

# DOING THINGS *differently*

*As any mum will tell you, dads parent differently. We talk to the experts about why we should celebrate dads' special way of interacting with kids. BY HARRIET EDMUND.*

## TIP

Eye contact is great for bonding and mums get this while feeding baby. However, Dad can achieve the same result by cradling baby in his arms at chest level, which is the right height and angle to look down and visually connect.

**T**hough it may seem that mums get a head start in bonding via pregnancy and breastfeeding, Dr Richard Fletcher, author of *The Dad Factor* and leader of the Australian Fatherhood

Research Network, says a newborn baby looks for their father and recognises his voice in the first few hours of life. From those precious moments onwards dads are not just household helpers, but a crucial influence in their own right.

Compared to mums, dads tend to have different ways of approaching parenting, problem-solving, risk taking and play. Where a mum might be quite structured, dads can be more uneven in the way they interact with their kids, using games, humour and lots of physical contact. As result of this, their importance as a carer and role model can be under-recognised.

New research shows that the bond fathers create with their sons and daughters, right from the earliest days, is different to the mother/baby connection. It boosts the way a little one's brain develops, says Dr Fletcher. "It influences how a child develops physically, emotionally and mentally, in terms of their reading and maths ability, and the way they get on with other children."

When The Fathering Project, a non-profit team from the University of Western Australia, recently summarised studies spanning 10 years, it found that high levels of father involvement was linked to increased social responsibility, better interactions with siblings and greater positive self-control.

Many dads still play the secondary role because they are their family's main breadwinner, but there are many important reasons why dads should be encouraged to spend more time bonding with their kids.

## Read it online

To read "Bringing Up Boys", an excerpt from Dr Arne Rubinstein's book, *The Making of Men*, go to [coles.com.au/babyclub](http://coles.com.au/babyclub).



## FATHER'S DAY SPECIAL

### Risky business

Dads challenge their kids through physical and mental activity that mums often don't have the time or inclination to do, says Murray Galbraith, founder of global community websites for digital dads called Dads.Co.

And, according to Dr Fletcher, researchers are studying how taking risks with a strong, loving father beside them can build children's emotional strength and mental abilities.

"Dads are often adventurous and will take their children to places and do things they wouldn't normally do," says Dr Arne Rubinstein, CEO of social venture The Australian Rites of Passage Institute and author of *The Making of Men*. "This helps children expand their boundaries, as their fathers show them what is okay and what is not okay to do."

### Gentle giant

Gone are the days when dads towed a stricter line. In fact, modern dads are often accused of being more lax than mums when it comes to discipline. But even if dads use their own tactics, they are generally instilling the same messages as mums, says Dr Fletcher. And the good news is this gentle giant approach

is having a profound effect on children when they are older. Dr Rubinstein says that when dads, who seem so big and strong, manage to be both clear and gentle when disciplining, it makes children feel safe.

"If a child grows up feeling safe they'll go to their parents at times when they're older and are concerned or in trouble or know they have done something wrong," he says. "If they grow up feeling afraid, they'll likely hide, or seek solutions from peers or the internet."

### Ready to rumble

Researchers from The University of Newcastle have given rough-and-tumble play a huge tick of approval. These fatherly games of wrestling, grappling, hugging, shouting and tumbling have been proven to boost your tot's brain development as well as stemming childhood obesity.

And if you're worried that it encourages fighting, don't be. Dr Fletcher says the crucial difference between rough-and-tumble play and fighting is what the experts call dominance swapping. In other words, the rumbler who is bigger, stronger or faster (dad), will sometimes deliberately lose to the less capable rumbler (the child). >

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# FATHER'S DAY SPECIAL

Dominance swapping teaches little ones about winning and losing. It also teaches toddlers and preschoolers to control their urges and think about other's feelings. "These skills are essential for doing well in school," adds Dr Fletcher.

When it comes to gender, Dr Fletcher says many sons are energetic mini-warriors who are keen to play rough, and fathers can provide the safety to manage this energy. The health benefits for girls can include building her physical and mental strength and even her self-image.

## Problem-solving

"A child learns from what they observe, not from what they are told," says Dr Rubinstein. That's why the practical, hands-on approach of many dads is valuable for teaching little ones problem-solving skills and creativity.

However, if there's something to be solved or repaired, research shows it's a dad's inclination to fix it, says James Brown,

parenting psychologist and lecturer at University of Southern Queensland. While this can encourage your kids to give things a go, the risk is dads can sometimes take over without realising it.

The key for dads is to try not to give kids easy answers, says James. "Encourage them to problem-solve, to think things through and find their own answers," he explains.

## An active role model

Children who have active fathers are more likely to be active themselves. A US study also found that dads took a more involved approach in their support of kids' exercise. Whereas mums were more likely to enrol kids in activities and cheer from the sidelines, dads were more likely to get out and exercise with their kids.

Dads can influence diet too. Australian researchers found that when fathers lost weight through efforts to eat better and exercise more, their children also ate better and were more physically active.

## TIP

Mums often wish Dad would help out more with the kids but can't resist hovering and offering advice when they do. Mums should relax and step back – it's a great opportunity for Mum to take some "time out".



# 5 TOP TIPS FOR DAD

*It's easy to parent on auto-pilot but there's always room for improvement.*

**1 CREATE A VISION FOR FATHERHOOD.** *Twenty years from now, what do you hope your children say about you as a father? What do you hope they don't say?*

**2 BE THE BRIDGE BETWEEN YOUR OWN FATHER AND YOUR CHILDREN.** *How will you pass on the positive aspects of your relationship with your father to your own children? How will you avoid repeating the negative aspects of your relationship with your father?*

**3 ESTABLISH DAD TIME.** *This is special one-on-one time with dad – cooking breakfast, going for a bike ride or walk or building something out of cardboard. It's not about what you do, but that you do it.*

**4 KNOW YOUR CHILDREN.** *By becoming an expert about your children's lives – knowing what a certain look on their face means, the best way to get them to sleep, who their friends are, what they're doing in school, what causes them stress – you send a powerful message that they are worthy of your time and attention.*

**5 BE KNOWN.** *Letting your children know more about you through storytelling creates a bond. What were you like at your child's age? What mistakes did you make? How did you handle embarrassment? Stories humanise you and give children a sense of where they come from and can initiate meaningful dialogue with your child.*

*The US-based Fatherhood Project has adapted these practical tips from The Modern Dads Dilemma by John Badalament. For more information go to [thefatherhoodproject.org](http://thefatherhoodproject.org).*

## WHEN DAD'S NOT AROUND

Single mothers shouldn't wear themselves out trying to be both mother and father to their kids, says Dr Fletcher. "Children need a lot of people around and there are plenty of father figures who can be involved, such as other relatives, boyfriends, men from the community and neighbours," he says.

Being a mentor or role model is a serious relationship and commitment. If you are hoping that a man in your life can become a mentor for your child, take the time to talk to him about what that means to you, what you'd like him to do and how much time you would like him to spend with your child.

The cliché is that the father-figure will take the child to the pool or show the little one how to kick a ball, but that's not the only option. Think about what's right for your child, says Dr Rubinstein. Some children will be yearning for someone to take them on adventures and do dare-devilish things outside the house. But other kids simply need the company of a trusted male, and the opportunity to ask questions of a caring adult who isn't their mum.

When Dad's not on the scene, mums can find role models for kids in male friends or relatives.



## DOWN TIME Top buys ranging from family fun to end-of-the-day relaxation.



**PLAYGRO MY FIRST FOOTY**  
With its movement-activated rattle and soft, easy-to-grasp plush cover, this ball may instil the love of footy in your little one!



**CLOSER TO NATURE FEEDING BOTTLE**  
Bottle feeding is something dad can do, not only to give mum a break but to create close bonds with baby.



**JOHNSON'S BABY BEDTIME BATH, 500ML**  
Getting involved in day-to-day activities such as bath and bedtime cements dad's role as a competent carer.



**HUGGIES LITTLE SWIMMERS, 11-15KG, 11-PACK**  
Swim pants take the place of nappies at the beach or pool. Smart easy-open sides make them simple to remove when wet.