

The Importance of Fatherhood in Home Visiting

Often when we think of maternal and infant home visitation programs (herein referred to as “home visiting”), we picture visits to a new mom. This is because we picture mothers as being central to the child’s development. But, of course, fathers also have a direct impact on the economic, social, behavioral, cognitive and academic well-being of children. Recent research provides strong evidence for inclusion of fathers in the home visiting process and many home visiting programs reach out to fathers. Including fathers in home visiting programs is not only good for young children, it is an opportunity to positively impact the health and well-being of new fathers.

Economic Benefits for Families

In homes where a father is present, those in the household are less likely to be poor.¹ Especially for those in lower socio-economic brackets, having an engaged father is shown to decrease economic disadvantage.² Clearly, one-parent households, usually headed by a never-married or divorced mother, can be expected to have fewer financial resources than a family with a second parent in the household. There are just under 700,000 households with children in New York State that are headed by a single female.³ There can be severe consequences for household finances in homes without the income of a father.⁴

Social and Emotional Development Benefits

Children also benefit developmentally and emotionally from the presence of fathers. Children of involved fathers are more likely to be emotionally secure, more securely attached to their caregivers, more comfortable about exploring their environment, more easily comforted after a brief separation from their parent and more socially connected to their peers.⁵ Teaching fathers to respond to infants’ cues and to play with them can have positive benefits. These infants become more securely attached, and as a result are more comfortable in exploring their environment, providing the basis for additional learning. Studies suggest that infants who receive high levels of affection from their fathers are more sociable and popular with other children throughout their childhood.⁶ These children get into less trouble at home, in school and in the neighborhood.^{7, 8, 9}



Fathers tend to stress independence and self-sufficiency with an orientation to the outside world, in contrast to mothers, who tend to stress nurturing.¹⁰ School-aged children with strong attachments to their fathers are less likely to lie and to exhibit disruptive behavior. They are also less likely to exhibit depression and more likely to show pro-social behavior.¹¹

Cognitive Development Benefits

Chronic or severe stress early in a child’s life has a toxic effect on the young child’s developing nervous system that can have a life-long impact on their patterns of behavior. These events leave an imprint on a range of brain structures and functions.¹² Experiencing fear activates a physiological response in the young child, including increased production of cortisol, what is commonly known as “the stress hormone.” Chronic exposure to these types of stressors that result in increased cortisol production have a negative impact on the areas and structures of the brain that are essential to memory function.¹³ Fathers can provide an enhanced sense of stability and security for infants and toddlers that improves childhood outcomes.¹⁴

Academic Benefits

Engaged fathers can also have a positive impact on a child’s academic achievement.¹⁵ Children who have a father in the household are more likely to finish high school and attend college, and are more likely to find and keep a steady job.

Children with involved, loving fathers, when compared to children who have uninvolved fathers, are significantly more likely to do well in school. Infants and young children with committed, responsible fathers exhibit greater emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills.¹⁶ Toddlers with involved fathers go to school with higher levels of academic readiness, and they are more patient with handling stress associated with attending school than are the children of less involved fathers.¹⁷ The gains made with actively involved, nurturing fathers have been shown to persist into adolescence and adulthood, resulting in higher intellectual functioning, better verbal skills and higher academic achievement.¹⁸ A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that highly involved fathers had children who were 33% less likely to repeat a grade and 43% more likely to earn mostly “A” grades.¹⁹ Children of involved fathers are also more likely to avoid violence, drugs and delinquency.^{20, 21}

Daughters in homes where their biological father is present are less likely to disrupt the completion of high school to become teen mothers. Girls with involved fathers have higher self-esteem; boys who have involved fathers have fewer behavioral problems at school.²²

Fathers as Role Models of Positive Adult Relationships

The quality of the adult relationships in the home has an impact on the parenting style of both mothers and fathers. Fathers tend to be more involved when they have a good relationship with the mother of their children and tend to spend more time with them, which is psychologically healthier for children.²³ At the same time, moms who have a good relationship with the father of their children tend to be better mothers: more confident; more responsive and affectionate with their infants; self-controlled in their behavior; and better able to give children their emotional support.²⁴

Fathers also have an impact on their child through their modeling of positive relationships with the child’s mother. Boys who witness their father treating their mother with respect and affection are more likely to treat women with the same respect, and girls who witness these positive relationships are more likely to look for that type of positive relationship.²⁵

Supporting the Health and Well-being of Young Fathers with Home Visiting

Teen and young/early fatherhood is often associated with negative outcomes, including poorer educational and financial outcomes, employment challenges, added stress, and less stable marital patterns.^{26, 27} According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, about 70% of pregnancies in 2006-2011—where the father was a never-married man aged 20-24—were unplanned.²⁸ Fatherhood means shouldering a very long-term commitment to raising a child.



Home visiting programs provide an opportunity to promote the health and well-being of fathers, including adolescent fathers, through screening, support and consistent reinforcement. Providers can build on relationships established for the care of the child to provide support for both parents. Young parents are capable of making positive choices if the necessary tools are available to them. Potential areas for intervention include:

- Providing coaching in the father role;
- Teaching fathers about infant and child development and explaining developmental changes, thereby helping them to become better able to understand and interpret their child’s behavior cues;
- Enhancing constructive involvement with the mother of the child and the infant;
- Screening for depression, anxiety and other psychological/social-emotional disorders;
- Addressing parenting problems associated with an abuse or neglect history, or a family history of instability, conflict or violence;
- Ensuring access to full health services, including family planning and disease prevention and treatment information;
- Addressing responsible sexual behavior and delaying becoming a father again;

- Referrals to programs supporting educational completion, financial literacy and employment services;
- Overcoming obstacles to participation in medical, mental health and support services, including assistance with accessing insurance, transportation, and appointments;
- Overcoming resistance and reducing the stigma of accessing programs to address family issues;
- Offering workshops where fathers can come together and help each other understand the family changes brought on by the birth of a child; and
- Supporting the assumption of parental responsibility.

To achieve these ends, home visiting programs need to form effective partnerships with other health and human service agencies within the community. Other agencies in the community can help address the full spectrum of needs of new fathers, and help build stronger supports for early childhood development and for families.

A story from Healthy Families Allegany-Cattaraugus values the impact of father involvement in child development

Shane Lehman, Fatherhood Initiative Services Manager for the program says, "Originally, like most helping agencies, we were really focused on a "target child." That has changed. Now our focus is expanded to the whole family, beginning with our very first assessment visit. We always schedule our visit for when everyone is home, so all family members, including Dad, can participate. Dads need to know they are important in their child's development."

To reinforce that message, Fatherhood Advocates are available to the dads 24/7 via cell phone. This kind of availability helps build rapport, and lets fathers know that the program is serious about "being there" for them.

One Fatherhood Advocate, Mike, tells the story of a dad who was at first more concerned about getting his chores done than talking to Mike about his role with his child. So when the dad said he had to go out to the barn to get his chores done, Mike said, "Get you coat, grab your son, and we'll get it done!" After his initial shock that the advocate would work along side him, he quickly began to absorb the lesson that his son could learn a lot from him. Mike reports that the relationship between this father and his son has never been better. Says Mike, "Until then, he hadn't realized that he had something to teach him, and that learning can take place anywhere, even a barn. This dad now incorporates his son into everything he does and uses it as an opportunity for learning."

A story from Parents and Children Together (PACT) program at Lourdes Hospital

A couple with a young daughter enrolled in the program and was assigned a Fatherhood Advocate and a Family Support Worker. At first, Dad seemed a little withdrawn, but he continued to participate in the visits.

After several months, the couple broke up, contributing to general upheaval. Due to financial circumstances, Mom continued to live in the house in a separate room. The agency continued to visit the family, with the Fatherhood Advocate working hard to keep Dad involved.

Unfortunately, Mom got angry and hurt the child, who was immediately removed from her care by Child Protective Services. Mom was no longer allowed to be around the child without supervision. The Fatherhood Advocate continued with Dad, feeling that it would be beneficial to stay involved with him until the situation was more stable.

Mom ended up deciding to discontinue the program, so the Family Support Worker was dropped. Luckily, the Fatherhood Advocate had built rapport with Dad and was able to convince him to continue with the program on a month-to-month basis.

Now, eighteen months later, the family situation has stabilized, and Dad is still involved with his daughter and with the program. On a recent visit he gave the best commendation possible when he said to the Fatherhood Advocate, "I'm glad that you really stayed with me and pushed me. My daughter is the most important thing in my life, and I don't know if I would have been able to keep her out of foster care without you."

Clearly, father involvement saved this family from what could have been a painful separation.

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