




# The 'DAD JOKE' Effect

*How shared laughter  
keeps pre-teen boys close*



Passing sweets in the car. Kicking the ball before tea. Being called 'a chip off the old block'. Dads and their sons often share a tight bond, but as boys reach teenagerhood, that dynamic can shift.<sup>1</sup>

**In this report, McCain and Beyond Equality take a closer look at how this relationship changes as boys grow up.**

From modern parenting pressures to the squeeze on family time, experts and dads themselves have all chipped in to help explain what's at play, and why shared laughter is key to keeping that father-son bond strong.

1. Throughout this report, "dads" includes all our nation's father figures, from stepdads to granddads, carers and beyond.

**63%**  
*of dads worry their son will drift away during the teenage years*

## A NOTE FROM McCAIN

McCain has always championed families of all kinds and the mealtime moments that bring them together. In this report, we've delved deeper into the crucial relationship between father-figures and their sons. We know dads often feel their boys pulling away as they enter their teenage years, so working with our friends at Beyond Equality, we've dug into the research to find out why and what can be done to support them. As the nation's favourite chips, we're proud to play a small part in keeping these important family bonds tight.

**Laura Kosciak**

**Director,  
Marketing at McCain Foods**



## WHAT WE KNOW NOW FROM BEYOND EQUALITY

**We know that many dads find it harder to maintain an emotional connection with their sons as boys leave early childhood and approach their teenage years<sup>2</sup>. Research in child development and gender socialisation shows that in early life, boys are just as emotionally expressive as girls. So, what changes during the pre-teen years?**

At this life stage, boys begin to absorb new messages about masculinity and emotional behaviour. Peers can also become a bigger influence than parents at this time. As their sons look outside the home for guidance, the dads we surveyed worry about growing apart, with many also saying that not spending enough quality time together, having

those harder conversations, and the pressure to parent differently from the generations before, weigh heavily too.

The good news is our research shows that humour can help bridge that gap. Playfulness, shared laughter and pranks all count – so it's not time to retire the dad jokes just yet.

**Holly Green** *Head of Quality, Learning and Impact*

2. Saarni, 1999; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013

# What FATHER FIGURES across Britain REALLY THINK

Across the country, dads shared their thoughts on everything from masculinity to how they spend their time with their sons.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We spoke to some dads across the UK about how they're finding ways to stay close with their boys, and what they think about modern parenting pressures.

I want my son to feel comfortable talking about anything with me. ***I think being a good parent is about showing up every day, being soft when they need comfort and someone they can turn to when they need guidance.*** There are always expectations around masculinity, but I focus on raising my son in a way that aligns with my values. I don't let outside noise dictate how I show up for him. I get involved with what my son enjoys, whether that's playing sport, watching something together, or just talking. It's about entering his world, not pulling him into mine.

***Emmanuel Brown (Dad), parent to Isaiah Brown (age 7)***



As a dad, I want to be present, aware, and attentive. I connect with my son best through playing games, messing about, and doing something that guarantees a "big cheeky laugh" from him. ***Meaningful time for us is less about grand gestures and more about focused attention.***

I've never really worried about what other people think when it comes to being playful or humorous with him, and I think that confidence comes from my own dad.

***Daniel Small (Dad), parent to Myles Small (age 5)***



I think being a good dad is less about being perfect and more about consistently showing up. Teaching my son magic has created a really special bond between us because it combines creativity, humour, fun, and trust. It's also something that we both like doing and can do together. I also try to connect with him during everyday moments too, whether that's walking somewhere together, driving to dance rehearsals while listening to his favourite K-Pop songs, or just having conversations at home. ***Meaningful time to me is when we're genuinely having fun with each other.*** I think he feels the same way.

***Steve Gore (Dad), parent to Emerson Gore (age 11)***

**38%**  
say their biggest challenge is not spending enough quality time together

## MODERN DADS, MODERN PRESSURES

As boys grow up, one-on-one time with dad doesn't always come easy. Homework, mates and hobbies take up after-school hours, and for dads, there are barriers that prevent them from spending as much time with their sons as they'd like. More than a third (38%) of them are concerned that they're not getting enough quality time with their sons, and more than a quarter (26%) say they only spend around 3-4 hours with them a week. Our experts agree that long hours, financial pressures, and work spilling into evenings and weekends can make it harder to find the headspace to connect.

"We know that dads are less likely to request flexible working and also less likely to get it approved," says Elliott Rae, Speaker, Author and Founder of Parenting Out Loud.

Experts say these expectations place a disproportionate burden on women, with dads also missing out on the opportunity to strengthen their connection with their children. "Society still assumes childcare is women's work, so not only do men find it difficult to request flexible work, but there is also a bias from employers in the decision-making process," says Elliott.

We know that dads today are trying to be more emotionally present while navigating pressures on their time and attention. Modern life means conversations are often disrupted by an urgent email or notification, but experts agree that if we want to create more meaningful connections, we need to be able to model them too by staying conscious of our phone consumption.

"Even a 10-minute conversation with your kid can be difficult without distraction from phones, social media," says Elliott. "So, it's important that those boundaries, like screen time limits, are in place, so the opportunity for connection is there. Being present, stopping what you're doing and looking at them, shows kids what they say is important, that they have a voice in the house, and that they're a top priority."

For many dads, the challenge isn't just that they find connecting with their sons hard; it's navigating the practical barriers that get in the way of that closeness. Intentionally building small moments into the day can help, even when time is short. Our research shows that the everyday moments that dads feel are most meaningful include bedtime routines (38%), chats over meals such as breakfast, lunch or dinner (33%), the school run (31%), and weekend rituals (23%). So don't feel bad if quality time feels fleeting; it's more about the consistency and intention behind those small moments.



**54%**  
*want a more meaningful relationship with their son, but don't know where to begin*



55%

*feel pressure to raise their sons to fit traditional masculine stereotypes*

## THE GENERATIONAL SHIFT

At one stage, dad might have topped the list of his little boy's superheroes, but as boys grow older, they start looking outside the home for examples of what being a man looks like. This can lead to mixed messages if the men they look up to don't model healthy masculinity. We know that almost two-thirds (63%) of British dads worry that their son will drift away from them in their teenage years, with more than a quarter (26%) saying that this is their biggest concern.

"Boys around this age often feel pressure to measure up to standards of 'masculine' behaviour (from friends, the media, online influencers and more) and they also become aware of the values and attitudes that are important in their lives," says Dr Robert Lawson, Associate Professor in Sociolinguistics at Birmingham City University.

More than half (55%) of dads say they feel the pressure to raise their sons to fit traditional masculine stereotypes. Almost three in five (59%) admit that they don't want to mirror their own dads when parenting style, with 42% already laughing and playing more with their son than they did with their own father. But balancing traditional masculinity with a more emotionally literate version of parenting can feel tricky, especially if dads didn't have their own model of this growing up.

"Examples of fatherhood don't always live inside the home," Elliott acknowledges, but reassures, "Sometimes dads can learn what good, emotionally open and aware parenting looks like from peers, grandparents, stepfathers, and even TV shows."

Experts agree that boys benefit from seeing that traditionally more masculine traits, such as confidence and strength, can comfortably

exist alongside empathy, respect, and emotional self-control. With a third (33%) of dads admitting that encouraging their pre-teen son to talk about his feelings is difficult, allowing boys to see their dads be emotionally open can help boys do the same. In fact, studies show that fathers who can do this shape how boys understand masculinity, from emotional expression to relationships and resilience<sup>3</sup>.

"Letting your kids see your emotions is important, particularly for boys aged seven to eleven, who are starting to be influenced by more than just their parents," says Elliott. "Their emotional range is largely based on what they see in the home, so don't be afraid to cry or show emotion in front of them. Let them know it's okay to be upset."

Despite one in five (22%) dads saying they struggle to share their own feelings and almost a third (30%) admitting emotional conversations were not part of their own upbringing, almost three-quarters (74%) of them say they feel confident having them with their son. Experts say this reflects a positive shift, with dads making space for their sons' emotions, even if voicing their own doesn't come as naturally.



## CREATING CONNECTION

Whether it's stealing chips off the plate, mucking about at tea, or exchanging memes, more than a third (36%) of father figures say they share the same sense of humour as their sons, with the same number (36%) stating it was one of the qualities that they liked most about themselves as a parent. Some of the dads we surveyed said a few other ways they bonded were by watching or quoting comedy together, doing improv and make-believe games, and listening to podcasts and audiobooks.

"Humour shows that we don't always have to take ourselves seriously," says Dr Lawson. "It removes that hierarchy, strengthens family ties and boosts creativity and imagination, all important parts of children's interpersonal development."

Parents often play different roles in the family, with many dads defaulting to humour and rough play, both of which can have a positive impact.<sup>4</sup> However, sometimes even the best dad joke leaves things unsaid. Dads know this too, with many (88%) admitting that they'd like to connect with their son beyond just laughs.

"Humour is a key part of bonding," says Elliott. "But if you can also have serious conversations with your child in a way that is non-confrontational, then it will help them open up. One of the worst ways to connect is a judgmental approach across the table, so think about having those serious conversations in a no-pressure environment, like a car journey or while you're playing a board game."

Experts agree that emotional regulation plays a big part in connection. Humour has its place, but during adolescence, boys need to feel seen and heard, so thinking about what approach your son needs from you is important.

"Dads may need to adapt in terms of how they express their guidance as their boys grow up," says Professor Anna Tarrant from the University of Lincoln. "Staying emotionally present and shifting from play and instruction (a common approach in the early years) to sharing the reasoning behind rules helps to foster a better connection."

There's no perfect formula for staying connected, but being present, staying playful, and finding ways to keep those channels of communication open, even indirectly, can go a long way.

**89%** of dads already use humour or playfulness to bond with their boys at least once a week, with a third (33%) doing so every day

**36%** say sharing the same sense of humour is one of the things they value most about their relationship

4. Amodia-Bidakowska, A., Laverty, C., & Ramchandani, P. G. (2020). Father-child play: A systematic review of its frequency, characteristics and potential impact on children's development. *Developmental Review*, 57, 100924.

## EXPERT'S TOP TIPS FOR DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

*Professor Anna Tarrant, Dr Robert Lawson, and Elliott Rae share their advice for helping dads and sons stay connected:*

- > Making your boy laugh helps keep them close, so don't ditch the dad jokes just yet!
- > Tell your son that you'll always be there for him for help, support and guidance, no matter how big or small the problem is.
- > Remain consistently interested and responsive, not just to what your son does, but how he experiences the world.
- > Build meaningful connection through small, intentional moments of attention, whether that's chatting after school, playing cards together or kicking a ball around the park.
- > Find something you both enjoy doing together. So much of parenting is chauffeuring to activities, but it's enriching if you have hobbies you both like doing together.

## OUR FINAL THOUGHTS

Above all, we know dads want to be the best they can be. More than half (54%) of father figures agreed with the statement: "I'd like a more meaningful relationship with my son, but I don't always know where to begin."

Parenting inevitably feels more challenging as boys enter their teenage years, but dads who stay emotionally present play a big role in positively shaping their sons' self-esteem and future relationships. This means being engaged and interested in the person they're becoming, while also making time to be playful and creating those moments of shared laughter. Boys look to their dads for guidance, and the dads who prioritise this connection with their sons in the years before adolescence will find that growing up doesn't always mean growing apart.

So, keep at it dads, even when your jokes or words of wisdom are met with an eye roll. We're rooting for you.

**25%**  
of dads feel  
"truly connected"  
to their boys by  
sharing  
a laugh  
with one  
another



And to all the dads, father-figures and boys who've helped us create this report, thank you for your contribution.