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When a dad's relationship with his children's mother ends, there are only two ways for him to (legally) ensure that he will remain an

active, involved parent: a negotiated custody settlement or successful litigation. In either situation, the father must be prepared to demonstrate his competence, character and commitment as a responsible parent. No court will approve a sole or joint custody agreement, unless the custodial parent provides a clean, safe home, and effective and attentive child care. So, despite the emotional chaos and legal wrangling that surrounds him, divorcing dads must find the time and energy to maintain or strengthen their relationships with their children.

For many fathers, the advice to become more involved in child-rearing is unnecessary. These dads have been significantly involved in every aspect of their children's growth and development. Unfortunately, economic forces, misplaced priorities, and outdated notions of fatherhood have kept some dads from proving they can be effective parents.

There is no official checklist or magic

formula for fathers seeking to prove they can be responsible caregivers, but I have put together a small list of basic do's and don't's for any father seeking custody. The following list is based on more than 20 years of experience as a domestic relations attorney focusing on representing fathers in custody disputes.

DO:

- Spend time with your children and get involved in their after-school activities, such as athletics, music or dance.

- Take an active role in the children's academic development by helping them with their homework and meeting with their teachers regularly

- Foster positive moral development and encourage attendance at church, synagogue or mosque

- Assist in helping solve your children's problems, large or small

DON'T:

- Lose your temper in front of your kids. Despite the stress of divorce, you must try to control your emotions

- Try to be your children's buddy. Impose and enforce (but not with corporal

punishment) reasonable rules of behavior

- Interfere with the children's relationship with their mother

The bottom line is: get involved. If you have been hovering at the edges of your children's lives, it's time to get down on the floor or out in the park with them. Meet their friends and their friends' parents. Take the kids biking, to the zoo, ballgames, and plays. Read to them, play games, fly a kite, go sledding. Reinforce a sense of belonging together. To the extent possible, share your hobbies with the kids and become involved in activities that interest them. Adjust your schedule to spend more time with your children. Talk, and listen to them.

Prepare for single fatherhood right now, even if you are still living with the children's mother. Improve or develop your performance of chores involved with child care. These include cooking, laundry, housework, grocery and clothes shopping. Learn by doing, or enroll in one of the numerous parenting classes at a community college or an adult education center.

The work and responsibilities of solo parenthood sometimes can cause a father to

lose heart and doubt his parenting skills. These anxieties can lead to fathers accepting the role of a secondary parent with limited involvement in their children's lives. But research shows that fathers need not worry. Several studies comparing the child-rearing skills of single fathers with those of single mothers found no difference between the two groups. If you think you can't be an effective parent because you are a man, think again.

Many divorcing fathers will find that the transition from married dad to single dad can be accomplished with only a minor increase in effort and commitment. For others, there will need to be a major realignment of priorities and lifestyle. In either case, when compared to the value of fatherhood to children, to fathers, and to society, the price is small.

Jeffery M. Leving is one of this country's leading family law attorneys and the co-author of the Illinois Joint Custody Law. His book, "Father's Rights" on which these columns are based, is regarded as a definitive work on this important subject. Mr. Leving has recently been appointed Chairman of the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood by Governor Rod Blagojevich.

DAD'S TALK