

Mother Nurture

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What Mom Can Do for Dad

I've been thinking more about my husband's needs lately, and wondering what I might be able to do for him, even while swamped with kids, laundry, and all the rest. Any suggestions?

When kids come along, a mom and dad have to work harder than ever. Naturally, they each get stressed and depleted. And that means they need more from each than ever!

A previous column suggested practical ways Dad could help Mom (it's on our website if you want to see it: www.NurtureMom.com). And here's a similar list of what Mom could do for Dad. Rather than playing it safe with a generic, gender-free list – like be more supportive or less critical – we thought we'd take a chance and try to capture some of the common, “him and her” textures in many relationships.

For many of these, we'll mention how often she could do them; feel free to adjust those suggestions to your own situation. Of course, if something doesn't fit for you or your mate, just move on the next item. And more than anything else, we hope you come up with your own lists: both what you'd like to receive and what you recognize your partner would like you to give.

Have confidence in his fundamental ability to be a parent. Hundreds of studies have shown that a father is just as able to parent with love and skill as a mother. For example, when babies cry, the typical father gets just as upset inside as his wife does, and just as relieved when the baby settles.

Encourage him. Be encouraging (though not patronizing) if he is learning a new skill or doing something uncomfortable. Suppose he feels awkward holding a little baby: you can reassure him that he's doing fine, that everybody feels a little funny at first, that he is getting better and better at it. You could self-disclose about ways you, too, have felt a little klutzy.

Acknowledge him. Try to admit it when his way worked even though it was different from yours, or when you learned something from him. Emphasize what you appreciate about his parenting rather than what you wish were different.

□ Understand the whole picture before jumping in. Be aware of how your emotions, beliefs, or previous experiences can make a situation look worse than it really is. And try to get the full story before you react; otherwise, you might make a mistake. A father once told Jan: *Our five-year-old son, Pete, whines and gets upset real easily. If we roughhouse, he gets mad over almost nothing, and then my wife, Joanie, comes in and yells at me. We were playing basketball in the backyard one day, and I was letting him win and he was happy. Then he missed a shot, and I got the ball for my turn. But he wanted the ball. I explained it was my turn but he started to cry. Joanie heard him and ran outside, glared at me, and said really nastily, "Can't you ever play without making him cry??" But I didn't do anything! First she tells me I don't do enough with him and then she's mad at me when I do. She's always watching, ready to pounce for the least thing.*

□ Don't micro-manage. Try not to be controlling, dogmatic, or self-righteous about small matters. That way, you'll be more credible when you discuss the big ones, and your partner will probably feel less defensive. Many disputes about parenting are inherently minor: If he puts an orange top and purple pants on your preschooler, maybe you should just smile to yourself and let it go. Every time you argue with him about how he parents has an emotional cost for each of you, plus it discourages his involvement; sometimes the issue is worth the price, but often it's not.

□ Be respectful. When you do offer suggestions, be respectful and specific. Give a positive idea of what he could do rather than what he should not do, like saying *It's been working for me to change Emma's diaper with that little music box going* instead of *This time, try not to make her cry*. If you can, filter out any implicit criticisms or commands in what you say.

□ It's alright for you to take the lead. Unless you and your husband truly share all aspects of parenting, it is natural for you to have a leadership role sometimes when it comes to the kids. He is probably entering a flow of activities that you've been managing, and he is just being a good team player when he asks you, the quarterback, what the play is. We suggest that you tell him at the time what you'd like him to do. Later on, if you like, you could talk together about similar situations in the future and figure out what he could do in them without you having to say anything.

□ Initiate romantic and erotic contact. Remember that romance and sex are important, even profound ways to feel loved and to improve well-being for each of you. Rather than waiting for him to take the first step, you could ask *him* out, or be the one to say first that maybe you could make love tonight.

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