

# Partnering With Fathers: Techniques for Strengthening Home Visits

By Neil Tift



Parents as Teachers™

Home visits provide a unique opportunity to assess parents' child-rearing skills and to provide targeted services to assist responsible adults in growing healthy families. If you are a home visitor, you are probably already aware of some of the barriers that you must confront when attempting to achieve these goals.

Often one of those barriers is the reluctance of fathers and men in families to recognize the importance of their participation in home visits. This tends to be true across a wide range of cultures, income levels, and educational backgrounds.

In order to engage fathers and men in families more fully, it is important to utilize some simple techniques that tend to enhance father involvement.

## Before the visit

- > When scheduling your home visit, ask if there are times that both parents are available to meet with you, especially if they live in the same household. Try to schedule the visit to accommodate both of their schedules.
- > Identify resources in your community or county that offer programs and services specifically for fathers. These may be located in family resource centers, social service agencies, the YMCA, Head Start, community education, school districts, men's therapists, hospital-based parenting programs, or the office of child support enforcement.
- > Locate and bring copies of articles of interest to local fathers. Two great online resources are the [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#) and [All Pro Dads](#). The articles should focus on helpful tips and positive suggestions, not articles that dump on dads.
- > Be aware that men's learning styles and parenting approaches tend to be action-oriented. Fathers tend to use their bodies more, so if you are going to discuss specific skills, consider demonstrating them and then letting the fathers demonstrate them as well. For example, touching or holding the baby or child, moving through space, walking, mixing, arranging, wiping, dressing, and rocking are active methods that are more likely to be effective and to be retained by the men with whom you visit.

## During the visit

- > Be sensitive to cultural perceptions and gender expectations about you as a female home visitor (if this applies) to visiting a home when only the father is in the household, not the mother.
- > When meeting the father for the first time, look at him and shake his hand. Tell him that you are glad he is able to be part of the home visit and that you would like to speak to both of the parents during the visit.
- > When seated on couches, stools, chairs, or around a table, try to sit beside the father, not across from him. Many men prefer sideways conversations for their own comfort level. But, obviously, if





you are female you don't want to sit too close or it could give the wrong impression.

- > During your conversations with the family members, try to look at the father and to engage him as often as it seems appropriate. You don't have to focus on 50/50, but try NOT to speak mostly to the mom. If he feels slighted or marginalized, the father probably won't prioritize your next home visit.
- > Mention that you have information about resources specifically of interest to fathers and men. These might involve parenting classes, drop-in groups, job fairs or job placement, family law information, co-parenting options, and related guy-type stuff.
- > Hand the father the materials (brochures, flyers, schedules, articles, and so on) that are clearly of interest to dads and men.
- > Ask the parents if they would each like to have a few minutes of one-to-one time with you to discuss specific concerns or issues.
- > Involve fathers in the screening and assessment procedures that you utilize on your visits. Fathers often present a different perspective about the skills and abilities of their children than mothers might provide.
- > Try to tune in to the body language of both parents and respond accordingly. Is mom protective of the child? Of the father? Is she jealous of his attention to you? Or of your attention to him? Try to be respectful of both.
- > Ask the father open-ended questions about his child-rearing involvement around the home.

When you wrap up the visit, ask the father if he would like any additional resources. Only offer to help if you think you will be able to actually provide them for him.

**Stories of Impact** William, age 35, is a stay-at-home father whose son is 2 years old. His wife is in the Navy full time. William found out about Dads on Duty through the Lincoln Military Housing community center in his neighborhood. William expressed relief finding a group for dads, as most opportunities cater to women or moms. The family identifies as low-income and has had CPS involvement in the past. William has a history of substance abuse (meth) but has been clean for several years now.

With an active son, deployed spouse, desire to remain clean, and general anxiety disorder, William frequently spoke of feeling overwhelmed. Through Dads on Duty, William developed friendships with several of the other participating fathers who also happen to live in the same neighborhood. A natural support network was built, and these dads now hang out on a regular basis outside of the groups.

*continued on next page*



In addition, William and his son enrolled in the Dads on Duty one-on-one Parents as Teachers in-home services. His son received a developmental screening, and both he and his child regularly meet with a parent educator to practice age-appropriate parent-child interaction and developmental learning. Case management is also provided to discuss topics like stress management and local resources.

William says he now knows the value of “bringing myself physically down to my child’s eye level in order to get my message across.” And he has incorporated other changes too. “Instead of forcing a meal upon my son,” he says, “I now give him choices, and mealtime is less stressful.”

Reflection and goal setting have become part of William’s everyday life. “Everything I am comes from the upbringing of my parents,” he says. “I feel inappropriate parenting exercises were instilled in me. [Through Dads on Duty] I am learning the reasons not to hand down this to my children and the positive skills to be a successful father. I also hope my child takes my faults as a challenge to improve parenting down the family line.”

William reports ongoing personal, economic, and family stress. Though his situation has not changed, he is learning how to effectively nurture his son, acquire resources, and reduce stress. Ultimately, this will impact his ability to remain drug free, prevent any future CPS involvement, and be an effective father and spouse.

By Joe Buehrle

[SAY San Diego’s Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center](#)

---

Neil Tift is the male involvement coordinator at the [Child Crisis Center](#) in Mesa, Ariz. He has served as director of training for three national fatherhood organizations, including the National Practitioners Network for Fathers & Families, the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#), and the [Native American Fatherhood and Families Association](#). Neil was also the founding director of the Fathers Resource Center in Minneapolis from 1990 to 1998. For over 20 years, Neil was adjunct professor of family studies at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minn., teaching ethics, child psychology, and human service administration.

Last updated: October 26, 2011