

How fathers can positively influence children's mental health through play

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

This short article outlines how fathers can influence their child's mental health through play. It describes various types of child-father play and their association with child mental health. The article also provides considerations for practitioners who work with fathers and other caregivers to support positive child development and mental health through encouraging child-father play.

Introduction

Play is beneficial for the health and development of children (Burriss & Tsao, 2002). Although both mothers and fathers¹ play with their children, research suggests that the type of play they regularly engage in can differ (Amodia-Bidakowska, Laverty, & Ramchandani, 2020; Cabrera & Roggman, 2017). Fathers are more likely than mothers to engage in physical play (e.g. wrestling) whereas mothers are more likely to engage in toy play and imaginary play (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Cabrera & Roggman, 2017). Generally, play between fathers and

1. This resource discusses the experiences of cisgender, heterosexual parents as the research literature focuses on this type of family. However, we acknowledge that practitioners may also work with fathers, mothers and non-birthing parents who may identify with diverse genders or sexualities. Play between gender diverse or same-sex parents and their children also likely benefits child mental health; however, we don't know if this might differ from the benefits of play with cisgender, heterosexual parents.



young children (from here referred to as 'child-father play') involves humour, spontaneity and physical activities, and encourages children to explore and take risks (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Cabrera & Roggman, 2017).² Children benefit from engaging in all types of play with their parents or carers (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Cabrera & Roggman, 2017).

However, fathers and mothers can also make distinct positive contributions to the health and wellbeing of their children through play (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020). Recognising this provides an opportunity for practitioners working with families to promote child mental health by encouraging play between fathers and their children.

2. These factors are general patterns of play that fathers engage in. Play between mothers and children may also involve humour, spontaneity, physical activities, and encouraging children to explore and take risks.

This short article explores how fathers can influence their child's mental health through play. It also provides considerations for practitioners on how to support positive child mental health through encouraging child–father play. Though the focus of this resource is on child–father play to support practitioners working with fathers, it doesn't imply that child–mother play isn't important for child mental health.

How can fathers influence child mental health through play?

There are different types of play that can occur between fathers and their children. Generally, all different types of child–father play can be a positive influence on different aspects of child mental health (Table 1).

Rough and tumble play (i.e. a type of physical activity play that includes behaviours such as wrestling, grappling, kicking and tumbling in a playful context [St George & Freeman, 2017]) is the most studied type of play in terms of the impact of child–father play on child mental health. Australian and international research has found that rough and tumble play has a positive influence on child mental health (St George, Fletcher, & Palazzi, 2017; St George & Freeman, 2017). For example, it has been associated with improved child social and emotional skills, and fewer child behavioural and emotional difficulties (St George et al., 2017; St George & Freeman, 2017). This is likely because rough and tumble play can teach children how to play physically with others within safe limits and learn to respect people's boundaries (St George & Freeman, 2017). This can help children learn to navigate social relationships with their peers and with their surrounding environment, such as at school (St George & Freeman, 2017).

To a lesser extent, existing research has also examined the impact of other types of play such as:





- creative play
- toy play
- structuring or guiding play; and
- active play.

Although there is less research on fathers and these types of play, there is evidence that such forms of play can support child mental health. Combining these play types may also help to promote child mental health. For example, combined active and toy play (e.g. playing with balls, blocks or dolls) is associated with improved child emotional regulation (Robinson, St George, & Freeman, 2021).



Table 1 summarises some types of child–father play and their impacts on child mental health. The evidence supporting the benefits of child–father play is growing and includes good quality longitudinal studies, which explore relationships between child–father play and child mental health outcomes over time, along with cross-sectional studies that are usually limited to exploring a single point in time. The play types in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive and there may be overlap in the different types of play, nor is it a complete list of all possible types of play, and there may be other types of child–father play that are yet to be described in research.

Table 1 Different types of child–father play and their impacts on child mental health

Play activity	Impacts on child mental health
 <p>Rough and tumble play For example: wrestling, grappling, kicking and tumbling in a playful context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased social competence, e.g. social skills (St George & Freeman, 2017) - Increased emotional skills, e.g. emotional regulation (St George & Freeman, 2017) - Increased self-regulation, e.g. attention regulation (St George & Freeman, 2017) - Decreased behavioural difficulties (St George et al., 2017) - Decreased emotional difficulties (St George et al., 2017) - Mixed evidence, i.e. different research has found evidence for positive, negative and no effects on aggression (Robinson et al., 2021; St George & Freeman, 2017)
 <p>Creative play For example: art, music, storytelling</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased emotion regulation (Robinson et al., 2021) - Increased prosocial behaviour (Robinson et al., 2021) - Decreased behavioural difficulties (Kroll, Carson, Redshaw, & Quigley, 2016) - Decreased aggression (Robinson et al., 2021)
 <p>Toy play For example: interacting with a toy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased emotional regulation (Robinson et al., 2021) - Increased prosocial behaviour (Robinson et al., 2021) - One study found that toy play was not associated with emotional and behavioural functioning (St George et al., 2017)
 <p>Structuring or guiding play For example: guiding the children's play, such as getting a child to follow directions or rules as in a board game</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased infant cognitive development (McMahon et al., 2019) - Increased infant language development (McMahon et al., 2019)
 <p>Active play For example, indoor toys, sports, playgrounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased child prosocial behaviour (Robinson et al., 2021) - Increased social competence (Robinson et al., 2021) - Mixed evidence, i.e. different research has found evidence for positive, negative and no effects on internalising behaviours, self-regulation, behavioural difficulties and socioemotional functioning (Kroll et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2021)
 <p>Other play not otherwise specified That is, no set criteria given for the play activities studied by the researchers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased emotional regulation (Robinson et al., 2021) - Increased social competence when supportive coparenting behaviours were present (Jia, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012) - Decreased internalising behaviours (Jia et al., 2012) - Decreased externalising behaviours (Jia et al., 2012)

How can practitioners support fathers to promote child mental health through play?

The following considerations and approaches may be useful for practitioners when supporting fathers to promote their children's mental health through engaging in play.

- Actively and routinely engage fathers in conversations about their parenting behaviours, including whether and how fathers engage in play with their children. Take a strengths-based approach to these conversations as fathers' perceptions of their parenting abilities can affect how frequently they play with their children (Kienhuis & Matthews, 2021).
- Empower fathers to play with their children by highlighting the positive impact they can have on their child's social competence, emotional skills and self-regulation. Provide examples of activities that are both fun and enjoyable but can also be low cost and accessible for families from all backgrounds.
- Share evidence-based resources and programs on play and parenting with fathers. Resources and programs for fathers are listed in the *Further reading and resources* section of this resource.

Conclusion

Child-father play is beneficial for child mental health and development. Fathers can be more likely to engage in play than mothers and their play usually involves humour, physical activity and risk-taking. Fathers' engagement in rough and tumble play is associated with benefits for child mental health (e.g. social competence, emotional skills and self-regulation). Other types of child-father play, such as creative play and toy play, also have a positive influence on child mental health. Practitioners can actively engage fathers in conversations about their fathering behaviours and how they play with their child. This can involve discussing the benefits of child-father play, encouraging fathers to engage in more play, and suggesting ideas for play activities that are easily accessible and low cost.

Further reading and related resources

A range of resources for practitioners when working with and supporting fathers are detailed below.

- Learn more about play and child wellbeing by reading [Free play and wellbeing](#).
- Learn more about the use of play to strengthen child-parent relationships and promote children's mental health by reading [Parent-child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children](#) and watching the [related webinar](#).
- Learn more about father involvement and child mental health by reading:
 - [The impact of paternal positivity on child mental health](#)
 - [How fathers' warm and responsive parenting can support child mental health](#)
 - [How fathers' positive engagement and caregiving can support child mental health](#)
 - [How fathers can support child mental health through setting limits and managing behaviour](#)

Practitioners can consider sharing the following resources with fathers:

- Playgroup Australia is an organisation that can help [link fathers and parents with local playgroups](#) that provide opportunities for play-based learning and social support for parents and carers.
- The Raising Children Network has plain language [resources for fathers on getting involved with their children, toy play and child-led play](#).
- The Fathering Project is a charity that runs [programs to help support fathers](#) and has resources about play, including this [resource for fathers of toddlers](#) that provides information on how to play, connect and understand their young children.
- This Western Australian Government website provides [practical ideas for parents to help their child learn and develop through play](#).

How was this resource developed?

This resource was developed as part of a series of resources focusing on fathers' engagement in parenting and child mental health. These resources synthesise the findings of a rapid literature review that searched for terms relating to fathering, child mental health, and prevention/association in Medline, PsycInfo and Web of Science from 1 January 2012 to 30 May 2022. The review includes relevant, peer-reviewed literature that: a) examined the association between fathering behaviours when the child was aged <12 years and child mental health, b) was published in English, and c) conducted in high-income, English-speaking countries. The scope and resources from the review were informed by a consultation process involving 14 practitioners, service leaders and researchers who are experts in parenting, fathering and men's and children's health.

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