



DAD MATTERS

How to Be the Father Kids Need

by Armin Brott

American fatherhood has evolved considerably in the last 50 years. While dads used to be kept out of the delivery room, today, more than 90 percent of new fathers are present for their child's birth, reflected in MenCare Advocacy's *State of the World's Fathers*. However, being there early on does not necessarily define the scope of future involvement. Overcoming obstacles that might keep men from being the "high-five" dads they and their family need them to be is key.

Involved fathers benefit children.

Most research on child development has focused on how mothers influence their children, but in recent decades, society has "discovered" fathers. In many studies, pioneering Psychologist Ross Parke, Ph.D., professor emeritus of University of California, Riverside, and others have conclusively shown that children of more-involved dads are

better at solving puzzles, score higher on cognitive skills tests, do better in school, are more likely to go to college, are more empathetic, manage their emotions better, have fewer behavior problems, are less likely to suffer from depression or mental illness and are less likely to break laws or become teen parents.

Fathering tip: Never miss an opportunity to change a diaper, play with the kids, read stories together or simply ask them about their day.

Equal workplace policies matter. The U.S. is the only economically advanced country that has no nationally mandated paid maternity leave policy and is absent a national paternity leave policy, paid or unpaid. When men don't get time off to learn basic parenting skills, it's harder for them to stay engaged later.

In 1977, 41 percent of women and 35 percent of men in dual-earner couples reported work-family life

conflicts. Today, the figures are 47 percent and 60 percent, respectively, according to the Families and Work Institute's ongoing National Study of the Changing Workforce.

Parenting tip: Advocate for national, paid parenting leave policies for men and women starting with local employers. It benefits both families and companies. Studies by Stanford University, the Families and Work Institute, Gallup, Inc. and others have found that companies with family-friendly benefits enjoy more loyal employees, better morale, lower turnover, fewer arbitrary sick days, higher levels of customer service and higher shareholder returns—all of which contribute to their bottom line.

Both genders can be naturally nurturing. Certainly, women are biologically adapted for giving birth and breastfeeding, but Parke found that caring new dads typically cuddle, coo, giggle, rock and feed their babies just as much as new mothers. One hurdle men face is that they usually have to return to work sooner, and their natural nurturing skills can get rusty, while moms' get sharper. Opportunity and practice are the biggest predictors of meaningful connections with children.

Fathering tip: Don't assume that a partner knows more. Whatever a mother knows, she learned by making mistakes, and that's the best way for fathers to learn, too.

Be open to complementary expertise. A dad with a mate that praises and supports him will be far more confident and engaged with his child than one with a partner that criticizes him.

Parenting tip: No one likes to feel incompetent, so when offering dad advice, do it in a nonthreatening way that supports and compliments his improving skills over time. It may mean adjusting personal standards a bit. Dad should take pride in practicing his unique rapport with offspring. Instead of letting mom pluck a crying or smelly baby from his arms, he can try, "Honey, I've got this."

End-running the legal system after divorce. For some 30 years, the default decision in divorce cases has been to award the mother primary physical custody, with limited visitation for the father. More states are now moving toward a presumption of 50-50 physical custody, but it's not the norm. Therefore, many divorced dads may feel disconnected from their children and suppressed in their parenting role moving forward.

Fathering tip: Never give up. Children need their dad in their life and vice-versa. It's critical to stay in touch. In person is best; phone, email and Skype are decent fallbacks. Make time together feel meaningful as well as normal, instead of falling into a "Disneyland dad" syndrome of trying to make every moment a party. Practice harmonious communications with the ex. The biggest known predictor of children's future mental and emotional health is how well their parents get along. Separated parents don't have to be friends, but they do need to acknowledge both parents' importance to the children and treat each other respectfully.

*Armin Brott is the author of eight bestselling books on fatherhood, including *The Expectant Father* and *The New Father*. Learn more at MrDad.com.*

DEAR DEPLOYED DAD

by Armin Brott



For parents serving in the military, some of the biggest barriers to involvement are inevitable and often repeated deployments. Dads returning home often struggle to reestablish both their family role—which changed while they were away—and their relationships with children they haven't seen for months and who may not even recognize them. Here are practical tips to counter any estrangement.

Talk to your children before you leave and tell them, in age-appropriate terms, what's happening and why. Record yourself reading a

child's favorite book and ask mom to play it every night. Their hearing your voice while you're gone will make it easier for them to get used to having you home again.

During deployment, communicate with home as much as possible by phone, Skype and email, taking into account time zone differences and military security. Don't underestimate the power of snail mail. Little things—a dried leaf from a tree near the barracks, a film canister full of sand—let a child know Dad is thinking of them and provides tangible signs that he's in a real place somewhere.