

Paternal influence crucial to the success of children: report

By Cosima Marriner



Children with involved fathers have better social skills, more successful relationships, stronger self esteem, more self-control and higher grades than those who do not.

They are also less likely to be overweight, suspended from school or bully, take drugs, engage in risky sexual behaviour or crime.

As fathers take a more active role in parenting there is growing evidence of the benefits to children, a report from the University of Western Australia's fathering project shows. The report, *How fathers and father figures can shape child health and wellbeing*, has reviewed all the research published in the past decade on the influence of fathers.

"We shouldn't underestimate the vast importance of fathers in children's lives because of the significant impact fathers have on the social, cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing of children from infancy

... into their adult life," it states.

Fathering project leader Bruce Gibson said fathers were highly influential because children were very sensitive to what their father thought of them.

"Kids have a notion that somehow dad is optional, that he could walk away at any time, whereas mum is stuck with the kids," Dr Gibson said. "They have a radar out for what dad has to say, how he treats them."

Dr Gibson said if both parents said the same thing to their child it had four times the impact than if just the mother said it.

The fathering project report found physical activity was a key way fathers influenced their children, helping to teach them limits, self-control and how to face challenging situations. Father/child play also encouraged healthy diet and exercise habits. Mothers tended to provide comfort in times of distress.

Children who spent more time with their fathers during their transition to adolescence had better social skills and higher self-worth than those who spent less one-on-one time with their fathers. "The same effect was not observed for mothers," the authors said.

Children with distant, unsupportive and cold fathers were at greater risk of developing a mental illness like depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder as an adult. They were twice as likely to have a substance abuse problem and 10 times as likely to be involved in crime.

"Research specific to fathers indicates that their influence on alcohol and illicit drug use in children may be distinct and stronger than that of mothers," the report states.

Dr Gibson said an involved father made his children feel worthwhile, and therefore less vulnerable to peer pressure. "Kids think 'my dad is really busy but he's willing to spend time with me'. It makes kids feel very special and worthwhile." He cautioned that a disciplinarian, authoritarian father had just as much negative effect on a child as an absent father. Fatherhood expert Steve Biddulph said fathers influenced their sons and daughters in different ways. "Girls regard dads as their first role model for the opposite gender [while] boys look to dads for how to behave."

Mr Biddulph, the author of *Raising Boys* and *Raising Girls*, said there had been a trebling in the amount of time fathers spent teaching, helping and playing with their children.

"The younger generation of dads that I speak to simply love being dads, they find it gives a sense of worth and purpose beyond the often impersonal satisfactions and frustrations of the corporate world," he said.

"Parenthood is a muddle-through kind of activity, you are always learning and stumbling, and once [you] get used to that, it makes you more real, relaxed, and humble."

Rebecca Giallo from the Parenting Research Centre said men need to look after their mental health if they are to be good fathers.

"When a father is experiencing good mental health he's more available to children to be responsive to their needs, to engage in play and learning activities and experience what is important to children," Dr Giallo said. "He's also an important support in the family if the mother is having difficulties."

Rough play builds spirit

Cameron McKay has been rumberling with his two sons since they were little, whether it's wrestling, doing the "typewriter" on their chests or kicking the footy at the park.

"I don't want them to grow up being precious," Mr McKay, who runs recruitment business ConnectTalent, said. "This is my little part of fatherhood. Life is difficult sometimes. I want to give them a broad spectrum of skills."

The Fathers and Families Research program at the University of Newcastle has found that children who engage in rough and tumble play with their dads learn how to read social signals, regulate their emotions, stay within limits and take "manageable" risks.

"Rough and tumble play influences how well a child controls their emotions and activity," researcher Jennifer St George said. New research by Dr St George suggests children whose fathers spend more time playing with them have lower risk-taking behaviours.

All three of Mr McKay's children love rough and tumble play, although his daughter Madison "likes to do it in a girly sort of way".

"When I bend down to pick something up off the floor they think it's game on, they jump on daddy," Mr McKay said.

"Parents are so protective of children these days. My kids aren't afraid of anything. They are confident little children."

Mr McKay said he consciously tries to be an involved father. "It's about being a role model for your children," he said. "The best thing for me about being a dad is growing the lives of three little children who you hope in their own way will make a difference in the world."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/paternal-influence-crucial-to-the-success-of-children-report-20130831-2sxf8.html#ixzz2dmD6rUoF>