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For Dads: Five ways to support your parenting role

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The image of the bumbling father, putting diapers on backwards or leaving baby on the roof of the car thankfully appears to be becoming a thing of the past. Today's dads are more likely to be seen sporting the latest baby carriers while the family is out shopping at the local farmer's market. That being said, there still appears to be some discrepancy between the amount of involvement fathers have in their children's lives in comparison to mothers. How can dads be more involved in their baby's first years and thereby help moms find more balance in their own lives?

It will be much easier and more natural for fathers to be involved in their children's daily experiences if they are engaged in caring for them right from the start. Thinking in terms of a 'family schedule', rather than 'baby's schedule' may help to promote a more inclusive process where every family member holds an important role. Planning for consistent times where dad will be responsible for baby will benefit everyone involved - fathers and children will be spending time together building trusting relationships, while mothers will have opportunities to engage in activities that are not solely child-related, maintaining a healthier balance in their lives as a result. It may be challenging for some mothers to hand over the reins, even for a short period, however to do so is vital. Children benefit from close relationships with both of their parents and this is more easily attainable when women support and trust their partner's competence. If this requires a belting rendition of 'Let it Go' to serve as a reminder, so be it, and please accept this advance apology for the eternal earworm.

Five Ways Dads can be More Involved with the Family

1. At Home: Becoming involved in daily care routines can provide opportunities to become aware of children's needs and preferences, better enabling fathers in reading their child's cues. Because moms are often responsible for the majority of care with a new infant they are also privy to the priceless bonding opportunities that come with this. Ensuring dads

have the chance to feed, change diapers and bathe their infant with regularity will promote bonding through the cuddling and quiet observations that can occur during these (usually) peaceful moments with their child. Working at least one daily feeding or a consistent bath time with dad into the family schedule can be an effective way to ensure these activities become part of the daily routine and support dad's beliefs in their capabilities to care for their children.

2. At Child Care and School: Active involvement in child care and school decisions demonstrates the importance of children's care and education and the significant role fathers play in their child's development. Attending meetings, parent nights and special events will provide opportunities to form relationships with the other people involved in their children's lives. Building relationships with knowledgeable educators can provide invaluable opportunities to gain further insight regarding child development and ways to promote growth at home. Fathers will be better able to support their child's development and may also gain new information about their child, as behaviour may differ from what is seen at home. Volunteering for field trips or attending parent council serve as excellent ways to become more involved while getting to know other parents in the community.
3. In the Community: The number and variety of community programs available for parents and children seems to be continually growing. Music classes, swimming or library programs are all great places to start and as children age the opportunities increase for more specialized programs, such as cooking, sports or art classes. Finding a program for dad and baby to participate in together will provide opportunities for one on one time, relationship and memory building, and may develop into a shared lifelong activity.
4. Within the Family: Maintaining communication in an honest manner while remaining aware of other's feelings and differing perceptions is not always an easy task, but one well worth working towards. Fathers need to let moms know they want to be involved, while mothers need to let dads know if they are feeling left out. Asking for guidance when it's required is essential, as is ensuring the guidance is offered in a supportive, general manner.

Detailed step-by-step instructions may undermine confidence and actually contribute to reduced involvement for fear of making mistakes.

5. Individually: It is important to remember that dads require balance in their lives, just as moms do. Times for both parents to engage in individual pursuits should be incorporated into the family schedule to support health and well being of all family members. Children who see their parents as individuals, as well as a family unit, will grow up understanding the value in maintaining individuality within a healthy relationship.

While this level of scheduling may seem contrived, it appears essential in today's climate. The non-stop distractions that come with constant connectivity can often interfere with the best laid plans to be engaged and present. In ensuring dads are more involved in their children's lives it is important to also remember the value of time spent together as a family. Moments together, away from computers, phones, tablets and whatever new devices may be on the horizon will help to promote a much deeper form of connectivity. Maintaining a family schedule will help dads to become more involved, provide moms with more balance, and also ensure healthy growth and development through meaningful experiences for all family members.

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Nicola has over 11 years of experience in early childhood education and over 9 years experience teaching visual art to children and youth through the Toronto District School Board of Education, the City of Toronto and her own private art school. Nicola was a recipient of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, London Branch (AECEO, London) Children's Service Award in 2001 for recognition of her dedicated work with children and their families and the Outstanding Student Award in 1990, when she graduated from Fanshawe College's Early Childhood Education program. Nicola is well known throughout her community for her extensive volunteer fundraising work supporting children's arts programming. She is currently enrolled at George Brown College in the Early Childhood Leadership Bachelor of Arts program.