

INSIGHTS

Why dads matter



Father's Day can be a tricky occasion for some families, especially for those who don't have a father who is present in their life because of family breakdown, or a geographical distance which may not allow them to be close by. There are also those of us who have lost a father, or who are being raised by single mums who are both mum and dad to their kids. This too can impact how our kids view 'dad' and what he means to them. Other family structures exist where dad is not present either, and this can complicate Father's Day further.

The reality is that dads, when present and safe, take different shapes and forms. And research shows that kids thrive when dad is that positive, safe presence in their lives.

Over the past few decades, research has shown us that dads (and other male role models like teachers, coaches, church leaders, uncles, grandpas, and more) matter. Enormously. Their positive impact cannot be understated or waved away. And research also tells us that dads (and those other male role models) are stepping up and presenting that positive and active presence in their children's lives.

Why do dads matter?

Having involved fathers, however they might look to you and your family, has a lasting effect on their children's lives, for the better.

Firstly, dads engagement can help kids achieve better results at school, help increase their self-esteem and even reduce the risk of delinquency, substance abuse and other high-risk behaviours in kids. Known as the '**father effect**' – this umbrella term describes these and the many other benefits of a paternal presence, a presence who values and prioritises quality time.

Secondly, these dads matter because their influence, attention, nurturing, and affection help promote children's social and emotional development. They set up a healthy relationship with their children, allow for emotional growth and help develop positive health and wellbeing. And they provide a model of healthy masculinity for their kids; the kind of masculinity that helps those around them feel safer and stronger.

Third, there is a sense of acceptance and security that fathers can help provide which not only help our kids in the short term but continues as they move into adulthood as well. This protective presence can come from both parents but seems particularly present with actively and positively engaged fathers.

Fourth, engaged fathers matter because they can also help our kids develop important life skills including respect, problem solving, empathy and social skills. They teach them about limits, consent, and responsibility. Researchers aren't quite sure why or how, but these things seem to develop differently when dads are present versus when they're not.

What does an engaged dad look like?

In TV talk, an engaged dad looks like everyone's favourite blue heeler dad, Bandit from Bluey.

parenting * ideas

If you've watched the show, you'll have seen that Bandit isn't perfect. He can be dismissive now and then. He can say things that are challenging. But despite his imperfections (which we all have), Bandit listens to his children – their thoughts, their concerns, their dreams and their ideas. He encourages them, he challenges them, he shows an interest in them.

And Bandit talks to his children – he makes jokes, he reads books, he tells them about his day, he involves them in other parts of his life. He is verbally expressive with clear communication but without being controlling or belittling.

Bandit plays with his children – he kicks the footy in the backyard, or feeds the baby doll a bottle; he helps put together Lego or find the missing piece of a puzzle. He supports their interests, imagination, and growth. He helps set limits and boundaries and regulate emotions.

Bandit also supports his children – emotionally he helps navigate their problems or worries with them, he doesn't dismiss them. Rather he guides them to solve problems or cope with disappointment themselves. He supports them physically– he watches their sports matches, or dancing recitals; he is their biggest supporter.

Bandit is a positive role model – he demonstrates values that he wishes to instil within his own child/ren. He is honest and shows integrity. But he's not perfect. He makes mistakes – because he is human and when he does, he will own them and will say sorry.

He grows alongside his kids – as his children get older and mature, his relationship with them evolves with it. They learn about each other and grow and feel confident and secure in their relationship together. He values self-care – he has time for himself and ensures his own wellbeing and health is prioritised too because without this, he can't be his best self.

All dads are different but equally important

These qualities of an engaged dad aren't a checklist that dads need to tick off. Every dad will be different and that is okay. What's important is that dads are there for their kids and want to grow with them. That's what life is. Growth. That is what our kids will notice the most and how they will know you matter... because you do!



Shona Hendley

Shona Hendley is a freelance writer and a former secondary school teacher. Her work appears in Kidspot, ABC Everyday, The Guardian, Body + Soul, and News.com.au amongst others. Shona currently lives in regional Victoria with her family, including husband, two daughters, two cats, and three super cheeky goats. You can follow her on [Instagram](#).