



absence make the heart grow sadder

How dads can stay connected

It's a common sight: a family—mother, father, rambunctious kids—enjoying dinner at a local restaurant. For dads separated from their children, either by work or divorce, it can be painful to witness.

Dana Melvin is a Westbank father to three and an engineer with the Department of the Navy whose job keeps him away at least two weeks per month. When away for work, he feels most “disconnected” when he goes out for a meal and sees families dining out, spending quality time together. “[This] is probably the hardest for me,” he says.

Fathers without regular “face time” with their children are challenged to maintain close relationships with their sons and daughters. While there are problems specific to each separation scenario, one important effort any dad should make is being consistent with his communication while he's away.

“Consistency is key,” says Morris Burka, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist with Ochsner. “Whatever your regular form of contact is—voice-mail, email, texting, anything—it should be consistent. There should be a regularity about it.”

divorced from mom, not the child

For divorced dad John of Mandeville (last name withheld at his request), his custody arrangement for his four-year-old daughter provides consistency for his care-giving; however, he doesn't have much contact with his child when she's in her mother's care. “My daughter has memorized my phone number and occasionally calls me,” he says. “Unfortunately, her mom doesn't like that.”

A father's relationship with his ex-partner can exacerbate his relationship with his children. “I really wish she could get past her anger and focus on what's best for her daughter,” says John. “It's really a shame, quite frankly.” Dr. Burka explains that even in the most difficult divorces, dads can stay connected to their children by reflective listening.

“It's the gold standard,” says Dr. Burka of this approach to listening. “Parents might try to solve the problem, give an explanation. You have to get in the mode to listen—learn what they're really communicating. Their feelings will become validated that way.” Dr. Burka is quick to say that it's important for a father “not to take things personally. The father needs to understand what a child is thinking about during the separation. The child might be angry or confused.” Key to reflective listening is not to “jump in to tell their child not to feel a certain way. Ultimately, that isn't satisfying, and it doesn't help the child.”

A frequent fear for divorced dads, says Dr. Burka, “is that they're going to be replaced.” Or, in the case of John and others with upset exes, that their ex-spouses will make them “out to be the bad guy.” Dr. Burka explains that while sooner or later there will probably be a step-father who enters the picture, “it's important to realize that a step-father will *never* take the place of the father. Unless, that is, the father completely removes himself from the situation.”

the long-distance dad

Married fathers face their own set of problems staying connected to their kids—including when they're home. “A common problem for a parent who's off two weeks, on two weeks—pretty common around here—is that dads, by culture, see themselves as the head of the family,” says Dr. Burka. “There are two cultures within his family. When dad's away, it's one way; when dad comes back, it's the other. Often dad makes himself the ‘heavy’ and when he returns, it's a tense situation. By the time

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the family gets in sync with dad's return, he's off again."

One effective way to avoid this conflict is to have the primary parent—the one with the children day in and day out—set the rules. "Obviously, dad can have some input," says Dr. Burka, "but it works a whole lot better if dad doesn't expect the mom to be his lieutenant, following his orders while he's away. She's the one who has to be comfortable with how she's parenting when he's gone."

Dana, stepdad to Matthew, 17, and dad to Mackenzie, six, and Nicholas, seven months, is very aware of the parenting stresses his wife faces while he's away, and the difficulties of transitioning to a two-parent household when he returns home. "When I go away, my wife Trish has it as rough as when she was a single mom [to Matthew]," says Dana. But at least she had a routine then, he explains, as she did in 2005 and 2006 when he, a Navy reservist, was deployed for 17 months to serve in Iraq. He knows it's harder for her to find that routine now. "I'm home and helpful one week, then I'm gone the next and she has to constantly adjust her work schedule and sleep schedule to accommodate those changes."

"Knowing that Matthew and Mackenzie are both old enough to help her out and have assigned chores to do" helps, he continues, "but they don't get done as thoroughly or as often when I am away as when they do when we are both home. When I do talk to Trish I know she is overwhelmed, so the hardest part for me when first coming home is to reintegrate with my family slowly and just enjoy their company. It's real easy to fall into the trap of wanting to yell, 'why hasn't the trash been done in two

weeks?!' "

When he's away, Dana stays connected to his kids through efforts big and small. Matthew will call him occasionally for help with homework, and they exchange letters, too. Mackenzie calls him at random, and enjoys leaving voice-mail messages for him if he's unable to answer. His wife emails him pictures of their baby frequently.

During his time in Iraq, when internet connections were difficult, he had friends send him age-appropriate books that he'd videotape himself reading; he'd then send the books and the videotapes home to his daughter. This year, Mackenzie's class read the book *Flat Stanley*. She made her own Flat Stanley which Dana takes with him—often along with her stuffed elephant Hefty—on each trip he takes. When he returns, he shares with his daughter the pictures of Flat Stanley and the elephant from his travels. "It's a way for us to reconnect," he says.

And that ability to reconnect is ultimately what all dads want.

Leslie Penkunas is the editor on *nola baby & family* magazine.

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