



Building Relationships: The Key to Engaging Fathers

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Larry, father of 3-year-old Jacob, proudly shares his feeling that his child's home visitor cares about his entire family—and that this caring increased his participation in Jacob's early childhood program. It's a sentiment we hear often as we interview fathers about how to build engagement.

Disclosing his hesitation during Jacob's enrollment, Larry emphasizes the importance of his relationship with his child and the early education provider. Larry sees his connection to Jacob as the foundation of other essential building blocks in Jacob's development. He also notes how important it has been for the home visitor to build a strong rapport with both Jacob and him. Larry especially appreciates that the home visitor has addressed Larry by his first name, provided information about Jacob's development while supporting Larry in deciding what is best for his family, and showed interest in Larry's work and hobbies.

Positive father involvement can promote healthy development of young children that goes above and beyond the benefits of mother-child interactions. This may be due at least in part to the unique ways fathers communicate, engage in physical play, and scaffold their children's cognitive skills, such as problem solving. By better understanding the ways fathers think about their parenting, early childhood educators can offer more support for the fathers of children in their programs.

The power of positive relationships

The more positive relationships fathers have—with their own parents, their children, and their children's teachers—the greater fathers' involvement with their children. Based on interviews we conducted with a diverse group of fathers in lower-income, less flexible careers (such as those in the restaurant and construction industries), we developed the following three principles early childhood programs can use to encourage fathers' engagement in their children's education.



Principle 1: Fathers' relationships with their parents are influential

Eighty percent of the fathers we interviewed mentioned their own parents as being influential in their fathering roles, with some noting positive interactions with their dads as particularly important. For example, a 33-year-old father of two who works full-time reported that his positive childhood relationship with his father served as a model for his interactions with his toddler: “My dad has always been good . . . he would come home and would play with us, even though he was tired. And I say that if you give time to your child, that is what will be the most valuable to them. Although one gets tired, one must have strength.”

For some fathers, their childhood relationships with their mothers also played a significant role in their parenting choices. A 39-year-old, stay-at-home father of three reflected, “I grew up in a good home. My mom had her challenges . . . like every mom does. But she wanted her kids' [childhood] to be better than hers, so she instilled a lot of those values in us.”

Questions for program staff to explore:

- In what ways does the program encourage fathers to explore their family histories and upbringings?
- In what ways does the program welcome the participation of extended family in activities?

Positive father involvement can promote healthy development of young children.

Strategies to employ:

- Encourage families to explore family traditions, including the traditions they want to continue and those they would like to replace or update.
- Ask fathers how they hope their children will describe them in 10 years.
- Assist fathers in exploring their childhood relationships with their parents and how those histories may be influencing their parenting styles.



Principle 2: Fathers place high value on building positive relationships with their children

When asked which potential benefit of early childhood education programs was most important to them, fathers overwhelmingly chose support in strengthening positive relationships with their children. For example, one father described building a positive relationship with his children as “the most important thing of all.” Another father stated that the most important thing is for “the dad to have . . . a close relationship [with his child] . . . for the educational side and for brain development, and all of that comes from a good relationship with the parent.”

Questions for program staff to explore:

- How do fathers define positive relationships?
- How do staff members engage in discussions with fathers about the relationships they have with their children?
- What steps do staff take to encourage father–child relationships?

The more positive relationships fathers have, the greater their involvement with their children.

Strategies to employ:

- Engage in frequent conversations with fathers about the types of relationships they have or want to have with their children.
- Strive to understand and support fathers in developing their own ideas of what a positive father–child relationship looks like. In other words, how do fathers describe the connection they want with their children?
- Explore stereotypes or misconceptions that are interfering with fathers building the relationships they want with their children.
- Consider providing a workshop for fathers, specifically driven by topics fathers feel are important or that may encourage the types of connections they are looking to build with their children.



Principle 3: Supportive relationships with early childhood staff encourage fathers to participate

Positive relationships between early childhood staff and fathers can promote fathers' participation in program activities. Fathers in our study highlighted the support home visitors offered them by answering their questions, providing resources, assisting them with their child's development, serving as role models, and dedicating time just for them as fathers. When these supportive relationships with staff were established, some fathers even reported changing their work schedules in order to participate in home visits and other program activities.

Questions for program staff to explore:

- How are staff interactions with fathers similar to or different from staff interactions with mothers?
- What opportunities are provided for fathers to connect with program staff?
- Do fathers see themselves or other men represented in the early childhood staff or in the classroom?
- Are programs focused on the well-being of the family as a whole?

Fathers find positive relationships meaningful, especially when those relationships involve their children.

Strategies to employ:

- Communicate directly with fathers. Greet them by name and use the word *fathers* to let them know they are included. (Also use terms such as *caregivers* to be sure all of the important adults in children's lives are welcomed and respected.)
- Have activities or tasks for fathers to do when inviting them to events; many fathers like to know that there will be something concrete for them to do when they arrive.
- Make sure all program materials and policies are inclusive (for example, leaving space for both parents and other primary caregivers to sign documents).
- Specifically ask fathers (and all other primary caregivers) about their experiences when discussing their children's development.
- Ask fathers about topics beyond their children's development (hobbies, work, summer plans). Listen to what fathers in the program have to say about their children, their own lives, and other experiences.

Conclusion

Fathers find positive relationships meaningful, especially when those relationships involve their children. Building positive relationships with fathers can bring them closer to their children and increase their participation in early childhood programs. While fathers may face barriers to their involvement, it doesn't mean they don't want to be involved or won't attempt to make adjustments—especially if they have a connection to the program and to the staff.

This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation standards and topic areas

Standards 1: Relationships; 7: Families

- **1A:** Building Positive Relationships Between Teachers and Families
- **7A:** Knowing and Understanding the Program's Families

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