



Celebrating Fathers as a Resource in Early Child Care Settings

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When Marcus picks up his 18-month-old son Bryson from family child care, he always takes a little extra time to play with the toddlers who are outside. Marcus runs around, and the toddlers squeal with delight as they chase him. He gives each of them a gentle swing in the air before gathering Bryson and heading home. Marion, the family child care provider, watches and wishes she could involve more fathers in her program.

IN MANY CHILD CARE PROGRAMS, father involvement is still not on a par with that of mothers. For these programs, *parent* typically means *mother*. There are a host of possible reasons for this difference, including fathers' work schedules, a belief that child care is a mother's domain, and fathers feeling unwelcome or out of place in the child care setting.

Since engaging fathers in their child's care can be challenging, why do it? Because fathers—and men—are an important part of a child's world. Fathers interact with children differently than mothers. They tend to engage in more physically stimulating and unpredictable play, as observed in the vignette, at left (Goldberg et al. 2002). This type of play can help children develop independence, self-regulation, gross motor skills, and problem-solving skills.

Fathers shape children's development in other ways. Recent research found that in families with two working parents, when a child's father used a more varied vocabulary with him or her at age 2, the child had greater language skills at age 3 (Frank Porter Graham Center 2006). In addition, research done with fathers participating in Early Head Start services found that greater complexity in father-toddler play predicted better cognitive and social developmental outcomes for young children (Roggman et al. 2004).

Even without the research, it is clear that involving fathers in the everyday care of their children (whether at home or in center-based or family child care settings) benefits everyone. Programs should begin father engagement campaigns by assuming the best. All discus-

sions about father engagement should be based on the assumption that fathers want the best for their children.

THINK ABOUT IT

Think about the men you see in the lives of the children you care for. Are your interactions with fathers different from those with mothers? In what ways? Share some of your observations with a colleague, and see if you can brainstorm ways to engage the fathers whose children attend your program. You might also find some useful suggestions below.

TRY IT

- Focus on one or two fathers you feel comfortable with or whom you see on a regular basis. Ask them for ideas on what the program can do to be more father friendly. Then plan activities around fathers' interests. For example, one program invited a local motorcycle dealership to host a motorcycle "petting zoo."
- Actively recruit male staff members for infant/toddler classrooms. Recognize the important role that all male employees (in administration, maintenance, or other roles) play. Seeing other men working in a child care setting goes a long way in making fathers feel comfortable and welcome.
- Welcome dads, addressing them by name. Share the same information with them that you would with mothers. Be sure to tell fathers what they're doing right with their babies and toddlers: "Dunia has been saying *dada* all the time now. She is really crazy about you." New fathers, like new mothers, are doing their best and learning as they go.
- Invite fathers to share their hobbies, skills, or information about their jobs with the children. Display images of fathers in the classroom. Include stories about fathers and a range of family types in your book choices.
- Set up volunteer roles outside of the typical workday. For example, plan a Saturday Gardening Day when fathers can bring their toddlers to help plant flower and vegetable plants at the center.
- Host a monthly Mom's Morning Out, when fathers and babies come in on a Saturday morning for a group activity (perhaps led by volunteer instructors from a local children's gym). A breakfast event or a Dinner with Dad, held at the center or family child care home, can also work well.

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- Encourage staff to expand their language in the classroom beyond just *fathers* to include father figures such as grandfathers, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and even “a man who is important to or cares about you.”

- Offer problems to solve. Near the front door, post a few projects the program would like help with, such as mulching the center’s garden or building a new sandbox. One program that used this approach had a father with woodworking skills build a toddler-size picnic table for the playground.

- Involve men in the program infrastructure. Invite fathers to be involved in the child care steering committee and/or advisory board. Ensure that goals around father involvement are included in the mission and vision of the program.

Child care programs and family child care homes are ideal settings for giving fathers opportunities to be involved with their children in positive and loving ways. Men can swaddle, joke, rock, bounce, lift, comfort, care, and hold. Their ability to care *for* and care *about* their children is just as fierce and powerful as that of women but may not be

expressed in the same way. By making room for fathers in child care, we offer babies and toddlers the opportunity to build an even stronger connection with fathers who affect their lives so profoundly and whose involvement will influence them forever.

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