



# men &

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## Fathering Toolkit

A guide to navigating fatherhood

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**Men & Early Fatherhood**

## Early Fatherhood

Finding out you're going to become a father can be exciting, overwhelming, terrifying or some combination of those emotions and more. Just as there is no one way to be a man or masculine, there is no one way to be a father. Everyone has to find their own level and their own way of navigating fatherhood.

Around 80% of men will become biological fathers in their lifetimes. Others may become involved in a child's life as a brother, uncle, stepfather or foster parent. In whatever way you become a 'parent figure' in a child's life, your experience will be unique to you alone. The transition from 'childfree' to 'parent' is not always an easy one but there are steps you can take to make that evolution a more comfortable one.

Most men want to be an involved, engaged, responsible and positive figure in their child's life. But there is no manual that will tell you how to do it and it's not necessarily as easy as it sounds. Becoming a father sets you on a developmental course that in many ways mirrors the different stages of your child. You will have to adapt and evolve, not just solve and fix – although that can certainly be a part of the role.

## Early Fatherhood

Fathering is not simply ‘mothering while male’. Your job is not merely to fill in or help out when mom isn’t available. The thought that dad is ‘babysitting’ when he spends an afternoon with his children is a more traditional understanding of fatherhood. And is less helpful when considering modern day fatherhood. A dad is more than a person who lives in the house and provides a paycheque or who helps their children learn to mow a lawn or tie a tie or fish or BBQ the perfect steak. While those roles clearly have value and can be important to a child’s development, a dad is also someone who contributes to a child’s emotional growth and helps them to learn to navigate the world – both the external one but also helping to mold their internal world of thoughts and identity.

**Good things happen to a child when they have a close and healthy relationship with their father. Research suggests children with involved fathers have fewer cognitive delays, increased school readiness, fewer tantrums and lower rates of depression. Some even suggest that decreased behavioural problems in the early school year leads to less chance of juvenile delinquency as teens.**

**We're Having**



**A Baby!**

## What's Next?



**If you have just found out you are going to become a parent, you will likely experience a whole variety of emotions – everything from happiness and joy to fear and worry**



There are things you can do to minimize your fear and help to support your partner as you prepare for this life change. During pregnancy, one of the main functions for you as a father will be simply to support your partner as she prepares for her own transition to motherhood. Something as mundane as supporting her ability to attend all the many doctor's visits a pregnancy necessitates is helpful. You may not be able to attend all of them but being present at ultrasound appointments – where you can see and hear the baby – will help you to feel a connection to your unborn child.

## What's Next?

Many hospitals offer prenatal and birthing classes. Attending these classes with your partner will help prepare both of you for the changes that are coming. Generally, such classes talk about the pregnancy and birthing process. They often also cover how to care for your newborn, including feeding, diaper changes, baths and how to understand and respond to your baby. In addition to providing information, these classes also give you an opportunity to connect with others who are going through the same things at the same time. It can be helpful to have others to talk to about these life changes as a built-in support group.

Learning about pregnancy and childbirth will help you to support your partner through the potential discomforts of these processes. Being present for the birth of your child, if possible, is a key way to build a connection with that child from the very beginning. While the focus at that time will not be on you and your role as father, being there for your partner will help to build confidence in your new role.



**The Baby**



**Is Here**

## Now What?

Fathering will evolve as your child grows. While the early days of babyhood seem thankless, they are important in helping not only your partner but also in developing a connection with your child. Interacting with your newborn – whether changing their diaper, bathing or feeding them or simply holding them as they sleep – will help you to bond with your child and develop confidence and trust. You don't have to wait until your child is old enough to participate in your hobbies to start building a connection.

**Spending time as a family will help to develop your confidence as a father. If you are able, take paternity leave from your job so that you can be fully present with your partner and newborn in those early days. Even if your partner is breast/chest-feeding and it feels like the baby-care responsibilities are mostly on their shoulders, there are ways for you to get involved.**

Support your partner by bringing drinks, making dinner, vacuuming the house and communicating with them about what they need. Change diapers, bathe the baby, or entertain the baby so your partner can sleep. Take turns sleeping in so that both of you have a chance to relax and feel rested. There are many tasks besides feeding that you can do to make your connection with your partner and child stronger.

## Now What?

Try different ways of holding, caring for and comforting your baby. Not everything will work but keep experimenting and you will figure out what does – just like every father has a different way to parent, every baby has a different way to feel comforted. From hour one, you can hold your baby – skin to skin contact isn't just for new mothers and it will help you to establish a close bond with your newborn.

**As your baby grows you can establish a special 'dad's time'. Take your baby for a walk, have a special daily playtime, establish a routine of bath and book before bed, or find something else that suits you and your family. Not only does this provide your partner with a break from baby-caring duties but it gives you special one-on-one time to develop a bond with your child. As your relationship evolves, consider not only what you enjoy doing with your baby but what your baby seems to enjoy doing with you.**

As you move forward in your parenting journey, consider what has changed or stayed the same in what you consider important in life. If there is an area of parenting you don't feel confident about, talk to your partner or a friend who is also a father. Many places offer specific fatherhood classes on various topics so seeking out a course may help you to gain confidence. Consider how you balance your work and home life. If you have a job that requires days or weeks away from home, consider how you can stay connected with your baby/child while you are apart.

## Now What?

It is also important to remember that it's not only mothers who experience hormonal changes around birth. From just prior to the birth of their first child to several weeks after birth, a man's testosterone, vasopressin and cortisol levels decrease and oxytocin levels slightly increase. Testosterone, vasopressin and cortisol help with things such as alertness, responding to unexpected situations, and competition, while oxytocin helps us recognize social signals and others' emotions. It is believed that these hormonal changes help new fathers with gentle interactions and sensitive care for their newborn.

In addition to these more subtle hormonal changes, becoming a parent can sometimes bring up difficult or uncomfortable feelings. Post-natal depression is not just something that affects mothers, it can also occur in fathers. In men, it could present as symptoms of irritability, restricted emotions and depression. Some risk factors to consider those include hormonal changes, a prior history of depression in either parent, and poverty. As with mothers, treatment can include medication and therapy. If you are feeling like something isn't 'right', talk to your partner or a medical professional and get the help you need.

**How To**

**Engage**



**With Your**

**Toddler And Preschooler**

## Practice Patience

The key to engaging with your child as they move into the toddler years is 'patience'. Toddlers don't care about your schedule. Something as simple as a walk around the block can take an hour because they need to stop and check out every blade of grass, insect and crack in the pavement. Dinnertime is slow and messy as they 'experiment' with their food. Tantrums over the wrong socks can bring everything to a screeching halt when you're trying to get out the door to daycare in the morning. You can temper your expectations by remembering that, for your child, everything is new and sometimes overwhelming. A healthy dose of patience will go a long way to navigating this time in their life.

Your child goes through an amazing amount of development and change during their toddler years, which lasts from about age 1 to about age 3. Toddlers are like sponges, absorbing information about the world around them through the people, objects and the environment they interact with. Being actively engaged with your toddler will pay dividends throughout their lifetime.



## Practice Patience

**Emotions can be a big deal and tantrums are a hallmark of their growth at this stage**

They're still learning how to cope with all their feelings – both the good ones and the bad. Helping them to understand what they are feeling and develop a vocabulary for explaining those feelings will help them to regulate their emotions and can help reduce tantrums. Loving and engaged fathers can help to raise less aggressive boys and girls at less risk for early sexual experiences and teen pregnancy.

It can be challenging to find time during a busy work week to really connect with your toddler. Taking time to read a book together before bed or playing for a few minutes when you get home from work can help to develop your bond. Simply talking to your toddler can also have benefits. Research suggests a father's use of vocabulary has the greatest impact on a toddler's language development.



**How To Engage**



**With Your**

**Elementary-age Child**




## Practice Patience

As a child grows, their need for connection with their father remains. As they move into school and progress through the earlier grades, they need more than simply help with their homework. You can connect with your child through their extra-curricular activities – take them to their dance class and chat in the car or coach their hockey team. Go to their special school events and attend parent-teacher interviews. Help them with their homework when they need it, of course, but also ask them about their day and their friends and teachers. Being interested in what they're doing and supporting them through all of it will go a long way to building a solid foundation.

Being engaged with your child's school and other activities helps to mitigate any negative feelings or experiences your child may encounter during their early academic careers. If you know your child's friends – and their friends' parents – it can be easier to help them navigate friendship challenges. Helping to resolve conflicts and discussing the events of the day build your child's trust in you and helps them to know they can come to you when there is an issue.



## Practice Patience



Express pride in your child by acknowledging when they do well but avoid comparisons to others or putting undue pressure on them by expecting perfection. There will be times that your child does something that causes you embarrassment. She may get in trouble at school or he may throw a tantrum on the baseball diamond. Strive to remember that they are individuals and making mistakes is part of the growing up process. You can't take all the credit for your child's successes, but you also don't have to shoulder the entire blame for their failures. You are working to raise well-rounded adults, ultimately, and that means understanding that your child is not simply an extension of you but an individual in their own right.



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## Resources

If you are struggling with new fatherhood or parenting in general, reach out to talk to someone. If you're in Alberta, there are many options available to you if you're ready to reach out:

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Call Men &'s Mensline  
1-833-327-MENS  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
Get help and support from a  
trained counsellor



Alberta Health Services has  
many resources available,  
as well as a dedicated  
Mental Health Line  
[Albertahealthservices.ca](http://Albertahealthservices.ca)

211

Alberta 211  
Links to many helplines and  
other resources available



Calgary's Distress Centre  
24-hour help available  
Phone or text 403.266.HELP

Edmonton's Distress Line  
780-482-4357 (HELP)  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week



(Southwestern)  
Alberta's Distress Line  
Call 403-327-7905  
Toll free 1-888-787-2880

Elsewhere: Search for your local hospital or hospital authority to find classes

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