



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

What Millennial Dads Want: *Harnessing the Potential of Fatherhood*

Policy Implications

Research shows that children with engaged fathers are more likely to be emotionally secure, confident, and have better social connections as they grow. And today's dads are eager and committed to being very present and highly involved with their children, and to do the best job possible supporting their development. How can policymakers ensure that children are able to reap the immense benefits of having an engaged father in their lives?

The benefits of engaged fathers are clear.

- Children with involved, loving fathers, when compared to children who have uninvolved fathers, are significantly more likely to do well in school, and exhibit greater emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills.ⁱ Toddlers with involved fathers go to school with higher levels of academic readiness, and they are more patient when handling stress associated with attending school than are the children of less involved fathers.ⁱⁱ
- The positive impacts of having an engaged father persist into adolescence and adulthood, resulting in higher intellectual functioning, better verbal skills, and higher academic achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that highly involved fathers had children who were 33% less likely to repeat a grade and 43% more likely to earn mostly “A” grades.^{iv} Children with involved fathers are also more likely to avoid violence, drugs, and delinquency.^{v,vi}
- Daughters in homes where their biological father is present are less likely to disrupt the completion of high school to become teen mothers. Girls with involved fathers have higher self-esteem; boys who have involved fathers have fewer behavioral problems at school.^{vii}
- Children benefit developmentally and emotionally from the presence of fathers. Children of involved fathers are more likely to be emotionally secure, more securely attached to their caregivers, more comfortable about exploring their environment, more easily comforted after a brief separation from their parent, and more socially connected to their peers.^{viii}
- Chronic or severe stress early in a child’s life has a toxic effect on the young child’s developing nervous system that can have a life-long impact on their patterns of behavior. Fathers can provide an enhanced sense of stability and security for infants and toddlers that improves childhood outcomes.^{ix}

Early childhood development programs for very young children often focus primarily on mothers and children.

Because infants and toddlers almost always reside with their mothers, regardless of where their fathers reside, programs seeking to boost early development and learning tend to be more oriented toward mothers. While some programs include fathers to a degree, most are designed without an expectation that most fathers will participate. Programs face barriers to engaging fathers, such as fathers not residing with their children, increased logistical issues, and relationships with the child’s mother that hamper co-parenting. Especially in home-based services, domestic violence is a very real consideration, so programs must be able to approach whole family engagement on a case-by-case basis.

Yet, we know that—despite stereotypes to the contrary—fathers want to be and often are involved in their children’s lives. [Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Tell Us What They Think, Know and Need](#), a comprehensive research effort by ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation that examined parenthood from the perspective of Millennial and Generation X parents, found that the vast majority of dads across all demographic segments are passionate about the positive role that fatherhood plays in their lives.^x Fatherhood initiatives, such as those through the Department of Health and Human Services [Responsible Fatherhood grants](#), support activities that help fathers improve their relationships with partners and/or the mothers of their children and help them become better parents. But large early childhood development programs, as well as national family-friendly policies, have the potential for a much greater reach—but only if they infuse a recognition of the essential involvement of fathers into basic program culture. The following discussion examines several ways public policy could bring dads into sharper focus in the early development picture.

Paid Family Leave

Since 1965, fathers in the United States have nearly tripled the time they spend caring for children, and working fathers are now just as likely as working mothers to say they find it “very” or “somewhat” difficult to manage work and family responsibilities.^{xi} Despite these changes, most men do not have access to leave that would allow them to take time away from work after the birth or adoption of a baby.

- Of private sector workers, only 20% are employed at worksites that offer paid leave to most male employees, and nine percent are at worksites that offer paid leave to all male employees.^{xii}
- One study found that only one in 20 fathers in professional jobs took more than two weeks off after their most recent child was born^{xiii} – a staggering three out of four took one week or less.^{xiv} Being a good financial provider continues to be seen as an important part of being a good father.^{xv} Men, especially those without paid leave, often feel pressure to limit their time off from work to keep a steady income.^{xvi}

Studies of two parent, opposite-sex households show that fathers who take two or more weeks off after the birth of a child are more involved in that child’s direct care nine months after birth than fathers who take no leave.^{xvii} Involved fathers also promote children’s educational attainment and emotional stability.^{xviii} And a father’s involvement in his newborn’s care in the first six months can mean both mother and baby sleep better.^{xix}

Policy Implications

Paid family leave that extends to fathers as well as mothers helps give dads the time and space to become attuned to their babies’ cues, in addition to relieving stress on the mother by having the other parent present. Legislation such *The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act*, or FAMILY Act, would create a national insurance program that would support workers, their families, and businesses. The FAMILY Act would:

- Allow women and men to receive a portion of their pay when they need time away from their jobs for specific family or medical reasons.
- Provide eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of paid leave for their own serious illness; the serious illness of a child, parent, or spouse (including a domestic partner); the birth or adoption of a child; the injury of a family member who is in the military; or exigencies arising from a service member’s deployment.

In addition, the *Military Parental Leave Modernization Act* would integrate each of the military Services branches’ adoption, paternity, and maternity leave policies into a single parental leave policy that is consistent and equitable. It would provide up to 12 weeks of parental leave for all Service members, including foster and adoptive parents who often have been treated as less deserving under previous policies. Currently, male Service members only get 10 days of paid paternity leave at the commander’s discretion. In addition, newly adoptive parents are granted three weeks of leave for only one parent, and Service members who foster parent are given non-chargeable leave.

Early Head Start

Early Head Start (EHS) is the infant-toddler portion of the Head Start program, serving pregnant women and families with children under age 3 with incomes below the poverty line. EHS works with fathers as well as mothers,

more often when the biological father is present in the home. Head Start has a long history of acknowledging that male family members and father figures are important contributors to the school readiness of children and to the well-being of families. Head Start and EHS programs consistently engage fathers as advocates, lifelong educators, and first teachers of their children. Programs also engage fathers in developing their own skills and interests and in achieving their personal goals.

Nearly all EHS programs invite fathers to participate. However, fathers are rarely included in the family needs assessment and few programs are designed with the expectation that fathers should and will participate.^{xx} Efforts within Head Start to promote father involvement have been able to significantly increase father participation.

- About half of EHS children in 2009 lived with both biological parents.^{xxi} An earlier study found that a quarter of EHS children without a resident father have an involved non-resident father.
- Research also suggests that EHS fathers are very connected with the baby and usually with the mother when the child is born, providing a window of engagement for both parents, ideally beginning in the prenatal period.
- The EHS Fatherhood Project focused specifically on how to increase father involvement. Insights to successful programs included having goals and case management specifically for fathers; hiring fatherhood coordinators; specific training for staff; use of multiple recruiting strategies including other fathers; recognizing that different cultural groups need different outreach strategies; and above all, cultivating an image that the program is as much for fathers as for mothers.^{xxii}

EHS Impacts

Findings from the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation project, a rigorous Congressionally-mandated study, indicate that the program had modest but positive impacts on EHS children at age three in cognitive, language, and social-emotional development, compared to a control group.^{xxiii} In addition, their parents scored higher than control group parents on such aspects of the home environment as parenting behavior and knowledge of infant-toddler development.

- Fathers in EHS approached discipline differently, with less spanking. The program significantly improved how fathers interacted with and related to their children. EHS children were more able to engage with their fathers and be more attentive, showing their fathers' efforts to engage with them.
- Even though few programs had implemented formal initiatives to increase father involvement, EHS influenced father participation in such activities as home visits, parenting classes and events, and parent-child activities.^{xxiv}
- Other research found that a father's presence in the family promoted cognitive outcomes.^{xxv} The toddlers with involved fathers were more secure and more likely to explore the world with enthusiasm. The fathers' presence also increased the mothers' cognitive stimulation of their toddlers. There also were long-term cognitive effects, namely higher math and reading skills in fifth grade.^{xxvi}

Policy Implications

Research showing the important impact of fathers on children's development makes a strong case for emphasizing outreach to ensure greater father participation in EHS. While programs receive resources to implement special projects to increase father participation, these efforts may not be sustainable. Future EHS policy should consider how best to infuse a culture of engaging fathers into EHS as well as providing adequate resources so programs have the means to do so.

Home Visiting

Often when we think of home visiting programs, we picture visits to a new mom. This is because we think of mothers as being central to the child's development. But, of course, fathers also have a direct impact on the economic, social, behavioral, cognitive, and academic well-being of children. Recent research provides strong evidence for inclusion of fathers in home visiting programs, and many of these programs do reach out to and

engage fathers. Including fathers in home visiting programs is not only good for young children, it is an opportunity to positively impact the health and well-being of new fathers.

- Teaching fathers to respond to infants' cues and to play with them can have positive benefits. These infants become more securely attached. Studies suggest that infants who receive high levels of affection from their fathers are more sociable and popular with other children throughout their childhood.^{xxvii} These children get into less trouble at home, in school, and in the neighborhood.

A study of five home visiting programs with different approaches to engaging fathers found there is little guidance for programs to follow. Some programs, while focused primarily on mothers, sought to have fathers also participate in home visits; others set up separate home visits for the fathers. All programs offered other activities for fathers, including peer support groups.^{xxviii} Some of the findings include:

- The motivation to participate included: a desire to be a better father; learning parenting skills and how to support their child's development; and breaking the cycle of absent fathers for those who had grown up without fathers themselves. Even those initially motivated by gifts such as free diapers or gift cards, were motivated to continue by the content on child development.
- Concerns or barriers to father engagement included: mothers and grandmothers acting as gatekeepers; concerns about safety because of domestic violence; reluctance of home visitors to work with fathers; scheduling and logistics; funding constraints; and difficulty engaging young fathers.
- Strategies to reach and engage fathers include: better training for staff; matching fathers with home visitors who could connect with them, as well as trusted mentors; tailoring activities to fathers' needs and interests, especially hands-on activities; and meeting fathers where they are.
- Lessons for other programs include: creating a program culture that welcomes and supports fathers as an integral part of the program; father-oriented activities that show them they are valued; persistence in recruiting and engaging fathers; ensuring they have the right staff; and helping mothers embrace the child's father as part of the "parenting equation."^{xxix}

Policy Implications

Home visiting programs can be an avenue to engage fathers in children's lives early on, but doing so requires both changes in program culture, as well as great sensitivity to family situations. These are programs mostly geared toward mothers; for example, the federal funding stream is named the *Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting* (MIECHV) program. Yet, MIECHV also involves families with multiple risk factors, which can include domestic violence, so sensitivity to individual families' circumstances must be incorporated. Home visitors may not be comfortable working with fathers, so special training and/or fatherhood staff may be needed. There is real promise in intentional efforts to draw fathers, as well as moms, into the process of recognizing the significant power they have to shape their children's lives. Policy considerations include training and technical assistance for states and local programs; more research on curriculum models for fathers; sharing best practices on peer support groups; and resources for infrastructure to support after-hours visits and activities. One approach to increase resource efficiency would be to pair home visiting programs with Responsible Fatherhood initiatives.

Child Welfare

While the involvement of fathers and paternal family members is critical to a child's growth and development, historically, child welfare agencies have not been effective in involving fathers in the family work that is needed to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being. Increasingly, agencies are focusing on ways to engage and involve fathers and paternal family members, creating greater opportunities for them to be connected in important ways that benefit their children.

- For children who are victims of abuse or neglect, studies suggest that father engagement contributes to child safety, permanence, and well-being as evidenced by a lower rate of repeat abuse and neglect reports, shortened length of stay in foster care, a higher reunification rate with fewer repeat placements, and greater stability in foster care.^{xxx}
- Studies of families involved with the child welfare system show:

- Involvement by nonresident fathers is associated with more reunifications and fewer adoptions.
- Higher levels of nonresident father involvement substantially lower the likelihood of later maltreatment allegations.
- Highly involved nonresident fathers' children exited foster care faster.^{xxxi}
- Children who had had contact with a noncustodial parent in the last year were 46% less likely to enter foster care.^{xxxii}
- In addition to social science research, much anecdotal evidence shows that youth in foster care benefit from contact with their fathers; youth often reveal that they value their relationship with their fathers, or wish they had more opportunities to get to know their fathers.^{xxxiii}
- Of children who become involved in the child welfare system, involving multiple parents in the case (e.g. mother and father) often results in a greater chance of a child returning home, fewer placement episodes, and reduced trauma caused by separation anxiety. With the prevalence of single parenting homes which are mostly maternal, child welfare agencies are examining the efficacy of engaging multiple caregivers and especially fathers, in the child welfare process. Research suggests that to involve fathers in child welfare processes, practices, and policies must be intentional in implementing systems and protocols that encourage involvement of all parents regardless of relationship status of the parents. However, few child welfare agencies are required to inquire about fathers or involve fathers in the child's case.^{xxxiv}

Policy Implications

Child welfare agencies should be prompted to use a developmental approach to services for young children, including adopting practices and policies that are intentional in involving all parents where appropriate and safe. States need guidance and best practices on engaging fathers in activities to promote positive parenting and support the child's development, as well as considering fathers or paternal families as possible placements for children entering foster care.

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About ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals and policymakers. For more information, visit www.zerotothree.org, [facebook.com/ZEROTOTHREE](https://www.facebook.com/ZEROTOTHREE) or follow @ZEROTOTHREE on Twitter.