

# Being there for your kids

Ten very important things you must do to be there for your children when they need you most

By Chris Barnardo

These tips are good advice for any father, but they are the Ten Commandments for the newly separated and single dads. There is no more crucial time in a child's life, for them to know that they can rely on you to be there for them, than after you and their mother have separated. When a child's parents separate it blows their whole world

apart. Their home is different, they see their parents crying every day, and any happy times seem to have the threat of upset lurking close by. There is no quick way out of this for them, but you can make it less bad by being there for them. Read these ten tips and take them seriously, if you are able to follow them you will be doing some of the best and most

considerate things for your children that you will ever do.

However, even with the best will in the world, when times are tough, no one can get it right all the time. So when you go wrong, just mentally go back to this list and try harder next time to be there for your kids when they need you most.

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## Be reliable

When you go to get them or meet them, always be on time. Always make every effort to do what you say you're going to do. The best way to do this is not to make promises you can't keep. If you agree to pick up from school, or go to a school event, write the date down when you are agreeing it. It's very easy to forget the exact details of what was agreed in the heat of a discussion, and end up letting your kids down.

## Be a grown-up

Remember you are the adult here. You will be dealing with a huge amount of feelings and hurt, but remember your children are hurting too, and they shouldn't have to worry about looking after you, you need to look after them.

## Build and keep to a routine

Keep to a routine, even if that means making a new one up. Periods of change are very unsettling for children, so even doing something simple at the same time, every time you see them, will stick in their minds as something they can rely on. This can be as simple as getting a bun on the way to your house at the same shop every time they come to stay, or always having the same favourite meal on the same night.

## Listen to your kids

The little things your children say and do will really give you a good idea about how they are feeling. Often feelings of anxiety (sad, stressful feelings) will come out as a change in the way a child does things, the things that they say or minor upsets like headaches or tummy aches. Try to think outside the immediate problem, don't try and become a psychologist, just try to take the bigger view. But most importantly, listen; it's all too easy to forget to listen to your children, when you are preoccupied with your own problems.

## Support your kid's mother

Never tell your children that their mother is bad, or make nasty, snide or cynical comments about her to them. They won't understand the irony of what you are saying and they unconditionally love their mother because she is their mother, just like they unconditionally love you because you are their father. However much you feel wronged by your ex-partner (or partner) your children don't need to know right now.

In the long run putting their mother down to them, or in front of them, will backfire on you anyway, because as they grow up they will come to see the situation for what it is, and they won't thank you for trying to score points off their

mother when they were vulnerable. Where possible, however hard it may seem, try to support their mother and if you have issues with her, take them up with her and work with her to make sure she supports you.

## Make your house or flat a real home

Make sure your place is a special place for them to stay. Think of things and ways of doing things that will establish your new place more than just a place to visit. Make it into their home, their other home. Dadcando has loads of tips and advice on how to do just that, even if you are on a very tight budget. See dadcando's 10 tips for homemaking and 10 ways to be prepared.

## Remember you are in it for the long game

Think of it like this - you might recently have had to rely on your mother or father, and how old are you? Your children don't just need you now, they will always need you. The relationship you build with them is a very long term one. This is something to remember when it all goes wrong one weekend, as it sometimes will. Being a father is about more than just one weekend, it's for life.

## Put excitement in their lives

You're the best person for the job, it's one of the father's roles, and as a big kid at heart, you can really do it. Excitement doesn't mean endless treats. It's hard not to over compensate for the fact that you are seeing them less, but hold back. Think about it - it's not a treat for them to come and see you, any more than it's a treat that they see their mother the rest of the time. Sure it's nice and they love it, but it's their right to be able to be with both their parents. So try and put the treating to one side and think of how to add to their lives, which can be things as simple as a new tooth brush, or a putting weird topping on a pancake you just made together.

## Never quiz your kids

However curious or desperate you are to know what is going on at their other home, with their mother, never ever try to find out information about your ex-partner from your children. Resist the temptation to use them for sending messages to your ex-partner. Even if you feel completely in the dark and annoyed that your kids know more about what's going on in your ex-partner's life than you do, you must resist fishing for information from your children.

Your Children didn't ask to be caught up in this and they are very sensitive to the fact that they have to go between their mum and dad and the last thing you want them to feel when they're with you is that is that they have to be on their guard. If you are unable to communicate with your ex-partner directly, use another adult, preferably a mutual friend or grown-up family member to pass important messages.

Never discuss contentious issues on the doorstep when you come to pick the children up or drop them off. If a disagreement starts, as it often will when contentious issues are discussed, and this happens more than a couple of times, the children will begin to dread the hand-over, and soon will dread you coming to pick them up, or mummy dropping them off.

## Support your kids

To understand your children better, engage the child in you. As a man you have the best chance of being able to access the child in you; use this skill to your advantage, if you don't already know, you'll find that you can communicate with your kids in ways their mother will never be able to.