

Fathering is Child's Play

Source: [First Things First](#)

A young girl was touring the social worker through the home she and her father shared. When she came to her bedroom, she proudly showed the woman everything in her room. With big eyes and a smile from ear to ear, the little girl asked, "Would you like to see bombs away?" Hesitantly, the social worker said yes. "Come on Dad, let's show her," said the little girl.

Dad came over to the bed, grabbed his daughter's arms and legs and started swinging her. Finally, he let go as she yelled "Bombs away" and landed on her bed. Loud, gleeful laughter followed. With a horrified look on her face, the social worker said, "Stop! No! You should not be doing that." Both the father and daughter looked at her with troubled and quizzical faces and said, "We shouldn't be doing bombs away?"

"This is probably one of the best examples of the difference in how men and women view play with children," said Dr. Ron Klinger, founder of the Center for Successful Fathering and author of *A Common Sense Guide to Becoming a Successful Dad*, a training curriculum for dads called "Bonding through Play," and soon-to-be-released book for new dads, *Fathering for Life*. "Researchers tell us that children of all ages, from infants to high school, prefer play with dad over mom because it is unpredictable, physical, rough, Dad cheats, and it's fun. It is a test; it stretches you. You find yourself doing things you would never do. Most importantly, it is a playful form or preparation for the challenges our children will face in the real world."

Klinger contends that what the father was doing with his daughter was totally appropriate. While mothers are the initial primary caregivers and continue to be the nurturers and protectors, it is the father's job to engage his children in rough-and-tumble play and to encourage them to take risks. The challenge for many men is that nearly 80 percent of dads today did not grow up with a father who was actively involved in their lives. When moms say "Don't play so rough," most guys don't know to say – "But this is what I am supposed to be doing."

"The bonding with a child and their father is based on this rough-and-tumble play," said Dr. Klinger. "This playful interaction turns out to be very powerful in teaching independence, self-reliance and courage. It also encourages children to become more tolerant of frustration. The father is introducing the child to a world that is defined by adventure and adversity, not comfort."

Other benefits to children include:

- Building a bond of affection and trust with their father;
- Exposure to personal challenges such as riding a bike;
- Learning to be a successful risk taker;
- Building self-confidence;
- Girls growing up to be unintimidated by competitive men; and
- Becoming resilient.

“When a mother approaches her child, the infant’s heart rate begins to slow down,” said Dr. Klinger. “When a father approaches his child, their heart rate begins to race in anticipation of excitement and action. Babies need this to stimulate brain activity. I can remember when my own son would climb our spiral staircase and leap out to me below. The space separating us was only a couple of feet, but for him he was jumping from seven feet high. He was investing a huge amount of trust in me. Admittedly, this is the kind of thing that drives mom nuts, yet it is exactly what dads and children are supposed to be doing. Play is the antidote for anxiety.”

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