

10 Ways to Be a More Involved Dad

I hope you're an involved dad. And I hope you recognize the difference you're making for your kids. I talk and write about that all the time, but I'm not sure anyone can do it enough.

Involved parents making a difference is the whole idea behind CASAColumbia *Family Day*—which is today, Sept. 23.

This initiative was launched over a decade ago by CASAColumbia with the goal of getting families to eat dinner together on that day—and generally eat meals together more often. Studies have shown that when families make it a habit to eat dinner together, teenagers are less likely to use drugs and alcohol and less likely to have high stress. Kids of all ages do better in school, especially reading. Plus, it's great bonding time.

Mealtimes are very important, but this movement is about a lot more than that. After all, there isn't that much value in wolfing down food together and then going your separate ways.

The emphasis is really on everyday activities that bring your family together—doing homework, riding in the car, tucking them into bed, attending events together and, yes, sharing mealtimes. You're really sharing life. You connect at different times throughout the day; you have more chances to affirm your child; you keep those lines of communication open; and you're available when your child has something on his or her mind.

Again, those regular hands-on investments make a difference in helping your children avoid risky and foolish behaviors, as the research shows.

I know how families are today. In my house, it's just my bride

and me and our youngest son, and often it's a challenge just to find time for the three of us to be together. With the way parents and kids are filling up their schedules these days, it takes a real commitment to establish and then protect that family time—and I believe dads play a key role in this.

Family rituals are important reference points that give our children security, and they provide a setting for a lot of fun, learning and affirmation.

What are some of the rituals that have “family fun” written all over them? I'm giving you 10 that we came up with, but I hope you'll use the comment box below to contribute more ideas that you use.

1. Reading. This can be a time of closeness, sharing new ideas and making your child feel special. It's an especially great way to end the day.

2. Mealtime. Don't stop at traditional dinners; picnics, carryout pizza or Sunday brunch can add to the togetherness. Maybe it's time to get out that old fondue pot you got as a wedding gift 20 years ago.

3. Physical affection. When you walk in the door after work, make sure you get hugs from everyone—and that means everyone. (Even if you have to hunt them down in the basement or backyard.)

4. Playing games. What better way to encourage your kids' imagination, physical and mental prowess, and a healthy spirit of competition? That includes peek-a-boo with an infant, whiffle ball in the backyard or a family chess tournament.

5. Chores and errands. Everyday chores help a child define his place in the family, give him an opportunity to contribute and provide another opportunity to spend time together. And those day-to-day trips to the store can become priceless times with Dad.

6. Cooking. Get the whole family working on a meal, and then enjoy the results.

7. Taking pictures. Family photographs are a great way to mark and then remember events for years to come. Some kids dread it when the camera comes out, but strive to make it fun—see who can do the most hilarious things in front of a camera.

8. Storytelling. Looking through old photos and videos can lead to some great stories about your youth, your parents and your grandparents. Or tell your kids a made-up story where they're one of the characters. (Or read a story together.)

9. Family outings. This can be a drive into the country to see the cows or a full-blown vacation to Yellowstone. Don't get so caught up in the destination that you forget to enjoy the trip. And remember, a low-budget camping weekend can mean more to your kids than a trip to Hawaii.

10. Spiritual activities. Praying together, attending church and family devotions can become unique and priceless rituals. Also, find ways to put it into action—like organizing the family to volunteer somewhere or gather clothes for a homeless shelter.

Once again, Dad, take a leading role in this. Don't let your family drift apart because of busy schedules or because there's something on TV or someone calls or texts a family member. Once you start allowing distractions in, it will only get more and more difficult to keep them out. Establish those positive rituals, then set boundaries for that time and protect it. Believe me, it's worth it.

Dad, what rituals are important to your family? Please add to our list either below or on our Facebook page.

Action Points for Dads on the Fathering Journey:

- Here's a great idea for family mealtimes: family

placemats that are unique to your family. This is what Rick Sapio, who's a good friend of the Center, does with his family. He provides some tips (for free) at .

- During dinnertime, consider serving the meal in courses so it's less rushed and there's more time to talk and be together.
- Be in charge of coming up with conversation topics, bringing home a new joke or finding some other way to make family time more interesting and fun. (And don't hesitate to get help, such as these conversation starters.)
- Do a "roses and thorns" or "peak, valley and plateau" routine with family members to help each person share the highlights and challenges of their day.
- Organize regular "family council meetings" or "family timeouts" to share what's happening in your lives, talk about events that have happened in recent weeks, and discuss plans and goals for the coming months.
- Check out the Family Day website for an activity kit, conversation starters and other related resources.

Carey Casey is the CEO of the National Center for Fathering, a nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the culture of fathering in America by enlisting 6.5 million fathers who to make the Championship Fathering Commitment.

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