Building Blocks for Father Involvement

Building Block 1: Appreciating How Fathers Give Children a Head Start

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> [Fathers] are the single greatest untapped resource in the lives of American children. Natural, renewable, and by and large nontoxic, they couldn't be healthier for the country's children. We can't afford to let another one get away.
>
> *—Kyle D. Pruett, M.D., Yale Medical School*

Overview

Nearly 30 years ago, leading child psychologist Michael E. Lamb reminded us that fathers are the "forgotten contributors to child development."[1] Since then, much work has been done to explore the ways fathers uniquely contribute to the healthy development of their children. Scholars now know that boys and girls who grow up with an involved father, as well as an involved mother, have stronger cognitive and motor skills, enjoy elevated levels of physical and mental health, become better problem-solvers, and are more confident, curious, and empathetic. They also show greater moral sensitivity and self-control.

As they grow, well-fathered children are substantially less likely to be sexually involved at an early age, have babies out of wedlock, or be involved in criminal or violent behavior. They are much more likely to stay in school, do well there, and go to college.

Fathers can help Head Start programs become more effective in achieving positive outcomes for children. Head Start programs can help to strengthen the parenting partnership, and help fathers to be more effective in their children's lives.

These five *Building Blocks for Father Involvement* will support Head Start programs in their efforts to promote father involement. *Building Block 1* provides up-to-date research on the essential role that fathers play in the healthy development of their children.

It is important that Head Start staff and parents understand the importance of the parenting partnership and why fathers are essential to children's well-being. This knowledge will help them to better meet the needs of families and children.

Photo by D. Mentzer, NRC.

Photo by W. C. Seigel, Alexandria HS

Father involvement has a unique impact on children's outcomes, including cognitive development, achievement, math and reading scores, as well as behavioral problems. The fact that this benefit is here should raise concern to those who do not have these resources.

—W. Jean Yeung, Sociologist, University of Pennsylvannia

How Father Involvement Improves Child Well-Being

There is a substantial body of research literature documenting the positive benefits fathers bring to the lives of their children. A review of studies on father involvement and child well-being published since 1980 found that 82 percent of these studies showed "significant associations between positive father involvement and offspring well-being…"[2]

An analysis of over 100 studies on parent-child relationships found that having a loving and nurturing father was as important for a child's happiness, well-being, and social and academic success as having a loving and nurturing mother. Some studies indicated father-love was a *stronger* contributor to some important positive child well-being outcomes.[3] Weinraub, in "Fatherhood: the Myth of the Second Class Parent," states that "There is no doubt that fathers are important contributors to child development. In particular, fathers significantly affect the development of sex roles, cognitive abilities and achievement motivation."[4]

School Readiness and Behavior

Children who have an involved father in their lives in the early years show up for school with more of the qualities needed for learning. They are more patient, curious, and confident. They are better able to remain in their seats, wait patiently for their teacher, and maintain interest in their own work.[5]

Educational psychologist Paul Amato explains that this higher level of self-control in school children with involved fathers was also associated with many other healthy qualities, such as improved general life skills, self-esteem, and higher social skills.[6]

Kyle Pruett, in *Fatherneed*, reports on another major scientific study that linked positive fatherhood involvement with:

- Lowered levels of disruptive behavior, acting out, depression, and telling lies;
- Obeying parents, being kind to others, and being responsible;
- Fewer behavioral problems in young boys; and
- Girls being happier, more confident, and willing to try new things.

Over the past four decades, fatherlessness has emerged as one of our greatest social problems. We know that children who grow up with absent fathers can suffer lasting damage. They are more likely to end up in poverty or drop out of school, become addicted to drugs, have a child out of wedlock, or end up in prison. Fatherlessness is not the only cause of these things, but our nation must recognize it is an important factor.

—President George W. Bush, June 2001

Pruett concludes, "Positive father care is associated with more pro-social and positive moral behavior overall in boys and girls."[7]

Cognitive, Motor, and Verbal Development

Psychologist Ellen Bing was one of the first scholars to explore how fatherhood impacts child well-being. In the early 1960s, she found that children who had fathers who read to them regularly were more likely to do much better in many important cognitive skill categories than children who did not have fathers who read to them. Interestingly, one of the strongest benefits was a substantial increase in a daughter's verbal skills.[8]

A study nearly ten years later, published in *Developmental Psychology*, found that both well-fathered preschool boys and girls had increased verbal skills compared with kids with absent or overbearing fathers.[9]

Ross Parke's research shows that father involvement in the early months of a child's life contributes to increased intellectual, motor, and physical development.[10]

Henry Biller, noted fatherhood researcher, finds time and again that father-involved children are more confident and successful in solving complex mathematical and logical puzzles. This may be because fathers tend to be more specialized in and have a higher interest in analytical problems. Norma Radin found that high father involvement contributed to higher mathematical competencies in young daughters.[11]

Michael Yogman conducted a study of the role fathering plays in overcoming the effects of prematurity in Latino, African-American, and other inner-city populations. When he followed up with these preemies at three years of age, Yogman found that kids with highly involved fathers had substantially higher cognitive skills than those children who did not have involved fathers.[12]

Michael Lamb found that preschool children who had involved fathers had higher cognitive competencies on standardized intellectual assessments.[13]

Photo by T. Santiago, Tolentine HS

The single biggest social problem in our society may be the growing absence of fathers from their children's homes because it contributes to so many other social problems… Without a father to help guide, without a father to care, without a father to teach boys to be men, and to teach girls to expect respect from men, it's harder.

—President Bill Clinton, October 1995

Security, Confidence, and Attachment

Infants who have involved fathers in their lives for the first eighteen to twenty-four months of life are more secure and are more likely to explore the world around them with increased enthusiasm and curiosity than children who did not have close, involved fathers. Father's active play and slower response to help the child through frustrating situations promotes problem-solving competencies and independence in the child.[14]

Making Wise Life Choices

Research from the University of Pennsylvania found that children who feel a closeness and warmth with their father are twice as likely to enter college, 75 percent less likely to have a child in their teen years, 80 percent less likely to be incarcerated, and half as likely to show various signs of depression.[15]

"A white teenage girl from an advantaged background is five times more likely to become a teen mother if she grows up in a single-mother household than if she grows up in a household with both biological parents."[16]

The likelihood that a young male will engage in criminal activity doubles if he is raised without a father and triples if he lives in a neighborhood with a high concentration of fatherless families.[17]

"The research is absolutely clear…the one human being most capable of curbing the antisocial aggression of a boy is his biological father."[18]

The research is absolutely clear… the one human being most capable of curbing the antisocial aggression of a boy is his biological father.

—Shawn Johnston, Forensic Psychologist

Photo by B. Blanken, Higher Horizons HS

Development of Empathy

A long-term study started in the 1950s found that the strongest indicator for a child being empathetic later in adulthood was warm father involvement in the early years of the child's life.[19]

In a 26-year-long study, researchers found that the number one factor in developing empathy in children was father involvement. Fathers spending regular time alone with their children translated into children who became compassionate adults.[20]

Kyle Pruett, after reviewing the large body of research on father involvement and child development, concludes "these findings take us beyond a shadow of a doubt" that fathers play an important and irreplaceable role in healthy child development. He adds, "the closer the connection between father and child, the better off they both are now and in the future."[21]

The Problem of Fatherlessness

Just as it has documented the many benefits of positive father involvement, the research is clear on father absence and its negative consequences for children.

How Many Fatherless Children Are There in America?

- The United States is the world's leader in fatherless families.[22]
- Tonight, some 24 million children (approximately 34 percent of all children) will go to bed in a home where their father does not reside.[23]
- Nearly 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year.2[4]
- More than half of all children who do not live with their father have never been in their father's home.[25]

Percentage of children living apart from their biological fathers (by race):[27]

African-American children:	66 percent
Hispanic children:	35 percent
White children:	27 percent.

- Single mothers are the primary caregivers in 84 percent of all single-parent families.[26]

Fatherless Family Growth Over the Decades

- From 1960 to 1996, the number of children who lived in homes without a father or stepfather rose from 7 million to nearly 20 million. However, since the mid-1990s, the number of children in fatherless homes has leveled off.[28]
- The number of children raised by single mothers more than tripled between 1960 and 2000—from 5.1 million to 16.2 million.[29]
- In 1960, only 4 percent of single mothers had never been married. In 2000, this number was up to 41 percent.[30]

Photos (left to right) by D. Mentzer, Higher Horizons HS; B. Beavers, Dane County Parent Council HS; and W.C. Seigel, Kentucky HS

Father absence is an American problem that crosses racial, ethnic, and class lines. All across the United States, fathers are quietly disappearing from the lives of their children.

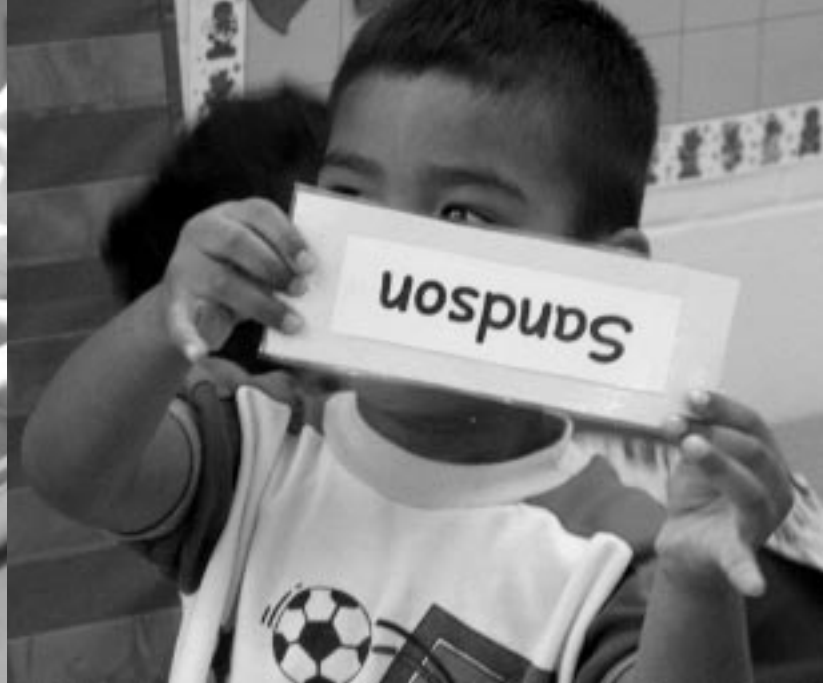
—Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America
A Statement from the Morehouse Conference on African American Fathers

Good News

The percentage of children under the age of 18 who were raised by only a mother was steady from 1985-1990. This number dropped eight percent between 1995-2000.[31]

Attitudes Toward Fathers and Fatherlessness

- Sixty-four percent of Americans believe that the rise of single-parent families is very problematic.[32]
- A poll conducted in 1999 found that 77 percent of Americans feel that upsurges in divorce and single parenting have weakened family connectivity.[33]
- When asked to name the adult "you most look up to and admire," only 20 percent of children in single-parent families named their father, compared to 52 percent of children in two-parent families.[34]
- Seven in ten adults believe a child needs a home with both a mother and a father to grow up happy.[35]



How Father-Love Is Different From Mother-Love and Why It Matters

Mothers and fathers parent differently, and this difference is a big benefit for children.

Fatherhood is just as essential to healthy child development as motherhood. The professional journal, *Review of General Psychology*, finds that "Evidence suggests that the influence of father love on offspring's development is as great as and occasionally greater than the influence of mother love."[36] Fathering expert Dr. Kyle Pruett explains in *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*, "Fathers do not mother."[37] *Psychology Today* states that, "Fatherhood turns out to be a complex and unique phenomenon with huge consequences for the emotional and intellectual growth of children."[38] Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the world of child psychology, explained that father love and mother love are qualitatively different kinds of love. Fathers "love more dangerously," Erikson states, because their love is more "expectant, more instrumental" than a mother's love.[39] A father, as a male biological parent, brings unique contributions to the job of parenting a child that no one else can provide.

These are some of the most compelling ways father involvement makes a unique and positive difference in a child's life.

Fathers Parent Differently

The mother/father difference provides an important diversity of experiences for children. Dr. Pruett explains that fathers have a distinct style of communication and interaction with children. By eight weeks of age, infants can tell the difference between their mother or father in interactions. This diversity, in itself, provides children with a broader, richer experience of contrasting relational interactions—more so than for children who are raised by only one parent. Whether they realize it or not, children are learning at an early age, through experience, that men and women are different and have different ways of dealing with life, other adults, and children.

Fathers Play Differently

While mothers and fathers are both physical with their children, fathers are typically physical in different ways. Fathers tend to play with their children, and mothers tend to care for them.

Photos (opposite page, left to right) by W. Siegel, Kentucky HS; W. Siegel, HI HS.

Over half of all children born in the United States today will, if current trends continue, live apart from at least one of their biological parents–usually the father–before they reach adulthood.

—Sara McLanahan, Princeton University

Photos by W. C. Siegel, Honolulu Community Action Program, Inc. HS

Generally speaking, fathers tickle more, they wrestle, and they throw their children in the air (while mothers warn "Not so high!"). Fathers chase their children, sometimes as playful, scary "monsters." Fathers are louder at play, while mothers are quieter. Mothers cuddle babies, and fathers bounce them. Fathers roughhouse, while mothers are gentle. Fathers encourage competition; mothers encourage equity. Fathers encourage independence while mothers encourage security.

Fathering expert John Snarey notes that children who roughhouse with their fathers learn that biting, kicking, and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable.[40] They learn self-control by being told when "enough is enough" and when to "settle down." Fathers help girls and boys learn a healthy balance between timidity and aggression. Children need mom's softness, as well as dad's roughhousing. Both provide security and confidence in their own ways by communicating love and physical intimacy.

Fathers Build Confidence

Go to any playground and listen to the parents there. Who is often encouraging kids to swing or climb just a little higher, ride their bike just a little faster, or throw just a little harder? Who is encouraging kids to be careful? Mothers tend toward caution while fathers often encourage kids to push the limits. Either of these parenting styles by themselves can be unhealthy. One can tend toward encouraging risk without consideration of consequences. The other tends to avoid risk, which can fail to build independence, confidence, and progress. Joined together, they keep each other in balance and help children remain safe while expanding their experiences and confidence.

Fathers Communicate Differently

A major study showed that, when speaking to children, mothers and fathers are different.[41] Mothers typically simplify their words and speak on the child's level. Fathers are not as inclined to modify their language for the child.

Mother's way facilitates immediate communication. Father's way challenges the child to expand his or her vocabulary and linguistic skills—an important building block of academic success.

Father's talk tends to be more brief, directive, and to the point. It also makes greater use of facial expressions and subtle body language. Mothers tend to be more descriptive, personal, and verbally encouraging. Children who do not learn how to understand and use both styles of conversation will be at a disadvantage, because they will experience both of these styles as they enter the adult world.

Fathers Discipline Differently

Educational psychologist Carol Gilligan tells us that fathers stress justice, fairness, and duty (based on rules), while mothers stress sympathy, care and help (based on relationships).[42] Fathers tend to observe and enforce rules systematically and sternly, which teach children the objectivity and consequences of right and wrong. Mothers tend toward grace and sympathy in the midst of disobedience, which provide a sense of hopefulness. Again, either of these by themselves is not good, but, together, they create a healthy, proper balance.

Fathers Prepare Children for the Real World

Generally speaking, fathers tend to see their child in relation to the rest of the world, while mothers tend to see the rest of the world in relation to their child. For example, mothers are often very aware of things from the outside world that could hurt their child (e.g., violence, lightning, accidents, disease, strange people, dogs or cats). Fathers, while not unconcerned with these things, tend to focus on how their children will or will not be prepared for something they might encounter in the world.

Fathers often help children see that particular attitudes and behaviors have certain consequences. For instance, fathers are more likely to tell their children that if they are not nice to others, kids will not want to play with them. Or that, if they don't do well in school, they will not get into college or land a good job. Generally speaking, fathers help children prepare for the reality and harshness of the real world, and mothers help protect against it. Both are necessary as children grow into adulthood.

Fathers Provide a Look at the World of Men

Men and women are different. They eat differently. They dress differently. They smell differently. They cope with life differently. Stereotypically, fathers do "man things" and mothers do "woman things."

Girls and boys who grow up with a father are more familiar and secure with the world of men. Girls with involved fathers are more likely to have healthier, more confident relationships with boys in adolescence and men in adulthood. This is because girls have a greater opportunity to learn from their fathers how men should act toward women. They understand from experience which behaviors are inappropriate. Girls raised by involved fathers also have a healthy familiarity with the world of men. They don't wonder how a man's facial

Photos (left to right) by W. C. Siegel, Honolulu Community Action Program, Inc. HS; C. Dyer, Higher Horizons HS; T. D. Summers, Child-Adult Resource Services

Many studies conclude that children with highly involved fathers, in relation to children with less involved fathers, tend to be more cognitively and socially competent, less inclined toward gender stereotyping, more empathetic, and psychologically better adjusted.

—Review of General Psychology, 2001

stubble feels or what it's like to be hugged by strong arms. This knowledge builds emotional security and safety from the exploitation of predatory males.

Boys who grow up with dads are less likely to be violent. They have their masculinity affirmed and can learn from their fathers how to channel that masculinity and strength in positive ways. Fathers can help boys understand appropriate male sexuality, hygiene, and age-appropriate behavior. It can be difficult for mothers to teach these things to their boys.

Fathers Can Teach Respect for the Other Sex

Research consistently shows married fathers are substantially less likely to abuse their wives or children than other men.[43] This means that boys and girls with married fathers in the home are more likely to learn by observation how men should treat women.

Girls with involved fathers, therefore, are more likely to select good boyfriends and husbands because they have had a good model by which to judge all candidates. Fathers also help weed out bad candidates. Boys raised with fathers are more likely to be good husbands because they can emulate their fathers' strengths and learn from their shortcomings.

The *American Journal of Sociology* finds that, "Societies with father-present patterns of child socialization produce men who are less inclined to exclude women from public activities than their counterparts in father-absent societies."[44]

Fathers Connect Children with Job Markets

A crucial point in life is the transition from financial dependence to independence. This is usually a gradual process, spanning from about 16 to 22 years of age. Fathers can help connect their children—especially boys—to job markets as they enter adulthood. Fathers often have the kinds of diverse community connections needed to help young adults get their first jobs. When dad is not around, boys may be less likely to have the connections and motivation necessary to land a summer job.

Fathers are far more than just "second adults" in the home. Involved fathers –especially biological fathers–bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring. They provide protection and economic support and male role models. They have a parenting style that is significantly different from that of mother, and that difference is important in healthy child development.

—David Popenoe, Sociologist, Rutgers University

Conclusion

As noted sociologist David Popenoe explains, "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers–especially biological fathers–bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring."[45] Fathers make substantial contributions to the lives of their children. Children are impoverished developmentally when they are deprived of their father's love.

The *Review of General Psychology* states, "Many studies conclude that children with highly involved fathers, in relation to children with less involved fathers, tend to be more cognitively and socially competent, less inclined toward gender stereotyping, more empathetic, and psychologically better adjusted."[46]

Fathers help children attain all the positive outcomes that Head Start programs do. Fathers can help Head Start programs become more effective. Head Start programs can help fathers be more effective in their children's lives. *Building Blocks 2-5* will help programs to prepare, plan, and sustain their efforts to make fathers a key and effective part of their missions.

Where are the dads? Where should they be? Daddy, you should be where your children are.

—Herman A. Sanders,
Daddy, We Need You Now:
A Primer on African-American Male Socialization, 1996

Reading List: Resources on Understanding Why Fathers Matter

Paul R. Amato and Fernando Rivera, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 375-384

Ronald J. Angel and Jacqueline L. Angel, *Painful Inheritance: Health and the New Generation of Fatherless Families*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993)

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Kyle D. Pruett, *Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child* (New York: The Free Press, 2000)

Ronald P. Rohner and Robert A. Veneziano, "The Importance of Father Love: History and Contemporary Evidence," *Review of General Psychology* 5.4 (2001): 382-405

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Promoting responsible fatherhood is the critical next phase of welfare reform and one of the most important things we can do to reduce child poverty.

—Former Vice President Al Gore, June 2000.

Endnotes

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Notes

Notes