

Dads and kids

Fathers and experts talk about ways dads can get more involved with kids' lives

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**—STAN SEIDERMAN,
Director of Bay Area Male
Involvement Network**

Richard Otero moved with his family from the quiet agricultural town of Gilroy to San Jose so he could take a better-paying job as a real estate agent. "My goal was to be able to earn more and create a better life for my family," he says. But "between working nights and weekends showing houses, I rarely see my two kids. To be honest, I probably was a better father before I took this new job."

"Dads often show their love for their family by being at work—away from the love of their family," says San Diego family counselor Warren Farrell, author of *Father and Child Reunion: How To Bring The Dads We Need To The Children We Love*.

But today American dads are starting to spend more time with their kids. One reason, of course, is that more moms are working outside the home, so dads are called in to share more of the parenting, says Suzanne Bianchi, a sociologist at the University of Maryland. Her research shows that from the '60s to the '90s, the average amount of time fathers spent with kids each day grew from 2.7 hours to 4.1 hours.

Still, many fathers feel unsure about their abilities as caregivers. "Some men think being a good parent means that you will be expected to do everything that the mother does and do everything as well as she does," says Stan Seiderman, director of the Bay Area Male Involvement Network (BAMIN), which is working to increase the involvement of fathers and other men in children's lives.

Seiderman tells dads, "You are still a man and she is still a woman. Yes, you can be a nurturing parent, just like the child's mother, but your nurturing style will be different from hers."

Pete Taylor, a clothing designer in Los Angeles, shares child care with his wife. He often brings six-month-old Vanessa to work and takes her on walks to do errands in the neighborhood. "My wife and I have very different styles of parenting," Taylor says. "For example, we both make sure that she gets enough to eat and drink, but let's just say that Vanessa looks a lot cleaner and neater when Mom's around."

That's fine, says Seiderman. "That is, in fact, just what a child needs. A child does not need two parents who are exactly the same in style and behavior, but two parents who have different and distinct styles, whose parenting styles complement each other."

Here are some other parenting tips for dads from BAMIN:

Spend as much time with your child as you can.

If you are not living with your child, establish a consistent schedule that you can stick to. Regular activities and time together strengthen your bond with your child.

At least once a week, when he gets home from work or on Sundays, San Diego father Zev Jaffa leads a family



KATHY SLOANE

hike up and down an easy climbing trail across the street from his apartment. The climb takes about an hour. Sometimes he goes with just his two kids, age 10 and 13. Sometimes neighborhood kids go along. Jaffa gets to stretch his muscles after a day of work as a bricklayer—and the kids get to spend time with him.

Nils Sedwick, dean in a San Jose business college, prepares pancake breakfasts on the weekends with his two kids, six and seven. "They seem to enjoy anything that involves cooking or mixing or moving stuff around," says Sedwick. "And that means that with some supervision they now actually have fun helping me to do things like washing the car and yard work."

Share your interests, skills and experiences, so your child can get a sense of your culture, religion, and beliefs.

Alejandro Gonzalez of Redwood City, a self-employed house cleaner and home-maintenance worker, has a great love for the *canción popular* (folk music) of his native El Salvador. On weekends Alejandro plays flute and guitar in a band. His four-year-old son, Santiago, loves to come to rehearsals—he enjoys the music and is learning some of the lyrics. When he gets older, Alejandro says he may teach Santiago to play. Some of the songs are ones that Alejandro's father taught him, so he says he is carrying on his family's traditions.

Take an active role in your child's development.

Talk to your child about feelings, thoughts and behavior. You can show an interest in your child in many small ways—keeping track of their height, hanging up their drawings, taking lots of photographs. Let your children know that you are proud of them.

Get involved with your child's education.

Some teachers seem to think that "parents" mean "mothers." You can

teach them that fathers are parents too. Visit your child's child care center or school. Take an interest in your child's homework. Provide help if it's needed, but don't do the homework yourself. Read aloud—many books, stories, and poems—and tell stories.

Be a role model for your child.

Lead by example. Your child looks up to you and will imitate you. Treat other family members with respect. Keep yourself healthy and continue to learn. Don't hold yourself up as the perfect father. Everyone has limitations and makes mistakes. It is good for your child to see that side of you also. He can learn that it is OK to make mistakes and to forgive himself when he does.

Make sure that your child is in good health.

Be sure that your child eats a well-rounded diet that includes grains, fruits, vegetables, milk, juice, and only moderate amounts of fats and sugars. Whether or not you're the parent who takes your child to the dentist and the pediatrician, you should know who they are and how to reach them. Help to teach your children about personal hygiene and flossing and brushing their teeth—and exercise with them regularly. ■

For more information, contact the Bay Area Male Involvement Network, 415-454-1811, www.bamin.org/listing.html.