

The Important Role of Fathers in the Lives of Young Children

By William Scott and Amy De La Hunt



Parents as Teachers™

Fathers play a significant role in fostering social-emotional, cognitive, language, and motor development in the lives of their young children. Research shows that fathers strengthen development when they take an active role early and often in the lives of their children, even before they are born.

Child development is part of a complex social system that varies widely from family to family (Lamb, 2010). There is no single “right” way for fathers to be involved. Instead, there are many types of father involvement in all aspects of raising a child. These include playing together, being nearby while a child explores, and taking a child for health checkups (Marsiglio, Day, Braver, Evans, Lamb, & Peters, 1998). Research has found that the value of father involvement is determined by the quality of the interaction between fathers and their children – for example, a father’s responsiveness to the needs of his child – rather than the amount of time fathers spend with their children (Palkovitz, 2002).



To better understand the unique and specific ways that fathers impact the lives of their children, researchers study the many roles fathers play in child development. The following findings provide insights into how children benefit developmentally from their fathers’ involvement.

Social-emotional development

- > Early involvement by fathers in the primary care of their child is a source of emotional security for the child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).
- > Fathers’ affectionate treatment of their infants contributes to high levels of secure attachment (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).
- > When fathers acknowledge their child’s emotional response and help them address it with a problem-solving approach, the children score higher on tests of emotional intelligence (Civitas, 2001).
- > Quality father-and-child time increases self-esteem, confidence, social competence, and life skills (Amato, 1994).
- > Children who have close relationships with their fathers have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed (Dubowitz et al., 2001).
- > Mothers may use more parenting techniques of gentleness and security, while fathers may favor independence and confidence-building. These approaches help children understand the world in different ways; they balance each other (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).
- > Rough-and-tumble play with fathers can help children manage aggressive impulses and learn to control their emotions during physical activity (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003).
- > Fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives before age 7 may protect against psychological maladjustment during the teen years (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002).



Intellectual development

- > “A number of studies suggest that fathers who are involved, nurturing, and playful with their infants have children with higher IQs, as well as better linguistic and cognitive capacities” (Pruett, 2000, as cited in Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, Section I.2.2, para. 1).
- > Early, positive involvement of fathers in intellectually stimulating activities, physical care, and general caregiving activities is associated with lower levels of cognitive delay as measured by children’s babbling and their exploration of objects with a purpose (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, Horowitz, & Kinukawa, 2008).
- > Mothers and fathers may have very different styles of play, and their children can benefit from both of them. For example, a father may hold his child’s attention with vigorous types of play, including roughhousing that allows the child to take risks and solve problems by using his body, while the child’s mother typically may play cooing games and use more toys and books in her play (Parke & Tinsley, 1987).
- > Fathers tend to do more than mothers to promote their child’s independence and exploration of the outside world (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).
- > Fathers are more likely to find new and unexpected ways to play with familiar toys, which expands their child’s creative horizons (Ladd, 2000).

Language development

- > While both mothers and fathers tend to use the higher-pitched, slowed-down variation of speaking called “parentese,” fathers are more likely to speak in ways that challenge their child’s developing language abilities and teach them about social communication exchanges (Lamb, 2010).
- > Fathers tend to use more “wh-” questions and more requests for clarification than mothers, both of which encourage conversation (Rowe, Cocker, & Pan, 2004).
- > Two-year-olds whose fathers use a more varied vocabulary have greater language skills a year later (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006).
- > Girls whose fathers read to them are likely to have better verbal skills (Bing, 1963).

Motor development

- > Six-month-olds whose fathers are involved in their care score higher on tests of motor development (Gestwicki, 2010).
- > Fathers tend to play more one-on-one, rough and tumble games with their children, which encourages large motor development, lets children explore what their bodies can do, and helps them learn to regulate their emotions when engaging in impulsive physical contact (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).



When parent educators share information about how impactful father involvement is, it can help both mothers and fathers become aware of fathers' important role in their children's lives. In addition, parent educators can encourage fathers to practice the behaviors that are most beneficial to positive child development outcomes. For example, by lifting up fathers' strengths in observations of parent-child interaction, parent educators can encourage moms to acknowledge and be supportive of those parental strengths.

Tip from the Field **Absent dads and positive male figures**

Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons a father might be separated from his child. If this should happen, positive male figures can serve as role models and mentors for the child. A competent, caring male figure can nurture and guide a young child effectively and contribute to all areas of the child's development.

Parent educators can encourage the child's mother to consider looking to male role models among immediate and extended family members, colleagues in her workplace, teachers at school, and leaders in places of worship.

They can also encourage absent dads to remain involved even if they are not able to be physically present. For example, a father could record himself reading books for his child.

And, although a father involved early and often is considered best practice, it's never too late for fathers to re-connect and engage with their child.

By William Scott

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William Scott was born in University City, Mo. After the separation of his parents, his mother moved to St. Louis, where he attended the Head Start program and was educated through the St. Louis Public School system.

He continued his education at Fontbonne University, receiving B.A. and M.A. degrees in family and consumer science. While at Fontbonne, William served on the Appeals Committee on Student Affairs and the Young Alumni's Committee, and he received a scholarship from the local chapter of The Greater St. Louis Home Economists in Home and Community. Currently, William works for the National Center for Parents as Teachers as a national trainer and program coordinator, with a special emphasis in working with fathers and Head Start programs.

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