

The little book of tips for fathers and father-figures.



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Fathers and father-figures are critical in every child's life. Loving and connected dads have an enormous impact, not only on their children's lives but also on their own.

This booklet contains simple tips and advice for dads and father-figures such as grandparents, stepfathers, youth leaders, uncles, teachers and coaches.

It's for fathers and father-figures who understand just how important they are in a child's life, and who are not afraid to reach out for advice.

We base the teachings on our research - and years of experience supporting fathers and father-figures. But the fact is, everyone's situation is different, so be creative and adapt the advice to suit your circumstances.

Take the time to try these tips and enjoy a closer and more connected relationship with your children.

Visit www.thefatheringproject.org for more helpful tips. At the end of this book is a blank page to add your own notes.

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The importance of fathers and father-figures

Our research links warm, engaged and effective Fathers and Father-figures to:

- Increased social and emotional development.
- Increased academic development.
- Increased physical activity and better health outcomes.
- Increased student connectedness with school.
- Increased self-esteem.
- Increased resilience.
- Increased social responsibility, social maturity, resilience and life skills.
- Reduced engagement in unhealthy and risky behaviours.
- Reduced alcohol, tobacco and drug use.
- Reduced bullying behaviours.
- Reduced suicide & self-harm.
- Reduced substance abuse.
- Reduced delinquent behaviour.

The references for these pages can be found here: www.thefatheringproject.org/research

The BUS principle

Children need their fathers and father-figures present and engaged in their lives. The BUS principle is a simple way to remember these important messages.

- **B** – Be There. Be available, present and engaged. Let your children know you are there for them.
- **U** – Give Unconditional Love. Tell them you love them and do it often. Even when you don't approve of their behaviour, reinforce that you still love them.
- **S** – Let them know they are Special to you exactly as they are and nurture their unique inner quality.

What your kids need is 'you'

- Minimise distractions (phone etc.) when engaging with your children.
 - Remind them you love them unconditionally.
 - Get involved. Be an active participant in their lives.
 - Listen to them. Get to know their thoughts, ideas, likes, dislikes, friends and dreams.
 - Value the everyday moments. Time together at home is as important as special events.
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Unconditional love

Unconditional love is love without strings attached. Children who receive unconditional love from their dads have improved lifelong health and wellness.

- Be consistent. It's important for your child to know you still love them during disagreements. Remind them it's their behaviour you disapprove of, not them.
 - Encourage open dialogue. Make sure they know, if they have done something wrong or are in trouble, they can talk to you because you love them.
 - Be patient. Do not withdraw from your child when they're going through adolescence, even if they appear to be pushing you away.
 - Set a goal to let your child know each day you love them, regardless of what has happened.
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What girls need

Positive father-daughter relationships can shape children's self-esteem, self-image, confidence and opinions of men.

- Girls need their father or father-figure to show affection and acceptance.
- Provide positive support, letting her know you will be there for her no matter what.
- Empathise with her. Show her you understand.
- A girl's self-esteem is built on a healthy, supportive relationship with her dad or father-figure.
- Don't put down her choices. Explain your reasons calmly and positively.

- Show respect to women. Girls form strong messages about future relationships from the way their fathers and father-figures treat women.

What boys need

The following tips are particularly relevant to raising boys.

- Boys need time with fathers and father-figures.
- Men are natural role models for boys. As a father, you hold a unique position in helping your son become a well-adjusted, responsible adult.
- Teach that aggression doesn't solve problems. Talk about emotions and your setbacks, fears and

mistakes growing up. Talk about and role model respect for women.

- Encourage physical activity and confidence and a healthy view of competition.
- Teach 'being a man' does not mean they have to always be tough. It is okay to make mistakes, feel sad or cry.

Dads and Teenagers

- Brain development, hormones, defining their self-identity, the struggle for independence all cause havoc in teenage minds.
- Fathers and father-figures play a crucial role in teenage years.
- Stay available and connected with your

teenagers, even if it feels they are pushing you away. Work around their busy schedule to spend time with them.

- Listen and get to know them as a teenager, it's the start of a new and important relationship phase.
- Teenage brains are attracted to impulsivity, novelty, risk taking, and influence from peers.
- Remain patient. The times when teenagers are the most rebellious, obnoxious and even hurtful are when they need your love the most.
- Tell them you are there no matter what, especially in tough times.
- Be supportive. Learn to recognise their trigger points and stresses.

Connect every day

Every day connecting is about finding time each day to connect with your children with undivided attention.

- Make time to connect. When you get home from work, around the dinner table, or at bedtime.
- Chat about their day, their feelings and their news.
- Put phones away and give undivided attention.
- Listen to your child. Get to know their thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes, friends and dreams.
- If you are working away or living apart, make time to reach out whenever possible.

Many dads report school drop off and pick up as one of the best times to connect with their kids:

- Walk to school side-by side. This is a great way to enjoy time together.
 - If you can't walk, drive your child to or from school. Put their bags and technology in the boot and turn music off to limit distractions.
 - Show interest and walk them to the classroom when possible. See where they sit, meet their friends and spend a bit of time with them.
 - Take them out occasionally for an after-school snack or treat and check in on how they are going.
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Dad dates

One of The Fathering Project's most popular suggestions is the Dad Date. Dad Dates are one child at a time, with no-one else and no interruptions.

- Focus on connecting with your child so they know they are valued, loved and worth your time.
 - Going to the park, lunch or a walk are simple one-on-one Dad Dates.
 - Show your child you've been listening to them by taking them somewhere they've been wanting to go.
 - Be interested, positive and encourage open conversation.
 - Book it in. Make a point of scheduling this in your diary, just like a work meeting or a job.
 - Go on Dad Dates that your children enjoy, especially when it comes to teenagers. Watch sport or movies. Exercise or join a social sport's team.
 - Listen and ask questions. Turn off technology and avoid other distractions.
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Side by side chats

The best communication between dads or father-figures and children often occurs when they are side-by-side, such as, driving to school or sport, walking together, cooking or doing the dishes.

- Create opportunities to talk when you are side-by-side doing things together. Side by side talking times are particularly good for having tricky conversations.
- Make it clear that your children can talk with you on any topic.
- Keep up to date with what is happening in their lives.
- Be open and ready for topics that are difficult for your child to talk about.

Asking good questions

When you ask questions that need more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer you are encouraging your child to open up to you.

- Ask open ended questions that require more than single word answers. Instead of 'How was school?', try "What was one good thing that happened at school today?"
- Ask for details. Try "Tell me about" or "What do you think".
- Show genuine interest. Kids know when we're faking. Try "Tell me more about that."
- Don't force it. If you are asking too many questions your child may pull back. Notice this and leave it for another time.

Listening to your children

- Pay attention and think carefully about what they are saying.
- Let them finish. Resist the urge to interrupt.
- Occasionally nod or say "yes" to affirm understanding.
- Don't boomerang the discussion back to yourself.
- Show you have listened by asking questions i.e., "So, what you're saying is, I'm putting too much pressure on".
- Listen even if you don't agree. It is important to allow children to develop and express their opinions.

Talking about difficult topics

- Create the right environment for open conversation (walking, driving). Sit side-by-side.
 - Calmly tell them what you want to talk about. Keep your emotions in check.
 - Acknowledge discomfort. “I know this may be hard, but there is nothing that we can’t talk about”.
 - Resist interrupting when they are talking.
 - Have an open and honest discussion. Come up with actions.
 - Older children may not want you to solve their problems, rather help to work out a solution.
 - Reassure that they can always talk to you no matter the situation.
 - Encourage your kids to tell you what is worrying them – personal worries, relationships or issues from the daily news.
 - Don’t laugh at their worries or dismiss them. Listen to their feelings calmly without interrupting.
 - It’s OK to admit that you are worried too. Reassure them and brainstorm on solutions.
 - Read-up on the issue together (if appropriate).
 - Check regularly on how they are coping.
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Family time

Family time is a ritual of getting the family together on a regular basis to spend valuable time connecting and having fun.

- Family time might include Sunday breakfast, Friday game night, picnics or an exercise routine. Anything that gets everyone together, to share, communicate and bond.
 - Establish a regular family time when everyone is available to focus on the family.
 - Get everyone in the family to contribute ideas for family time.
 - Block out this family time. Don’t schedule other activities during that time. Keep it as a sacred time.
 - Family time can also be used for family meetings for organising the family calendar, establish agreements and rules or discussions about family topics.
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Family meetings

Family meetings are regular get togethers to 'check in' on how everyone is feeling, discuss important issues, and plan for the week.

- Encourage regular family meetings even if they are just a quick 'check-in' for everyone to share.
- A meeting can be followed by a fun activity together.
- Let your children chair the meeting and create a list of topics to discuss.
- Ask questions about what is working well, what could be better.
- Make sure one person talks at a time.
- Start and finish every meeting with positive messages.

Family values

Dads and father-figures are a powerful influence in shaping the beliefs and values of children, through what they say and do.

- Be specific about values like trust, honesty, integrity, respect, racism, generosity and kindness to those in need.
- Teach acceptance of different backgrounds or abilities.
- Develop their conscience about bullying, aggression and abuse.
- Apologise to your kids when you are wrong.
- Discuss how values and behaviour should not change when we go online.
- Actions speak louder than words. Live the values you teach.

The importance of playing with you

Dad's or father-figure's play is usually more active. It encourages children to explore, solve problems, and take safe risks and supports the development of a child's social, emotional and physical skills.

- Rediscover your inner child. Play with your kids. Get out and have fun.
- Engage in physical play - even with the youngest children. Tickle, chase, and give piggy-back rides.
- Engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity - fast walking, riding a bike or scooter, playing and running.
- Don't stop as your children get older. Engage in recreation activities that are fun and playful. Explore their abilities and skills in a safe environment.

Challenges and healthy risks

- Encourage your children to 'have-a go' at trying new things.
- A healthy risk pushes a child to try something new outside their comfort zone.
- A healthy risk may include a new sport, joining school plays or giving a speech at assembly.
- Teach your children that mistakes and setbacks are part of learning.
- Encourage perseverance. Help them stay positive during setbacks.
- Encourage positive mindsets i.e. If they say, "I can't do this" try "you can't do this yet, but you are learning to do it."
- Explain practice helps the brain to remember, so the next time the task becomes easier.
- Make a list of things you could do with your child that are new to you both.

There is a page at the back of this book for you to make your list.

Partnering with your child's school

- Introduce yourself to the teacher at the beginning of each year. A partnership helps you and the teacher learn more about your child and helps teachers to personalise instruction.
 - Attend the class parent meeting at the beginning of the year (if there is no arranged meeting, arrange to see the teacher yourself).
 - At the beginning of a term, after the teacher and students have had a chance to settle in, make an appointment to see the teacher to discuss how your child has settled in.
 - When your child sees you and their teacher working in partnership, they see that you value their education. Don't hesitate to reach out to your child's teacher if you have any concerns.
 - If your child is struggling with schoolwork, emotional or social issues, work with the teacher and the school to find solutions.
 - If your child has been in trouble, don't take this personally. All children will make mistakes and misbehave at some time and discipline is a normal procedure within the school.
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Getting involved in the school

- Meet the Principal and/or school leaders such as deputies and class or year coordinators.
 - Check school planners and newsletters so you can diarise being involved in activities at the school e.g., orientation days, excursions, sports carnivals and working bees.
 - Map out with your children at the start of the year what you will volunteer for (canteen, working bees, classroom assistant, etc.) and how often (e.g., once a term).
 - Attend parents' evenings and parent-teacher interviews.
 - Offer to attend some of their school camps if parent help/attendance is requested.
 - Lock in appointments in your diary for school activities, just like a work appointment.
 - Take an interest in your child's school. Read the school newsletter and discuss activities at dinner with your child.
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Helping with your child's education

- Read with your child from an early age and encourage a positive attitude to learning new things.
 - Be willing to help with homework (even if just asking questions).
 - Support your child with their homework, rather than do it for them. Discuss what they must do and how they are going to do it.
 - Encourage and praise their efforts to work independently on their homework as this demonstrates self-management skills.
 - Instead of praising intelligence or talent, focus on the processes used, e.g. "That homework was so long and difficult. You did such a good job of working hard and finishing it."
 - Don't put too much pressure on them – encourage them to be as good as they can be and help them plan how to improve.
 - Encourage them to see mistakes as an important part of the learning process and help them to see how to use their mistakes to learn.
 - If your child is having trouble with homework and it is causing stress or arguments, put it aside and take a break. Try again later. If there are still problems, contact the teacher to discuss solutions.
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Positive attitude towards school and learning

- Ask your children about what they have learnt at school today and their thoughts and opinions on topics they are learning.
 - Focus on the positive aspects of school. Praise your school for the good things that you see being done.
 - Let your children know that our brains are always learning even when we are adults.
 - Show respect for their teachers with the words and actions your child sees.
 - Show interest in your child's homework and assignments. Ask if they would like to discuss anything with you.
 - Praise your child when they try and work hard - encouragement from dad or father-figure will go a long way.
 - If you are called in about a problem at school, be open to the situation and work together with the teacher for a common solution that is best for your child.
 - Remember both you and the school want the best for your child, so you need to work together to find the best strategies and actions.
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Positive Discipline

Positive discipline is best looked at as guidance and teaching, not controlling and punishing.

- Be warm, calm and firm when talking about behaviour. Fathers or father-figures who discipline in a calm and fair manner show love for their children.
 - Be consistent. Dependable boundaries help children know where the limits are, so they are less likely to cross them.
 - Be fair with your discipline. Children like things to be fair.
 - Watch for when your child might be going to test a rule and calmly remind them of the possible consequences. i.e. "Remember, if you don't go to bed on time tonight, you will miss out on your screen time tomorrow and that wouldn't be great."
 - Catch them doing good things. Heap on the praise and reward your children when they follow the rules and do the right thing.
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Family rules and agreements

- When dads and father-figures are consistent with rules in a warm and caring way, it helps to reassure children and teenagers they are protected and supported if they make a mistake or are at risk.
 - Involve every member of the family in establishing your family rules. Consider the age of your children. In addition to the ground rules, establish age-appropriate agreements/rules for each child.
 - Explain the purpose of each rule. Rules help kids learn what is expected of them.
 - Set good routines through rules about screen time, and good habits like brushing teeth and eating their vegetables.
 - Agreements are a great way of giving older kids more responsibility within the safety and support of the family.
 - Set consequences. Discuss the result of breaking the rules. Ask older kids to suggest appropriate agreements and consequences and then negotiate what you think is fair.
 - If they break a rule, calmly remind them of the family agreements and the reasoning behind them, then move to apply the consequences.
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Guiding teenagers' behaviours

- Be clear and consistent. Teenagers gain strength and self-respect from parents who are clear and consistent in their expectations and willing to discuss reasons for their decision.
 - Give love and support. Teenagers still need and usually react positively to parental love, support and guidance.
 - Allow competent teenagers to take responsibility when you see them handling situations well.
 - Praise their efforts. When your teenager displays good self-management skills let them know you have noticed and are proud of them.
 - Step in if you need to. Show respect for your teenager's feelings and opinions but reserve the right to limit their actions if you feel they're at risk.
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Teamwork with positive discipline

- Discuss and come to shared agreements around family values with your co-parent.
 - Communicate with your co-parent to agree on behaviours, house rules and fair consequences.
 - Avoid using the good cop, bad cop trap between parents. Children need consistency. Watch out for your child playing one parent off against the other and communicate with your co-parent.
 - Discipline in an atmosphere of love and support.
 - Work as a team to reinforce family values so everyone feels loved and respected.
 - If you have two households, set the rules and expectations for each household so the children will know what to expect.
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Promoting family wellbeing

- Maintain regular day-to-day routines where possible, e.g., wake up and bedtimes, getting outdoors, exercise, play, learn and work times.
 - Use family meetings to ask open questions about how everyone is feeling and functioning as a family.
 - Focus on the positives. Ask family members to share something they are happy about, are grateful for, or have enjoyed.
 - Take care of yourself. Your children will look to you as an example of healthy wellbeing.
 - Make time to have fun and laugh together.
 - Encourage healthy habits. Talk to your kids from a young age on the importance of looking after your body and mind.
 - Keep screen time to a minimum. Think about what your children could be doing instead.
 - Plan time to be active with your children. Play games, take a walk in the park, or go cycling.
 - Set family exercise goals. Record your progress on a weekly activity chart or map how far you have travelled. Reward yourselves with something you all value.
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Kids and Sleep

A 4-year-old needs about 11 hours sleep a night, a 9-year-old about 10 hours, a 14-year-old about 9 hours.

- Set a bedtime and stick to it.
 - No screens in the child's bedroom. Phones, Tablets, TVs and other electronic gadgets affect children's sleep.
 - Keep lights low. This encourages your child's brain to produce the sleep hormone, melatonin.
 - Relax with reading or stories. Once they are in bed, read a story together, encourage older children to read quietly or listen to relaxing music.
 - Use the opportunity for a quiet catch up with your child. Keep the conversation light. Send them off to sleep in a positive frame of mind without worry.
 - Charge their phones in a different room. Older children may stay up late or wake in the middle of the night to use social media.
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Supporting emotional wellbeing

- Schedule emotional check-ins. Try having days of the week on the fridge and getting the children to draw an emoji for how they feel.
 - Help kids name feelings. The process of identifying and naming an emotion can help the brain to calm down.
 - Explore emotions together. Read stories or watch videos or TV shows and discuss the characters emotions.
 - Practise gratitude. Reflect each day on what they're grateful for or went well.
 - Ensure ample sleep. Keep clear and consistent routines including rules around screen time or quiet reading or story time before lights out.
-

Building their resilience

Resilience is the ability to cope with change and challenge and to bounce back in difficult times.

- Demonstrate a positive attitude. Talk about your challenges as opportunities to learn and improve.
 - Support your child's sense of self. Help them to develop a positive sense of who they are, how they feel about themselves and what they can do.
 - Build coping skills. Talk to your child about strategies for dealing with difficult situations.
 - Help them find solutions to their problems. Ask open questions like, "What could you do?" and "What do you think?" Avoid solving their problems for them.
 - Provide opportunities to build confidence. Encourage them to work through challenges, problems and dilemmas.
 - During discipline, show you believe in them, e.g., "this isn't like you" or "you're better than that".
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Supporting their self-esteem and self-confidence

- Let your children know they each have their own special characteristics and positive qualities. That you love them regardless of their grades or abilities.
 - Help your children think about their abilities and what they are capable of in a realistic way, e.g. "You are doing so well for someone who is just learning".
 - Encourage them to value a wide range of abilities and get a balanced view of all their strengths and weaknesses.
 - Give positive feedback. Children remember the positive and the negative statements we say to them.
 - Praise effort and success. Encourage them to try their best and have a positive attitude to learning and improving.
 - Encourage independence. Teach your children to do things for themselves and not just rely on others.
 - Don't overuse praise. Kids need coaches, not fans.
 - Discuss setbacks as part of any journey. Give constructive feedback on how to learn and improve from setbacks.
 - Create family celebrations around milestones and successes, e.g., a special meal, with speeches.
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Encouraging healthy body image

Fathers and father-figures are an important source of reassurance in their child's healthy body image.

- Keep the focus on being healthy. Emphasise healthy lifestyle, eating, and exercise habits.
 - Be mindful of the impact of negative body talk around children.
 - Discuss the different aspects that make up a person, such as personality, skills and outlook on life.
 - Be supportive of older children as they experiment with new looks and styles. This is a natural exploration of their identity and self-image.
 - Teach realistic expectations. Analyse images of celebrities or influencers with your child. Discuss whether they are healthy images with which to compare themselves.
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Supporting their friendships

- Ask about and find out who your child's friends are and learn their names.
 - Get to know the parents of your child's friends and have regular communication with them.
 - Have casual conversations with your child about friendships. Talk about topics such as - What makes a good friend, what is the difference between being popular and being a good friend, and how to look after your friendships.
 - Encourage your child to explore new friends outside of school through activities such as hobbies, sport and music to expand their friendship groups.
 - Monitor your child's social media use and time spent online. Make sure your children are not socialising late at night.
 - Support opportunities and safe environments for your children to spend time with friends.
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Peer groups and peer pressure

A peer group could be a class at school, members of a team or a group of friends. Friendship groups are usually developed from within these peer groups.

- Being part of a healthy group has many benefits. When your child is in a healthy group, they feel comfortable with their group.
- Unhealthy groups may result in your child feeling pressured to do things they are not comfortable with. This also applies to online groups.
- Have a conversation about healthy and positive friendship groups.
- Let your child know, going along with a healthy group of friends is okay, if it does not involve engaging in reckless behaviour.
- Peer pressure/positive peer influence can be healthy for your child. Discuss with your child the difference between healthy and unhealthy peer pressure.
- A good rule is if it makes you feel bad about it, it is probably bad for you.
- Talk to your child about things they can say if they feel pressured, such as 'Sorry, I can't do that', or 'I don't feel like doing that'.
- Let them know: "Go with your instincts. If you are encouraged to do something you know is wrong, or feels uncomfortable, then you need to think carefully about your choices".

Drugs and alcohol

- Start from an early age to discuss what's healthy and unhealthy for children's bodies. This helps to prepare them for later conversations about smoking, drugs and alcohol.
- Talk with your children (even pre-teen, if appropriate) about drugs and the dangers, their awareness of drug availability and use in their area, school or peer group.
- Ask your children what they know or have heard about drugs.
- Establish a clear and consistent family position on drugs, smoking and alcohol.
- Provide information, not threats. Love, encouragement and listening are far more effective.
- Help kids deal with peer pressure. It is okay to say, 'no thanks, I will pass'.
- How you model behaviour is important. Show healthy behaviours towards alcohol and drugs.
- Be aware of new drugs, what they are made from, their impact and symptoms of a user. The following link has more information:
<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/teens-using-drugs-and-alcohol>

Bullying behaviours

Bullying is when someone is repeatedly hurting, upsetting or is aggressive towards another person.

- Let your children know it is okay to ask for help if they are afraid, upset or can't deal with a problem themselves.
- Advise them to calmly walk away from the bully and talk to a trusted adult as soon as they can. Not to show they are upset or angry. This is probably what the bully wants.
- Don't encourage them to fight back. This often makes the situation worse.
- Discuss how to solve social problems. Ask questions like, "Do you ever see kids having problems with each other at school? What would you do if this happened to you?"

If your child tells you about being bullied:

- Listen to your child. React in a calm and supportive manner. Although upsetting, remain calm.
- Acknowledge that bullying is wrong, and that your child is upset by the experience.
- Talk about options, working out a plan to help the situation. With older children ask how they want you to help.
- Sometimes older children don't want you to jump straight in. Decide whether it is safe for your child to try dealing with the bullying themselves or if you need to take the lead.
- Remind your child that the bullying is not their fault. Work together to make the situation better.
- If it is happening at school, make an appointment to meet with the school to work in partnership to stop the bullying.

For more information see:

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/bullying>

or <https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/>

Tips for children's cyber safety

- Keep digital devices in communal areas that can be supervised. Check regularly what your child is viewing. Set time limits that balance time spent in front of screens with offline activities.
 - Know your children's digital friends. Ensure the digital friends are people they know in real life.
 - Set parental controls and privacy settings. Install and regularly update filtering software to block unwanted content, pop-ups and restrict access to specific pages.
 - Warn against sharing passwords with anyone other than you. Ensure strong passwords on devices.
 - Stay up to date with changes in technology.
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If your child is bullied online make sure they don't respond. This brings attention to it and can cause it to become worse:

- Block the person who is bullying straight away and set the child's social networking profile to private.
 - Keep a diary of events with screenshots which can be used as evidence. Report the bullying to the site's service provider.
 - Inform your child's school. Bullying usually happens within the child's social network. Your school can help with advice and support your child while at school.
 - Download the Beacon: Cyber Safety App. This App is designed for adults to help keep children safe online.
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**“I can’t think of anything
I’d rather be good at.”**

- Justin Langer.

The tips in this book have come from the most recent published evidence around fathers’ impact in parenting, education, and health of children as well as from interviews with thousands of fathers and father-figures.

Additional copies of this book
can be purchased from
www.thefatheringproject.org

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