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Tips for Practitioners: Talking with Fathers about Early Child Development and Parenting Skills Transcript

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Moderator:

- Nigel Vann, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC)

Presenters:

- John Badalament, Director of Programs, The Fatherhood Project, Boston, MA
- Gardner Wiseheart, Managing Partner, Southwest Partnership for Fathers and Families, San Angelo, TX

Operator: Good day and welcome to the “Tips for Practitioners: Talking with Fathers about Early Child Development and Parenting Skills” webinar. As a reminder, today’s conference is being recorded. At this time, I would like to turn the conference over to Nigel Vann. Please go ahead.

Nigel Vann: Okay well thank you very much and again welcome, everybody. This is Nigel Vann with the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. As you see and know, obviously, we are going to be talking about early childhood development here today. Just a few notes that the webinar is being recorded, so in the next month or so, all the materials will be posted at our website, fatherhood.gov, and you’ll be able to listen to this again if you want to, and you can download the slides and all the materials.

Now, in terms of what you’re seeing on your screen. You can download – right now, you can download the Presenter Bios. We have a list of helpful resources that I’ll be talking about for a few minutes, and then we have handouts for each of the presenters. Beneath those handouts, if you scroll below them, you’ll also see a PDF of today’s slides if you want to download that. And as you have obviously seen, people are talking to each other in the chat box. In terms of questions for the presenters, we ask that you use the Ask a Question box, which is in the bottom right hand corner, and then at the end of the webinar we will have a Q&A with the presenters and get to as many of the questions as we can. If we don’t get through all the questions, I’ll see if the presenters can provide some written responses, which we will post after the webinar. Then we’ve also got those web links there, so you can see how you click on to various Clearinghouse pages and also the Fatherhood Project, which is John Badalament’s website.

So with that, I’m just going to give you a quick overview of the Clearinghouse, for those of you haven’t joined us before. We are funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, and their Office of Family Assistance. And the resources that are available on fatherhood.gov are primarily for fathers and practitioners, but there’s also information for researchers and policymakers as well.

Here again is our website. We would like to emphasize the Toolkit, where you can actually download various resources that we’re going to talk about today, and you can also find archives of all our webinars at fatherhood.gov/webinars. You can contact us with the help@fatherhoodgov.info email. And you can always call our National Call Center. It’s not staffed 24/7, but it’s staffed pretty extensively. We have trained counselors on the end of that line, and they can talk to fathers, they can talk to mothers, they can actually get fathers and mothers on separate lines together and do some mediation. They can also provide resources for practitioners, so it’s a very useful number to have: 1-877-4DAD411. And you can also connect with us via Facebook and Twitter.

So in terms of today’s webinar – and as you see, we’ve got two very experienced practitioners here – you may well have heard of both of these gentlemen. I’ll introduce them formally a little bit later, but they have an awful lot to share with you. We are going to

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be focusing on child development, you know, from ages 0-8. This is obviously one of the very best times to engage with dads. We can engage before they're born, and the first few months and years after the birth because research is very clear, and you're going to hear a little bit about this from Gardner and John, but the research is very clear that early bonding with fathers and with mothers increases the chances at positive outcomes – not just the kids, but also the fathers and the mothers.

And because men are often reluctant – I certainly know I was, as I was grappling with some of the issues when I had a young child. A lot of guys are reluctant to ask for help, so it's really good for practitioners who are working in responsible fatherhood programs, but also other family support and early childhood programs who are in touch with families, to really have the skills to engage dads. And that's a lot of what we're going to hear today from Gardner and John.

I just want to emphasize again the Helpful Resources list and the fact that you can also download the handouts from Gardner and John in the Downloadable Resources section. I'm just going to quickly go over a few other things that are on that Helpful Resources list. These are resources from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. The Tip Cards are designed for you to print, if you want, and share with dads. They can be printed on paper, but they can also be printed on cardstock as a two-sided card.

This is just an example of some of the cards we've got. If you download the Helpful Resources list, you'll be able to click directly on the links to those resources. Then we have various resource briefs. We also have a series of Safety Tips for Dads with tips on how to keep your children of certain ages safe. And we've also linked at the bottom to a webinar we did back in 2013 that's also got a lot of useful information.

I'm just going to give you a quick glimpse of a couple of these tip cards. So this is the first tip card we did, called "Tip Card for Expectant Dads." It gives you various information on that card. I know it's hard to read on the screen, but it's basically making the point that when dads are involved as supportive partners during pregnancy, it's good for their babies, it's good for the mother, and it's good for dads. And then on the flip side of that, there is some tips for dads.

We haven't got that one up there, but this is the "Tip Card for New Dads," so this is for dads that just got that baby. And it emphasizes at the top that when dads are very involved from birth, their children do better and dads do too. Then in the bullets below that, some of the things it's pointing out is that when dads are very involved from birth, their children form better friendships, do better at school, are less likely to get into trouble as teenagers – all the good research that I'm sure you're all well aware of now. In terms of dads spending time, they do form a bond faster, and then they're likely to enjoy fatherhood more. And then the third column there is talking about a few things to be aware of as a new dad because a lot of dads, particularly younger dads, may not be aware of some of these things. So you know, it's pointing out that bright light can hurt your baby's eyes, loud sounds can be scary.

And on the flip side of that, here's a few things that as a dad you can do. So we're really encouraging dads to be involved, be caring, be there, hold your baby, cuddle them, talk to them. I certainly remember when my son was just born, and I was talking to him in the crib, and I think probably a lot of us do that, but some guys may feel a bit awkward about doing that, so connect with them whatever way you can. And these are some of the things that Gardner and John are going to be sharing.

The Tip Cards are a resource that was developed to provide tips for dads and for the practitioners that work with them on ways to talk about healthy eating, good sleep habits, and ways to get good physical exercise for dads and kids. Some of the tips that it makes in terms of sleeping is it talks about talking to your children about screen times and having some limits on what screens are going to be allowed in the bedroom, having a bedtime routine that you follow regularly, and making sure that you reduce the household noise at night. Again, things that a lot of new parents maybe don't necessarily focus on.

Then finally, the resource I just want to quickly share is this one about the benefits of reading to your children. It's just another way to talk with dads and get your dads who are maybe not that comfortable reading themselves, or who didn't get read to themselves as children, just to emphasize how much fun it can be for their kids, for sure, but also for them. So that's just a quick sample of some of the things we've got there.

So before I introduce Gardner, we are going to do a quick poll question. So if we can have the first poll question, Enzo. We're just wanting to get a sense of who's on the line so the presenters know who they're talking to. It is a little bit different than doing this in person.

So, which of the following statements best describes the work you do?

Thanks. We got a fairly good spread across the board here. Looks like about 20 percent of you are working mainly with children, so that's great because you've really got the way in to reach some of these dads who fatherhood programs maybe aren't getting to. And then about the same percentage are working with mothers and children. And about the same who work mainly with dads. So we really are across the board here.

Okay, so let's close that one out, Enzo. And I'd like to bring up our second poll question as well. I think we'll go ahead and do that. We usually save this for later, but I think it'll help the webinar flow a bit more. I don't know if you've heard about the National Fatherhood Summit that OFA is organizing in conjunction with the Clearinghouse in Nashville, but if you have, if you could just let us know if you are going to be coming, and if not, why not. I know that the registration is now full, and so you may have tried to register and not been able to get in.

And the main reason I'm asking this is because we will be having a workshop on this topic at the Summit, so in a sense, this is sort of a sneak preview of that. There will obviously be more time to go into depth in the workshop. So it looks like we've got about 10 percent of you maybe are going to be there. That's certainly good to know. And it looks like at least half of you are interested in attending future Summits, so thank you very much for that.

With no further ado then, let me introduce my good friend, Gardner Wiseheart. I always say he has – he is perhaps the most aptly named person I know because he is indeed a man with a “wise heart.” He's been working in this field for over 25 years, designing and implementing services, supervising staff, and providing direct service. He's provided training and technical assistance on father involvement, mainly with family support and early childhood programs, and he's done that across the United States and Canada. He is co-author of *Maps for Dads*, a father-child interaction curriculum that you're going to be hearing more about. And the handouts of his at the bottom there, they are from that curriculum.

He was founder and director of the program, Dads Make a Difference, which was the fathering component of the Healthy Families San Angelo program. He is recently retired from that position, but he is still doing some consulting work under the umbrella of the Southwest Partnership for Fathers and Families. Back in the day, he was one of the original members of the Board of Directors for the now-defunct National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, which I also was involved in. And that was a grand scheme at the time that hopefully will get reinvigorated, but we like to think that here at the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, we are able to sort of replicate some of the work that was going on there.

Finally, I should point out that Gardner is married. He's got two daughters and a son. His son actually runs a couple of restaurants as a chef in Austin, Texas, and I've had the pleasure of going to both of them, and they are extremely, extremely good. So with that anyway, let me give the microphone to you, Gardner, and share a bit of that wisdom from your wise heart please.

Gardner Wiseheart: Well thank you, Nigel, and I'm glad to be here today to visit with you all about involving dads in the lives of their children and supporting positive father-child interaction.

Nigel Vann: You are sounding a little bit faint, Gardner, if you could speak up a little bit.

Gardner Wiseheart: Alright, thanks. The information that I'm going to present is based on research and experience and on strategies developed in the *Dads Make a Difference* project. In our program, we work with dads prenatally through the child's age three. We met with them prenatally or at birth of the child and stay with them for three years. We work with them in home visits, dads' groups, couples' groups, and father-child play groups. Our focus is on what's in the best interest of the child. We partner with dad and advocate for the child, and to do this, we mobilize all the resources we can for all the people in the child's life.

I'm having trouble moving that slide. There it is.

Our focus today is on father-child interaction. What it is, why it's important, how to assess it, how to promote it and help dads build on their strengths. But first, as Stephen Covey says, let's begin with the end in mind. What's the outcome we want? We want our children to have a set of emotional and intellectual skills that prepare them for successful lives. There are several things that are important for this to happen, and one of them is having an involved father. We know from research and our own experience that

fathers play a unique and irreplaceable role in healthy child development. Of course there are people who grow up without fathers and become successful adults. There are always people who beat the odds, but that's not what we're about. We're about changing the odds for our children. The first step in changing the odds is for us as practitioners to know about father-child interaction: what it is, why it's important, how to assess it, and how to promote it.

But let's start with a couple of definitions, just to be clear in our discussion. Father-child interaction is all the little exchanges that go on between father and child: the smiling, the cooing, the talking, the playing, picking up the baby when they cry, changing diapers – all of those things and more. The father-child relationship is the result of those interactions. It's the overall connections and feelings that dads and children have for each other. So those early relationships influence the child's ability to trust, his feelings of self, his perceptions of the world, their social relationships, and literally, their brain development.

So now we know what father-child interaction is and why it's important. Now, how do we assess it? When we first started out, our folks would report that there was good father-child interaction or bad father-child interaction, but this really wasn't very helpful. Luckily, our colleague Linda Elliott developed a systematic way to assess parent-child interaction. It's clear, easy to use, and very helpful for those of us who are not child development specialists. The purpose of the assessment strategy is to structure your observations of the father-child interaction, and then you can use this tool for planning how to grow and promote the father-child interaction. It's called CHEEERS, with three e's.

Now as I go through these elements, keep in mind that they're based on what the research identifies as characteristics of an effective caregiver. How a significant caregiver responds is what leads towards effective attachment and bonding. These become the folks the child clings to when upset and relies on as a source of comfort and security as they explore their environment. So let's look at this tool and its individual components, then I'll show you how we use it to enhance positive father-child interaction.

First is “cues.” Cues are the language of a child. What kind of cues does the child give? Does dad recognize and respond quickly and sensitively to them? Babies have ways of telling you what they think and feel and want. Crying is one way to say many things. Watching what he does helps you figure out what he wants. When he wants to say “let's party,” he might smile at you, look in your eyes, widen his eyes, open his hands out and reach, babble and coo, or laugh, or get excited, or sometimes cry so you'll pick him up. When he wants to say, “cool it, I need a break,” he might turn his head away, look away, sneeze or cough, arch his back, kick his legs or wave his arms, or hiccup. When he wants to say, “I don't know, but fix it,” he might cry, kick his legs, wave his arms, turn his head away, search for something, or get excited. It's important that dads learn the cues of the baby, and then the toddler, and then the older child, so he can respond sensitively.

“Holding.” What's the quality and frequency, including any touching? The expression? How much does dad talk to the baby or the child? Does he speak respectfully about the child to the child? How frequently does dad vocalize in ways that support the language development, and what's the frequency and quality of nonverbal expression by dad between the father and the child? Especially eye contact and touch – these are so important.

“Empathy.” Does dad recognize the child's emotional states? Does dad recognize the child's feelings and experiences? Does dad responds sensitively to the child? How often? And it's important to keep in mind that empathy has two parts: the first is recognizing states, and the second is responding to those states in a sensitive way. What are some examples of states? Infants are capable of expressing seven states: sad, angry, interest, surprise, disgust, joy, and fear. And for toddlers you can add frustration.

“Environment.” This is the environment as it relates to child development. Does the environment support growth and encourage child development? Is Dad interested in supporting his child's development? Does he speculate about upcoming development? Does he notice and attend to the child's development? Why is it important that dads understand normal child development? If they don't understand the child's development, there's a potential for dad to see the child as being hurtful, demanding or provocative. When they do understand the child becomes cute and smart and fun. It's important for practitioners they have a good working knowledge of what to expect developmentally from kids to support positive father-child interaction.

There are many good resources like Zero to Three with age based charts that help dads learn about the skills and behaviors to expect from the child in each stage of development and how dad's interaction can promote positive father child interaction. We don't have to be experts. Knowing about a child's development helps dad celebrate developmental milestones and anticipate what's to come.

Now keep in mind that developmental milestones happen within a range of time, not on a certain date. Walking occurs around twelve months; it may happen somewhere between 11 months and 15 months. Kids have to master other activities before they can walk like crawling, standing with support, standing on their own. There are also some differences between girls and boys. For example, girls tend to begin speaking earlier than boys. Helping dad support his child in this development will lead to positive healthy outcomes for kids and a tighter bond between father and child. Knowing about child development will also help practitioners pick up on developmental delays.

So many problems result from developmental delays. For example, kids entering school not ready to learn are mostly due to developmental delays. When not picked up, they can lead to school failures. The earlier a delay is picked up, the more you can do to correct and bring the child up to level. I think that programs and practitioners should consider using a developmental assessment. There are several out there. We use Ages and Stages – it's simple to use. Every six months or more often if needed the practitioner, dad, and child go through a structured series of questions and activities about what the child is doing. We come out with information in a number of areas to indicate how the child is progressing developmentally. Ages and Stages is a great tool for teaching about this specific child's development, as well as how to prepare dad and child for the next developmental stage, as well as suggest potential activities for father and child to encourage appropriate development. If we pick up on a potential delay we can refer to a medical home or another program for further evaluation and rehab.

“Rhythmicity and Reciprocity.” This is the give-and-take; the dance between father and child, with both contributing. Is there a mutual initiation of interaction and activities? Is there a smooth back-and-forth, give-and-take quality in the interaction between dad and child?

“Smiles.” Is there joy and love in the interactions in this relationship? Are there smiles? Your observation using CHEEERS represents what happened during that time you were with dad and child and helps you to make plans for what to do next: strengthening areas and building on the strengths that you observed. In our program, after every contact with father and child, we complete a visit record by going through each area of CHEEERS with a summary of interactions, observed strengths, areas for improvement and a plan for the next home visit.

So let's look at an actual home visit record using CHEEERS:

- Cues – “dad was a little too much at times while playing with the baby. He didn't seem to recognize disengagement cues.”
- Holding – “touch: there was a lot of touching, patting. Very nurturing expression. Dad talked a lot to baby and was positive and respectful. Eye contact between the two was good.”
- Empathy – “baby started to get fussy and dad was slow to recognize he needed a diaper change.”
- Environment – “dad was proud of his son's development, wanted me to see how he is pulling himself up, and speculated that he would be walking soon. Said son was saying more words and wondered how he compared to other kids his age.”
- Rhythmicity and Reciprocity – “there was a nice give-and-take between them. Dad would make a funny face and then wait for a response. Baby would giggle and then make a response. It was good dancing going on.
- Smiles – “there's definitely joy in this relationship. Lots of playing and laughing.”
- Strengths: One, there was nurturing touch. Two, there was frequent and respectful expression. Three, there was attention to and pride in the son's development. He expressed interest in future development, specifically verbal skills. Four, observed joyful relationship between father and son.
- Areas for improvement: One, dad needs help recognizing cues and two, recognizing emotional states.
- Plan for the next home visit: take curriculum pages on recognizing and responding and cues; emphasize why it's important. Take developmental information about language development and activities for dad to work with child.

You'll notice that the home visitor first reflected on the strengths he observed. You can use CHEEERS not only as an observational tool, but also to organize your positive comments and reinforce behaviors while you're with dad and child. For example, to reinforce dad recognizing cues, you might say: “you really know what your baby needs. That will help him know he can trust you.” For empathy, you could say: “he's so lucky to have a dad who can tell what his different cries mean. That helps them feel secure because you know what to do.”

Using CHEEERS helps practitioners with teachable moments in an ongoing way. It promotes dads learning in an experiential way and it leads directly to activities that are tailored to this dad and this child. In this way you're helping men become the dads they want to be.

Thank you and I hope this is useful to you and your work promoting positive father-child interaction. Nigel?

Nigel Vann: Thank you very much, Gardner. Yeah, and you do have this final slide as well. I did see there was one question about the Ages and Stages questionnaire that you mentioned. I'll just pull that back up for one more minute. If people want more information on that, they can go to agesandstages.com, but there are various other tools. There's all sorts of things out there.

Gardner Wiseheart: There are a number of developmental assessments that are out there. This one we found to be the easiest to use and it presented a lot of good information to the relationship; both the father and child and as well as the mother and child.

Nigel Vann: Yeah, you know they say it is so important. So, we will circle back on some of this in the Q&A, so any questions for Gardner do go ahead and put those in the question box now.

Now we've got a couple of videos we're going to show. We're going to show one at the beginning of John's presentation, and then you've got another one that's particularly relevant for some of what Gardner was talking about on CHEEERS. If we don't have a chance to show the second one, they're on the helpful resources list. I just mentioned those real briefly now. The one that John is going to show, and he'll tell you more about that, is just called "Antonio's Story." It's the story of a young man who was in one of the programs that John worked with. Then there's, and you probably all know quite a bit about serving return approach, but I was thinking about it when Gardner talked about how well you dance. We've got a nice little video there. So if we don't have a chance to show it at the end of the webinar, I encourage you to check there. But there's a link: it's the very last item in the helpful resources list and there's a youtube link in there.

There is Gardner's contact info, and you'll have that again on the closing slide. Now let me introduce Mr. John Badalament, who has done all sorts of things. He's not quite as old as Gardner or me, but he seems to have done all sorts of things in this fatherhood arena. He is the author of a very popular book called *Modern Dad's Dilemma: How to Stay Connected with Your Kids in a Rapidly Changing World*. And there is an activity from that available from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearing House Toolkit in the Activities section. You can download that. You can also download the activities Gardner was just talking about directly from our toolkit.

John is also the director of the PBS documentary *All Men Are Sons*, exploring the legacy of fatherhood. He's spoken internationally at convenings, to schools, government agencies, and all sorts of organizations. He's been featured on ABC News, CBS Sunday morning, NPR, in the Boston Globe and other media outlets. He is a regular contributing blogger for US News and World Report.

Just a brief word about his work at the Fatherhood Project with the Massachusetts General Hospital: he does two basic things there that he'll tell you a bit more about, but he's got a project working with expectant and brand new dads and then he's got a project working with dads of slightly older kids – younger kids up to the age of five or so. Whereas Gardner has really been focusing his remarks more on those very early stages, John's going to take us a slight step further down the line. And he also has a couple of kids, I believe. John, you've got a boy and a girl, right?

John Badalament: I do, a fourteen-year-old boy and [indistinguishable].

Nigel Vann: Right, the boy plays real football, so that's something that's always good for me. You know, he plays the game where you kick the ball.

John Badalament: Yes; he broke his hip doing it but that's another story.

Nigel Vann: Yeah problems there, so anyway, John, I'm going to turn it over to you now. Do you want to start with the video, or do you want to say a few remarks and then ask Enzo to pull it up?

John Badalament: Yeah, why don't I take a couple couple remarks, and then if we can put up the video pretty quickly... just because so much of what Gardner just presented – I think the video is a beautiful transition. I think as you watch this video, you may even want to pull, well, can you hear me okay?

Nigel Vann: Yep, yep, yep, sorry.

John Badalament: Okay. You'll want to certainly think about other, or to that degree, have notes. Or, I don't know if you have the slide, but Gardner's CHEERS in terms of the interaction, because I think you'll you'll notice pretty much every single one of them. And I'll remind you of them: Cues, Holding, Expression, Empathy, Environment, Reciprocity, Dancing, or Rhythmicity, that's a good one, Rhythmicity and Smiles.

I would I would be hard pressed to say that you won't see all of those. So the video actually is a short clip from a larger piece that I believe is probably still available. I directed and produced it, or co-produced it, for what was called the Children's Trust Fund in Massachusetts. It is now called Children's Trust. And Children's Trust Massachusetts – I guess most states, if not every state, has a Children's Trust – and you certainly can contact them or you can contact me and I can get your the link.

The the film has four stories in it: it's very short. Each story is about two, three, maybe four minutes, and this is one of those stories. The film is called "He Treasures Being a Dad" and they're portraits of fatherhood. So this is gonna be Antonio's story. Now I'll just say as a transition; so you'll see much of what Gardner, you can apply actually what Gardner was just talking about, but in terms of the way I think about this film and then what I'm going to present to you is a little bit, as Nigel mentioned, age-wise. I will be looking a little bit forward from, you know as Nigel mentioned, that we run a program at fatherhood project called The Dads And Kids Activity Group and that's really for dads. By the way I should note: I refer to the words "dad" or "father" as meaning biological and/or whoever that primary male caretaker is, whether that's a grandfather or community father etc. So I'm using that pretty broadly in most cases. The ones I'm not I'll be specific about. But the program the Dads and Kids Activity Group is for dads with kids from birth to five. We do have some dads that show up; it's on a Saturday morning in a community-based setting. The hospital. It's through the pediatric department. We also run obstetrics; we're doing research in the obstetrics department, which I'll talk about in a moment. I would say the bulk of my work now is around dads and education, so I'll touch upon this in terms of age-wise what we think of as early childhood education into school-age children. Then we also, and you can see this at the website for The Fatherhood Project at Massachusetts General Hospital, which is is there – the link will be there – we do a program for parents in recovery, as well as specifically a gender-based moms in recovery as well as dads in recovery from substance use disorders. So that's just a quick overview.

We're gonna see the film and and the way I think of the interactions: I think of them as micro moments. That's what I would look for and I would ask you to look for in this film is these micro moments. These foundational moments of interaction between father and child then are so critical as Gardner pointed out. And so often dads don't know that they're doing them. I really want to highlight that. Antonio is a great example of a dad who, on so many levels, is doing so many great things with his child. Frankly, prior to at the time at Children's Trust...I worked with him in Bolton through the video, as well as I've included him in my book as well. He's just one of those guys that, you know, had learned and took a course, actually through Boston Public Health Commission. But here's a guy a dad who's doing a lot of really great things, but he doesn't have – didn't have – the language for them, and didn't even know how good of a job he was doing.

And I think that's what – if you take away anything from this, from what I'm gonna say, it is that as practitioners, we need to help fathers develop a language and an understanding for their strengths. For what they're doing right. And and help them understand that they can and they should do more of this. I'll give you some examples afterwards, but that's what I think is critical. Because if you don't know you're doing something right, you might not continue to do it.

So with that said, we're gonna show you the video. I believe it's four minutes and then we'll go from there. I'm gonna give you some practical practices and skills to take with you. So, without further ado.

[He Treasures Being A Dad Video]

John Badalament: All right, so are we back here? All set Nigel?

Nigel Vann: Yep, you're back. Just make sure that you've got your computer muted.

John Badalament: Excellent, okay, so, just a few, you know... Obviously, you see the many ways that Antonio was doing, you know, so much of the interaction. I just want to point out a couple of really important things in terms of what's probably the most interesting to me – I didn't catch the first time I watched it – but when showing it to practitioners, people pointed out. Now, I would love to see if anyone can answer this. I'm you know looking at the questions. What what did what did you notice about his trip to the supermarket?

What was it the thing that stood out most about his trip to the supermarket? See if anyone – I'll give two seconds here for anyone to write in the answer. Well, I'm gonna give it to you. He let him run around! That's it, somebody just answered it. Yep, he did not have him in a cart. Which, you know, if he wasn't attentive and paying attention, that could be that could be a risk factor or a danger. But as as you notice, he was very very much in tune with with his son Antonio Jr. And I think the benefit to me as long as that child is safe – the benefit was tremendous. Now, he was just getting a few items. But the point is what he gained from not being in the cart was he was able to really explore and take. If we think of attachment and a secure attachment: there is what we refer to as a "circle of security." If you notice when Antonio Jr. went up, and the guy that worked there that said "super cool" and offered his hand to him – if you notice Antonio Jr. went up to him and he responded, but he kept looking back to see if dad was there.

That was a great example of how a secure attachment is built. He went out of that circle of security, which was his father, and he moved away and he sort of pushed it, and he kept looking back and he did the high-five with the guy – the the stranger in this case – and then he got excited and he ran back to his father. And again, to his credit, his father was there for the entire interaction and that's a great example of a very micro interaction that builds connection between the father and child. That child knows he can take these risks; he can step out of that circle of security and return to it and his father will be there.

Also the father mimicked. He did what we refer to as "serve and return." He even babbled. I think a lot of dads don't understand the importance of language. Just even narrating their day or repeating whatever the child is saying. In this case, it was babbling. Antonio did that. That builds literacy skills as he gets older. And then the last thing, somebody mentioned to, was he basically engaged that child in almost every aspect of what he was doing, including handing him the bag at the very end. Which was I thought really cute because he handed to him and you know, his son was interested for about a second or two and then he let go of it. And his dad snickered. But the point is, he engaged him in all these little ways. So that to me is really really critical in building the relationship and in doing the work of interaction. So that's that's the micro moment.

Moving kind of right along, I would like to to just say in terms of practitioners: this is really important. Antonio is another good case for this. It's important that we think about what it is that we bring: our own relationship – or lack of relationship – with our father in our life. Or in cases where the mother was a significant figure. But I find for men, it's really important for them to look at what they got from their father or what they didn't get from their father, as practitioners. Because I think that has a huge impact on the ways that we see fathers. The belief systems that we have, the expectations that we have for the fathers that we work with. And I bring this up because Antonio, as a good example, talked about this. This is in the in my book, *The Modern Dads Dilemma*.

He talked about his experience of going into a health care setting – into the hospital – and going to a visit with his son. He talked about this feeling of not being welcomed: this feeling that he was being judged, that he didn't belong there. I think it's really really important as practitioners that we check ourselves and that we look at and reflect upon "what are our own beliefs and attitudes towards the fathers we work with?"

When Antonio talked specifically about this, you know, he thought "Gee I wonder if it's the way that I'm dressed. I wonder if it's my afro, my hair being the way it is." He very clearly articulated that he felt like he was he was being judged and was being treated very differently than perhaps if he had come looking differently. And he went on from there. So I just want to say it's important that we we begin this by looking at what we bring to this work.

And then I'm gonna zip through a little bit of the research, but long and the short of it: we've done a study where – I should say we're *doing* a study, it's ongoing, in obstetrics for this very reason – to look at what are men's experiences in early childhood and prenatally, in this case. What we found I think is very interesting, but I would say probably the most significant thing to me were these two statistics. Over a period we did two, two-week periods where we sat in the waiting room at Mass General Hospital, which is a massive hospital in Boston, and we sat in the obstetrics room and waiting room and we asked fathers to fill out or to do a survey

on Ipads. It was two parts, so the point of that was they had to fill it out before they went into the visit. Most of them were there for prenatal visits, a lot for ultrasound, but for various reasons. And then they had to come when they came out of the visit, they had to finish the survey. So point being, it was not a small, quick, you know, tick-off-ten-questions. It was a significant thing we asked them to do.

We had 900 men fill out this survey over the period of basically four weeks. 900, which is – for any study, that's an incredible number – but specifically for fathers it's unprecedented. And then, also important to note, and I think is telling, is that 85% of the men that we approached...and we walked up to them just cold and said "Would you be willing to fill this out?" We had an 85% response rate. Again, what does this say to me? What it says is men are hungry to be engaged and they are hungry for information.

Just going on, I'm not going to get into the details of what we found – you can look at this – but there were also very significant findings: one of them being that, in general, there there was a pretty significant portion of men across all all socioeconomic statuses that felt as though they weren't necessarily being engaged or they weren't being informed as much as they could be. And they really wanted information. Specifically, a lot of men wanted information about how they could be useful, how they could help Mom. So I think that's very very important.

We went over the research, as was mentioned numerous times, that we know dads matter. And the way I like to think of it is this: Having done this work for for about twenty years now, it is no longer a question of whether or not to engage fathers. The question is: how are we going to engage fathers? We're done with asking the question "should we, should we not?" I mean this across institutions: healthcare, education, social services, government, all of these institutions. We need to move beyond it. Because, there is now a very very robust – and it's growing every day – body of research that shows we know men matter. We know that dads have an impact whether they're there or not. In the past it used to be the focus...you know, 20 or 30 years ago...was almost exclusively on father's absence and what that impact is. We now know very much that father's presence makes a positive difference. How their presence matters, and the quality of that relationship matters. So I think it's critical that we have that attitude that it is no longer optional. I don't think it ever should have been, but the reality is it's not optional as to whether or not we engage dads, that it's how we do it.

That being said, I want to give you three or four very concrete ideas... I like to think of them as practices. They're skills as well, but really that word "practice" is important because these are activities that I encourage dads to do on a regular basis so that they can get in the habit of doing them.

The first one is this idea of being intentional as a parent. I think for fathers this is a very simple idea, but somewhat radical and definitely different in terms of generationally. I'm 50 years old; I'm pretty sure that my father did not do a Dad's Vision Statement as you have up here on the screen. Frankly, I think having seen fathers do this and done these practices with fathers and sons and daughters for, like I said, 20 years now...having dads do this and then share their vision for the relationship with their child when the children are old enough – you know, five six seven years old I would deem as old enough. Having a father do that has such a powerful effect on that child and on that relationship. Because, it's really to say with this question that I asked is: Imagine 20 years from now – and this is what I did in in the film that I made – imagine 20 years from now: Your child, and those of you that are parents can think of this, is interviewed about their relationship with you. Their father, their mother. What do you hope that your child or your children say about you, about your relationship? What do you hope they don't say? And then, what we do – and again this is in the full exercise that you can download – is ask dads to really then drill down on a specific parenting goal that can guide them, or lead them towards this vision.

So very very concretely: a lot of dads will say "I hope my children say that I was there for them. that I was around." and usually in our programs – we have a 10 session curriculum – we will kind of ask them to get specific about that. "What do you mean, 'to be around?' what does that mean? having meals together? does that mean showing up for activities or events?" Often, they will say "what I hope my kids *don't* say in 20 years is: 'who's dad?'" Or, you know, "he wasn't there for me." Or a lot of guys will say "I hope I'm still around. I hope they don't talk about me in the past tense." This leads to them setting goals for being healthy and staying healthy, so they can be around. and then we have them take specific action steps and think about breaking down their goals.

So this is a really important starting point, I think, for working with dads. The short version is: "What are you doing? What are you trying to do with your children? What kind of relationships are you trying to build?" And though it may not sound very radical or even significant, it is. Because, again, I think historically fathers have been less proactive and more reactive in terms of their

parenting. So this is a great way out of the gates with young kids to say, or even prenatally to say, “Hey, what are you up to? What kind of relationship do you want to build? And, what can you do today to start moving towards that?” So that's the vision.

In terms of developing emotionally connected relationships, I think of this in terms of very simple...almost like a mantra or a saying that I like to teach dads. For any relationship, really, you have to know and be known. You've got to know who you're dealing with, who that other person is. That means you have to listen to them. It means you have to pay attention to the details. You have to be present. So that's knowing. And then being known, which can be challenging for a lot of men – in particular for fathers– that is: Gradually and over time, letting the other person know who you are. The way I encourage that is through storytelling. Children, I think, want to know the stories of their fathers lives, their parents lives. “That’s what Dad was like at my age” is sort of a guiding way to think of storytelling.

So a couple of research points I think that are important: This idea of parental knowledge is a good one. That is just –and they found this to be true – that it's protective against many of the risk factors that pretty much all parents worry about. Parental knowledge is simply knowing what are your kids are up to: Where are they, who are they with, what are their daily experiences. And I think what's really important is that early on, when kids are young, this is nothing. Frankly, it's easier. Now of course, we've got all different contexts in terms of fathers who see their kids more or less often, and that can be very difficult depending on the family structure. But the idea is that with the intention of knowing and learning what the child is doing on a day to day basis, that can be done. That can be making sure you're in contact with the school or with the child care providers. It can be done with mom. It can be done with friends. In other words, the point is, it's easier when they're younger.

As they get older, then that communication and that parental knowledge becomes more difficult. I can speak to that, having a fourteen and sixteen year old. If you intend on getting information, it really requires building that relationship so that there's trust. And so that there's two-way communication. My kids don't necessarily offer up what they did. I'm sure many of you can relate to asking a child “hey, how was your day?” “Fine.” “What did you do?” “Nothing.” “Are you doing good?” Or, in the case of my son, it might be just a grunt; but the point being that relationships are the foundation. Built early, they can provide you with with this idea of parental knowledge.

Here's the the last couple, which are practices that I want to give you. Then we're going to open it up. There's a quiz that is a really good way to help dads think about this parental knowledge, and here are some of the sample questions. The download has ten questions, and I always say that these practices can be modified to be relevant to the situation and the fathers you're working with. But here are some of the the questions. The idea is to take this quiz, to give it to the fathers, and say “How well can you answer these questions?” And as their children are older, or get older, they can check their answers with the child. They can check their answers with, perhaps, the child's mother, but the idea is these these five examples are important things to know about your child. And oftentimes it makes for a great discussion, which is to say: What are the most important things for you to know about your child at any given time?

And there's a whole chapter on this that I write, but what's most important is knowing where your child is or who your child's with. Something about what they're doing with their day, what they're doing at school, what they're doing in childcare. Then you can see here there are other questions: What milestones have they reached recently? What are their favorite sounds and words? And the idea here is really about raising consciousness. This can be a great way for dads to have have fun with it, and to also be tuned in and reminding themselves. In fact, I have them write these questions down and keep them with them, and at any point be able to say “Huh, I wonder if....i don't know what my what my child's favorite food is these days.” So that's an example of of a practice, like I said.

And these quiz cards for when the children are older; five, six years old. And again, the questions can be modified, but this is an activity can be done together where the child answers questions about dad and dad answers questions about child. Then they share their answers. And again, often times can be very very fun. These questions are for the kids a little bit older, into school-age.

And then two last things here. The relationship checkup – there's two versions of this I have. This is the younger version, and then there's one for ages nine and up. These are not hard and fast ages; it really depends on the child, on the relationship. But the idea of the relationship checkup is that the father and the child both take time to answer the questions. They might, you know, take one or two of the questions: Again we're being flexible. Whoops, what happened here. And that is questions that the dad answers and then the child answers, and then they share their responses. This is what I would say is most important: not just the content. What's

important here, equally important, is the process. That is, we teach the relationship by doing it. This teaches children a language for relationships.

In relationships, we talk about what's good, what's going well. We talk about what we like, we talk about what's hard. It's building the foundation for a relationship by doing it and having and using the language of relationships. As you see in the the version core kids that are older – and I've done this with literally thousands of fathers and their children – their answers are often very surprising. Oftentimes, fathers and children will find they're on the same page or there's things they didn't know. But again, it's the process of saying as a father: "I value our relationship enough that I would like to talk about how things are going." I encourage dads to bribe their kids if they need to. With younger kids, it's not as difficult. But, if the teenager *doesn't* push back on this, I usually am a little concerned. They will push back, but ultimately I believe firmly – and I've seen this – that kids really want to connect with their fathers, and this practice gives...it's a tool that gives dads almost, like, an excuse to have conversations that are difficult to just strike up out of the blue.

So, that is the relationship checkup. Lastly is building in time as a father, what I call "ritual dad child..." sorry, "dad-child time." And, as you see, there's some research behind this. Ideally, it's one-on-one time. In some cases that's not possible, but to the extent it is, I encourage dads to make one-on-one time on a regular basis – once a month, even, I think is a really great ritual to have. And I encourage them to try this for, say, three months and see how it goes. You can see here that there are tips on how to do it, but the key is following the child's interest. I've had all...I've seen all kinds of different ways dads and kids have done this. Where they alternate: one month the child chooses what to do, next month, the dad chooses. And it can be...it's really about having time together. It's not pressured or "quality" time, it's just about being together. And I'll note here to minimize distractions as much as possible, in terms of devices and screens. So that's the last point there, in terms of some practices that you can offer dads. I encourage you to, if, you know, you have kids or you work with kids, to try some of these out and see how it goes.

So that's my talk; I think we're going to turn it back to you, Nigel.

Nigel Vann: Okay, well thanks very much John, yeah. I'd really like to stress one of the things that John just said in there: You know that kids really want to connect with their dads. I think sometimes as dads, we don't necessarily realize that; that they are looking for ways to connect with us. So I mean, those tools are just so good, John, for helping dads do that and finding a way to do that.

John Badalament: Yeah, can I just say, sorry, I just want to add one thing because I noticed it here. As you can see, these practices, are, I would say, germane and useful for moms as well. Because I think we oftentimes assume moms know everything about relationships, and I think that's a fallacy. It's important for moms to have tools as well. I think these are extremely relevant and can be easily done and adapted.

Nigel Vann: Yeah, no, great point. In fact, I think, you know, I've been keeping an eye on the chat box and I mean that's been part of the chat that people have been having on the side there. Yeah, so, I got, um, just a few questions that have come in. So, if people want to send more, please do, but one quick question for you John, then I got a couple for Gardner. Somebody wanted to know when you had the guys complete the survey. Did you provide any incentives for that, or was it just that they were keen to do it?

John Badalament: Yeah, it's a great question. You know what, we we did not. There were no incentives. We said that this was going to be used to improve the practice, improve the obstetrics, and I will say: The vast majority of guys would thank us. They were really excited to do this. And, as I said, the response rate was pretty incredible.

Nigel Vann: I think that's a good lesson as well. We talked about the fact that kids want to connect with their dads. Dads, you know, are willing to connect with the father program or, you know, anybody who's trying to reach out and help them. just so they know the right way to do that.

Right, so, Gardner, let me ask you one sort of general question and there's a question I'm going to approach to the both of you. So the work that you used to do, Gardner, was more, sort of home visiting. I see there's been some chats in the box from people doing Healthy Start and Head Start work: could you just talk a little bit about what you see is the difference between talking to the fathers in a home visit versus talking to them in an office or classroom setting?

Gardner Wiseheart: Sure. In the home visit, we're on their territory. It's all about them. We also don't have to rely on an appointment time in terms of them coming in. We go to them. If they're not home at that particular moment – they forgot the appointment, or something came up – we go back. We keep going and connecting with them. Being in the father's environment puts them in a place that they're more comfortable, as opposed to an office setting which sometimes can be a little more sterile or a little more daunting. The other part of that is by going out and connecting with dads, meeting them where they're comfortable – and that may be their home or it may be a park – then that makes them more comfortable to come in for things like dads groups or father-child play groups. Because what we do through those home visits is develop a relationship. And it's through that relationship that we do what we do.

Nigel Vann: Uh-huh, yep, yes, and that's the work, right? That really is.

Gardner Wiseheart: Well, yeah.

Nigel Vann: You know, sometimes, what do you need to do this work? You've got to be able to form that relationship so that guys want to be with you, kind of.

Gardner Wiseheart: Well then, you know, I think...I mean, listening to John, John's got a lot of really great tools, and and you've got a lot of terrific tools listed on the website. But, our most powerful tool in our practitioner's toolbox is our relationship with dads and moms. It's through the relationship that we kind of model for dads how to connect with kids, using all those other tools that we have in our toolbox.

Nigel Vann: yep, yep. So the other question for you, Gardner, which is, sort of, down a little bit deeper here. You had mentioned the fact that you help guys understand if their child has a developmental delay. Could you give a specific example of a dad you've helped with that? And how you help them deal with that? That's obviously one of the hardest things for a dad to accept and, you know, they always say that dads want to fix things...where you can't fix everything right.

Gardner Wiseheart: Right, and the delays can be, you know, subtle in terms of slow to speak, or they can be more insidious in terms of things like hearing problems. I can think of a couple of examples. There were a couple of kids that we worked with that as toddlers were having trouble developing language skills. By working with them through the ASQ or the Ages and Stages, we picked up on some hearing loss. Once we got that picked up on, we got them into a medical home who was able to evaluate a little bit further and then do some rehabilitation. They were able to, kind of, deal with that problem so that they could, kind of, rehab those developmental delays. They were able to get into kindergarten. In preschool, they were having some problems, but in kindergarten...by the time they got into kindergarten, they had been able to overcome those delays.

Nigel Vann: Okay. So I have one...it's a general research question. I don't know if, John, you can take a stab at this, and perhaps Gardner as well. Somebody has pointed out that it seems to be that dad's presence or even no presence has a bigger impact than a mom's. Why is that? Do you know anything about any kind of research that it would help answer that?

John Badalament: I'm not familiar with that. Mom? I'm not sure.

Nigel Vann: Well, you know, I think what it is we sort of tend to make the case that...if you read the book *fatherhood* by Kyle Pruett, he's emphasizing that in a lot of ways, dads are doing things that moms don't do. So, there is a big impact if dad's not around.

John Badalament: I can't find anything specific. Actually, on our website we have a downloadable research review that's kept pretty current, which is really useful. So that's one place I would turn. The other place would be to look at the Fatherhood Institute in the UK who tends to have an incredible body of research and unbelievable tools. But their research specifically – it doesn't always deal just the UK. It often will address U.S. fathers and mothers. But I'm not aware of that particular study. I will say that, you know, in education, there's been a number of studies where they found that a father's presence in his child's education can have a greater impact in certain subjects. On girls, I believe it was in math. But I think that there's so many different factors involved in that – for instance, fathers have not historically been as involved. So I don't know that it's even useful to say that they're present. You know, one or the other. It's not a zero sum.

Nigel Vann: Yeah, yeah, I think that's a great. In fact, I see Nick in the chatbox who's making the same point.

You know that fathers are more important, I do apologize for some you know as Nick is saying in the chat box some fathers would not say fathers are more important but the mom's just equally important and that's obviously here that we want to be getting out there so I think moms and dads are complimentary with each other in terms of what children need and and actually just it's a note I just noticed in the chat box somebody had mentioned that we need to also teach moms about the importance of fathers.

I think that's really important prenatally as well. Interestingly, just in a healthcare setting, I found it fascinating that that we actually worked with with interns and I'm forgetting the name but basically we worked with medical students that here is the next generation of pediatricians and obstetricians and they're the one thing that was noted was father's specifically did not break down the the gender of the parents. So these these doctors to-be were never given anything other than we did a module for them where we had never been asked to think about fathers, that it was still parents and we're talking about one of the greatest hospitals and health care providers in the world. The medical school has yet to know how to differentiate and there's lots of different reasons. Some of them are political and some of them not but it's not differentiated between the mother and the father and there's a huge opportunity miss if doctors do not know the impact fathers have. If mothers do not know that and of course if the father's themselves don't know that so yes, I think that's really an important point it was brought up.

As I said, that's a great point again John that I think it may be that when we are trying to convince people that they should be doing more with dads then we maybe we do tend to over stress the impact of the dad but we should always remember that we don't want to under stress the impact of the mother. You have that issue with some people you know if you if you're talking about what we're doing this program for dads then someone's gonna say well why aren't you doing it for mothers and it's because that maybe those services are there and more readily so and you've got a balance that we don't ever want to be seen as putting dad's in front of mothers. So I think this was a great discussion.

I don't see any more questions actually so I think we do have time to show the other video if you pull that up and then we can have John and Gardner reflect on this. I think there'll be some good opportunities here to make some more points so this is just a short two-and-a-half minute video. You didn't introduce this John that just one of the concepts that we teach in art in our curriculum and in in the various programs that we run is "serve and return." This is for healthy brain development the idea that we need to, as parents, pay attention to what children are serving up and then return it so in the case of an infant on the changing table might coo or make sounds, that's a serve the return. It would be great to repeat those sounds and maybe even add another sound and see if the child mimics that. As kids get older, the idea of serve might be the idea that you have to be tuned into that child to see what it is they're serving or what are they offering up so that you can return it. Also, parents can initiate the serve and see that the child returns it. Reading is a great example or as they get older having a conversation and again the idea is interaction back and forth exchange.

What this does is early on, especially zero to three, and actually even prenatally in utero, is this build pathways in the brain that that are important for for language and for relationship development so that's just okay but I think let's take a quick look at the video and then after this I'll ask each of you to just share maybe a thought on the video and if there is time also share a key takeaway that you'd like to leave people with but let's roll the video. [music]

We're now learning about the many ways in which solid brain foundations are built and maintained in a developing child. One important way is through what brain experts call *serve and return* interactions. Imagine a tennis match between a caregiver and a child but instead of hitting a ball back and forth across the net, various forms of communication path between the two from eye contact to touch, from singing to simple games like peekaboo. The child serves or indicates they're interested in something. The adult who's attentive to that child returns that interest and that ramps up the child's enthusiasm and they do the activity again. So when they're learning to read the child shows an interest in a book the adult sees that and reads to them the child gets all excited and tries reading back and then the child's using those circuits that underlie reading over and over again driven by the enthusiasm of the interaction with the intent of adult response. The attention a child receives from an adult when they are practicing certain social emotional and physical skills goes a long way to sparking that child's own excitement with learning and repeating certain actions. The child gets positive feedback from the adult and they try harder so they're using that circuit again and again that circuit will really be sturdy and will form a sturdy architecture for later life function. In order to build these sturdy circuits in a developing brain it's crucial for caregivers to actively engage with the child. Prolonged passive activities such as leaving the child alone in front of a television or merely holding the child without eye contact will not build solid brain architecture without attentive adult interactions.



The child's much less likely to undertake a lot of these activities and their brain won't develop as *serve and return* interactions repeated throughout a young person's developing years are the bricks that build a healthy foundation for all future development. [music]

Nigel Vann: So Gardner, would you like just to reflect on that for a minute and tell us how you think that relates to the whole CHEERS and assessment that you use?

Gardner Wiseheart: Well I think it kind of reflects on on CHEERS from the standpoint of all of those parts go together in terms of the *serve and return* that they're talking about which creates and develops and enhances brain development of a child going through each of those elements of CHEERS helping moms and dads to get more in tune with what they're noticing, how they're responding, how the child is responding, and then in turn how they're responding back makes a lot of sense and it's for child development.

Nigel Vann: Okay great. So I hope you enjoyed both those videos, and we are getting close to time now, so I'm going to give John and Gardner the opportunity to leave us with one with one final thought. I don't know if we have John Allen on the line... are you there John? I guess not. so it's John Badalament: would you like to leave us with one final word of wisdom here?

John Badalament: Yes. In the words of my mentor and friend/colleague Terry Real, that's R-E-A-L, he has a great saying, which is: "relationships aren't something we have, they're something we do." I think that's that's really really important and there's a lot that that we, as practitioners, can help fathers to do in their relationships. Being active is really critical, and I think of three C's. I want to help dads to be confident, giving them and helping them with knowledge and understanding that they matter. Competent, and that means competent with skills and with practices that they can put to use and then lastly, connection. That what's most important is their connection, whether they live with their child or not. That the relationship that they build early and often can last a lifetime, and it's really all about connections.

Nigel Vann: Well that's great. You say competent, confident and connection. Almost progressively... confidence first, then competence, and then connection. But, you know though, take those three there. And I love what you said as well- every relationships are not something we have...there's something to do because that's what we do as parents and as practitioners.

My final word is just to echo John: I think that was just wonderful, what he's saying. And then, what he's learned from his mentor in terms of our relationships as practitioners, our relationships with the fathers we work with and supporting them in their relationships with their children. I think that's what it's all about.

Wonderful, okay well we've gotten some very positive feedback in the chat box there; I think the audience has enjoyed you both here. So I thank John and Gardner very much. I thank everybody else for their attention. And you will see a survey link pop up after this, so we do always appreciate any feedback you provide them via that. And with that, we will catch you next time. And those of you who are coming to the summit, I look forward to meeting some of you there. Thank you very much for your time, good bye and that does conclude today's conference.