The research team is watching dads to understand the impact of play.

PICCOLO, a tool that measures parent-child interactions, began in the Research and Evaluation Division of the CPD and literally moved on to the world. Now, the research tool is taking on a whole new frontier: Dads. Dr. Lori Roggman, a professor in Utah State University’s Family Consumer and Human Development department and a CPD Faculty Fellow, led a research team on the original PICCOLO (Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations) project. From over 4,500 video clips of mothers with their young children, the team identified good things parents do to contribute to learning and healthy development. Eventually researchers developed a checklist to measure affection, responsiveness, encouragement and teaching. Now thoroughly road-tested, that checklist has been used by numerous programs all over the United States and even internationally. (It has been distributed in response to 118 requests for permission to use it at last count, and researchers from five countries have sought permission to translate it.)

The uses for the tool vary, but they all have something in common: they seek to measure—and encourage—good parenting. But the tool was primarily used to gauge a mother’s behavior. What about fathers, and that activity that dads do so well: play? “The same parenting behaviors that we established in PICCOLO are important for dads as well,” Roggman said. But research shows that dads spend a higher percentage of their parent-child time playing than moms do. (Moms spend more of their parent-child time taking care of the child.) Roggman wanted to understand how those play behaviors correlated to a child’s development. “Father research is this emerging area,” said Sheila Anderson, a doctoral candidate in the Family and Human Development department who is doing a dissertation associated with the PICCOLO-D project. PICCOLO-D seeks to understand parenting without forcing fathers into the same template as mothers. The research team is watching dads to understand the impact of a father’s parent-child play, like rough-and-tumble experiences, surprise, non-verbal touch, animated behavior and excitement.

And while the data the researchers have collected is still preliminary, Anderson said it’s safe to say fathers are important for children.

To get started, the researchers listed possible father behaviors and had practitioners rate them for importance. They also had ten father research experts do the same thing online. From there they developed a checklist of behaviors to watch.

As with the original PICCOLO project, the data will be gathered by watching and “coding” 1400 video clips of fathers with their young children. PICCOLO-D will identify the fathering behaviors that predict good results in a child’s problem-solving skills, vocabulary, and social behavior.

Both the PICCOLO and the PICCOLO-D tools are developed for the field so that professionals working with young children and their families will be able to measure what Mom and Dad are doing right.
It's an important angle to take, said Roggman, since giving parents advice on how to raise their children can be a touchy thing.

For more information on the PICCOLO and PICCOLO-D projects, contact Lori Roggman or Mark Innocenti. The research team that developed the original PICCOLO measure included Gina Cook, Mark Innocenti, Vonda Jump Norman, and Katie Christiansen. PICCOLO-D is run through the Family, Consumer and Human Development Department at Utah State University.