

The Down To Earth Dad

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The Monthly Newsletter for Fathers

Dedicated to providing dads with tools to build stronger bonds with their kids.

After The Bell Rings

...Do You Know Where Your Kids Are After School?

By Patrick Mitchell

There's a role for fathers to play in afterschool programs for the forty-thousand American kindergarten children who are on their own after school, and for the total 14 million kids who have no adult supervision once the final school bell rings.

"As we all know, fathers play an important role in kids' lives. What

"Afterschool programs become a really nice bridge for fathers to get involved in their child's education."

— Ursula Helminski, Vice President
Afterschool Alliance

we see happening in afterschool programs is that the (afterschool) programs become a really nice bridge for fathers to get involved in their child's education after school, whereas they might not seek to be as involved in their child's education during regular school hours," says Ursula Helminski, vice president of external affairs for *Afterschool Alliance*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of quality, affordable afterschool programs for children.

"Afterschool programs are a less intimidating place for parents to get involved in their

child's life. The parents are coming to the afterschool program to see their child perform, and to see what their child is learning or creating," she said. "Athletics, science, and math are things that we see a great connection with in

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Dad to Dad... Frisbee Golf at the Park

Patrick Mitchell is founding editor and publisher of THE DOWN TO EARTH DAD monthly newsletter, now in its seventh year of national and international circulation. His National Dads Matter!™ Project helps states and local programs connect fathers to children. His keynotes, trainings, and Down To Earth DadSM Coaching for fathers, educators, and child-and-family-serving programs and schools helps parents and practitioners enhance father involvement in kids' lives. Call 1-877-282-DADS, or visit the website at www.DownToEarthDad.org for details.

My two preschoolers and I sought something fun to do one recent morning when I left work to spend time with them while their mom took one of our other children to the doctor.

"Let's go there!" my son said, pointing out the window of the car at a park we'd never been to before. His sister agreed, and I suggested we throw Frisbees at the park. I told them I'd teach them to play *Frisbee Golf*. So we drove home and found two Frisbees in the garage, and my son handed me a recorder (which he called a "flute"), and he suggested I blow into it to announce the starting of the game.

At the park, I explained the game concept: *Each player throws*

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After The Bell Rings

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terms of fathers getting involved in afterschool programs and getting involved in kids lives in general. There's the need for afterschool programs, and that need is far from being met," Helminski told THE DOWN TO EARTH DAD. "Forty-thousand kindergarteners is a real concern. It's frightening; the statistics are alarming," she said, referring to *America After 3 PM*, the most in-depth study ever to explore how America's children spend their afternoons. The study, commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance, showed that American children are largely unsupervised during the often-dangerous 3:00 – 6:00 p.m. time frame.

Kids Need Something Productive to Do

As for the millions of older children who are unsupervised after school, Helminski said this: "We know that unsupervised kids who are not in afterschool programs are more likely to skip school, use drugs, and drink alcohol. Kids are actually less likely to smoke, drink, or do drugs if they're in an afterschool program." The bulk of juvenile crime, she notes, is committed in the three-hour window immediately after school and before the dinner hour—literally before the adults show up. "The hours between three and six p.m. are the peak hours for juvenile crime; that's when juveniles are the perpetrators and victims of crime," she said, adding that a March, 2001 YMCA study of American teenagers found that teens who do not participate in afterschool programs are nearly three times more likely to skip classes during the school day than teens who do participate in afterschool programs. They are also three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs, and they are more likely to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes and engage in sexual activity.

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Frisbee Golf

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a Frisbee toward a target—a tree, bush, or piece of playground equipment—and the object is to get the Frisbee to the target with the fewest number of throws. I blew into the recorder, and both kids threw their Frisbees at the first target—a large, wooden bear carved out of a tree trunk. They ran to their Frisbees, impulsively picking them up and immediately throwing them again...and again...and again. After hitting the wooden bear, they moved on to subsequent targets including the metal pole holding up the basketball backboard, a tree, and a large, metal slide.

I urged them to slow down a bit, and to not simply chuck their Frisbees without pausing between throws and taking turns. That's where "the flute" came in handy. I told them, "You have to wait until I blow the recorder before you pick up your Frisbees." They agreed, but they forgot the new rule in the excitement of throwing their Frisbees again... and again... and again.... Eventually I succeeded in training them to pause between throws, and we had a real game of Frisbee Golf on our hands. They seemed to appreciate, and benefit from, the relative structure of the game played Dad's way.

Being three years old, they abruptly lost interest in the game when they reached the coolest target of all—the slide. So, instead of playing more Frisbee Golf, we slid on the slide, and after that, they played on the monkey bars while I rested on a nearby bench and soaked up the sun. It was a great morning.

They tell me they want to go back to that park again sometime. I told them I've got the Frisbees (and the recorder) stashed in the trunk so we'll be good and ready to play next time.



The remedy? Parent involvement. But what to do when most parents are still working between 3 and 6 p.m.? As J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., Extension Rural Sociologist in the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University put it, "There's not too many full-time jobs for parents that last only until 3:30 in the afternoon when school is out. If kids can be with their parents after school, that's great. But the fact is their parents don't always have the work schedule or the flexibility to be with their kids every afternoon." J. Arbuckle has a scholarly interest in afterschool programs, having provided program evaluation support to University of Missouri Outreach and Extension's Family and Community Resource Program's Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) programs. He says afterschool programs can be great for allowing for social interaction among kids in a less structured environment than school, but with enough structure to bring about positive outcomes. "Research repeatedly shows that unstructured, unsupervised after-school time, especially for teens, can be problematic. Afterschool programs fill a need," he said, adding that afterschool programs are generally positive environments, and that, "Anytime that you're in a structured, supportive environment, the potential for negative outcomes is less."

For kindergarteners, it's about safety, said Ursula Helminski. For older kids, it's about safety too, but it's also about avoiding the negative outcomes correlated with lack of adequate afterschool supervision of children by adults—things like getting into trouble with the law, abusing drugs and alcohol, and violent crimes. So, just having after school programs around for kids to go to is a big plus. Then there's the matter of figuring out which ones are the best. "The best after school programs tie together the school day with fun afterwards," Helminski said. "Some afterschool programs teach fractions as part of putting a recipe together and cooking something; other programs teach robotics, math, and science. Afterschool programs meet a critical need for kids to have a safe, supervised place to go after school. Afterschool programs give kids access to mentors, help with their homework. They get to do a lot of the things that are taken out of the school day now. They get a chance to be physically active... it makes sense to us; after school programs make common sense. Families literally cannot be home, so we need someplace for kids to go. Not only are these kids safer and out of trouble, but they're getting better grades," said Helminski.

"The sad thing is that we're really not investing enough in these programs, especially when we all know that afterschool programs fill a common sense need. We need to do more to provide more (after school activities) to children.

Asked what advice she'd offer working fathers, Ursula Helminski said this: "I would tell dads that afterschool programs will keep their kids safe and help them learn, and afterschool programs give kids opportunities to be with mentors, help improve their grades, help ensure that they don't drop out of school, and give them the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century."



Father and Family Activities

Making up silly games to play with one's children is a necessary art in parenting. Fathers (and men in general) are famous for *playing* with children, be it rough and tumble play, or playing more structured games. Dads' games tend to be spontaneous and idiosyncratic—meaning the games often begin suddenly and are personalized, unique (and sometimes downright crazy!) reflections of the Dad's personality.

Based on interviews I've conducted with play experts, psychiatrists, early childhood educators, child psychologists, and MDs, I have come to believe that playing games with children is perhaps the single most important thing a dad can do, for three reasons: 1) To play a game, you must be *physically present* (or at least present by telephone), and that's definitely a positive thing, 2) To play a game you are focusing and concentrating on a *shared activity* with your child, and this means you're engaged and fully "in the moment," which is a definite plus for father-child-interactions, and 3) You're *building a positive memory*, and memories of positive dad-child interactions fill a reservoir of images of positive fathering that can become a lifelong resource for children to tap if and when they become parents themselves one day.

Getting Started...

Think up a game you can play (it can be a game you've never played before), and then bring the game to life with your children. You can put some "rules" to the game right from the start, or you can just let the game unfold and add the rules later, if at all. And, of course, have some fun!

The Down To Earth Dad

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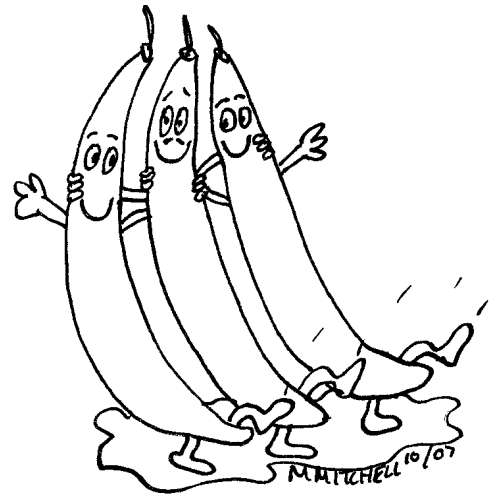
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Dad's Delicatessen



Sautéed Green Beans

It's time to take advantage of the last of the fresh fall produce. You've eaten the apples, tasted buttered corn on the cob, dug the onions and potatoes, and you've still got a few raspberries stashed in the freezer. But here's something you might not have considered: Preparing fresh green beans, either from the grocery store, a local farm, or right from your own garden, for you and your children. These are nothing like the "canned green beans" you buy at the grocery store (or rather, don't buy at the grocery store....) Rather, fresh beans prepared as follows, are amazingly good. Just maybe your kids will actually say, "I like green beans!" (Okay, I said *maybe*.)

Ingredients:

1 ½ lbs	Green beans
1/8 tsp	Salt
1 Tbl	Olive oil
1/4 cup	Chopped walnuts

First, wash and remove the stems from the green beans and dry them. Put them into a big skillet and drizzle the olive oil over them and sauté lightly. When green beans are just about done, add the walnuts and sauté until the beans have been cooked. Sprinkle with salt and serve as a wonderful accompaniment to your favorite dish. Enjoy!