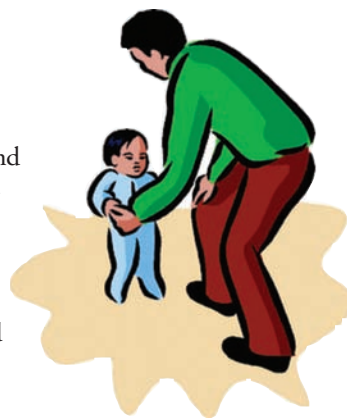


# To Be A Father

Scientists have confirmed what many parents and caregivers have known all along: fathers have a lasting impact on their children. Research on brain development shows that children's earliest experiences influence the way their brains grow, and that everyone who cares for young children makes a difference in how children learn, think and behave for the rest of their lives.



In today's world there are many kinds of families. It's not always possible for fathers to have an active role in their children's lives. But if you have the opportunity to be an involved father, you have been given a great gift. And you have an important responsibility, because fathers can have an incredible impact in bringing up their children.

Studies show that when fathers are involved in their children's lives, their children tend to be more independent and self-reliant, and more likely to begin school ready to succeed. The rewards of being an involved father are enormous—for your children, your family, and yourself.

**"A father is someone loving... someone who you should be able to talk to about anything."**

### ***A few key points to remember:***

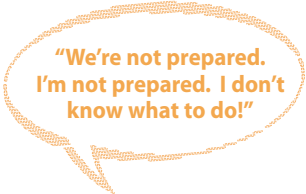
- For moms and dads, parenting is mostly on-the-job training.
- Moms and dads both have nurturing instincts.
- By building and maintaining a close relationship with your partner, you can teach your child what a loving relationship looks and feels like. This lesson will have a lasting impact on your child's development.

### ***Right From the Start***

Being a good father doesn't start after your baby is born -- supporting your partner during pregnancy gets everything off to a good start. Some men feel left out when their partner is pregnant -- as moms are often the center of attention. But both you and your partner are becoming parents together, and dads-to-be can play an important role in their partner's pregnancy. What can you do? Here's a quick list:

- Go to prenatal appointments with doctors/midwives. Ask questions and help mom remember to ask hers.
- Help your partner stick to a well-balanced, nutritious diet.

- Listen to your child's heartbeat and feel her kick. Talk or sing to your baby (babies can actually tell the difference between their mom's and dad's voices at birth).
- Share ideas, hopes and fears about parenting with your partner.
- Take walks together. The exercise will be good for both of you, and it's a good time to talk about your plans for the future.
- Go to childbirth and parenting classes before baby is born. The more you know, the better prepared you will be for the new baby.
- Find a pediatrician for your baby.
- Prepare your home for the baby. Paint, decorate, and create a safe environment.
- Learn all you can about parenting and child care. Read about how your child is growing during pregnancy. You can get information by taking a parenting class, reading books and magazines, or finding videos and TV shows about parenting, checking out the internet, or talking to other parents.
- Learn about breast feeding. There is no doubt that breast milk is the best food for a newborn baby. It is nutritionally complete, the perfect temperature, and it contains antibodies and nutrients that protect your baby from illness and help his or her brain develop.
- Breastfeeding may not come naturally for all new mothers, so help your partner find help and advice from professionals or experienced mothers.
- Stop smoking and don't smoke around mom. Help mom quit if she smokes.



**"We're not prepared.  
I'm not prepared. I don't  
know what to do!"**

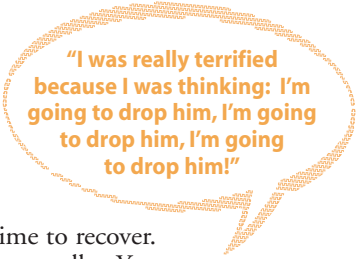
## *Birthing Together*

**W**hen you participate in labor and delivery, your care and attention do wonders to calm your partner, reduce her pain, and even shorten her recovery time. And it promises to be one of the most amazing experiences of your life—seeing your baby being born is something you will never forget.

## *Settling In To Parenthood*

**O**nce your baby is home, understand that parenting will take some getting used to. Your baby depends on you completely, and you will probably have a lot of questions about how to recognize and

meet his needs. The secret is to be easy on yourself and each other. New mothers and fathers both have a lot to learn.



**"I was really terrified because I was thinking: I'm going to drop him, I'm going to drop him, I'm going to drop him!"**

Remember too that your partner's body needs time to recover. Don't take her low energy or changing moods personally. Your patience and understanding will help you both ease into your new roles as parents.

## ***Starting Early: Building A Relationship***

**J**ust as children's bodies need food to grow, science also tells us that caring, nurturing relationships help young children's brains grow and develop. Studies show that involved fathers have many positive effects on their children's lives. Get involved with your child right from the start.

### **Parenting Together**

Sometimes it can be hard to break down society's stereotypes and traditional roles. "Mothering" is a task that is often left to the mother, and it is not uncommon for mothers to become gatekeepers between a father and his child. As a result, fathers can feel left out or intimidated. Talk to your partner about parenting together. You are partners in this important task, and both of you must learn by doing. There is no reason fathers can't be involved with their children from the beginning – hugging them, bathing them, and playing with them. It is a myth that men do not have the same instincts for parenting – men and women have the same nurturing instinct.

*There are simple, everyday interactions that can help you build a strong relationship with your child.*

- Show your love, acceptance and appreciation frequently, through words, smiles and loving touch. When children receive warm, responsive care, they are more likely to feel safe and secure. Find ways to connect with your baby right away. Whether it's bath time, reading together in the rocker, or even at the changing table, there are countless opportunities every day not just to "help out," but also to be a parent.
- Infants can't use words to communicate their moods, preferences, or needs, but they send many signals to the adults who care for them. Pay close attention so your child knows that when she smiles, someone will smile back; that when she is upset, someone will comfort her; that when she is hungry, someone will feed her.

- Talk, read, and sing to your child. Making up stories about daily events, singing songs about the people and places they know, describing what is happening during daily routines – all of these “conversations” give your child a solid basis for later learning. When babies hear you say words over and over again, the parts of their brains that handle speech and language develop. The more language babies hear in these “conversations”, the more those parts of their brains will grow and develop. Talking, singing, and reading to your child are also wonderful opportunities for closeness with your child.

**“At first it was scary because I just didn’t know what each cry meant. If she was too hot, if she was hungry. Now... it’s like she can talk to me and I can understand her. It’s like a father daughter thing.”**

- Establish routines and rituals. One toddler knows it is nap time when his mom sings a song and closes the curtains, as she always does. Another toddler knows it is almost time for her dad to pick her up when her child care provider gives her milk and crackers. Daily routines and repeated positive experiences reassure children and help them feel secure. They help a child understand what to expect from his environment.

- Encourage safe exploration and play. In the first few months of life, parents and caregivers are a child’s whole world. Playing with your child helps him learn about the world. It’s a wonderful fact that mom’s and dad’s styles of play can complement each other. Different ways of playing (quiet and calm, or active and physical) are important to your child’s developing curiosity and self confidence.

- Limit the amount of time your child spends in front of the TV, and be selective and involved in your children’s TV habits. Television by itself can’t teach an infant language, and it can’t teach him how to communicate. Studies show that children who learn best in school have families who limit the amount of time they spend in front of the TV and are selective as to the kinds of shows they watch.

- Use discipline as an opportunity to teach. Set firm, fair limits and give reasonable consequences for harmful/dangerous behavior. As children grow and explore their ever-expanding world, they need limits and consistent, loving, adult supervision.

Don’t expect your young child to do what you say all the time, and NEVER HIT OR SHAKE A CHILD. Young children will yell, hit, or have temper tantrums at times. Helping children learn self-control is a long-term process. It is normal for children to “test” rules by breaking them. When you respond in a supportive, consistent way, you help your child to feel safe in the world.

- Recognize that each child is unique. Children have different temperaments: one child is outgoing, while her brother is more bashful and slow to warm up. Children also grow at different rates – physically and emotionally. Their ideas and feelings about themselves



reflect your attitude toward them. Tell them they are wonderful and they will feel wonderful about themselves!

- Choose quality child care and stay involved. Choosing a child care provider is one of the most important decisions families make. Research shows that high-quality child care and early education can boost children's learning and social skills when they enter school.
- Take care of yourself. Parents and caregivers need care, too. Taking care of our children is the most important and wonderful job in our society. But don't get overwhelmed before you take care of yourself. If you feel good, you'll be able to give more to your child and your partner. Reach out and ask for help from family, friends, neighbors, pediatricians, child care providers and others.

*For a more detailed explanation of many of the points outlined above, including: early literacy and school readiness, tips on discipline, nutrition and strategies for choosing quality child care, please visit [www.iamyourchild.org](http://www.iamyourchild.org).*

## ***Fathering In Challenging Times***

**M**ore and more these days, we're parenting under less than ideal circumstances. Societal and economic pressures can make it difficult or even impossible for fathers to be engaged in their children's lives in a consistent, stable way. Regardless of the particular circumstances you may be facing--divorce, step-parenting, or too much time away from home--the key thing is to stay involved with your kids.

**"I don't want to miss the first steps, the talking and the little funny things they do as they grow."**

By far, the most important guideline for parenting under difficult circumstances is this: be there with and for your children. Give your kids your attention; take an interest in their schoolwork, their teachers, their friends. Talk to them about what they think and what they feel. Share your thoughts and feelings, too.

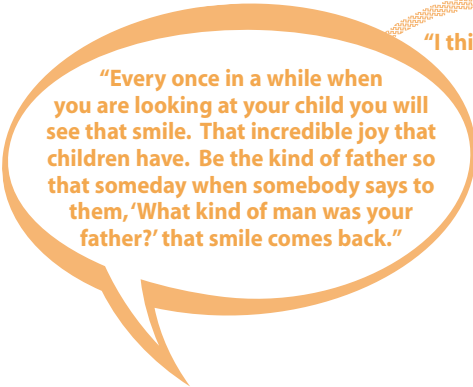
When you must be away from your child, make sure you stay connected. It is especially important to stay involved when times are tough. Although it may be difficult to avoid, don't let yourself drift away. Children want you there emotionally, even if you can't be there physically. You can help your children maintain a sense of steadiness and stability when they see that




you are part of their lives despite the circumstances. Keep the lines of communication with your children open--any way you can. Regular e-mails, calls, and sending pictures go a long way towards bridging the gap.

## **YOUNG FATHERS**

Very young dads are often misunderstood and not taken seriously, but the truth is that, when given the chance, many teen fathers can be very devoted dads. It's easy to get 'squeezed out' of the picture and feel 'lost', but take heart in knowing that by keeping up a relationship with your partner and your child, he/she will definitely feel the difference. Check out parenting classes, school day care programs, and services that can help you provide for your child and stay an active part of his life.



**"Every once in a while when you are looking at your child you will see that smile. That incredible joy that children have. Be the kind of father so that someday when somebody says to them, 'What kind of man was your father?' that smile comes back."**



**"I think being a father has made me more responsible... more focused... and more committed."**

## **YOUR VOICE IS IMPORTANT:**

Special thanks to Jack Heinowitz, PhD whose contributions were instrumental to the development of this booklet. Dr. Heinowitz is a psychologist and family therapist, director of Parents As Partners Associates in San Diego, California, and author of *Fathering Right From the Start: Straight Talk About Pregnancy, Birth, and Beyond*. Dr. Heinowitz can be reached at (619) 692-4038.

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*For more information, or to order the  
I Am Your Child series of educational materials,  
visit our website at [www.parentsaction.org](http://www.parentsaction.org)  
or call 888-447-3400.*