

Fathers, Play, and the World of Children

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Imagine traveling to a foreign country where you cannot speak or understand the language and the flood of feelings you would experience from not being able to communicate. How would you feel? Perhaps frustrated from not being able to understand or be understood by those around you about your wants and needs. Maybe helpless, disconnected, or alone and isolated. You might even feel ignorant or like less of a person than those around you. What you quickly learn is that there is an intense need to understand and communicate in a language that makes sense to the people you wish to connect with. This is how fathers often feel in the world of children.

As adults, fathers have a different language than their children have, and children have a language that differs from that of their parents. These two languages often separate the world of fathers from the world of children. When children cannot speak their father's adult language, they are prone to experience the flood of feelings described above. Fathers can prevent that experience and strengthen their bond with children if they learn their child's language.

The language spoken in the world of children is play. A baby doll, a bouncing ball, a dress-up hat—these are the tools of play for children. They represent the language in which younger children engage each other, their parents, and the world around them. Play is critically important to a child's healthy development and provides opportunities for mastering physical tasks, engaging in social interaction, and thinking creatively. Play provides endless opportunities for learning and growth. It has been said that play is a child's work. However, it is even more. Play is a child's world, and fathers must understand and engage in play if they wish to understand and engage their children. Fortunately, fathers typically enjoy play and tend to do very well at this particular aspect of parent-child interaction.

Much of my work involves outreach to low-income, urban fathers who often face significant challenges in their efforts to be the involved fathers their children need. My work as executive director of the Urban Father-Child Partnership at the National Center for Fathering in Kansas City brings me into regular contact with fathers from all walks of life. Our programming efforts attempt to meet dads where they are, and we find there is no quicker way for a man to reach his child's heart than through the shared language of play. Learning a child's language of play and engaging with children through play is a key aspect of how we help fathers to connect with their children. Fathers and father figures don't need to move into their child's world, but they do need to visit it through play. The doorway to a child's world is small, and it requires getting down on a child's level and engaging in play.

The focus of this chapter is primarily on the preschool and school-age play of children and its important role in a child's development. It also addresses specifically the powerful role that fathers play in aiding their children's development through interaction and play with them. It discusses the purpose of children's language of play and how dads can connect with their children through play to communicate and help them cope with life, comprehend the world around them, and achieve success in their pursuits.

Dads at Play with Children

Someone has said, “Man is more childlike than woman.” It seems men of any maturity level are often more predisposed than women to enter the world of play. Perhaps the excuse to play again is one of the benefits of being a dad. For example, talk to children about what they’ve done recently with their parents, and you’re probably more likely to hear about snowball fights and wrestling matches with dad than with mom. I can personally relate to this benefit. My wife and I have three sons and a daughter. It is as if my children have awakened something in me to play. Usually I purchase toys, rather than my wife, to engage in play inside or outside with my children. And when it becomes time to throw ourselves into play my wife would more often be a spectator rather than a playmate. Does this mean mothers and other caregivers cannot play like fathers do with children? Of course not. It simply means that fathers seem to bring a willingness to engage in play to their involvement with children, and this capacity should be recognized and built on as a strength in their parenting.

One area of play in which fathers are recognized as experts is rough-and-tumble, interactive play with children. I believe my sons Timothy, Jeremy and Geordy would testify to my expertise. And if they won't then let my scars speak for themselves. The play of fathers is typically more physical and exciting than that of mothers: it is play with a turbo-charger! Fathers’ play with their children is usually noisier, involving exaggerated movement, and more likely to include the element of surprise.¹ This type of interaction between fathers and children is evident even in the first months of a baby’s life. Fathers are more likely to play by moving the baby’s legs and arms in imitation of walking or kicking, by lifting the baby through the air, or by tapping or tickling the baby’s stomach.² The result is that these infants are more likely to laugh and cry in episodes of play with daddy. Children learn from early ages that fathers typically bring excitement and a chance to explore the world around them.

Although many fathers care for their infants, typically fathers are just as likely to focus on playing with their infants as on caring for them. A majority of exchanges between fathers and their babies, for example, are brief play episodes that come at a specific period of the day.³ As the infants grow older, fathers generally increase the time they spend with them and are more likely to engage in physical play. When my children were toddlers I crawled after them in chase, swung them around, wrestled with them on the floor and rode them on my back and shoulders. I remember a time I carried my son Geordy on my back and ran a half mile to his school. I paid for that ride in pain for the next week. At times fathers have been criticized for being the “playmate” parent and avoiding the hard work of being the caregiving parent. However, play is a key component of a healthy caregiving environment, and it is probably the most important interaction facilitating a child’s healthy development during the first few years of life. This means that fathers and father figures who play actively with their children bring tremendous benefits to their child’s growth and learning.

Play is a hands-on and practical approach to use in involving fathers with their children. While many fathers may be not be enthusiastic about attending a parenting class, they are often interested in participating in activities in which they can interact and play with their children. For example, asking parents to assist children in making a holiday treat or gift for family members at school is more likely to draw fathers than a lecture on children’s language development. One of the most-attended father-involvement activities I’ve heard of was a “water fun” day at a local park where fathers and kids could throw water balloons and slide on a wet sheet of plastic. Programs that utilize play as the basis for fathers’ interaction with their children focus on this strength and provide a means for fathers and children to connect with each other in positive ways.

The unique approach of fathers to play can benefit their children in a variety of specific and practical ways. Consider the following:

- *Dads at play help their children further develop physical abilities.* Lev Vygotsky called a child’s developing physical skills a “zone of proximal development,” which means that a father or other parent supports a child in a physical action that he or she will later learn to accomplish independently.⁴ For example, a father may help a small child learn to walk, climb,

wave, bounce a ball, or jump up and down.

- *_Dads at play can help a child cope with emotional issues.* An important role of a father is to be aware of his children's feelings and what hurts, challenges, or brings joy to them. Through play, a father can learn his child's questions and concerns or notice some danger sign that leads him to seek out appropriate help. Play is a meaningful pathway to getting in touch with a child's emotions and helping him or her cope with feelings of frustration, sadness, or boredom.
- *_Dads at play help their children develop social skills and moral character.* Even in rough-and-tumble play, fathers can teach children about limits and love; after all, dads get hurt, too. Fathers interacting with children in play can soothe emotions and guide behavior so kids learn the appropriate boundaries for their actions. As children grow older, they begin to play rules-based games, such as chess or soccer, which provide opportunities to learn about fairness and making choices in a safe environment.
- *_Dads at play help their children develop cognitively.* As children develop intellectually, dads learn to adjust play activities accordingly. Not only does this help a child's ongoing development, but it's also a great way for dads to shape their children's long-term educational destiny. Fathers are able to help children extend their cognitive abilities and think creatively, tools which will help them succeed in school and other areas.

Many of the benefits associated with such play between fathers and children happen unintentionally. However, if fathers and father figures understood the significance of play for a child's well-being and development, they would likely engage in more frequently and longer periods of play.

It is not accurate to suggest that fathers are falling down on the job when they "just play" with their children. Play is fun. Play is relaxing. Play is a vital part of a child's world and learning and development. Fathers are great play companions for children because they like to tickle, make faces, play games, wrestle, and engage kids in all kinds of adventures. This is what children need as they encounter the world around them.

Why a Child's Play Matters and How Fathers Help

Jean Piaget, a renowned scholar of child development, sought to understand how children come to know the world and act effectively within it. In Piaget's view, knowledge is acquired (or in his words, "constructed") through action.⁵ This particular perspective maintains that nature and nurture are equally necessary for development—both the child's play environment and those whom the child engages in play assist that child in his or her development. Most children engage in play because it is fun, but play also has purpose. Play is powerful for a child. Through the power of play (action), children acquire (construct) knowledge to:

- *_communicate their thoughts and feelings,*
- *_cope with life's stresses and emotional distress,*
- *_connect with those around them in their family, school, or neighborhood, and*
- *_comprehend the world around them through imagination, exploration, and learning.⁶*

With my daughter Sydney who is eight years younger than her brother I have another opportunity to introduce the world to one of my children through play. I have to admit that she makes it easy by her natural curiosity and assertiveness. Children's play matters because it facilitates so much of their interaction with the world and others. Fathers can shape this world and give it greater meaning as they play with children.

Communicating Thoughts and Feelings

Children experience feelings and form thoughts long before they can express them clearly in verbal language. The interactions of a baby with the world are physical, interactive, and social. For example, a baby will see a person's face and reach up to touch it. A toddler will climb onto a couch

and begin jumping on it. This is the language of play. Before children learn the language used by adults, from early infancy they learn the language of play.

Through that play, children communicate what they think and feel with those around them. The language of play is universal in the world of children. Children do not have to be taught to play, because it is not just what they do but an expression of their identity. If a father bounces a one-year-old child on his knee and then stops, if the child wants it to continue, he or she will likely begin moving in a bouncing fashion to encourage more fun. This action communicates several things. The child wants more fun activity. The child is feeling happiness and enjoyment. The child connects play with the involvement of a parent. So, this single small example of play between a child and father communicates thought, feelings, and social awareness.

The vocabulary of the language of play includes at least four different types of play. *Active play* is described by mostly the gross motor skills of running, jumping, climbing, or throwing. Fathers engage in this type of play as they roll a ball to a child or see who can run faster in a race around the house. *Object play* is exploration of the senses that may employ fine motor skills through actions such as picking up, observing, smelling, shaking, and tasting. Fathers facilitate this kind of play by doing things like giving a child a rattle to shake or letting them play in the sand at the beach. *Social play* involves an exchange with another person that may or may not include physical contact. Peek-a-boo games or wrestling are examples of social play. *Pretend play* typically involves make-believe or use of the imagination with objects and acting. A father might facilitate or encourage such play by letting his kids take his temperature with a play thermometer or watching their made-up skit. All of these varieties of play are opportunities for children to form thoughts, express themselves, and communicate with others.⁷

Coping with Stresses and Challenges

Through the course of a child's life, he or she may experience injuries, personal stresses, or insults. A child's healthy development requires that children receive physical and emotional healing from these hurts. Play is one powerful approach that children often use to cope with the stresses of life and emotional distress. Play gives a child an outlet to explore emotions without shutting down emotionally and without the threat of being out of control. For example, after the events of 9/11, it was not uncommon for parents and preschool or kindergarten teachers to see young children focusing on play that involved firefighters and emergency response personnel or drawing pictures that involved planes and buildings. Children were using different forms of play to explore their fears, thoughts, and feelings about the events. Fathers can help to facilitate such play and guide it in positive, caring ways.

A child can sometimes be hurt or insulted as part of a domino effect within the hierarchy of the family. For example, the falling of the "dominoes" might follow this sequence: the dad yells at the mom, the mom yells at the child, the child yells at the dog, and the dog whimpers in the corner. Such a sequence of events can leave a child feeling powerless and out of control. However, play can serve as a natural outlet for a child to express feelings of frustration and learn to deal with them in healthy ways. Play is a natural stress-reducer for kids. As they engage in play, their bodies and minds become more active and produce hormones that help to diminish feelings of stress.

The sheer fun of play can also help children to forget minor issues that upset them. Play is absorbing, and small emotional distresses typically fade as children engage in play that engages their minds and energy. Also, friendship concerns can be overcome as children bond through play with each other. More serious issues can be resolved through play by giving children a place where they have the power and control to act out some of their hurts, questions, and feelings through pretend play. Coping with stresses becomes more manageable as children engage in play, express their feelings, and learn different ways to approach their world.

Connecting with Family and Others

Who does a child feel close to? Why does he or she feel close to that person? Shared, enjoyable experiences help a child build close connections with others.

Attachment theory examines the topic of connection. Forming connections with others starts at an early age and continues through adulthood. When the primary caregiver (often the mom, but this can also be the dad or include the dad) responds to an infant's needs, the child develops trust, a sense of worth, and security in that relationship. This usually translates to being secure in relationships with others. Play is a key pathway that fathers can use to build a child's sense of connection to the world and trust in parents, family, and others as they grow older.⁸

A father whose son became involved in a community soccer league decided to spend some time playing soccer at a local park with his son. They spent a couple of hours kicking the soccer ball around and working on skills and laughing together. As they left the park, the son said, "Dad, that was the greatest day!" What had seemed like an hour or two of fun to the father became more important in his mind as he listened to his son talk about the time they had spent and what a great day it was for him. He realized that the simple activity of playing soccer together was a powerful message of love to his son and a way for them to connect.

This concept of play as a pathway for children to connect with family and others is covered in the National Center for Fathering's urban program, "Quenching the Father Thirst." We compare children to a cup: when they are empty, they are lonely or bored and need to be heard and loved and to learn. The cup is refilled when significant others interact in a positive way, take time to listen and talk, affirm the child verbally and physically, teach the child a skill, or play together in fun. Play refills the cup by connecting children with those who play with them. Fathers are great candidates for playing with children and meeting a child's needs for connection through time shared in play.⁹

Comprehending the World

As children encounter the world, they are immersed in opportunities for growth and learning. They must learn to comprehend the world around them. During a child's preschool years in particular (ages birth to five), his or her brain is developing, and learning connections are forming. The mind of a child is "wired" for learning. For example, an infant reaches curiously to grasp a ball on the floor, or a toddler repeatedly sings a song that he or she has learned. As a child interacts with others and his or her environment, connections between brain cells are formed that become "highways" for processing information and provide the foundation for learning.¹⁰

Although it is never too late to encourage learning, these early years of a child's life are a key period of development. Most of a young child's learning involves one or more of these three techniques: seeing (visual memory), hearing (auditory memory) and doing (kinesthetic memory). The interactive experiences of play involve all of these patterns and help to establish these important neural connections in a child's brain. Children *learn through play*.¹¹

Ross Parke has summarized research on fathers and children and notes that a number of studies consistently indicate that fathers across cultural backgrounds are more likely than mothers to engage in play with children.¹² Parke further notes that playing games with a child has a direct connection to their cognitive development. For example, he suggests that games in which fathers get children to reach for objects, such as catching a rolling ball, help young children to learn how to interact with their environment. A game like peek-a-boo engages a young child in social interaction and learning how to take turns. These examples link fathers' involvement through play with cognitive development in children and suggest that play is very important for helping children to comprehend the world around them.

All children are unique and express different types of intelligence. However, various kinds of play

can help a child learn, no matter what his or her learning style may be. Fathers tend to bring variety, energy, and enthusiasm to their play and involvement with children, which allows them to influence their children's development of different types of intelligence. Following is a list of specific types of intelligence and how fathers can use play to assist in developing them:

- *Linguistic intelligence* involves a love for words and using language, learned by seeing, hearing, and saying words, as in reading or practicing the alphabet.
- *Spatial intelligence* is visual learning, learned by using pictures, diagrams, and films.
- *Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence* is learning through movement, as in role-playing, drama, dance, sports participation, or other active experiences.
- *Musical intelligence* is learning with rhythm and melody, as in singing, tapping the beat, or using an instrument.
- *Logical-mathematical intelligence* is based on patterns and relationships involving numbers or problems, developed by solving puzzles, playing games of logic, or learning and using numbers.
- *Interpersonal intelligence* involves ability in relating to and cooperating with others, facilitated by group play activities, cooperation, and interactive games.
- *Intrapersonal intelligence* is expressed in children who learn most effectively individually or in a solitary environment, for example by doing chores or practicing and mastering a skill.⁸

The many different ways fathers can play with their children are fundamental in developing the neural wiring of different parts of a child's brain, which aids in developing a child's multiple types of intelligence. Conversely, a child's natural, unique strengths in terms of types of intelligence may be expressed through his or her play preferences. Whatever children's unique capacities might be, those who are encouraged to play and develop their skills in multiple areas are much more likely to enjoy learning for a lifetime.

Entering a Child's World through Play

Not only children but also fathers benefit from play. Whether a father is engaged in play by running around in sports-related activities like soccer, teaching board games, or dressing dolls or action figures, he is connecting with his child. Moments of connection with a little boy or girl through play can bring great satisfaction.

Why don't fathers play more frequently with their children and for longer periods of time? Often, fathers' early experiences playing with their own dads can shed light on this question.

Take a trip down memory lane. With whom did you play during childhood? You remember these people because they had a significant influence on your life. What were your favorite toys or games? Whether they were wind-up, electric, battery-operated, or electronic, the memories of these toys and games are etched in your mind. This kind of reflection—recalling your childhood play—may bring up fond memories and make you smile: play is fun!

Now let's relate these memories back to your role as a father or to fathers in general. Did your dad ever play with you? Chances are, if he did, you can remember it even if the play was only brief, because the enjoyment of the time together is embedded with the memories. Although my father was the picture of health and fitness he did not engage me or my three brothers and two sisters in play. There were only a handful of times that he played with me. But they were glorious and I still emotionally remember them today. Play with dad is forever!

Fathers need to consistently set aside time to play with their children, to enter their children's world to connect in a deeper way and exchange thoughts and feelings. The father and child can help each other release life's stresses and get to the bottom of other challenging issues. Finally, through play fathers can help their children develop in the other domains of their life—physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and moral. Some dads relish the idea of playing with their children; others find it

repulsive. Lawrence Cohen, author of *Playful Parenting*, reminds us that the goal is to *visit* the world of children through play, not to “move into their world.” Dads are required to step down from their adult language and concrete thinking to speak the sometimes abstract language of play to their children.

How can we help fathers reenter the world they were once so familiar with? How can they be retaught the childhood language they spoke so fluently? The answer lies in the parts of the language they have retained over the years. Sports, hobbies, and possessions are often a continuation of men’s playfulness, carrying over from games or toys that were meaningful to them in childhood.

My daughter Sydney invites me into her world through play almost everyday. “Daddy, will you play with me?” “Let’s play after you eat.” “Don’t you want to play, okay?” And if that doesn’t get my attention she will say it louder, look me eye to eye with her hands on my cheeks or pull my arm. My sons were never that aggressive, I mean assertive. Perhaps your children aren’t either so the message is simple, don’t wait to be invited into your child’s world to play, invite yourself. To enter a child’s world through play, here are a few important points for dads to remember:

- **_It isn’t about you.** Entering your child’s world of play is about your child—not you. Children are not looking for someone to tell them how to play but to play with them. Dads need to ask children what they want to do and allow them to lead—and if they want to play the same thing over and over, do it!
- **_Be childlike.** The doorway to your child’s world of play is small. It requires one to become childlike and get on the child’s level (sometimes on hands and knees). There is no room for machismo or embarrassment. You may have to play with dolls or sing silly songs. Do it; it will mean the world to your child.
- **_Make play a priority.** The adult world is busy. We have important things to do, people to see, and little time to do it all. Unfortunately, those most important to us (family) often get the least of our time. Employ the sanity principle: Do things creatively and intentionally *differently* if you want different results. Schedule playtime with your child, and guard it like a watch dog!
- **_Play hard.** You can con a con, and you can fool a fool—but you can’t kid a kid. Children know when you are only half-hearted and not fully engaged in play. You have to be completely, actively involved.
- **_Have fun.** Laughter is a good gauge for how well play is going with a child. Sometimes a dad can initiate laughter through tickling. Remember, it is not about how well your children do something but the fact that you are playing together. Steer clear of the adult role unless the play becomes dangerous. Keep encouraging your child.¹⁴

Entering a child’s world is a gift. You have the opportunity to send and receive love, share warmth and laughter, and build self-esteem. Communicating in a child’s language may mean throwing a ball or building a tower of blocks. “I love you” can be said in so many ways through play.

Conclusion

One of the greatest strengths a father can bring to his involvement with children is play. Remember that the language spoken in a child’s world is play. Play is much more than fun; it has a powerful influence on children and their development in many areas of life.

Taking time to play with children assists them in developing physical abilities and learning to manage emotions. It also enables them to become more skilled in social interactions and understand their environment. Play is not only a language children understand but a primary way in which they encounter and explore the world around them. Growth through meaningful play allows children to communicate feelings, cope with life’s stresses, connect with others, and comprehend the world.

Play speaks powerfully to a child. The giggles and shrieks of joy, along with the smiles, gestures

and other nonverbal signals, convey contentment more deeply than words and language can. Playing with Dad confirms some important truths to a child: that he is highly valued by a very important person in his life, that he is gaining competence in skills and wisdom, and that he belongs and is at home.

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