



Fathers Are Important!

Dana H. Davidson

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

A growing body of international research shows us that fathers the world over are important and effective parents. In this country, as more mothers leave home to work, fathers' roles at home become more expanded. Current findings are complex, just as each father's interaction with his children is complex, yet certain effects of father-presence seem to stand out.

The requirements of being a good father seem simple but, of course, they are not: a father should be sensitive to his children, warm, loving, non-domineering, competent in his care-giving, secure in his masculinity, interested in his family and the outside world. When he consistently demonstrates these things and when he interacts on a daily basis with his children, his children may be as attached to their father as to anyone.

Fathers are inclined to hold their children, play with them, do things together, and provide the teaching of specific skills, which may range from playing catch to problem-solving and mathematics. Where mothers are often interested in care-giving, fathers are often interested in teaching their children how to interact with the world outside the family. Dads provide lots of affiliative behaviors which include smiling, looking at their children, vocalizing, laughing, and giving things. Fathers share their interests with their children and therefore enrich and widen horizons for their young. Fathers model techniques for making and being friends, and they encourage verbal and physical skills.

Sons especially benefit from identifying with their dads. Girls also benefit from interacting with their fathers in healthy ways by developing positive feelings about men. Fathers of preschool children seem to care more about sex-role development than do mothers or other women, including women teachers. Fathers encourage the development of gender identity and serve to encourage the self-concept of their children. Fathers set high expectations for their children. Either parent

who works outside the home represents the world beyond the family to their children; fathers in particular seem to do this.

When both parents are present, children benefit from the rich exchange between mothers and fathers, which provides a source of information about relationships. When fathers leave, children not only miss them but they are also affected by changes in the economics of the family and by the losses felt by their mother. The relationship between mothers and fathers is a major source of emotional strength, especially for families with infants. Older children, too, feel the effects of father presence or absence. When there is separation, divorce, or death and fathers are no longer present, children need access to a positive male model. Studies of remarriage show that step-fathers can provide many of the requirements of a good father. Uncles, grandfathers, teachers, Big Brothers, and sports-team coaches can also be good sources of male support for children.

In sum, fathers are important! They are not supplements or "add-ons" to child development; they are an integral part of a necessary package for healthy growth. Young children who have secure relationships with their fathers are usually eager to explore, have good social skills, and do well in language, math, physical, and spatial activities; they are less likely to show fear of strangers; and they may be high in self-esteem. There are few credentials required for becoming a father, yet research from the past twenty-five years shows us that fathers can provide very specific measures for healthy growth and development of their children. In exchange, fathers need encouragement and appreciation!

References

- Honig, A. 1980. The importance of fathering. *Dimensions*, October 1980, pp. 33–38, 63.
- Lamb, M. et al. 1983. *The role of the father in child development*. Wiley Press.