

Daddy I Need You

*A Father's Guide to
Early Childhood Brain Development*

Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network
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Have you noticed all the buzz about early childhood development these days?

TV programs show amazing pictures of brain activity. Newspapers trumpet the latest findings about various factors and experiences that promote brain development in young children. Experts say things like, “The early years last forever.”

Companies offer parents all sorts of products and programs that are supposed to be good for brain development. They want to sell us language learning CDs for babies, activity gyms with all sorts of “stimulating” gadgets or videos that claim to stimulate brain development. They use names like Brainy Baby, Baby Einstein and Bright Tots.

It’s true that early childhood is a very important period with respect to brain growth and other aspects of child development. But a lot of what we hear is hype. If you take only one idea away from this booklet, let it be this: what your baby, and her developing brain, really needs is you – your care and the interaction you provide – not some special product.

If you’re reading this, you’ve already got what it takes to do a good job of helping your child grow and learn. You don’t have to be an expert. Fathers have a lot to offer their children. And we all have a lot to learn about kids.

This booklet will help you make sense of all the things you will hear about early childhood brain development and help you understand the role you can play in supporting your child’s development. Don’t worry, it’s simpler than you think.

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A Father's Guide to Early Childhood Brain Development

T a b l e o f C o n t e n t s

Chapter One

The Wonder of Your Baby's Brain

Baby brain basics; the importance of touch and other senses in early brain development; brain pathways and how they develop; why fathers are important; ten interesting facts about brain development.

Chapter Two

The Father-Child Connection

The role of early relationships in brain development; how fathers and babies connect with each other; dads and moms; ideas for connecting with young children of different ages.

Chapter Three

The Importance of Father Involvement in Daily Care

Why it's important for fathers to participate in baby care; the link between daily care and brain development; differences between mothers and fathers.

Chapter Four

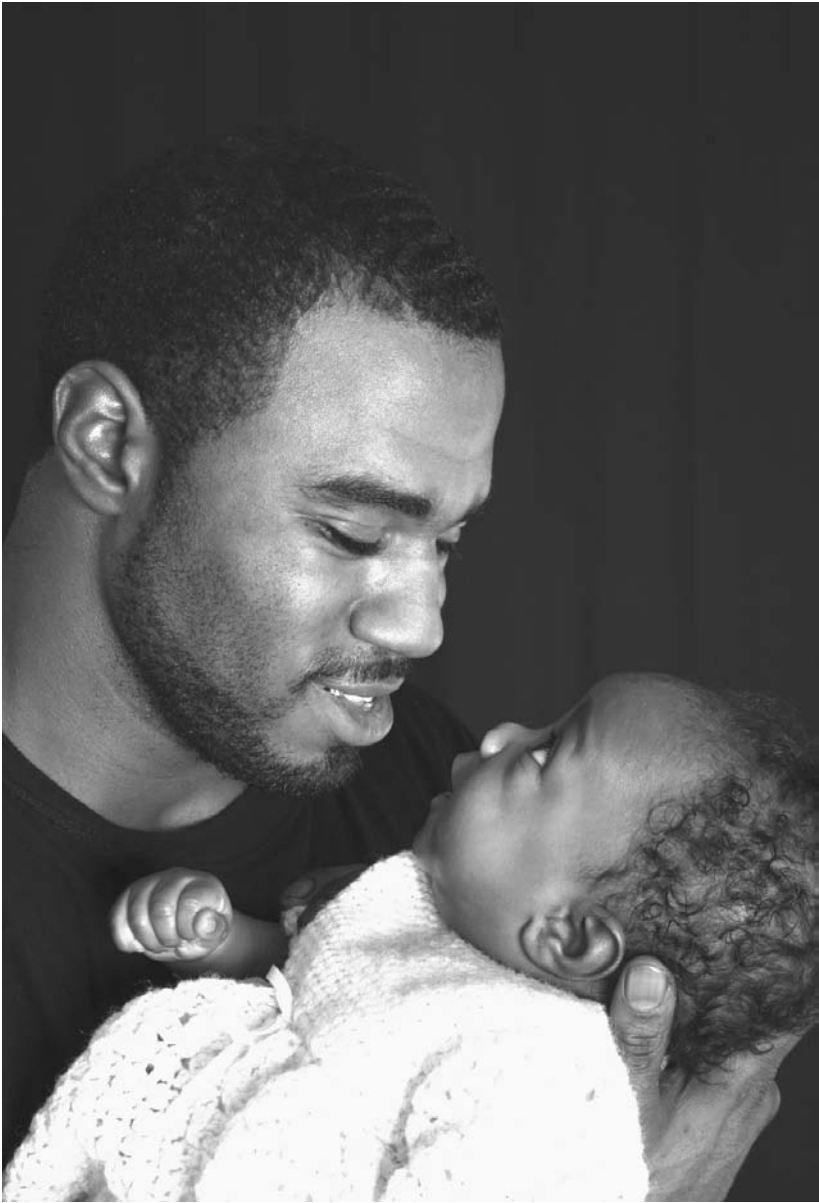
Supporting Your Child's Emotional Development

Comforting babies; how babies experience and learn about emotions; emotional development is different from child to child; tantrums; the connection between emotion and learning.

Chapter Five

Building Brains Through Play

The importance of floor time; a father's role in play; five ways that playing builds brains; various ways for fathers to be involved.



The Wonder of Your Baby's Brain

Jamal is looking down at the tiny baby lying in his arms. Little Miriam seems content at the moment, but her body is in constant movement. Her legs kick, her arms wave and her eyes dart about. "She's so small and totally helpless," Jamal thinks. He reaches down and takes her little hand between his thumb and his finger. She grasps his finger. "Hi baby girl," he says. "It's your Daddy. Daddy's talking to you." She turns her head towards him for a second and then looks away. It seems like she wants to look at everything at once. "I'd give anything to know what's going on inside that little head," he thinks.

Actually, a lot is happening inside Miriam's little head.

The day she was born, Miriam's head was half as big as her dad's head. But the brain inside that head was even smaller – only about a quarter the size of Jamal's brain.

That tiny brain, and all the little cells and connections inside it, will do a lot of growing in the first few years of life. By the time Miriam turns five her brain will have grown to 90 percent of its adult size.

But right now her brain, and its ability to think and make her body work, is not highly developed. That's one thing that makes humans different from other animals. Baby fish are born swimming. Calves and horses can stand very soon after they are born. Just days after birth, some animals who live in the wild must be able to run to keep up with the herd. Jamal's daughter won't be able to walk for almost a year. Other core abilities like talking in sentences or feeding herself will come a little later.

That's because most animals are born with brains that are almost fully developed. But a great deal of human brain growth takes place after birth. So early in life the human brain is nurtured "outside the womb." Experiences like being held, cuddled, fed, sung to and played with not only help a child survive and feel safe and secure, they help the brain to make the connections that will enable it to work properly and effectively. We're not talking about anything extraordinary or special, but simply the kind of interaction and stimulation that usually takes place naturally as parents care for and enjoy their babies.

Jamal has dreams for his daughter. He hopes they will have a special relationship. He wants Miriam to be an honest, caring person who gets along well with others. He hopes she'll do well in school. He wonders if she will find a sport or an art that she loves and is good at.

Jamal wants to be part of his daughter's learning. Jamal is an accountant. He looks forward to helping Miriam with her math homework someday. He loves long distance bicycling and pictures himself teaching Miriam to ride a two-wheeler. "When will she be ready to learn from me?" he wonders.

Jamal may not have figured it out yet, but his daughter is learning from him right now. Simple actions like lying in her father's arms, feeling the warmth of his body, hearing his voice and heartbeat send all sorts of information to Miriam's brain. That may not seem like learning, but it is.

Brain pathways and how they develop

One of the things a brain does as it matures is develop various pathways. Brain pathways are the networks of nerves and connections the brain uses to deal with information and experiences we have and to send signals to and from the body's different systems. They equip us to deal with the different situations we face in our lives, including learning and getting along with people. The brain continues to build and adjust pathways throughout childhood and even into adulthood.

The brain pathways that are most developed in Miriam right now are those that deal with her senses – touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Her brain has to develop ways of taking in and dealing with sensory information before it can develop the more sophisticated types of thinking required for talking, reading or solving problems.

So being with Dad or Mom is just what Miriam needs right now.

Jamal and his wife cannot control everything about Miriam's development. She was born with a huge set of genes, about 24,000 of them in every cell of her body. Half of her genes came from Mom, half from Dad, and they will have a big influence on how she turns out. Her genes will affect things like the colour of her eyes and hair, how tall she will be, whether she'll be shy or outgoing, what sorts of abilities and skills she might develop, and even her likelihood of developing certain diseases.

But genes don't tell the whole story. The environment a child grows up in – her family, her school, her friends and her childhood experiences – will all help to shape the kind of person she will become. We all know that. But the fascinating thing that scientists have discovered in recent years is that life experience, and especially early life experience, actually influences the way genes work.

Here's an example. People born with a certain version of one particular gene have a higher risk of developing depression as adults. But, researchers have found that when people with this gene receive normal good parenting and nurturing, the gene works in a different way, and they don't develop depression.

Does that seem intimidating? Does it make you wonder if every time you do something with your baby you've got to get it exactly right because her future health and brainpower is at stake?

It's not like that at all. The real problems in brain development occur when children are born with biological problems or when they are deprived of care and interaction with parents. The most important experiences for baby brain development are ordinary ones: being carried, fed, bathed, and diapered, playing peekaboo, going for a walk in a baby carrier or stroller, or having people say, "Hi, sweetie! What a beautiful baby you are."

Jamal is looking at an online toy catalogue. "There are so many amazing infant toys these days," he says. "They are all supposed to help brain development in some way. How do I figure out which ones to buy?"

Toys, books, special gadgets and structured learning activities or programs like toddler gymnastics or preschooler music can provide both fun and learning experiences. But fancy toys, videos, and specially designed mobiles are not the most important requirements for baby brain development. Babies' brains are especially well designed to get information from people. Nothing is more important for a young child than being with loving, nurturing parents and caregivers.

Why fathers are important

In the past we tended to think of looking after children mostly as Mom's job. And mothers certainly play a crucial role in early childhood. But fathers are important too – especially in today's world where most women work outside the home and fathers are needed to take on more of the day-to-day work of parenting.

Think about it. Isn't it better, when possible, to have more than one person who is good at caring for a young child? And any parent will most likely be a better one with the support of a partner he or she can count on to share the load of parenting. Most of today's mothers no longer have the networks of grandmothers, sisters and female friends that supported mothering in the past. Fathers are now needed to provide a lot of that vital support.

So it should come as no surprise that research is beginning to identify various ways that father involvement is beneficial for children. For example, father involvement has been linked to improved mental health, better ability to cope with stress, disappointment and frustration, even better grades in school.

Children can grow up successfully in many different family structures and circumstances. But the active involvement of a caring father offers kids a unique and rich source of the types of nurturing, interaction and stimulation that young developing brains need.

Summing up

In many ways children's brain growth is complicated. Scientists are only just starting to understand what goes on inside "that little head." But we do know enough to understand that the most important ways that fathers, and mothers, support early childhood development are fairly simple. And the key is the interaction and nurturing that takes place during everyday life as we care for, comfort, and play with our children.

Ten Interesting Facts About Brain Development

- The brain can send signals to various parts of the body at a speed of 200 miles per hour.
- A baby's brain typically comes prepared to make connections that will help him deal with almost any situation he experiences regularly.
- Everything in a baby's environment contributes to brain development in one way or another – sound, light, the touch, voice and smell of a parent, changes in temperature, even feelings of hunger or pain.
- At birth, a baby's ability to see is not fully developed. A baby sees objects best when they are about 10 to 18 inches away, which is about the distance her face is from yours when you hold her in your arms.
- Research has shown that singing captures a baby's attention more than normal talking does.
- By age three months, most babies will make a sound or gesture and wait for your reaction. This is the first step towards having a conversation.
- A recent study found no benefits of watching so-called “smart baby” videos. In fact, babies who did not watch videos developed language a little more quickly than babies who watched videos and television.
- At around eight months a baby will look for a toy hidden behind your back. A younger baby will not do this because she cannot hold the idea of an object in her head unless she can see it.
- At age three, a child's brain has twice as many connections as an adult brain. One key part of brain development in childhood is getting rid of connections the brain doesn't need.
- A child's brain development continues into early adulthood.

The Father-Child Connection

Just about everything you could ever want to accomplish as a parent is tied to the relationship you have with your child. Whether you want to encourage good behaviour and judgement, teach skills or pass on good values, you won't get far if you and your child don't feel a sense of connection.

And guess what? Research shows that early relationships, particularly those with parents, play a very important role in early brain development. Little brains need to be able to interact with people and the world around them. They do this best with those they love, trust and depend on.

Building a relationship starts as soon as your baby feels real to you. Some fathers say they feel connected to their children before they are born. However, in order to build a true relationship fathers and babies have to get to know each other and that takes time and touch. Remember, the first brain pathways to develop are those that involve the senses. Touch is particularly important, not just for babies, for parents as well. One reason mothers bond with their babies so quickly is that they touch and hold their babies more often than fathers. Anything you do that involves touching your baby, such as a diaper change, will help you get to know each other.



Getting started

“Before Gabriel was born I was really nervous about babies. I never wanted to hold someone else’s baby. The first time I held Gabriel I didn’t want to rely on just my hands and arms. I used my body too. I was surprised at how quickly it started to feel natural. The way I usually held Gabriel was almost like a football. He’d be lying along my arm with his cheek on my forearm and his face looking out. My one hand would be between his legs with the other one on his back. A lot of the time my other hand would be sort of wrapped around his face and he’d be sucking on my finger. He really seemed to like having my hand against his cheek.”

Finding a way of holding his baby that feels best is as important for Justin as it is for little Gabriel. Getting connected is as much about you learning how to be with your baby as it is about him bonding with you.

Dads and moms

Fathers are quite capable of doing most things that mothers do with babies and children, but mothers and fathers are different, especially in early parenthood. For one thing, mothers get a head start. Pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding give mothers and babies a biological connection. Then mothers usually spend more time with babies, develop baby care skills more quickly and become the one who is in charge. So new fathers who want to connect with their babies and develop parenting skills usually have some catching up to do.

In the past this didn’t matter very much because women did most of the caring for children. But now, most fathers want to participate in the care of their children, and, in families with both a mother and a father, women need and expect their partners to be involved. This is a good thing for men, but sharing the territory of early parenting is not always easy.

“You could definitely say that Carole and I had different priorities about dressing our kids. Usually I would just grab whatever shirt and pants I could find. I didn’t worry too much about how well things went together. She didn’t always comment. Sometimes she would just look at Adam and shake her head. I remember one time she said, “Don’t you have any fashion sense at all? Nobody wears vertical stripes and horizontal stripes at the same time.”

Most couples who want to share caring for young children, including same sex couples, will have to find their own ways to negotiate little issues like what’s the “right” way to dress a baby or spoon baby food into her mouth. But, in general, men need to keep a few things in mind.

- Women come to parenthood expecting to be “in charge.” They feel the 24-hour load of parenting responsibility more strongly than fathers, and when something needs to be done with a child, mothers usually act more quickly.
- Fathering is less automatic than mothering. Dads need to make more of a conscious effort to become involved with children.
- Mothers have a fair bit of influence on relationships between fathers and children. Father involvement works best with Mom’s support.
- It may take time for your partner to get used to having you – or anyone else for that matter – look after her baby. You need chances to develop your own skills, but try to respect her skills and judgement about baby care and be prepared to learn from her.
- Mother/child relationships are very important to both moms and kids. Support their relationship, but make sure you get enough time with the children to build your own.

Celine is climbing up her dad. The three-year-old does this almost every day. They stand facing each other, holding hands. Celine puts her feet on top of Dad's feet, leans back and starts to walk up his legs. Gaetan holds his daughter's hands firmly and braces himself as she climbs. She keeps going right up to his neck and then she flips over and hangs for a few seconds until he lowers her gently to the floor. She scrambles up with a smile, grabs her Dad's hands and says, "Again!"

Many people believe that this kind of rough and tumble father/child play is good for children. It helps them figure out what their bodies can and can't do, helps them learn to make judgements about risks, and gives them a different kind of stimulation that they don't get as often from their mothers. But the most important thing about physical, active father/child play is that Dads and kids both enjoy it and it helps them feel connected. Anything you and your kids like to do together helps to build your relationship – painting, playing catch, going for walks, washing the car, shopping, or cuddling up on the couch with a stack of books. And if you like to wrestle and roll around, go for it!

Building connections

The key to a strong father/child bond is doing things together. Here are some ways to connect with children at various ages.

With Babies: (age 0 to 1)

Care time: Caring for a baby is the single most important thing you can do to get to know her. These everyday tasks take up a big part of a baby's day. So in the first year, a father who is not involved in daily care won't spend very much time with his baby.

Quiet time: Sometimes fathers have to hold unhappy babies. Babies need lots of comforting, so do your share. But make sure you also get chances to hold your baby when she's quiet and happy. It's a whole different experience, and it helps you see that baby care isn't just work. Sometimes it feels good too.

Dad's special time: Sometimes mothers become so good at caring for babies that fathers find it hard to get involved. You may wonder, "How can I do it as well as her?" Look for one area where you can be in charge. Some fathers become the bath guy, others take the early morning shift, and some become the one who usually wears the baby carrier when the family goes out.

With Toddlers: (age 1 to 2 1/2)

Floor time: Get down on the floor and play. Help him build a fort out of couch cushions and blankets, play hide and seek, build a farm for his animals, or just do whatever he wants to do.

Story time: Snuggle up and read a book. Take your time and talk about the pictures. Children who are read to a lot usually become good readers. But story time is also a great way to be together.

Cuddle time: Toddlers sometimes have tough days where everything seems to go wrong and they get upset easily. One of the best ways to handle a day like this is to give your toddler some of your time. Carry or hold him if that's what he wants. Your presence and physical contact can help him settle down.

With Preschoolers: (age 2 ½ to 4)

Play time: Quality time with your child need not be a special outing or activity. Usually, little kids are as happy digging in the dirt or playing games with Dad as they are going to a movie or special event, especially if the child gets to choose the activity.

Outdoor time: Outdoor play gives kids much-needed exercise and lets them burn off energy without bothering anybody. And most fathers like to be outdoors. So go to the playground, collect some rocks or wildflowers, or just kick a soccer ball around the yard.

Make-believe time: Most preschoolers love to pretend. Keep a box of dress-up clothes – costumes left-over from Halloween or Mom and Dad's cast off clothes. Get dressed up and act out a story together. They'll think you're hilarious.

The Importance of Father Involvement in Daily Care

Yuan just changed his first diaper. “That wasn’t such a big deal,” he thought. But getting Lily’s sleeper on was another story. He couldn’t believe how hard it was to get her kicking legs through the legs of the sleeper. Then her little arm didn’t seem to bend the right way to get into the arm hole. “I’m not sure how much I can bend it without hurting her,” he wondered. Finally he got one hand in. But her fingers kept sticking out and getting caught in the fabric. He tried to reach into the tiny sleeve to pull Lily’s hand through. “How does Maria get this done so fast?”

There is only one way to become good at looking after babies. You can read all the instructions and articles you want, but basically you’ve just got to get in there and do it.

You won’t do everything perfectly at first. That’s OK. Nobody does. Even mothers, who often seem so magically skilled to us, have to learn how to look after babies. It just takes practice.

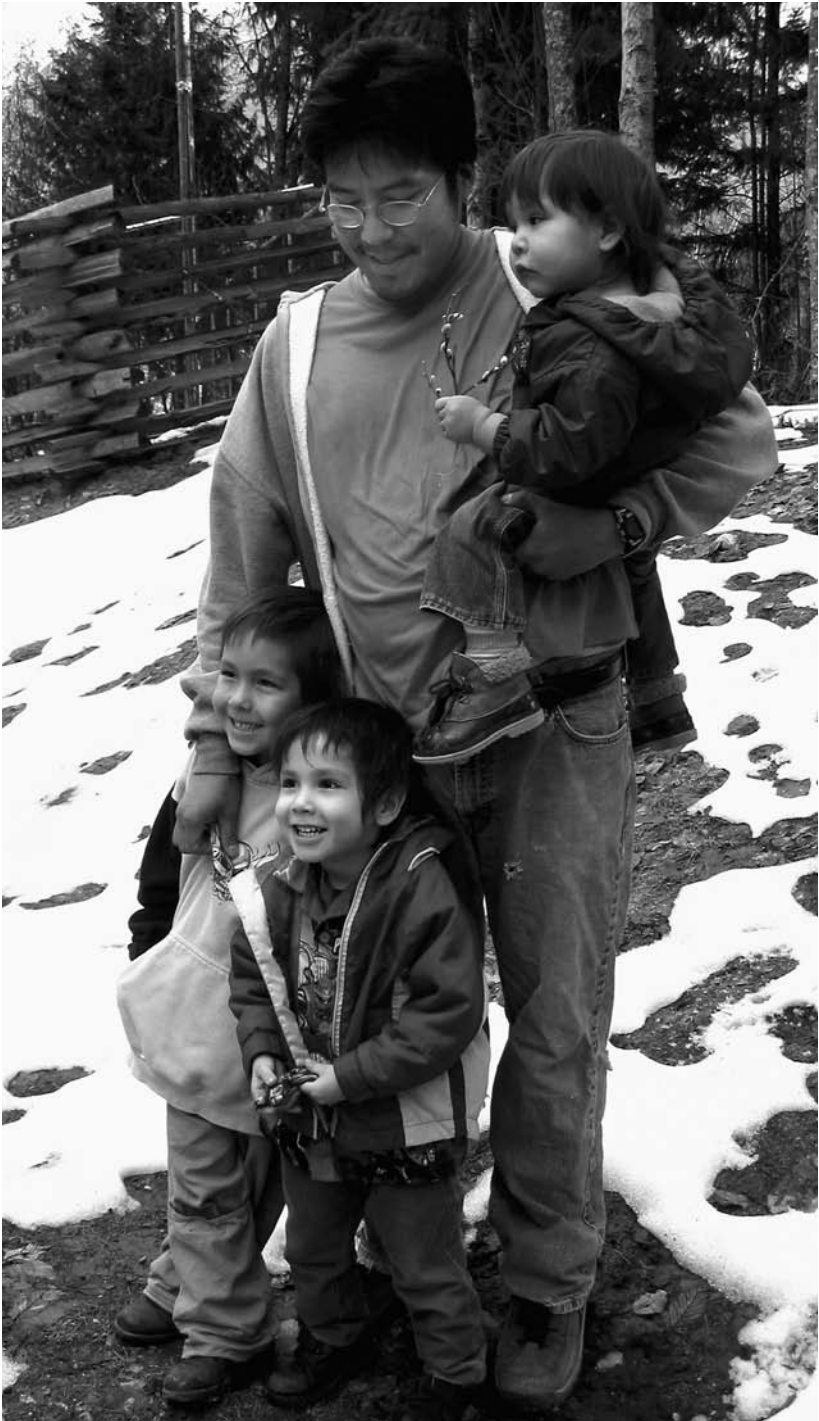


Photo by Jessica Ball. Thank you to the Bruyere family.

Caregiving means interaction

Obviously being well cared for is central to a baby's well-being from moment to moment. But there's more to it than that. When you dress your baby in a fresh sleeper at bedtime, you don't just put it on her. Well, OK, maybe sometimes you do. But more often you look her in the eye. You talk to her. You make faces and funny sounds – anything that gets a reaction from her. You smile. She smiles back. That's a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication between you and her brain.

Manuel and his partner have two children under the age of three, so bath time requires both parents. After the bath Manuel wraps 10-month-old Miguel in a hooded baby towel and takes him into the bedroom to get ready for bed. Manuel pulls out a fresh diaper and puts it on Miguel's head. "Is this where the diaper goes?" Miguel stares at his Dad for a second. Manuel smiles. Miguel giggles and waves his arms. Later Manuel puts Miguel's sleeper on his own head and holds up the legs. "I'm a bunny," he says, and starts hopping around. Miguel giggles again.

These little interactions happen naturally as we look after babies. It's one of the ways kids learn to communicate with people. These encounters also provide some of the sensory stimulation little brains need to grow.

Caregiving means touching

Another cool thing about baby care is that, no matter what the task is – a bath, a comforting cuddle, a feeding – it involves touching. Physical contact with parents is very, very important, not just for babies, but for older children as well. Surely you've seen how even 10-year-olds feel the need to plaster themselves up against Dad or Mom sometimes.

There was a time, not so long ago, when some experts thought babies should be trained not to be too dependent on parents. They advised mothers not to respond too quickly when a baby cried and told them that babies could become spoiled if parents held them too much.

About 30 years ago people began to realize that this approach was wrong and they developed the slogan, “You can’t spoil a baby.” Recent research has shown that this is even more true than we thought. It’s true that babies who are held a lot usually like it and will want to be held. But that’s OK, because it’s good for them. Being touched, held, carried, stroked, massaged, even simply sleeping on your chest gives babies stimulation that contributes directly to the development of brain pathways. In particular, touch influences the growth of the pathways that enable people to deal with stress and strong feelings throughout their lives.

“Sarah always seemed to like to have my hand right up against her cheek,” says Misha. Sometimes I’d hold her in front of me, sort of sitting on my arm facing out. I used to cup her chin with my hand with my fingers up against her cheek. If she was starting to fuss this would often calm her down. I was always amazed that such a simple thing helped her feel better.”

Sarah is pretty lucky that her dad has been able to figure out what she needs and how to give it to her. This is an important part of becoming a good caregiver. The more he does it, the better he’ll be at caring for her and the more he’ll enjoy it. And if he can learn how to read and respond to the signals Sarah gives him, chances are he’ll give her lots of brain-building interaction and stimulation without even really thinking about it.

Are moms and dads different?

Ram and Marla both play with Vijay when they change his diaper. Marla likes to sing nursery rhymes and walk her fingers up Vijay's belly and then tickle him under the chin. Ram sometimes rubs his nose on Vijay's belly. He has facial hair, so it tickles. When Vijay was an infant he found this almost overwhelming. He'd hold his breath, grab his Dad's head and hold on for dear life. Sometimes it seemed a little rough to Marla, but she noticed that Vijay never cried when Ram did this. "I guess he's learning how to deal with two different people," she says.

Mothers and fathers who share the care of their children usually discover fairly quickly that they have different ways of doing it. And research has found these differences too. Mothers tend to be more verbal (they use more words and have more conversations) and they tend to be more protective than fathers. Dads, on the other hand, tend to be less verbal, more physical and more inclined to encourage children to explore and take little risks.

This doesn't mean that fathers can't be verbal or nurturing with their kids or that mothers never get physical or act goofy. But these differences exist to some extent in most couples. What do they mean?

It seems likely that dealing with different types of input from Dad and Mom, (or from two Dads or two Moms) is a useful learning experience for children, but nobody can say that these differences are "necessary" or "highly important" for brain development. What is important is for parenting partners to understand and respect each other's parenting style, so they can co-parent effectively.

The bottom line

Whether you and your partner's styles are very similar or quite different, your child will benefit from being able to count on more than one person to meet his needs. That's one important reason to become a good caregiver.

Another advantage is that your participation in caring for your children takes some of the load off of your partner. Mothers who are not stressed out and overburdened probably do a better job of mothering. That's got to be good for a kid's brain development too.

Being a good father-caregiver is important in many ways. So, start now. Don't wait until your child needs to be taught how to tie his shoes or shovel the driveway to start doing your share.

Supporting Your Child's Emotional Development

Fernand will never forget the first time Sylvie left him alone with Chantal. The baby was about 10 weeks old. Twenty minutes after Sylvie left, Chantal started crying – really crying – so hard that she couldn't catch her breath at times. "Nothing worked," Fernand remembers. "I tried getting her to suck on my finger. I rocked her. I put on some music and walked the floor. I tried leaving her in her crib. I pushed her around the house in the carriage. Finally I was sort of jiggling her up and down as I held her against me. All of a sudden she stopped crying and went limp against my body. It happened so fast it scared me for a second. Then I realized she had just fallen asleep."

Comforting babies and young children is something parents do over and over again. It's not always easy – sometimes it seems impossible – but helping children deal with emotions is one of the most important things that parents do.

Here are two “big ideas” for this chapter, right off the top. One becomes obvious to most parents fairly quickly. Young children need lots and lots of help to deal with emotions. Basically, they can't do it without us.

The other big idea is that the pathways the brain constructs to help us deal with emotions are a foundation for later pathways that govern higher level thinking such as reading, learning various skills, learning right from wrong and feeling empathy for others.

In other words, basic parental actions like comforting babies, smiling at them and reassuring them when they are fearful, not only help kids to feel OK, they also support their overall brain development in important ways.

Babies can't deal with emotions on their own

Have you ever seen a five-month-old baby smile with his whole body? His arms wave, his belly wriggles, his legs kick and he grins so hard it looks like his face might crack. How can you not smile back at him?

But when a baby is really upset, his body tenses up, and he seems to put every ounce of energy into his cry. He has no ability to make sense of how he feels. You know he won't cry forever. But he doesn't. You need to teach him that bad feelings end and good feelings come back and you do that by giving him the repeated experience of being comforted.

Everything children learn about emotions – how to recover from feeling bad, how to control emotions when you need to, and how to deal with other people's feelings – depends on interacting with people. Think about it. Just about all of a baby's early interactions are emotional. She's upset, you pick her up, she feels better. She looks you in the eye, that makes you smile. Even if she's too young to smile back you your baby will still notice the change in your facial expression that signals what you are feeling. Young children also pick up emotional signals in our body language and tone of voice. Eventually, they connect the words we say with these signals. That's how children begin to learn about emotions from parents.



Emotions are part of life

Prakash's girls are both wailing. Tabitha (age three), grabbed Vandi's doll and then Vandi hit Tabitha. His partner takes Vandi (age two) aside, while Prakash picks up Tabitha and takes her to another room. She buries her face in his chest while he talks to her quietly and rubs her back. "That really hurt, didn't it?" After a few minutes, Tabitha calms down and Prakash takes her into the play room. "Let's go see what Barney's doing right now," he says. (Barney is Tabitha's stuffed dinosaur.) "Does he want to look at a book?" Tabitha nods her head, while clutching Barney. She picks a book and they settle down for a story.

Helping kids learn to deal with bad feelings doesn't mean you have to make sure your children never feel unhappy or that when they do you have to make it better instantly. And it doesn't mean that parents must never do anything that upsets their children. Negative emotions – anger, sadness, frustration, fear and uneasiness – are part of life. All emotions serve a purpose. Fear can keep kids from getting hurt (sometimes). Guilt tells us we've done something wrong. Our job is to be there to help kids understand bad feelings, provide comfort and, gradually, to help them learn how to cope on their own. The brain pathways that help people cope with stress and strong emotions continue to develop throughout childhood.

Different kids, different feelings

Children were definitely not created equal when it comes to handling emotion.

Some are emotionally reactive – they get upset more easily and often and they are harder to calm down than other kids. No one knows exactly why some kids are like this while others get upset less often and are easier to calm. But research has shown that children are born with different temperaments – sets of personality traits – which appear to be hard-wired. That is, easy-going people tend to be that way for their whole lives and the same goes for emotionally reactive people. However, the

nurturing they get as young children can make a difference. Neglect and abuse can make a calm child into an anxious or angry teenager. And emotionally reactive children can learn to handle their emotions, or not, depending on the experiences they have during childhood.

The important thing to know is that the kids who get upset more easily aren't "bad" (though they can be very frustrating at times). But it takes them longer to develop the brain pathways that help them cope with frustration, anger and other strong feelings. Therefore they need more help from us – more patience, more comforting and more emotional support. Our job is not to change children's personalities, but to provide the care, support and discipline that works for a child's temperament.

Tantrums

Temper tantrums are a very challenging part of children's emotional development. Most kids have them, some more than others. Here are some key ideas about tantrums.

- A tantrum is an emotional melt-down caused by extreme frustration, stress or tiredness. It's not a child trying to be manipulative. Sometimes strong surges of emotion are just too much for an immature brain to handle.
- Tantrums themselves are not a discipline issue. In the middle of a tantrum a child needs understanding and support, not punishment or anger. If there is a behaviour problem, talk about it after the child calms down.
- The best way to deal with tantrums is to prevent them. Try to avoid long shopping trips when your child is tired and hungry. Watch for signs of kids being frustrated, overstimulated, upset by a change in routine or oncoming illness, and deal with them before your child blows up.
- Most children grow out of tantrums gradually.

The fun part of emotional support

Kids have to learn about positive feelings too. In many ways children learn about feelings by using us as a mirror. They see their feelings reflected in our facial expressions and tone of voice.

That doesn't mean we have to make our kids happy all the time, or that we can never let them see us be sad or angry. But try to share in your child's good feelings. When she expresses happiness, interest or excitement, pay attention, listen and enjoy it with her.

The hidden bonus

Here's a cool new discovery about children's emotional development. In the past, people thought of emotion and intelligence as separate things. They thought emotion got in the way of rational thinking. But as scientists learn more about how the brain works, it's becoming clear that emotion and intelligence are actually linked. When you think about it, every idea has an emotional component. Here's an example.

Dad is reading the paper. Eleven-month-old Chad, who can walk, but isn't talking yet, comes over and pulls on Dad's pants. Dad lowers the paper and says, "Hey buddy, what's up?" Chad starts babbling and pointing. He pulls even harder on Dad's sleeve. Dad stands up and Chad starts pulling him towards the kitchen. Dad follows until Chad stops at the cupboard where the cookies are kept. He looks at the cupboard, then at his Dad. He keeps babbling. Finally Dad laughs, opens the cupboard and takes down the cookie tin. The look on Chad's face is an amazing mixture of pride and joy.

Chad definitely had an idea, didn't he? The emotional part was that he liked cookies. It felt good to eat them. That feeling drove him to act, to figure out how to tell his dad, without words, what he wanted. Such feelings are part of what makes children want to learn and explore new ideas.

So, by supporting your child's emotional growth, you're also building his ability to learn and think intelligently.

Five ways to support emotional development

- Comfort kids when they are upset. But realize that you can't control their feelings.
- Allow them to feel the way they feel. Try not to say things like, "Don't be silly!" to a child who is angry, afraid or sad.
- Use feeling words when children are emotional. "You're really frustrated, aren't you?" "I can tell you're really excited about seeing your cousins."
- Be patient. Children learn to handle emotion very gradually. They will also be inconsistent. At times their emotional responses may seem quite mature. Other times, they will be immature.
- Model good emotional management. Children learn a lot from the way we handle emotions. When you are upset with your child, say, "That made me really angry. I can't talk to you for a few minutes," rather than, "See what you did, you little jerk?"



Building Brains Through Play

Jorge is sitting on the living room floor playing dolls with his daughter Rosa. He doesn't have much experience with dolls, but he's learning. One way he participates is by asking Rosa questions.

"Where did Chloe sleep last night? With you or in her doll house?" he asks. "She likes to sleep in the doll house, Daddy," says Rosa. "How's Chloe feeling today?" Jorge asks. "She has a little cough," Rosa replies. "Now it's time for her to get dressed."

"What skirt does she want to wear today?" asks Jorge. Rosa picks out a red skirt. Jorge looks through Rosa's assortment of doll clothes. "Does she want yellow shirt today?" Rosa laughs, "Daddy, it's a blouse, not a shirt." "Oh, right," says Jorge. He watches his daughter put the "blouse" on. "Do you think she needs a sweater today?" They continue until it's time for breakfast.

This father is doing a lot of good things here. For starters he's playing with his daughter. That's a great way to interact with her and it's good for their relationship.

Next, Jorge is down on the floor involved with an activity Rosa has chosen. He's helping her have fun, but here's the key part – he's letting Rosa lead the play. He's paying attention and responding to what she seems to be interested in doing. This kind of father participation in play helps kids develop the ability

to take initiative in their own learning - something that will benefit a child throughout life.

Here are some of the ways that play is good for children's brain development.

Play gets the brain working

André is doing some tummy time with four-month-old Scott. André holds out a rattle and shakes it to get Scott's attention. Scott raises his head and stares at the rattle. He reaches for it but he can't reach very far. Scott gets tired and lowers his head. André shakes the rattle again. When Scott looks at it André puts the rattle down on the floor and holds it in place within Scott's reach. Scott reaches out, wraps his fingers around the rattle and pulls it to his mouth.

One of the important things about play is that it gets kids interested. When Scott sees and hears the rattle it gets his brain going. That interest is what leads children to reach for a mobile, roll a ball or open a book to see what pictures are inside. They want to know what the picture looks like. What happens when they drop the ball on the floor? This kind of thinking seems simple, but actually it's an early version of the kind of thinking children do in school.

Play helps develop language skills

We all know that reading and writing are crucial skills for school and life success. So it's important to introduce children to books in the first year of life. But did you know that some of the earliest literacy development has nothing to do with books, letters or words on a page? It takes place as a baby or toddler watches her parents speak. Gradually, without really being aware of it, her brain starts to connect the sounds she hears with the movements of her parents' lips.

Before they can read, children need to hear all the sounds of their language over and over again. That's why the little tickle and rhyming games that parents have played with children for years are so great. A game like "This little piggy went to market," gets a baby or toddler's attention and it's fun. They also help kids connect sounds with words. That helps prepare them for reading.

Joe has discovered that his three-year-old loves rhymes. They have a little game where Jennifer says a word and Joe makes up a little rhyme about it. Jennifer points to her tummy. "My tummy is yummy!" says Joe. Jennifer smiles and points to her head. "My head is red and I have to go to bed!" says Joe. Jennifer touches her nose. "Nose!" she says. "My nose is a hose and it glows." Jennifer laughs. "Elbow!" she cries. Joe makes a face. "My elbow is a, um, um, um...schnelbow!" Jennifer laughs. "Schnelbow, schnelbow, schnelbow!" she says.

Books are important too

"I've got three different ways of reading to Armin," says Matthias. "Sometimes it's about being close to me. When he's stressed out he wants to cuddle up with a book and feel me against him. Other times he wants to point to the pictures, talk about them and ask questions. So we might spend 15 minutes and only look at one book. Other times he comes over with a stack of books and wants me to just go through them one after the other."

It's great that Matthias reads to Armin, but what's really great is that he has learned to read in different ways depending on what his son needs at the time.

Play can be a way for a child to participate in life

Children have a natural hunger to experience and understand the world. Copying or helping adults is a kind of play for preschoolers. It helps them learn as they experiment and try out ideas. It also helps them to feel part of the "real" world.

Steve is trying to plant some shrubs. The job is going a little slow because, Madeline, his toddler bundle of energy, wants to be right on top of what Steve is doing. It's all he can do to keep her out of the holes he's digging. He picks her up and takes her over to get her toy wheelbarrow. "Maddie, I need your help with the rocks." Steve puts two rocks – ones small enough for Maddie to handle – in the wheelbarrow. "Can you take these rocks and put them over by the gate?" He points to the other side of the yard. Maddie eagerly delivers the rocks and comes toddling back, looking pleased. "Great!" says Steve. "Now can you take these ones way over there?" He points to the far corner of the yard." Steve keeps Maddie busy "helping" "him" until he gets his bushes planted.

Play provides opportunities for problem-solving and learning

One of our jobs as a parent is teacher. We teach kids how to get dressed, brush their teeth, cross the road safely and be polite. We show them what to do and say "OK, now you try it." Then we watch them try, praise their success and correct their mistakes.

But children do a lot of learning on their own, and the older they get, the more important this becomes. And even when we teach them, most learning requires kids to take a little "learning leap." They must put ideas together, make sense of them and draw a conclusion or decide what to do. We can help and guide children as they learn but we cannot make these leaps for them.

Nelson remembers trying to teach Gareth to skate backwards. "I spent a lot of time working on it with him, but I got nowhere. He'd stand there and wiggle his skates but he didn't move at all. To tell you the truth he didn't seem all that interested. Then, the following year, Gareth started organized hockey. One day, I got home from work and he dragged me out to our backyard rink. 'Watch this Dad,' he said. "And sure enough, he could skate backwards. I guess it didn't mean all that much to him until he started hockey and saw some other kids doing it."

In order to take that final step towards skating backwards, Gareth had to pull together everything he knew and then go for it. Playing when he was little helped prepare him to do that. As preschoolers play they have to make all sorts of little decisions. “Where should I try putting this puzzle piece?” “How can I see which toy Daddy is hiding behind his back?” “What colour of marker should I use for my flower?” These are a child’s first learning leaps, made as they do things like building zoos for their toy animals, blowing bubbles, climbing playground structures and playing catch.

Don’t forget that play is supposed to be fun

Just because children learn through play doesn’t mean that we have to turn play time into a string of structured learning opportunities. Wouldn’t you have hated that when you were a kid?

Some children’s lives are fairly programmed between day care, school, after-school programs, lessons, sports and other activities. Kids need times when they can do what ever they please, even if it’s something silly like crashing two cars together over and over again. They learn from everything they see, hear and do, including play. But above all, play is one of the things that makes childhood enjoyable and interesting. They say play is a child’s work. Yeah, but it’s also their fun.

Final Thoughts

People are as important as toys

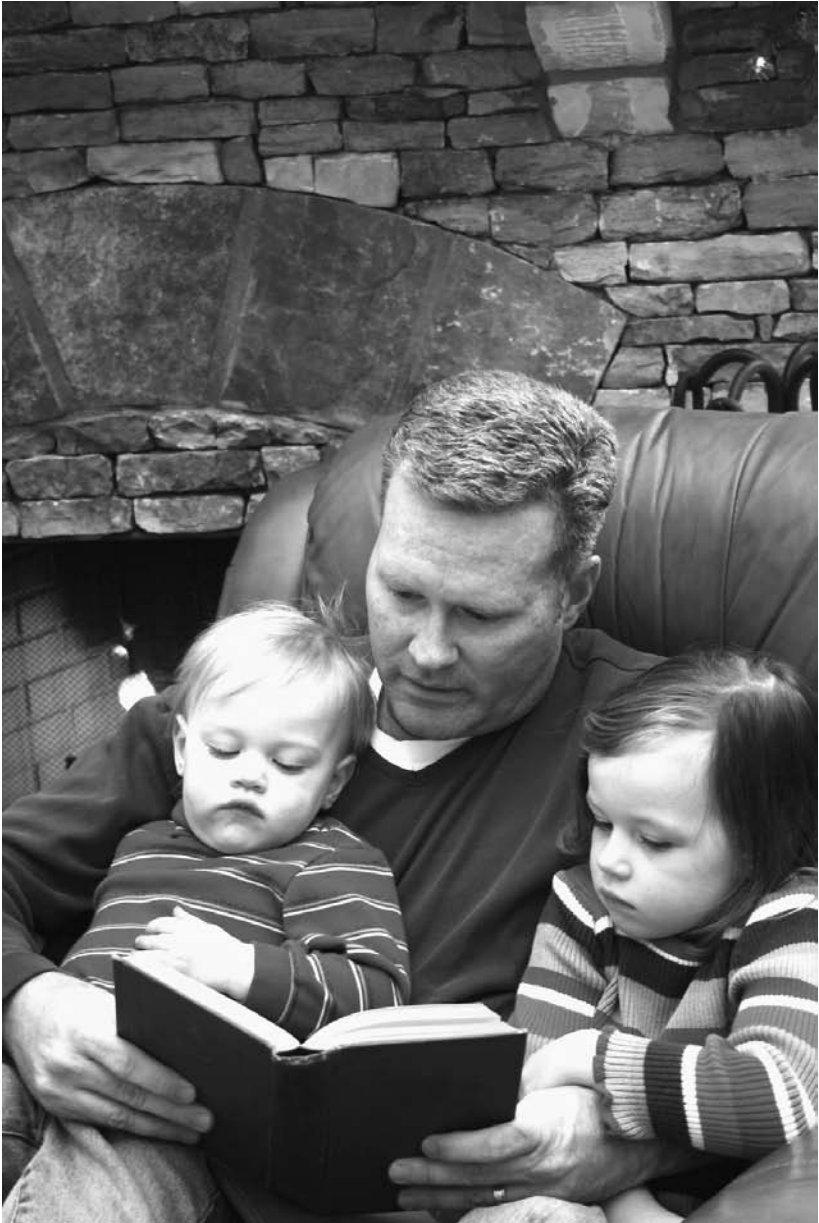
Did you notice that in this whole discussion of early childhood brain development there was very little mention of computers, videos, educational toys and classes for preschoolers? Most children are exposed to those products now. Kids enjoy them and learn from them. But products and gadgets are not the most critical contributors to children's brain development. People are the most important, especially parents.

More is not always better

If something is good for a child it doesn't necessarily follow that more and more and more and more of it is better. That includes parent/child interaction. You don't have to be in your baby's face every minute. In fact, your child wouldn't want it. Children need normal kinds of interaction rather than unusual or extraordinary amounts of it. They also need time to play on their own. Parents need time to do adult things too. It's OK to read the paper or watch the hockey game sometimes while your child does something else. Sometimes you just go shopping and you lug your kid around with you because you have to get it done. Children need to experience real life and it's not always amazing, fascinating and highly educational. Sometimes life is just ordinary.

There's more to kids than brains

We've focused on brain development here but, you know what? Even if this had been a booklet just about how to be a plain old good dad, we would have said a lot of the same things. If you can build relationships with your children, care for them, provide emotional support and play with them, chances are you'll be part of all kinds of rich brain building experiences. And you'll be an involved, caring dad too.



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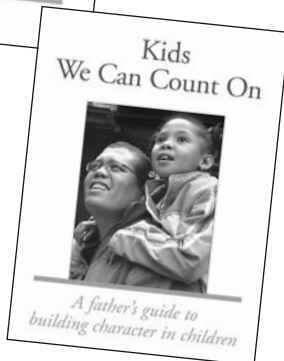
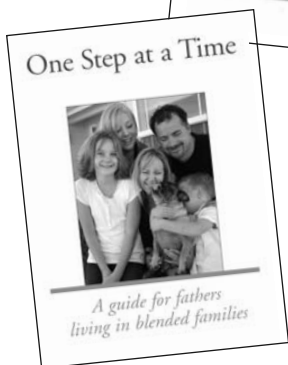
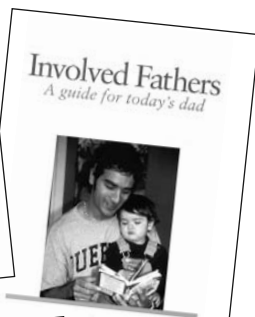
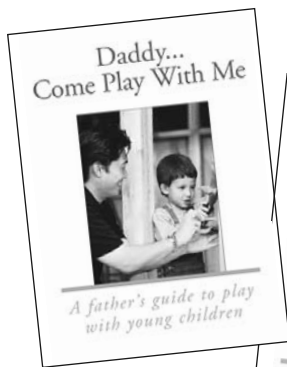
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