

# Evidence based practice summary – Why involving fathers is essential!

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## Fathers' attachment to their children

According to attachment theory a secure relationship is essential for a child's healthy development into adulthood<sup>i</sup>. In the past, studies surrounding the development of children have focused almost exclusively on a child's relationships with their mother. Today, fathers play a unique and crucial role in nurturing and guiding the child's development. Many researchers now believe that fathers can be just as nurturing and sensitive with their babies as mothers<sup>ii</sup> even though they may be expressed differently. Healthy child development relies on the roles played by both the mother and father respectively, whether they live together or apart. The early years of bonding and attachment are crucial to the developing child's brain which sets the blueprint for the rest of their lives.

Over the last couple of decades the emphasis has been taken off of father involvement (presence/absence) to father sensitivity. So rather than quantity of time spent with a child, it is the quality of time spent with a child that is important. As children grow, and develop, fathers take on added roles of guiding their child's intellectual and social development.

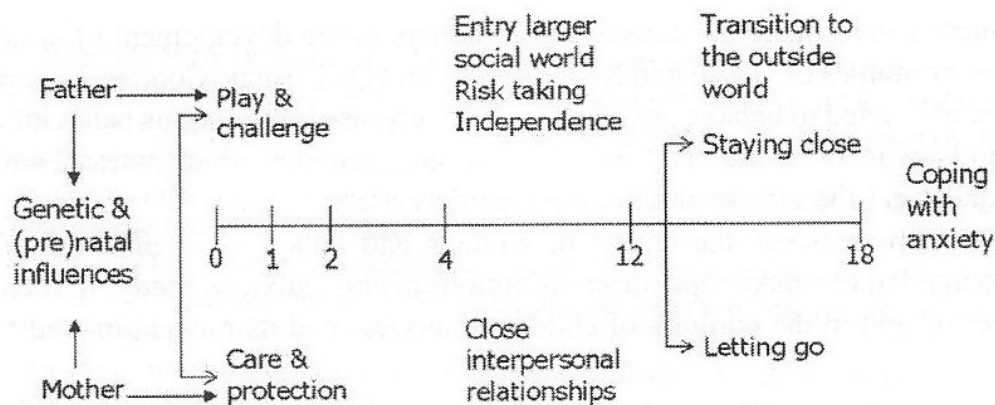
Traditionally, parenting approaches have previously emphasised the importance of the mother's role. However, it is now being recognised<sup>iii</sup> that the best outcomes for children are not as much linked to the amount of parental involvement but the quality of that relationship. While, a father maybe at work or travelling for many hours each day, they might provide their child with a positive view of the world, emphasizing that it is a safe place to live within.

When a father is 'just playing' with his children, he is nurturing their development. Mothers and fathers interact with their children in different ways, fathers tend to play more physically and induce more excitement from their children than do mothers<sup>iv</sup>. Fathers instill a sense of confidence to explore within relationships.

Studies on attachment have shown that there are no differences between fathers' and mothers' potential abilities to develop an attachment to their children. It has been shown that fathers and mothers in a representative population are equally able to form a secure base for their children<sup>v</sup>.

In the first years of a child's life, the mother often holds a child for the purposes of care taking and nurturing, whereas a father holds the child for the purposes of playing<sup>vi</sup>. The fathers' interaction is often more active, stimulating, exciting, teasing, challenging and may even at times scare or arouse anxiety in the infant. These experiences serve as an important purpose in children's lives, not just for their immediate care but also for their longer term development.

Traditionally attachment theory has emphasised the significance of safety, comfort and security as key factors in a child's development. It is now recognised that 'risk and exploration' are equally important factors and are often undervalued. Figure 1, highlights that the child's experience of the play and challenge experiences with their father support the development of independence, risk taking and the skills required for development throughout childhood into the larger social world<sup>vii</sup>. A key focus in understanding this today is the experience of 'rough and tumble play'.



**Figure 1: Different roles of fathers and mothers in their child's development (Bogels & Phares, 2008).**

## Rough and tumble play

Rough and tumble play is not equivalent to fighting between children. All mammals on the planet, especially the juveniles, have some form of rough and tumble play. In experiments, when rats are deprived from experiencing rough and tumble play, they are much more anxious and likely to socially isolate<sup>viii</sup>.

One father said "I know he wants to wrestle when he gets that gleam in his eye. I chase him into the bedroom and he throws himself on our bed. I play the bulldozer. I put my head down and push and push until he falls off the bed onto the carpet. Other times we do world wrestling. I push him down on the bed,, where I am going to slam him, but I do it really slowly, so that he has time to roll away before I crash down on the bed. There's lots of tickling too"<sup>1</sup>.

Rough and tumble play may involve:

- Wrestling, grappling, kicking and tumbling
- Has few rules
- Can be clearly distinguished as different to fighting
- Key emotion is enjoyment, not anger
- Involves dominance swapping (different people take turns in 'winning')
- Can involve the fathers teaching the skill of winning/losing with effort
- Is connected with the development of emotional self-regulation in children.

In summary, fathers' play with their children seems to promote an active, competitive, autonomous and curious attitude in children that is beneficial to the child's cognitive and social development. It also buffers early separation, stranger, and social anxiety<sup>ix</sup>. While the involvement of fathers has been associated with the rearing of boys, it is equally important for the girls. However while dads may be seen to have natural tendency to play with their children, they need to be more conscious of the important opportunity they have and actively develop more quality play experiences with their children. This is a key role that health professionals have in working with the family. An important measure is the amount of sole-time play the fathers have with their children, where they can develop their own confidence without the mother being present.

## Research about the value of involving fathers

It is now recognised that when men spend time in having the intimate care (hands on responsibility) of a new born children, it increases the level of oxytocin (also known as the love or trust hormone) in their body and decreases their level of testosterone. The mother's level of oxytocin also increases during birth and breastfeeding. However, the researcher found that oxytocin levels in mothers and fathers are triggered differently. High oxytocin levels in fathers is more often triggered by stimulatory parenting, such as tossing their baby in the air, while levels of oxytocin in mothers tended to correspond with affectionate actions such as soft hugs, caresses and baby talk<sup>x</sup>.

In summary, the evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal research in infancy, childhood, and adolescence suggests that the father has an equally important role in child development but a role that is different from that of the mother. In general terms the father's role can be described as one in which it is undertaken through play, challenge, risk taking, encouraging independence, and, later in development, by helping the child making the transition to the outside world<sup>xi</sup>.

A British study<sup>xii</sup> followed a group of British women since their birth in 1946. This study identified all sorts of information has been gathered on these women since infancy including their memories of how their parents behaved towards them up to the age of 16. The study found that if a father was very controlling, authoritarian, or didn't trust the child, then this led to lower scores of psychological wellbeing when the women were measured in their adulthood. However, the participants had very high levels of wellbeing when they had a relationship with a father who was trusting, respectful and appreciative while providing good guidance. This finding was irrespective to the quality of the relationship they had with their mother.

Indirectly, fathers also play a key role in the development of their children through the support they give the mother and the family. This support may be emotional, behavioural or financial. Even in post-separation contexts, it is critical for fathers to realise the on-going significance of this support and the role they continue to play in their children's lives.

Researchers and other professionals recognize that men as well as women can be engaged in caring for, and have healthy relationships with children. This, usually, is referred to as 'non-deficit perspectives' to fathering, where men take an active role in family life and the care of children<sup>xiii</sup>. Practitioners can be very important in helping fathers develop attachments to their children. This is facilitated by:

- Including information on fathers' roles in child development and child development in general.
- Helping fathers create a baseline checklist of their involvement activities with their children, so that they can see how they are progressing.
- Identifying and providing 'emotional space' to address loss (i.e. child or children, step-children, pregnancy, miscarriage etc).
- Including one-to-one sessions or 'turning-point moments' at any time with fathers when facilitating parent education groups<sup>xiv</sup>.

In summary, it is important to encourage fathers to develop strong attachments with their children as it will benefit not only the child but also the mother, the father and their relationship and connection to society in general.

# Involving fathers - Significant benefits for the whole family

Research<sup>xv</sup> indicates that fathers play a key role in raising active, vigorous, robust and thriving infants. Fitting with the research regarding risk and exploration attachment, infants seemed especially comfortable with, and attracted to, stimulation from the external environment. They could quiet and regulate themselves, but their appetite for engaging the outer world and bringing it into their own was especially sharp.

Eight-week-old infants can discriminate between their fathers and their mothers, and respond in a differential way to their approach. Yogman (1981) compared videotapes of comfortably seated infants' response to their mothers' approach and their fathers'. In anticipation of their mothers' picking them up, babies settled in, slowed their heart and respiratory rates, and partially closed their eyes. When they expected their father to hold them, babies hunched up their shoulders, widened their eyes, and accelerated their heart and respiratory rates. Parke and Sawin (1975) found that the more fathers participated in bathing, feeding, diapering, and other routines of physical care, the more socially responsive the babies were. Statistics also show that one of the most significant indicators of breast feeding rates at one and six months is the *fathers' attitude towards breast feeding*. For this reason, and many more, it is vital that we get dads involved in an increased capacity.

## Involving fathers improves support for mothers

Benefits for mothers when involving fathers in child birth are summarised<sup>xvi</sup> as being:

- Women whose husbands were present and supportive during labour were less distressed<sup>xvii&xviii</sup>.
- Labouring women benefit when they feel 'in control' of the birth process<sup>xix</sup>. A key component of feeling in control is experiencing support from their partner during the birth.
- Support during delivery provided by a 'close support person' (who can be, and often is, the baby's father) creates a more positive childbirth experience for the mother, with a shorter duration of delivery and less pain experienced<sup>xx</sup>.
- When the support person (including fathers) knows a lot about pain control, women have shorter labours and are less likely to have epidurals<sup>xxi</sup>.
- When women are more supported during child birth, they develop more positive attitudes to motherhood<sup>xxii</sup>.

### A home visit reflection

A reflection by a father who felt he had a role to play: "Our early childhood nurse was very supportive. When she did the first visit after the birth of our child, she engaged with both my wife and myself in how we can care for our son. After she discussed breast feeding with the mum, she turned to me and asked me to stand up and move to the other side of the room. She asked me to look at the angle of how my son was positioned on my wife's lap. She encouraged me to remember this, as it will be useful feedback if my son was not connecting with the breast and getting distressed. That weekend, that is what happened. My son was distressed; my wife was exhausted and was getting upset. I was able to stand back and encourage her to lift the head a bit more. It worked, and my son attached". In difficult situations, it is crucial to remind fathers to encourage the mothers to maintain breastfeeding and seek professional support.

Men need education about labour and childbirth processes so that they are aware of what to expect when they accompany their partners for childbirth. This understanding will enable them to better support their partners emotionally throughout the birthing process<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Ways to improve the support of the fathers<sup>xxiv</sup> are:

- In childbirth classes, have a short time where the mothers and support people can have separate small group discussions about how they can respond to the challenges of child birth and the theme or issue currently being discussed.
- Provide expectant father classes that cater for their information needs with easy-to-read handout and materials.
- Use practical examples in how men can be supportive. It is important to provide active examples for how they can support their partner through the birth process.
- Encourage the reflection and involvement of fathers in child birth classes. Fathers who have been prepared well to participate productively in the labour process tend to be more active participants, and their partners' birth-experiences tend to be better.
- Use the personal testimony of a mother and father who recently had a child, to talk to the next class about their reflections and experiences.
- Recognise the psychological boost the fathers can provide as a support person. Medical professionals greatly underestimate the psychological boost fathers give to their partners during delivery – as well as the practical support the men provide during labour, and afterwards.

## Involving fathers to support mothers with post-natal depression

When mothers have post-natal depression, the father's functioning as a support person is critical as the women often receive more support from their partner than from any other individual, including medical staff<sup>xxv</sup>. Some studies have shown that:

- A Canadian randomised control study found that involving partners in support programs for the mothers with postnatal depression. When the women's partner participated in 4 out of 7 psycho-educational visits, the women displayed a significant decrease in depressive symptoms and other psychiatric conditions<sup>xxvi</sup>. When only the women (and not their partner) received the intervention the general health of the depressed women's partners deteriorated. This effect was not found where the men were included in the intervention<sup>xxvii</sup>.
- A shorter length of hospital stay among women with pre/post-partial psychiatric disorders is strongly and positively correlated with supportiveness by their (male) partners. However, only 30% of these men are categorized by the researchers as supportive<sup>xxviii</sup>.
- A brief and inexpensive US intervention (one prenatal session, in separate gender groups focusing on psychosocial issues related to becoming first-time parents) was associated with reduced distress in mothers at six-weeks postpartum<sup>xxix</sup>.

Fathers, as well as the mothers, can experience physical and/or emotional disturbances. These may include:

- feelings of sadness
- anxiety
- irritability

- poor concentration
- changes to appetite
- sleeping difficulties
- increased intake of alcohol or drugs.

These feelings may be related to life changes, personal or relationship issues, fears or concerns either parent may have.

Encourage both the mother and father to:

- Work as a team to tackle this challenge in their life.
- Allow family and friends to support and help.
- Learn about post-partum depression and ways they can support each other.
- Share their thoughts and feelings with each other.
- Focus on their shared dreams for their child and family
- Spend time engaging in pleasant activities as a family.
- Create an environment that allows each of them to engage in positive interaction with their baby.
- Create an environment that allows each of them to have some time for themselves.
- Maintain regular contact with family and friends.
- Nurture each other.
- Go for a walk and eat nutritious meals.
- Take time out to rest.
- Join a group where they can have contact with other parents.
- Consult their local doctor, therapist/counsellor or nurse and develop supportive networks.

## **Making the most of parent leave opportunities**

Even though the Commonwealth Government have provided legislation that supports men having parental leave (2 weeks of paid leave at the minimum wage), many men still cannot utilise this opportunity as they are casual workers, self-employed or work in a context where employers are less supportive.

However parental leave should be encouraged by health professionals as it can have significant consequences for the whole family. The new parental leave legislation reflects the positive effects that occur when avail themselves of this opportunity<sup>xxx</sup>:

- Develop more stable couple relationships.
- Maintain higher levels of contact with children, should mothers and fathers subsequently separate.
- Adopt healthier lifestyle (by the father) and reduced mortality risk. There is a decreased risk of “all-cause mortality” indicators amongst men who take between 30 and 135 days of parental leave.
- Increase in the father’s role in caretaking throughout the child’s life.
- Women less likely to smoke or become depressed and more likely to breastfeed.

## Benefits for children's development

Due to the ethical challenges of conducting a study that measures children's outcomes, most studies have looked at improvements in fathers' skills or father-and-child interactions as 'proxies' for benefits to children<sup>xxxix</sup>.

Programs that involve fathers have observed the following benefits to children, have found<sup>xxxix</sup>:

- Improved social competence
- Reduced anxiety
- Higher self-esteem with the children
- Better health outcomes and reduction in obesity
- Increased cognitive benefits
- Healthier relationships with peers.

"Supportive, positive play interactions between fathers and their young children have also been associated with enhanced cognitive development and reduced delay among disadvantaged children. Research also suggests positive effects are ongoing throughout childhood and adolescence"<sup>xxxix</sup>.

### Sons and dads

Boys who have engaged, supportive fathers<sup>xxxix</sup>:

- Do better academically and achieve more financially rewarding employment.
- Have higher self-esteem throughout adolescence and their entire lives.
- Are less likely to be aggressive to other children or adults or get hurt themselves.
- Go on to form loving relationships with their partners.
- Have better coping mechanisms to help them get through the stresses of modern life.

### Daughters and dads

Girls who have connected, loving relationships with their father (or a male role model who is close to them):

- Have higher self-esteem.
- Rarely become pregnant as young teenagers.
- Become well-adjusted women who go on to seek loving relationships with a partner of their choice.
- Are less likely to be assaulted.
- Are more likely to continue their schooling and achieve academically.

## Importance of involving separated fathers

A 2009 longitudinal study of a group US of adolescents explored what impact closeness to their father had on their life<sup>xxxix</sup>. The study was well designed. The study controlled for the difference in age and how adolescents may respond differently to either the mother or father. It found that:

1. Adolescents who are close to their non-resident fathers report higher self-esteem, less delinquency, and fewer depressive symptoms than adolescents who live with a father with whom they are not close.
2. There was no difference between the two groups with respect to school grades, being involved in violent activities or substance use.



3. Adolescents living with a father with whom they are not close have better grades and engage in and less substance use than those having a non-resident father who is not close. At the same time, however, not being close to a resident father is associated with lower self-esteem compared to having a non-resident father who is not close.
4. Adolescents do best of all when they have close ties to resident fathers. A central conclusion of this study is that it is important to consider the quality of father-child relations among those who have a resident father when assessing the impact of non-resident fathers on their children.
5. Closeness to fathers reduces violence similarly in resident-father families and non-resident-father families.

## Childhood obesity

The obesity of the father is associated with a four-fold increase in the risk of obesity of sons and daughters. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a strong link between father and child weight problems in over 3,000 families across a four-year period was found<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

Similar to USA research in 2000, the father's BMI (Body Mass Index) is a better predictor of the sons' and daughters' BMI independent of the offspring's alcohol intake, smoking, physical fitness and father's education<sup>xxxvii</sup>. The fathers, (not the mothers) total and percentage body fat was the best predictor of changes in daughter's total and percentage body fat as well as the father's diet and enjoyment of physical activity.

This finding echoes other research that found that fathers' inactivity was a strong predictor of children's inactivity and has led to the significant focus on rough-and-tumble play. The research indicates that to successfully tackle obesity in children, fathers need to be part of the solution.

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