



Childhood Looks Better When Dad is in It: AAP Report Explained

By: David L. Hill, MD, FAAP

In the weeks after my first child, Abby, was born I spent a lot of time doing "kangaroo care (</English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/About-Skin-to-Skin-Care.aspx>)" with her—keeping her warm on my bare chest while her mom caught some rest between feeds. As she grew hungry, Abby would inchworm towards my chin, pecking and nuzzling in a vain search for a food source that was in fact on the other side of the room. When she grew frustrated she would raise her head and look up at my face with an expression that seemed to say, "**Dad, what are you for?**" There were times I wasn't sure I knew the answer.



Dad's Many Roles

Now that Abby is 16, she can ask me such questions aloud (and does). In the intervening years I have been a stay-at-home dad (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/Pages/Stay-At-Home-Dads.aspx>), a working dad (</English/family-life/work-play/Pages/Working-Parents.aspx>), a married dad, a single dad (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/Pages/Stresses-of-Single-Parenting.aspx>), and a stepdad (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/Pages/Some-Advice-for-Stepparents.aspx>). In each of these roles, I've tried to figure out what I was for and hoped that my involvement made a difference in my kids' lives.

In the meantime, **the volume of science on fatherhood has exploded**, and it tells us that dads are for a lot, in both traditional and nontraditional roles. See the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) updated clinical report, *Fathers' Role in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians* (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1128>), for more information.

Involved Dads = Positive Effects on Kids

The positive effects of paternal involvement start before birth. Mothers with involved fathers are more likely to receive early prenatal (</English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/default.aspx>) care and are less likely to deliver prematurely (</English/ages-stages/baby/preemie/Pages/default.aspx>), and their newborns are less likely to suffer infant mortality. Right after birth, fathers can help support breastfeeding (</English/ages-stages/baby/breastfeeding/Pages/Dads-Role-in-Breastfeeding.aspx>), and their participation in kangaroo care helps newborns calm themselves and sleep soundly.

In childhood, dads' involvement contributes to language development, and children whose fathers are involved early on enjoy protection from mental health and behavioral problems. The good news continues through the teen years, when paternal involvement is associated with decreased high-risk behaviors, lower rates of teen pregnancy (</English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Teenage-Pregnancy.aspx>), protection from depression (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/childhood-depression-what-parents-can-do-to-help.aspx>), and improved cognitive development (</English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Cognitive-Development-In-Preschool-Children.aspx>). As a whole, the picture of childhood looks better when dad is in it.

Changing Times

Given all these positive effects, the even better news is that paternal involvement in child-rearing has increased dramatically since the days when I was the only dad sitting on the alphabet rug at the library's toddler reading time.

Between 2003 and 2012, the number of stay-at-home-dads skyrocketed from 98,000 to an 189,000.

Dads in 2011 had more than doubled the amount of time they spent on housework and childcare from 1965.

Let's face it: in the era of "Father Knows Best" a lot of fathers were just guessing.

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Both Parents Bring Different Strengths

When we ask who's better, fathers or mothers, the answer is "yes." Both parents bring different strengths to the family. Fathers, for example, tend to play in more stimulating, vigorous, and arousing ways with their children. It's not that they don't also read, snuggle, and kiss boo-boos, but dads tend to be more rambunctious and exploratory during fun time (</English/ages-stages/preschool/nutrition-fitness/Pages/Motor-Activity-and-Self-Play.aspx>). Fathers are important not because they are just like mothers, but because they are in some ways different.

Challenges of Maintaining Dad's Involvement

With 40% of today's births being to unmarried couples, many families face the challenge of maintaining dads' involvement. The trend away from traditional marriage correlates to an increase in the number of nonresident fathers. But while 1 in 6 fathers do not live with their children, only a tiny fraction, 1% to 2%, never see their kids. In most cases finding some way for kids and fathers to interact helps both parties, leading to measurable improvements in children's academic achievement (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/Ten-Tips-for-Your-Childs-Success-in-School.aspx>), emotional well-being, and behavioral adjustment (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Shape-Manage-Young-Child-Behavior.aspx>).

Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids

It should not surprise us that a father's health affects his family's health. Paternal depression has significant negative impacts on moms' and children's mental health. Doctors are now recognizing that post-partum depression affects dads, too (</English/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/Pages/dads-can-get-postpartum-depression-too.aspx>), and they are beginning to screen for it. On the positive side, dads who maintain a healthy weight can lead their children to healthy weights, as well, since fathers' weights correlate with childhood obesity and overweight. And vaccinating dads against pertussis (Tdap (</English/safety-prevention/immunizations/Pages/Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis-Tdap-Vaccine-What-You-Need-to-Know.aspx>)) can prevent an estimated 16% of cases of whooping cough (</English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Whooping-Cough.aspx>).

Paternal Leave: Dads Need Time, Too!

Corporations and governments are starting to recognize the critical role fathers play in their families' mental and physical health, and increasingly they are seeing how these benefits contribute to the success of a company or even a nation. Many developed countries mandate paternal leave policies that have led 90% of fathers to take at least some time off after a birth to bond with their children.

We Now Know What Dads Are For!

The more we encourage fathers to share their unique gifts with their families, the better off we all are likely to be.

Additional Information & Resources:

- What Dads Are Good For: A Pediatrician-Dad's Perspective (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/What-Dads-Are-Good-For.aspx>)
- A Special Message to New Dads (</English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/A-Special-Message-to-Fathers.aspx>)
- Fathers' Role in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1128>) (AAP Clinical Report)
- Parental Leave for Residents and Pediatric Training Programs (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/2/387.abstract?rss=1>) (AAP Policy Statement)
- Celebrate Dads Who Live Smoke-Free Lives (<http://www.cdc.gov/features/smoke-freefathersday/>) (CDC.gov)
- Fathers' Involvement With Their Children: United States, 2006–2010 (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr071.pdf>) (CDC.gov)

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