and interest, rather than teaching from a position of superior understanding.
- ✓ Read to and with your children. Reading is the best thing you can do for your child’s education.
- ✓ Take them to the museum zoo, library, forest etc. Watch science and nature programs.
- ✓ Say yes as often as possible.
- ✓ Ask your child questions that cannot be answered yes or no, such as, “What did you like best about...” and, “Which do you think was the funniest part?”
- ✓ Lie on your backs outside and look up at the sky. See how many shapes you can imagine in the clouds. Take it in turns to point them out.
- ✓ Start some family traditions that relate to each child uniquely, such as favourite birthday dishes or special activities first thing Monday.

3. Show affection and praise ***(they're worth it)***

You know how you feel about your children. But it's easy to assume they know it, and you forget to show it.

It's hardest when you're stressed and dealing with discipline and behaviour problems. It may not be spontaneous and it may be an effort, but if you show your affection more often, your parenting will be easier and more effective.

The same applies to praise. The more a child breaks the rules and falls short, the more they need praise for the times when they do well.

As with all parenting, review the way you show affection and praise as your child matures. Older children may prefer, especially around friends, a friendly arm around the shoulder rather than a full embrace. This may be easier for you too, especially if you're not into open displays of affection.

TIPS for showing affection and giving praise

- ✓ SAY IT! Say it often. Say it at every opportunity. You may know it, your child is still growing up and needs constant reassurance.
- ✓ Praise all achievements. Don't let them pass. If children are not praised for achievements they may think they weren't worth much and not bother trying for them again.
- ✓ Where practical, ask your child to demonstrate how they achieved what they did.
- ✓ If they have received certificates or trophies, display them prominently in your house. Mount or frame them, or make a special display case yourself.
- ✓ Praise your children to others.
- ✓ When meeting with your child's teachers, emphasise their good points. The teacher may be able to use these to improve classroom performance. At the very least, it won't hurt for them to know that your child is a good and valued person.
- ✓ Express affection openly, including hugs.

4. Structure your parenting role ***especially discipline***

Children need and want structure. Structure is essential to the sense of security which underpins self confidence, and to the building of a framework of values.

Younger children especially need the stability of routines, set times and patterns, and the placement of things. They need to have personal control over some aspects of their immediate space, and may include exclusive use of some items, such as favoured cups, towels etc.

These things are part of a process of the child building confidence in the reliability of the world and their place in it.

This means your parenting must be thought about and planned, not just reactive. There must be consistent patterns and rules which your children know and understand.

Variations will sometimes be necessary: try to give the child advance warning of these, just as you would if they were changes to your workplace routines.

Discipline

Discipline is a primary responsibility of parenthood. It doesn't stop with separation either. Discipline means setting realistic boundaries and realistic consequences.

Children need discipline and mostly welcome it – later, if not at the time!

An important part of growing up is about learning limits. Limits are essential to values, and without values, life is much poorer. So children who grow up without limits and values – discipline – will always find it harder to build rewarding lives. They will always be more susceptible to peer pressure and more likely to get into trouble.

Discipline is the part of parenting that most needs structure, so that it is clearly understood by the child. If the child cannot understand how it works, they cannot learn from it and will grow to resent and resist all forms of authority.

In practice the importance of structure means, for example, trying always to respond to particular unwanted behaviour in the same way. This is not one time ignoring the behaviour because you're feeling laid back but then another time blowing up and over-reacting because you are in a bad mood.

It means that the rules you set will flow from a set of principles. Eventually, your child should learn to figure out what the rules for a new situation will be because they have an understanding of the principles.

For example, you may set as a principle that inter-personal violence is taboo. This principle might lead to the rule that when you are choosing movies to see, you will not consider those with excessive violence. Subsequently if your child is at a friend's place where an ultra-violent computer game is being played, they will understand that playing the game violates a set principle – even if no specific rule about computer games has ever been set.

Reliable structure means that you won't invent arbitrary rules to suit your mood at the time, or to cover up for a mistake you made. If there are special circumstances, explain them. You might even ask your child to modify their behaviour on this occasion, outside the normal rules.

What's important is that the rules are clear, based on consistent principles and consistently applied.

TIPS for structured parenting and discipline

- ✓ Negotiate standing principles of behaviour with your children. Explain each one and gain their understanding and agreement. Write out the rules – even better, have them write out the rules – and display them on a wall or on the fridge. You might deal with one principle a week and work your way through them. You may be surprised, if you involve your children in the process, to find them receptive and even pro-active in sorting out a workable system.
- ✓ Obey the rules yourself.
- ✓ Write the rules on paper, not in stone: make it clear that your children can ask for renegotiation of the rules, if they have good grounds.

- ✓ Review the rules as your child matures.
- ✓ Learn about “Positive Parenting” at your local Community centre, or contact MensTime to talk about options.
- ✓ Use a ‘star chart’ to reward positive behaviour. “You’ve achieved such and such today, and we agreed when this happened you would be rewarded with a star on your chart. You’ve only got two more stars to get and you’ll get the bonus we agreed on.” School teachers can help with ideas for these.
- ✓ Don’t wait until you’re pushed past your limit. If you’re frustrated, possibly angry, the atmosphere of the discipline will be hostility and, for the child, fear. No learning will take place in this atmosphere. Deal with situations early, when you’re in control and before they become emotionally charged. Or, set time aside later to deal with them. Don’t discipline when you are really angry.

5. Learn from your own childhood

Our own childhood is a major influence on how we act as parents. Sometimes parenting can involve a working through of our own forgotten childhood issues.

Draw on the experiences of your own childhood: think about how you responded to the behaviour of your own father before you automatically repeat it. If there are experiences you want to be better for your child, you must change how you parent.

Reach back into your own childhood and you will see how the world is very different when viewed from a child's perspective.

Children, for example, sometimes suffer from fears we see as foolish. But the fears are still real and can be terrifying. Maybe you can remember an incident like this, or a situation where you developed a mistaken view of some terrible future.

A seemingly irrational fear is actually a good opportunity for you to strengthen your relationship with your child, by giving them support and comfort which is not conditional on your recognising the cause of their distress, but automatic in response to their need.

It's usually *very* important to children what their peers think of them. As adults, we become self-sufficient and self-confident enough not to be too affected by peer opinion (or so we like to think), but that doesn't make the situation any less real or difficult for our children.

Empathy – the ability to understand how others feel – is a late developing skill. When your child is young, you'll have to do most of it, for both of you.

TIPS for learning from your own childhood

- ✓ When you're facing a difficult parenting situation, think back to your childhood: were you ever in a situation similar to what your own child now faces? What were your emotions? What were your *needs*?
- ✓ Tell your child about your own childhood, especially the times you felt afraid or rejected or faced similar situations.
- ✓ If your child is suffering peer rejection, the only compensation is for you to step up your demonstrations of acceptance and support.
- ✓ If you have photos and mementos from your own childhood, show and explain them to your child. Talk about the stories behind them and what you felt.
- ✓ Give your child a copy of the front page from the newspaper for the day they were born and talk about what it was like then. (You can get newspaper copies from libraries.)
- ✓ Tell them what your life was like when you were their age. Not how much tougher it was but what you did and who your mates were, what the fashions were, what the music was, what the cool words were, and what you enjoyed best. Let them know that you were a kid too. Remind yourself that you were not perfect in your parents' eyes.

6. Nurture your relationships *to get more back*

Your first relationship is with yourself. It's hard to have good relationships with others if you're not happy with yourself.

Take care of yourself, including time to recharge. Don't disappear into the roles of husband, father and provider: maintain your individuality.

Nurture your relationship with your children's mother. A strong relationship between parents makes it easier to raise children.

The skills of keeping relationships strong – especially repairing damage rather than sinking into blame and resentment – take a long time to learn. Your children learn by modelling your behaviour. Give them a head start by making sure you have part of your life set aside as your 'time out'.

Remember that your relationship with your children is two way: it's a challenge, but it can be one of the most rewarding of your life.

TIPS for nurturing your relationships

- ✓ If you set yourself up as infallible and perfect, you're going to have a hard time living up to yourself. Your kids don't expect you to be perfect, so don't hide it from them when you get things wrong.
- ✓ Involve your children in making breakfast in bed for your partner, or some other treat or assistance.
- ✓ Children (and sometimes adults) have to learn about emotions. They need to learn to identify and name their feelings, to understand them. So it's part of good parenting to talk with your children about emotions: yours as well as theirs.
- ✓ Share your feelings with your children, and your partner. You are not failing as a man if you do this. Quite the contrary. Allow them to have blue or quiet days, without mocking them for it or trying to tease them into happiness.

- ✓ People need some time alone and some privacy. So do your children. Negotiate mutual private time and respect for each others privacy, such as knocking before you enter a shut bedroom door. Remind them to do the same when your bedroom door is shut.
- ✓ Give your children some control over their lives. For example, one night a week, let each of them choose the menu (and help cook it). Involve everyone in mutual decisions.
- ✓ The best way for boys to learn respect for women is from men who respect women. And respect is essential to all relationships: if your children don't learn it, they will have relationship difficulties later.
- ✓ Sometimes, with even the best intentions, we just don't deliver on our promises, or on what we know we should do. Whether it's our partner or our child, we should tell them we're sorry and ask them to forgive us. All relationships are two way, even with a child. The trick is to show that as adults, we learn from our mistakes.

7. For separated fathers ***the extra step***

You may be separated, but your children still need a father. Your parenting responsibilities are still there.

You have to work at all the six steps, only harder.

Most important for you is to stay involved across all the areas of your children's lives, including their education and social lives.

Your relationship with your children's mother is very important to them. Even if you are separated, work to make the relationship as effective for your children as possible. Try to maintain joint parenting policies, with consistent rules and expectations.

Remember, regardless of the problems the two of you may have, she will always be their mother. They need to love her. So keep your conflicts to yourselves. Don't involve them.

TIPS for separated fathers

- ✓ Write when you can't visit.
- ✓ Send a postcard to let them know you are thinking of them.
- ✓ Use email and SMS.
- ✓ Use the phone, at a time that will be convenient to them.
- ✓ Tell your child bedtime stories over the phone.
- ✓ Vary the context of your involvement. Try not to see your children always in the same place, especially if you do not live with them.
- ✓ Plan in advance the time you will spend together. Send brochures, maps and your local newspaper.
- ✓ Play internet games online together. Don't get too upset when you get beaten!

- ✓ Simultaneously read the same books or go to the same films, and talk about them. You can send the book or the movie tickets, or have your child choose them.
- ✓ Don't get upset if they reject an idea or something you do doesn't work out. It's not a rejection of you, just of the activity. The skill of rejecting a suggestion without offending the person who made it is usually only learned in adulthood (if at all!), so don't expect it of your children. Try something else. Ask them for a suggestion.

Resources

The 7 Secrets of Effective Fathers by Ken Canfield

This book explores seven fundamental practices necessary to achieve life-changing improvements in father-child relationships:

- Collaborating with the mother of your child;
- Commitment to your child;
- Connecting with your child;
- Consistency in your fathering;
- Caring for your child;
- Communication with your child;
- Counselling your child.

Parenting With Love and Logic by Foster Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay

The authors believe that “responsible behaviour has a direct correlation to the number of decisions children are forced to make.” If we allow children to make their own mistakes while they’re young, they’ll learn responsibility. The authors recommend offering children structured choices (some of which will have related negative consequences).

About MensTime

A lot of men feel they can't talk with others about their problems, and they don't trust counsellors. That's why we wrote this series of booklets, and made it available anonymously over the internet.

But we know that talking with other men in groups *does* help. It makes men stronger, not weaker. Of course it can be hard to make that first move, and maybe some people would laugh at you if they knew – but it's not their life.

You won't be laughed at in a **MensTime** group. You will be heard and maybe even understood. Chances are, you'll end up getting a better handle on your life, as do most men who attend.

- **MensTime** provides group meetings and resources for men to deal with issues such as parenting, relationships and personal development.
- **MensTime** Group Programs allow men to take stock, affirm who we are and reclaim our unique contribution to relationships, families, the workplace and society.
- **MensTime** is time out, for men to reflect on the important issues of life.
- **MensTime** is for men, because we believe it's time to recognise the needs and contributions of men.
- **MensTime** is an opportunity for men to enhance our relationships and our parenting.

MensTime is presented by the Relationship Services division of Anglicare WA, and is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. It is approved by the Federal Attorney General's Department.

Anglicare offers a wide variety of groups and courses that help people change their lives.

Publication data

This publication was written by MensTime group leaders Noel, David, Bruce and Tim, based on their combined decades of experience. The authors gratefully acknowledge the input of thousands of men and women they have worked with.

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ABN 32 797 454 970.

ISBN 0-9580705-3-9

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Gender specific pronouns

This publication looks at communication within male/female partnership relationships from a male perspective. The authors acknowledge that other types of relationships exist. Many of the principles used here are probably applicable across all forms of relationships, however the authors however do not profess expertise in other types of relationships.

Feedback and contact

This publication will be updated and other publications are planned. Your feedback is an essential part of this process. Please send comments and suggested additional resources to info@menstime.com.au

Or contact us: Anglicare (WA) Anglicare (WA)
 GPO Box C138 23 Adelaide Terrace
 PERTH WA 6839 EAST PERTH WA 6004

Additional resources from Anglicare

For additional resources for men visit www.menstime.com.au

For other resources which can help men and women make positive changes to their lives, visit www.anglicarewa.com.au

Send us your tips for more effective relationships! Email us at info@menstime.com.au

