



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Do Dads Really Make A Difference?

A young mother and father watch as their six-month-old daughter tries to reach a toy on the floor in front of her. Sometimes her efforts move her closer; sometimes they move her farther away. The mother's first instinct is to move the toy within the baby's reach or to place her hand firmly against the bottom of the baby's feet so that the next move will be forward. The father is content to let the baby work things out on her own. In mom's view, the baby is frustrated and needs help. In dad's view, she's simply working hard and will learn from the effort, whether she succeeds this time or not. Is there one approach that is better for babies? Not necessarily. Recent research tells us that children actually do better when they experience the different parenting styles of both men and women. Babies don't get confused by the different ways their mothers and fathers care for them. Instead, they learn that two different people can both give them loving care. And while there are differences in the ways fathers and mothers care for their babies, there are many similarities, too. Both fathers and mothers are able to warmly nurture and take care of their babies' emotional and physical needs.

Benefits of Active Fathering

As they grow, children who have highly involved fathers often do better in some areas of development than children who have less involved fathers. They tend to become better at solving problems and handling frustrations, more socially skilled, more understanding of other's feelings, and better at dealing with a variety of people. Active fathering also contributes to a child's sense of humor, attention span, and eagerness to explore and learn.

Barriers to Active Fathering

Though men and women are equally capable of learning to care for babies, mothers often take the role of primary parent early on. There are a number of reasons this can happen:

- **Men often have less experience with children than women.** In our society, child care skills are practiced throughout life by many girls and women as big sisters, through babysitting, as volunteers, and through work experiences. Boys and young men are offered fewer such opportunities. For this reason, men may initially feel less comfortable with and be less skilled in caring for children.
- **Men tend not to feel the same social pressure as women to learn how to care for their own children.** As a result, they're less likely to seek the help they need from professionals, family, friends, and other sources to gain skills in parenting.
- **As mothers do the work of parenting, they get better at it and can view fathers as less competent.** When this happens, a pattern is set in which the mother does more, learns more, feels more confident, and continues to take on more and more responsibility for children. The father in that situation does less, learns less, and feels less capable of providing daily care. When that pattern becomes too strong, mothers feel over-burdened, fathers feel left out, and children miss the benefits that come from having two loving, involved parents.
- **Family arrangements and socioeconomic realities can make fathering a challenge.** In situations of single parent families, divorce or separation, many



fathers do not live with their babies. In all types of families, both men and women are often faced with economic pressures or work schedules that don't match their baby's needs. For some men, these living situations and work demands can make it even more difficult to spend as much time with their babies as they might like.

What's Best for Your Family

Although fathers may experience a number of challenges caring for their babies, these can successfully be addressed within a supportive couple relationship. There are many ways fathers and mothers can share the work of parenting and be effective parents. As you think about your family, you may want to consider the following:

Involved fathers learn by doing. Parenting skills are learned on the job, and men may shy away or have less opportunity for this hands-on experience. The earlier a father starts and the more he does, the more comfortable and competent he will feel. Most people feel pretty incompetent at first, but for giving, loving and gentle parents, babies are very good teachers.

- **There are many ways fathers and mothers can be effective parents.** The differences, as well as the similarities, between parents are good for children. Remember that there are many right ways to raise children and that your baby benefits from more than one way. Allow for loving differences in the ways your partner parents.
- **Each parent deserves a chance to develop his or her relationship with the baby.** Most of us do better at learning the art of parenting when we do not have someone looking over our shoulders "correcting" us as we go. Arrange for each parent to have some time alone with the baby, keep instructions to one another to a minimum, and trust your partner to learn as you did – by doing.
- **Keep the parent relationship strong.** Research shows that a solid couple relationship helps promote sustained, active fathering.
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By Gloria Ferguson, B.A., CAPS, Health Educator, Health Start's Director

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

of Community Services, St. Paul, Minnesota.

For More Information

For more information about fathering very young children, call the Father's Resource Center at 612-521-3409, the Early Childhood Family Education program in your local school district, or 1-800-KIDS-709. Or go to <http://www.fathersworld.com/resources>.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

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University of Minnesota
Center for Early Education and Development
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425
St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108

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The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.