

Fathers Matter

GETTING INVOLVED

**YOUR
KIDS
NEED
YOU**

**WORKING IT
OUT WITH
YOUR PARTNER**

**FATHER-CHILD
BONDING**

PLUS

Don't mess with depression

Fathering after separation

Getting help to fix things



MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER



Parenting is one of the most important roles most of us will undertake. The role of parents, particularly fathers, has changed remarkably over the last generations. Mothers and fathers across Australia have contributed to a period of great social change; one that has seen the breakdown of traditional gender-based notions of the mother and father role.

Victorian fathers are more actively involved in their children's lives than ever before, and are more likely to give their time exclusively to their children when they are looking after them. Recent research also confirms what many parents know instinctively: fathers make a real difference to their children's learning and development in everything they do.

Research shows that the positive outcomes of fathers taking an active role with their children are profound and include: better peer relationships; fewer behaviour problems; lower criminality and substance abuse; better education outcomes; increased capacity for empathy and higher self-esteem.

The Victorian Government's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* brings together a new vision and mission for Victoria's children and young people, and is committed to working in partnership with parents and communities to achieve optimal outcomes. *Fathers Matter*, and its accompanying articles and supports through Parentline, accords with the strategies outlined in the *Blueprint*. In commissioning this new publication, *Fathers Matter*, from the Parenting Research Centre, the Victorian Government is fulfilling its commitment to provide more support to all parents.

I commend the Parenting Research Centre on its work and hope that *Fathers Matter* provides dads with useful information and tips on a range of fathering issues, and will serve as a point for further discussion.

Maxine Morand

Maxine Morand MP

Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development

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Fathers often underestimate how important they really are to their children. You might think that a mother has the key role when it comes to a child's development, especially in the formative early years. But you would be wrong. Fathers are just as important as mothers.

FATHERHOOD

ONLY FATHERS FATHER

Why is the importance of fatherhood frequently underestimated? Is it because we believe mothers do the 'real' parenting, while dads have to make do with 'best supporting role'?

Fathers come fully equipped to deal with fatherhood. Research has shown that fathers are just as good as mothers at recognising and responding sensitively to the needs of their newborn babies, and just as able to care for older children.

On the whole, fathers are more similar than dissimilar to mothers in their capacity to parent and the way they parent, yet there are subtle differences and research is showing that these differences are important.

For example, fathers play with children differently than mothers. The father 'brand' of play expands children's experiences and is linked to important social skills needed later in life.

When you care for and play with your child, you are doing so in ways only a dad can. You're not just 'babysitting' or 'being mother' for a while; you're fathering.

FATHERING IS IRREPLACEABLE

Then there is the issue of father involvement. Despite the fact that fathers in our society spend less time with their children (and far less time with babies) than mothers, they have a major impact on how their children turn out. High levels of father involvement have been linked to better social and academic skills in their children. Disengaged fathering has been linked to problems in children and young people as diverse as obesity, delinquency and depression.

PATHS TO FATHERHOOD

Unlike mothers, modern fathers do not have universally accepted role models or fatherhood scripts they can follow. Our idea of fatherhood is in a state of flux, with rapidly changing views on what constitutes good fathering. You only have to think about how much fatherhood has changed over the last generation. Looking around today, you'll see many approaches to fatherhood – from the slightly detached traditional father role, through to fathers who have a much more 'hands-on' approach.

Finding the right path for you is not made any easier by mass media which routinely highlights derelict fathering, focuses on violence and abuse, or presents fathers as lovable dills at best. Don't be deterred. You will discover that, in addition to the more traditional roles of father as 'provider' and 'protector', there are other roles that you can fill competently – such as 'carer', 'teacher', 'role model' or 'guide'.

The good news is that it's up to you what kind of father you'll become. Sure, you'll be influenced by your cultural heritage and your own experience of being fathered. But by no means are you destined to follow any previous pattern. You may or may not want to emulate your own father – but the point is you have a choice.

Being a father is one of the most rewarding life experiences a man can have. In the end, the only limiting factor is the role you choose to adopt – and how involved you decide to be. This booklet describes the rewards and benefits of choosing to be an involved father, and what that means for men and their children. No matter what stage of the journey you're at, we hope this booklet will offer some useful tips and ideas to help you on your way.

GETTING INVOLVED

"Oh, hello. I see you're babysitting the kids today. How nice."

This well-meaning comment is not unusual for a dad to hear. It reveals a common assumption in our society that dads don't do the real parenting, but rather have a role supporting mothers, a bit like a babysitter.

Some fathers are completely comfortable with this role. Others want much more. The key to being an involved father is building your parenting skills and your confidence.

CONFIDENCE GROWS WITH EXPERIENCE

Being hands on

Every parent learns on the job, and getting hands-on experience is the best way of building your skills and your confidence. The key is to get in and give it a go.

As early as possible, try your hand at everything involved in caring for your baby – dressing, settling, playing, bathing

and nappy changing. Resist the urge to pass your baby over when things get demanding. It's tempting to do this, especially when you still lack confidence, but each time you give in to that reflex you lose the chance to learn how to do it by yourself.

When you can take care of feeding as well, start looking for opportunities to spend larger blocks of time caring for your child alone. When it's just you responsible for taking care of your baby, you learn by necessity. It's also good for your partner, who'll be getting a much-needed break.

Don't compare yourself to your partner

Perhaps, like many new dads, you're the main breadwinner and at work during the first months of your baby's life. This will mean your partner at home gets more time and opportunity to practice her parenting skills such as feeding, dressing, bathing and settling. In comparison, you may not feel as competent. Don't be discouraged – you just need to rack up more 'flying hours'.

Handling her feedback

When it comes to working out the challenges of parenting, two heads are better than one. Learning from your partner and listening to her feedback and advice can be worthwhile. Still, in weighing up the advice you receive from her (and others), be aware that there are many different ways of completing most parenting jobs. As long as the outcome is good, don't be afraid to put your own stamp on parenting tasks.

Negotiating your involvement with your partner

You may get mixed messages about how involved your partner wants you to be in the daily care of your baby. But be patient – just like you, your partner is still getting used to her new role and responsibilities, and may be feeling pressure to do everything just right. Also, it's natural that sometimes you'll both 'jostle for position' a bit as you figure things out and learn to work as a team. The key is to stay positive and show her that you can do the job. Proving you're up to the task will build her confidence in you as a parenting partner.



FATHER FACT ■

Fathering is good for you

Any father will tell you that fatherhood has many joys and rewards. In addition, it turns out that fathering may be good for your own development as a person. Researchers have found links between fatherhood and better self-understanding and awareness of others, as well as positive community involvement. You are good for your kids, but it seems your kids are good for you too.





FATHER FACT ■

Work affecting fathering

The effects of a negative and stressful workplace can spill over into home life, resulting in dads being more distant or negative with their children. Your work role can even be reflected in how you parent your children. Research has shown that men who have more control in the workplace tend to value independence and reasoning in their children; while men in more highly supervised workplaces value conformity and obedience. If your workplace is stressing you, maybe it's time to do something about it or even get another job.

KEEP YOUR 'L-PLATES' ■

Being a parent is a journey, not a destination. Once you accept that you never really stop learning to be a father, you will be able to go easier on yourself and relax into it more.

There is no shame in educating yourself on anything that you feel nervous or unsure about, and there are lots of ways of finding helpful answers to the things that have you wondering. You can:

- talk with other dads over the BBQ
 - think of what it is you want to know and go on a fact finding mission
 - attend a parenting education course.
- Fathers – even those skeptical about the idea – find they learn a great deal in these courses, not to mention getting a chance to express what's on their mind
- check out one of the many online forums for dads.

As your parenting toolkit grows and you rack-up more time on the job, your self-confidence as a parent will increase and you'll enjoy your new role more and more.



FATHER FACT ■

Work hours and fathering

Juggling work and family is a complex business for fathers, especially given that young children and high work demands often coincide in a man's life. Australian research has found that 25% of fathers of 4-5 year-old children worked 55 hours or more per week. On average these fathers spent 2.2 hours with their child each day compared to 2.9 hours for fathers working 35 to 44 hours per week. Fathers who work longer hours are less involved with their children, and less available to support their partner, but they contribute more to family income.

Working less, however, does not guarantee greater involvement. Results of this study suggested that, even though they might have less time with their children, some fathers who worked long hours were actually more involved in their children's activities and more supportive as a co-parent than fathers who worked less. A reminder that it's what you do with the time you have that really matters.



FUN WITH YOUR KIDS

Having fun with your kids is a great way to stay connected. And the simplest things are the best.

- **Take regular walks or trips together.** Visits to the zoo or a nearby park are fun, or make regular weekend trips to the pool.
- **Read together.** Books are a great way to connect, as is reading words that arise in everyday situations – like checking street signs while on a walk together.
- **Get busy together on a small project.** It could be anything – fixing a bicycle puncture, writing a letter for grandma, building a house of cards, even just making a sandwich together.
- **Play pretend games at home.** Whether it's making a car from a shoebox or being chased by a 'dinosaur dad', pretend play is great fun. Don't worry about rules and let your child lead the play.
- **Enjoy some music together.** Why not find out which of your favourite songs your kid likes too.

FATHER-CHILD BONDING

Bonding: new dad's web post

"I'm just coming back from being over in Iraq and my daughter who is six and a half months old doesn't stop crying whenever I hold her. The moment my wife is out of her sight she starts crying and the longer I'm holding her the worse she gets. I don't know what to do. I've tried holding her and letting her cry until she stops...I want for us to re-bond so bad that every time she cries I cry."

This story shows how hard it can be when a dad has difficulty bonding with his baby. The father is engaged, trying hard and knows what he wants.

What might help?

The good news is that, though it might seem hard at first, father-child bonding can be a simple and enjoyable process – it may just take time to get there. But how does bonding work?

HOW BONDING DEVELOPS

By about six months of age, most babies have formed trusting bonds with the key people in their lives.

The process of bonding with your baby, especially in the early years, is similar for mothers and fathers. Still, for many new dads, getting involved can be tricky at first. When your baby is very new, and all he or she does is sleep and feed, it might feel as though there is little for you to do. But don't worry, in time you'll develop your own special relationship.

Two things are essential:

- Having one-on-one time with your baby.
- Paying attention to what your baby is 'telling' you.

ONE-ON-ONE TIME

One-on-one time is about just you and your baby. It's about creating opportunities for moments when your baby has your exclusive attention and you are really tuned into them (you are not trying to talk on the mobile or watch the semi-final replay at the same time).

One-on-one time is 'Bonding time.' And the best thing is that no real planning or special occasions are required. These moments can happen when you are doing everyday things with your baby – like bathing, dressing and changing nappies. All of these moments, however brief, are the building blocks of bonding.



FATHER FACT ■

Breastfeeding: how you can help

When it comes to food, there is nothing better than breast milk for your baby: the science is clear on this. Among the many facts that you won't see on formula tin labels is that formula fed babies go to hospital with infections more often than babies who are breast fed, and that breastfeeding protects women against early breast cancer. And sagging breasts? The number of children a woman has will affect breast shape, but breastfeeding does not.

Ok, you might think, but it's up to her – what do I have to do with it? Well it turns out that your attitude and the support you offer can be crucial as she faces the doubts, discomforts, and worries that typically come with learning how to breastfeed. It's also tiring, so practical support – such as being there with a glass of water, another pillow or whatever she needs – makes a real difference.

And if she can't breastfeed – as some mothers can't for very good reasons – reassure her that she is not a failure, and get into the feeding yourself (starting with mastering formula mixing).



Watching baby learn: a dad's story

"If you can imagine him lying there. Suddenly he lifts his arm and touches me. At the same time he's watching his own hand and I can see how he closely follows its movement. In that moment, it becomes clear to me that a serious learning process is happening. It's fascinating. He's examining the world and it is extraordinary to be part of that process! My wife laughed at me and said: 'Listen. The other two also did that. You just weren't there'. At that point you're reminded about what you've missed."

BONDING : LIKE VIRTUAL TENNIS

Bonding starts with recognising that, as well as needing sleep and feeding, babies need time to have 'conversations'.

These brain-building episodes are a bit like a virtual tennis match between you and your baby. There is no tennis ball, but the two of you are rallying frowns, tongue-poking, grunting, mouth-opening and, at around six weeks, smiles back and forth.

You are the expert here, since you have learnt to coordinate the scores of muscles needed for facial expression. But your baby is a very fast learner. Like any good coach, you will also begin to recognise the signs when your talented learner has had enough of the conversation for now – perhaps turning their head or looking away from you.

NEVER TOO LATE !

Don't worry. It's never too late to start bonding with your child. The dad who was having trouble re-bonding with his daughter can take heart – he just needs to persevere. With some one-on-one time and moments of real connection, he will build a lasting bond with his daughter whilst contributing to her general learning and development.

Even if your child is a bit older and you're wondering if you've 'missed the boat' on getting involved, don't worry. It's never too late to start giving time and attention to your child. You'll be surprised how quickly the relationship grows stronger.



FATHER FACT ■

Your affection literally makes your baby grow

When you show your baby affection, you set off a train of events that literally grows your baby's brain. It's like photosynthesis and you are the sun! It works like this. When you cuddle or even smile at your baby, a natural feel-good chemical (neuropeptide), which plays a key role in our emotional life, is released in your baby's brain (prefrontal cortex). As well as making baby feel good, this chemical helps build connections between nerve cells, thus stimulating brain development. At the same time, another chemical (dopamine) is released in the brain stem that helps brain cells take up energy (in the form of glucose), so helping new tissue to grow.



FATHER FACT ■

Bloke hormones

Women are not the only ones who experience hormonal changes. Changes in hormones such as testosterone, prolactin and cortisol have been measured in men before, during and after the birth of their babies. Not only that, reduced levels of testosterone have been linked to greater nurturing and sensitivity to baby cues in men. Your hormone changes actually sync with hers, so don't be surprised if she is not the only one getting emotional!



EVERYDAY FATHERING

You may not realise it, but as a father you have a profound impact on your children's learning and development. And the most significant, enduring contribution you make is not through 'big ticket items' like gifts, expensive outings or holidays, but rather through the normal, everyday interactions you have with your children.

HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS

Not all interactions between fathers and children offer the same learning benefits. Some interactions are higher 'quality' in that they promote children's learning better than others.

High quality interactions happen when fathers capitalise on opportunities to do that little bit more than what's required simply to care for or manage their child. This could include:

- taking a moment to listen attentively and respond to what your children are saying
- making a special effort to explain something; or
- taking the time to offer choices and listen to their child's opinions.

IT'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE

The good news is that you don't need special training to provide quality interactions. Quality interactions happen in all families. Chances are, you are already doing lots of good things. And while not every encounter with your children will be a high quality one, just increasing their frequency will have an impact on how your children learn and develop.

Being aware of what quality interactions look like is the first step to creating more of these everyday moments. Once you know what to look for, you'll find more opportunities to inject quality into your interactions.



FATHER FACT ■

According to a recent Australian survey, 87% of fathers find parenting to be very or extremely rewarding and fulfilling; about the same number (85%) also reported that parenting is very or extremely demanding!



FATHER FACT ■

Father Time

The average Aussie dad spends:

- about 8 hours a day in the company of his children
- about 2 hours a day caring for his children
- about 40% of their childcare time playing or talking
- about half of their interaction time with their children doing that and nothing else

Here are some simple ways of adding learning value to your interactions.

Talk to your children. There's more to talking than just conveying information. Adult talk is like brain food for babies and young children (and they don't have to understand your words to get the benefit). It also brings you closer emotionally. Talk about what you are doing; talk about what they are doing; talk about how you're feeling or what you think of the latest Bond movie – they'll never get sick of you!

Tell your children about things. Point out the things that are worth noticing or remembering. When they show an interest in something, talk about it some more: *"Yes, it's a truck. It's a fire truck that firemen use to put out fires."* It's also good to continuously prepare your child for what's coming next: *"Let's clean you up now, then we need to change your nappy?"* Preparing them like this also helps them to learn how to cope with situations they don't like: *"I'm going to rinse your hair now, so get ready so you don't get water in your eyes."*

Listen to your children. It's great for their development! Moments when your children have your exclusive attention are gold. Interrupt your own activity – even for a short time – and pay full attention to your child. Look at them. Comment on what they are doing. Repeat what they say. Focus on their interest and add your thoughts.



FATHER FACT ■

38% of fathers read to their children every day, according to a recent online survey.

Try to be nice. Your children learn how to interact with others through their interactions with you. They will copy the 'tone' of your interactions with them. Being nice is about trying to keep the atmosphere as positive as possible. It can be a challenge at times, especially when you have to enforce rules or prohibit behaviours. Every parent has to say "no" and "don't" occasionally, but even these moments can be 'learning moments'. Be clear about the behaviour you want, and give them time to respond. Praise them when they cooperate, and model politeness. When your child is not permitted to do something, explain why and offer alternatives. Show them how you can be strong and persistent as well as gentle and respectful.

Create challenging learning opportunities. They are great for learning. If you watch carefully, you will work out how to keep a game just within reach of your child's ability – not too hard, not too easy. Like pointing to where a puzzle piece might go, rather than letting him flounder or doing it for him.

Offer choices. Choices can be a good alternative to commands and they help children learn about making decisions. Choices help build independence, encourage responsibility and give children the opportunity to voice disagreement.



FATHER FACT ■

Father's warmth and affection

Warmth and physical affection from fathers is associated with higher self-esteem and fewer social and emotional problems in their children.

ACTIVE, ROUGH & TUMBLE PLAY

Active, rough and tumble play is a father speciality. Fathers are more likely than mothers to engage in this play with their young children and this is often because children, particularly boys, demand such play. This kind of play is not suitable for very young children or infants so keep in mind your child's age and keep the play age appropriate.

MORE THAN FUN ■

Playing with dad benefits children because it broadens the range of activities they are exposed to or naturally drawn to.

Active, physical play with your child also builds trust and confidence between you, and prepares them to take their place in the world. Outside play gives kids the chance to explore their environment, create imaginary scenarios, become more active and have the freedom to express themselves boisterously.

Rough and tumble play is physical and playful, that's essential. High energy games without these ingredients do not qualify. And it often takes place outdoors, involving lots of touching and action.

PLAY FIGHTING VS. AGGRESSION

Play-fighting is different from serious aggression. Research in animal species tells us that rough play behaviours are different from behaviours during real aggression, ensuring neither player is injured. On the surface, play fighting may seem like preparation for real combat. However, research suggests that roughhousing is about learning to get along with others, and promotes the development of social skills needed later in life.

While rough and tumble play has few rules, it does require cooperation (and some attention to playing safe). For example, if one player is much stronger or bigger than the other players they have to let themselves be overpowered or caught so that another player can 'win'.

Because there are few rules, there's no limit to how creative you can be. Some dads wait for the child to tackle them as soon as they get home and then they wrestle. Other dads play favourite roughhousing games – perhaps pretend wrestling or monsters.

When the play is done, friendship is maintained or made stronger since the key emotion is enjoyment. Fighting, where the key emotion is anger, rarely builds friendships.

BENEFITS OF ROUGH & TUMBLE PLAY

Rough and tumble play risks some bumps and bruises, but there are also benefits. Serious learning takes place during this kind of play.

When a five-year-old is using all of his strength to hold dad down on the floor he is learning a lot about his physical limits and what he can and can't do with his body. He is also involved in social learning - like learning what is 'fair' (no gouging) and what it feels like to be physically in control (even briefly) of his much bigger father. In trying to 'win' the game he is learning how to manage himself when emotions are high – not just anger and excitement, but emotions connected to perseverance and striving to achieve.

A father can help both sons and daughters learn these important skills by encouraging them to keep trying when they collapse in defeat, or by remaining calm when the child punches to hurt.

FINE TUNING YOUR ROUGH & TUMBLE PLAY SKILLS

Timing the play

Children playing with their father can become so excited that they need some quiet time before they can go to bed, eat their meal or get dressed. A common complaint from mothers is that "He gets them hyped up and then I am left to calm them down". It helps to be conscious about timing and the need for calming down time following rough and tumble play.

Playing safe

Although you should ensure this kind of play happens in a safe environment, it's impossible to avoid the occasional bump or collision. A child's distress is difficult to handle, but usually it's a case of calming things down and the game can start again once the tears are dry.

If the injury is taken as deliberate or unfair, the game may end with resentment or complaint. Dads can fine tune the play by pinpointing what led to the child being hurt and helping everyone understand what happened.

NEGOTIATING PARENTING WITH YOUR PARTNER

Families are small networks, little systems where each part affects the others. In your roles, you and your partner have a real influence on each other's parenting.

Depending on your relationship and how things are going, you can help or hinder each other in becoming the best possible parents to your children.

So it makes sense to invest in and look after your relationship. Support each other. Work as a team. Keep the lines of communication open. Show that you are committed to working through any differences that arise, as together you learn how to parent.

LOOKING AFTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP

The emotional energy required to care for a baby places extra demands on relationships. Take the extra time and effort to do things to help you stay connected as a couple. As a priority, find a baby sitter you can trust. And supporting your partner to maintain their own interests and friendships outside the family will help them recharge their batteries.

TEAMWORK

Working as a 'tag team' is a big advantage in two parent households, and really helps you deal with the daily pressures and stresses of parenting. Here are some ingredients of good teamwork.

Listen to your partner's interests and concerns – mothers frequently say they really value the opportunity to share what is happening – good and bad – with someone who really cares.

Be ready to step in when you are needed, and take over so your partner can step out of the ring for a breather.

Back each other up in front of the children, and discuss any disagreement about how something should be handled later, away from the children.

Avoid giving unwanted advice:

Sometimes mothers just want to off-load the stress by expressing their feelings. This is not always an invitation to you to start problem solving. If in doubt, check out what your partner wants to do so you can solve things together.

Catch-up regularly about the children: discuss approaches and ideas for dealing with problems. Try to do this when the stress is low, rather than in the middle of a stressful encounter with the children or each other.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Some conflict is inevitable – even in the strongest relationships. Mothers and fathers might have different ideas about family life, and may differ on fundamental parenting issues such as what is 'normal' or 'right'.

Your children's sense of safety and wellbeing is closely linked to how you behave towards your partner. Exposure to unresolved conflict between parents is associated with behavioural and developmental problems in children. On the other hand, showing children that disagreements are a normal part of life, and teaching them (by example) healthy strategies for coping with and resolving conflict benefits children.

THE DIVISION OF LABOUR

One common source of tension is the division of everyday parenting and household tasks. Fights about who is doing what around the home are second only to disputes over money.

It's not about whether household and parenting tasks are divided perfectly equally. What really matters is how satisfied you both are with the division of labour at home. Some mothers are perfectly happy with a fairly traditional division of household labour; for example, you looking after bins, gutters, lawns, dishes, and nightly baths, while she does the cooking, laundry, and vacuuming. However, if your partner is not satisfied – regardless of how you rate your contribution – this can lead to resentment and can harm your relationship.

To avoid tension, have a conversation with your partner about the parenting and household jobs that need doing and whether you are both happy with the way they are allocated. If there's an issue, you'll be able to do something about it before the tension gets any worse.



FATHER FACT

An Australian study found that fathers who were happier in their relationship with their partner spent more time with their child in playing indoor or outdoor games and involving children in everyday activities.



STAYING INVOLVED AFTER SEPARATION

Being separated from your children is tough. It is the biggest challenge fathers face staying connected and involved in their children's lives. But it does not mean that you are any less important or less needed by your children.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The initial groundwork depends on how well you can put aside your own anger, hurt or disappointment, and focus on negotiating parenting arrangements that are in the best interests of your children.

Fortunately, services like the Family Relationship Centres can help you work with your ex-partner towards the best possible outcomes.

There are two key aspects of staying involved in your children's lives following separation: making the most of the time you have with your children and finding a suitable way to manage your relationship with their mother.

GETTING INTO THE SWING OF SOLO PARENTING

For many fathers, the first time they have had sole care of their children for any significant length of time is after separation. It may take time getting used to having a one-on-one relationship with your children, especially if you have not been the main carer in the past.

In an effort to make the most of limited time, some separated dads fall for the trap of becoming an entertainer, taking their children on visits and outings. Yet the most effective way of staying involved is to immerse yourself in your children's daily care and activities: feeding, dressing, playing, homework, reading, sporting activities and school life. In fact, the need to assume more responsibility for their children's daily care gives many fathers an opportunity to strengthen their relationship with their children in ways that didn't occur before the separation. Taking sole responsibility for your children while they are in your care might involve a steep learning curve. Doing

this at a time of high disruption and stress doesn't make it any easier. Most dads in this situation could use some more support, so there's no shame in seeking it out. It helps to discuss your situation with others. Find out more about getting help in our information and services section (Page 14).

MANAGING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR EX

Continuing the parenting partnership

Being separated does not dissolve a parenting partnership. There is still an ongoing need to negotiate the approach you'll take to parenting issues. Children benefit too, as they see their parents presenting a shared front, and being consistent in how they handle things.

Don't worry though, if you and your ex-partner have some different approaches to parenting – children can cope with differences, and even benefit from learning that some rules apply in some situations but not others.

Minimising your children's exposure to conflict

With time, many separated couples develop workable, even amicable relationships. While this may seem hard and a long way off in the beginning, it is important to work towards a workable relationship in the shortest time possible. It is especially important to limit your children's exposure to conflict between their parents.

Research shows that exposure to high level conflict is associated with trauma, increased anxiety and/or aggression in children. On the other hand, children get valuable life skills by watching adults work through their differences and solve problems.

Here are some tips for handling friction:

- If you need to have a difficult conversation with your ex, or you think the conversation could get a bit heated, try to do it somewhere or sometime when your children are not around.

- Try to stay polite and respectful in your dealings with your children's mother. Having brief conversations in public places like your child's preschool or childcare centre might make it easier to keep feelings in check.
- When you need to, speak to your partner directly rather than asking your children to deliver messages.
- Writing is an alternative if emotions are running high. Email, SMS or a home-to-home diary can help you share important information about your children.
- Keep the focus of your communications on your children's accomplishments and needs. Your children will feel reassured knowing that both parents are interested in their wellbeing.
- Avoid asking your children intrusive questions about their mother, or asking them to withhold information.
- Acknowledge your children's feelings and affection for their mum, and avoid criticising her in front of your children.
- Share the good parts of your relationship with your former partner.
- Talk to adult friends, rather than your children about any problems you are having with their mum.
- Perhaps talk with a counsellor, or ring a telephone counselling service such as Mensline.

Find out more about getting help in our information and services section (Page 14).

FATHERING FROM A DISTANCE

Caring for your children part-time does not make you a part-time Dad. Not living with your children doesn't mean you have to be cut off. Your children will always benefit from you knowing how things are going, being up-to-date with their interests and concerns, or just simply staying in touch. Telephone, emails, letters and SMS messages can help you stay in touch.



DEPRESSION IN FATHERS & HOW MATES CAN HELP

In 1912, when an iceberg opened the side of the Titanic, there were 2223 passengers and crew on board. Without enough lifeboats, and many launched half full, only 704 people survived – 3/4 of women on board and half the children. Most of the victims who died of hypothermia in the Atlantic waters were men.

Although social roles for men and women have changed since 1912, there is no indication that today's fathers would behave any differently from those on the Titanic. Men's honour, duty or sacrifice is an enduring and powerful theme. As a community, we generally expect men in a crisis situation to ensure women and children are taken care of first.

But for fathers in the throes of depression, in conflict over access to their children, or facing financial ruin or serious personal difficulties, it is possible that the idea of 'women and children first' carries the wrong message. Some fathers mistakenly believe that sacrificing themselves will be best thing for their families. Men separated from their families are six times more likely to die by their own hand than fathers in intact families. A strong warning sign for contemplating suicide is making comments such as 'they'd be better off without me'.

SIGNS OF DISTRESS

Depression can affect a father's ability to think clearly. Fathers overcome with hopelessness can grossly underestimate their importance to their children, and believe their children don't really need them or that their connection to the family is not important. It is vital for men in this situation to get help and support, and this is where their mates can step up.

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED FOR A MATE

If you have a mate you know is going through a rough patch there are three things you can do to help the situation:

- Seek out information on depression and its causes and treatments. Try asking your mate about the list of symptoms.
- Make sure that your mate knows where to get some help if he needs it.
- Most importantly, let him know you think it's smart to get help. Tell him that getting help will also help his children.

FOR MORE HELP

Ring **Mensline** or **Lifeline** and check out your thinking with one of their trained counsellors. They talk to all types of men so they can help you figure out what may be going on for your friend.



FATHER FACT ■

Don't mess with depression

Fathers can become depressed at any time, especially in times of stress. However, just having a baby can trigger depression. One in 14 men may experience depression around the birth of their baby. Men whose partners are depressed are at greater risk, but men can also be affected by depression regardless of their partner's experience.

Everything is connected. Depression in fathers following the birth of a baby has been found to have a detrimental effect on their children's early behavioural, social and emotional development. Your kids need you, so take action on your depression.

Signs of depression in a father

A notable change in mood (sadness, irritability, frustration), social life (withdrawing), work (increasing or decreasing time at work), interests (loss of interest in food, sex, exercise, or hobbies), risk taking, or increased use of alcohols or other drugs, can all be signs of depression. In deciding whether someone has depression, a mental health specialist would look for:

- signs of feeling sad, down or miserable most of the time
- loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities.

Plus four or more of the following:

- Major change (increase or decrease) in weight or appetite.
- Disturbed sleep.
- Feeling slowed down, restless or excessively busy.
- Feeling tired or lacking in energy.
- Feeling worthless, excessively guilty or guilty about things you should not be feeling guilty about.
- Poor concentration or indecisiveness or difficulties in thinking.
- Recurrent thoughts of death?

(Source: *beyondblue*. Visit www.beyondblue.org.au)



WHEN YOUR PARTNER IS DEPRESSED

"I came home early after she called me sounding pretty dreadful. Shelly had done some of the washing but the lounge room was a mess, even though I had cleaned it up and put things away before I went to work. The main thing seemed to be going shopping. She couldn't get it organised. 'Hey,' I said, 'we can do this. We can go if you like.' I got Leon's change bag and put him into the capsule and Shelly came out and got into the car. We backed down the drive and looked around and Shelly was crying, saying: 'You can do it. Everyone else can do it except me, it's just me that's hopeless.' We didn't go."

Postnatal depression (PND) can be a real curve ball for a couple already having to adjust to big changes brought by a baby. The good news is that PND is treatable and that the chances of a full recovery are good. The first step is recognising what's really happening. In time, with your support and the help of others, your partner will find her feet again.

WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Trust your instincts if you become concerned about your partner's wellbeing or her ability to look after your child. You might notice:

- you're finding it more difficult to leave your partner and go to work each day
- you often need to leave work early to help out at home
- your partner has severe mood swings, or her behaviour seems odd
- your partner has lost interest in sex.

Other signs that your partner may be experiencing PND include:

- talk of harming herself or the baby
- bizarre thoughts or speech patterns
- risk-taking behaviour
- withdrawing from all social contact
- becoming obsessed with morbid ideas
- statements showing very low self-esteem, such as "You'd be better off without me"
- signs of extreme despair.

MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

Taking signs of depression seriously sometimes means making some tough decisions. For example, deciding to take time away from work – not just an afternoon or a few days but perhaps weeks or months. The decision to seek professional help is another. Women with PND are often unwilling or unable to tell others how they feel or to ask for help.

HELPING HER GET HELP

There are a number of ways to treat PND, from medication to effective support groups for depressed mothers.

- Learn more about PND and its treatment.
- Help her get the support she needs – counselling, support groups or involving friends and family.
- Make sure your partner has a proper medical assessment and is regularly monitored.
- If your partner is taking medication, be supportive and encourage her to take it as prescribed.
- Although it might be upsetting if your partner is hospitalised or admitted to a mother-baby unit for her PND, be assured that she will be receiving appropriate and necessary treatment.

Effect on your children

If your partner is depressed, it affects everyone in the family. In this situation, your connection with your children is as important as ever as you can provide much needed care and positive attention.

HELPING HER COPE

- Don't worry if you feel that you don't know what to say. It is a difficult time for you both and you will learn the best way to deal with it together.
- Encourage her to express her feelings. Don't just try to fix things or offer solutions.
- Don't be discouraged if she seems withdrawn – there will be other times when she'll respond and be able to express gratitude for your support.
- Encourage and support her. Knowing that you are okay with whatever she can manage is important.
- At all times reassure her about her relationship with your baby.

- Try to avoid making any major decisions, such as buying a house, while your partner has PND.
- Tell her that you will stand by her and not tire of supporting her through the illness.
- Try to reassure your partner that you are okay if she is not interested in sex for the time being. Touching or cuddling may be more comfortable at this time, without leading to sex. It's important that you both communicate what you want and how you feel.
- Try to help out as much as you can with household tasks and child care.

Look after yourself too

- Try to stay positive.
- You don't have to do everything yourself.
- Accept any offers of help from family members or friends.
- Tune into "the depression is talking". If your partner's comments or tone sound unduly critical, think about them as "the depression talking and step away."
- Remember your own wellbeing – make sure that you have someone you can talk to and get as much rest as you can.
- Recognise the good you are doing.
- Remember that your partner will recover with the appropriate help



INFORMATION & SERVICES FOR FATHERS



BEING A DAD

Raising Children Network: This Australian parenting website provides easy-to-use information and support for parents of children aged up to 8 years (teen content coming in 2010). The site offers written, illustrated and video content covering over 800 topics related to being a parent, and includes a dedicated section and online forum for fathers.

Website: www.raisingchildren.net.au

MyTime: Free local support groups for mums, dads, grandparents and anyone caring for a young child with a disability or chronic illness.

Freecall: 1800 889 997

Website: www.mytime.net.au

Dads for kids: A US site created as a tool to help fathers help their kids.

Website: www.dadsforkids.org

Fatherhood Institute: The UK's fatherhood 'think-tank': collating the research on fatherhood, helping shape the government's family policy, influencing the public debate on fathers and training family services to be father-inclusive.

Website: www.fatherhoodinstitute.org

For fathers: An online resource for everyday dads. Created by the National Center for Fathering (USA).

Website: www.fathers.com

SINGLE DADS

Lone Fathers Association of Australia: Provides policy advice to government, conducts information meetings, and provides a free telephone information and counselling service throughout Australia dealing with family law and related matters.

Website: www.lonefathers.com.au

Parents without partners: A nation-wide organisation offering a range of benefits for members, including access to a bi-monthly magazine, member forums, and social activities run for parents and their children. Membership is open to mothers and fathers who are widowed, separated, divorced or never married, regardless of custody arrangements.

Phone: 03 9852 1945

Website: www.pwpaustralia.net

Camp Connect Australia: Provides opportunities to bring fathers and children together to connect and bond. Resources and support groups for fathers also available.

Website: www.campconnect.org.au

Holidays With Kids: A website with a section devoted to travel ideas and advice for single parents.

Website: www.holidayswithkids.com.au/single_parent_travel

Step Families Australia: Stepfamily information and referrals, as well as telephone counselling and support. The helpline operates Monday – Friday, 9 am to 5 pm.

Phone: 03 9639 6611

Website: www.stepfamily.org.au

COUNSELLING & SUPPORT

Parentline: A Victoria-wide telephone counselling, information and support service for mothers, fathers and carers of children aged from birth to 18 years. Parentline staff are from a wide range of professional backgrounds and have many years experience working with families. Parentline's professional counsellors are able to explore a variety of issues that impact on parenting and relationships. They can also provide contact details and referrals to other parenting services and community services across Victoria. Parentline operates 7 days a week and 365 days a year between the hours of 8 am and midnight, Monday – Friday, and 10 am – 10 pm Saturday and Sunday.

Phone: 13 22 89

Website: www.education.vic.gov.au/earlychildhood/parentline

Mensline Australia: Support for men who are dealing with family and relationship difficulties. The service offers anonymous telephone support, information and referrals for men around Australia.

Phone: 1300 789 978

Website: www.menslineaus.org.au

Lifeline: A national 24 hour counselling service.

Phone: 131 114

Beyondblue: A national organisation working to address the issues associated with depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. It provides information about symptoms, and where to get help.

Infoline: 1300 224 636

Website: www.beyondblue.org.au

Dads in Distress: A community-based organisation that supports men who are experiencing divorce, separation or relationship breakdown. This organisation offers telephone support, web-based information, and peer support groups.

Phone: 1300 853 437

Website: www.dadsindistress.asn.au

Relationships Australia: Counselling and resources to couples, individuals and families to help enhance and support relationships.

Phone: 1300 364 277

Website: www.relationships.com.au

Family Relationships Online: Information for all families (together or separated) about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution. You can also ring the *Family Relationship Advice Line* or attend a *Family Relationships Centre*: call the advice line or visit the website to find your nearest centre.

Freecall: 1800 050 321 (Family Relationship Advice Line)

Website: www.familyrelationships.gov.au

PANDA : Support, information and referrals to anyone affected by post and antenatal depression and other mood disorders. The telephone helpline is open from 9:30 am – 4:30 pm, Monday – Friday.

Phone: 1300 726 306

Phone: 03 9481 3377 (Administration)

Website: www.panda.org.au

Maternal & Child Health Service: A free service for all Victorian families with children aged up to 6 years. Offers support, information and advice on parenting, child health, development and behaviour, maternal health and wellbeing, child safety, immunisation, breastfeeding, nutrition and family planning to mothers and fathers. Parents can also join groups that provide health information, and an opportunity to meet other parents in the local area. Contact your local council for referral to a local service. 24-hour telephone support available.

Phone: 13 22 29

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Men's Health Australia: An information and research centre which designs, develops and supports research and projects which contribute to the enhancement of the health and wellbeing of men and boys.

Website: www.menshealthaustralia.net

Better Health Channel: Online health and medical information, including helpful articles on preparing healthy meals and snacks, and sections specifically on men's health issues.

Website: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF (CONT)

Mental health associations and foundations: Information on mental health, research, programs, services and links.

NSW: www.mentalhealth.asn.au

NT: www.teamhealth.asn.au

QLD: www.mentalhealth.org.au

SA: www.mhcsa.org.au

VIC: www.mentalhealthvic.org.au

Go for Your Life: A website with information about healthy living options, diet, exercise and general wellbeing.

Website: www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au

Gymlink: Provides a list of local gyms and leisure centres. Many centres offer child care facilities.

Website: www.gymlink.com.au

FINANCIAL, LEGAL & HOUSING

Centrelink: Information and services for financial and other forms of support from the Australian government.

Phone: 132 850 (Employment Services)

Phone: 136 150 (Family Assistance Office)

Website: www.centrelink.gov.au

Child Support Agency (CSA): An Australian government agency with information and services for child support payments. It also has a list of free community information sessions and a number of relevant publications that can be downloaded or ordered as hard copies.

Phone: 131 272

Website: www.csa.gov.au

Victorian Legal Aid Service: Provides legal support and advice. Phones are open from 8:45 am – 5:15 pm, Monday – Friday.

Phone: 03 9269 0120

Freecall: 1800 677 402

(for country callers)

Website: www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Men's Referral Service: Information and referral service for men who want to change their abusive behaviour towards their family.

Phone: 1800 065 973

Website: www.mrs.org.au

Enough Campaign: A Victorian government website with information on new family violence laws and contact details for those who are experiencing family violence and want to seek help.

Website: www.familyviolence.vic.gov.au

Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA):

A 24-hour telephone crisis support, counselling and information service for people who have been sexually assaulted as adults or as children.

Freecall: 1800 806 292

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Hard copies available from Parentline

Phone: 13 22 89

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www.raisingchildren.net.au



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Being a father is one of the most rewarding life experiences a man can have. This booklet describes the rewards and benefits of choosing to be an involved father, and what that means for men and their children. No matter what stage you're at, we hope

this booklet will offer some useful tips and ideas on how to make the most of everyday interactions with your children. Topics covered include bonding, rough and tumble play, negotiating parenting with your partner and parenting after separation.

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