



Fathers are primary parents!

Children love their Daddies! Your children love to hear your voice, to see you come in the door, to sit next to you at the table, and to play with you as long as you can possibly play.

One father I know told me that his fifteen-month-old climbed up on his and his wife's bed at six a.m. one morning, crawled over, peered in his face, and gently put her finger up his nostril! Your children want contact with you—all of you!



Dads get a raw deal, however. The pressure to earn a living often has a desperate thread woven through it: there's a sense that if you don't provide, dire things will happen to your family.

We live in a society in which the lack of any safety net for families translates to a "life and death" feeling around work issues for Dads. And when work is pursued in a worrisome way, exhaustion is not far behind. Long hours, worry, heavy expectations, an uncertain working environment, and the threat of poverty all make it harder to enjoy our children. It's also hard for Dads to think independently about themselves as Dads and as men. What do I want to do with my life? How do I really want to live? What's important to me?

Listening to other Dads talk about parenting and about what's important to them is a first step to climbing out of a heavy sense of obligation. Getting a chance to say what

your highest hopes are for your relationship with your children and your partner can help lift a trudging spirit. And seeing how good other Dads are, how valiantly they struggle to be their best and to care deeply, lets Dads go easier on themselves.

One point that's important to clarify is that fathers are absolutely primary parents. Children want, need, and love their Daddies. Some children grow up without the benefit of a Dad, and they manage well, but you need to know that, whatever your parenting circumstance, your child wants you close.

Children often look like they favor their Moms, and that when the chips are down, it's Mom they want to stroke their forehead or kiss their hurt or listen to the tale of their hard day. But this is usually just the result of cultural circumstance: Mom is nearby more often when the chips are down, because in our culture, Dad usually spends more time at work.

In families in which the Dad stays home, the children gravitate to him in hard times, and it's the Mom who has to work to keep from living on the emotional outskirts of the family.

You don't have to remain on the emotional outskirts of your children's lives. What helps children grow close are simple things any Dad can do, if he has been clued in to the secret.

Your children love play, especially physical play

Your children will love it any time you get down on the floor and have a pillow fight, wrestle, be their horsy, or play hide and seek. If you are careful to always lose (maybe not by much, children love a good contest) and if you are careful not to



overwhelm them with your strength in play, they will laugh and find all kinds of ways to “get” you. The more they laugh, the closer they’ll feel to you. Joy and closeness are built through playtimes like these.

Your children want you to listen to their feelings, not to correct them

When children have played all-out, they feel safe enough to bring up heavy emotions. This is a golden opportunity. They’ll start a big cry over some minor issue: you said that play is over now, or you said they have to put their seat belt on, or they don’t like what’s being served for dinner. What you need to remember, in order to build closeness with your child, is that she wants you to listen while she cries!

Love her, touch her gently, say little, and stand by whatever limit you have set. She will get the bad feelings out and will notice that you offered your love even while she was feeling desperate or mad or sad. It’s this kind of listening that helps children feel like you are on their side forever. This kind of listening gets your caring across at the most crucial time—when your child feels undone and vulnerable. All you have to do is to be kind and patient. Your child will show you more closeness and trust when she has finished her cry or her tantrum.

Your children want your life to be good

Working too hard and having no one to talk with about what matters to you will keep you remote from your child. Your child needs your presence more than the things money can buy. It’s OK to say no to the pressure to buy things your children want in order to spend more time with your family. They may cry and storm. If you offer your



love, your child will come around, feel closer to you, and that insatiable “I want” will melt into “Let’s play” more often.

Go ahead and set limits that you think make sense, limits that allow your life to be good too.

You belong in the center of your family, close and warmly loved. And we all need to work together to see to it that fathers win more time, more peace of mind, and more connection to other parents, so that they can relax and enjoy the rich experience of nurturing children.

The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads, by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, contains an excellent chapter on the hardships for fathers in our present economic system and what can be done.

