

# Father Times

## Fathers, Kids, and Communication

Issue 3

A newsletter for fathers and father figures of young children

### Taking Time for Communication

To a child, listening is love. Children are full of questions, comments, insights and exclamations that they want to communicate — with you! How often have you heard a child say, “Hey, mom!” or “Dad, guess what?!” Children, especially young children, learning to talk and explore the world, have a lot to say. They need to communicate. How do you communicate with them?

Communication helps us share our feelings. It gives us a chance to exchange ideas. It makes us feel close to others or it can hurt our feelings and make us feel alone if it is unpleasant. How fathers communicate with young children has a big influence on the quality of their relationships in later life. Take time to think about communication, and about what kind of communication you want to have with your own child.

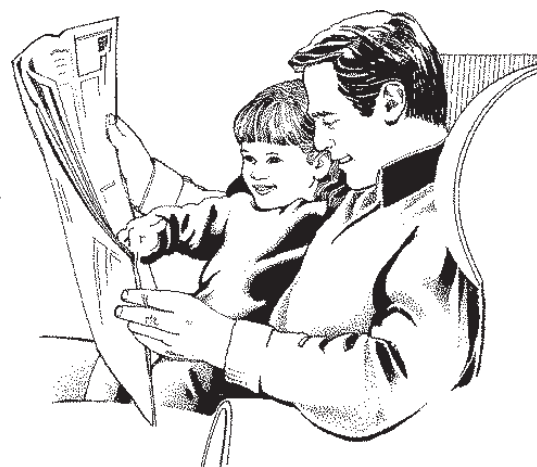
### Once Upon A Time . . .

#### Baby Conversations

Mark still remembers the first day he was left completely in charge of his baby. His wife had a conference to attend. He was, in fact, the other parent, so why shouldn't he be expected to take care of his child? Mostly “why not,” Mark thought, “is because I can't.” He thought to himself, “I won't know what to do when she cries. I can't do this.”

Like many modern-day fathers, Mark's job and commute took him away from his home and family at least 10 hours each day. Weekends had always been for kicking back, doing home projects, running errands, connecting with friends and sharing time with Paula. Now she was busy with Celeste, so he worked extra hours to provide for this little person with so many needs. After all, that's what fathers do, right?

Mark had been “solo” in caring for Celeste, his darling baby, only a few times in the 8 weeks since her birth. Not only had he had little experience with his child, but he also had not babysat or even played with little kids before this time. The prospect of caring for a wordless infant sent Mark into a mini-panic. Just days before Paula was supposed to leave, Mark decided to get as much information as he could about his upcoming task. He watched Paula as she cared for Celeste. He secretly read several chapters in the baby care book Paula had been after him to read, and then, he took the plunge.



Mark picked up Celeste when she cried, and then he worked to figure out what she might need. He noticed what seemed to help the most was looking at his tiny bundle and talking directly to her. “You seem to be upset about something, baby girl. What could it be?” “Are you lonely?” “I can visit with you.” After a few minutes he would try a new idea. “Could you be hungry already?” or “You are really growing.” “Let's try a bottle.” “We have to warm it up first.”

The conversation went on until Mark figured out, with Celeste, what she needed. There were times he noted that she just simply needed to fuss in order to fall asleep. At other times, her cry was an indication of pain, hunger or lonely misery. He quickly learned to interpret each cry. Mark also learned that even at such a young age, with no words, his baby was successfully communicating with him. And, to his delight, he was communicating with her.

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## Fathers and Communication

Children need consistent and caring communication from their fathers. This includes listening, sharing stories, hugs and affection, talking and laughing, and discussing problems or concerns. Communication is especially important to help young children develop their own language skills. Here are some ideas about what children really need from dad when it comes to communication.

- **Babies** – Babies need to have their cries and coos answered in order to build trust. Young babies can see about 8-12 inches and love to look at human faces. A father should make a habit of picking up his infant as much as possible when he is home so that the baby learns to trust his face.
- **Babies** – Babies are great communicators. Besides crying, their expressions and bodies help you read their cues. Speaking softly to the baby will help him or her understand that you are trying to be helpful. Remembering to speak calmly can soothe both the baby and the parent! Talk to your baby constantly! He or she will know you are near and also learn new words.



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- **Toddlers** – Toddlers are mobile babies. They also love to be talked to, read to and sung to. If you aren't comfortable with a large audience yet, sing to the child when you are in the car alone with him or her, changing a diaper or giving the bath. You do not need to remember the words. Just make up the tune and lyrics as you go. Something as simple as "this is the way we wash your hair," "shine your toes" or "scrub your knees" can teach body parts, new words and creativity, all while getting the child clean. Talk about productive bath time!
- **Preschoolers** – Preschoolers are learning new words at an amazing rate. Be sure they are learning the words you want them to repeat by cutting out any language you don't want repeated. Many two-parent families find it difficult to talk during those first minutes when work is done and children have been waiting all day to connect with their loving parents. One idea is to agree with your partner to spend time with the kids first.

## Fathering Facts

### On Fathers and Communication

We all enjoy feeling loved. Children learn to share this with others as love is communicated to them. Making eye contact, laughing together, telling a story, asking a question, learning to listen — these are all part of communication with children. What do the facts say about fathers and communication with kids? Here are some key findings:

- Communication between fathers and mothers, whether married or not, has a big influence on children's well-being. If there is conflict and anger communicated often between a father and mother, children tend to perform less well in school, have more social problems, and feel less positively about themselves. Also, fathers feel much less motivated to stay involved and communicate with their children when there is conflict with the mother.
- Research shows that fathers tend to communicate most with young children in times of shared activities. During such times, fathers will play, talk, ask questions, and communicate more than at other times.

A half hour of tearing around the park, lap time with a short book or playing with blocks on the floor can do wonders for getting time for an uninterrupted conversation later.

- **Kindergartners** – Kindergartners are learning about following directions and communicating with people that you don't even know. Use eye contact, sit down and take time to go through the backpack each day to hear about what your child has experienced in school, and before and after! Ask open-ended questions, not the yes and no kind. Keep the television off — as always, during meals.
- **Kindergartners** – Take special time every day to talk about the worst and best parts of your child's day. This works especially well at bedtime since a kindergartner will admit to nearly anything in the dark. Start with the worst part, so she or he gets to unburden his or her worries. End the time with the best thing that happened, in order to celebrate his or her successes, and send him or her off to dreamland with happy thoughts.

- One aspect of communication that fathers and children enjoy in their relationship more than with mothers is humor. Fathers tend to inject fun and gently tease their young children. This helps children learn social interaction.
- Research also shows that the most effective communication style for fathers to use with their children, when handling discipline, is to use a combination of love, reason and firm guidelines. Children who receive this type of communication tend to do much better than those whose fathers communicate with anger and threats or act too permissive and provide little direction.
- Fathers tend to share and tell stories with their children more often than mothers. Telling personal stories is an important way that many fathers communicate with young children. A regular "story sharing" time can be a meaningful way to communicate and connect with young children.

## Activities for Fathers and Children – *Let’s Communicate!*

This section provides a variety of activities that fathers can do to communicate and enhance language with their children. Have fun and concentrate on communicating!

- ❑ Imitate your baby’s happy sounds. If she or he coos, coo back to him or her. Take turns, like a real conversation. Babies will tell you when they are done by looking away or falling asleep. Let her or him know where you are and where you are going. Talking during care routines helps the baby anticipate what is happening and teaches him or her words that he or she will use in a year or two.
- ❑ Do “This Little Piggy Went to Market” at changing time or other times.  
This little piggy went to market  
(gently wiggle the big toe).  
This little piggy stayed home  
(gently wiggle the next toe).  
This little piggy ate roast beef  
(gently wiggle the next toe).  
This little piggy had none  
(gently wiggle the next toe).  
This little piggy went wee, wee, wee,  
all the way home (tickle under the chin).

- ❑ Babies are frightened of loud, sharp noises. Around three months, the baby will enjoy listening to or watching a rattle or shaker type baby toy. He or she will not be able to use it alone with much success yet. Young babies have a hard time letting go of a toy once it is placed in their hands. Shake a rattle and watch your child’s reaction!
- ❑ Read a baby picture book to your child at least once a day as a part of your “father time” routine.
- ❑ Older babies like to follow simple instructions and play games. For example, pretend you’re the “tiger” and ask, “Can you find your tiger?” Then, “Give the tiger a big hug.” End with, “Grrrrr, the tiger likes his hug.”
- ❑ Around 15-18 months, many young children begin to cling to their parents. This has been called “velcro time” by some language specialists. These specialists feel that children this age hang on tight to their parents to watch their mouths move and pick up on sounds. In other words, to study how to talk.

Pick up your baby when she or he wants to be held. You are the teacher, after all, and your mouth is the chalkboard. Children need to see your face to figure out how to imitate words. Hold your child up to a mirror. Make faces, talk and sing to your child while looking in the mirror.

- ❑ Find a jack-in-the-box or other hand-crank music box. Dig in the cupboards for a pots-and-pans band. Safety first, of course! Read books together. You will have the favorites memorized in no time. Let your child see you reading for enjoyment too.
- ❑ Take a tape recorder with you while you run errands today. Tape interesting sounds to play back later. For example, record the car engine starting, cash register, radio, gas pump, birds, emergency vehicles and the like. Can you identify all of the sounds together? Also, take the tape recorder on a “listening walk” with your child. Tape record your footsteps on the cement or gravel, the squeak of stroller wheels or the sound of a bird singing.
- ❑ Older preschoolers and kindergartners will delight in getting notes from you. Write out something in pictures with the words underneath. A picture of an eyeball, a heart and a U will tell the child “I love you.” Leave a note by the child’s place on the breakfast table or in his or her backpack.
- ❑ Dads who are not living with their children need to take special care to connect with both verbal and written communication. Send pictures and letters with self-addressed stamped envelopes so your children can send you their drawings and letters too. Set up a time to talk on the phone often and never break that date! Write e-mails. Send videos of yourself. Make tapes of your voice reading books and singing songs and telling stories. Send faxes. Do what you can with what you have to keep in positive contact with your child. Tips for communication from a distance can be found on the “Dads at a Distance” web site at [www.daads.com](http://www.daads.com).

### What Does Dad Think?

Young children love to hear and share stories about their growth or experiences you’ve had with them. Record the answer to these questions in a “Dad’s Eye View” baby book. You can use a spiral notebook or an “official baby book.” Remember to date your writing and answer these questions as your baby grows and changes. Add your own questions, answers and observations. Paste in pictures and write down memorable stories. Your children will enjoy reading this together, and it provides a great opportunity to communicate. Wouldn’t you like to know that your father had watched your growth so closely when you were young?

- At what time of day does your baby or child feel most like playing?
- What helps your baby or child relax?
- What is your baby or child most interested in looking at?  
Listening to?
- In what position does your baby like to be held?
- What is your baby or child’s favorite toy or play activity?
- What are some funny or exciting things your child has said?
- What foods does your baby or child like to eat? Dislike?
- How does your baby or child react to pets or other animals?
- What are some memorable experiences with your baby or child?

# Do You Listen to Your Children? – A Checklist For Parents

We are constantly telling our children to “Listen!” But how well do we each listen to our children? For each statement, rate yourself “most of the time,” “sometimes,” or “seldom.”

Listening Questions	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Seldom
1. Do I give my children the impression that I’m interested and willing to hear what they have to say?			
2. Do I put my work aside when listening to my children?			
3. Do I look at my children when they talk to me?			
4. Does my body language show that I’m paying attention?			
5. Do my responses show that I’ve been listening carefully?			
6. Do I give all my children equal attention when they’re talking to me?			
7. Do I avoid interrupting my children?			
8. Do I listen for feelings without jumping in to offer advice?			
9. Do I listen even when I don’t like what I’m hearing?			
10. Do I repeat or rephrase what my child has said to see if I’ve interpreted correctly?			

## Key

Ten “Most of the Time” answers indicate you listen well. “Sometimes” and “Seldom” answers may indicate some areas for improvement. Post the list where you are most likely to see it so you can work on “sometimes” and especially “seldom” spots in your communication.

(Used with permission. University of Minnesota Extension Service, *Positive Parenting*, 1995.)

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## Fathering Resources

*Fathers and Babies* by Jean Marzollo and Irene Trivas, 1992. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.

*Fathers and Toddlers* by Jean Marzollo and Irene Trivas, 1994. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.

*The Expectant Father* (2nd ed.) by Armin A. Brott, 2001. New York, NY: Abbeville Press, Inc.

*What A Difference A Daddy Makes* by Dr. Kevin Leman, 2000. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

## Story Time

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Eric Carle

*Good Night Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd

*A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein

*Pots & Pans* by Patricia Hubbell

*Daddies at Work* by Eve Merriam and Eugenie Fernandes

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