

Involved Fathers Get Results

BY ROBERT NASEEF, PH.D.

Male role models are important for children, and boys and girls growing up on the autism spectrum are no exception. Fathers are more involved than ever, and research backs up their impact on children. However, when a child has autism there are often steep challenges for the typical male parent. Let's take a look at the potential for growth and how to overcome the barriers that autism may present.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT FATHER INVOLVEMENT

- A nationally representative survey of over 10,000 men found that most American fathers report being heavily involved in hands-on parenting. Ninety percent of these fathers said that they bathed, diapered, helped with toileting or dressing, ate meals together, and talked about their day with their family on a daily basis. Even more frequently, played with their children. This type of father involvement has been shown to result in better academic success, fewer behavior problems, and healthier eating habits.

- Forbes writer, Susan Adams, recently reported that men who spend more time with their children are likely to have a greater sense of satisfaction at work and less desire to change jobs. They are also less likely to experience conflicts at home, according to Beth K. Humberd, Assistant Professor of Management at the University of Massachusetts, and one of the study's co-authors.

- Studies of father-child interactions with typically developing children indicate that fathers offer different language models than mothers, which make important contributions to children's language development. Fathers tend to use a more complex language model than mothers, and this likely applies to interactions with children with ASD as well.

- New research from the University of Illinois also suggests that fathers who read to their infants, and take active roles in caregiving activities, promote healthy development in their children and boost mothers' mental health as well.

- Through play, both mothers and fathers help their children develop language. A father's play is typically more active and rough-and-tumble. As their child's primary play partner, fathers have a distinctive role in supporting their development through play. Research has demonstrated that interventions can improve both play and language outcomes for children with ASD.

IT'S NOT EASY TO DO IN PRACTICE

When you love someone you want to be with them, but children with autism can be hard to be with. Most typical children are engaged every waking hour, but it's not easy to engage with a child on the spectrum. They often prefer to do the same things over and over again. Parents can easily become exhausted or frustrated—not to mention feel rejected and sad.

Even though there's a huge potential for fathers to contribute positively to the development of children on the spectrum, many fathers feel powerless to engage in play with a child who has more repetitive and less varied play. Most fathers have a difficult time talking about their feelings, especially when there is a problem that they are unable to fix. 80% of children diagnosed with ASD are boys, which can be especially difficult for fathers who expected a different kind of son.

WHAT FATHERS CAN DO?

First, acknowledge the spectrum of painful feelings, including sadness, hurt, frustration, anger, embarrassment, and rejection. Share your experience with your partner, family members, and friends who want to support you. Like the weather, your unpleasant feelings will come and go periodically. Accepting this experience opens the door to hope, building a connection, and celebrating every little step of developmental progress.

Second, spend some time each day joining your child on the floor, at the table, in front of the screen, or outdoors watching and following your child's lead, having fun, and building connections. Your child with autism is still a child and needs more than therapy. It may not be what you imagined, but it can still be wonderful regardless of the severity of the challenges. As fathers, you cannot control the outcome for any child, but you do make a difference, and you can have a rewarding relationship regardless of who they are.

Third, focusing too heavily on behavior, and trying to change the person that they are can suck the joy out of your relationship with your son or daughter. This may seem impossible, considering your child's behavioral issues, but this does not mean denying real problems. It just means paying attention and cultivating the moments you might overlook or ignore when problems are absent; such as when the kids run to you when you get home at the end of the day.

Fourth, attend as many meetings as possible with your child's school and other service providers. Don't hide behind your work. Being an active partner in the parent-professional affiliation is an opportunity for fathers to deepen their understanding of their child's strengths and challenges and use their problem solving skills to promote greater success. Many couples report better results in collaboration with professionals when fathers are involved, and in turn, mothers report less stress and more happiness.

The science is in: wherever a child starts on the autism spectrum, with parent involvement and good services, progress is possible; and father involvement certainly makes a difference.

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