

The Hidden Benefits of Being an Involved Father¹

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Overview

Most people agree that having an involved father has obvious benefits to children. Many of us have either read newspapers or seen TV programs that talk about the clear benefits of fathers being involved in raising a child by providing love, support, and comfort. We can probably also agree that fathers are important because they help to teach children values and lessons in solving the problems they may face. Fathers also serve as role models in their children's lives, affecting how well their children relate to peers and adults outside the home.

Before you think "*wait a minute, what about mothers?*" tell yourself that it's not a question of who is more important: mothers or fathers. The point is that having both parents involved in rearing their child has some obvious, and some maybe not-so-obvious, benefits for the child, the family, and for fathers themselves.

Over the past twenty years, as more mothers entered the workforce, so happened a dramatic increase in fathers being involved in their child's lives. Father involvement is motivated by dad's sense of skills, self-confidence, social support, and

community and cultural practices (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

Benefits for Children

When we talk about the benefits of being an involved father, we most often focus on the benefits that children receive from such a relationship. It makes a lot of sense to focus on children. After all, being an involved father means being actively involved in nearly every aspect of your child's life (Marsiglio et al., 2000), from direct interaction (play) and responsibility for childcare, to making oneself available to his child (Palkovitz, 2002).

Also, the benefits of having a father involved in raising his children are pretty clear. Researchers have been studying this issue for decades. For instance, did you know...?

- Fathers' interaction with babies (engaging in cognitively stimulating activities, emotional warmth, physical care) reduced their infants' chances of experiencing cognitive delay.
- Babies as young as three months old can tell the difference between their mother and father. They

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can tell by the way each speaks to them, holds them, and by their different smells.

- Children whose fathers are involved in rearing them ("sensitive and responsive fathering") fare better on cognitive tests and in language ability than those with less responsive or involved fathers.
- Improved cognitive abilities are associated with higher educational achievement. In fact, fathers who are involved in their children's schools and academic achievement, regardless of their own educational level, are increasing the chances their child will graduate from high school, and perhaps go to vocational school, or even to college.
- A fathers' involvement in children's school activities protects at-risk children from failing or dropping out.
- Positive father involvement decreased boys' problem behaviors (especially boys with more challenging temperaments) and better mental health for girls.
- Fathers who are more involved with their children tend to raise children who experience more success in their career.
- Fathers being involved in their children's lives protects against risk factors that pose harm for children (such as problematic behavior, maternal depression and family economic hardship).
- Father involvement is associated with promoting children's social and language skills.
- Involved fathering is related to lower rates of child problem behaviors, including hyperactivity, as well as reduced teen violence, delinquency, and other problems with the law.
- Father involvement is associated with positive child characteristics such as increased: empathy, self-esteem, self-control, feelings of ability to achieve, psychological well-being, social competence, life skills, and less sex-stereotyped beliefs.
- Children in foster care who have involved fathers are more likely to be reunited with their families and experience shorter stays in foster homes.
- Children who grow up in homes with involved fathers are more likely to take an active and positive role in raising their own families. For example, fathers who recall a secure, loving relationship with both parents are more involved in the lives of their infants and more supportive to their wives.
- Both men and women who remember having loving, supportive fathers had high life satisfaction and self-esteem.
- Educational programs that successfully increased father involvement produced positive changes in children's behavior.

(Facts gathered from: Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Chang et al., 2008; Flouri, 2008; Lamb & Lewis, 2004; Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Sarkadi et al., 2008)

Benefits for Children with Nonresidential Fathers

Along these same lines, the involvement of nonresidential fathers (fathers who don't live in the same home as their child) seems to be particularly important.

Did you know that children who grow up with non-resident but involved fathers (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008; King, 1994):

- report having better, more nurturing relationships with their fathers as young adults than their peers who grew up with less involved non-resident fathers
- tend to get higher grades than those without involved fathers
- seem to have better social skills; can make friends more easily and handle difficult social situations better

- tend to have fewer behavioral problems; in fact, even when not living with their children and their children's mother, fathers who were actively involved with their children kept them from getting involved in problem behaviors as teens
- have fewer mental health problems as adults (especially true for daughters)

Benefits for the Family

The family benefits from having an involved father. These benefits come from having loving and nurturing relationships among family members, not only between parents and children, but between a spouse, partner, or relative. Being involved in caring, not only for the child, but for the family can bring greater harmony and fewer arguments. The family tends to enjoy their time together more.

Did you know that involved fathering is related to these benefits?

- better communication between fathers and family members
- a greater sense of commitment to the family
- less troubling conflict with teenage children

And parent training programs (like those offered through Cooperative Extension) that included fathers as well as mothers yielded greater positive changes and behaviors (for both parents and children) than programs that did not include fathers (Lundahl et al., 2008).

Benefits for Fathers

Finally, being an involved father brings benefits to dads themselves. When fathers build strong relationships with their children and others in the family, they receive support and caring in return. Healthy family relationships provide the strongest and most important support network a person can have, whether that person is a child or an adult.

Being involved in their family members' lives helps fathers:

- enjoy a secure attachment relationship with their children

- cope well with stressful situations and everyday hassles
- feel as if they can depend on others more
- feel more comfortable in their occupation and feel that they can do their job well
- feel confident they have a lot to offer others in terms of their job skills, parenting skills, and social relationships (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004)

Granted, fathers may feel awkward at first, for example, when joining a parent-teacher association as a 'minority' parent. Fathers may feel they are "too busy" to get involved in some aspects of their children's lives. But the benefits outweigh any potential excuses.

Last, as a disclaimer, being a parent involves huge costs in commitment, time, money etc. Some men (and women) struggle to accept this cost. When potential fathers are unwilling to pay the cost, they should reconsider becoming a parent as this will hurt the child(ren) and the other parent involved.

The benefits listed in this publication are really only a few of the major research findings from studies of families with involved fathers. Many of the benefits may seem obvious, but perhaps not all of them. If you look at your own involvement in your family, you might discover that you have been enjoying some of the benefits listed above without really noticing it. Sometimes being an involved parent takes hard work and setting priorities. Don't forget to stop and look around once in awhile to see all that you are getting in return.

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