

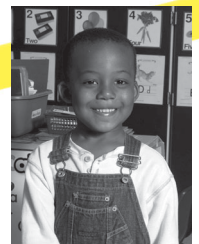
# Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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## **Fathers and Father-Figures: Their Important Role in Children's Social and Emotional Development**

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**SERIES**

**WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**

# Fathers and Father-Figures: Their Important Role in Children's Social and Emotional Development

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to be used to help teachers and other caregivers support young children's social and emotional development. In-service providers and

others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

*Lenny Ramano is a first-time father of an extremely energetic 4-year-old son, Angelo Michael. Lenny's own father was not very involved in his life, particularly his "school life," because Mr. Ramano worked long hours and his job necessitated that he travel often. Angelo Michael attends a Head Start program in the morning and a community child care program each afternoon. He loves going to school and talks about his teachers and friends frequently. He typically brings home artwork and books from the early childhood program, and at dinner, he shares stories of field trips and activities that occur at school.*

*Lenny wants to become more involved in his son's early childhood programs. He has tried on several occasions to talk with the teachers about volunteering on field trips, reading books to the class, or sharing his expertise as a chef with the class, but the teachers have not taken him up on his offers. He feels as if the teachers mostly share concerns and children's accomplishments with the mothers and do not really want parents to be very involved, especially fathers. For example, when the class was planning a field trip to the local planetarium, Lenny asked about coming along to help out. He was politely thanked for volunteering but told that there were plenty of adults for the number of children. Another time, he stayed a bit longer in the classroom when he dropped his son off, because Angelo Michael was rather clingy and did not want his father to leave. After about 10 minutes, a teacher moved close to where Lenny was sitting (just outside the circle for group time) and told him that she would take over now. He felt as if the teacher was suggesting that it was time for him to leave. Although Lenny realizes that he may be misreading things that the teachers say and do, he feels frustrated with not being able to get more involved. His wife, on the other hand, feels very welcome in the program and tells Lenny that she has no trouble talking with the teachers. The teachers, on the other hand, believed that they were being welcoming to the father by acknowledging his offers yet respecting his time and work schedules.*

## The Changing Role of Fathers

Over the past 50 years, the role of fathers and father-figures has changed dramatically. Early research centered on the role that fathers played in their children's gender identity and children's development. During the 1970s and 1980s, father involvement was often based on a deficit model, focusing on families without fathers present and the impact that father absence had on children's development. In recent years, the focus has shifted to a strengths-based approach, looking at the positive impact of father involvement and contribution to the day-to-day care of young children. Along with interest in the changing role of fathers, a change in the definition of "father" also has emerged. Now the term "father" is sometimes used more broadly to describe men who are important in the life of a child. This broader definition is in no way meant to undermine the importance of the role of the biological father in the life of a child. Instead, it serves to highlight the positive impact that men (e.g., grandfathers, uncles, and stepfathers) can have on young children. What has remained constant over time is the acknowledgment that parents, both mothers and fathers, are children's first and primary teachers. Every parent has a unique way of caring for and interacting with his or her child, with mothers and fathers typically interacting with their children in different ways. Although some fathers, like Lenny in the example above, wish to become actively involved in their child's school life, other fathers might not be as comfortable in this role. One can imagine a continuum of fathers from those who do not choose to be involved in their child's early care and education, to fathers like Lenny who desire to be more involved, to other fathers who are satisfied with their level of

participation. Care must be taken to determine the unique strengths, wishes, and concerns of each parent as early care providers strive to bridge the gap between early childhood settings and home.

## Fathers' Impact on Children's Social and Emotional Development

There are several ways to conceptualize fathers' impact on children. This Brief provides one way that emphasizes three areas to consider when thinking about father involvement. These three areas are discussed below. Some variations in programs and outcomes exist because of differences in the cultural, demographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the populations presented in the research.

### Engagement and Interaction

Many factors affect the level of engagement and interaction between a father and his child. Naturally, all fathers, like mothers, have their own way of interacting with and nurturing their child. Although play makes up the largest paternal engagement activity, providing basic care activities, such as bathing and feeding their child, comes in a close second. Over the past several decades, researchers have shown that levels of father engagement have significantly increased. Evidence shows that the quality of interactions in a father-child relationship positively impacts the cognitive, social, and moral development of young children. For example, when a child experiences positive interactions through play, reading a story, or singing a song, the bond between father and child increases. Also, a father's attitudes toward his child, his

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child's development, and the quality of these interactions are crucial to the overall development of positive social and emotional skills. Notably, the quality of father-child relationships also can impact the relationships that children have with peers. Social competence can be predicted to some extent by the quality of emotions shown between a father and his child during play. Lenny is a very social, outgoing father who frequently takes Angelo Michael to events in the community. Like his father, Angelo Michael is extremely social. He loves to play with peers and often can be found in the middle of a large group of playmates.

### **Availability and Accessibility**

Availability and accessibility refer to both physical and emotional presence. One can imagine a time when a young child enters the kitchen where her dad is busy cooking something and the child is told to find something to do and not bother the adult, or a time when a young child attempts to tell her parent a story but Dad is really "not there" as he watches his favorite television program instead.

The amount of time that fathers are accessible and the time that they actually spend with their child can be highly dependent on factors such as work schedules and variations in child routines. Recently, levels of availability and accessibility have increased as fathers are becoming more and more involved in the lives of their children. Fathers may have to be more creative when trying to find ways to spend time with their child outside of the home. For example, in our vignette, Lenny is willing to volunteer and help out at school so that he is able to spend more time with Angelo Michael.

### **Day-to-Day Care**

Now more than ever, fathers are taking an active role in the day-to-day care of their children. This is an excellent time for social and emotional skills to be developed. Fathers' responsibility for day-to-day care can be measured in two ways. Direct care, or actual physical care for the child, is measured in terms of the time fathers spend with their sons and daughters doing things such as bathing, feeding, and dressing children.

Indirect care includes things like arranging for child care, scheduling play dates, and talking with teachers on the phone about a child's experiences at school. In this way, fathers share responsibility for the other aspects of parenting, which are often complex and require planning. For example, knowing that a child needs to have vaccinations and a physical examination before school begins, a father schedules the appointment early in the summer, or realizing that summer camps fill up quickly in a community, he gets an application completed in early spring. These are areas where involved staff can assist fathers and mothers.

### **What Can Early Care Providers Do?**

Despite our beliefs about the importance of involving fathers in early care settings, fathers report receiving limited support from social services and early childhood programs. Early care providers should make a conscious effort to reach fathers in a manner that acknowledges them as skilled and knowledgeable caregivers. In our example, the teachers may feel that they welcome and support fathers, yet it is clear that Lenny is not satisfied with the type of support he is receiving in order to be more involved in Angelo Michael's classroom settings.

It also is critical to remember that not only do fathers impact the lives of their children, but also, children impact the lives of their fathers. For example, teachers might notice that the father of an

overly shy child is cautious when bringing the child into new situations or introducing the child to new people. Thus, the father adapts his behavior to support his child's temperament.

Early care providers should realize that a father's willingness and comfort when caring for his child on a day-to-day basis can depend in part on the level of encouragement that he receives from his spouse, as well as from other relatives, medical personnel, and the child's teachers. Therefore, it is important to support and encourage fathers like Lenny who are eager to try to take an active role in their child's education.

In the recent past, a great number of local efforts have been undertaken to support fathers' accessibility, engagement, and interaction with their children. For example, some programs host father nights, playgroups, and support groups. Since these programs are relatively new, little is known about how they are structured and what impact they have on fathers' behaviors. For those developing and implementing programs that support father involvement, there is a significant need for systematic evaluation efforts to determine what outcomes are being achieved.

Programs need to be clear about why they are concerned about reaching out to fathers and increasing father involvement. They need to emphasize the unique contribution each parent makes to his or her child, that is, what fathers do is sometimes different from what mothers do, and both are important. In addition, as fatherhood programs are created, it is critical that they be developed within a clear framework that has the potential to explain or predict the impact of the program. To develop this framework, early care staff should first assess the needs of the fathers they serve. Early in the year, ask fathers what the program can do to help, either talking individually with fathers or at a parent meeting. Staff should also ask if fathers are satisfied with the range of involvement options available in the early childhood setting. As staff develop and implement programs, they need to ensure that there is a logical fit between the needs of the fathers (based on the assessment) and the stated outcomes of the fatherhood program. For example, programs should evaluate if they are helping fathers to feel more comfortable playing with their children, and if they help fathers feel more confident in addressing their child's behavioral issues. Finally, the framework should include a process of evaluation that determines both the impact of the fatherhood program, as well as ways to improve it. Without this process, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of fatherhood programs, and it is difficult for the field to move beyond the current grassroots orientation of these efforts.

### **Who Are the Fathers Who Have Participated in Research in This Area?**

Research on fatherhood and the involvement of fathers and father-figures in early childhood programming has been conducted on a broad sample of individuals. Culturally diverse fathers from a variety of early childhood settings have participated in such research. When designing programs or considering strategies to support fathers in the development of their young children, the importance of adapting strategies to meet the unique needs of families cannot be overemphasized.

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**We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.**

### **Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?**

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources.

Practical information on including fathers can also be found on the following Web sites and in these books:

National Fatherhood Initiative: <http://www.fatherhood.org>

The Fathers Network: <http://fathersnetwork.org>

The Center for Successful Fathering: <http://www.fathering.org>

The Fatherhood Project: <http://www.fatherhoodproject.org>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Fatherhood Initiative: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/index.shtml>

Fagan, J., & Palm, G. (2004). *Fathers and early childhood programs*. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.

Horn, W. F., & Rosenberg, J. (1998). *New father book: What every new father needs to know to be a good dad*. Des Moines, IA: Better Homes and Gardens Books.

Levine, J. A., Murphy, D. T., & Wilson, S. (1994). *Getting men involved: Strategies for early childhood programs*. New York: Scholastic.

### **What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?**

For those wishing to explore the topic further, the following resources might prove useful:

Cabrera, N. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Bradley, R. H., Hofferth, S., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Fatherhood in the twenty-first century. *Child Development*, 71(1), 127-136.

McBride, B. A., & Lutz, M. M. (2004). Intervention: Changing the nature and extent of father involvement. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 446-475). New York: Wiley.

McBride, B. A., Rane, T. R., & Bae, J. (2001). Intervening with teachers to encourage father/male involvement in early childhood programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16(1), 77-93.

Parke, R. D., Dennis, J., Flyr, M. L., Morris, K. L., Killian, C., McDowell, D. J., & Wild, M. (2004). Fathering and children's peer relationships. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 307-340). New York: Wiley.

Pleck, J. H., & Masciadrelli, B. P. (2004). Paternal involvement by U.S. residential fathers: Levels, sources, and consequences. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 222-271). New York: Wiley.

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# **WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**





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## HANDOUT

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### **Why focus on fathers and father-figures?**

- ✓ Fathers and mothers are children's first and primary teachers.
- ✓ Every parent has a unique way of caring for and interacting with his or her child.
- ✓ Bridging the gap between early childhood settings and home requires that teachers determine the unique strengths, wishes, and concerns of each parent.



### **What is known about how fathers impact children's development?**

#### *Engagement and interaction*

- ✓ Play is the most frequent activity that fathers engage in with their children.
- ✓ The quality of interactions in a father-child relationship positively impacts children's cognitive, social, and moral development, including peer relationships.

#### *Availability and accessibility*

- ✓ Fathers can be both physically and emotionally present for their young children:
  - Physical presence refers to being in close proximity to the child doing things such as playing with puzzles, reading a book, or watching a video.
  - Emotional presence refers to being engaged with a child in a way that shows that the adult is truly listening to the child's story, paying attention to the artwork he is creating, or watching the "play" she is performing.

#### *Responsibility for day-to-day care*

- ✓ Fathers play a role in direct care and indirect care for their young children:
  - Direct care refers to attending to young children during routines such as feeding and toothbrushing.
  - Indirect care refers to activities that need to be done for the child such as arranging for a babysitter or child care and talking with early care providers about changes in a child's behavior at home.



### **What can early care providers do?**

- ✓ Be clear about why involving fathers is important to program staff.
- ✓ Acknowledge fathers as skilled, knowledgeable, and important caregivers.
- ✓ Recognize that fathers have an impact on cognitive, emotional, and social development, as well as child health.
- ✓ Make a conscious effort to reach out to fathers, seeking their feedback on how they would like to be involved.
- ✓ Actively demonstrate to fathers how they can have a positive impact. For example, use role play, video tapes, or handouts describing activities that young children enjoy.
- ✓ Systematically evaluate the needs that fathers have and the programs developed in response to these needs.
- ✓ Realize that each father has strengths, needs, and concerns — individualizing is key.