

The 6 Traits & 12 Habits of the 24:7 Dad

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

—Aristotle, philosopher

Being a 24:7 Dad means that you're a confident father who knows how to be involved in his children's lives. It doesn't mean being physically present in your children's lives 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That's impossible and, quite frankly, not healthy for you or your children. Being a 24:7 Dad means that you're striving to be the best father you can be around the clock, *based on your circumstances*. This book will assist you in *customizing your fathering* so that you can become the confident father your children need you to be.

The 6 Traits of the 24:7 Dad

Becoming a 24:7 Dad involves building the 6 traits of an involved and confident father. The traits are what separates the 24:7 Dad from uninvolved fathers who don't believe in their ability to be a good father. The traits encompass what the 24:7 Dad knows and how he acts:

- 1. Self-awareness.** The 24:7 Dad is aware of who he is as a man and a father. He's aware of his importance to his family. He knows his moods, feelings, capabilities, strengths, and challenges.

He's responsible for his behavior and knows that his growth depends on how well he knows and accepts himself. He also knows that his ability to be with his children is affected by the choices he makes and accepts responsibility for those choices.

- 2. Self-care.** The 24:7 Dad prioritizes his physical and mental health. He schedules annual check-ups, eats nutritious foods, exercises regularly, and seeks knowledge about the world around him. He understands the link between his physical and mental well-being. He fosters a strong bond with his family and community, surrounding himself with friends who encourage his healthy lifestyle. The 24:7 Dad is a model of self-worth through his healthy choices.
- 3. Fathering skills.** The 24:7 Dad knows his role in the family. He knows he's a model for his children on how to be a good man and father. He knows that, when possible, he should be involved in the daily lives of his children—from getting them up, dressed, and fed in the mornings, to attending parent-teacher conferences, to supporting them in sports and other interests and activities, to helping them with their homework, to tucking them in at night. The 24:7 Dad applies his understanding of the unique skills he and his co-parent bring to raising their children.
- 4. Parenting skills.** The 24:7 Dad nurtures his children. He knows how his parenting skills contribute to their physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, and creative development. His children trust him and feel safe because he cares for and nurtures them using proven parenting skills. The 24:7 Dad uses discipline and consequences to teach and guide his children, not to threaten or harm them.
- 5. Relationship skills.** The 24:7 Dad builds and maintains healthy relationships with his children, co-parent, other family members, friends, and the community. He knows and values

how relationships shape his children. He knows how his relationship with his co-parent impacts his children and strives to create a positive relationship with them for their benefit. He seeks to enhance his communication skills.

- 6. Stewardship.** The 24:7 Dad is thankful for what he has and learns. He knows that he's part of a community of fathers—a brotherhood committed to supporting other fathers. He doesn't keep his knowledge about being a good father to himself. He shares his insights with others, thereby contributing to the well-being of other fathers, children, and families in his community. He supports his community by participating in its civic life.

You'll build these traits through the application of the 12 habits we'll be discussing. Think about the 24:7 Dad as a house. The traits are the bricks that comprise the house. The habits are the mortar that we'll use to bind the bricks together. As you apply the mortar, the habits, the traits will build a more confident father over time. We'll discuss the knowledge, attitudes, and skills—the mortar's ingredients—that you'll need to apply the habits successfully.

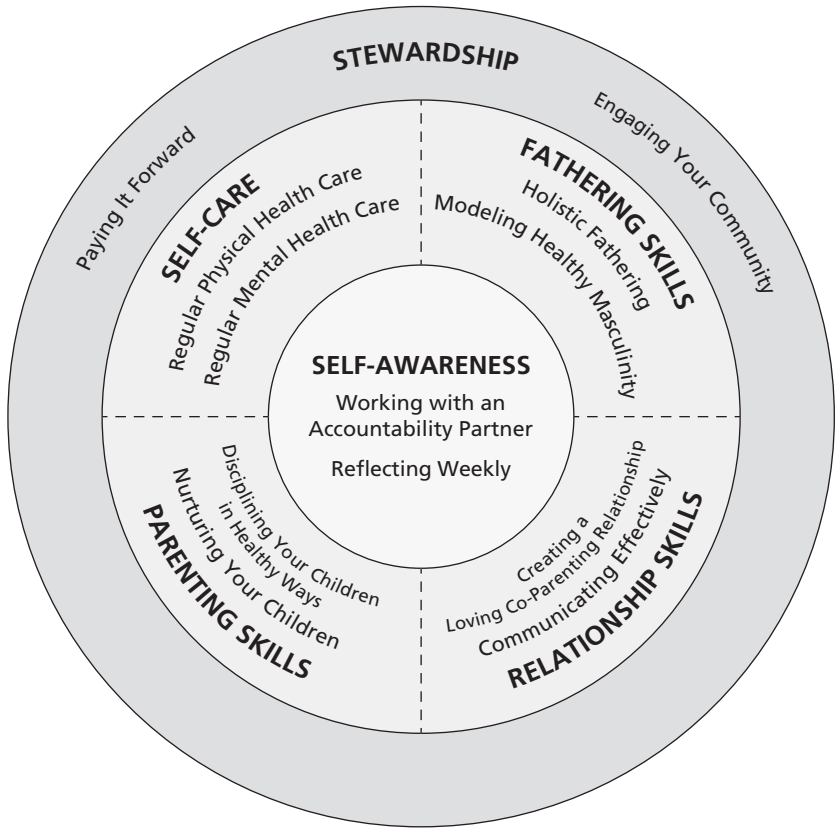
The 12 Habits of the 24:7 Dad

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I've spent my career understanding the factors that motivate fathers to be involved in their children's lives and how confidence has emerged as one of the most critical factors. I've examined the research not only on what motivates fathers' involvement, but that provides evidence for what motivates individuals to engage in any behavior that benefits themselves and others. That approach allowed me to identify and integrate into National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) programs what works in areas like raising self-awareness and improving physical and mental health care to effective fathering.

Applying the right habits lies at the heart of effective, sustainable behaviors that benefit you and others. This is why the 12 habits matter in building the 6 traits and lead to confident fathering. There are two habits that help build each of the traits:

1. Working with an accountability partner (*self-awareness*)
2. Weekly reflection on your actions (*self-awareness*)
3. Regular physical care (*self-care*)
4. Regular mental health (*self-care*)
5. Holistic fathering (*fathering skills*)
6. Modeling healthy masculinity (*fathering skills*)
7. Nurturing your children (*parenting skills*)
8. Disciplining your children in healthy ways (*parenting skills*)
9. Communicating effectively (*relationship skills*)
10. Creating a loving co-parenting relationship (*relationship skills*)
11. Paying it forward (*stewardship*)
12. Engaging your community (*stewardship*)

You'll learn more in the following chapters exactly why these habits work. For now, I want you to understand that they work together. They're not a collection of separate habits operating in isolation. The model below reveals that they're part of a system. They reinforce one another.



The system is anchored by the self-awareness habits on the front end because they're fundamental for following through on the remaining habits. The system is anchored by the stewardship habits at the back end because you'll apply them only after consistently applying the first 10. You can't pass on what you don't know, and you won't be ready to become a steward of confident fathering until you consistently apply the other habits first.

The Transformative Power of Habits

Before I joined NFI, I worked at the Texas State Department of Health Services in Austin. I helped public health programs develop, implement, and evaluate programs and resources that encouraged Texans to adopt healthy behaviors and avoid risky ones. That work involved influencing the behavior of men and fathers.

Shortly after I started there, I completed a workshop that would change my life. The “7 Habits of Highly Effective People Workshop” taught me about the transformative power of habits and the importance of preparation. One of the workshop videos revealed that fire-fighters spend only three percent or less of their time fighting fires.¹ They spend the rest of their time preparing for fires and educating citizens on how to prevent them. Much of their preparation time involves habits, such as cleaning fire trucks and exercising to stay in shape. These habits prepare them to maximize their effectiveness in fighting fires. From the moment we learned the first habit, I saw how applying habits could provide a roadmap for improving my effectiveness in specific areas of life through preparation and planning.

Before you continue reading, jot down two or three of your habits, things you do daily or weekly without fail. This is your first opportunity to use the worksheet at confidentfathers.com.

It might have taken you a moment to write down the habits because they’re behaviors you repeat without thinking about them. Habits have the power to transform our lives in both positive and

¹IARC Working Group on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans. (2010). Exposure data. In *Painting, firefighting, and shiftwork* (IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans, No. 98). International Agency for Research on Cancer. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK326815/>

negative ways. They can be friends or foes. People are sometimes unaware of their harmful habits. One of my harmful habits in raising my daughters was when I had differences with my wife in how to raise them. Rather than confront her and talk about the differences calmly, I retreated and buried my uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. That reaction prevented me from applying the habits of relationship skills (communicating effectively and creating a loving co-parenting relationship). In Chapter 6, you'll learn how I stopped that harmful habit.

Charles Duhigg is one of the country's foremost authorities on habits. In his book *The Power of Habit*, he says, "Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not. They're habits. And though each habit means relatively little on its own, over time, the meals we order, what we say to our kids each night, whether we save or spend, how often we exercise, and the way we organize our thoughts and work routines have enormous impacts on our health, productivity, financial security, and happiness." That's powerful. Duhigg cites a study by Duke University researchers that found more than 40 percent of our daily activities involve habits, rather than decisions.²

Researchers have extensively studied how habits function, particularly harmful ones. They have also explored ways to break those habits and replace them with healthier alternatives. We have gained substantial insights into how habits wire our brains, creating destructive behavior patterns, and how we can rewire them for healthier behaviors. I could discuss the research on habits for days; it's fascinating. However, I'll limit myself to three insights from the research that are most relevant to our work together.

²Duhigg, C. (2012). *The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business*. Random House.

Insight #1: Habits Put You on Autopilot

The first insight is how habits create behavior patterns that we repeat without thinking. They put us on autopilot: we don't have to think, we just act. When we establish habits, we reduce the "cognitive load" of thinking that requires energy.

According to Duhigg, the autopilot kicks in through a three-step process. First, something in your environment, known as the "cue," signals your brain to go on autopilot and perform a specific action, referred to as the "routine." When you perform the routine, you anticipate and crave the result or outcome that your brain likes or desires, known as the "reward."

Knowing how habits form is vital to implementing the 12 habits of a 24:7 Dad. Three characteristics of this loop are crucial to remember:

1. Each step—cue, routine, and reward—is essential. You can't establish a habit with only one or two.
2. The loop is self-reinforcing; once established, it sustains itself.
3. If you perform the loop frequently enough, it becomes a habit.

Parents use habits all the time. Take bedtime routines, for instance. At a specific time every night (cue), my wife and I bathed our girls, put them in pajamas, read to them, fed them, placed them in the crib, and turned off the light (routine). They got enough sleep, and so did we (the reward), at least on most nights!

Insight #2: Not All Habits Are Created Equal

Some habits are more powerful than others; they're called "keystone habits." Like the first domino in a lineup, which, when pushed, triggers all the other dominoes to fall one by one, these are the habits that matter more than others in behavior change. When you establish a

keystone habit, it sets off a cascade of change. Exercise as part of caring for your physical health (Habit 3) is a prime example. The power of exercise lies not only in its ability to help people lose weight and become more fit, but also in its ability to start widespread, positive change in people's lives, even in areas that seem unrelated to physical fitness. As Duhigg points out, research shows that when people start exercising habitually, they usually eat better, smoke less, become more productive at work, exhibit greater patience, feel less stressed, and even use their credit cards less frequently. This cascading effect fosters other healthy habits because it makes them easier to establish.

Involved fathering leverages the power of keystone habits, which is why fathering affects so many people and areas of life. When men become involved fathers, it triggers a cascade of benefits for themselves, their children, mothers, and communities.

Insight #3: Habits Cueing Other Habits

The third insight is the power of “habit stacking.” James Clear is one of the country's foremost authorities on habits. In his book *Atomic Habits*, Clear explains habit stacking as identifying a current habit and then stacking a new behavior on top. His habit-stacking formula is:

“After [current habit], I will [new habit].”

The habits reinforce one another.³ In other words, one habit cues you to perform another habit. Staying with the exercise as part of caring for your physical health, I work out first thing in the morning, but not every day. I exercise five to six days a week with one or two rest days. To help me maintain consistency with that weekly routine, I place my

³Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. Avery.

exercise gear in a location where I'll see it the next morning. When I wake up, it reminds me that it's a workout day. Before the rest days, I don't lay out my gear. When I wake up the next morning, I know it's a rest day. The habit of laying out my exercise gear the day before made it easier to establish and maintain the routine because I didn't have to remember if it was an exercise or rest day. I stacked maintaining the routine on top of laying out my gear. (I also started recording the kind of workout I did right after I got home from the gym. That helped me maintain variety in my workouts, an important objective of mine.)

Directing Your Rider

As I mentioned in the Introduction, getting the most out of this book involves trusting that research-backed habits and other guidance will work for you. One reason people don't change isn't a lack of motivation; it's a lack of clarity. They either lack guidance or the guidance they have is murky. I'll use research-backed information to provide you with clarity in establishing the 12 habits and addressing many of the pain points in fathering by "directing your rider."⁴

In their book Switch, Chip and Dan Heath present a framework for helping people make difficult changes. Changing behavior requires appealing to people's emotional and rational sides. They refer to this as "motivating the elephant" (emotional) and "directing

⁴In conducting extensive research, I prioritized the results of studies using a research methodology known as "meta-analysis." A meta-analysis combines separate studies on the same topic by statistically analyzing their combined data or results. This allows for a more reliable and precise estimate of an effect, such as the factors that lead to or cause a specific outcome. It increases statistical power, reduces bias, highlights consistent findings, and can help resolve conflicting results. This makes their conclusions more trustworthy.

the rider” (rational). Your elephant and rider must work together so that one doesn’t override the other, and they move in the same direction.⁵ Your elephant knows it wants to be a better father. You don’t need me to motivate you. However, your rider needs a map to guide your elephant in the right direction. I’ll provide that map.

Applying and Customizing the 12 Habits

Now that you understand how habits can help you, here’s a framework that will help you apply and customize the 12 habits of a 24:7 Dad. Because there are many ways to apply each habit, I’ll share seven options that will assist you in customizing the habits in a way that works for you, given your current stage in life and the fatherhood journey. These options will make applying the habits more manageable and help you focus on the most effective approaches for you. Using these options will help you identify ways to apply and customize the habits that are realistic rather than idealistic. By identifying realistic ways, you’ll set yourself up for success. The options are:

- Ways that involve only me
- Ways that involve me and my children
- Ways that involve me and my co-parent
- Ways that involve my entire family
- Ways that involve one or more friends
- Ways that involve what I do at work or with co-workers
- Ways that involve me interacting with my community

⁵Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. Crown Business.

As you consider using these options, determine how your unique situation will affect the degree to which you can use them, such as the age of your children; whether or not you live with your children and have custody of them; the quality of the relationship with your co-parent; the quality of the relationship with your children; your employment status; whether you have a disability; and your overall physical and mental health status.

I recommend starting with two or three options that will provide the quick wins that are so helpful in forming and sticking with habits. You can refer back to these options when I ask you to customize the habits in each chapter.

When you customize each habit, I'll remind you to consider habit stacking. Here's an example of using habit stacking to customize the regular physical care habit in a way that involves a child: Suppose you're a divorced, non-residential father with partial custody of your nine-year-old son. You have him for the entire day every other Saturday. You've started exercising to improve your physical and mental health. You go to the gym most weekdays and try to do something active outdoors on the weekends. You want to firmly establish your weekend exercise routine. In choosing to involve your son in establishing this exercise routine, you decide that every other Saturday when he's with you, you'll take him on an outdoor adventure. This way, you stack the outdoor adventure habit with your exercise routine, making both habits easier to maintain.

Fathering Pain Points

As we discuss the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for applying the habits, you'll learn how to address the challenges that fathers often face—not all of them, but those that research and the experiences of staff serving fathers in the organizations I've worked

with identify as being among the most common. From now on, I'll use the term "pain points" rather than "challenges," "problems," or similar terms because they're often painful. Other terms don't carry the same connotation. You might have faced some of the pain points, depending on where you are in your fatherhood journey. If you have, you know they suck. These pain points include resolving conflicts, communicating effectively, how and when to discipline or punish your children, and more.

For example, in Chapter 4, you'll learn how to identify the traits of healthy masculinity that you want to pass on to your children. In Chapter 5, you'll learn to identify your typical style in disciplining your children and how to use non-violent discipline techniques. And in Chapter 6, you'll learn how to resolve rather than avoid conflicts with your co-parent and how to use the "Five-Second Rule" to communicate effectively with anyone. I'll describe each pain point and provide tips and other guidance on addressing it effectively.

Are you ready to learn and start applying the 12 habits to build the 6 traits? Let's do it.

