The Dad Factor by Richard Fletcher

This extract (abridged) from the first two chapters of Richard Fletcher’s book looks at what we know about how fathers connect to their babies.

If you were a father who wanted a good, solid bond with your youngster, what sort of information would help? Knowing something about what bonding is, how it works and so on, would be useful. But perhaps the first question would be, ‘Does it matter?’ Is bonding something that really has some science to it, or is it just a fad? This year parents are supposed to bond like crazy, but next year all the talk will be about making rules, showing the toddler who’s boss, or some new angle. And, is there only one kind of bonding or does it come in different-sized packages? Then there is the question of the pay-off for even trying to bond. Suppose you do go ahead and form a terrific bond with the little one; who’s to say there’s a result for all the effort? If not a guarantee, at least some connection between the two makes perfect sense. Imagine the father–child bond requires more effort. Although the footy count? Will the number of hours you spend watching him or her at Drama class put you over the line? Having some practical guidelines and straightforward explanation of how it is supposed to work might make a new father’s job a lot easier.

We are used to the notion that mothers bond with their babies. We see images of infants suckling at the breast, and the close relationship between the tiny baby and the mother is obvious. We can hear the intensity of a baby’s distressed cry for his mother, and the idea that there would be a special connection between the two makes perfect sense. But what of the father and the baby? Imagining the father–child bond requires more effort. Although advertising for products from computers to business suits now features good-looking young males holding babies, the intense connection between a father and his infant is less apparent. As well, our understanding of the processes involved in bonding is fairly new; it has taken neuroscientists, psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, physiologists, paediatricians, midwives, and a host of researchers more than 50 years to give us a clear picture of the ingredients for a successful connection between a baby and a mother. It is only recently that the father–infant bond has been investigated. We are still sorting out the way bonding works for fathers: in some senses it seems to be identical to the way mother–infant bonding develops, but there are also differences. Fathering, it turns out, is not the same as parenting….

PLAYING GAMES BUILDS BRAIN CONNECTIONS

Fathers seem to prefer to use games, physical contact and humour to interact with children. While the child’s physical coordination is still developing, fathers often adapt games to make them enjoyable. But with infants, especially newborn infants, fathers sometimes do not see the point of interaction, and are not sure how to become involved with a baby who cannot run, kick a ball or catch. This is where the usual two weeks’ paternity leave works against fathers. If you don’t spend time with your baby while she is awake, you might not get the opportunity to be a play partner who picks up the cup that is dropped onto the floor, a father whose glasses need to be retrieved from sticky hands, or one who can be ready to play when your little one is ready. It is through frequent practice that a father learns when and how to respond to his baby…..

A REAL SKILL

One of the earliest ‘games’ that you can play with a baby is imitation, and it is through imitation that the crucial links are made in your baby’s brain. Imagine that you are sitting in front of your young baby; she has had a feed, is not too sleepy, and is looking at you. If you poke out your tongue, you are likely to see something happen. Her tongue will appear, sometimes off to one side and maybe barely visible, but if you repeat the action you are likely to get another pink, poking tongue response. For many fathers this level of imitation seems like a minor achievement, hardly something to brag about. But when you think about what is involved, it is an amazing feat.