

Father Times

Fathers, Kids, and Making Connections

Issue 2

A newsletter for fathers and father figures of young children

Taking Time for Connections

Do you remember a time when your dad put his arm around you and told you “good job”? Can you think of a time when he cheered you on while you competed with your team? These are moments of connection and among the most helpful experiences that build positive relationships between fathers and their children.

A feeling of connectedness is considered to be one of the most important parts of a relationship with parents and children. Kids who feel connected to parents are less likely to get into trouble and more likely to have successful relationships with others. One of the technical terms for this feeling and the behavior that goes with it is “attachment” — the way a young child feels and acts in the relationship with a parent. Healthy attachment is critical for helping young children learn trust, security and initiative. Making sure that your children feel connected to you will help them as they grow, and it will also help you to enjoy the most memorable moments of fathering.

Once Upon A Time . . .

DaddyMommyDaddyMommy

Oliver loved to take his family out for dinner on the rare occasion that the budget allowed. These mini-celebrations were the closest thing to a date that he and his wife, Tracy, were able to have. With both of them working part time and attending school, raising two young children left them with little time, money and energy. Still, they had their short evening dates over lemonade or decaf tea after the kids went to bed each night. They knew how important it was to keep connected in their own relationship if they expect to stay healthy as a family.

Despite work and school schedules, Oliver and Tracy wanted to have more influence in their children’s development than outside sources. They limited television to an hour a day for the whole family, which meant they made selections carefully and learned to share. They also taught their children to live their lives first and incorporate fun or meaningful television in around the edges, not to program their lives around TV.

The other important step Oliver and Tracy took was to schedule around one another, so that most of the time at least one parent was caring for the kids. Of course, this was also somewhat of an economic necessity. It took sacrifices of sleep to make the schedule work, but both parents were mindful of the other’s needs.

On this particular night, Oliver and Tracy had saved enough money to take their children, 18-month-old Charlie and 3-year-old Alyssa,

to a family-oriented restaurant. As the family waited for their food, they played “I spy with my little eye” games with Alyssa. When Charlie started to fidget, Oliver took him for a short walk around the restaurant, pointing out various interesting sites as he went.

It wasn’t long before the food was delivered to the table, and Oliver started to head Charlie in the right direction. Charlie, being about table-top height, ran full speed ahead toward the dining area. He was soon turned around in the tangle of strangers and chair legs. Oliver watched his young son from his much taller vantage point. Charlie looked from one unfamiliar face to the next and then threw up his tiny hands and started to yell, “DaddyMommyDaddyMommyDaddy” as loudly and firmly as he could.

Oliver immediately walked over to where Charlie stood waiting to be saved from all of the confusion. He leaned down and quietly said, “Charlie, Daddy’s here.” Charlie turned to see Daddy’s familiar face and then threw himself into his father’s arms. It was obvious that this was not the first time “daddy” had come to Charlie’s rescue and it wouldn’t be the last. Charlie feels secure enough in his relationship with both of his loving parents to run courageously out in front and then, should trouble find him, call out for “MommyDaddyMommyDaddyMommy” knowing without a doubt that one or both will come to his aid.



NDSU
Extension Service
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What Children Need

Fathers and Attachment

- Spend as much solo time with your children as possible, starting from the time they are born. There is no substitute for being the sole person in charge of a child's care. Being alone with your child not only helps you develop a special bond, but it also encourages your own spontaneity and problem-solving skills.
- See yourself as "on duty" for parenting whenever you are home, unless you and your spouse have negotiated down time. Don't assume you can tune out the children because your wife is around.
- Avoid "handing over" a child to his or her mother when you get frustrated — unless there are also times when you take over for her. You don't hand over the wheel of the car when traffic is frustrating.
- Resist the attempts of your wife or other women to rescue you when you are in charge of the children.
- Children who are accustomed to their mother's involvement during specific situations, like bedtime, will sometimes resist the father's involvement. Resist your child's attempts to decide that Mom will be permanently in charge of important activities like this. Begin early to connect with your child in meaningful activities. Don't let your child vote you out of parenting. Children are not store customers who can decide which clerk to ask for help.
- Support your wife or former spouse with the children. This means backing up her discipline, giving her a respite and offering her moral support.
- Take more leadership in family traditions such as meals. Organize a ritual or tradition that is solely your responsibility.

Father Times is a set of nine newsletters developed with support from the NDSU Extension Service and the North Dakota Head Start State Collaboration Office.

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Fathering Facts

On Fathers and Attachment

Healthy attachments help young children develop trust, self-control and problem-solving skills. Here are some key strategies you can use as a father to help develop strong connections with your kids:

- Young children normally form a strong attachment with only one or two primary caregivers during the first two years of life, rather than with many persons.
- During the first six months of life, children respond best to immediate and consistent attention and comfort and cannot be "spoiled" by it. This builds a sense that they can trust the world around them — which is critical for later development.
- According to research, young children who don't develop secure and positive connections with parents, both fathers and mothers, during the early years of life often have more difficulties in school, work, marriage and social behavior related to crime.
- For fathers, perhaps the most important part of connecting with their children is participating in activities together. A research study involving 25 fathers found fathers felt most connected to their children while they were spending meaningful time with them in a variety of activities. These included times for recreation, play and learning, working together, and attending a child's important events.
- Children are sensitive at times of stress or illness. Research suggests that stronger connections between fathers and children form when fathers act in a caring manner when a child is ill, concerned or simply tired.
- A national study of adolescents in the United States recently showed that connectedness to fathers is one of the most important influences protecting kids from poor school performance, early sexual activity and use of illegal drugs or substances.

- Make yourself available. Do your best to manage your schedule and life so that you are available to your children when they need you.

- Increase your knowledge and experience interacting with young children. Find specific opportunities to volunteer in child care or school settings, go to interactive classes or activities with your child and take advantage of books, videos and others' ideas.
- Be attentive to your child's cues. "Tune in" to your child's signals and recognize when he or she needs to be held, needs to talk, needs a new toy, needs a new diaper or just needs rest.
- Provide a quick, consistent response to your child's needs. Children learn trust when someone responds promptly and consistently to their needs, especially in the first year of life.
- Express warm, positive and caring responses as you interact with children. Love, affection and touch should be given abundantly to children as you interact with them.
- Follow your child's lead and cooperate with him or her in how he or she tries to play or interact, rather than forcing him or her to follow your patterns for interaction.
- Avoid over-stimulating your child as you interact. Young children often can't say, "Hey, stop it, I'm tired out!" But they will look down, avoid you, squirm to get away or turn away if they feel too much stimulation. Watch for these signals.



**Healthy attachments
help young children
develop trust, self-control
and problem-solving skills**

Activities for Fathers and Children – Getting Connected!

This section provides a variety of activities that you can do to feel more connected with your children. Enjoy your child and get connected!

- ❑ Muffin tin puzzles are easy to make and fun for even young toddlers. Collect 6 or 12 objects from the toy shelf and put one in each compartment of a muffin tin. Show the child how to dump

them out and put them in again. Six bright tennis balls in a jumbo muffin pan are very appealing to a toddler!

- ❑ When you find an odd sock or mitten in the dryer and the mate is gone for good, fill it with hard beans and sew the opening shut. Then, you have a beanbag. Beanbags are easy for small hands to handle. Pull out a clothesbasket or plastic pail to aim and throw the beanbags into.

- ❑ Sing the “wheels on the bus” song while you gently pedal your child’s legs or arms “round and round.”
- ❑ Play with a flashlight. Make shadow pictures. Let your child try to catch the spot when you shine the beam on the floor in one spot and then move it to another. This works best if it’s not too dark in the room.
- ❑ If you are at work by the time your child gets up in the morning, leave a small glass of juice and a “good morning” note that his or her mother can read to him or her.

- ❑ Older toddlers (and preschoolers) are learning about their homes, people in their families and the neighborhood. Take walks in your own yard or neighborhood often. If there are farms, parks, stores or animals that are regularly seen on your walks, check out books about these topics to read to your child. Ask questions about what you will see on future trips outdoors.
- ❑ Make a cardboard fort or tunnel. Use a large appliance box and cut one seam. Overlap two sides to make a triangle shaped “tent.” Tape with strapping tape. Put the double thick side down for extra crawling comfort.
- ❑ Walk to your child’s school (if possible) and tour it informally, more than once. You can take photos of the child on the playground to have him or her send to grandparents or friends that live far away. Talk about school in a positive way. It will make a difference. (Note: Do not talk about taking the child to the doctor for his or her “school shots.” What an association for the child to make even before he or she gets there!)
- ❑ Build a sand castle in the sandbox or a snow fort in the yard or at the park.
- ❑ Take a walk with your child. Every time you come to a corner, flip a coin to see if you go right (heads) or left (tails).

Children and Separation Anxiety

Forming attachments begins at birth. Most babies are wired with the ability to attract attention from people who can help them survive and thrive. Newborn infants do this in several ways. They:

- cry.
- make eye contact.
- hold on to your finger.
- turn toward the sound of your voice.
- follow your voice with their eyes as you move around the room.

As babies become mobile, able to crawl and walk, they follow their favorite people from room to room. When babies are around 8-10 months old, they know the difference between people. This is the beginning of stranger anxiety. Let the child warm up to new people and situations. It is far better to let the baby get comfortable with the new person rather than forcing it. Even grandparents who have regular contact may see a change in the child’s willingness to “come to Grams or Gramps” at this point.

Around 10 to 12 months of age, children begin to realize that they are separate from their mother, father or other primary caregiver. This induces great sadness when the “principal person” (Mom, for this example) has to go away for any length of time. If you find yourself in charge of this situation, use these helpful hints to comfort the child.

- Be sure that Mom says goodbye to the child and lets him or her know that you will be there to care for him or her. She should also make it clear to the child that she will come back later. She should then exit immediately.
- Empathize with the sad child. “You like to have Mommy home, I know. She is going to the store and will be back later with groceries.” Describing his or her feelings will help the child realize you know what he or she wants. This actually makes the child less upset in the long run.
- Suggest something that the two of you might do, or start to do it. “Here are some trains and a baby with a bottle. What would you like to play?” “See, I can feed this baby.”

Showing the child you understand his or her distress, reassuring him or her and offering yourself as an alternative are all nurturing ways to help the child see that you are a confident caregiver too.



My Father's Voice

by Deena M. Beck Ehlert

With supper finished it was mom's time for a break from her children. It was our time to be with Dad. Cindy, my eight-year old sister, got the book while Tom, my six-year old brother, and I (four years old) climbed on our gray couch. Book in hand, Cindy joined us on the couch and we all waited for mom to start the old reel-to-reel tape player. Dad was piloting airplanes in Vietnam for the Air Force. His one-year isolated tour would be over soon and he would be coming home.

Throughout the year of his physical absence, our family received at least one tape a week from dad. Mom played a section to us every day. Dad began each day's session by asking each of us how our day had gone and what we had done. Speaking to the tape machine as if he could hear every word, each of us told him about our adventures. Unbeknownst to us, mom wrote down our responses so dad was kept up-to-date. In the subsequent tape, he praised our good deeds and gently corrected our errors. After everyone told dad their tales, he read to us from the book mom had sent. Cindy turned the pages while Tom and I followed along to his voice. Sometimes dad recorded himself teaching English to Vietnamese children in his neighborhood. It was always fun to hear the children talk in the strange language. Today, I don't remember the stories dad read, but I do remember the feelings I felt. I knew my father loved me because he talked to us nearly everyday, albeit by tape.

Near the end of Dad's year away, mom told us we were going to meet Dad in California. We would be staying with Aunt Jenna Vee and Uncle Jack until Dad arrived. The house was big, and it had a swimming pool! Mom loaded us all up and we made the few days journey from Texas to California. I was anxious to hear Dad's voice again but had no recollection of what he looked like.

The day before Dad was scheduled to arrive, all of us were lounging around the swimming pool. Cindy was diving off the diving board, and Tom and I were holding onto the edge of the pool because our feet could not touch bottom. Tom and I were working our way back to the steps to get out of the pool when the gate in the fence opened. A tall man dressed in a uniform walked through the gate. My sister jumped off the diving board, ran squealing at the top of her lungs towards the man, and threw herself into his arms. Mom walked in behind the man, yelling at Cindy to get off him because she was getting him all wet. While hugging my sister and laughing at Mom, the man embraced Mom, then kissed her.

Puzzled by all the commotion, Tom and I looked at each other and silently wondered who our sister and mother were hugging. Soon, the tall, uniformed, and wet man disentangled himself and walked toward my brother and I who were still hanging on the side of the pool. He arrived at the pool's edge and smiled down upon us. He looked so tall. With the innocence of a four-year old, I looked up at the man and asked, "Are you my father?" He burst into tears, knelt down, pulled us both out of the pool and into his arms and said, "Yes, I am your father." The moment I heard his voice I recognized it as my dad's because it was the same voice I heard so frequently reading me stories on tape. This was the voice that asked us questions and listened so intently to our answers. He seemed not to care that we were getting his uniform even wetter. Tom and I both threw our arms around his neck as my father's embrace tightened around us.

This is the first time I recall seeing my father. The man with the loving voice.

(Used by permission of The National Long Distance Relationship Building Institute, 2001. Information found at www.fambooks.com/)

Fathering Resources

Father Courage: What Happens When Men Put Family First? by Suzanne Braun Levine, 2000. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family by James Levine and Todd L. Pittinsky, 1997. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Story Time

The Run Away Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown & Clement Hurd

Night Shift Daddy by Eileen Spinelli & Melissa Iwai (Scholastic, 2000)

The Father Who Had 10 Children by Skip Skwarek (Dial Books for Young Readers, 1999)

Tom Goes to Kindergarten by Margaret Wild & David Legge

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