


1996

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Glen F. Palm

St. Cloud State University, gfpalm@stcloudstate.edu

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Recommended Citation

Palm, Glen F., "Working with Fathers...Planning for Dads and Kids Together Time" (1996). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 7.
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Working with Fathers...

Planning for Dads and Kids Together Time

By Dr. Glen Palm,
Associate Professor, Child
and Family Studies,
St. Cloud State University,
St. Cloud, MN.

In Early Childhood Family Education Programs in Minnesota, the parent-child interaction component is seen as the *heart* of the program (Christensen, 1984). Parent-child interaction time is an opportunity for hands-on learning to take place in parent education with fathers. Men in interviews about learning to be parents (Palm, 1988) emphasized learning through experience as the primary route for learning knowledge and skills. Looking at pictures of father-child interaction time over the years I have often been struck with the warmth and intimacy that comes through as dads play and interact with their young children. Here are some typical scenes during father-child interaction time:

Three-year-old Ted and his father Jack are sharing a pretend meal of pizza, tacos, eggplant and oranges oblivious to the noise around them.

Kevin is playing floor hockey with his daughter Kendra. Kendra fires a slap shot that skips over her dad's outstretched stick and squeals with delight.

Jim holds a piece of wood while his 5-year-old son Nate concentrates on sawing off a small piece for a sailboat that they are making.

Marti giggles as she rides on her father's back across the gym floor as he crawls and barks pretending to be a "daddy dog" with 15 other fathers and children.

These scenes depict the fun and intimacy that is shared between father and child during parent-child time. This article will focus on planning fun and effective parent-child interaction time as a critical component of parent education for fathers of young children. This component is often paired with a parent education session, although parent-child interaction can be a stand alone special event. Many fathers are motivated to come to family education because it provides quality time with their child.

Fathers Learning Through Parent-Child Interaction

The major focus of parent-child interaction time is relationship building. However, there are a number of lessons that fathers may take away from this experience. They learn the value of spending focused time with their child doing activities that children enjoy. They bring home ideas that are developmentally appropriate, simple and fun. They discover through observation and experimentation which activities are most interesting for their children. Some fathers rediscover their own sense of childhood when they are led into their child's world of wonder and imagination exploring the world through dramatic play.

Fathers also have an opportunity to observe other men and are exposed to a variety of ways of relating to young children. Many fathers also take away a renewed sense of confidence and patience. Spending time with a child without the distractions of home life supports a father's sense of competence (McBride, 1990). Children also benefit both directly and indirectly from these lessons for fathers. As one father stated in a recent evaluation, he and his child take away "*shared memories.*"

Tips for Designing Father-Child Interaction Time

The thoughtful design of father-child interaction time is critical. The family educator should set a positive tone for these sessions. This should be a time for dads and kids to have fun together, a time to relax and enjoy each other's company. This message can be conveyed by careful preparation of activities and the environment and by clarifying expectations and roles as the session unfolds. The tips that follow reflect some of the lessons learned over the years about how to ensure that father-child interaction time is both fun and educational.

1. The activities should be **familiar and comfortable** for both dads and kids. It is important to start in a comfort zone for dads. Many men are comfortable in a gym doing large muscle activities. Others like working on craft or wood projects together with their children. A number of years ago I organized a session on creative movement (dance) led by a male dancer as a father-child interaction time. It was a step beyond the comfort zone for many of the men. While one of the goals of father-child interaction time is increasing the variety of activities, this stretching is best done in subtle ways after fathers have gained a sense of comfort and safety. Cooking with kids has proven to be a good way to stretch some dads. We start out with very simple projects like melting cheese on chips in a microwave or making a juice drink in a blender with ice cubes and then can move on to more complicated recipes and experimentation.
2. Make activities **simple and easy** to replicate at home. It is important to keep the projects simple with easy to find materials from around the house. For example, most of our wood projects can be made from "wood scraps" using basic tools such as hammers, saws and drills. To encourage and support the projects to be tried at home we provide a description of projects including materials and basic instructions. The fathers often add their own interesting twists to the basic designs as they become comfortable in exploring materials with their children.
3. Help fathers to **understand the different roles** that they may play during parent-child time. They may be a teacher showing their child how to sand the rough edges from a board. An observer, watching and encouraging their child painting a picture on a large mural. A playmate in the dramatic play area ordering pizza from their child who is running a pizza restaurant. It is important to let fathers know all of these roles are appropriate. Fathers can be encouraged to watch for signs from the child about what activities they enjoy and when they are becoming fatigued or frustrated.
4. Provide a **variety of different kinds of activities** so that dads and kids can explore and discover activities that are mutually enjoyable. We often design different stations around a theme such as the sounds of science where fathers and children can make different instruments, explore different sounds and make a recording of themselves singing. In addition to these choices we always have a typical preschool environment with dramatic play and other small motor activities as well as the gym with large motor activities. This variety allows most dads and kids to find an activity that can be fun and interesting for both of them.
5. **Some of the activities** can be **more product than process focused** in this context. In early childhood the emphasis on activities for children is on the process not the product. Some emphasis on products during interaction time seems useful because fathers enjoy working on a concrete product and kids take real pride in some of the projects that they bring home. For example a sail boat that a dad and child made together may rekindle fond memories for the child of the time she spent with dad making the boat. The importance of learning through process is addressed by providing other opportunities for experimenting with media such as finger paints or shaving cream. The more important goal here is building a father-child relationship that is often supported by working on projects that can be products to bring home. (See handout *Top Ten Activities for Young Children and Dads*, M&M 66.)

Roles of the Family Educator

The family educator continues to play an important role after the environment has been set up. The family educator has to be a sensitive observer to support father-child interactions without disturbing the father-child "dance" when all is going smoothly. The educator can step in and model how to do an activity but must also step back quickly. Provide a quick tip and not a long explanation. During the activity time there are a number of problems that may occur including, fathers who are easily distracted by adult conversation, fathers uncertain of how to set limits and fathers who are having a hard time tuning into their child's needs. There are no simple solutions for these situations (see Palm, 1992 for a variety of suggestions). The family educator must model a respectful attitude towards children and fathers when they intervene. Interventions should generally be brief with the primary purpose to reengage the father and child in an activity that is fun. It is important to provide fathers with some encouraging words when things are not going smoothly.

The bottom line of parent-child interaction time is to support healthy relationships between fathers and children (Levine & Pitt, 1995). The activities are a bridge to solid relationships between children and fathers. The key is to make the activities non-threatening, fun and mutually enjoyable to both fathers and kids. Parent educators set the tone for these types of events by modeling respect for fathers and children, a playful attitude and encouraging men to learn through observation and experimentation. While the list of activities described is for young children, father-child interaction could easily be expanded to include fathers and children in the primary grades. When fathers come back years later and report the fun they and their kids had, we can be assured that memories were built and relationships strengthened!

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Key Words: fathering,
parent-child interaction,
relationship building
(father-child)



Top Ten Activities for Young Children and Dads

1. **Sail boats** — Fathers and children cut small (4-6") pieces of narrow pine board (3-4" wide). They can drill a hole for a small 1/4" dowel (also 4-6" long). The sail material can be made from thick paper (plastic coated works best) with 2 holes punched to hold the sail in place on the dowel rod mast.



2. **Balloon rockets** — This is a fun "science" project using balloons, straws, a long piece of string or yarn (20-25' long) and clear tape. Attach one end of the yarn to a wall with tape. Thread the string through the straw, blow up the balloon and tape the straw to the balloon. Hold the string tight, count down and let the balloon go.

3. **Murals** — Find a smooth (or textured) wall space and cover with large sheets of paper. Children and dads can draw with a variety of different media (markers, tempera paint, water colors or cray-pas). It is fun to do this as a group work of art.

4. **Blender drinks** — A variety of drinks can be made from frozen juice concentrate, water and ice cubes in a blender. Experiment with different combinations of juice flavors.

5. **Name plaques** — Young children like to practice making their name. This project can be made from any long piece of scrap wood (8-12" depending on the name). The letters can be traced on the wood and sticks, glitter or beans can be glued to make the letters.



6. **Parachutes** — The parachutes are made from a thin plastic bag. Cut a square from the bag and tie a piece of string or yarn (12-15" long) to each corner. Then attach all four strings to a wooden clothespin. Fold up the parachute and throw it in the air and watch it float down.

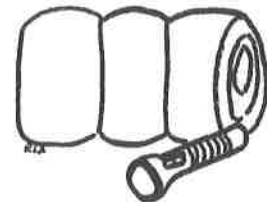
7. **Fruit & cheese kabobs** — Cut up fruit (apples, bananas, strawberries, grapes, pineapple) and small squares of a mild cheese. Use toothpicks and arrange a combination of fruit and cheese to eat off of the stick.

8. **Musical instruments** — Rhythm sticks are a favorite and easy to make from 1/2" or larger dowel rods. Cut dowel rods into 6-8" pieces. Sticks can be decorated with markers or colored tape.



9. **Shaving cream** — This is a simple but messy project that is easy to clean up. Children enjoy the texture and smell as they experiment with shaving cream on a smooth surface like a table. Color can be created by adding a few drops of food coloring.

10. **Dramatic play areas** — Camping is a popular theme with dads and kids. Set up a free standing tent, include props such as sleeping bags, backpacks, flashlights and pots with a pretend fire made from logs.



This handout is part of November, 1996 *M&M* section. Developed by Dr. Glen Palm, St. Cloud, MN
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