

Helping DADS

Get More Involved

with raising their kids

RECIPE FOR DADS→10 things men can do...

1. Be more active.

Instead of letting your partner pluck your crying or smelly baby from your arms, try saying something like, “That’s okay, I can take care of this,” or “I think I can handle things,” or “You know, I really want the practice.” There’s also nothing wrong with asking her for advice: ask her for suggestions instead of allowing her to do it for you.

2. Get more practice.

Don’t assume that your partner magically knows more than you do. Whatever she knows about raising kids, she learned by doing—just like anything else. And the way you’re going to get better is by doing things too.

Don’t be afraid to get help if you’re uncertain or feel ill prepared to be a father. You’re not alone. Even among fathers who have taken childbirth classes, many feel totally unprepared for what comes after. Programs are available to help fathers learn the basics of caregiving. And they work.

3. Take pride in the special way you are with your kids.

Men and women have different ways of interacting with their children. Men tend to stress physical and high-energy activities; women, the social and emotional. But don’t let anyone tell you that safely wrestling, bouncing on the bed, or other “guy things” are somehow not as important as the “girl things” your partner may do (or want you to do).

Not only do children enjoy the rough-and-tumble of father play, but it also teaches valuable lessons about regulating emotions such as excitement and arousal. Children with physically active dads are more popular and more successful in their relationships with other children.

And the effects are not restricted to boys. In fact, there’s some evidence that girls who are exposed to higher levels of physical play become more assertive in their peer interactions.

4. Be emotionally available to your children.

“Men must allow themselves to be aware of their feelings so they can empathize with their children. Then they must take whatever steps necessary to make themselves available to their kids. They must structure their lives so they can give more time and attention to their children,” says John Gottman, author of *The Heart of Parenting*.

Hawai‘i Coalition for Dads

Promoting involved, nurturing, responsible fatherhood

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5. Be a partner, not a helper.

The traditional father-as-helper model is outdated, outmoded, and won't work nowadays. If men are going to be fully involved, they are going to have to share responsibility for childcare and the household in an active fashion. Fathers and mothers should see each other as PARENTING PARTNERS, and they need to ask each other for help.

6. Be available more than on weekends.

Leaving everything to the wife means that the father will miss out on the small pieces that give meaning to a child's life.

Make a special effort to share with your partner such responsibilities as meal planning, cooking, food and clothes shopping, taking the children to the doctor, library, or bookstore, getting to know their friends' parents, and planning play dates.

Not doing these things may make your partner think that you don't think they're important, or that you're not interested in being an active parent. By doing them, you make it more likely that she will feel comfortable and confident in sharing the nurturing role with you.

7. Show respect for your partner.

Being an involved father means recognizing all of the ways in which your partner keeps the family running and respecting the decisions she makes when you're unavailable. Try to develop a system with your partner to plan parent-child and family activities together.

As the children mature, help them take part in the planning process as well. This is a good way to demonstrate to your children, both boys and girls (future fathers and mothers), that fathers can be active and equal participants in planning and implementing family activities.

8. Be aware of the need to communicate.

Talk to your spouse about your desire to be a good father. You may need to give her time to learn that you are serious about wanting to participate more, and that you are competent and sincerely motivated to get more involved in parenting.

If your partner seems reluctant to share the role of child nurturer with you, don't take it too personally. Many women have been raised to believe that if they aren't the primary caregivers—even if, in addition, they work outside the home—they've somehow failed as mothers.

9. Family leave.

Find out whether you're eligible for a UNPAID family leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act—if you work full time and your company has fifty or more employees, you probably are. You may be eligible for leave under a state-mandated plan or for a personal leave of absence.

Unless you insist on exercising these rights, no one is going to do it for you. Every man we know who has taken family leave says he'd do it again.

10. Stay involved after separation and divorce.

Even after divorce, there are lots of ways in which dads can continue to play an active role. The most critical is to stay in touch, by phone, by mail, and in person. And make the time you spend with your kids meaningful. Avoid the "Disneyland dad" syndrome of turning every visit with your kids into an extravagant party.

Avoid, too, trying to settle old marital disputes by using your children as pawns. Parents need to cooperate and support each other for the sake of the children.

TOOLKIT FOR MOMS→7 things women can do...

1. Look at things from your partner's perspective.

“Women usually measure what their husbands do against what they do,” says researcher Jay Belsky. Using this scale, most men fail.

But men tend to “measure their domestic contributions against what their fathers did,” adds Belsky, “and sometimes even against what their male friends and coworkers are doing.” By this standard, many husbands feel pretty satisfied with themselves and the contributions they make around the house.

2. Be flexible with your childcare and household standards.

Let's face it, men and women often have very different childcare and household standards. “When my husband says the kitchen is clean, he means that the dishes are in the dishwasher,” says one mother. “The counter might still be filthy and the floor might be covered with crumbs.”

Adjusting your standards to his doesn't mean that the kids will be wearing the same clothes every day. Also, there are many different ways to change diapers, play, teach, and entertain the children. Yours isn't always right. And when wives are flexible with their childcare and household standards, husbands are more involved with the kids and in the household. No child ever suffered long-term trauma by having her diaper put on a bit looser than mother would like.

It's hard to shift standards, because for many women, attention to domestic details is part of their upbringing and part of how they define themselves.

3. Treat men as partners, not as helpers.

Mothers and fathers should see each other as parenting partners, and they need to ask each other for help.

Just as men need to see their family roles as a “PARTNER,” not an “assistants” to mothers, women need to change their ideas about what's reasonable to expect from their partners.

Asking a father for help only reinforces the view that men have little direct responsibility for the care and management of children. Instead, ask him to do his share.

Every woman who asks her husband to help with the dishes or change a diaper immediately puts herself at a disadvantage. Asking for help makes it seem as if whatever he's helping with is really the woman's job, and that she should be grateful.

4. Praise your partner.

As a group, men generally dislike doing things that make them feel incompetent. At the same time, most men love compliments. Sweet talk soothes: nagging only irritates. Tell him what a great job he's doing, and ask him to do the same thing again—even if it's not exactly the way that you would have done it.

5. Don't be a gatekeeper.

Many women tend to take charge of the household and childcare domains because this is an arena that they can still control. But far too many women are so intent on keeping control of the household that they don't leave enough space for their partners to participate.

For other women, control is not the issue: they assume that men are either uninterested or incompetent. And men get the message: many find it easier just to back off.

The moral? Even if you know how to stop the baby from crying, let your partner try to figure it out for himself before jumping in. Men need the confidence that only comes with practice.

Especially after divorce, mothers need to open the gates and encourage their children's relationships with their fathers. It is important to remember that they may be ex-husbands, but they'll never be ex-fathers.

6. Recognize that you can't do it all.

The days of the "second shift," when women tried to do it all—work all day, and do all the work at home too—must end.

Let your spouse or partner know that you have limits. Increasing his awareness that you simply can't do everything will go a long way to bring men into action on the home front. A well-timed, good-natured "your arm's not broken, do it yourself" may occasionally be a helpful reminder that men and women are partners in parenting.

7. Redefine work.

When dividing up responsibilities, many couples have trouble defining what exactly the term "work" means. Too many couples make a mistake when they don't give parenting the same weight as other domestic chores.

So when your partner is wrestling with the baby while you're making dinner, things might not seem equal. True, he may be having more fun, but play is still a very important contribution to the household.

Still, just to make sure that everyone gets to have fun, switch responsibilities regularly—he can make dinner while you do some wrestling. This kind of trading can expand your understanding of what both of you contribute.

Of course, some couples with strong preferences for one sort of job over another may divide household tasks unequally but still end up satisfied. The point is that as a team, you and your partner can devise your own ways of assigning responsibilities. Then you can change them as preferences or schedules change and as the needs of your growing children change over time.

*Adapted from **Throwaway Dads** by Ross D. Parke & Armin A. Brott, 1999.*

**DAD—be involved with your kids, and your parenting partner,
...today, and everyday!**

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