

FATHERS DAY ARTICLE FROM THE COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

Happy Father's Day to all the dads. Being a father has its daily challenges and since parents are the first educators of their children, just one of these challenges involves the education of your child. While the responsibility of monitoring a child's progress through school has often fallen to mothers, fathers are increasingly engaged in the learning of their children. In fact, there are now more dads than ever before who are their children's primary or sole caregivers.

At CCSP, we draw a distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement. Parent involvement is being involved in the life of the school and includes such things as volunteering at athletics carnivals or running a stall at the school fete, attending working bees and serving on the canteen. While parent involvement is very important and our schools rely on it, it is important that parents are also engaged in the learning of their children. This is what parent engagement is about – parents playing an active part in their child's academic progress and achievement. It includes parents and children working on homework and reading together, accessing the school's parent portal, participation in activities and resources that promote learning, and, working closely with your child's teacher to best facilitate how your child learns and develops.

Of course, schools have a large part to play in encouraging parent engagement and are urged to ensure they make dads feel as welcome as mums in being part of their child's life at school. There may be ways in which schools can reach out to dads to help them feel more comfortable in the school environment. In addition to the good old working bee, schools could hold a dads' retreat or reflection day, or extend a special invitation to dads to attend school events, including their child's parent/teacher interview, or to encourage dads to stand for leadership positions in the school, such as the Parents and Friends Association or Committee. We need dads to be aware of the important role they play in the development of their children.

For all the dads out there who would like some advice on being more engaged in their child's learning, here are six tips to help you out:

1. **Take an interest and stay informed** – let your child know that you are interested in what they are doing and what they are learning – ask questions about what's happening in the classroom, with their friends, and in their life outside of school. If your child sees that you are genuinely interested in them, they will be more likely to invite you to share in conversations that facilitate your engagement in their learning and development. Make a special effort to attend parent/teacher interviews and school information evenings – this will help demonstrate your interest in a tangible way. Read the school's newsletter and any other information you can that will deepen your understanding of what and how your child is learning.

2. **Be present to your child** – along with taking an interest in all aspects of your child's life, make time in your day to be with your child and to speak with them about what they are learning at school. If possible, try to establish a routine that facilitates this, such as school drop-off or pick-up, discussion during the family's evening meal (with TV off), or even during mundane activities like washing up. If you need to bring work home with you from your job, try sitting at the table or desk with your child as they do their homework. This can help you to model a responsible work ethic. Consider what opportunities your home life will allow and give one or more of them a try. The best part about making an effort to be present to your child is that you spend time together and strengthen your relationship. Take a lesson from Harry Chapin's song *Cat's in the Hat*. (Some dads might be more familiar with Ugly Kid Joe's version.)
3. **Read.** There is a plethora of research highlighting the importance of parents reading to their children. Where possible, try to do this daily. This develops healthy reading habits for both you and your child and is likely to draw you closer together. Some dads make the mistake of no longer reading to their children once they go to school, but it is important to continue. Reading not only strengthens the father-child relationship, it can facilitate conversations about what is being learned at school. For older children, try to source books and articles that you both enjoy, on topics in which you share an interest. You could each do your reading individually and then have a chat about your book or article – a bit like a mini-book club. Model positive reading habits to your children. Let them see you read more than just the TV guide or notifications on your phone. To find reading material, visit your local library with your child – this can be done with children of any age. You can also tell your child stories about your own childhood. While it's not reading, it can benefit your child in similar ways by letting them see how you use language, expression, recollection and creativity. Children have a great appetite for this and, again, this kind of sharing is likely to bring you closer as it allows your child to get some deeper insights into who you are.
4. **Go on out-of-school adventures** – plan an after-school or weekend or holiday outing related to something your child is currently learning about at school. It is particularly beneficial if you focus on an activity your child would really like to do or try and, if possible, to make it adventurous and creative and/or hands-on so that it will not be forgotten easily. Targeted experiences like these can complement and reinforce what is being learned in school. Best of all, this will provide many happy memories for you to share in the future.
5. **Incorporate learning into leisure time** – as appropriate, find ways to engage your child in learning in unlikely settings. For instance, you could watch an educational TV program together. Perhaps you share a hobby that involves learning a new skill – if so, leverage off this to talk about your child's learning at school. Look for opportunities in the playground, sports field or the shopping centre to introduce your child to knowledge and skills that will be able to be built upon at school or incorporated into other school-based learning activities.

6. **Model yourself as a learner** – we never stop learning and it is important for your child to see that. Provide your child with the example that you too are a learner and need to work hard at learning new things. Celebrate the joy of learning something new. This can be anything from studying a uni or TAFE course to setting up your new digital device at home or building a cubby house in the back yard. Show your child that, while it can be challenging, learning not only has its rewards; it is a normal part of everyday life