

# Father Times

## Fathers and the World of Play

Issue 4

A newsletter for fathers and father figures of young children

### Taking Time for Play

Children love toys. They enjoy trucks, blocks, dolls, balls, dress-up clothes, puzzles — the tools of play. Toys and play activities provide young children with opportunities for learning. In fact, play is really the most important way that children learn about the world around them. Play is fun, but it also helps children grow and develop in many ways.

It has been said that play is a child's work. It is even more. It is a child's world. When do we see children most happy and growing? At play. When do we see children at their most creative? At play. What do most children ask parents to do?

Come and play. Play, in all of its many types and activities, is the cornerstone of a child's learning and development. Why wait? Go out and play!



### Once Upon A Time . . .

### All You Do is Play!

Libby and Mike had been married for five years before they decided to have their first child. Both had worked since high school and through college. Now, with most of their loans paid, they felt financially ready to have a child. Both had agreed that Libby would take a one-year leave from her job and spend her time with their baby. Everything seemed like it should work perfectly. And it did, for the first six weeks or so, as Libby recovered from the pregnancy and cared for their beautiful daughter.

Mike loved coming home to his wife and new baby. By the third

month, Amelia was smiling, cooing, and being incredibly fun. Libby was cleaning closets and cupboards with her "spare" time. By the fourth month, Libby was out of projects. She was also out of patience. She felt lonely because all of her friends were at work, and she took it out on Mike.

"All you do is go to work, come home, eat and play with Amelia!" she complained. "I do all of the bathing, changing, and most of the feeding, and you just play." She knew she did not want to spend the rest of her life like this.

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Mike tried to understand how Libby must be feeling. He also felt somewhat bound by their original agreement to have Libby stay at home and care for the baby. Amelia preferred to have Libby care for her because she was used to it. When Mike tried to diaper or feed Amelia, Libby would often correct the way he was applying the powder or holding the bottle.

It didn't take long for Mike to decide that Amelia's toothless smiles of delight when they played were far more rewarding than hearing about how he had done something wrong again in the care routine. Libby provided wonderful care, but said herself that she rarely took time to "just play." Mike felt that play was important for grown-ups as well as children, and began to see that his wife was most certainly missing out on this important element of life.

Mike waited for a calm moment and brought up the idea of Libby planning a fun night out with her friends once a week. Perhaps she could find a neighbor to walk with each day when he came home from work to take care of Amelia. He said he understood that she was very attached to Amelia and would probably want to be gone for only short periods of time at first. He promised that he wouldn't be offended. He also suggested that he himself could learn to do more

of the care routine when they were together. Mike vowed to ask for help if he needed it. Otherwise, he thought it might be good for Amelia to learn that both Mom and Dad were able to care for her.

As for "just playing," Mike and Libby decided to learn more about the importance of play by gathering some information on the topic from a local child care resource center. Here is what Mike found in *A Parent's Guide to Early Childhood Education*, by D. Dodge and J. Phinney:

When Children...	They Learn...
Smile and coo at people	How to engage others in interaction
Shake a rattle	Their actions produce results; to distinguish sounds
Throw toys on the floor	Principles of gravity; cause and effect
Look at picture books	Pictures represent real objects; words label objects
Roll a ball	How to gain control of muscles; round stuff rolls
Cuddle a stuffed animal	To rely on their own ability to seek comfort; to nurture
Build with blocks	Concepts of size, weight, symmetry, number and balance; muscle control and coordination
Dress up and play house	Small muscle, self-help skills; to recreate their own world
Pretend to be firefighters	Social roles; to work with others; share materials and communicate with other children

Mike noticed that as they made adjustments in Amelia's care routine, Libby had more personal time and seemed to feel more satisfied with life. Libby also no longer commented that all he did was "just play." And, thanks to these changes, Libby saw the importance of fun in her own life as well as her daughter's.

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## Fathers and Play

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Fathers are great play companions for children. Dads like to tickle, make faces, play games, wrestle, and engage kids in all kinds of play. This is what children need. In fact, play is perhaps the most important way that children explore and learn about the world around them. Play can be fun. Play is also fundamental to a child's growth and development. Some ideas for fathers playing with children at different ages include:

- **Babies, 0-6 Months** — Babies are most interested in human contact. They are very sensory and learn by seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. For the first few months, they need to be held and loved. The baby will delight at seeing your face and even try to imitate what your face is doing. Try a big yawn, wiggle your tongue, smile and make your eyes large. Babies know how to make even the toughest of us find our silliest voices and faces. Enjoy it. Your baby will! As your baby gains more control of her body, she will twist toward, kick, throw and swing at objects. She will enjoy some time alone with baby toys on the floor
- or a mobile in her crib. Remember that little babies need play companions — they need you!
- **Babies, 6-12 Months** — Around 7 months of age, babies will start to sit by themselves and will be able to pick up and drop items they are playing with. Hiding toys behind a pillow or under a blanket and then playing peek-a-boo with it can be good practice. Babies are learning that toys have permanence and can be found again. Infants at this age enjoy Dad's attention and playful interaction with different toys and sounds.
- **1 to 2 Years** — One-year-olds need parents and a stuffed friend for playmates. Children this age sometimes treat people like objects and may poke at another child's eyes or taste their arms just to see what will happen next. Dads are good for such exploration. This age is a very active time and children are learning to walk, explore, talk and relate to others.
- **2 to 3 Years** — Two-year-olds love to imitate adults. There are tools for toddlers for this very reason (they love to pound nails if they've seen Dad doing it). Watch what you do and say. Your shadow is learning from you. Give your children opportunities to use a variety of tools, toys and interactive games. Play lots of tag, gentle wrestling, or hide-and-seek.
- **3 to 4 Years** — Three-year-olds enjoy playing with other children but are not great at sharing yet. Adults should be present at all times to teach negotiation and problem solving during play. Children are not yet mature enough to handle play interactions all by themselves. Also, imagination is coming out — enjoy the stories!
- **4 to 6 Years** — Four- to six-year-olds love to have friends over to play. Their friendships are just becoming important. Playing cooperatively with other children is great fun. They enjoy children with similar skills and interests. They have great imaginations which requires close adult supervision. As children reach kindergarten age they need understanding parents who help them negotiate the daily taunts, such as, "If you don't play trucks with me, you can't come to my birthday."

## Toy Tips

Children do not need a lot of things to play with as they grow but do need a variety. They mostly need carefully selected, well-made and affordable toys that come from a variety of the categories listed below. *Remember: Not all categories of toys are appropriate for all ages.* This list is meant to give you ideas you may not have thought about offering your child before now.

- *Art and Craft Materials* (scissors, tape, glue, chalkboard/chalk, crayons, paper, play dough)
- *Audiovisual Materials* (recorded tapes, short videos about familiar themes like animals, babies)
- *Balls and Sports Equipment* (clutch balls, chime balls, see through balls, beach balls, kick balls)
- *Books* (Good variety, bright clean illustrations, few words to start, pop-up and homemade books)
- *Construction Materials* (cloth, rubber, wood, cardboard, snap-together blocks, pounding toys)
- *Dolls* (safe cloth cuddly dolls, plastic-body dolls to wash, clothing, etc. for older children's dolls)
- *Dressing, Lacing and Stringing* (lacing cards, stringing beads, toy to snap, zip, button, buckle)
- *Games* (matching games, card games, board games, dominoes, marbles, checkers, picture bingo)
- *Grasping Toys* (For babies only — rattles, open/shut toys, suction cup toys, knob puzzles, switches)
- *Mirrors* (non-breakable crib, hand, full length, for play props as well as self-awareness)
- *Mobiles/Visuals* (start 14" from baby, move it up as he grows, remove before he starts standing)
- *Musical Instruments* (rattles, bells, rhythm sticks, sand blocks, sturdy drums, crank music box)
- *Outdoor and Gym Equipment* (large foam blocks, tunnels, boxes)
- *Pattern Making Materials* (pegs, pegboard, magnet board and shapes, flannel board and shapes)
- *Play Scenes* (wooden or plastic people and animal shapes, vehicles, buildings and furniture)
- *Puppets* (safe and sturdy hand and finger puppets, mitten and sock puppets, theater, scenery)
- *Push and Pull Toys* (plastic push and pull toys, buggies, wagons for 4 to 6-year-olds' "work")
- *Puzzles* (wood, plastic, cardboard, knobs, start with two to three pieces — work up to more, number puzzles)
- *Ride On Equipment* (low, sturdy one year old toy, rocking horse, trike, bike with training wheels)
- *Role Play Material* (dolls and stuffed animals, toy phone, dishes, dress up, firefighter materials)
- *Sand and Water Play Material* (floating toys, sprinkling can, funnels, water pumps, sand molds)
- *Specific Skill Development Material* (nesting cups, shape sorters, prism, stethoscope, pulley)
- *Stuffed Toys/Play Animals* (washable cloth, sturdy rubber, vinyl or plastic, reptiles and dinos too)
- *Transportation Toys* (one piece, big wheels for babies, work machines, vehicles and trains for older kids)

## On Fathers and Play

What are children learning when they play? More than you might expect. Music and dance, arts and crafts, outdoor play — all of these play activities help children develop the physical, mental, social and creative skills a child needs. Research supports the importance of play for children's development, and fathers have a key role as play companions. Here are some key findings:

- Research on children's learning shows that play is not just the way children entertain themselves; instead, it is the primary way that kids learn about themselves, others and the world around them. Play helps to develop physical, mental, social and creative abilities in children.

- Most fathers naturally make good playmates for children. Fathers tend to focus on play interaction more than mothers or other caregivers. Children often prefer fathers as play companions because fathers are usually more active and stimulating in their play activity.
- Young children whose fathers are involved with them in play regularly tend to perform better in areas of problem solving, cognitive skills and exploration of the environment around them.
- Fathers feel most connected to young children through play as they engage in interactive activities such as playing tag or ball, recreational time such as sports activities or time together at the park, and educational activities such as board games or puzzles.

- Play with fathers is great practice for play with peers. Fathers who engage in high levels of physical play with their children, especially if their kids are having fun, tend to have children who are more popular with their peers. It is also important for fathers to have give-and-take with their children about the different play activities they do together. Dad and kids should alternate and be flexible about deciding what activity should come next.
- What is it that children learn from playing with their dads? A lot about their own emotions and the feelings of others. Research shows that because there is a lot of excitement and emotional ups and downs during play, children become more aware of their own and others' emotions. Fathers engaged in play with their kids can help kids recognize if someone is getting angry or upset. They can also show an example of directing your emotions or calming down, and resolving problems that might come up if play becomes too rough or wild.



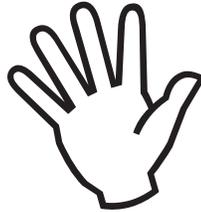
## Activities for Fathers and Children – *Play Time!*

This section provides a variety of activities that you can do to pursue play activities with your kids. Have fun as you play with your children!

- ❑ Catch your baby’s attention with a brightly colored toy. Move it back and forth in front of her. Hang interesting pictures over the changing area for her to look at. Talk about the pictures while diapering and dressing her.
- ❑ Recite the rhymes you remember — such as “Itsy-Bitsy Spider” or “Patty Cake” — and do them interactively with your child. Or make up your own using her name in the rhyme!
- ❑ Have older infants pick a piece of masking tape off the table or tray, then you can put it back on for them! This simple game can last a long time.
- ❑ Put some colored plastic balls in the baby tub. Use them to splash, toss, or play together.
- ❑ Create a homemade “noise and music” station. Provide rattles, plastic bowls, wooden spoons and other items kids can use to bang together, make noise and learn about sounds. Play with them and show them how to make different sounds and noises.
- ❑ Toddlers love to fill and dump. Use an old baby bathtub and some plastic containers for materials to dig and dump. Fill your homemade “sensory station” with bubbles, sand, water, cornstarch and water (mixed 2 to 1), cornmeal, beans, pasta — whatever suits you and is fun for you and your child. Add plastic scoops, spoons, hoops, and containers of all sizes and shapes. Playing outdoors with this means less indoor mess to clean up.
- ❑ An assortment of balls is great fun for all ages. Make up your own games that suit your children. Have few winner-loser games till children are age 10 or older. Children need to learn to cooperate first.
- ❑ Clean out your closet or drawers, and fill a box with dress-up clothes for your children. Let them dress you up too.
- ❑ Preschoolers and kindergartners love to explore with real tools. Dig out the binoculars, magnifying glasses, telescopes, and microscopes. Find different items in the yard or around the house to examine. Whatever you have that gives a closer look at something will fascinate this age, especially if Dad shows them how to use the equipment.
- ❑ Teach her how to write her name using paint brushes and water on the sidewalk or fence. Use sidewalk chalk to trace outlines of each other on the driveway or to send “picture” messages to each other.
- ❑ Play a board game such as Checkers or Candyland, or a game of marbles before bed each night. Talk about the games you played as a kid. Teach your child how to play.
- ❑ Sort buttons into a muffin tin or egg carton. Put all the round ones in one section, the blue ones in another spot. Decide together where the round blue ones should go. Use this activity to teach your child shapes, colors, and how to classify/categorize.
- ❑ While you are waiting, test your powers of observation. Take turns with your child closing your eyes and asking each other questions about the room you are in. What color are the walls? Is the clock digital or does it have hands? What is on the floor — carpet, tile or wood? Playing “question-and-answer” games such as “I Spy” or “What Animal Am I?” can be very fun for young children.

## The Little Turtle – A Finger Play

Finger plays, that use fingers and hands, are simple, rhythmic activities that children enjoy. Try the following with your child.



### The Little Turtle

There was a little turtle *(make a fist like a turtle)*

That lived in a box. *(draw a square in the air)*

It swam through the puddles *(swimming motions)*

And climbed on the rocks. *(climbing motions)*

It snapped at a mosquito. *(snap your fingers)*

It snapped at a flea. *(snap your fingers)*

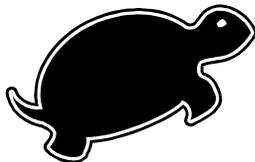
It snapped at a minnow. *(snap your fingers)*

And it snapped at me. *(snap towards yourself)*

It caught the mosquito. *(tickle your child)*

It caught the flea. *(tickle again)*

It caught the minnow. *(tickle again)*



But it didn't catch me.  
*(point at self, shake head no)*

### Story Time

## Books for Dads and Kids

*Pat the Bunny* by Dorothy Kunhardt

*Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?* by Dr. Seuss

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

*Harold and the Purple Crayon* by Crockett Johnson

*Good Night, Gorilla* by Peggy Rathmann

*Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes

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## Further Information on Play Books and Pamphlets

*Fun Play, Safe Play* (pamphlet). New York, NY: American Toy Institute. This pamphlet provides insights into toys as “tools of play,” an age-linked guide for toys to use with children, and safety guidelines in toy use and purchase. It can be ordered from the American Toy Institute, Inc., 1115 Broadway, Suite 400, New York, NY 10010.

*Keys to Becoming a Father* by William Sears, 1991. Hauppauge, NY: Barrons Educational Series, Inc.

*Partners in Play* by Rita Anderson and Linda Neuman, 1991. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, Inc.

*Play in the Lives of Children* by C.S. Rogers and J.K. Sawyers, 1992. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

*Play is Fundamental* (pamphlet) by Janet McCracken, 1992. Washington, D.C.: National

Association for the Education of Young Children. This pamphlet highlights the fundamentals of play and how parents can enhance play in the lives of children. It can be ordered by calling 800-424-2460 or on the Internet at [www.naeyc.org/](http://www.naeyc.org/)

*Playing to Learn: Activities for Parents and Children* (pamphlet series), 1997. Minneapolis, Minn.: MELD. This pamphlet series highlights activities that parents can do with children in play to promote growth and development. It can be ordered by calling 612-332-7563 or contacting MELD, 123 North Third Street, Suite 507, Minneapolis, MN 55401.

*The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8* by M. B. Bronson, 1995. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

*The Father's Almanac* by S. Adams Sullivan, 1992.

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