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# Connecting with Fathers at Sea

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**C**ommercial fishing can require long absences from home, is often financially unpredictable, and is inherently dangerous. The work of fishing presents special challenges and stresses to many fishing fathers. Fishing families often contend with Father's frequent absences and reappearances. Many fishing families express concern that Father misses out on birthdays and other important childhood events.

In talking with fishing families, we found that many have terrific ideas for staying connected with fishing fathers. This publication summarizes ideas and activities to help families connect with fishing dads, based on what works for some fishing families. We also have included ideas from other parents, family advocates, and professionals. The information is based on developmental needs, abilities, and interests of specific age groups. Although some of the ideas are "age specific," most can be adjusted to accommodate a broad range of ages.

## **Infancy: Birth to One Year**

The birth of a child is a joyful but stressful time for families. Parents must adapt to meet their infant's needs. As your family grows in new ways, your child's own physical development is rapid. Shortly after birth and in the first couple of months, infants show a fondness for their parents' faces.



Infants communicate their physical, emotional, and social needs by crying, cooing, and imitating facial gestures. Babies use their five basic senses (taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight) to explore and learn about the world.

## **Toddlerhood: 12 months to 3 Years**

Although not growing quite as rapidly as infants, toddlers exhibit great strides in intellectual and social growth. Motor, language, and social skills increase. Toddlers begin to express independence and want to be self-sufficient, a desire evident in the frequently balky and bossy behaviors they use to communicate their needs. Toddlers learn by combining their senses with their new ability to do things. As a result, they get into everything and love to imitate parents and siblings. They often want to help with family tasks and chores. Toddlers begin to talk and to understand many concepts, such as that "bye-bye" implies someone is leaving.

Around five months to three years of age, many children become uncomfortable with unfamiliar adults. Many fishing dads have experienced a frightened, tearful greeting from their child upon their return from sea. Because of Dad's absence, toddlers may challenge his authority (more than usual), act cold or indifferent, or become noticeably clingy during this transition. For the toddler, these feelings are natural and can be addressed while promoting positive relationships for fathers and children.



## **Remembering Dad: Ideas for Infants and Toddlers**

Familiarity is a key to connecting with dads at this age. Young children need contact with and exposure to objects that will help them feel connected to Dad.

1. Laminate pictures of Dad's face for your child to have. Large black-and-white photos are easiest for young babies to see. A copy center can laminate your photos for a dollar or two. One fishing wife copied a wedding picture for her toddler to keep so he could see Mom and Dad together. You also could make a mobile out of laminated pictures strung together on fishing line (get older brothers and sisters to help).
2. Dad can read a story, make one up, or sing lullabies on tape. Newborn babies recognize the sound of their mother's voice. With exposure to Dad's voice, new babies become familiar with the deeper tones and bond with Dad, too.
3. Make a video of Dad and the family doing different things together such as reading a book or sharing a picnic. It might be nice to get some footage of Dad on his boat. Toddlers love to see themselves on tape. One wife reported mailing home movies to Dad when he was in port.
4. Even very young babies have a keen sense of smell, and providing opportunities for your child to be familiar with Dad's scent can assist in bonding. Give your child a T-shirt or night-shirt worn by Dad to keep his presence close.
5. Some fishing families have used cellular phones to quickly inform Dad of important events, including first words and steps and use of the potty.

### **Preschool: 4–6 Years**

Preschoolers continue to imitate behavior and seek identification with their parents by adopting family beliefs, values, and standards of behavior. An increase in understanding emotions, gaining physical and emotional control, and experiencing the emotions of guilt and pride are preschooler landmarks. Preschoolers become more independent and socially involved. They are curious (endlessly asking "Why?") and industrious. Their personalities (shy, loud, talkative) are evident by this age, if not before. Preschoolers often are unable to discriminate their own point of view from others'.

Preschoolers are very gullible and take things at face value, although they can make abstract associations, too. For example, the movie *Pinocchio* portrays a boating mishap that can be extremely disturbing to young children of fishing dads. They

are able to connect the danger viewed in the film with the reality of Dad's work. In addition, being part of a fishing family necessarily exposes children to real concerns about danger. Because it isn't possible to completely shelter your preschoolers from the true potential dangers of fishing, it's best to teach them about the safety precautions Dad takes on his boat.



### **Staying Close: Ideas for Preschoolers**

1. Movies, books, and stories that show boating and fishing in positive ways can help counter the more publicized, dramatic, and negative side of being at sea. One film that has been recommended is *The Secret of Roan Innish*.
2. Have Dad show the safety precautions he has on his boat. Children can understand the use of the radio, life boats, and Coast Guard in case of an emergency. Knowing such resources exist to help bring fishing dads home safely is reassuring to children.
3. Your child can draw a special picture to send with Dad. Preschoolers are very proud of their work and might enjoy drawing pictures of a special day or event to share with Dad when he returns. A particularly water-hardy project can be made with crayon shavings, wax paper, and a warm iron. Have your child sprinkle the crayon shavings on the waxy side of waxed paper, cover with another piece (waxy side down), lay a cloth or newspaper over and under the wax paper, and gently press with a warm iron for a few seconds (you also can add leaves, sand, glitter, and spices for fragrance before pressing).
4. Children at this age love to playact. Role-playing Dad's daily life on the boat can help them to feel connected with Dad and to deal with their emotions concerning his absences.
5. You can use all the activities listed for infants and toddlers with preschoolers, too. For example, photos of Dad, cassette recordings, and

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videos can help your child remain connected. Preschoolers also benefit from transitional objects, such as Dad's T-shirt at sleep time.

### **Middle Childhood: 7–12 Years**

During middle childhood, children continue to refine their intellectual and social skills. They become more understanding of other people's feelings and more independent. They typically show more responsibility and effective problem-solving skills and are better able to interact with others. Having friends is important, and many elementary children develop a group of primary friends (usually of the same age and gender). Your child's expanding verbal skills often can be seen in relentless arguments and negotiations for desired objects or activities. In addition, your child's sense of self expands to incorporate what is called the "social self." When asked to describe herself, a preschooler might answer, "I am four" or "I have freckles," whereas an elementary-age child is more likely to say, "I am shy" or "I am kind."

Many fishing moms have said they feel as though they are being held hostage to strict and strenuous schedules when children start attending school and participating in activities. Fathers may find themselves competing for their child's time. Children identify strongly with their specific school, peer, and community groups.

#### **Sharing Time Apart: Ideas for Middle Childhood**

1. Children at this age can talk about their feelings when they (or Mom) are missing Dad. One family bakes when they are sad; another uses art projects such as making collages to help them deal with sadness or anger. Finding positive ways to deal with anger is important with the older children, too—they can make a quilt, build a fence, or even whack weeds.
2. Involvement in formal and informal organizations that advocate for fishing families can help children feel connected to Dad's work. Established associations such as the Fishermen's Wives Association and the Women's Coalition for Pacific Fisheries are available in many communities. Meetings that occasionally include children can provide opportunities to meet other children in fishing families.
3. Take your children to coastal community festivals—especially those with a fishing focus.

Even though Dad cannot always attend, your children can identify with the fishing-related activities and will probably be thinking about Dad.

4. Have your child keep a scrapbook for Dad while he is at sea. Include report cards, special school or art work, photos of events and activities, letters, etc. When Dad returns, your child can share it with him.
5. Your child can hide surprises in Dad's luggage. Dad also can hide things for the children at home before he leaves (cassettes, treats, movie tickets). The surprises can be jokes or warm thoughts. One father and son reported trading the same Trailblazer basketball card back and forth, anxious to unload the "loser" card on the other person.
6. When Dad is home, have him visit the child's classroom. Dad can be a hit at "show and tell" by telling about his work and some of the things he uses at sea. Many families reported doing this with great results.

### **Teenagers: 13–18 Years**

Most adolescents experience physical growth, brought on by hormones, somewhere between the ages of 12 and 18. In addition to the physical changes (unmatched since infancy), adolescents often experience intense mood swings, want even more independence, solve complex problems, and interact frequently with others. How a child develops depends on many things, including the growth patterns of his or her parents, health conditions, and the environment.

As you may know, it can be difficult to communicate with teenagers at times. They often answer questions in quick, abrupt sentences. For example, when asked to describe himself, a typical teenager might say, "I dunno" or "I don't like to think of myself in labels." Adolescent changes can be particularly disturbing for fathers. Children can seem to grow up overnight. Dads returning from sea may find their children's interests now revolve around peers, jobs, and other activities that often don't include parents. Sons and daughters may be less concerned about spending time with family and more interested in borrowing the car and money. Some teenagers may express hostility toward Dad because of his absences. Maintaining connections with adolescents can be difficult for all parents.

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It's important to consider your child's interests and hobbies and attempt to find or cultivate common ground. Make an effort to acquaint yourself with your child's friends. Allow your child to bring a friend on family outings occasionally or to join your family for dinner. Getting to know your child's friends (and their parents) can help ease discomfort regarding the large amount of time teenagers want to spend with peers.

Adolescence is a time for gaining responsibility and beginning the transition toward adulthood. Recognizing your children's many progressions toward adulthood can enhance their self-esteem, encourage responsible behavior, and provide opportunities to make positive connections. Teenagers like to be appreciated for their abilities, ideas, and accomplishments.

### **Creating New Connections: Ideas for Teens**

1. Have your teen help Dad with onshore boat maintenance. You can reward these added responsibilities through extended privileges (use

of the car, for example), extra money (wages), a private phone line, or special school clothes. Men and teenagers are more likely to talk about personal matters while working on a task than while sitting face-to-face.

2. Play a long-distance game with your child. For example, one fishing family has an ongoing chess game between Dad and his 12-year-old daughter. The board and pieces are left at home and Dad mails or calls in his next moves. The chess board acts as a symbolic reminder of Dad.
3. Encourage your teen to become involved in community associations and organizations that focus on fishing communities. Many of these organizations rely on the work of volunteers and offer opportunities for involvement.
4. Invite your teen for a special date when you are home, and make it a regular event. If you let your child determine the type of outing you will have, you may have better luck keeping him or her interested.

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