

# Childcare and children's health

HEALTH CARE INFORMATION FOR CHILDCARE STAFF AND FAMILIES  
FROM THE ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, MELBOURNE

## Dads want to 'be there' for their children – Childcare staff can help them 'get there'

There is a growing tendency in society for fathers to become more involved with their infants and small children. However, many men face difficulties when they try to put into practice their own notions of modern, nurturing fatherhood: to 'be there' for their children. Lack of role models, support systems, and paternity leave are examples of such obstacles. Early childhood professionals have a unique opportunity to encourage fathers' involvement with their children by actively encouraging and including men in all care-related issues.

In most western societies there is a trend for fathers to be more involved in childrearing even if women usually remain the primary caregivers, i.e. spend most time with the children and related chores. Interviews with 'expectant' fathers in several countries have revealed that men want to 'be there' for their children more than their own fathers, who were perceived as often absent and uninvolved. However, many men are faced with the lack of role models and support from their environment – they have to construct the notion and practice of good fatherhood for themselves without obvious examples to follow.

Historically, the father-ideal has gone through different phases – from moral teacher and disciplinarian, through breadwinner, gender-role model and 'buddy', to the 'new-age', nurturing, co-parenting father. An increasing number of couples opt for a more equitable position with regard to parenting and demands are being made for better parental leave policies, including paid leave for fathers. Because of these social changes, many of the assumptions and expectations about fatherhood might have to be reconsidered: we must be open to new interpretations of fathers' roles and places in their children's lives.

Researchers today talk about factors that are of importance



in determining paternal involvement: **motivation** (or interest), spousal and other **social support**, **self-confidence**, the acquisition of **practical skills**, and **institutional practices**, such as paternity leave. The more these circumstances are satisfied the better are fathers' chances to be involved and stay involved with their children: to truly 'be there' for them. Early childhood professionals have a unique opportunity to help fathers to 'get there' by actively supporting men in these areas.

Naturally, fathers have to feel the need to be involved in their children's lives themselves. However, **motivation** needs to be fuelled. A father who is not encouraged to participate in everyday tasks or to take part in health care routines may eventually lose some of his motivation.

Actively encouraging fathers to visit the Maternal and Child Health Nurse and directing questions to them as well as to

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the mothers sends the message to both parents that fathers are assumed to be both important and competent caregivers, thus increasing fathers' **self-confidence**. If the child enters child care, staff can support fathers' motivation by inviting them to participate in all discussions and procedures from the time of enrolment. Work is often cited as an obstacle for participation. This is of particular importance in Australia where it is now noted that Australians are working longer hours than in most countries. There is also fear that they may lose a job or be overlooked for work promotions. There is great job insecurity these days and this can be an obstacle for both mothers and fathers. Still, if the father feels that his engagement is welcome and even expected, he may be more likely to find a way to take part in this important process.

**Practical skills** in taking care of a baby or small child are not genetically predetermined. They are acquired through practice. When it comes to caring for small children it is traditionally the mother's domain and fathers may find they are not encouraged or included by some spouses who may not want them to take over. They may also exclude themselves due to awkward feelings about asking for help. This is another reason why fathers should be invited to events such as health visits, especially if there are any problems with feeding or settling the infant. Nothing promotes better **self-confidence** in parenting than success in soothing a crying infant or feeding a cranky baby. If both parents are taught new skills it increases fathers' involvement and probably also the effectiveness of the intervention. Child care staff will be eager for either parent to share any information that will assist in helping the child make a smoother transition from home to childcare too.

The current and traditional organisation of maternal and infant care is based on the needs of the mother-infant relationship. Fathers still seem to be dependent on support from their spouses and/or networks to which their spouses belong to take on an active fathering role. Institutions that help parents should be aware of the lack of natural **social support** systems for men and promote opportunities for fathers to talk to other fathers. Different initiatives for fathers' groups have been shown to be warmly appreciated by participants who witnessed that although the birth of their child had been the most important event of their adult lives they had often not discussed this with any other man, not even their own fathers. Psychosocially or economically deprived families are at higher risk of lacking paternal involvement: low income as well as low job-satisfaction has

been related to fathers' being less positive to their children. These fathers, thus, might need extra support and encouragement.

**Institutional practices**, including poor paternity leave provisions in industrial awards in Australia do not bolster paternal involvement. However, estimates from the USA, where policies are often as restrictive as those in Australia, point out that 75 to 90% of fathers take at least some informal leave such as vacation, sick days, or discretionary time to be with their children. Informal and formal paternity leave, in turn, are strongly associated with paternal involvement: the more time fathers take off from work when the child is small, the more involved they are later on. As official policies will not change overnight, it is important to encourage fathers to create their own time with their child. Depending on their work situation and its flexibility, fathers may achieve this by going to work later or leaving earlier on a certain day of the week and, if necessary, compensating for this time another day.

Within centres and family day care homes it is important that fathers receive the message that they are included and wanted as part of their children's lives wherever they are spent. Any time they are able to be present with their child in the care setting should be personally relevant and rewarding with their own child as a minimum and possibly with friends of their children also. It may be possible to encourage at least one other father to be there at the same time so that there is an opportunity for informal chatting and this in turn may be helpful in making both feel more comfortable and positive about their involvement. At other times, special events such as camping in the childcare grounds, preparing new gardens, eating and socializing with the children at meal and snack times might be organised.

In terms of confidence building, encourage the father to be with their own child and do something together that he knows his child will enjoy. Other children will no doubt want to join in and this response can reinforce the fathers interest and motivation to be involved. For instance, if Dad chooses reading a favourite book under a tree to his own child, others can readily join in and all can enjoy the experience. An opportunity to build with far more Leggo blocks than they own at home could be a treat that can easily develop into an opportunity for Dad and the children to talk, use imagination and make the father feel more comfortable in his ability to relate to his own child while getting to know some of his own child's friends. If your centre is so designed, it is sometimes a great opportunity to invite the father to have a coffee break in a parent's nook while looking through their child's portfolio. This can also

present an opportune time for you to join him to discuss where the child is up to from the home and childcare perspective.

**In summary, childcare staff can encourage fathers' involvement with their children by systematically and actively including men in many care-related issues and**

**by demonstrating to fathers that their presence and participation is both welcome and expected.**

*NCAC Principle: Principle 1*

*By Anna Sarkadi M.D, Ph.D. and  
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## Self-regulation in early childhood

**Self-regulation is an important developmental task for young children. This task involves young children making the transition from total dependence on others to gradually acquiring competencies to manage the world for themselves. Parents and early childhood professionals play key roles in providing experiences, supports and encouragement for young children to move to well-regulated behaviour.**



By working closely together, parents and early childhood professionals have the opportunity to understand and impact on the child's level of development in three important tasks:

- emotion regulation,
- behaviour regulation and
- attention regulation.

While these three areas of self-regulation can be thought about discreetly, they also interrelate. Success in one area assists success in another area, and problems in one area can undermine development in another.

Early regulatory tasks include acquiring day-night wake-sleep patterns and learning to regulate crying. Later regulatory tasks include understanding and managing feelings, by using them effectively in relationships.

Early emotional development lays the basis for later well-

being and mental health. Some of the kinds of emotion related disorders found in older children and adults can also be found in toddlers and preschool age children.

The task of all adults playing caregiving roles in the lives of young children is to help organize and give meaning to the early emotional experiences of the children by:

- responding to them,
- managing the feelings of the children,
- identifying and naming the emotions and
- discussing emotional experiences.

Emotion regulation is related to competent social functioning. In preschool age children, well-regulated children have been found to be:

- good problem solvers,
- more able to compromise and meet mutual needs when playing with peers,
- able to make new friends,
- likely to develop peer interaction skills through higher levels of play,
- more popular, and
- more likely to engage in positive peer relationships.

### Consider these important points about self-regulation:

- There is much to learn about normal patterns of self-regulation as well as the additional challenges that may confront children who might have a range of developmental disabilities.
- Regulation is an important part of the early development of the child and it is strongly linked to the child's relationships with others. Supporting the child to take over and self-regulate in one area of functioning after another is one of the most critical elements of good caregiving.
- Learning to regulate emotions, behaviours and task-oriented capacities presents a different challenge for each child, depending upon their temperament, and this in turn will also affect the child's caregiver.
- Regulatory problems may provide an early indication that the child has mental health problems but early

diagnosis is not clear cut. Nearly all young children display some “poorly regulated” behaviour at some time simply because they are little children.

- Some young children struggle with serious mental health problems and need medical help urgently. Others may benefit from early interventions to address social and emotional problems by focusing on ordering the environment to reduce the number of demands on the child. Paying attention to these matters may balance the preoccupation of “fixing the child”. Another promising approach lies in focusing on young children’s relationships with adults and other children.
- Cultural values have a profound impact on how young children learn to interpret and express their emotions, and on the behaviours that are thought to be appropriate. These cultural dimensions have important but unexplored implications for children with a home culture which differs from the dominant culture of the settings in which they may spend time eg child care, homes of friends. Additionally they have important implications for early childhood professionals who are working with diverse groups of young children and whose responses to the children’s behaviours are closely linked with their own cultural expectations.

**Reflection points:**

- **How do these ideas relate to each of the children in your care?**
- **Have you discussed any of these ideas with the parents of the children in your care?**
- **Where are the children in your care positioned in terms of self-regulation in the areas of emotions, behaviour and attention?**

This article provides a general introduction to the topic of self-regulation in early childhood. In the next edition, this general introduction will be followed up with specific information about ways of supporting self-regulation in infants/toddlers and preschool age children.

*NCAC Principles: Principles 1, 2, 3*

*Sourced by Jan Duffie from:*

National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000.

*From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development.* Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development.



**www.ecconnections.com.au**

*The Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with Johnson & Johnson would like to launch the new look ‘early childhood connections’ website.*

*The website, which provides up to date information for parents and professionals across the health, education and community sectors has recently been reviewed and redeveloped. So visit the site to check out the new features including an early childhood connections mailing list, discussion forums and the latest information on the early years.*

*The Childcare and children’s health publications from 2000 onwards are available online at [www.ecconnections.com.au](http://www.ecconnections.com.au) by following the links: For Professionals, Publications and Resources, Centre for Community Child Health.*

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