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Fathers can have a significant effect on their children

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Recent studies of fatherhood have provided more detail to something many of us know instinctively: dads can have a big effect on their children. Parenthood is a lot of responsibility, but understanding the role dads play can help them be better parents and help care providers support fathers.

Fathers frequently treat their sons and daughters differently

A recent study published in the journal Behavioral Neuroscience found that many dads treat their sons and daughters differently—and that can affect kids.

Fathers who participated in the study gave toddler daughters more active engagement, spent more time talking about emotions and bodies with them and even sang more with them. They also “had a stronger neural response to their daughter’s happy facial expressions in areas of the brain important for reward and emotional regulation,” the researchers write. By contrast, fathers who participated in the study spent more time roughhousing with their toddler sons and used more “achievement language” with them, the researchers found.

This research shows that the way dads parent in the real world and the way their brains work around their kids is influenced by gender, they concluded. “We should be aware of

how unconscious notions of gender can play into the way we treat even very young children,” said lead researcher Jennifer Mascaro in a press release.

You are what your dad eats

A cluster of recent studies has found that dad diet during and before conception can influence everything from a son’s ability to have kids to whether children have reached normal height and weight by the age of five.

It’s not just what dads eat before having kids, though: new research from Canada showed that fathers’ eating habits were more likely to be copied by kids than mothers’ diets. That means that dads who are big consumers of junk food are more likely to pass their habits on to kids.

“I think the message to fathers is: you are important,” Wayne Hartrick, president of the Canadian Men’s Health Foundation, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about this last study. “If they’re sacrificing their own health, they might actually be sacrificing their children’s health.”

Involved dads help babies learn faster

Babies whose dads play with them perform better in cognitive testing by the age of two, a recent study found. As Katherine Sellgren reports for the BBC, the value of a paternal figure being involved showed up by the time babies were three months old. That means actively playing with kids and reading to them.

The study also found that babies who interacted with calm, sensitive fathers had the best outcomes. “Our findings highlight the importance of supporting fathers to interact more

positively with their children in early infancy,” one of the researchers told Sellgren.

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