

# Hands-on dads give kids an edge

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Erin Pougnet is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Psychology and a member of the Center for Research in Human Development. Credit: Concordia University

Fathers who actively engage in raising their children can help make their offspring smarter and better behaved, according to new research from Concordia University.

Published in the *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, the long-term study examined how [fathers](#) can positively influence the development of their kids through hands-on parenting.

"Fathers make important contributions in the development of their children's behaviour and [intelligence](#)," says Erin Pougnet, a PhD candidate in the Concordia University Department of Psychology and a member of the Centre for Research in Human Development (CRDH).

"Compared with other children with absentee dads, kids whose fathers were active [parents](#) in early and middle childhood had fewer behaviour problems and higher intellectual abilities as they grew older — even among socio-economically at-risk families."

## **A patriarch's influence**

"Regardless of whether fathers lived with their children, their ability to set appropriate limits and structure their children's behaviour positively influenced problem-solving and decreased emotional problems, such as sadness, social withdrawal and anxiety," continues Pougnet.

A total of 138 children and their parents took part in the study and were assessed by researchers in three separate sessions.

Kids were evaluated between the ages of three- to five-years-old and again from nine to 13-years-old. They completed intelligence tests, while their mothers completed questionnaires on home environment and couple conflict. All children were recruited as part of the larger Concordia Longitudinal Risk Research Project, an intergenerational study launched in 1976.

School teachers were also recruited as observers of child behaviours outside homes. "Teachers were a somewhat more independent source of information than mothers, fathers or children themselves," says Pougnet, "because a father's absence can result in home conflict, maternal distress and child distress."

## **Greater impact on girls**

The study found girls to be most affected by absentee dads, although the researchers caution that paternal absence can foster other problems such

as lack of support or discipline.

"Girls whose fathers were absent during their middle childhood had significantly higher levels of emotional problems at school than girls whose fathers were present," says Pougnet.

## **Mothers, caregivers equally important**

According to 2007 Statistics Canada figures, there are an increasing number of single-parent homes across the country. The agency estimates some 13 per cent of Canadian families and 22 per cent of Quebec families are comprised of households where biological fathers are absent.

"While our study examined the important role dads play in the development of their children, kids don't necessarily do poorly without their fathers," stresses co-author Lisa A. Serbin, a professor in the Concordia Department of Psychology and a CRDH member. "Mothers and other caregivers are also important. No doubt fathers have a major impact, but there are definitely many alternative ways to raise a healthy child. Some kids with no contact with fathers, or with distant dads, do well intellectually and emotionally."

The findings, however, should encourage governments to formulate policies that encourage increased and positive forms of contact between [children](#) and their fathers. "Initiatives such as parental leave for men and parenting classes that emphasize the role of fathers could help to maximize children's development from early childhood to preadolescence," says Serbin.

Provided by Concordia University

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