

Enhancing Father Engagement

A Practice Guide for Family Services Specialists



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

WDS Workforce Development
and Support

Acknowledgements

Portions of the content for this practice guide were adapted from the curriculum, *Engaging Absent Fathers*, developed by the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work and *Skills and Strategies for Working Fathers*, Georgia Division of Family and Children Services and George State University School of Social Work. This practice guide may be used for training and other educational intent.

Table of Contents

PREFACE	4
ENGAGING FATHERS IN CHILD WELFARE – A REAL EXPERIENCE	5
RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT FATHER INVOLVEMENT	7
IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING PATERNITY	8
WORKING WITH MEN ON PATERNITY ISSUES	9
ESTABLISHING PATERNITY – A CHECKLIST FOR FATHERS	10
THE VIRGINIA BIRTH REGISTRY	11
IMPORTANCE OF CONTACTING NONCUSTODIAL FATHERS	12
WORKING WITH DIFFERENT FATHERS IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS	13
MARRIED FATHERS.....	13
COHABITATING PARENTS.....	13
INCARCERATED FATHERS.....	13
MULTIPLE FATHERS.....	14
BOYFRIENDS.....	14
STEPFATHERS.....	15
STRATEGIES FOR ENLISTING MOTHERS’ SUPPORT	16
MESSAGES FOR MOTHERS	17
STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO FATHER INVOLVEMENT	18
ADVICE FOR FATHERS	19
INTERVIEWING FATHERS	21
MEN, FATHERS, DADS, BOYFRIENDS: RESOURCE OR LIABILITY	22
FACTORS TO CONSIDER.....	22
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER.....	22
THE ABCS OF A FATHER-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT	24
TIPS FOR MANAGING SERVICES BETWEEN VARIOUS SUPPORT SYSTEMS	25
FATHER ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES FOR FAMILY SERVICES SPECIALISTS	26
APPENDIX – FATHER ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES	27
TIPS FOR FATHERS.....	28
FATHER CHILD REUNION TIPS.....	30
KEYS TO GOOD DISCIPLINE.....	31
ACTIVITIES FOR FATHERING.....	32
TEN WAYS TO BE A BETTER DAD.....	34
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR KNOWING YOUR CHILD.....	36
TWENTY LONG DISTANCE ACTIVITIES FOR DADS AT A DISTANCE.....	37
TIPS FROM A FATHER IN PRISON.....	39
ONLINE WEB SITES FOR FATHERS.....	41

Preface

Best practices in child welfare informs us that working with families should be based upon a holistic approach, which requires engagement of all family members and individuals that play a role in the family. Yet, few fathers are involved with case planning and more importantly, few fathers are involved with their children. Interestingly, agency culture is often more supportive of mothers. In addition, the limited print media that is geared toward fathers is usually punitive and frequently related to child support enforcement.

Currently, the main focus in child welfare is on mothers; family services specialists fail to consistently involve fathers. In a national study looking at the participation of non-resident fathers whose children were involved in the child welfare system, the researchers found the following: only 88 percent of noncustodial fathers were identified in the child welfare case file. In only 63 percent of the cases, paternity was established. Of the noncustodial fathers, 28 percent expressed an interest in assuming custody of their child (*Child Welfare Casework with Nonresident Fathers of Children in Foster Care, prepared by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*).

Child welfare agencies and fathers of the families they serve have an uneasy, almost underground, relationship. While the majority of family services specialists believe involving noncustodial fathers enhances a child's well-being in practice, it is not a regular occurrence. Reasons abound: workload size, difficulty locating fathers, discomfort in working with men and lack of institutional support. There are many reasons why fathers and men are "missing" when it comes to child welfare. These reasons are magnified by the distressed circumstances characteristic of the child welfare population. To address this absence of fathers, with the goal of creating greater accountability and responsibility on all sides, we need to begin with this cornerstone fact: Fathers and men are excluded within the policy, programs, and practice of child welfare. (*Susan Brooks, Northern California Training Academy, Center for Human Services, UC Davis Extension*).

In recognition of the value of working with fathers as an important piece of resolving permanency issues for children in child welfare, this practice guide focuses upon the impact of fathers in children's lives, the current research related to father involvement, and how this information can be applied throughout the child welfare continuum of services. In this practice guide, you will find strategies for identifying, locating, and engaging fathers in the casework process in addition to numerous resources for local departments and fathers. In addition, this practice guide is designed to equip local departments of social services' family services specialists and supervisors to work successfully with fathers in a wide range of family situations and structures.

Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare- A Family Services Specialist's Moment and A Father's Love

While it is easy to assume why a father is not involved with his child, family services specialists must consider whether an accurate assessment of the father has been conducted before drawing conclusions about his lack of involvement. Read below to learn how one family services specialist witnessed a life changing moment between a father and son, despite the many barriers she faced.

As a CPS investigator, I received a referral alleging Physical Neglect, Inadequate Supervision of two children (a daughter aged 6 and a son aged 10) by their mother. The referral alleged the mother was abusing illegal drugs and not adequately caring for her children. The children were fathered by different men. The six year old's father was actively involved in his daughter's life and had filed for custody during the course of the agency's involvement. The mother reported that the 10 year old's father was not involved in their son's life and she did not have any contact information regarding the father's whereabouts. She believed he lived out of the state. The mother would not provide demographic information and indicated that the father did not pay child support, nor wanted to have anything to do with his son. I will refer to this child as Johnny.

During the course of the investigation, I was able to obtain information about Johnny's father (I will refer to him as Mr. A). I spoke to Mr. A. on several occasions. He confirmed that he had not had contact with Johnny for several years, but insisted that it was not for his lack of trying. Mr. A. reported that he had family in Virginia where he would sometimes receive information about the whereabouts of his son and would attempt to file custody; however, the mother would move. Mr. A. told me that he had spoken to Johnny's sister's father who expressed serious concerns regarding the care of their children by the mother.

As a result, Mr. A. filed for custody of his son during the course of the investigation. I encouraged Mr. A. to bring information about him and his current family to include finances, home environment, pictures, etc. to provide to the court. I contacted the local agency in his state and requested criminal and CPS history (both of which there was known), but more importantly requested that agency to do a courtesy home visit and if applicable open services to Mr. A and his family should he be granted custody of Johnny in the future.

I interviewed Johnny a few times during the course of the investigation; however, he appeared very guarded and protective of his mother. The day before the custody hearing, I met with Johnny again to let him know about the court hearing. Johnny reported that he "hated" his father and talked about his father being a "cheater" and was "no good." Johnny said he had not seen his father since he was a year old and did not even know what his father looked like. The day of the custody hearing, the mother did not show up

and the judge ordered that the father could keep the child locally and a new hearing was set for a week later.

Now, the dilemma for me as a worker, was how to tell Johnny that he has to stay with his father whom he hates. I was confident that Mr. A. would be appropriate with his son, but I did not want to further traumatize this child. I understood what the court ordered but, quite honestly, was a little apprehensive with the process. I spoke with Mr. A. and advised him of Johnny's feelings and prepared him for how his son may react. We went to the school to meet Johnny. I explained to Johnny that the judge ordered that he spend some time to get to know his father. I ensured Johnny that I would be checking on him daily. His eyes widened and he stared at the door as I brought Mr. A. into the room. Mr. A. took a few steps and then dropped to his knees. Johnny ran up to his father and the two of them embraced without saying a word. The embrace lasted several minutes. Mr. A. and Johnny were crying. Talk about a social work moment!

During the week they shared together, both Mr. A. and Johnny expressed how this experience changed their lives. We returned to court a few days later and the judge granted primary custody to Mr. A. and allowed him to return to his home with his son. Mr. A. followed up with me several months later and expressed again his gratitude for assisting with reuniting him with his son. Mr. A. was grateful that as an institution and as a family services specialist, **we value the role of fathers in their children's lives not just in words, but in actions as well.**

As a family services specialist, we cannot rely solely on one parent's perspective. We have to remember to look at the whole picture and the entire family situation identifying strengths, revealing underlying needs and utilizing protective capacities to ensure well-being, safety and permanence for the children and families we serve.

by Barbara Wright, BSW

Barbara Wright began her social work career in Norfolk, Virginia where she was a facilitator for a teen pregnancy prevention program of a non-profit organization. Later, she worked as a CPS Investigator and CPS Ongoing specialist at the local department of social services in Virginia Beach. She currently works for the Division of Workforce Development and Support in the Virginia Department of Social Services as an instructional trainer.

Research Findings about Father Involvement

Research suggests that children with involved and engaged fathers tend to have more positive outcomes relative to physical, cognitive, and social emotional health.

Below are some of the research findings about father involvement included in the book, *Father Facts*, published by the National Fatherhood Initiative.

- In a study of 799 families from the National Survey of Families in Households, fathers in two-parent biological families reported spending more time with their children and having higher family cohesion than did fathers in all other types of family structures.
- 63% of black children, 35% of Hispanic children, and 28% of white children are living in homes absent their biological father.
- Half of black children (51%) live with single mothers, compared to one in four Hispanic children (25%), and one in six white children (18%).
- Of the 20.4 million children living with a single parent in 2003, 17.1 million (83%) were living with their mother; 3.4 million (17%) were living with their father.
- Marital status is the strongest predictor of father presence or absence. Compared to children born within marriage, children born to cohabitating parents are three times more likely to experience father absence. Children born to unmarried, non-cohabitating parents are four times as likely to have an absent father.
- When asked to name the “adults you look up to and admire,” only 20% of children in single-parent families named their fathers, as compared with 52% of children in two-parent families.
- In-hospital paternity establishment was connected to a 16% greater chance of financial contributions from the father. Fathers who establish paternity in the hospital were also more likely to be supportive of the mother and were 15% more likely to have seen the child in the last month when compared to fathers who did not establish paternity.
- In a longitudinal study of males 14 to 22 years old, it was found that after controlling for other variables (such as education, race, income, and neighborhood characteristics) boys who grew up outside of intact marriages were, on average, more than twice as likely as other boys to end up in jail. Each year spent without a dad in the home increased the odds of future incarceration by 5%. Boys raised by unmarried mothers were at greatest risk, mostly because they spent the most time in a home without a father. In contrast, boys living with their single father were no more likely to be incarcerated than those living with both parents.

Adapted from: Horn, W.F., & Sylvester, T. (2007). Father Facts (5th ed.). Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative.

Importance of Establishing Paternity

- **Self Esteem**— Generally children respond better when given love and support from both parents.
- **Shared Parenting** — Parenting is the responsibility of both the father and the mother. Early paternity establishment may increase the father's involvement in the child's life. Once a legal relationship is established the father is more likely to maintain his own relationship with his child over the long-term.
- **Health History**— A child is more likely to have a complete health history if the father establishes paternity. Knowing the family's medical history is important for children and their physicians. The father's medical history is critically important if special conditions exist, such as disease or specific genetic traits, or if transplant donors are needed for the child.
- **Important Rights**— When paternity is established, the father has the same rights as a father of a child born in a marriage. If the father dies or is permanently disabled, paternity establishment may ensure benefits for the child, such as inheritance, social security, or veteran's benefits.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, if parents are not legally married at the time of birth, the biological father's name will not appear on his child's birth certificate unless they establish paternity.

Reasons why you should add a dad to the birth certificate include:

- The biological father does not have any legal rights to the child until paternity is established.
- To be recognized as the child's legal father there are steps that you must take as the biological father to become the legal father.
- As the legal father of your child you are not automatically required to pay child support, have custody or even visitation. These are separate issues from establishing paternity and require separate court determinations.
- Even if you plan to marry or if you live together, establishing legal fatherhood guarantees the child's rights. Only when the father's name is added to the child's birth certificate can the child be sure of who his or her legal parents are.

Virginia Paternity Establishment Program

Working with Men on Paternity Issues

Important questions to ask fathers:

- Were you married to the mother at the time of birth?
- Was the mother married to someone other than you?
- If unmarried, have you ever signed a paternity acknowledgment form?
- Have you had a blood test (DNA test) to establish paternity?
- Are you now or have you ever lived with the child, or let it be known that the child is yours?

Other issues to address with fathers:

- Assess his willingness to go through the process of establishing paternity and legitimization if he has not yet done so.
- Explain how this can be done and explain the difference between establishing
 - paternity and legitimating—this is critical! Only legitimization will give him the
 - opportunity to petition for custody or visitation. If the child is in foster care, he
 - must legitimate in order to be considered as a placement resource or for his
 - relatives to be considered as placement resources.
- Use available resources to assist the father in accomplishing this, including
 - referring the father to legal services if necessary.
- Find out his willingness to assist with a search for paternal relatives.



Importance of Establishing Paternity – Checklist for Fathers

The following is a **checklist to help fathers follow the necessary steps to establish paternity** for their child:

- Be familiar with the paternity establishment policies in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This can be done by:

- Reading the “Importance of Paternity” [here](#)
- Reading the VPEP brochure
- Calling the Virginia Paternity Establishment Program for more information at **866-398-4841**
- If accompanying newborn’s mother to the hospital, begin to review father’s section of the *Acknowledgement of Paternity* form (AOP).
- If no photo ID is available, the AOP form cannot be notarized.
- If unavailable before newborn’s discharge, but would like to complete the acknowledgment of paternity form, schedule an appointment with a birth registrar to return later. This should be done within 7 days of newborn’s hospital discharge, as the process is free during that time frame. However, AOP can be completed after the first seven (7) days for a minimal fee.
- Once the completed acknowledgment of paternity form is submitted to the Office of Vital Records by the hospital, the newborn’s birth certificate will be mailed to the address provided. Ensure contact information is correct.

The Virginia Birth Father Registry

The Virginia Birth Father Registry (VBFR), formerly known as the Virginia Putative Father Registry, is a confidential database maintained by the Virginia Department of Social Services that protects the rights of unmarried men (and their relatives) to children they may have (un)knowingly fathered. By voluntarily registering with VBFR within 10 days after child's birth, a putative father can protect his rights to his child(ren) and be notified in the event his child is placed for adoption or placed into foster care.

The VBFR does not establish paternity. Registration may be used to help establish paternity but does not start the legal process.

What is a Putative Father?

- Not married to the child's mother; or
- A court has not determined the child's father; or
- Has not signed a written agreement acknowledging he is the child's father; or
- Has not adopted the child.

Reasons to Register

- Protect paternal rights to be a part of child's life
- Prevent the adoption of the child without knowledge
- Enhance opportunities for co-parenting or visitation

How to Register or [Search the Registry](#)

- To register, complete the registration [form](#) and mail to the following address:

Virginia Department of Social Services
801 East Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219

There is no fee to register. However, registration must be mailed within 10 days of the child's birth. A putative father should register his name for each child he believes he has fathered. As such, individuals may register more than once.

The Importance of Contacting Noncustodial Fathers

Engaging fathers is important not only for the potential benefit of a child-father relationship, but also for making placement and permanency decisions and gaining access to resources for the child. Fathers and paternal relatives may also offer social or financial resources that could support a plan of reunification with the mother.

Ways to Contact Noncustodial Fathers

- Department of Motor Vehicles
- Department of Corrections or Probation and Parole
- Law Enforcement
- Department's Division of Support Enforcement
- Telephone and utility companies
- Employer
- SPIDeR searches or Person Locator Tools
 - <http://www.whitepages.com>
 - <http://www.anywho.com/>
 - <http://reversephonedirectory.com>
 - <http://www.locateamerica.com>
 - <http://www.people-finder.com>
 - <http://www.advsearch.com/person.htm>
 - <http://www.uslocate.com>
 - <http://www.aaronspi.com>
 - <http://www.amerifind.com>
 - http://www.alphagp.com/missing_persons/index.html
 - www.zabasearch.com (address locator from public utilities)
- Internet searches including generic search engines
- Social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter
- Other appropriate contacts



Working with Different Fathers in Different Situations

Family services specialists need to adapt their approaches to fit fathers in varying circumstances. There is no single model for fatherhood and no single model for being an involved father. While it is clear that a married father is more likely to be involved in his child's life, fathers in other situations can be and are good fathers as well. The following discussion highlights different father situations and explores relevant family services specialists' issues for each situation while working with families in the child welfare system.

Married Fathers. This is the model most often associated with positive outcomes for children. Child maltreatment may be a sign of a problem in the marriage. At the very least, it signals significant stress upon the marital unit. When working with a family headed by a married mother and father, the family services specialist must come to understand the status of the marriage. Is it strong and healthy? Is it troubled and, if so, why and how? The condition of the marriage directly influences the children. Furthermore, the child maltreatment may have occurred because of marital problems that caused misdirected anger, stress, and exhaustion.

Cohabiting Parents. A man and a woman living together who have one or more children together display many of the same issues as a married couple. However, the research shows that cohabitation—even and especially when children are involved—is not the same as marriage. For example, one study reveals that when couples marry after cohabiting, they are nearly 50% more likely to divorce eventually as compared to couples that did not live together.

Other research has shown that teenagers being raised by cohabiting parents have more emotional and behavioral problems than peers who are living with married parents. Why there is such a difference in outcomes for couples and children alike in a cohabiting arrangement? This can only be answered by theory and speculation. It may have to do with the view the couple has toward marriage, commitment, and their own relationship. It is theorized that perhaps cohabiting parents, especially men, view the union as more tenuous and perhaps temporary, which suggests that the family services specialist determines how the cohabiting mother and father view their own relationship, its strength, and its longevity.

Incarcerated Fathers. More and more programs are working with men in prison not only to prepare them for returning to a productive role in society, but just as importantly to prepare them for being a good father upon their return. Many men who are in prison have never had an opportunity to learn how to be good fathers. These programs work with men around issues related to fatherhood not only out of a commitment to connecting men with their children, but also to ensure that men who leave prison are prepared to take an active role in their family. This may be one of the best ways to motivate men to avoid the behaviors that lead them into prison in the first place. A family services specialist working with a family who has a father currently in prison may find it valuable to determine where the father is incarcerated, and if one of these programs is currently operating at the facility.

Working with Different Fathers in Different Situations (CON'T)

Multiple Fathers. A situation that can be extremely challenging occurs when there are multiple fathers involved in the family. In some families, children are living in the same household, yet have different fathers.

There may be different arrangements:

- The mother is living with children by herself, while the fathers of the children may or may not be involved.
- The mother may be living with the father of one or more of her children, while the father(s) of her other children may or may not be involved.
- The mother may be living with a man who is not the father of any of her children, and the father(s) of her children may or may not be involved.

Obviously, any one of these scenarios presents the potential for tension and confusion over roles. Concerns over who is responsible for the safety of the children, who plays the role of the psychological father—the man who acts, in the eyes of the child, as "dad"—and how other adults are portraying the father to his children will come into play. Financial issues are often a source of tension. Issues of trust between and among the adults are almost sure to arise. As one would expect, it is common for one father to be angry at another over who is responsible for a child being maltreated.

When working with a family with multiple fathers involved, it is important for the family services specialist to understand the role each man plays in the family dynamic. It is also important to learn how each father views the maltreatment, what led up to it, and who, in his mind, is responsible for the maltreatment occurring. All men living in the household should be part of the process, including family meetings. Whether and when to involve other fathers of children in the household needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis and, like any challenging issue facing a family services specialist, the input of a supervisor can be a valuable tool. The goal of the entire process, of course, is to achieve safety and permanency for the child. One or all of the fathers who are connected to the family can prove to be a valuable ally in accomplishing this goal—determining which of the fathers and how he or they will be helpful, and how the family services specialist can support them in being helpful, is the task the family services specialist faces.

Boyfriends. While he is not the father, a boyfriend may fill the role of father to the child. He may contribute financially to rearing the child. He may be the father of other children in the house, but not of the child who was maltreated. If the father of the child who was maltreated is involved in any way, the father assuredly will have strong feelings about the boyfriend. Much has been written about boyfriends in the house and their role in child maltreatment. Because these men typically do not have the same history of care and nurturing with the child, the same emotional and normative commitment to the child's welfare, and the same institutionalized role as a father figure as do biological fathers in intact families, boyfriends pose a higher risk to children if they spend time alone with them.

Working with Different Fathers in Different Situations (CON'T)

These factors help to explain why mothers' boyfriends are much more likely to be involved in physical or sexual abuse of children than a biological father. In one study of physical abuse, boyfriends accounted for 64% of non-parental abuse, even though boyfriends performed only 2% of non-parental care. Another study found that the odds of child maltreatment were 2.5 times higher in households with a boyfriend living in the home, compared to households with a biological father. The authors of this study concluded that family services specialists should "focus more of their attention on the high-risk relationship between a surrogate father and the children."

Stepfathers. While research varies, some studies show that stepfathers are more likely to abuse their children physically and sexually. A 1997 study of more than 600 families in upstate New York found that children living with stepfathers were more than three times more likely to be sexually abused than children living in intact families. Another study found that the presence of a stepfather doubles the risk of sexual abuse for girls—either from the stepfather or from another male figure. Analyzing reports of fatal child abuse in the United States, one study found that stepfathers were approximately 60 times more likely than biological fathers to kill their preschool children. While these studies find that stepfathers often invest less in caring for their stepchildren, others cite many examples of caring behaviors by and close relationships with stepparents, suggesting that paternal investment is not restricted only to biological offspring.

This is not to suggest that the family services specialist should assume the boyfriend or stepfather is a dangerous member of the family. There are, of course, countless stepfathers who step into the role of dad with both competence and caring, and many live-in boyfriends provide both love and structure for the children in the household. It does mean that the family services specialist needs to recognize that there are unique issues at play when working with a live-in boyfriend or stepfather. It also may mean that, if the perpetrator is the live-in boyfriend or stepfather, there are additional challenges and issues to consider when assessing the safety of the child.

Adapted from: Rosenberg, J., & Wilcox, W. B. (2006). The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>

Strategies for Enlisting Mothers' Support

The father's relationship with the mother is the single greatest determinant of significant and successful father involvement.



Case managers can use these strategies to enlist mothers' support in locating and engaging fathers. These strategies apply to mothers as well as to maternal relatives.

- Explain that the father has a legal right to see his children (legal fathers).
- Explain that children have a right to get to know their father.
- Encourage mothers to look beyond her personal issues with the father and consider the lifetime benefits to the child that might come out of the father's connection (e.g survivors and disability benefits, inheritance, health history, emotional support, etc.).
- Provide mother with concrete examples of situations that might occur in the future, where both she and the child will need the father. For example, mothers may want fathers to re-enter the picture and share parenting when children become teens and are engaging in high-risk behavior.
- Listen to what the mother is saying (or not saying) about the father.
- Assure mother that safety is always the top priority.
- Remember there are two sides to every story.
- Do not expect things to be perfect.
- Use supervised contact as a strategy to ensure child safety.

Messages for Mothers

These are some messages case managers need to communicate to mothers concerning their children and their children's father.

Every child has an irreplaceable biological father

Your child has a tie to his or her biological father that can never be broken. If you refuse to talk about a father who is absent from the home, it will merely arouse your child's curiosity and result in the child creating fantasies about the father. An honest discussion, appropriate for the child's age, is the best place to start in acknowledging the role of the father in the child's life.

Every child needs a relationship with his or her father

Your child will develop a way of relating to his or her father even if the child never sees him, and this relationship will affect the child throughout his or her life. Either the relationship that the child develops will be healthy in terms of the way the child views the father, himself, and for girls – the way she will view future men in her life; or, the relationship will be unhealthy. Choose healthy. To the greatest extent possible, the relationship should be face-to-face, nurtured, and encouraged.

You are the gatekeeper – open the gate!

Mothers have to place reasonable limits on access to children when the father is absent from the home, but total denial of access is seldom justified. A father can relieve the mother of some of the emotional, physical, disciplinary, and financial burdens of child rearing. Not only will the child benefit from the father's involvement, but you will too.

The father has strengths, use them

Fathers relate to children differently than do mothers. They tend to be more involved in play, enforcing rules, and expressing concerns about the child's long-term future. Identifying a father's strengths and encouraging him will help both the father and the child establish a productive relationship.



Strategies to Address Barriers to Father Involvement

- Help fathers understand the importance of father involvement and the negative consequences children experience through fatherlessness and inadequate fathering.
- Connect dads to appropriate resources and services. In addition to job training, many dads can benefit from referral to housing assistance programs, parenting classes, specialized co-parenting programs for single and divorced fathers, programs for incarcerated and previously incarcerated fathers, and programs to address mental health, substance abuse, anger management, or domestic violence programs.
- Encourage and support fathers in establishing paternity and legitimating their children. This applies across all VDSS program areas, not just in foster care. Also, help fathers to establish their relationship beyond just the legal relationship.
- Make efforts to ensure the father is involved to the extent possible in the family's/child's case plan. Also, help to set the stage for long-term involvement of the father beyond the life of your case.
- Aid fathers by helping them identify supports that will continue to be available beyond the "life" of this case.

Advice for Fathers

Family services specialists should communicate the following to fathers, especially noncustodial fathers.

Respect the mother of your children.

Regardless of your feelings for the mother of your children, you need to treat her with respect—for the sake of your children. Children are happier and feel more secure when their parents get along. You should ignore negative comments, compliment the mother when you can, and keep the lines of communication open. Try to seek common ground with mothers around common goals for your children, and never criticize your children's mother in front of the children.

Something is better than nothing.

If you have provided no emotional or financial support to the child in the past, anything you can offer is better than nothing. For example, providing care for an active toddler even for a few hours gives the mother time to rest. Or, buying a child a pair of shoes indicates that you understand you have financial responsibilities. Time is the most important gift to your child. Spending time with a child communicates to the child your love and concern in a way that nothing else (presents, money, promises) can.

Keep your promises.

Children who have endured divorce or the breakup of a parental relationship often feel abandoned and distrustful of the adults in their lives. You need to be careful to nurture or restore your children's faith in adults and you, in particular. Therefore, keep the promises you make to their children. You have to earn your children's trust by keeping your word.

Don't be a "Disneyland Dad."

Nonresidential fathers are often tempted to play "Disneyland Dad," that is, to spend virtually all the time they have with their children in fun activities. You need to challenge your children to grow in virtue and spend time doing ordinary things with them. Help your children

with homework, have them do chores around their home, and tuck them into bed on a school night. You will discover more about your children amidst the ordinary struggles of daily life than you will eating popcorn with them in a darkened movie theater.

In addition, the father who never moves into the fathering relationship is creating problems for the children and their mother. The mother does not want to be the only disciplinarian or the only one saying "no". When you remain the "weekend warrior" who is there only for the good times, the mother may become resentful and less inclined to allow visits. Take on responsibilities of a father if you want your children and their mother to accept you as one.

Advice for Fathers (CON'T)

Stay in regular contact.

Nonresidential fathers should stay in regular contact with their children. If you live locally, you should be faithful about seeing your children on a given day. If you do not live close by you should be faithful about calling or sending a letter or email to your children on a weekly basis.



Nonresidential fathers should stay in regular contact with their children. If you live locally, you should be faithful about seeing your children on a given day. If you do not live close by you should be faithful about calling or sending a letter or email to your children on a weekly basis. Children thrive on maintaining regular contact with their fathers. This advice holds even for teenagers, who may have to be asked to make sacrifices in their social or sports schedules to spend time with you. In the end, maintaining the father-child bond is more important than a missed game or movie with friends.

Don't be too soft on your kids.

Nonresidential fathers often feel like they should go easy on their children when it comes to discipline. Given the shortness of father-child visits, many fathers do not want to alienate their children by disciplining them for misbehavior, but this is a big mistake. Children will take advantage of your laxity by pushing the behavioral envelope even more. Be a firm, consistent disciplinarian with your children, even if that means that one or two visits are spent largely on discipline. In the long-term, children who are disciplined well are better behaved and more respectful of their fathers than children who are given a free reign.

Take care of your children financially.

Nonresidential fathers need to take at least partial responsibility for the financial welfare of their children. Children who receive regular financial support from their fathers do better educationally and are more confident that their father is there for them and their family. You should pay child support on time and be flexible enough to help your children when unforeseen expenses come up. If possible, you should tell your teens that you will help pay for college or vocational training. If employment or child support is a problem, ask for help. Ask for assistance in locating and accessing programs that will help with job-skills and job placement.

Note: This advice draws on educational material from The Children's Trust Fund of Massachusetts, The National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, and the National Center for Fathering.

Adapted from: Rosenberg, J., & Wilcox, W. B. (2006). The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>

Interviewing Fathers

For **fathers who live in the home**, family services specialists should address the following topics:

- What role does the father view himself playing in the family?
- How does the father view the maltreatment? Does he see it as a failure on his part?
- Is there anything he believes he could have done differently to prevent the maltreatment?
- What father role models, if any, has he had? What was this role model like?
- How does the father think his role model would have handled the situation that led to the maltreatment?
- What is the father's view of discipline? What role does aggression and anger play? Is he open to learning new ways of discipline?
- What is the quality of the relationship with the child's mother?
- Who are the other men in the family? How does the father view these men?
- What is the father's current level of interaction with the children?

Additional issues to explore with **fathers who live outside the child's home**:

- What is the current living arrangement of the father in relation to the home in which his child lives?
- Is there another man living in the home with the child? How does the child's father view this man and his relationship with his child and the mother of his child?
- How often does the father see his child? If and when he does see the child, what is the nature of the interaction?

Adapted from: Rosenberg, J., & Wilcox, W. B. (2006). The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series.
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>

Men, Fathers, Dads, Boyfriends: Resource or Liability

Factors to Consider

History of violent behavior

- prior restraining orders
- criminal record
- frequency/severity of abuse in current and past intimate relationships
- violence towards others outside of intimate relationships
- threats to kill others or self

State of mind

- obsession with significant others
- increased risk-taking
- ignoring consequences
- depression
- desperation

Individual factors that reduce behavioral controls of perpetrator

- substance abuse
- certain medications
- evidence of a serious mental disorder, such as paranoid schizophrenia or bipolar disorder

Situational factors

- presence of other significant stressors (e.g. recent loss like job, family member, significant relationship)
- access to weapons
- past failures to respond appropriately to interventions

Interview Questions to Consider

Remember that rapport is paramount in obtaining accurate information. Rapport must be established and questions asked in a respectful manner. The following questions may be helpful when trying to assess a father's level of risk to children.

Significant Relationships

- Describe your relationship with your partner.
- How would you describe your partner?
- What do you do when you and your partner disagree?

Men, Fathers, Dads, Boyfriends: Resource or Liability (CON'T)

Problem Solving Abilities

- What do you do when things don't go well? How do you manage your frustrations?
- How do you and your partner manage your household duties and income?
- Do you and your partner ever yell at each other? Do you and your partner call each other degrading names or put each other down?
- Have you ever physically harmed or used force on anyone in your family? In what way? When?
- Have you ever threatened to harm or kill yourself, your partner, your children, or your pet?
- Have you ever threatened or used a weapon or gun against your partner? Do you have access to a weapon or gun?
- Have the police ever come to your home? If so, why? What happened?
- Have you ever been arrested, charged, or convicted of a domestic violence assault? If so, what happened?

Quality of Relationship with Children

- How would you describe your children?
- What kinds of things do you expect from your children?
- How do you discipline your children? Have you ever lost control while disciplining, or felt you disciplined your children too harshly?

Risk Factors

- Did you ever see either of your parents harmed by a spouse or significant other? If so, what did you do and how did it make you feel?
- Were you ever harmed as a child?
- When was the last time you drank or used an illegal substance? How much?
- Have you ever attended a substance abuse program or been arrested for DUI?
- Have you ever been treated for depression?
- Have you previously been violent with your partner? With others?
- Have you experienced pervasive thoughts of homicide or suicide? Attempts?

Adapted from: Domestic Violence Training Program, Simmons School of Social Work, Massachusetts NASW Committee on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault (2002). Adapted from: Bragg, H. L., (2003) Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series, Child Gateway Information Gateway.

The ABCs of a Father-friendly Environment

Assets of fathers are emphasized, not their deficits.

Budget indicates that fathers are a priority.

Curricula and educational materials respect the range of fathers being served.

Diverse staff reflects the population using your services.

Environment clearly states that dads and men in families are welcome here.

Father-child bond is emphasized and encouraged.

Gender-neutral forms, policies, and procedures are employed.

Hands-on learning experiences are components of many activities.

Importance of fathers is promoted but not at the expense of mothers.

Journals, magazines, and reading materials reflect the interests of dads, too.

Knowledgeable men are recruited to address sensitive concerns of fathers.

Language is respectful and affirming of all parents and children.

Marketing plan invites many faces of fathers and promotes their full involvement.

Needs of fathers influence the program's growth and development.

Outreach staff recruits in locations that all types of fathers frequent.

Paternal and maternal parenting styles are recognized and respected.

Quality evaluation tools and procedures that respect fathers are in place.

Recognize and reduce barriers that limit father involvement.

Staff receives periodic best practices training to better serve fathers.

Targeted services are offered specifically for fathers.

Understand wide range of fathers' physical and mental health concerns.

Values are emphasized that promote gender reconciliation.

Women's and men's rooms each have a diaper changing station.

eXcellent advisory council and active speakers bureau are in place.

Young fathers are offered services.

Zealous attitude prevails that we are all in this together.

Adapted from: Tift, N. (n.d.). The ABCs of a father-friendly environment for maternal and child health agencies. Washington, DC: National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families.

Tips for Managing Services between Various Support Systems

- Get release of information from fathers to get permission for discussion between the various service providers.
- At the time of referral, brief the service provider fully on the case, the reason for the referral, and the goals and objectives for the father.
- Communicate freely and frequently with the service providers.
- Maintain contact with any professional or organization to which the father is referred. Ensure that needed services are, in fact, being provided and that progress is being made.
- Ensure that services provided are supportive of the ultimate goal: safety and permanency for the child.



Father Engagement Resources for Family Services Specialists

Video Clips

[Effectively Engaging Young Fathers in Child Welfare](#)

[Engaging Fathers](#)

[Dads Rock! Nurturing Father Engagement](#)

[Including Fathers](#)

[Role Fathers Play](#)

[The Importance of Fathers – Ted Talk](#)

Online Resources

[The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children](#)

[Engaging Fathers and Paternal Family Members](#)

[Engaging Fathers Podcast – Part I](#)

[Engaging Fathers Podcast – Part II](#)

[Engaging Fathers Podcast – Part III](#)

Webinars

[National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#)

Flyers

[Virginia Paternity Establishment Program \(English\)](#)

[Virginia Paternity Establishment Program \(Spanish\)](#)

Brochures

[Virginia Paternity Establishment Program \(English\)](#)

[Virginia Paternity Establishment Program \(Spanish\)](#)

Appendix

Father Engagement Resources

Tips for Fathers



- Take it slow – Get to know your children and don't expect everything to be perfect immediately. It may take some time to mend this relationship, but don't give up.
- Be consistent – Follow the rules that the children are familiar with. Find out what time they go to bed, what they eat for breakfast, any fears they have, and other crucial details about their lives. Maintain these routines when the children are with you.
- Get support – Everyone is overwhelmed with the changes in their family – you, your children, your extended family, your partner. Get support to deal with the stress you are under. Reach out to a clergy member, neighbor, or friend, when you need to talk about the stress you are experiencing. Seek professional counseling before things begin to spiral out of control.
- Learn as much as you can about child development, communication skills, and discipline techniques. Your child may have entered a new stage while you were away from him/her, and you need to know how to deal with him/her effectively. If you took parenting classes, review the materials you received, or take another class.
- Libraries have many books on parenting that you can borrow.
- Listen to your children – Make time to give each child attention every day. Resist the urge to substitute giving “things” for giving “time.”
- Start with today – You cannot change the past, so start today as the new and better parent you are NOW.
- Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs for rest, proper nutrition, adult relationships, and respite from your children.

Tips for Fathers (CON'T)

- Give yourself and your children time to adjust. You are forming a new family, with healthier lives than you had before your children were placed in foster care. It takes time, love, and patience to put all the pieces together.
- It is important that you remain involved in parenting through visits with your children.
- Be on time and consistently attend your visits. If your child is in foster care placement, ask if you can write or call your child, speak to his foster parents, or have other types of interactions with your child.
- Reassure your child but be honest about what the future may hold. Don't make promises you are unable to keep.
- Show your child he is important to you. Listen to what your children are telling you during the visits – take an interest in their school, friends, and activities.
- Be positive. Visits with your children are not a time to talk to case managers, criticize services, your child's mother, or foster parents, or react negatively to the situation. Use the time to talk with, read to, and play with your children.
- A father can be psychologically available to his child, whether or not they live in the same household.
- Fathers are important in providing children with a sense of their culture and history – with their genealogical connectedness.
- Be a good role model for your child.
- It is the quality of the relationship you have with your child, whether you physically live with your child or not, that is important to them. They want to be loved and valued by you.
- Take the opportunity to hug your children.

Father Child Reunion Tips

In his book, *The Prodigal Father*, Mark Bryan, himself a once absent dad, shares suggestions that fathers can use in reconnecting with their children.

These include:

- Stay relaxed. Your child will be curious and most likely will want to get to know you.
- Choose a comfortable setting for your first contact (when possible).
- Keep the meeting simple. Have minimal expectations. First meetings should not be too long.
- Listen. Be open to what your child has to say. Avoid getting defensive.
- Think ahead. What do you want to say to your child?
- Plan a next visit. This will be reassuring to the child.
- Don't bad mouth your children's mother. Avoid this at all costs.
- Move Slowly! Don't rush the relationship.
- Don't expect to be treated like a returning hero. Your child needs time to deal with the situation and feelings.
- Be careful what you promise. The relationship needs to be rebuilt. It takes time to establish trust.
- If the child is old enough to understand, address your absence but avoid attempting to justify it. Do not blame others for not being there. Reassure your child that you will be there for him or her.

Adapted from: Bryan, Mark. Prodigal Fathers: Reuniting Fathers and Their Children. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1998.

Keys to Good Discipline



- ✓ Set clear rules and enforce them.
- ✓ Be consistent.
- ✓ Never give into a tantrum. This will only teach children that tantrums work and will encourage more and louder tantrums in the future.
- ✓ Keep anger out of discipline. This also helps the parent refrain from either inappropriate or excessive discipline.
- ✓ Do not confuse bad behavior with a bad child. Parents need to verbalize to children that it's the bad behavior they don't like, not the child.
- ✓ Use time-outs and other appropriate consequences.
- ✓ Praise good behavior.
- ✓ Combine rules and limit setting with explanations.
- ✓ Telling children why rules are what they are, and why they are being punished helps them learn what is and is not acceptable behavior.

Discipline Self-assessment

Four questions to ask yourself

- Did I teach or did I express anger?
- Was my response consistent with our family rules?
- Did the consequence suit the misbehavior?
- Was there any possibility my response could have hurt my child?

Adapted from: Rosenberg, J., & Wilcox, W. B. (2006). *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series.
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>

Activities for Fathering

A father can do any of the following quality-time activities with – or for – his child:

1. Send a card on birthday and holidays.
2. Call on the phone to wish child happy birthday, holiday, or any day.
3. Help with homework.
4. Read a book with his child.
5. Go to a ball game.
6. Go to a movie.
7. Go to a school event.
8. Go to a park.
9. Take a walk.
10. Watch an appropriate show on television.
11. Build something together (ex: a birdhouse).
12. Prepare and plant a garden.
13. Play a board game.
14. Put a puzzle together.
15. Toss a football or baseball.
16. Put a model airplane together.
17. Send flowers.
18. Go shopping.
19. Read the comics in the newspaper together.
20. Go to the library.
21. Ask a question such as “Why do you think the sky is blue?”.
22. Do a clean-up project together.
23. Go to a local tourist attraction.
24. Cook dinner together.
25. Make cookies or brownies.
26. Change the furniture in a room (let the arrangement be your child’s suggestion).
27. Get a bird book and go bird watching. See how many different birds you can find.
28. Write a poem together.
29. Make up a story together.
30. Play school. Let your child be the teacher.
31. With magnetic letters write notes back & forth to each other on the refrigerator.

Activities for Fathering (CON'T)

32. Make finger Jell-O and cut it into crazy shapes with a cookie cutter.
33. Build a sand castle at the beach or sandbox.
34. Start a hobby together such as collecting stamps or postcards.
35. Play tic-tac-toe.
36. Create a scavenger hunt list for your child to find.
37. Go to a yard sale and pick up some cool books.
38. Go to yard sales and see who can spot the weirdest object for sale.
39. Make hand puppets out of socks and create a puppet show.
40. Create a dream vacation (you do not have actually to go on it to have fun creating it).



Ten Ways to be a Better Dad



1. Respect Your Children's Mother

One of the best things a father can do for his children is to respect their mother. If you are married, keep your marriage strong and vital. If you are not married, it is still important to respect and support the mother of your children. A father and mother who respect each other and let their children know it provide a secure environment for them. When children see their parents respecting each other, they are more likely to feel that they are also accepted and respected.

2. Spend Time with Your Children

How a father spends his time tells his children what is important to him. If you always seem too busy for your children, they will feel neglected no matter what you say. Treasuring children often means sacrificing other things, but it is essential to spend time with your children. Kids grow up so quickly. Missed opportunities are lost forever.

3. Earn the Right to Be Heard

All too often, the only time a father speaks to his children is when they have done something wrong. That is why so many children cringe when their mother says, "Your father wants to talk with you." Begin talking with your kids when they are very young so that difficult subjects will be easier to handle as they get older. Take time and listen to their ideas and problems.

4. Discipline with Love

All children need guidance and discipline, not as punishment, but to set reasonable limits. Remind your children of the consequences of their actions and provide meaningful rewards for desirable behavior. Fathers who discipline in a calm and fair manner show love for their children.

5. Be a Role Model

Fathers are role models to their kids whether they realize it or not. A girl who spends time with a loving father grows up knowing she deserves to be treated with respect by boys, and what to look for in a husband. Fathers can teach sons what is important in life by demonstrating honesty, humility, and responsibility.

Ten Ways to be a Better Dad (CON'T)

6. Be a Teacher

Too many fathers think teaching is something others do, but a father who teaches his children about right and wrong, and encourages them to do their best, will see his children make good choices. Involved fathers use everyday examples to help their children learn the basic lessons of life.

7. Eat Together as a Family

Sharing a meal together (breakfast, lunch, or dinner) can be an important part of healthy family life. In addition to providing some structure in a busy day, it gives kids the chance to talk about what they are doing and want to do. It is also a good time for fathers to listen and give advice. Most importantly, it is a time for families to be together each day.

8. Read to Your Children

In a world where television often dominates the lives of children, it is important that fathers make the effort to read to their children. Children learn best by doing and reading, as well as seeing and hearing. Begin reading to your children when they are very young. When they are older, encourage them to read on their own. Instilling your children with a love for reading is one of the best ways to ensure they will have a lifetime of personal and career growth.

9. Show Affection

Children need the security that comes from knowing they are wanted, accepted, and loved by their family. Parents, especially fathers, need to feel both comfortable and willing to hug their children. Showing affection everyday is the best way to let your children know that you love them.

10. Realize That a Father's Job Is Never Done

Even after children are grown and ready to leave home, they still look to their fathers for wisdom and advice. Whether it is continued schooling, a new job, or a wedding, fathers continue to play an essential part in the lives of their children as they grow and, perhaps, marry and build their own families.

Adapted from: National Fatherhood Initiative. (n.d.). 10 ways to be a better dad [On-line]. Available: <https://www.fatherhood.org/10ways.asp>

Practical Tips for Knowing Your Child— Nontrivial Questions

It is amazing what things men commit to memory, for example, key statistics for the Atlanta Braves or Chicago Bulls, specifications for next year's Corvette, or lyrics to songs from 20 years ago. However, many dads can't answer even simple questions about their children who are as important as anyone or anything in their lives.

Here are some questions fathers can ask their children. Some may be easy, some are not, but this is not just trivia. These questions provide a marker for how aware a father is of his child and his or her world. A healthy awareness will help in so many areas of fathering. It can be as simple as going out for a soda and asking about his child's friends at school and what they like to do together. This should not turn this into an interrogation. A child can tell whether the questioner is genuinely interested or simply collecting data that may be used against him or her later. It is simply to get to know more about the various aspects of the child's life. Some examples of appropriate questions include:

- Who is your child's all-time hero?
- What is your child's most prized possession?
- Who is his or her best friend?
- What causes your child to lose sleep?
- What were your child's greatest achievements and disappointments in the last year?
- What is your child's favorite meal?
- What would your child like to do when he or she grows up?
- If your child had \$20 to spend, what would he or she buy?
- What does your child most like to do with you?
- What is the most important thing you need to discuss with your child in the next 6 months?

Even for the most aware fathers, these questions may serve as a wake-up call. After asking such questions, a father may decide he needs to sit down with his child and find out more about what makes him or her tick. It could lead to a great discussion about who he or she is and hopes to become. Fathers also should listen to their child's friends, teachers, coaches, and, especially, their mothers. All of these people see a different side of the child, and they will give dads insights they would have never noticed on their own.

Adapted from: Rosenberg, J., & Wilcox, W. B. (2006). *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, User Manual Series.
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>

Twenty-one Long Distance Activities for Dads at a Distance

The *Dads at a Distance* web site has been designed to help fathers who are business travelers, military men, non-custodial fathers, airline pilots, travel guides, traveling salesmen, railroad workers, truckers, professional athletes, musicians/entertainers, actors, corporate executives, and any other fathers who have to be away from their children to maintain and strengthen the relationships they have with their children while they are away.

1. Go to the mall and have a photo of yourself put on a pillowcase and then send it to your child. If you have a favorite cologne, you might want to put a little bit on the pillowcase to remind your child of you.
2. Purchase or make stickers of your child's name and stick them over the names of a character in one of their favorite books. You also can get a picture of your child's face and place it over the character's face.
3. Make a video or audiotape of you reading bedtime stories. Send them to your child along with the book.
4. Arrange for flowers or pizza to be delivered to your child before or after a special event (e.g., a play, recital, or sports game). Include a note telling them how proud you are of their accomplishment.
5. Send a package containing all the things your child will need if he or she gets sick. For example, you could send a can of chicken noodle soup, a special blanket or pillowcase, a video or audiotape wishing them a speedy recovery, crossword puzzles, or a stuffed animal.
6. Send home a photo documentary of what you do all day when you are away. Be sure to include things like what you eat and how you travel. Things that you might think are boring, your kids will be very interested in seeing. Have your child do the same.
7. Have a star officially named after your child.
8. Send a postcard attack. (Send a postcard everyday for a week straight; try to send postcards from unique places).
9. If both you and your child have access to cell phones, then go fishing with them from a distance.
10. Include surprises within your letters: fast food wrappers, foreign currency, pencil shavings, coasters, Band-Aids, your own art, flower petals, Sunday comics, sand, fortunes from cookies, newspaper clippings, stamps, or old shoe laces.
11. If both you and your child have access to the Internet, then go on a virtual field trip together. Be sure to use a chat program so you can communicate with each other while looking at the web sites. A couple of places to start would be NASA's web site at <http://www.nasa.gov> or the PBS web site at <http://www.pbs.org>.

Twenty-one Long Distance Activities for Dads at a Distance (CONT)

12. Find unique things to write your letters on, for example, things your child likes—a favorite color of paper, stickers, or pictures of things they like; fun objects—coaster, napkins, paper tray liners at restaurants, air sickness bags, old handkerchiefs, or pictures of you or of favorite spots; paper cut into special shapes (holiday shapes like shamrocks or hearts); or puzzles (cut your finished letter into pieces; try sending one piece at a time).
13. Send home some money so that your child can go to the ice cream parlor. Be sure to send a special letter along that can only be read at the ice cream parlor. If you both have access to cell phones, then you can both be at a ice cream parlor talking over your ice cream.
14. Write a newsletter (have a regular issue of your own family newsletter with columns about each child, family events, and exciting news).
15. If your child does not already have access to a speakerphone, then buy one. Set the phone in the middle of the room, and you will be able to have dinner with them, be there as they brush their teeth, and get ready for bed.
16. Start a letter and take it with you throughout the day. Add a sentence every now and then and be sure to add where you are when you write the different sentences (i.e., an elevator, taxi, or café).
17. Play internet games together like Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune. Other games that can be found on the Internet include golf, card games, chess, checkers, and strategy games.
18. Make a package that contains cookie cutters and the non-perishable ingredients of your child's favorite cookie so you can "help" them bake while you are away.
19. Choose a photo from your photo album that you can send to your child and then write a letter explaining the events surrounding it. Also, if both you and your child have access to the Internet, have a family home page.
20. Begin a life's lessons booklet. Each week write down a few of the lessons you have learned in life and how you learned those lessons. When the booklet is full, send it to your child to use as he or she begins or continues the journey of life.
21. Before you leave home next time, hide some treasure (notes of appreciation, videos of you reading stories, candy, or toys) around the house. Be sure to draw a treasure map of where you have hidden these things, and then mail it home. If your child has a portable phone, then you can talk to them and give hints as they hunt for the treasure. If you are not living with your child, you can still do this activity by mailing the treasures ahead of time to the person who is taking care of your child.

Adapted from: The National Long Distance Relationship Building Institute. (2001). *20 long distance activities for dads at a distance* [On-line]. Available: www.daads.com/fathering.html.

Tips from a Father in Prison

The following is a list of suggestions that you can use to maintain the attachment to your children from inside a prison.

1. Even if your relationship with the mother of your children is over, you need to establish and maintain a positive relationship with her. For the sake of your children, try to find ways to connect with her respectfully.
2. Do not expect big changes right away from your family members. Take your time.
3. Find out about policies regarding how you can connect with your child—visitation, letters, telephone calls, and audiotapes. Ask your prison chaplain, counselor, or other staff.
4. Develop a plan and follow it on how often you will connect with your child.
5. When explaining to your children why you are not living with them, be honest but respect their ability to understand it according to their age.
6. When telling your children how important they are to you, do not be surprised if they do not respond the way you want them to. Children are often angry that you did something wrong that prevents you from being with them.
7. To establish and maintain your family relationships, be ready to make amends and apologize to them.
8. Find ways to support your children emotionally, financially, and spiritually as much as possible.
9. Your family and children need to be able to rely on you if you say you will call or write regularly, so be consistent in your approach and contact schedule.
10. Be realistic about goals and expectations. Do not expect too much, too soon from them.
11. Remember family celebrations, special occasions, and cultural events. If you have a hobby or crafts at prison, make gifts or draw pictures and make them into a coloring book.
12. If at all possible, purchase small items for your children through the commissary or mail order catalogs.

Tips from a Father in Prison (con't)

13. Use your time constructively. Get your GED, or take parenting classes, anger management, adult continuing education classes, anything that better yourself.
14. Some prisons allow you to purchase and make video or audiotapes. Use these to tell stories, share memories, and bedtime stories. Have your children listen to it when they miss you.
15. Before your release date, clear up any legal problems that may be pending such as your driving record, credit problems, or child support.
16. Your children might not know how to say exactly what they are feeling and thinking, so be patient with them.
17. Make a realistic plan and follow through, no matter how bad things get, when re-connecting with your children after you are released from jail.
18. While you are still in prison, research programs that might help you reach your goals once released. Seek out programs about parenting, housing, jobs, legal problems, or credit problems.
19. Work with other prison fathers trying to connect with their children from inside prison.
20. Get some counseling from the appropriate staff (psychologist, chaplain, case manager, correctional counselor).
21. Think about how you want to be a parent and your future as a dad and make decisions about that future. Look at your own relationship with your dad to see what was learned, good and bad.
22. Go to the prison library, take the time to read what you can to try to learn about being a better dad. Try to read as much as you can about father/child relationships.
23. Check out some of the other resources in the Incarcerated Fathers Library.

Online Web Sites for Fathers

The following are some of the thousands of electronic sites available that contain information fathers may find beneficial:

- Provides a variety of information and activities. In addition, dads can type in parenting concerns and areas of interest and receive tips and suggestions.
<http://www.ctw.org/parents/advice>
- Provides a wealth of activities dads can do with their children.
<http://www.childfun.com>
- Provides developmental basics, milestones, and screening information for children birth to 17 years of age
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/index.html>
- Provides information for special fathering populations; such as, incarcerated fathers, single fathers, etc. In addition, fathers can sign up for emails on parenting tips and updates on issues of importance to dads.
<http://www.fatherhood.org>
- Provides information that may specifically be of interest to fathers.
<http://www.fathers.com>
- Provides a wide variety of fatherhood articles.
<http://www.fathermag.com/news>
- Provides accessibility to free local resources families may need.
<https://211virginia.org/consumer/index.php>
- Provides accessibility to families in search of child care.
<https://vachildcare.com/>
- Provides a clearinghouse of resources to assist dads with local fatherhood resources, ways to spend meaningful time with family, and co-parenting principles.
<https://www.fatherhood.gov/>
- Provides activities and resources for long distance dads and their families.
<http://www.daads.com>.
- Provides help for incarcerated parents and their families.
<http://www.fcnetwork.org>.