

Being an Involved Father: What Does It Mean?¹

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Overview

It seems that more and more folks are sharing the message that fathers should be more involved in caring for their children. You may hear this message on TV, on the radio, where you worship, at school, at meetings, at work, and, especially, at home. Father involvement is defined as men's "positive, wide-ranging, and active participation in their children's lives" (Marsiglio et al., 2000, p. 276).

Being an involved father can be defined in many more ways (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Marsiglio, 2006).

Father involvement means

- direct interaction between a father and child (play, caretaking);
- accessibility, or how available a father is to his child when needed;
- responsibility, or managing and providing resources for a child (doctor's appointments, supplementing family income or child support);

- building of social capital, or how fathers provide a support network for children as they grow up to contribute to society.

These are all ways in which a father shows he is involved in his child's life. The first two ways involve direct interaction between fathers and children and the last two ways are more indirect ways that fathers stay involved in their children's lives. Father involvement also changes with the age and stage of the child. For example, fathers take on a nurturing role with infant children, but act more as "teachers" in the toddler years (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009).

How Much Is Enough?

Efforts to get every father more involved in their children's lives leaves many fathers asking themselves: *"How much is enough? When have I done enough to be considered an 'involved' father?"*

Many of us remember how much or how little involved our fathers were in raising us. We notice the difference in today's dads. More fathers are involved in caring for their children than their own fathers

1. This document is FCS2141, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication: December 1999. Revised: July 2005, November 2009. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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were, especially in the early phases of a child's life (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002). In fact, most fathers of infants through school-aged children today are Generation X-ers (age 30–39) who tend to value time spent with families over careers and economic advancement more than fathers of earlier generations (Badalament, 2008).

You may end up asking yourself if it's enough just to do more or spend a little more time than your father did. Or, you may find yourself asking the question, *"How much time and attention do I need to give my child to ensure she or he grows up healthy?"* Perhaps you coach a little league team, or shuttle your child back and forth to games. Maybe you cook dinner for your child or, as a new father, feed your baby or change diapers. You may even take the time for a sit-down talk about sexuality with your child.

Instead of counting how many minutes you spend with your child as a measure of "good" fathering, ask yourself, *"What do I do with my child with the time that I have?"* Researchers generally find the **quality** and **type of activities** that you do with your child are far more important than the **amount of time** you spend with them (Palkovitz, 2002).

What follows are strategies that you can use to make sure that you have a healthy and "involved" relationship with your child.

Spend Quality Time with Your Child

Quality time is an expression used a lot on TV and in books and magazines about parenting. The trouble is, many people aren't really sure what *quality time* is. In essence, *quality time* is time that parents use to focus on healthy, positive, and nurturing experiences with their child. The emphasis is on **what you do with your child** instead of how much time you spend with them. Consider whether you are actively engaged with your child. Here are a few checkpoints to decide whether you are spending quality time with your child and influencing his or her healthy development:

- Is your child the center of your attention—or are you just trying to keep them busy while you do other things? In other words, be both accessible to your child and engaged when with him or her.

- During your time together, are you involved in activities that **both** you and your child enjoy?
- Do you occasionally take time to assist your child in learning a new skill that enhances her or his development (mental, physical, or social)?
- Do you assist in planning for your child's future on a regular basis (small steps toward education and career) and connecting her or him with resources in the community?
- Are you investing time and energy in your children's lives on a daily basis or are you interacting with them just when it is convenient? In other words, are you accessible to your child on a regular basis?
- Are you happy just spending ordinary time with your child with no particular purpose or goal in mind?

If you answered "yes" to all these questions, it looks like you **are** actively contributing to the healthy development of your child. It's important that you stay involved. If you are like many families, you may not be your child's primary caregiver. This means that others (such as child care workers, teachers, and mothers) influence your child on a daily basis as much, if not more than, you do.

Quality, positive interactions help form a healthy bond between fathers and their children. These interactions help father-child attachment to grow. Fathers can understand their child's world a little better, and children will be able to see and understand their dad as a real person.

Stay Involved in All Phases of Their Life

Being involved in all aspects of parenting is an important part of being an involved father. Some fathers are more comfortable with teaching, playing with, or even disciplining their child because they see these activities as what a father is supposed to do. However, fathers who are involved in as many areas of their child's development are happier as a parent and have healthier, more successful children.

For many dads, being involved in such a broad range of activities takes a serious commitment. It

means being willing to feed and diaper, play and problem-solve, as well as serve as a resource to and liaison with the community. For example, fathers can assist community-based organizations serving youth as volunteers or advocates to alleviate youth problems.

Fathers experience many transitions as their children grow up (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009).

In the infant years, father involvement that promotes healthy development includes providing physical care, sharing emotional warmth, and engaging in cognitively stimulating activities (such as games involving positive emotions and the element of "surprise") (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008). Being an involved father in the school-age years means packing a lunch box or even taking a leadership role in a school, community, or classroom event as well as cleaning a bicycle and going shopping. It means being willing to share in all parts of your child's life.

Doing more care-taking activities as well as connecting with others in the community who have potential to help your child may seem a little unnatural for some fathers, at least at first. When they engage a little more, even in the seemingly mundane care-taking activities like diapering, dressing, bathing, etc., dads almost always find that it's worthwhile—they see these actions improving their relationship with their child as well as fostering the child's development.

Don't Confuse Providing with Loving

Men may get caught up with the idea that providing for children is the best way to show they are involved in their children's lives. Providing represents only a part of the "responsibility" definition of father involvement. While it's true that creating the means for food, clothes, and shelter is a great way to provide for a child – it's not the only way to show caring. In fact, these basics are just the beginning.

There is a maxim, "I've never seen a tombstone that read, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work'." The message is that, as we grow older, most of us wish we would have spent more time with our families and less time trying to get ahead at work. In the same

way, rarely does a child say, "I wish my dad spent more time at work."

More than anything in the world, children want their parents' attention and love. Further, research shows that when children receive positive attention from and healthy interaction with their parents, they do better in most all aspects of their lives (home, school, work, etc.) than children who do not receive this attention. This occurs regardless of how much money they have or the type of neighborhood they live in. So remember, being a good father doesn't mean making sure your child has all the best toys, or lives in the best neighborhood. It means making sure your child has all the benefits of having you in his or her life.

Have a Plan (Where to Start)

Where to start? You probably have many demands on your time including, commitments to your spouse, your job, your friends, and yourself. You may wonder what you are going to stop or drop to spend more quality time with your child. No one has said that being an involved father is easy—its not. It's especially hard for new fathers who suddenly find that they have to make a lot of room in their life for a baby's absolute demand for attention.

A good motivator and helper for beginning fathers are guides on fathering and books that help dispel myths about fatherhood and masculinity. Some suggested books and guides on fatherhood are listed in the reference section. These resources help fathers to better understand the role they play in their family and in their children's lives.

New and experienced fathers alike can start with a small plan. Set aside a block of time for one type of activity that you are going to do with your child. If your child is older, pick something you have hardly ever done before. Maybe you will decide to play with them for 15 minutes before dinner, or help them with their homework. You might decide to be a regular part of bath time or make a snack for them between meals. Commit yourself to this small activity. You may even find that you enjoy it. This time alone with your child will grow and become more rewarding for both of you. After you take this small step, it becomes easier to do other things with your child.

Don't wait to be asked, volunteer and take responsibility; talk it over with the other parent and agree on a plan. If you are a new father, view your caretaking role as a partnership with your spouse or partner rather than as a "helper" or "assistant." Research shows that a father's care of his infants includes soothing, bedtime activities, diapering, and feeding and that most new fathers engage in at least one of these activities on a given weekday (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002). Your sharing of parental responsibilities is beneficial, considering that in most families both parents need to earn income to survive economically. Most important, fathering your child, regardless of whether your child is a girl or boy, contributes to her or his positive development.

Realize that, as you become more involved in your child's life, you may become less involved in other areas of your life. You may not be able to work as many overtime shifts or stay as late at work. You may have to say no to an outing or two with the guys, take a season off from your bowling or soccer league. Know that in the end, most fathers agree that the benefits that they receive through building their relationship with their child far outweigh these sacrifices. Last, these benefits influence the development of your child into a successful adult and future parent.

Getting to the Point of Being

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Resources

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