

What Fathers Contribute to Child Development

Fathers who are active in their child's life will have a tremendous effect on their child's development— both cognitively and socially. Having the experience of *two involved parents* adds variety and dimension to the child's experience of the world. Researchers stress that parents must be actively and positively involved in their child's life to contribute to the healthy development of their child. Let's take a look at what scientists believe that fathers add to their child's development in a unique and important way.

Fathers and social development. Fathers who tended to hold their babies facing out reported that they did this because "it's easier for the baby to see the world." In over 20 years of studying fathers, Dr. Ross Parke states that men have a tendency to allow their infants more freedom to explore, which appears to support the development of independence in their children. Fathers who actively play with their children appear to reinforce the notion of emotional self-control in their children and help their children learn to recognize the emotional cues of others.

Young children whose fathers were involved in their lives tended to make better, longer-lasting friendships across their lifespan. Children raised with responsible fathers tended to get along better with their peers, be academically successful, stay in school longer, use drugs and alcohol less frequently, and didn't become pregnant or get someone else pregnant.

Fathers enjoy practical ways of playing. Men tend to do more practical, educational activities with their children rather than talking about what they are doing with their children. Fathers like to expand their child's horizons by playing with toys in non-traditional ways. A father might take a cup and place it on his head or throw a block rather than stack it. Fathers are much more comfortable with physical play at any age but especially as their children grow older.

Fathers and cognitive development. Infants raised in father-absent homes did less reaching, grasping and following of objects, and playing with new toys and objects in their environment. Researchers have determined that active fathers have children who score higher on tests of verbal skills, in problem-solving tasks, and in social situations. Fathers who played peek-a-boo and tossed the ball with their children had children who scored higher on cognitive tests than did children whose fathers were non-active or absent. Some researchers believe that active father involvement has a positive effect on their child's math skills.

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Sources:

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- Ross Parke, Center for Family Studies at the University of California, Riverside.