

Dad's involvement with baby early on associated with boost in mental development

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Fathers who interact more with their children in their first few months of life could have a positive impact on their baby's cognitive development.

In a study, published in the *Infant Mental Health Journal*, researchers from Imperial College London, King's College London and Oxford University looked at how [fathers](#) interacted with their babies at three [months](#) of age and measured the infants' [cognitive development](#) more than a year later.

They found that babies whose fathers were more engaged and active when playing with them in their initial months performed better in cognitive tests at two years of age. The researchers say that while a number of factors are critical in a child's development, the relatively unexplored link between quality father-infant interactions at a young age may be an important one.

Professor Paul Ramchandani, from the Department of Medicine at Imperial and who led

the research, said: "Even as early as three months, these father-child interactions can positively predict cognitive development almost two years later, so there's something probably quite meaningful for later development, and that really hasn't been shown much before."

In the study, researchers recorded video of parents interacting with their children, with mothers and fathers playing with their babies without toys, at three months, and then during a book-reading session at two years of age. The videos were then observed independently by trained researchers, with different researchers at three months and 24 months grading the fathers on their interactions.

At two years of age, they scored the baby's cognitive development using the standardised Bayley mental development index (MDI) – which involved tasks such as recognising colours and shapes.

After analysing data for 128 fathers, and accounting for factors such as their income and age, they found a positive correlation between the degree to which dads engaged with their babies and how the children scored on the tests. Dads with more positive outlooks were also more likely to have [babies](#) who performed better on the MDI scales.

What's more, the positive link between involved dads and higher infant MDI scores were seen equally whether the child was a boy or a girl, countering the idea that play time with dad is more important for boys than girls, at an early age.

Dr Vaheshta Sethna from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London, said: "We also found that children interacting with sensitive, calm and less anxious fathers during a book session at the age of

two showed better cognitive development, including attention, problem-solving, language and social skills. This suggests that reading activities and educational references may support cognitive and learning development in these children."

Dr Sethna added: "Our findings highlight the importance of supporting fathers to interact more positively with their children in early infancy. Specifically, considering interventions which encourage increased father-infant engagement with shared positive emotions, and book sharing sessions supportive of cognitive [development](#)."

While the study provides a window into the effects of dad's involvement with baby, there were a number of limitations. Parents recruited to the study were drawn from a relatively well educated population. In addition, the measure of interactions were taken from relatively short videos, so may not represent how they interact in other situations.

The researchers are now working on a trial based on helping parents with their interactions with their [children](#) and then giving them positive feedback to help them deal with challenging behaviour.

Professor Ramchandani concluded: "For those fathers who are more engaged it may be that there is a lot more positive stuff going on in their lives generally. That might be the reason for the link, but we can't be sure of that. All we can say is that there is a signal here, and it seems to be an important one.

"The clear message for new fathers here is to get stuck in and play with your baby. Even when they're really young playing and interacting with them can have a positive effect."

More information: Vaheshta Sethna et al. FATHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS AT 3 MONTHS AND 24 MONTHS: CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AT 24 MONTHS, *Infant Mental Health Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/imhj.21642](https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21642)

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