



Dads Can Make a Difference! Getting Dads of Children with Autism Involved in Intervention

Moms and dads are different.

When it comes to our kids, we have different ways of talking, playing, and interacting. I witness this on a daily basis in my own home. Just last night at dinner time I was trying to get everyone to the table, but no one was listening because my husband and young son were wrestling on the couch, while my other son was trying to get in on the action. They were all laughing hysterically and I stood there watching them and smiling, like an observer from another planet.

In a recent article, researchers Micelle Flippin and Elizabeth Crais summarized the differences between the ways mothers and fathers interact with their children, and the unique role they each play in the development of their children's social and communication skills [1].

Differences in Mothers' and Fathers' Interactions with Their Children

- **Fathers tend to use higher level language with their children than mothers** – this includes more complicated words, grammar, and questions. This may promote children's language skills – a 2006 study showed that the fathers' vocabulary directed towards their two-year-old children predicted the children's language at 3 years [2].
- **Fathers' language style is often more directive than mothers** – while fathers tend to direct the conversation, mothers tend to promote the conversation through questions and comments that focus on the child's interests.
- **Mothers and fathers play differently with their children** – fathers engage in more active, rough-and-tumble play as well as elaborated play that stretches beyond the physical

properties of the toys. In North America, the “playing role” in the family is more frequently associated with fathers than mothers.

These differences influence the way children interact with their parents:

- **Children tend to use higher level language with their fathers** – including longer, more complicated sentences and stories.
- **Children have more “communication breakdowns” with their fathers** – this may be due to the higher level language used in their interactions. However, these breakdowns may help children learn how to clarify misunderstood messages.

We know that mothers and fathers have different strengths and skills and that they both provide an important contribution to their child’s development. When it comes to children with autism, it seems only logical that we should help both mothers and fathers promote their child’s language at home.

So why is it then, that so much of early intervention in autism is focused on supporting mothers?

Flippin & Crais study children with autism, and they explain that

“mothers continue to be the primary and often exclusive participants in both autism research and early intervention...” [1, p. 25]

But they explain that there are several reasons why we should be including fathers more effectively in intervention with children with autism.

Why Include Fathers?

- **Fathers are more involved with their children nowadays** – while mothers have traditionally had a greater caregiving role in the family, recent statistics show that among fathers with a wife in the workforce, 32% are the primary caregiver for their children [3]
- **Responsive fathering results in better developmental outcomes for children** – this includes better development of thinking skills, language, and behaviour [4,5]
- **Mothers of children with autism may experience greater levels of stress than fathers** [1] – this could be because mothers have traditionally had a greater caregiving role in the family. But it could also be due to mothers’ greater involvement in their child’s intervention – this places unintended stress on mothers, as they add the role of therapist to their caregiving role.
- **Parents’ stress has a negative effect on children’s outcomes** – but Flippin & Crais feel that involving fathers in intervention will “help fathers feel more effective in their interactions with their child with ASD” [1, p. 45] and this will have positive effects on the whole family, including less stress for mothers and a stronger family bond.

- **Fathers are “uniquely suited to support the play development of their children with ASD”** [1, p. 33] – fathers have special ways of playing with their children, such as physical and rough-and-tumble play. This type of play can be very helpful and motivating for children with autism.

Intervention which Includes Mothers AND Fathers

We know that a child’s parents make all the difference in intervention because

- parents know their child best
- children have the best chance of reaching their potential within a supportive family [6]
- parents can provide intervention as effectively, if not more effectively, as a clinician [7](Read more about that [here](#))

But by involving only mothers in intervention, we are missing out on fathers’ unique strengths. Flippin & Crais make a strong case for including fathers in Autism intervention and explain that:

“if professionals are not involving fathers in early ASD intervention, they may be missing important opportunities to maximize social-communicative gains for these children” [1, p. 25].

They suggest that professionals make their intervention more father-friendly by choosing activities that will appeal to fathers and the way they play with their children, such as rough-and-tumble play or physical play. These fun physical games are sometimes referred to as “People games” and they are a great way to help build children’s interaction and communication skills. Children with autism tend to love People Games because they involve movement and sensations that appeal to the children’s sensory needs. To learn more about using People Games with your child, read our article [“R.O.C.K.™ in People Games: Building Communication in Children with ASD or Social Communication Difficulties”](#) [8].

Life is busy, and it’s not always possible for both parents to be a part of all aspects of intervention. But by ensuring that both parents are receiving support about ways to promote their child’s language at home, both parents can use their strengths to help their child reach his or her potential. If you want to find out more about the benefits of people games, take a look at the Hanen booklet, *Plan for People Play*.

This booklet offers examples of two dozen people games you can play with your child based on his sensory preferences (i.e. what kinds of sensations he enjoys). Detailed examples, illustrations, and

“Game Plan” templates make it easy for you to build your child’s social interaction skills while having fun with people games.

[Learn More](#)

References

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