

## **Do Fathers Really Matter? You Bet They Do & Especially for Boys**

*Melanie Horn Mellers, Cal State Fullerton*

When researchers examine the importance of parental warmth and affection on the child, the mother often receives the most empirical attention. This attention most likely stems from the fact that, although gender roles are more evenly distributed in household duties than ever before, women continue to do a majority of child care-related duties, serving as the central point for parental activity and maintaining responsibility for almost all child-care roles (Grossmann, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Kindler, Scheuere-Englisch, & Zimmerman, 2002 et al., 2002; Pleck, 1997; Robinson & Godbey, 1997). However, the level of father involvement for both married and divorced fathers has increased over time (Bianchi, 2000; Huang, Han, & Garfinkel, 2003; Pleck, 1997; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001). Further, the increase of father involvement is even stronger in families with employed mothers and today, more divorced fathers stay involved in their children's lives by sharing legal custody with the mother of their children. Despite this, evidence suggests that women, in general, are still more directly involved in the everyday lives of their children, on average, than are men (Dempsey, 2000; Pleck, 1997). Further, during times of stress, the mother is the parent who most often provides the comfort and reassurance for both boys and girls (Paquette, 2004).

Thus, the questions remains as to what role fathers exactly do play? While mothers often provide an overall atmosphere of comfort for the child, research suggests that fathers are more likely to engage the child in active play behaviors, such as roughhousing, talking and recreational activities (Lamb, 1997). Through physical play, fathers

make more problem-solving related demands on their children (Labrell, 1996). In contrast, mothers tend to solve problems for their children. The play-based behavior of fathers emerges as a unique predictor of child attachment security (Bretherton, Lambert, Golby, 2005; Grossmann et al., 2002; Paquette, 2004). Paquette (2004) describes this play-based interaction as an 'activation relationship' and notes that it encourages the development of competition skills (Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002) and emotion regulation (Paquette, 2004). Indeed, fathers have been shown to serve as catalysts for risk-taking (Kromelow, Harding, & Touris, 1990), often inciting children to take initiative in unfamiliar situations and to explore, take chances, and overcome obstacles. According to attachment theorists, fathers' provide a sensitive and challenging support as a companion when the child's exploratory system is aroused, thereby complementing the secure base-role of the mother as the primary attachment (Paquette, 2004). In summary, this activation relationship, founded in active play, is believed essential for predicting child's problem-solving capacity, social competence, social efficacy and interpersonal cognition in peer interaction (see Liu, 2008). Thus, although mothers may play a stronger role for shaping overall safety and emotional health, fathers play a stronger role in shaping how children react to stressful experiences.

Additionally, paternal affection may play an even stronger role for boys than for girls. Research indicates that when fathers are active with their children, they generally spend more time with their sons than their daughters; mothers, in contrast, spend an equal amount of time with boys and girls (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998; Harris & Morgan, 1991). Attachment to the father therefore comes with some unique

implications for boys, such that the influence of the father may be more potent for sons than daughters. The critical role of fathers for their sons is further enhanced by the fact that fathers may serve as one of very few male role models in their lives. For example, children are surrounded by a majority of women in childcare and school activities while males typically represent a small, underrepresented portion of teachers in preschool/kindergarten and elementary/middle school settings (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). With the development of gender awareness and typing, children are socialized to seek out and engage in more same-sex rather than opposite-sex behaviors (Crouter, Manke, & McHale, 1995). As explained through social learning perspective models (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1999), children attract to same-sex role models and learn what behavior is appropriate to imitate or not imitate. Through gender-based socialization practices, children internalize the outcome expectancies and behaviors associated with male and female ascribed roles. Because fathers tend to spend more time with their sons than daughters and provide one of the few same-sex role models in their daily lives, paternal affection may be even more important for boys than for girls.

As such, it is especially critical that men remain active participants in their children's lives. Both boys and girls depend critically on having engaged and close relationships with their fathers. In fact, children with active fathers living at home tend to perform better, both academically and emotionally; they tend to have improved grades, higher levels of self-esteem and empathy, and fewer incidences of depression, as well as lower rates of delinquency. Furthermore, because men, compared to women, also spend less time in child-centered contexts, we need to support the growing push to get

men into the field and work together to remedy the gender imbalance that exists in the early childhood teaching profession (Sumsion, 2005). And during divorce, parents need to work hard at ensuring consistent involvement of the father with his children. This is especially critical for boys given that men are more able than their female counterparts to identify with and respond to their needs. Overall, we all pay the price when children are not exposed to strong, male role models.

Follow [link](#) for References