

Study says fathers should ask kids: 'Am I the dad you need me to be?'

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As Father's Day draws near, psychologist Jeff Cookston says dads should ask their children for a little more feedback than they might get with the yearly greeting card.

Just being a good parent may not be good enough, said Cookston, professor of [psychology](#) at San Francisco State University, who has studied fatherhood extensively. "There's a need for fathers to sometimes say to their kids, 'How am I doing? Am I the dad you need me to be?'"

"Kids are actively trying to make sense of the parenting they receive," he explained, "and the meaning that children take from the parenting may be as important, or more important, than the behavior of the parents."

"I don't think a lot of parents give these ideas about meaning much thought," Cookston said. "You may think that you're being a good parent by not being harsh on your kid, for instance, but your child may view that as 'you're not invested in me, you're not trying.'"

The meanings that adolescents in particular attach to their fathers' behavior can vary depending on the child's gender, [ethnicity](#), and the presence of a stepfather in the child's life, Cookston and former SF State graduate student Andrea Finlay report in a new study published in the *Journal of Family Issues*. The study included children from California and Arizona.

The researchers examined how adolescents view their fathers'

actions—specifically, whether the teens attribute these actions to a dad's overall character or to his reaction in a particular situation. For instance, a daughter might believe her dad took her to the baseball game because he is a good father, or she might believe that he took her to the game because he likes to go to the game.

The study suggests that girls tend to believe that a father's "enduring aspects" are responsible for a dad's good deeds, while boys are more likely to think that [dads](#) do good depending on the situation. Mexican-American children are more likely than their European-American [peers](#) to think that good times with dad depend on the situation.

The reasons for these differences are not clear, Cookston and his colleagues say, although in the case of boys and girls, it may be that girls are socialized to interpret other people's behavior in a more positive light. In Mexican-American families, the process of adapting to U.S. culture may increase family conflict, leading children to have a less optimistic view of their fathers' [good deeds](#).

Cookston has conducted extensive research on parenting and fatherhood, with a focus on how children from diverse cultural backgrounds respond to parenting and how children perceive and construct their relationships with their fathers. His research has shown that the relationship between father and child can have a significant impact on the child's tendencies toward depression and behavior problems.

Father's Day can be a good time for dads to rethink their relationship with their children, with a few tips that Cookston has gleaned from these studies:

Be sure to check in with your child. Dads may be surprised by the "filters" their children use to interpret their behavior, making it important for fathers to regularly ask about the relationship. "Fathers

should ask, 'am I more or less than you need me to be?'," Cookston said, "and children—particularly [adolescents](#)—should be able to say, 'I need you to change course.'"

Show your emotional support. Dads provide everything from discipline to role modeling, but Cookston said it is the [fathers](#) who emphasize their emotional relationships with their children who have kids that are less likely to behave in aggressive and delinquent ways.

Don't be afraid to switch up your style. If you weren't always a warm and accepting father, it's not too late to become one, according to Cookston. "Parents can change, and kids can accept that. Parents need to be constantly adapting their parenting to the development and individual needs of the child."

Be a team player. Cookston's research focuses on dads, but his work with divorced families has taught him how valuable it is when parents work together as a team. Children are more likely to talk to parents about family relationships if they see that they agree on parenting decisions, he noted, and "parents play unique, additive roles in their [children's](#) lives."

Aim high as a dad. "We need to raise the bar for fatherhood. If a man is around and is a good provider and doesn't yell at his kids and goes to soccer games, we say that's enough," Cookston said. "But we need to expect more in terms of engagement, involvement and quality interaction."

More information: The study "Attributions of Fathering Behaviors Among Adolescents: The Role of Gender, Ethnicity, Family Structure and Depressive Symptoms" was published March 5, 2013 in the *Journal of Family Issues*.

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