

Role-play shows which expectant dads will thrive as new fathers

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Doll used in role-play for this study. Credit: The Ohio State University

A five-minute role-play done with men before the birth of their first child predicted the quality of their parenting after the baby arrived, a new study showed.

Researchers videotaped 182 expectant fathers during the third trimester

of their partners' pregnancy, observing how the men interacted with a doll that they were told represented the baby they were about to have.

Ratings given to the fathers on their levels of "intuitive parenting" while playing with the doll predicted how well they were rated on parenting quality nine months after their baby was born.

"We were able to detect the capacity for positive parenting in these men before they even became fathers," said lead study author Lauren Altenburger, who began the work as a doctoral student at The Ohio State University.

Altenburger is now an assistant professor of human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University-Shenango, where the study was completed.

The intuitive parenting skills measured as the men interacted with the doll included talking directly to the face of the "baby," using baby talk and smiling, and showing concern for the baby's well-being.

The good news is that the intuitive parenting skills measured in this study can be taught, said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"We can help expectant fathers learn these parenting skills," said Schoppe-Sullivan, who is a senior research associate on the board of the Council on Contemporary Families. "Not all parents start out knowing how to do these things, but they can be shown how."

The research was published online June 22, 2020 in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

The couples in the study were participating in the New Parents Project, a

long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time.

Researchers visited the couples' homes during the third trimester of the woman's pregnancy.

The procedure using dolls was developed by researchers in Switzerland, but has rarely been used in the United States.

"It may seem silly to have adults play with dolls, but it is actually pretty easy for them to do," Altenburger said.

"The birth is right around the corner, so they are already thinking about what it is going to be like. They took the role playing seriously."

The doll they used was custom-made and consisted of a footed infant sleeper sewn shut with 7-8 pounds of rice inside to make its weight similar to a newborn. A doll's head made of green fabric was sewn onto the footed sleeper.

In the videotaped procedure, an assistant playing the role of a nurse presented the "baby" to the parents.

"We were looking for how natural fathers acted with the baby. Did they hold it properly, smile at it and do things like gently pinching the baby's foot or other positive behaviors that many people just instinctively do with babies," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Trained assistants viewed the videotape and rated the fathers on their level of intuitive parenting behaviors.

Nine months after the birth of the baby, the fathers' parenting quality was assessed by a different team of research assistants who watched the

fathers try to teach their [babies](#) to play with either a shape sorter or stacking rings.

The assistants rated how well the fathers paid attention and responded to their child, how engaged they were, and their expression of positive feelings.

"Those dads who were rated as showing more intuitive parenting skills with the doll a year earlier tended to have a more positive interaction with their real child," Altenburger said.

This was true even after taking into account several other factors that could affect how well fathers did at parenting their infant, such as the men's personality traits, their co-parenting relationship with the child's mother and the child's temperament.

Findings showed that dads who showed more high-quality parenting skills when their baby was 9 months old also tended to score higher on tests of two personality traits.

One trait was being open to new experiences, which is obviously helpful for dads becoming [parents](#) for the first time.

The other trait was conscientiousness, which is being careful and diligent with your responsibilities.

The researchers found that a good co-parenting relationship between the mother and father—how they worked together to raise their child—also predicted better parenting quality in dads. Co-parenting relationship quality was observed between mothers, fathers, and their 3-month-old baby.

The child's temperament was not related to fathers' parenting quality in

this study. But the researchers said this should be interpreted with caution, because temperament was reported by fathers at a single time point.

The New Parents Project involves couples in which both partners have jobs and are mostly white and well-educated, Schoppe-Sullivan said, so the results may not apply in the same way to all fathers.

The researchers said the results could help [health care professionals](#) and others who work with expectant couples to identify and help fathers who may need extra help learning their role as a parent.

"Although it is called 'intuitive parenting,' it isn't really intuitive for everyone. We need to work with fathers to make sure they know how to be the best [fathers](#) they can be," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

More information: Lauren E. Altenburger et al, New fathers' parenting quality: Personal, contextual, and child precursors., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2020). DOI: [10.1037/fam0000753](https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000753)

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