



on being a dad

Relationships Australia

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***“There is something awe-inspiring about witnessing
a child put together the jigsaw pieces of his world...***

***Who needs to go and see a brilliant new movie
when you've got a brilliant new person
making a mess in your living room?”***

Introduction

Most Dads want to be there for their children but at times other activities, such as work, make that hard.

How do Dads like you balance their busy lives so they can be there for their children?

This booklet will help you sort through some of the issues about being the best Dad you can for your children. It will give you some ideas about being a Dad and explain some of the reasons why being a Dad can be difficult.



What is happening with **Dads?**

Dads live in many different situations including as one of a two-parent family, as a step-parent, a single parent or within a part-time family. Some Dads are looking for work, some work full or part-time, and some care for the children all the time while their partner works full-time. These situations bring new pressures and possibilities for Dads. Since most Dads live with their partner as a couple, what follows will tend to focus on these Dads, but the information is very useful for all Dads.

One thing is for sure: what it means to be a Dad today is changing. The table to the right summarises some of the shift from what we might loosely call 'traditional fathering' to 'non-traditional' fathering. Your way of being a Dad might be a combination of these two types. On some days, you might be more one than the other. It might help you to think about why you might be more one way than the other.

‘Traditional’

Fathers are often:

- the main breadwinner
- the head of house (authoritarian)
- the family protector
- the sole disciplinarian
- reserved in their relationships with the children
- uninvolved in domestic chores
- emotionally and physically disengaged from the children
- at work when children are born
- not responsible for child care and schooling

‘Non-traditional’

Fathers more often:

- have emphasis on career and family
- make joint decisions with partner (authoritative)
- teach problem-solving and responsibility to their children
- share responsibility with their partner for parenting and discipline
- form friendships with sons and daughters
- share and negotiate domestic chores with their partner and children
- are emotionally involved, enter into play and spend time alone with their children.
- express physical affection
- are present and involved in birth of children
- are involved in child care and schooling options

(For a research basis for this table, see the work by Jain, Belsky & Crinc, 1996, in the reference list.)

Many of these changes are in thinking rather than in action and haven't been put into action by most Dads. For example, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics research, there was little change overall in the time men spent in domestic activities such as housework between 1992 and 1997. There is not a single 'Dad's role' to which all fathers should aspire. Your role should match the needs of your family and give all family members a 'fair go'.

If you have a partner (often called 'Mum') she may carry most of the load of parenting and domestic duties and probably works as well. It is in your best interest to be in touch with her needs and to work together. Maintaining a healthy, loving relationship with your partner is about the best thing you can do for your children; it gives them an environment in which to flourish. On the other hand, having constant conflict with your partner is among the worst things you can do for your children.

Learning to be a Dad



Many Fathers say that they learnt to be a father from their own father. What sort of Dad did you have?

In-depth interviews with 14 Australian men found that all of them described their fathers as having little involvement with them when they were children. These men talked about a 'lack of closeness' with their fathers. As fathers, these men said they were trying to be different with their own children.

(White, 1994)

We mentioned above the shift away from the way your Dad might have been as a parent ('traditional' fathering). Your challenge is to build the best qualities and skills that you learnt from your Dad into your parenting. Like the men described in the insert, you may also want to develop some other aspects of parenting in which your Dad was lacking.

There is a lot of discussion today about men needing to make peace with their Dads in order to get their own lives on track. Many men in the baby-boomer generation feel they missed out relating to their Dads. Songs such as "In the Living Years", sung by Mike and the Mechanics, capture the sentiment of many Dads of baby-boomers and their sons who now still have the chance to connect in 'the living years'.

**When my Father passed away
I didn't get to tell him
All the things I had to say
I think I caught his spirit
Later that same year
I'm sure I heard his echo
In my baby's newborn tears
I just wish I could have told
him in the living years**

*(The Living Years,
Mike and The Mechanics, 1988)*

All Dads of whatever generation could do worse than to sort through their own experience of being fathered. This may clear the way for you to be a better person as well as a better Dad.

“When are you coming home, Dad?” “I don’t know when.”

Do you remember the Harry Chaplin song, ‘Cats in the Cradle’, that describes a conversation between a father and son on their relationship? While the father laments not being around as his children grew up, his grown-up son (who ‘turned out just like me’) has no time to stop. This ballad is an invitation to all Dads to check whether they are being there for their children.

Among the big questions for men is what sort of life you want to have and how do your children fit that? Taking some time to look at your short- and long-term goals for life may help you get your priorities right.

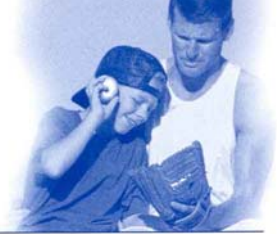
Most men don’t have a life. Instead we have just learnt to pretend.

(Biddulph, 1994)

There are lots of things you want to fit into your life, and maybe your children are close to the top in theory. But in practice where do they rate? What sort of things do you like doing with your children that both you and they enjoy? Ask your children whether they feel they get a fair piece of you. How about setting some goals and objectives each year for your relationship with your children and writing them in your work diary on a date each quarter to remind yourself? You could also ask your child or partner, now and again, to keep you honest on your objectives.



Work and Family



Many Dads are struggling to make ends meet and have to put in long hours at work, study or looking for work. It would be nice to have more time at home but, when things are tight, you have to work.

“For the average paid worker in small business, the nation’s largest employer, telling the boss you want time out to be with your children is hardly a positive career move.”

(Hughes, 1999)

A recent study on overtime by the Curtin University of Technology showed that male managers feel pressure to work late so they can get a career advantage rather than go home on time. The trouble is that overwork both stresses their family life and reduces their work efficiency.

All is not lost. Your children receive positive spin-offs from what you do. As well as your direct involvement with them, your children also gain esteem by seeing you achieve at work and in other areas of life, such as sport, or simply being a handyman. When they see you strive and work hard it teaches them important lessons about responsibility, diligence and perseverance. When they see you overcome problems and take

initiative at work it models problem-solving skills and gives them confidence. Plus, they gain material benefits as a result of your pay packet.

I toss work, the children, my wife and myself high into the air each day and trust that life will provide what is necessary.

(La Cervi, 1990)

Nevertheless, many Dads feel a tension between work and family life - they want to be good providers and also be there for their children. At times, trying to combine both as well as getting time for your partner and then yourself is very stressful.

Paradoxically, staying connected to your children may not require spending a lot more time with them, but rather more time staying connected to your partner and to other important people in your children’s life, such as child care providers, teachers, doctors and coaches. This means you are more ‘in touch’ with your children.

Any man today who returns from work, sinks into a chair and calls for his pipe is a man with an appetite for danger.

(Cosby, 1986)

Smart Work for Dads

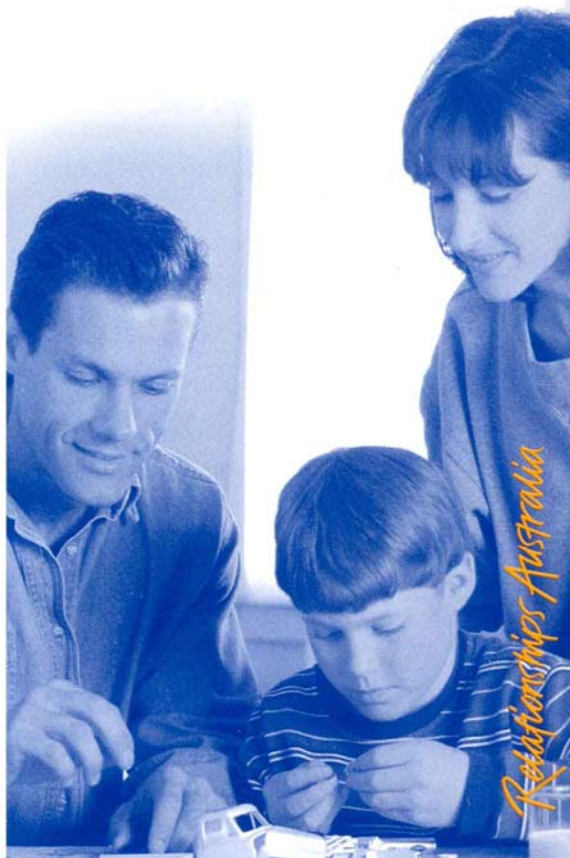
Here are some ways to work smarter so your family also gets a fair go.

All work functions are not equal. If a work function such as a social event doesn't directly benefit you or your workplace, should it be a priority over your family? There are always extra things at work, such as being on the social committee, that are not essential. Sometimes you have to say 'no' to such work if your family will miss out.

If you have to work at home, try to do it after the children are in bed. If you have to work late, give the children a 'phone call to let them know you are missing them. Mark your work diary with important family events. Try to avoid taking work home by reducing your lunchtime and working more efficiently.

There are ways to have your family feel part of what you do at work. You can keep a photo of your family on your desk. Let your children visit your workplace to see where you spend your time. Try having lunch with older or adult children (don't forget your partner, either). Take leave during school holidays when your children are around.

If you are going away for work, prepare your children for your absence. Reassure them that you are coming back, keep in touch with them and come home bearing small gifts. See if you can make up the time lost with them when you get back.



This is your life: what does “being there” for your children mean in your day?

It is great to get time with your children, but it is how you relate to them that will determine whether it is a positive interaction for them and you. It is of little benefit relating to them if you are tired and grumpy and are simply reacting to them. There are many positive ways to be a Dad. Here are some suggestions that may help you to ‘be there for your children’ during each day.

In the mornings, you can:

- say “Good morning” to your children even if you have to go to work early;
- help get them breakfast;
- make their lunches;
- turn off the TV and relate to them before you go to work;
- rise five minutes earlier and spend that time each morning with one of your children.

In the evenings, you can:

- try to relax on the way home by listening to music, walking some of the way or catching public transport;
- try to get home for dinner;

- catch up on the TV news later in the evening rather than while your children are still up;
- go outside and play with them for five minutes if you have time before dark;
- ask them about their day. One way you can do this is ask, “What is the best/worst thing about today?” If they are not ready to talk, do an activity with them to help them thaw out;
- leave the mobile phone off and the answering machine on during meals and family time;
- hold family discussions or meetings;
- take an interest in their homework without being critical;
- turn off the TV one night a week and have a family night reading stories or playing games;
- if they are watching TV, do it with them for a while and use the viewing as a time to teach them about life;
- have special bedtime routine with your child - for example, a story, a little chat or prayers; and
- share what you have been doing during your day.

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Often you may be tired and just want to 'veg' out in front of the TV when you get home. Sure, you need some time out, but try not to do it in the small window between dinner and your children's bedtime.

"When I am with them I feel guilty about my lack of patience; when I am not with them I feel guilty about my negligence."

(Harrison, 1987)

During the weekend, you can:

- do chores as a family;
- spend real time with your children. Sometimes this will mean playing with them. At other times you may have a talk about how things are for them. Also, they are interested in what is going on with you and want to know about your past and present life;
- plan some family activities such as picnics, outings, weekends away, camping overnight.

In most places there will be a range of attractions to take children.

Many of these are free such as the local park, playground or the beach, library or museum.

When you take your holidays you may prefer to read or watch sport. Ask your children what they would like to do with you. If you only see your children on weekends, try to get a balance of normal and special activities with them. The most important thing is to spend time relating to them.

The more you can get to school-related events, the better. How about scheduling into your calendar the parent/teacher interviews, concerts and sports days? Keep in touch with how your child is faring at school so you can be there through their ups and downs. This is also good with younger children who are at pre-school, kindergarten or in child care.

Many Dads enjoy having a go at coaching their children's sporting team, or going on school or pre-school excursions. All these activities show that you are interested in how your children are going.

Parenting

Being a father will probably be the most important and lasting legacy of your life. Here are some healthy ways to relate to your children that will give them a positive experience of you and give them confidence and resilience to negotiate their own lives.

Communicate with your children and your partner

Did you know that, on average, we spend four-and-a-quarter hours every day listening to radio and watching TV and under two hours talking? Maybe the TV should be tamed so you get some more time to relate to your children and your partner.

Listen to them, they are the authority on their life. Let them talk and echo back some of the things you hear them saying. Show interest in them and answer their questions. It is good to share your thoughts and feelings. Tell them about your life and what happened today for you. It helps to speak at their level of height and of language. You can be encouraging, especially with what they want to talk about and the things they do.

Communicating is not just about talking. Make eye contact with your children. Give hugs and kisses. Play with them.

Take them seriously when they are upset and be a friend.

Model and coach the way you would like them to be

Showing your children how you would like them to be helps them. For example, what do you do and say when your team loses? Are you helping your children to be good sports?

You can model how to develop skills and behaviour that they haven't yet mastered. They will learn how to solve problems by your asking them questions such as, "What do you think?" Simply giving them an answer doesn't help them develop their own problem-solving skills. Coach rather than compete with your children.

Managing behaviour

Try to share the load of parenting with your partner (if you have one). To share the load with your partner means you will have to come up with some agreed family rules that can be applied consistently and fairly. Work out limits and consequences for misbehaviour and stick to them. As your children reach school age, you can start to include their input in setting these limits and consequences.



It is a good idea to listen to their side of the story before you jump in. If you are upset or angry, calm down, cool off and don't take your stress out on them. Say "sorry" if you have done the wrong thing; it helps them learn to say "sorry" and to be responsible. There are better approaches to discipline than yelling or smacking – find out about them. If you feel you are lacking in parenting skills, talk to someone you know who can give you some ideas, or go to a parenting course.

Catch your children doing something right and affirm them. Give rewards for good behaviour. Find out about their development level so you don't expect too much and can understand how they are acting.

Build networks for your children and for yourself

As your children get older, they are often influenced greatly by their peers. You cannot choose their friends or peers but you can encourage them in positive friendships. You can do this firstly by the example of your own relationships. Can you begin to build a network of friendships with families who have similar values? This may include contacts from child care, pre-school, school, work or the local neighbourhood. You can make it easier for your children to develop healthy friendships by offering welcome to their positive friends (and the families of these friends) and allowing interactions like sleepovers, etc.

Research about being a Dad

Recently some research was done called *Fitting Fathers Into Families in Australia*, by the Department of Family & Community Services (1999). We have summarised some of the results that may help you sort through how you want to be a Dad.

It seems that 'non-traditional' Dads form stronger emotional bonds with both sons and daughters, especially during adolescence, than those who did not participate in child rearing. Dads make a difference in adolescent development, particularly in areas of:

- emotional well-being;
- positive self-esteem of girls;
- hostility and self disclosure;
- getting in trouble with the law; and
- empathy in sons.

Unfortunately, many Dads don't relate as much to their teenagers as Mums do and so are removed from the important awakenings in their teenagers' lives.

The research shows that Dads tend to revert from being involved to more 'traditional' styles of fathering over time (after first baby) unless:

- they have a supportive community for non-traditional fathering patterns;
- the mothers are invested in careers and earn high salaries. This means less pressure on the Dad as the breadwinner;
- they have flexible working hours;
- they find caring for the children gratifying; and
- the demands for child care remain low. This usually means there are not too many children and they are reasonably well-behaved.

Dads talked about some of the barriers in getting involved with their children. Thirty per cent said that workload or other work commitments were a barrier, and this is not surprising since those in full-time work are working longer hours. General time pressures, social expectations to do other things like sport, an expectation from others to be a 'traditional' father, and emotional barriers within themselves were among the other barriers. The Dads in the survey did not indicate that a lack of training or skills for parenting or a domineering attitude from their partners were significant barriers. Of course, if you are a part-time Dad, getting some time with your children will also be a major barrier.



If these barriers apply to you, how do you get around them? This booklet has given you some ideas about doing this.

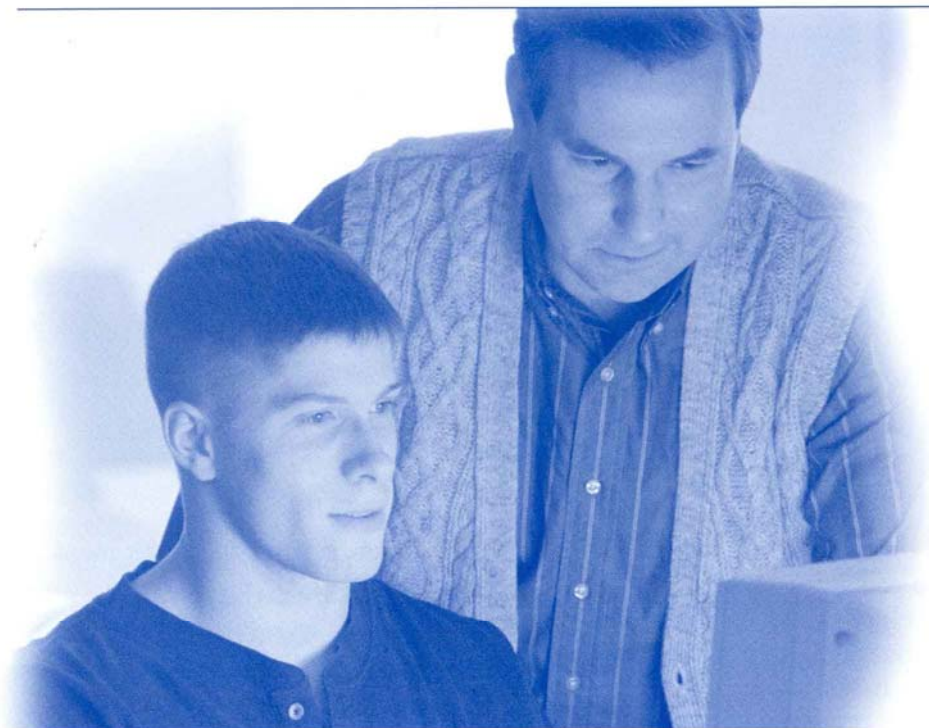
Dads are more involved in the care and nurture of young pre-school children than with teenage children. More of this time is spent in play and socialising than in care-giving. Fathers relate less in one-to-one ways with their children than as part of a family context.

A Dad's involvement with his children is a predictor of better academic achievement for children (more so for girls than boys). Relationship harmony and quality (for traditional two-parent families), along with the income of the father, are other key variables in children's achievement.

Fathers perceive that their most important roles (in terms of impact on their children's well-being and adjustment) include: being accessible, guiding and teaching, providing income and economic security, giving emotional support, developing a good relationship with the children's mother, being a friend and providing discipline. How do these roles fit with what you do with your children?

Far from Dads being redundant in the new millennium family, the Fitting Fathers into Families research shows that Dads can be very important for healthy families and children.

Epilogue: Father Time



Imagine there is a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400. It carries over no balance from day to day. Every evening it deletes whatever part of the balance you failed to use during the day.

*What would you do?
Draw out every cent, of course!*

Each Dad has such a bank.
Its name is FATHER TIME.
Every morning it credits you with
86,400 seconds.
So . . . make the most of today.

Prize every moment that you have.
Prize the moments you spend with
those you care about, including
your children. When you are gone
and your children talk about you
to their children, will they speak
well of you? Will they be filled with
gladness at your memory?
Or will their memory of you be a
collage of missed opportunities,
misunderstanding and unfulfilled
promises?

When you look back on your role
as a parent, will you be proud of
what you have done? Will you have
taken the time to learn from your
children how to be a better man?

Resources for Dads



General books about being a Dad / Parent

Babies! A Parent's Guide to Enjoying Baby's First Year by Green C, 2002, Simon & Schuster.

Beyond Toddlerdom Tips by Green C, 2004, Transworld Publishers (Division of Random House Australia).

Constructing Fatherhood, Discourses and Experiences by Lupton D & Barclay L, 1997, SAGG Publications Ltd.

Fatherhood by Cosby B & Poussaint A, 1994, Berkeley Publishing Group.

Fatherneed: Why father care is an essential as mother care for your child by Pruett K, 2001, Broadway Books.

Kid Wrangling: Real Guide to Caring for Babies, Toddlers and Little Kids by Cooke K, 2003, Penguin Books.

Love, Laughter and Parenting by Biddulph S & Biddulph S, 2001, Dorling Kindersley Publishers Ltd.

More Coaching for Fatherhood, Teaching Men New Life Roles by Epstein L, 2007, New Horizon Press.

Nontraditional families (second edition) by Lamb M (editor), 1999. See especially the chapter by Graham Russell on primary caregiving fathers.

The Blue Book of Tips for Fathers & Father – Figures by Robinson B, 2007, Finch Publishing.

The Father Lode: A new look at becoming and being a Dad by Dye P, 1998, Allen & Unwin.

The Gift of Fatherhood by Haas A, 1994, Simon & Shuster.

The 7 Secrets of Effective Fathers by Canfield K, 1995, Tyndale House Publishers.

Toddler Taming by Green C, 2006, Transworld Publishers (Division of Random House Australia).

You might like to have a look at some of these resources. Most of the books can be borrowed through your local library. Your library should also be able to help you with the Internet if you do not have access at home. Good bookshops will have most of these books and a range of other publications on parenting.

Books for new Dads

Becoming a Father: How to Nurture and Enjoy Your Family by Sears W, 2003, La Lache League International.

Beginning Fatherhood: A Guide for Expectant Fathers by Pudney W, & Cottrell J, 1998, Finch Publishing.

First-time Father: Pregnancy, Birth and Starting Out as a Dad by Russell G & White T, 2005, Finch Publishing.

She's Had A Baby - And I'm Having a Meltdown: What Every Father Needs To Know About, Marriage, Sex and Diapers by Barron J, 1999, Quill.

The New Father: A Dad's Guide to The First Year by Brott A, 1997, Abbeville Press Inc.

What Every Father Needs To Know To be A Good Dad by Horn W & Rosenberg J 1998, Better Homes and Gardens.

Separated and Part-Time Dads

Dad's Place: A New Guide For Fathers After Divorce by Burrett J, 1997, Ward Lock.

Live Away Dads: Staying A Part Of Your Children's Lives When They Aren't A Part Of Your Home by Klatte W. 1999, Penguin.

Solo Dad Survival Guide: Raising Your Kids On Your Own by Davis R, 1998, NTC/Contemporary Publishing.

Fathers, Sons and Daughters

Daddies & Daughters by Berr C & Barrington L, 1998, Simon & Schuster.

Daughters and Dads: Building a lasting relationship by Clark C & Clark D, 1998, Navpress Publishing Group.

How To Father A Successful Daughter by Marone N, 1989, Crest.

Me And My Dad by Hamp S, (Editor), 1999, Workman Publishing Company.

Prodigal Father: Reuniting Fathers and Their Children by Bryan M, 1998, Three Rivers Press.

Raising Boys by Biddulph S, 1998, Finch Publishing.

With Love, From Dad by Wolgemuth R, 2001, Honor Books.

Time and Work Issues

Daddy Work: Loving Your Family, Loving Your Job, Being Your Best In Both Worlds by Wolgemuth R & Blanchard K, 1999, Zondervan Publishing House.

Father Time, Making Time for Your Children by Petre D, 2005, Pan McMillan.

Fathering from the Fast Lane, Practical Ideas for Busy Dads by Robinson B, 2003, Finch Publishing.

Fathers, Sons & Lovers: Men Talk About Their Lives From The 1930's to Today by West P, 1996, Finch.

Fathers Work and Family Life by Warin J, Solomon C & Langford W, 1999, Family Policy Studies Centre, London.

Finding Time For Fatherhood: The Important Considerations Men Face When They Become Parents by Linton B, 1998, Fathers' Forum Press.

Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work & Family Life by Levine J & Pittinsky T, 1998, Harvest Books.

Internet Sites

www.cfii.ca/fiion

www.dadcando.com

www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/family/supporting_fathers.htm

www.fatherandchild.org.nz

www.fatherhood.org

www.fatherhood.org.au

www.fathersdirect.com

www.fira.ca

www.goodbeginnings.net.au

www.greatdads.com.au

www.lifelinewa.org.au

www.menslineaus.org.au

www.mfrn.net.au

www.mydad.ca

www.ngala.com.au

www.raisingchildren.net.au

www.triplep.net

www.zerotothree.org

DVD's

Being a Dad: Pregnancy and Birth, 2005, PNMG.

Being a Dad 2: Bringing the Baby Home, 2007, PNMG.

"Hello Dad".....*Infant communications for fathers by Good Beginnings Australia and The New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry*, 2006.

Raising Children, 2006 by Smart Population Foundation, PNMG.

What Kids really need from their Dads – A short video for fathers and father figures by The Fathering Project, 2007, University of Western Australia School of Medicine, Western Australia.

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A Winter's Tale by Harrison F, 1987, Collins, London.

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The Living Years, Mike and The Mechanics, 1988, Wea/Atlantic.

"Who Can Afford To Be A Good Father?" by Hughes T, 1999, in *The Australian*, 26 July.

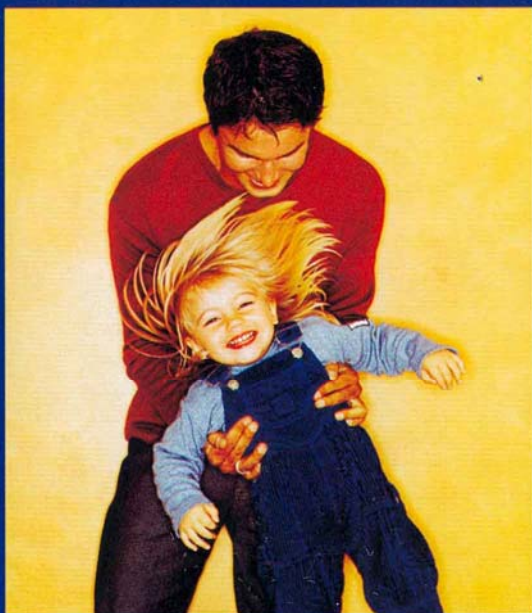
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Readers wishing to learn more about programs and support for Dads, or for parents, can gain information by contacting their local Relationships Australia office on **1300 364 277**.

Information about courses and other services is also available on the Relationships Australia website - **www.relationships.com.au**.



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