

# Exploration in toddlers activated by fathers

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A new study has found that fathers give toddlers more leeway and that allows them to actively explore their environments, according to a new study on parent-child attachment published in *Early Child Development and Care*.

Daniel Paquette, a professor at the Université de Montréal School of Psychoeducation, says the 'activation theory' is just as important as the 'attachment theory.' The latter was the prevailing 20th-Century notion that children usually connect with their primary caregiver since they fulfill their emotional needs and guarantee their survival.

"In attachment theory, a [child](#) seeks comfort from a parent when he or she is insecure. This theory underestimates the importance of exploratory behavior in children," says Dr. Paquette, who completed his study with Marc Bigras of the Université du Québec à Montréal.

As part of the investigations, kids aged 12 to 18 months (accompanied by a parent) were placed in three different risky situations: social risk (a strange adult entered his or her environment), physical risk (toys were placed at the top of a stairway), and a forbidden activity (parents were forbidden to climb the stairs after the child succeeded the first time).

"We found fathers are more inclined than mothers to activate exploratory behavior by being less protective," says Paquette. "The less the parent is protective, the more activated is the exploratory behavior in the child. Children who were optimally stimulated, meaning they were exploratory yet respectful of the rules, were 71 percent boys.

Meanwhile, 70 percent of children who were risk averse were girls."

The parent's behavior was measured by the distance they kept from their child as he or she climbed the stairs. "For a child to become self-confident, the parent mustn't be too far or too close," says Paquette. "The ideal distance seems to be an arm's length. This distance was statistically significant with fathers yet not with mothers."

According to Paquette, classical attachment theory doesn't highlight these differences between boys and girls. This is why he feels his theory is better adapted to evaluate the role of the father while factoring in the temperament of the child and the level of protective parenting, both of which trigger the activation relationship.

Paquette is convinced that mothers and fathers intervene differently in the education of a child and these complementarities benefit a child. "Even if both parents change diapers and give the bottle, they don't do it the same way," says Paquette. "By stimulating exploration, controlled risk-taking and competition, [fathers](#) provide something different to the child who will benefit greatly from this singular contribution."

**More information:** Early Child Development and Care study:  
[www.informaworld.com/smpp/sect ... 8&fulltext=713240928](http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/sect...8&fulltext=713240928)

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