

Fatherhood and Early Childhood Development

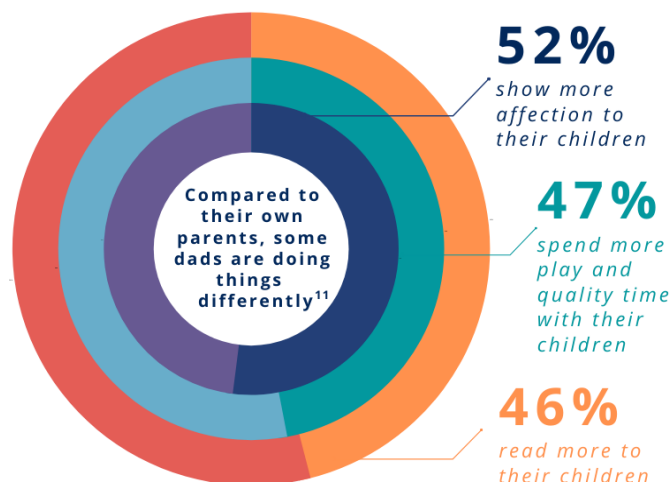
The Washington Interagency Fatherhood Council

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What do we know?

The early stages of a child's development have lifelong implications for health and well-being. An infant's environment, interactions and formation of relationships, activities, and experiences from birth into toddlerhood influence whole-body health and are essential for brain development, resilience-building, and other physiological functions.¹ As infants test communication capabilities, such as through gestures and babbling, how parents and adults respond, or fail to respond, can hinder or scaffold critical social-emotional development.^{2,3}

The positive and protective impact of fatherhood and the father-child bond on early childhood development is undeniable, in particular for a child's social and emotional development between birth and three years of age.⁴ In early years, fathers are formative play partners, language modelers, and brain stimulators for their children, which support children's ability to converse and socialize positively with peers, regulate behavior, and process emotions.^{5,4,6,3,7} A father's role is unique and multi-dimensional, and it functions in concert with the presence of mom, enhancing the mother-child relationship and facilitating positive adjustment in children.^{6,3} Conversely, the absence of a father figure, even in infancy, can result in negative behavioral outcomes and delayed development.^{4,8} Quality of time is important. While resident fathers are more likely to interact consistently with their children, research shows that both resident and non-resident fathers can have positive influence through intentional interaction.⁹



What is the Washington story?

Fathers want to be involved in their children's lives. National trends reveal dads who are increasingly engaged with their children and aspire to even more meaningful time with them.¹⁰ Many dads participate in more play and quality time, show more affection, and converse more with their children than

their own parents did.¹¹ In Washington State, overall paternity establishment in 2019 was 97.9 percent.¹² Dads recognize the vital role they play in their children's well-being and are eager to engage from the moment of birth. Still, 21 percent of Washington children live in father-absent homes and 29 percent live in single-parent homes.¹³

"I want to teach them while I'm spending that time [with them]."

Washington fathers have shared their voices. In one interview, dads expressed their deep value of their identity as a father, the challenges of parenting alone or within complex family structures, and their desire to foster an environment that supports the well-being of their children. "I want to teach them while I'm spending that time," said one dad who values play and time with his kids as teachable, transformative moments. Fatherhood is not a one-size-fits-all framework. As dads embrace both the joys and challenges of fatherhood, they need support to grow healthy children in the context in which they live, work, and commune.

Where do we go from here?

The significance of a child's early development should drive us to consider how program, policy, and community efforts can support the best possible outcomes for children in infancy. As is evident by the current literature base, fatherhood inclusion is lacking, yet invaluable. Embracing a fatherhood-inclusive ideology will require multi-sector collaboration, a adaptation of current practices and policies, and prioritization of equity.¹⁴

Fatherhood in policy and programming¹⁴

- ◀ Expand pre- and post-partum leave policies and support for fathers.
- ◀ Develop father-inclusive curriculum appropriate for diverse needs of fathers, including expectant fathers.
- ◀ Increase fatherhood-inclusive and -focused programs.
- ◀ Ensure equitable resource access for both parents that serve a wide range of needs and contexts.
- ◀ Frame programmatic strategy on the importance of the home environment as critical for childhood development and later success.

Fatherhood in research¹⁴

- ◀ Adapt data measures to identify paternity outcomes in addition to maternal and child outcomes.
- ◀ Invest in research that includes a paternal-child and whole-family health focuses.
- ◀ Promote equitable representation.

Resources

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Fatherhood and Early Childhood Infographic

Dads are important for children's early social-emotional development, which leads to better life and health outcomes^{1,2}

Social competence and resiliency

Speech and conversation skills

Emotion and behavior regulation

Problem-solving and cognition

Positive play and attachment

Birth — 3-5 yrs

Dads want to be engaged with their children...

97.9%
Paternity establishment in Washington in 2019³



52%

show more affection to their children

47%

spend more play and quality time with their children

46%

read more to their children

Compared to their own parents, some dads are doing things differently⁴

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