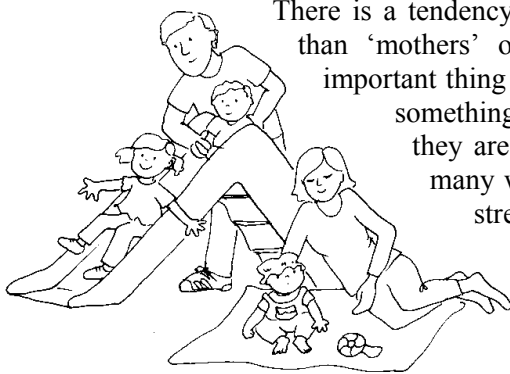


How Do Fathers Fit In?



There is a tendency today to speak of ‘parents’ or ‘carers’ rather than ‘mothers’ or ‘fathers’. People often say that the most important thing in raising children is to give them lots of love, something that all parents can do, regardless of whether they are a mother or a father. However, there are also many ways that mothers and fathers can bring unique strengths to their relationships with their children.

In real people’s lives, you can see these contributions, and they have been measured by social scientists. Fathers—just like mothers—always matter.

This factsheet is based on the findings of social science, which is primarily concerned with what works best on average. Many individuals will be striving to make the best of a difficult situation and social science does not seek to diminish the importance or sincerity of their efforts. In an open society, however, the role of social science is to help us all to learn from the experience of others and to discover the best way forward.

Two Heads are Better Than One

Richness of Care

A child who has both a mother and a father benefits from an increased richness of care. In other words, children with both a mother and a father can benefit from *more* caring, as well as a *variety* of caring styles.

Bridges to the World

Through their fathers and mothers, children have access to a vast network including grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, friends of the family, work colleagues, community organisations, faith communities, and even personal histories. Fathers and mothers provide ‘bridges’ to all these aspects of the outside world, providing more experiences for children as well as practical opportunities such as job possibilities.

Mothers Benefit from Fathers’ Support

If a mother can count on her children’s father to help with keeping the house clean and in good repair, caring for the children, paying the bills, and planning for the future, she probably will be a happier, more effective parent. The support a mother receives from her child’s father can even help her be more competent and sensitive when feeding her baby. Mothers seem to gain the most security when they are married and know the father is committed to a lifelong relationship to her and their child.¹

Breadwinning

Today, most families rely upon the incomes of both mothers and fathers. However, fathers still provide the lion’s share of income. Fathers are either the sole earners or the main earners in two-thirds of two-parent households. Moreover, fathers’ earnings are uniquely linked to many positive results for children, even when mothers’ earnings are taken into consideration.²

Complementary Roles

It often is useful, as well as accurate, to generalise about *average* differences between men and women. Whether these differences are due more to inborn biological chemistry, or social pressures, or some combination of the two, is much debated.

It is generally agreed that men and women should no longer be regarded as ‘opposites’. The important thing to remember is that mothers and fathers often bring different strengths and styles to their parenting roles. These roles *complement* each other, meaning that they are not interchangeable and are each necessary for healthy childrearing.

‘Do fathers and mothers have different styles of play?’ Consider these two examples: a father picks up his son, seven-month-old David, tosses him in the air, and throws his head back so that he and David are face to face. As David giggles and chortles, his father lowers him, shakes him, and tosses him up in the air again. A mother sits her daughter, ten-month-old Lisa, on her lap and pulls out her favourite toy, a green donkey that brays when you squeeze it. Lisa smiles, and for the next few minutes her mother moves the donkey in front of Lisa’s eyes, makes it bray, and talks and sings to her daughter. Lisa watches intently, smiles, and occasionally reaches for her donkey. Are these examples merely cultural stereotypes, or do mothers and fathers really play with their babies in different ways? A series of studies confirm that differences in parental play styles do exist.³

From the book *Fatherhood*, by Ross Parke

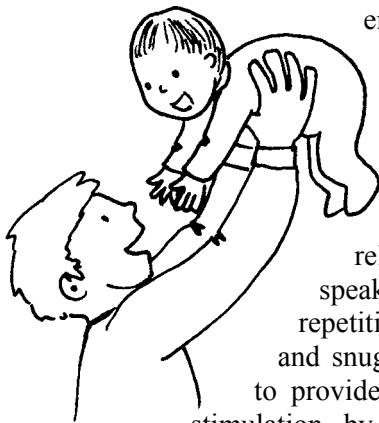
How Fathers Influence Children As They Grow

In the past, psychologists studying the development of children focused almost exclusively on children's relationships with their mothers. Today, they have come to agree that fathers play a unique and crucial role in nurturing and guiding children's development. Many experts now believe that fathers can be just as nurturing and sensitive with their babies as mothers.⁴ As their children grow, fathers take on added roles of guiding their children's intellectual and social development. Even when a father is 'just playing' with his children, he is nurturing their development.

Fathers and Babies

Babies need predictability and security, which they get when their mother and father respond consistently, promptly, and appropriately to their cries, smiles and other signals. As a baby develops a relationship with his or her mother and father, he comes to prefer them to other adults, in a process known as *attachment*. Psychologists agree that babies with secure attachments to their parents have better chances to develop into happy, successful, and well-adjusted children and adults.⁵ Mothers tend to be relied upon more than fathers for the comfort and security components of attachment, primarily because they are usually the infant's main caregiver.⁶ Babies also form attachments to their fathers, who tend to be just as responsive to their babies' bids for attention as mothers.⁷ When fathers spend more time with their babies, they get to know exactly what each of their baby's signals mean. This familiarity allows fathers to respond *sensitively*, meaning that they know when their baby is hungry rather than when he just wants a change of scenery.⁸

The effects of attachment on children are broad and long-lasting. For example, one study found that primary school children scored higher on tests of *empathy*—the ability to see a situation from another person's viewpoint—if they had secure attachments to their fathers during infancy. These children were able to recognize how other children felt and took steps to make them feel better.⁹



Both mothers and fathers encourage their babies to investigate the world, manipulate objects, and explore physical relationships.¹⁰ However, mothers and fathers have different styles of relating. Mothers tend to speak soothingly and softly in repetitive rhythms to their infants and snugly hold them. Fathers tend to provide more verbal and physical stimulation, by patting their babies gently and communicating to them with sharp bursts of sound. As babies grow older, many come to prefer playing with their fathers who provide unpredictable, stimulating, and exciting interaction.¹¹ This stimulation is important

because it fosters healthy development of the baby's brain and can have lasting effects on children's social, emotional, and intellectual development. Infants with involved fathers tend to score higher on tests of thinking skills and brain development.¹²

Both the mother and the father are important to an infant's development in special ways. For example, in one study, baby boys whose fathers engaged in physically playful, affectionate and stimulating play during infancy were more popular later as school children. Mothers influenced their sons' popularity through a different route, by providing verbal stimulation.¹³

Fathers and Small Children

When babies become toddlers, parents must go beyond nurturing them and begin to address two additional needs: supporting their toddler's exploration and setting appropriate limits for the child. Through playing with their toddlers, fathers take a special role in achieving these two goals. Children learn from them how to solve problems and how to get along with others.¹⁴

Fathers spend a larger proportion of their time playing with their young children than mothers do, and they tend to be more boisterous and active in their play.¹⁵ Most children enjoy this kind of play. Even if their fathers spend less time with them than their mothers, fathers become *salient*, or meaningful and special, to their children through play.¹⁶

When fathers play with their toddlers, they are not just entertaining them. They are providing a safe, yet challenging arena for toddlers to learn how to interact with the world and with others. Through rough-and-tumble play, fathers create obstacles for their children and demand respect for limits and boundaries. At the same time, they challenge their children and encourage them to explore their own strength, their ability to do new things, and their impact on the world around them. Toddlers who must work out for themselves how to achieve goals—such as retrieving a ball that is just out of reach in their father's hand or wrestling their father to the ground—are practicing important problem-solving skills. In fact, when fathers are good at playing with their young children, these children score higher on tests of thinking and problem-solving skills.¹⁷

Playing with fathers also helps children develop emotional knowledge, so that they can identify their own emotions, acknowledge the emotional experiences of others, and describe the causes of emotions. Toddlers must also learn *emotional regulation*, the ability to express emotions responsibly and control their behaviour. To understand how much emotional regulation develops during early childhood, one can picture a toddler in the midst of an angry temper tantrum, holding his breath until he gets his way. Contrast this with a four-year-old who feels frustrated that the rain has ruined his plans to play football, yet moves beyond those feelings and engages in a board game with his sister instead. When children understand their emotions and know how to control them, it makes them more popular with other children.¹⁸

The father's influence on emotional development is not limited to play, but also comes through direct teaching and daily interaction. Studies have shown that, when fathers are affectionate and helpful, their children are more likely to get on well with their brothers and sisters.¹⁹ When children have fathers who are emotionally involved—that is, they acknowledge their children's emotions and help them deal with bad emotions—they score higher on tests of 'emotional intelligence'. Moreover, they tend to have better relationships with other children and behave less aggressively. Fathers' involvement in their young children's care can even last well into adulthood.²⁰ Mothers seem to have much less impact in this area of emotional regulation and peer relationships than fathers. It really is fathers who can have a major influence on helping their children build strong social relationships during childhood and later in life.

Fathers of Children at Primary School

Learning to meet challenges

As children reach school age, they begin to grapple with learning more adult-like skills, testing them out in new environments, and dealing with the feelings evoked by successes and failures. A sense of *industry*, or a belief that he or she can accomplish a goal or master a skill, is important to a child's developing sense of self-esteem. Fathers seem to be key teachers in this area. As one expert puts it, 'the quality of the father's involvement during this period is a crucial factor in determining whether the child develops the confidence and competence to meet new challenges in a positive manner.'²¹

One reason that fathers have such an influential role at this time is because they tend to challenge their children to try new experiences and to become more independent. Challenged children have more opportunity to develop

problem-solving skills. In one study, children whose fathers expected them to handle responsibilities, such as carrying scissors, crossing the street, or taking a bath alone, scored higher in tests of thinking skills.²² Accomplishing tasks at this age is so important, and fathers' involvement is so crucial, that fathers have a larger influence on their children's self-esteem at this age than do mothers.²³

By encouraging children to take on new challenges, fathers help them not only to learn new skills, but also to take responsibility for their own actions.²⁴ Fathers with a strong commitment to their family provide a model of responsible behaviour for their children. These children have an *internal sense of control*, which means that they are more likely to believe that their successes and failures are due to their own efforts rather than due to external factors. These children tend to take more responsibility for their actions and rarely blame others for their mistakes.²⁵

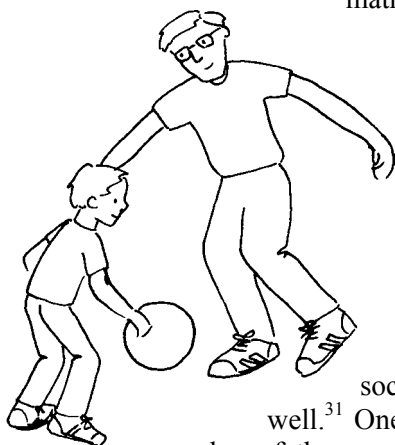
Fathers usually have a positive influence on their children's sense of industry, competence, and responsibility. However, if a father discourages his children and intrudes on potential learning situations by being too restrictive or imposing his own solutions, he will have a bad influence on his children. Whether this type of paternal behaviour is motivated by a desire to protect his child, by feelings of impatience or frustration, or by his lack of trust in the child, it can hamper children's development of creativity, motivation, and problem-solving skills, making them less responsible and more dependent.²⁶

Achieving in school

Generally speaking, the more actively involved and interested a father is in his children's care and education, the more intellectually developed his children are.²⁷ Why should this be the case? One reason is that, when fathers are involved, they tend to provide better economic support for their children. Children with better economic support have access to more educational resources and have better opportunities to learn. For example, in two-parent families, the more the father earns, the better his children do at school, even when mothers' earnings are taken into consideration.²⁸ Another reason that fathers influence intellectual development is that, when their children are school-aged, fathers spend a good deal of time helping them with studies. This level of commitment has an impact on children's academic success. In one study, four- and five-year-old boys scored higher in maths tests when fathers encouraged skills like counting and reading.²⁹ In another study, the level of a father's involvement in



his child's academic studies predicted success later in life. One expert even found that the amount of time fathers spend with their children has a direct link with maths skills.³⁰



The influence fathers have on their children's intellectual development is not limited specifically to helping with school work. Fathers can have a positive influence on their children's thinking skills by participating in social activities and sports as well.³¹ One study found that children whose fathers encouraged them in sport and fitness activities were more successful in school and in their careers later in life. This held true for daughters as well as sons.³²

Getting on in life

A father's involvement during his children's school years has other positive outcomes. The first years of school can be difficult for children, but fathers can help their children adjust.³³ When fathers are supportive, their children have fewer problems at school such as excessive absence or poor exam results. This holds true even after taking into consideration the influence of the children's mothers.³⁴ Even when fathers provide only limited attention, warmth, and affection, and are not around all of the time, their children benefit from their influence in terms of adjusting to new experiences, having stable emotions, and knowing how to get along with others.³⁵ For children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), supportive fathers can have a stronger positive influence on their adjustment to school than mothers.³⁶

Moral development is another area where fathers have special influence. How do fathers influence their children's moral development? First, by directly providing guidance and direction. When fathers share their plans, activities, and interests, their children are better behaved in school. When fathers emphasise how behaviour can affect other people's feelings, their school-aged daughters are regarded as very unselfish by classmates. The mere presence of a father helped boys in one study to develop patience by waiting for things they wanted. These children chose to delay a small reward of sweets for a week in order to receive a larger reward of sweets.

Fathers also influence their children's moral development by providing models for their children. In one study, boys who felt similar to, admired, and wanted to resemble their fathers scored higher on tests of personal moral judgement, moral values, and rule-following. However, boys who did not identify strongly with their fathers

showed reluctance to accept blame or guilt when they misbehaved. These boys also tended to have problems with self-control and were more aggressive in school.³⁷ The father's special influence on his school-aged children's development of personal morality lasts into adulthood. Adults whose fathers had been highly involved when they were children were more tolerant and understanding and engaged in more socially responsible behaviour than those with less involved fathers.³⁸

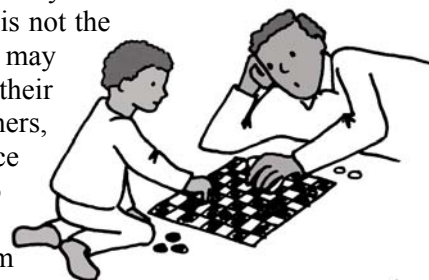
Fathers and Teenagers

One of the main tasks for adolescents and teenagers is to develop their personal identity and deepen their relationships with their friends, while also maintaining a strong connection to their families. Teenagers spend more time away from their parents and look to their friends for cues on how to dress and which parties to go to. However, mothers and fathers continue to have a strong influence, especially upon their children's beliefs, values, and plans for the future.

Adolescence is often a time of increased conflict between children and their parents, especially their mothers. This might be because teenagers spend more time with their mothers than their fathers, or because mothers tend to take issue with aspects of behaviour that touch on teenagers' sense of personal identity, such as clothing or body piercing.

Although teenagers rely more upon their mothers for emotional support, the relationship with fathers continues to be important. Teenagers rely more upon their fathers for conversation, advice, and just 'being there'.³⁹ Adolescents who felt their fathers were 'available' to them had fewer conflicts with their friends.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, some fathers seem to withdraw from their teenagers. Whether this is due to his concern for instilling independence in his children, or due to changes and stresses he is experiencing in his own life, a reduction in a father's availability and guidance during his children's adolescence can have bad consequences. This is especially the case for daughters. As noted above, fathers' involvement was important to both sons' and daughters' self-esteem when they were in primary school. However, for 15-16 year old girls, the level of a mother's involvement seems to have more influence.⁴¹ Teenage girls find it easier to talk to their mothers, which can make fathers feel as if they are not needed. However, this is not the case. Teenage girls may find self-esteem in their relationships with mothers, but they find guidance about how to relate to others and how to plan for the future from their fathers.



How Fathers Fit Into the Family

The Family System

Social scientists often emphasise the role of fathers in the *family system*, and how their actions affect the entire environment and context in which a child grows. One of the most important ways a father influences that environment is in his interaction with his children's mother. This is because the relationships which children observe and experience at an early age influence their own relationships later in life. It is also because family relationships are interrelated—the way that mothers and fathers interact affects the mother-child relationship as well as the father-child relationship. Because of this interrelatedness, parents who have a strong and happy relationship have a head-start to being good parents.⁴²

Non-resident Fathers

Statistics about children who do not live with their fathers can be grim. On almost every outcome that has been tested, including educational achievement, self-esteem, responsible social behaviour, and adjustment as adults, children do better when they live with both of their parents. Family instability and financial problems do contribute to the poor outcomes for children from broken homes. However, as one scholar who reviewed 28 studies of father absence states: 'the major disadvantage related to father absence for children is lessened parental attention'.⁴³

Non-resident fathers can face special challenges in contributing positively to their children's development. Fathers who do not live with their children simply are less available to nurture, guide, and provide for their children. In cases of divorce, some mothers limit the time children have with their fathers. Fathers who were never married are even less likely than divorced fathers to keep in contact with their children. Moreover, the large geographic distances that exist between some children and their fathers make close relationships difficult to maintain. Either parent or both may form new relationships and have children with other people. In many cases, the entire family enjoys a lower standard of living when they live apart.

Despite these disadvantages, non-resident fathers can still make a difference for their children. The most obvious route of influence is by providing adequate financial support. Studies show children whose fathers pay child support do better in school and have fewer behaviour problems.⁴⁴ Children who feel close to their non-resident fathers also tend to do better. And, when non-resident fathers are able to use their time with their children wisely by helping with homework, setting and enforcing rules, and supervising their children, children can benefit a great deal.⁴⁵

Married or Cohabiting Fathers

The role of marriage as a foundation for family life has become controversial. More and more people are cohabiting or living together before marriage or as an alternative to marriage. More couples also are having children without marrying. Some people say that marriage is 'just a piece of paper' and does not make any difference to the couple or their children. For some couples, this might be the case. However, studies have shown that the majority of cohabiting couples are less committed than married couples, even if they have children. In fact, only 36% of children born to cohabiting couples are likely to live with both their mother and their father for their entire childhood, compared to 70% of children born within marriage⁴⁶. It is for this reason that many supporters of the father's role in raising children also support marriage for fathers.⁴⁷

Good Fathering is Good Parenting

Most children do best when their mothers and fathers engage in what developmental psychologists call *authoritative parenting*. This style of parenting involves spending time with children, providing emotional support, giving everyday assistance, monitoring children's behaviour, and providing consistent, fair and proportionate discipline.⁴⁸ This can be contrasted with *permissive parenting*, in which parents avoid setting standards and limits, and *authoritarian parenting*, in which parents are harsh and rigid in their discipline and fail to respect their child's point of view. Neither of these parenting styles have as positive an influence on children's development as authoritative parenting.

Authoritative, or 'good parenting', may be expressed in different styles. While mothers tend to provide more emotional warmth for their children, fathers provide a strong sense of security. While children usually can depend on their mothers for unconditional love, they often must earn their father's approval. While mothers soothe their children more often, fathers often provide more stimulation.

All parents—both mothers and fathers—have important roles in rearing their children. Better appreciation of where fathers fit in will lead to happier and more productive children.

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