

Children who have an active father figure have fewer psychological and behavioral problems

Active father figures have a key role to play in reducing behaviour problems in boys and psychological problems in young women, according to a review published in the February issue of *Acta Paediatrica*.

Swedish researchers also found that regular positive contact reduces criminal behaviour among children in low-income families and enhances cognitive skills like intelligence, reasoning and language development.

Children who lived with both a mother and father figure also had less behavioural problems than those who just lived with their mother.

The researchers are urging healthcare professionals to increase fathers' involvement in their children's healthcare and calling on policy makers to ensure that fathers have the chance to play an active role in their upbringing.

The review looked at 24 papers published between 1987 and 2007, covering 22,300 individual sets of data from 16 studies. 18 of the 24 papers also covered the social economic status of the families studied.

The smallest study focused on 17 infants and the largest covered 8,441 individuals ranging from premature babies to 33 year-olds. They included major ongoing research from the USA and UK, together with smaller studies from Sweden and Israel.

“Our detailed 20-year review shows that overall, children reap positive benefits if they have active and regular engagement with a father figure” says Dr Anna Sarkadi from the Department of Women's and Children's Health at Uppsala University, Sweden.

“For example, we found various studies that showed that children who had positively involved father figures were less likely to smoke and get into trouble with the police, achieved better levels of education and developed good friendships with children of both sexes.

“Long-term benefits included women who had better relationships with partners and a greater sense of mental and physical well-being at the age of 33 if they had a good relationship with their father at 16.”

However the authors point out that it is not possible to conclude what type of engagement the father figure needs to provide to produce positive effects.

“The studies show that it can range from talking and sharing activities to playing an active role in the child's day-to-day care.”

The researchers believe that more research is needed to determine whether the outcomes are different depending on whether the child lives with their biological father or with another father figure.

“However, our review backs up the intuitive assumption that engaged biological fathers or father figures are good for children, especially when the children are socially or economically disadvantaged” says Dr Sarkadi.

“Children who lived with both a mother and father figure had less behavioural problems than those who lived with just their mother. However, it is not possible to tell whether this is because the father figure is

more involved or whether the mother is able to be a better parent if she has more support at home.”

The researchers feel that it is important that professionals who work with young children and their families explore how actively fathers are involved with their children from an early age.

“Involving them in healthcare visits and explicitly seeking their opinions when making decisions could be a good way to promote high levels of engagement” says Dr Sarkadi. “Stressing that fathers have an important role in promoting their child’s social and emotional development is another good strategy.”

Governments and employers also have an important role to play in ensuring that men can spend quality time with their offspring, stress the authors.

“Public policy has the potential to facilitate or create barriers to fathers spending time with their children during the crucial years of early development” says Dr Sarkadi.

“Unfortunately current institutional policies in most countries do not support the increased involvement of fathers in child rearing. Paid parental leave for fathers and employers sympathetic to fathers staying at home with sick children is still a dream in most countries.

“We hope that this review will add to the body of evidence that shows that enlightened father-friendly policies can make a major contribution to society in the long run, by producing well-adjusted children and reducing major problems like crime and antisocial behaviour.”

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