

How Fathers' Style of Parenting Benefits Their Children's Development

By **Randell D. Turner, Ph.D.**



Parents as Teachers™

If you have ever been to the neighborhood playground, you have likely witnessed the distinct differences in the parenting styles of mothers and fathers – maybe without realizing it. See if this scenario rekindles any memories.

A mother and father stroll onto the park's playground. Their rambunctious preschooler is pulling at Dad's arm imploring, "Let's go to the swings, Daddy! Let's go to the swings!"

As the child races ahead with Dad in tow, Mom takes a seat on a bench near the swing set, relaxed yet attentive. Dad places the now-beaming child into the swing's wraparound seat and, from behind the child, begins gently pushing the swing forward. As Dad and child get familiar with the swing's rhythm you can hear the delight in the child's cries of "Mom, look at me!" She responds enthusiastically, "I see you!"



Then Dad asks the age-old question that dads have asked since the invention of the swing: "Do you want to go higher?" To which the child almost always exclaims, "Yes, higher! Daddy, push me higher!"

Just as Dad reaches back to give the child a real good push, you hear Mom say with a tone of caution, "Be careful!" The parents exchange knowing glances as Dad restrains his urge to send their child soaring to the swing's maximum arch.

What you have witnessed in a small way represents the uniqueness between mothers' and a fathers' parenting styles. In general, mothers tend to stress emotional nurturing and personal safety focus while fathers tend to stress autonomy and independence.

Providing a healthy balance of these two parenting styles enables children to grow up in a safe, nurturing environment while challenging them to explore their unique gifts and abilities. However, understanding fathers' parenting style and being able to maximize its uniqueness for the benefit of an individual child's outcomes still remains a mystery for many educators. Understanding the strengths and contributions of fathers' parenting style can add significantly to teaching and learning opportunities that benefit both fathers and children.

A contrast of complementary parenting styles

In general, these traits represent a healthy mother's and father's parenting styles:

- > Fathers' parenting style tends to be less predictable and have a more activating physical element, while mothers tend to follow established patterns of physical interaction.
- > Fathers are more likely to promote a child's intellectual and social development through physical play, while mothers are more likely to promote intellectual and social development through talking and teaching while caregiving.



- > Fathers tend to teach through example, emphasizing lessons learned from experience, while mothers tend to teach with the focus on learning through a pattern of processing.
- > Fathers tend to play by encouraging the child to higher levels of challenge, while mothers tend to play at the child's level, letting the child direct the play, be in charge, and proceed at his own pace.
- > Fathers tend to make use of their bodies when interacting with their children. They become a jungle gym, monkey bars, or rocking horse, giving piggy back rides, roughhousing, tickling, wrestling, and so on, following activation-exploration themes. Mothers tend to play in more conventional ways, employing traditional games, songs, and themes.
- > Fathers tend to offer less immediate support in face of child's frustration, thus promoting adaptive problem-solving skills. Mothers are more likely to intervene more quickly in face of their child's frustration.
- > Fathers tend to discipline with an interest in the societal bottom-line outcome. In other words, they focus on what their child needs to learn in order to be successful in the everyday world. Mothers tend to discipline with focus on the impact of their child's behavior on emotional relationships.

These are just a few of the contrasts between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles. The uniqueness of these two parenting styles contributes significantly to the healthy growth and development of a child. As professionals, we can use this knowledge to educate and guide fathers in ways of maximizing their parenting style to benefit their children.

This will take time and effort, because most fathers don't understand the benefits that they bring to their children's development. However, my experience has been that with a little guidance, encouragement, and opportunity, fathers will become more engaged in their children's lives. As they do, we begin to see the positive influence and benefits it has on their children. After all that's what being a father is all about, nurturing your children so that it enables them not just to succeed and but to soar!

What Fathers Are Saying "I really enjoyed attending the Dads in the Mix training. We learned hands-on activities that showed us how to get down on a kid's level and work with our kids with small motor skills and lots of hand-eye coordination skills."

– *Anonymous, Dads in the Mix, Allegheny Intermediate Unit*



1. Education

There hasn't been a tremendous amount of education to professionals or to parents about this topic. Therefore, I recommend that a concerted effort be made each school year to provide education workshop and information to staff and parents alike. As the staff and parents become more educated, they can begin to incorporate this information into their classrooms, activities, educational materials, and programs throughout the year.

2. Guidance

Once education efforts have become part of your program, providing guidance becomes the next step in the process. For example, since we know that fathers tend to teach through play, parent educators should work with fathers and mothers to develop games to do just that. A good example might be teaching a child how to recognize shapes: To make it a game, have fathers take a 2-inch square wooden cube and draw a different shape (square, triangle, rectangle, and so on, on each face of the cube). They could then create a game card that has the different shapes randomly placed in four rows across by rows down, totaling 16 shapes, some being repeated, similar to a bingo card. Then have the child and father take turns rolling the cube. Whatever shape is on top they mark off on their card. Whoever gets four across, down or diagonally wins. This not only teaches the child to identify shapes, it also teaches social skills of following rules and taking turns.

This same game format can be used for learning colors, numbers, small words, and a variety of other new information.

3. Encouragement

Remember, most fathers have not been told that they can have a positive influence on their child's development by just being who they are. Therefore, consistent encouragement may be needed as fathers try to become more involved and aren't confident in their efforts. That's why educating staff and parents will help encourage father involvement. Because everyone understands the benefits to the child, sincere encouragement will become an easier and more consistent part of your program.

4. Opportunities

Fathers can't and won't apply what they learn unless they have the opportunity. Not that you always have to provide separate "fathers only" activities or programs. You can do this as part of your normal program activities and events. Just make sure you try to integrate events, activities, lessons, and resources that tend to focus on fathers' parenting style. It may take a little extra effort, but remember, the children will benefit the most from your efforts.



Randell D. Turner, Ph.D., is senior associate, child and family therapist, at ICF International in Fairfax, Va. He specializes in working with children and adults with ADD/ADHD and in working with men and fathers. His work includes writing, developing resources, and facilitating training and workshops for and about fathers. He is father and stepfather to seven children.

Last updated: November 30, 2011