



FI Research Summary: Fathers, Sensitivity and Parenting Style

Fathers who exhibit ‘parental sensitivity’ generally function as a supportive presence, respect their children’s autonomy and exhibit low levels of hostility towards them. This is more often found in men who were older when they first became fathers, hold less traditional child rearing beliefs and report more intimacy with their children’s mothers (NICHD, 2000).

The kinds of interactions by fathers that have been shown to benefit young children’s development include supportive play, sensitive responses to children’s ‘cues’, expanding on what they say, referring to objects and events, eliciting actions, directing attention, prompting play, reading books, and using large vocabularies (Tamis-Le-Monda et al, 2012).

The ‘magnitude’ of fathers’ influences are equal to and sometimes larger than those of mothers (Tamis-LeMonda et al, 2013). For example, “school readiness” in young children is associated with high levels of paternal sensitivity, over and above mothers’ sensitivity (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008).

Babies whose fathers play a big role in caring for them are generally more sociable (Frascarolo, 2004).

Sensitive and substantial involvement by dads from the month following birth are connected with a range of good outcomes in babies and toddlers (Yarrow et al, 1984; Wachs et al, 1971) including better language development and higher IQs (Yogman et al, 1995; Magill-Evans and Harrison, 1999).

In China, their father’s ‘warmth’ was found to benefit children’s educational and social adjustment (Chen et al, 2000).

Also in China, a father’s authoritarian parenting style (rigid and bossy) had a more negative impact on his children than authoritarian parenting by mothers’ (Chen et al, 1997).

Similarly, in the Philippines fathers’ authoritarian parenting style was found to be linked to their children feeling frustrated and stressed (Esteban, 2006).

Authoritarian parenting by African American fathers' was again found to be more impactful than mothers' and was connected to poorer vocabulary and receptive and other skills (Roopnarine et al, 2006).

To support paternal sensitivity, practitioners should:

- In resources for and interventions with parents, address myths about fathers' capabilities with infants and children, so that both fathers and mothers understand that parenting skills and parental sensitivity are learned, not 'innate', and that fathers can learn as quickly as mothers (Myers, 1982)
- Within hospital and home settings, encourage fathers to go 'skin to skin' with their newborns (Erlandsson et al, 2007)
- Brief interventions such as Brazelton which teach parents to assess their babies' capabilities or read infant 'cues' or engage in baby massage can make a real difference to both the amount of father-infant interaction, and its quality (Sholz & Samuels, 1992; Myers, 1982)
- Consider use of 'video-play-back', where fathers and their babies are video-ed interacting with each other, and the video-tape is then watched by the dad with a trained professional who points out successes in the interactions (Lawrence et al, 2013).
- Pay attention to 'micro moments' within family routines, for example encouraging fathers to hold their infants as often as possible, including when out as a family; and to engage in verbal exchanges with their babies when changing and feeding them (Tamis-LeMonda et al, 2013).
- Encourage fathers to take charge of their infants on their own: fathers who regularly spend time in 'sole charge' of their babies develop confidence and skills and interact with them in a much wider range of ways than other fathers (Pedersen et al, 1987). This is connected with very good outcomes for children, including higher school grades (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999).
- Consider using 'Hello Dad', a superb and inexpensive DVD resource designed to help dads connect with their babies, which can be purchased online from the [New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry](#) in Australia. Among other things, this demonstrates to fathers how to engage in 'mutual gaze' with their infants, and explains how this assists brain development.

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