

THE INVOLVED FATHER

By Glenn Stanton



Fathers are just as essential to healthy child development as mothers. *Psychology Today* explained, "Fatherhood turns out to be a complex and unique phenomenon with huge consequences for the emotional and intellectual growth of children."¹

Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the world of child psychology, asserts that a father's love and a mother's love are qualitatively different. Fathers "love more dangerously" because their love is more "expectant, more instrumental" than a mother's love.² A father brings unique contributions to the job of parenting a child that no one else can replicate. Following are some of the most compelling ways that a father's involvement makes a positive difference in a child's life.

Fathers parent differently.

Fathering expert Dr. Kyle Pruett explains that fathers have a distinct style of communication and interaction with children. By eight weeks of age, infants can tell the difference between their mother's and father's interaction with them.

This diversity, in itself, provides children with a broader, richer experience of contrasting relational interactions. Whether they realize it or not, children are learning, by sheer experience, that men and women are different and have different ways of dealing with life, other adults and children. This understanding is critical for their development.

Fathers play differently.

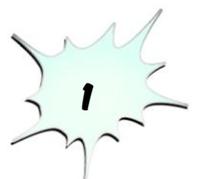
Fathers tickle more, they wrestle, and they throw their children in the air (while mother says . . . "Not so high!"). Fathers chase their children, sometimes as playful, scary "monsters."

Fathering expert John Snarey explains that children who roughhouse with their fathers learn that biting, kicking and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable.³ They learn self-control by being told when "enough is enough" and when to settle down. Girls and boys both learn a healthy balance between timidity and aggression.

Fathers build confidence.

Go to any playground and listen to the parents. Who is encouraging kids to swing or climb just a little higher, ride their bike just a little faster, throw just a little harder? Who is encouraging kids to be careful? Mothers protect and dads encourage kids to push the limits.

Either of these parenting styles by themselves can be unhealthy. One can tend toward encouraging risk without consideration of consequences. The other tends to avoid risk, which can fail to build independence and confidence. Together, they help children remain safe while expanding their experiences and increasing their confidence.



Fathers communicate differently.

A major study showed that when speaking to children, mothers and fathers are different. Mothers will simplify their words and speak on the child's level. Men are not as inclined to modify their language for the child. The mother's way facilitates immediate communication; the father's way challenges the child to expand her vocabulary and linguistic skills — an important building block of academic success.

Fathers discipline differently.

Educational psychologist Carol Gilligan tells us that fathers stress justice, fairness and duty (based on rules), while mothers stress sympathy, care and help (based on relationships). Fathers tend to observe and enforce rules systematically and sternly, teaching children the consequences of right and wrong. Mothers tend toward grace and sympathy, providing a sense of hopefulness. Again, either of these disciplinary approaches by themselves is not good, but together, they create a healthy, proper balance.

Fathers prepare children for the real world.

Involved dads help children see that attitudes and behaviors have consequences. For instance, fathers are more likely than mothers to tell their children that if they are not nice to others, kids will not want to play with them. Or, if they don't do well in school, they will not get into a good college or secure a desirable job. Fathers help children prepare for the reality and harshness of the world.

Fathers provide a look at the world of men.

Men and women are different. They eat differently. They dress differently. They cope with life differently. Girls and boys who grow up with a father are more familiar and secure with the curious world of men.

Girls with involved, married fathers are more likely to have healthier relationships with the opposite sex because they learn from their fathers how proper men act toward women. They know which behaviors are inappropriate.

They also have a healthy familiarity with the world of men — they don't wonder how a man's facial stubble feels or what it's like to be hugged by strong arms. This knowledge builds emotional security and safety from the exploitation of predatory males.

Boys who grow up with dads are less likely to be violent. They have their masculinity affirmed and learn from their fathers how to channel their masculinity and strength in positive ways. Fathers help sons understand

proper male sexuality, hygiene and behavior in age-appropriate ways. As noted sociologist David Popenoe explains, "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers — especially biological fathers — bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring."⁴

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¹"Shuttle Diplomacy," *Psychology Today*, July/August 1993, p. 15.

²As cited in Kyle D. Pruett, *The Nurturing Father*, (New York: Warner Books, 1987), p. 49.

³John Snarey, *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation: A Four Decade Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 35-36.

⁴David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 163.

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