



youth service bureau

Do Dads Really Make a Difference?

By: Mike Huntley, M.A., LP, YSB Youth and Family Therapist

This information was adapted from Gloria Ferguson, author of a booklet titled The Dad Book: a guide to pregnancy, labor, birth, and parenting, published in 1998 by Fairview Health Services in Minneapolis, MN.

Absolutely!

Imagine this scenario: 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 to the toy; sometimes they move her farther away. The mother's first instinct is to move the toy to within the baby's reach or to place her own hand against the baby's feet so that the next move by the baby will be forward. The father is content to let the baby work things out on her own, and he enjoys watching her learn. In mom's view, the baby is frustrated and needs help. In dad's view, she is simply working hard and will learn from her 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 do not get confused by the different ways that their mothers and fathers care for them; instead, they learn that two different people can both provide them loving care. While there are differences in the ways fathers and mothers care for their children, there are many similarities too. Both fathers and mothers are able to warmly nurture and take care of their children's emotional and physical needs.

Research shows that as they grow, children who have highly involved fathers often do better in some areas of development than children who have less involved fathers. Children with highly involved dads 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 enhance a child's sense of humor, attention span, and eagerness to explore and learn. These are some of the important benefits of fathering.

There are also some barriers to active fathering... though men and women are equally capable of learning to care for babies and children, mothers often take a primary role early on. There are a number of reasons this can happen:

Men often have less experience with children than women

In our society boys and young men are offered fewer opportunities to develop and practice child-care skills. This may leave men feeling *initially* less comfortable with and be *initially* less skilled in caring for children.

Men tend not to feel the same social pressure as women to learn to care for their children

As a result of this, men are less likely to readily seek the information or assistance they might benefit from to gain skills in parenting.

As mothers do the work of parenting, they get better at it and can begin to view fathers as less competent

When this happens, a pattern can develop where the mother does more, learns more, feels more and more confident, and takes on greater responsibilities in caring for the children. The father meanwhile, does less, learns less, and feels less capable in providing daily care. If this pattern becomes too strong, mothers feel over-burdened, fathers feel left-out, and children miss having the benefits of two loving and 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 children. In all types of families, both men and women are often faced with economic pressures or work schedules that may not match their children's needs. For some men, these living situations and work demands can make it even more difficult to spend as much time with their children as they would like.

So, what's best for your family?

Although dads may face a number of challenges in caring for their children, these challenges can be successfully addressed with support – from within the parenting/couple relationship and from outside sources. As you think about the needs of your own family, you might consider the following –

Involved dads learn by doing

Parenting skills are learned on the job, not by genetics. The earlier a dad starts, and the more he does, the more comfortable and competent he will feel. Most everyone feels pretty incompetent at first, but for parents who are giving, loving and gentle... babies/children 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 your child will benefit from exposure to more than one way. Allow for loving differences in the way your partner parents.

Each parent deserves a chance to develop his or her relationship with the child

Most of us do better at learning the art of parenting when we do not have someone looking over our shoulders or correcting us as we go. Arrange for each parent to have some time alone with a baby or child, keep instructions to one another at a minimum, and trust your partner to learn by doing.

Keep the parent relationship strong

Research shows that a solid couple relationship helps promote sustained and active fathering.