

The Daddy Factor: How Fathers Support Young Children's Development

The old image of dads as bumbling “babysitters” for their own children is long gone. Dads today are much more involved in the daily care of their children than in previous generations. And that’s great for kids (and, of course, dads, too). Research clearly shows that children benefit in many important ways when their fathers are active participants. Greater father involvement helps children:

- Develop better problem-solving and language skills
- Keep on trying when faced with a new challenge
- Manage everyday frustrations more effectively
- Feel secure enough to actively explore the world around them
- Be better able to wait their turn for teachers’ and parents’ attention
- Develop greater confidence in their own abilities and ideas
- Have a better chance to enter college or find stable employment after high school
- Be less likely to get in trouble at home, in school, and in the neighborhood, and be less likely to experience depression
- Be 75% less likely to have a teen birth
- Be 80% less likely to spend time in jail

Research shows that it is the quality of the interaction between father and child—whether the father is sensitive to the child’s needs and reactions—that determines the overall value of his involvement in his child’s life, not the quantity of time spent together. (This happens to be true for mothers, too.) You don’t have to be a stay-at-home dad or even live in the same home as your child to develop a close relationship and have a powerful and meaningful impact on his or her development.

HERE ARE IMPORTANT WAYS DADS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:

- **Actively participate in pregnancy.** Dad can help by supporting Mom in taking good care of herself; talking, singing, and reading close to Mom’s belly; and helping prepare your home for the arrival of the baby. Research shows that when fathers are involved during pregnancy, they are more likely to be involved in parenting later on, such as reading with their child, performing caregiving tasks, and offering emotional support.
- **Show lots of affection, respond quickly to your baby’s cries and other cues, and engage in loving play.** These actions lead to babies being securely attached to their fathers. Research shows that secure attachments—or strong, trusting, loving bonds with a parent—have benefits that last into adulthood. Children who are securely attached do better academically. They are also more sociable and well-liked throughout early childhood as compared to children who do not have secure attachments.
- **Participate in your baby’s daily care, such as feeding, bathing, and playing together.** When dads engage in these kinds of activities, children are more likely to be confident and have better language and math skills. And, as they grow older, children of involved fathers enjoy stronger social connections

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with peers. An important added benefit is that when dads actively participate in caregiving, they tend to experience less conflict with their wives. This strengthens the marital relationship, which also has long-term benefits for children.

- **Talk, tell stories, and sing with your children, beginning from birth.** New research shows that fathers may have an even greater impact on children's language development than mothers. When fathers use lots of words with their children during play, children have more advanced language skills a year later. This is especially important because language skills are associated with academic success and are also associated with stronger social skills.
- **Engage in lots of active play.** The rough-and-tumble play that fathers tend to use more than mothers helps their young children learn to regulate their feelings and behavior. It also teaches children how to deal with aggressive impulses and physical contact in socially acceptable ways.