I go to many, many research meetings about early child development, and in the past these kinds of conferences almost exclusively focussed on mothers and their babies. But recently, I have noticed a change. Today, there is an active discussion and growing research into not just mums, but dads and how they contribute to children’s development, particularly in the early years of life.

Fathers are important to their children’s lives. There is now a large body of research demonstrating that having an actively involved father leads, on average, to children who are happier, have fewer behavioural problems, settle better into school and learn better. I say “on average” because this does not mean that children with fathers that they don’t see will automatically do worse in life, but it does mean that an actively engaged, supportive father always has the opportunity to be a positive influence on their children’s lives.

The roles that fathers play in their children’s lives vary enormously across the globe and across different cultures. Whatever the culture or setting though, fathers can care for, engage with, and play with their children. When they do this regularly, the quality of the care they provide for their children improves. This involvement has important consequences for fathers and children. For fathers, it can actually alter their biology, such as hormonal responses (including testosterone and oxytocin levels). For children, the involvement of dads also allows them to positively influence their children’s health, happiness and brain development, particularly in the first few years of their children’s lives.

So, whatever cultural background dads come from, whatever their own experience of being parented, and whatever their own beliefs about the roles that men and women play in child rearing, fathers who become more engaged in their children’s lives can have sustained and positive influences on their children’s development and life chances, right from the start of life.

Just like mothers, fathers can take on a wide range of roles with their children. Caregiving, of course, is the most obvious and the most necessary. But the most fun role is the role of play partner. And it’s very important too.

Some fathers find playing with their children, particularly very young children, a challenge. Some feel less confident around younger children and might feel restricted to certain types of play such as rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play and other types of physical play can be great fun for dads and children and can help children learn lots of different skills, like physical coordination and self-control.
However, dads don’t need to be restricted to just these kinds of physical play. They can get involved in a wide variety of play activities, including fun games and singing songs with younger children. As children get older, towards school age, many other types of play become more possible, including pretend play and more active sports and games. Trying these different kinds of play can be great for most dads, though some might struggle, particularly if they didn’t have good experiences of being played with as a child.

Fathers play a unique and important role in helping children to grow and develop, particularly in their first years of life when they learn and grow at a speed that will never be repeated. We can all play a role in helping and encouraging dads to get involved in their children’s lives, and to enjoy doing it.

Here are a few simple tips for Dads

- Don’t worry too much about the type of play you should be doing, the key is to get involved. Your engagement is the most important thing for your child.
- Take the time to pause and watch your child, and then try and follow their lead, doing what interests them – this kind of interaction (often called sensitive or responsive parenting) is one of the keys to supporting young children’s learning and social and emotional development.
- Remind yourself to slow yourself down to your child’s pace – this allows you time to notice what your child is most interested in, but it also allows you to support your child’s learning and curiosity. Children might take much longer to complete any task or turn themselves, but they learn through being able to do this.
- These aren’t complicated things to do, but they do take time and practice for many of us. It’s worth the investment though because getting engaged with your child in this way will not only support their development, but also bring you both a lot of joy.

This Play Piece is based on an article first written by Paul Ramchandani with Ciara Laverty at the LEGO Foundation, which was published by the LEGO Foundation.

Read more

Below are some links to papers for readers who are interested in accessing academic research relevant to this piece.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.