

# A Different Kind of “Deadbeat” Parent

By Dr. Chris Miller

THE TERM DEADBEAT DAD is typically given to fathers who fail to pay mandated child support. They may be truly unable to pay, or they may be living in luxury and simply refusing to pay out of spite or vengeance. Either way, the child is not provided for and suffers as a result.

Over the years, I have encountered another kind of deadbeat dad – and mom, for that matter. These are parents who make promises to their children to see them, attend their ball games, spend the weekend with them, or simply take them out to dinner because it's their week-night evening with the kids. The catch is that instead of keeping their promises, they back out, sometimes at the last moment, leaving the child feeling abandoned, disappointed, and rejected. I have seen instances when these deadbeat parents even miss a child's birthday, school graduation, award ceremony, or, believe it or not, wedding. What is at the root of making and breaking promises to one's own children?

Granted, there are times in single-parent living when one must miss a night or a weekend with the kids because of illness or having to go out of town for work. I believe that children understand the occasional missed time together if it is not the norm and if the parent is honest in explaining the situation. This is not the problem I am addressing. I am talking about a chronic pattern of making a promise and then breaking that promise through excuses or lying. Why do these deadbeat parents continue to do this? Let me suggest a few reasons.

First, some parents leave a marriage partly because they no longer want to be parents. They don't like the responsibility of parenting or the time that goes with it. So when they are

out of the house and on their own, parenting slips to the bottom of the priority list. Second, some single parents are exhausted from work and are simply too tired (in their minds) to be with the kids on the weekend. “I need some downtime” is a statement I hear regularly. In addition, some parents, men more than women, feel inadequate as parents and instead of learning how to be better moms or dads, they avoid their children and lie. Some single parents are very guilt-ridden about the divorce and make promises to their kids to minimize the negative feelings and to convince themselves that they have good intentions. They focus on the promise and the intent: not the breaking of the promise or the impact of the broken promise upon their son or daughter. Finally, some parents are addicted to something and the addiction takes priority over the children. Deceit and selfishness are inherent in addiction, and addicts are classic promise makers and promise breakers.

However, in my 18 years of working with families in divorce, I've come to see that the main reason moms and dads break promises to their children is because the parent has a new love interest. He or she would rather spend time with the new lover than with the children. This is especially true early on, when many things get ignored for the sake of the exciting new relationship: health, work, sleep, exercise, and hobbies. Sadly, all too often the kids get thrown in with the other items on this list.

To continue breaking promises, deadbeat parents often rationalize their actions to the point of outright deceit, lying both to themselves and to others. Deadbeat parents usually believe they are successfully fooling those

around them. They tend to think along the lines of “no one will find out about a lie here and there” and “the kids will be fine.” Living a lie requires lying to oneself before lying to another. Let's take these rationalizations one at a time.

The first lie the deadbeat parent believes is “no one will find out.” A deadbeat parent may get away with his or her lie for a season but often will be exposed, and sometimes by his or her own child. I have seen computer genius 11-year-olds get into their fathers' e-mail accounts and find out that dad wasn't on business last weekend but in San Diego with a new girlfriend. I have seen these kids get into a parent's computer airline account to discover not one ticket to New York for a business conference but two tickets to Las Vegas with the new lover's name listed. Some of these deadbeat parents who think they are being coy and smooth forget that their ex still gets the cell phone bill and can examine call records. Some of these deadbeat parents own up and take responsibility when exposed and confronted. Sadly, many others deny, rage, threaten, and continue to live their lie. In their arrogance, they feel justified in their behavior, rarely considering the impact they are having on the hearts of their children.

The second lie the deadbeat parent believes is “the kids will be fine.” It is true that kids are resilient, but it is also true that the actions of deadbeat parents deeply scar their children. Children of deadbeat parents feel abandoned, rejected, unimportant, and unloved. Their self-esteem can be significantly diminished. They learn not to trust the promises of those closest to them. They become cynical and at times depressed or self-loathing. They refuse to let

themselves have hope. They begin to expect the worst from the deadbeat parent and then from others. They lose respect for their parent and may grow to hate them. Recently, the teenage son of a deadbeat dad told his mother, "I don't matter to dad. I never will. He cares more about her [the new girlfriend] than me. I don't care if I see him again." Such a statement is all too common from the children of parents who chose to live this way. Sadly, the deadbeat parent struggles to understand later why the child isn't accepting the new lover into his or her life. The deadbeat parent doesn't understand why the child doesn't want to be around the new lover or why, in the case of marriage, the child refuses to call the new stepparent "mom" or "dad." The pain of rejection runs deep for a child who feels replaced by a new lover in his or her parent's life. That pain is usually seen and experienced most personally by the child and the custodial parent.

What should a custodial parent do if his or her ex is a deadbeat parent? First, don't make excuses for the ex to the child. Covering up for the ex isn't good for the child or for the parent doing the covering up. Later, the child may wonder why you lied for or enabled the deadbeat parent. Instead, if your child asks, "Why didn't mommy come to my game?" tell him or her, "I don't know" (if you don't) or, "That's a good question. You need to ask your mommy that." Work hard to direct your child's questions to the other parent rather than making excuses. Encourage your child to talk directly with the other parent.

Second, recognize that often children don't need answers. Their questions are rhetorical. (Why didn't dad come like he said he would? Why did mom break her word again?) What they need from the resident parent is listening, affirmation of their emotions, acknowledgment that their question is a good one, and a hug if they will let you give it. Sometimes the custodial parent simply needs to hold the child while the child cries.

Finally, it may become necessary for the parent to step in and confront the deadbeat parent regarding the impact on the child. Deadbeat parents are masters of blaming the custodial parent for problems the child is experiencing as a result of their own behavior.

Often, they refuse to take responsibility for the damage they are causing their children, turning it around and making the custodial parent the problem and the cause of the child's pain. When trying to confront the deadbeat parent, focus on the broken promises and the hurts that are piling up in the child. While exposing their lies may be necessary at times, this usually sets up defensiveness and conflict. Get a journal and document every broken promise with a note of the promise made, the broken promise, and the date. Documenting can be tedious work, but sometimes the only thing that can cut through the denial of the deadbeat parent is the truth, based on facts. In addition, if legal action becomes necessary, this documentation may prove helpful in the case.

The best step to take would be to have the child speak directly to the deadbeat parent about the impact of the broken promises upon him or her. It is common for children of all ages to be resistant or afraid to speak directly to their deadbeat parent, but with support, training, or the help of a counselor, the child can respectfully address these issues with his or her parent. Oftentimes this will have a greater impact on the relationship, as the parent hears the truth directly from the child. As communication opens up and the child grows in strength, the relationship can begin to heal.

If you are reading this and you are a deadbeat parent, it's not too late. Children and teens can be forgiving if you show that you are sorry and genuine in your desire to do things differently. If your ex is a deadbeat parent, don't put your energy into trying to change him or her but rather into your child as you walk through this difficult experience with them, teaching and modeling a better way. While deadbeat parents will continue to be a problem for many, it is possible to change the situation, protect the child, and improve the relationship between the child and the deadbeat parent.

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