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April 2011

Work-Life Balance for Dads

Whether it's changing diapers, coaching a little league team or putting in extra hours at work to snag that promotion, a father's work is never done. At home and work, the more hours worked, the higher the expectations. Navigating the expectations of work and family life can leave dads feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Here are some practical tips to help today's dads in the never-ending battle to balance work and family life.

Understand the importance of a father's presence. Amidst the frustrations of fatherhood, it's easy for dads to lose sight of their far-reaching role. Recognizing the importance of that role is a first step in regaining perspective and reevaluating priorities. Beyond just bringing home a paycheck and playing with the kids, studies suggest that fathers influence our health, our safety and our futures. Having a dad involved means children are less likely to struggle with obesity, live in poverty or have behavioral problems. They are less likely to become addicted to drugs or alcohol. Children growing up with their dads are less likely to commit crimes and fill up our jails. They are less likely to be victims of child abuse. Instead, children with involved fathers tend to do better physically, socially, emotionally and academically. Fathers also give us a sense of security, confidence and self-control that we take with us long after we leave home.

Adopt a long-term view. Stepping back now and then to take a long-term look at life helps reduce stress in two ways: it gives us a sense of distance from our current situation and reminds us of the meaning behind the sacrifices. Long-term, it's easier not to sweat the small stuff. Wise dads look far into the future and see that they aren't raising kids so much as they are raising adults. The long term view is what inspires these dads to be actively involved here and now by doing things like playing catch, going to parent-teacher conferences or teaching their kids about the world of money. The long-term view also reminds us that long after we've changed jobs or retired, our loved ones will be with us. Especially in our later years, we will want to know and be part of our children's lives.

Draw strength from relationships. Building supportive relationships with loved ones and friends help dads lead a balanced life. Loved ones give our lives meaning, purpose and joy. Supportive relationships help buffer us and our families against the harmful effects of stress. Men historically avoid talking openly about feelings, but talking about the stresses and uncertainties of work with a loved one may provide some relief. It also helps loved ones understand what's going on at work and in our dads' worlds.

Eat dinner together more often than not. While it can't happen every night, preparing and eating meals together is a great way to reconnect and spend time together. When eating dinner together, be sure to turn off the TV and keep the conversation positive. Dads can foster family conversation by asking kids to take turns talking about their biggest challenge, the most interesting part of their day, or a way they helped someone else. We learn a little more about them every day and can teach them by example, as well. Kids also will learn good table manners by watching and through dad's tireless reminders. When they're old enough, kids can help prepare food and set and clear the table. They'll learn healthy habits and skills that will last a lifetime. But the best part of all is that kids will learn that they can count on time spent with dad.

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When schedules are tight, schedule a family night. If your schedule is packed, dads can schedule family time just as they would an important appointment for work. Many families have a regular “family night” where they play games, work on puzzles or just hang out together. To ensure success, plan family night activities in advance to avoid last-minute errands and to give the family something to look forward to. Include kids in the planning when possible by giving them options for activities or choices for dinner. Dads and moms can schedule a “date night” for themselves too so they can reconnect as adults and as a team apart from their children. While it may seem counter-intuitive to schedule fun times with the family, it is one way to be deliberate about making family time happen.

Take your kids to work. Not too many generations ago, kids saw their fathers at work. They worked alongside them on the family farm or learned trades from their fathers. In doing so, kids learned about their fathers’ work, the value of work and about their fathers’ strengths. Today’s dads still can introduce their children to the world of work by explaining their duties or by bringing them to the workplace for a short visit or tour. I still remember loving even the briefest of trips to my dad’s office, seeing all of the neat tools and gadgets and asking dozens of questions. By giving kids a view of dads’ work, they can better understand what the heck dad does when he isn’t hanging around with them.

Give them homework. While playtime is important, not all of the time spent with dad has to be fun and games. At home, kids may take to helping dad work on the car or projects around the house. Little ones can hold tools and ask questions. Older kids can learn by actually helping dad with the project. The important thing is that they see dad planning, organizing and tackling a project. My daughter recently said to me out of the blue that “what you do is exciting,” referring to projects around the house. What is interesting and exciting to kids is spending time with dad and understanding how he sees the world.

Know when to seek professional help. Dads are among the 6 million men in the United States who struggle with depression and other mood disorders each year. While everyone experiences low mood now and then, clinical depression is more severe, more disruptive and lasts weeks. Without treatment, depression can last months to years, devastating families and careers. Depression may appear differently for dads and men in general. They may be more likely to report irritability, anger outbursts and changes in sleep or weight than feelings of sadness. Depression often robs men of the ability to enjoy being around loved ones. They may tend to withdraw from others and may refuse offers of help. Some dads may be reluctant to seek help because they see it as a sign of weakness. When depression interferes with work or family life, it’s time to seek help. Depression is a real illness and treatment for depression works. It takes courage for dads to reach out to get the help they need to stay healthy and involved as fathers.

Be realistic. Dads, remember that the super-dad who can do it all and do it perfectly is a myth. At work and at home, one of the best ways to reduce stress is to set realistic expectations for yourself and talk about realistic expectations with others in your life. Dads need to be able to say that powerful little word “no” to good things so they can say “yes” to the best things. If you see a need to rebalance or make changes in your life, make small changes incrementally over time. Recognize that in the short run stress may increase. In the long run, dads will have many happy, healthy years balancing work and family life.