

CHAPTER 1

Decide What You Want: Develop Your Vision

What outcomes do you want in your relationship with your kids? What are your parenting goals and priorities? These are questions that can help you to identify and clarify what you wish to accomplish. It's fairly easy to state broad goals such as, "I want to be a good father" or "I want to do all I can to help my kids." However, in order to develop a game plan that will maximize your chances of success, you'll need to be more specific and precise.



In looking at how to meet your goals, it will be important to assess what your strengths are as a father. It will be essential to identify what you need to learn so that you can fill in any gaps in your parenting skills. These steps,

combined with setting priorities and goals, form the basis for a successful plan of action.

Most fathers want to have the opportunity to stay closely connected with their kids. They want to do their part in helping the children grow up into happy, well-adjusted adults. Yet there are several barriers that can prevent a father from realizing these objectives. First, he may not have a clear vision or definite objectives about what he wants for his kids and the quality of his relationship with them. Second, his relationship with his ex may have deteriorated to a low point. After encountering consistent resistance from her, he may become discouraged and conclude that his children are largely inaccessible except for court-ordered visitation. Third, even during visitations, he may not know how to offer the nurturing that kids need, and he may actually do things that harm his efforts to build a loving relationship with the children.

Developing a plan for parenting will give direction to your efforts. Imagine yourself as a father with a wonderful relationship with your child. The time you spend together is special, and both of you share a satisfying bond of closeness that seems to get even better as time passes. *This outcome is possible.* The fact that you are divorced does not have to harm your bond with your child. On the contrary, some men actually improve the connection with their children after they are separated from a wife. This can be possible for you too if you first spend time developing your vision and creating a goal-oriented action plan. The tips in this chapter will show you how to do this.

TIP
1

Set Priorities

Get clear in your own mind about the importance of your children in your life.

What are your priorities? What is most important to you? When asked these questions, many dads immediately reply that the kids are one of their top priorities. If this is true for you, then ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Am I really connecting with my children in the way that I would like?
2. If not, then why not?
3. Am I allowing conflict with my ex-wife to get in the way?

Unfortunately dads often do not know how to establish and enjoy a more healthy and loving relationship with their kids. In fact, divorced fathers are frequently so bogged down in acrimony with their ex-partners that they fail to pay enough attention to what matters the most to them until it's too late.

As a noncustodial dad, you probably have court-ordered visitation privileges. Therefore time is precious because you have limited visitation with your children. Unless you take action, days, weeks, and months could easily slip by, and your children might grow up without the involvement from you that they need and deserve. How are you going to use the time that you *do* have to your best advantage to improve your connection with your kids? What steps are you going to take to improve your bond of trust and love so that when you and your children are not together that connection will still be strong?

Too often divorced dads feel hopeless and discouraged

in their attempts at noncustodial parenting. It is all too easy to decide to back off, stop trying, or drop out of your kids' lives. You *can* take steps to change your situation, but the change must begin with *you*. First, you have to decide what you really want for your children and for yourself. Second, you have to be willing to do whatever it takes to have a good relationship with your kids. Third, you have to take action.



CRAIG HAD ALWAYS LOVED HIS CHILDREN, *but he and his ex-wife Jenny fought continuously. She made it difficult for him to talk to his two children between visitations. Jenny had learned to adjust to life without Craig. In fact, it was easier for her to handle the kids if Craig were not even involved at all, since his phone calls to the kids disrupted their evening schedules and often left them in an agitated state. Afterwards Jenny had problems getting them to finish their homework and go to bed on time. As the strain between Craig and Jenny continued, he became increasingly frustrated that it was so difficult to connect with his children. Craig was also embarrassed that he was behind on his child support. Finally, at one point, his anger exploded. "What's the use," he thought. "She's never done me right." Then he rationalized, "Who knows if the kids are even mine. How do I know she didn't cheat on me?" Over the next few months, Craig gradually withdrew from trying to see or contact his children. He, in effect, abandoned them. The kids, in turn, grew up without knowing their father. It was sad because all of them lost. Things could have turned out much differently if Craig had only had the right tools and the resolve to use them.*

Get Clear on What Matters Most

Try this exercise. Imagine that you're standing in the middle of some railroad tracks. Far ahead of you, by the side of the tracks, you can see a gathering of people. You are surprised, as you realize that the gathering is actually a funeral. You see the podium, the flowers, the coffin. And now various people from the assembly take turns at the microphone, offering remembrances of the person who is deceased. A middle-aged woman gets up to speak. She looks familiar. You vaguely feel as if you should know her. Then, with sudden horror and shock, you realize that this woman is your own aging daughter, and the person she is eulogizing is *you*.

As she approaches the podium, you realize that you're looking into the future, and you marvel at how she now looks, so many years later. What will she say? That her parents let anger and bitterness between them get in the way of being there for her? That she was glad that you spent so much time climbing the ladder of success that she never got to see you? That even when the two of you were together, you never related to her in a way that was nurturing or encouraging of strong self-esteem and confidence?

Or will she say that you turned off the television when the two of you were together so that you could really listen to her? Will she say that you made the effort to be there for her school play? And that you did not let lack of rapport with her mother stop you from being a good parent?

You look down at the railroad track you're standing on. It's actually a timeline and where you're standing on the track represents one point in time. In back of you is your past. You see behind you your ex-spouse and all the other things that stand out in your memory. You cannot change any of that. In front of you is your future. And every tie in the track represents one day of your life. The choices you make every day during your daughter's childhood will determine the memories she takes with her to your funeral.

You get to choose which funeral scenario will take place. It's your call. You can have a child who remembers your