

Dad Allies Learning Series

The Parallel Journeys of Fathers and Their Children Across the Years

February 10th, 2022

11:30-1:00 PM

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WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION FOR
Infant Mental Health

The Parallel Journeys of Fathers and their Children across the Early Years



WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION FOR
Infant Mental Health

Washington Association for Infant Mental Health (WA-AIMH)

Vision

All young children in Washington experience healthy development through nurturing relationships with one or more loving, capable, and consistent caregivers.

Mission

WA-AIMH supports the professionals and systems that nurture healthy beginnings in life, because early relationships matter.



Agenda

- I. Father-child relationships and children's development
- II. Emotional and relational journey of fathers from prenatal through early childhood
- III. Influences on becoming and being a father
- IV. Role of providers and systems in supporting fathers



What do young children need to grow and thrive?

Fathers and children's development

Fathering impacts all areas of children's development

- Communication and language
- Learning and cognition
- Relationships and social-emotional skills

Fathers impact children

- Directly (father-child relationship, provision/protection)
- Indirectly (coparenting relationship, family system)
- Uniquely



Children develop in the context of relationships



Father-child relationships are important

When relationships are important, they are

- Valued
- Attended to
- Supported



What do fathers need to grow and thrive?



Reflections to hold in mind

- *What shows up in your work? What are you already doing to support father-child relationships?*
- *How might you stay mindfully aware of the emotional and relational experiences of children and fathers who are in this journey?*
- *What more might you do to explicitly value, attend to, and support father-child relationships?*

Diverse pathways to fathering



Fathers...

- Exist in many kinds of family systems.
- Bring their own unique personal story to fathering.
- Experience many different factors within their systems that can contribute to risk or resilience.

Developmental tasks of the early years

Babies/children

- Develop a sense of trust and security
- Develop a sense of self
- Begin to develop emotional and behavioral regulation
- Build positive relationships with others
- Engage in exploration and learning

Fathers

- Develop a sense of self as a father
- Provide care and protection
- Establish trust and security
- Get to know this baby
- Provide co-regulation
- Support exploration and learning
- Father with and within systems

Infant/early childhood mental health defined

The developing capacity of the child from birth to 3* to:

- experience, regulate and express **emotions**;
- form close and secure interpersonal **relationships**;
- and **explore** the environment and learn—

all in the context of **family, community**, and **cultural** expectations for young children.

Father-child attachment relationships

- Enduring emotional bond between THIS child and THIS caregiver.
- How care is sought and given.
- Emerges from a history of interactions.
- Developmentally-expected and culturally-bound.
- Creates mental representations (internal working models).





Internal working models (IWMs)

Babies/children

- *What do my feelings mean?*
- *Will I be okay? Am I safe?*
- *Does what I do matter?*
- *Can I trust you? Will you care for me?*
- *Am I worthy of your love and care?*
- *Is the world safe?*

Fathers

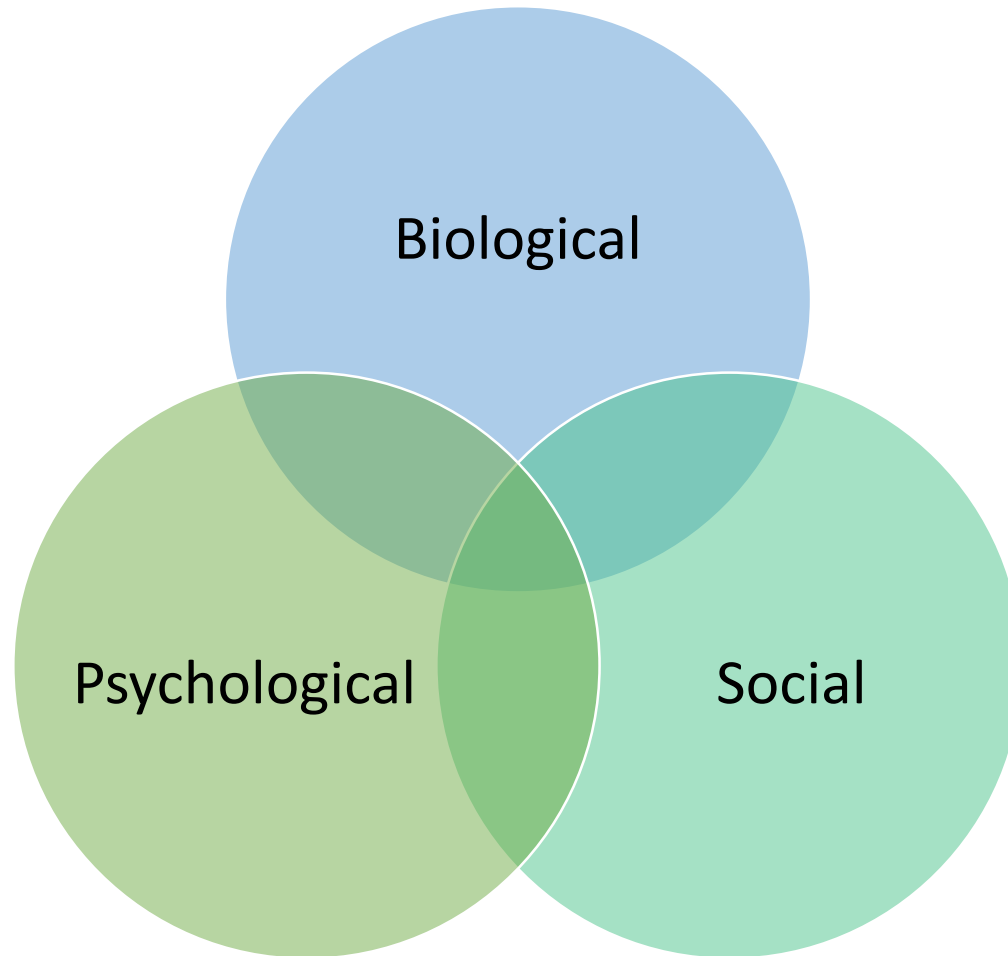
- *What does this child want from me?*
- *Can I meet those needs?*
- *Does what I do matter?*
- *Who am I to this child?*
- *How am I as a father—am I good enough?*
- *How am I perceived as this child's father?*

ABCs of father-child relationships



- Affect
 - *What is the emotional climate within this relationship?*
- Behavior
 - *What behavioral styles emerge in father-child interactions?*
- Connection
 - *How do fathers' and children's emotions, behaviors, and cognitions contribute to "relational synchrony"?*

How fathering impacts fathers



The beginning of relationships

- Even before the baby arrives, the foundations of the father-child relationship are being formed.
- How fathers think and feel about the developing baby is related to their relationship with the baby after birth.
- Promoting feelings of closeness to and investment in the baby prenatally can set the stage for positive father-child relationships.



The perinatal context



- Depends on
 - Pregnancy circumstances
 - Coparenting relationship
 - Life circumstances
 - Relationship history
 - Trauma history
 - Culture
 - Capacities
 - Supports and resources
- Includes challenges and protective factors.

The neurobiology of early bonding



- Adults are biologically driven to want to care for their babies.
- Brain changes activate the neural networks that support mentalizing, empathy, and mirroring.
- Oxytocin (“bonding” hormone) is released by involved caregivers during pregnancy.

Thoughts about the baby and fathering



- *Who will this baby be?*
- *What will this baby be like?*
- *Who will I be to this baby?*
- *How will I be as a father?*
- *How will this baby fit into the family?*
- *How will life change after this baby arrives?*

Prenatal stress and mental health

- Preparing for fatherhood includes a psychological reorganization, complex emotions, and emerging changes.
 - Up to 20% of expecting fathers report high levels of anxiety.
 - 10% experience a prenatal mood or anxiety disorder.



The prenatal experience



- Many complex changes!
- Shaped by
 - Expectations
 - Interpretations
 - Meaning
- This emotional journey impacts
 - The actions and reactions of fathers as they prepare for the baby and after the baby arrives.
 - The developing father-child relationship.

Promoting prenatal bonding

- Encouraging fathers to
 - Become aware of the baby's patterns of movement.
 - Talk to their baby.
 - Talk about their baby, with increasing individuality.
- Help to normalize some of the challenges of the prenatal months.
- BUT, listen carefully for how fathers describe their feelings about the pregnancy, their baby, themselves as fathers.

Early fatherhood

- Childbirth experiences
- Transition to parenting
- Fathering across the early years



A father's experience



The fourth trimester

Life changes for babies

- Sights, sounds, smells, textures
- New feelings (hunger, cold, movement)
- New touch, decreased contact
- Physiological demands

Life changes for fathers

- Exhaustion
- New tasks/routines
- Relationships
- Family dynamics
- Identity
- Isolation

Born ready to relate



- Babies are born with the ability and motivation to communicate, respond, and form relationships.
- Early relationships provide the fundamental experiences for building neural networks that support learning and social-emotional well-being.

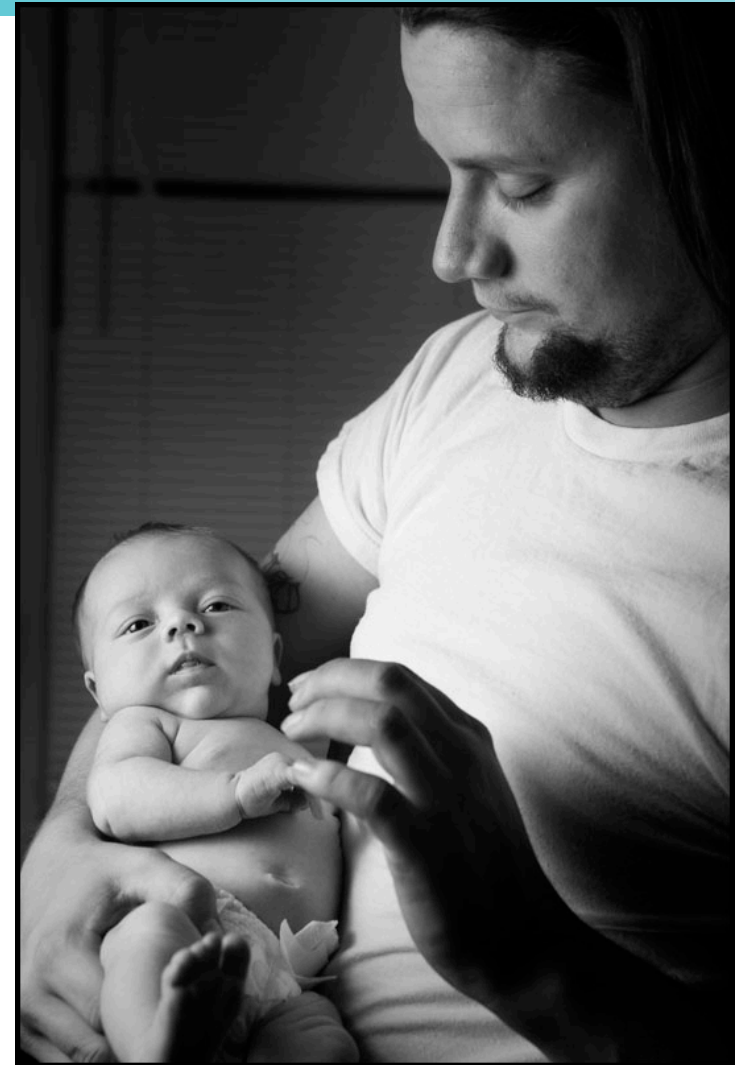
Developmental tasks of early fathering

- Physical, practical, psychosocial adjustments
- Getting to know baby
- Providing care and co-regulation
- Establishing the father-child relationship
- Caring for other relationships
- Caring for self



The parental brain

- Neurobiological changes of early parenthood:
 - Lowered physiological reactivity to stress
 - Increased sensitivity to infant cues
 - Increased sense of bonding and closeness through contact and nurturing care
- Promotes responsiveness and the ability to provide sensitive care and co-regulation, which impact baby's neurological pathways.



Building attunement



Getting to know baby, getting to know oneself as a father

- Focus on understanding baby as an individual
 - *What do you think your baby is experiencing or feeling right now?*
 - *What do you think your baby is telling you?*
 - *How does your baby usually respond to...?*
 - *What do you think makes your baby unique?*
 - *What do you think makes your relationship with your baby unique?*
- Supports paternal competence and confidence
 - Fathers as experts in their baby
 - Increased attunement
 - More sensitive care that meets baby's needs

A child's sense of self is organized around two largely unconscious assumptions: the trust that the parents are capable of raising the child well and the conviction that the child is worth this care.

~Lieberman & Van Horn, 2008, p. 12



Family risks in the postpartum period

- Challenges of the postpartum period can
 - Increase economic and other stressors
 - Exacerbate family conflict
 - Increase the likelihood of mental health issues or substance use/relapse
 - Lead to isolation



Fathers' needs in early parenthood



- Can be critical supports to mothers/caregivers, but also have own needs.
- Programs often engage men only in a “supportive” role, or not at all.
- Supporting men in their fathering role:
 - Less depression
 - Greater bonding
- Active, positive engagement of fathers is good for fathers, babies, and families.

Fathering across early childhood

- Emerging developmental competencies and needs of children require new ways of fathering.
- Father-child relationships can face new challenges, and new opportunities.
 - *Affect*
 - *Behavior*
 - *Connection*





A father's journey

Becoming and being a father

How are men prepared for fatherhood and supported in fathering?



1,000 touches



Influences on fathering

- Childhood experiences in caregiving relationships
- Male socialization
- Father identity and beliefs about fathering
- Father and child characteristics
- Coparenting and maternal gatekeeping
- Broader ecological systems – family, community, work
- Historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context
- Professional gatekeeping



Psychological presence in the context of physical absence



- Divorce
- Military deployment
- Hospitalization and treatment
- Foster care
- Incarceration

Attending to father-child relationships

- *How does the child engage and respond to the father? How does the father engage and respond to the child?*
- *How much joy do they share?*
- *How does the child use the father when they are distressed? How effective is this?*
- *How does the father talk about the child? About fathering?*
- *What is the emotional experience of the child in this relationship? What is the emotional experience of the father in this relationship?*

Supports for fathers

- Ensure that fathers feel seen, heard, and held – always
 - *What does this father need?*
- Attention to each caregiver, and the family system
- Provide prenatal education, developmental guidance, resources
- Promote shared positive experiences with their children
- Support fathers' competence and confidence
- Attend to mental health and encourage fathers' self-care

Providers and systems of care

- Early parenthood is a critical and often receptive time for supporting fathers.
- *How might we be devaluing, marginalizing, or missing opportunities to support fathers and father-child relationships?*
- *How do we value, attend to, and support father-child relationships? How do these translate into program and policy goals and actions?*





What shows up in your work? What are you already doing to support father-child relationships?

How might you stay mindfully aware of the emotional and relational experiences of children and fathers who are in this journey?

What more might you do to explicitly value, attend to, and support father-child relationships?



Thank
you!

