



The Benefits of Engaging Fathers in Home Visits

Fathers play a critical role in promoting their child's health and development. Home visitation programs often focus on providing strategies to promote parental attachment and engagement with their children. However, home visitation programs have typically been designed for pregnant individuals and caregivers who identify as women and mothers. Engaging individuals who identify as or assume a role as a father in home visiting has benefits for children, mothers, and fathers themselves. Understanding the types of engagement fathers display may assist public health nurses in more fully assessing and then responding to a family's needs. This practice guidance focuses on the benefits of engaging fathers in home visits and outlines how engagement benefits all family members.

Evidence suggests that the presence of a father figure critically influences a child's health, growth, and development^{1,2}. Engaging fathers during pregnancy helps begin bonding before birth. Father involvement during the early years supports healthy attachment³. Fathers can have an influence that is positive or negative depending on the nature of the father's involvement with the family.

Fathers who are positively involved in the family unit can contribute in many ways:

- Providing direct or indirect care – e.g. feeding, bathing, arranging childcare
- Contributing economically to the family
- Supporting improved maternal-child attachment
- Promoting mother's academic achievement
- Reducing adverse child outcomes, including mental illness

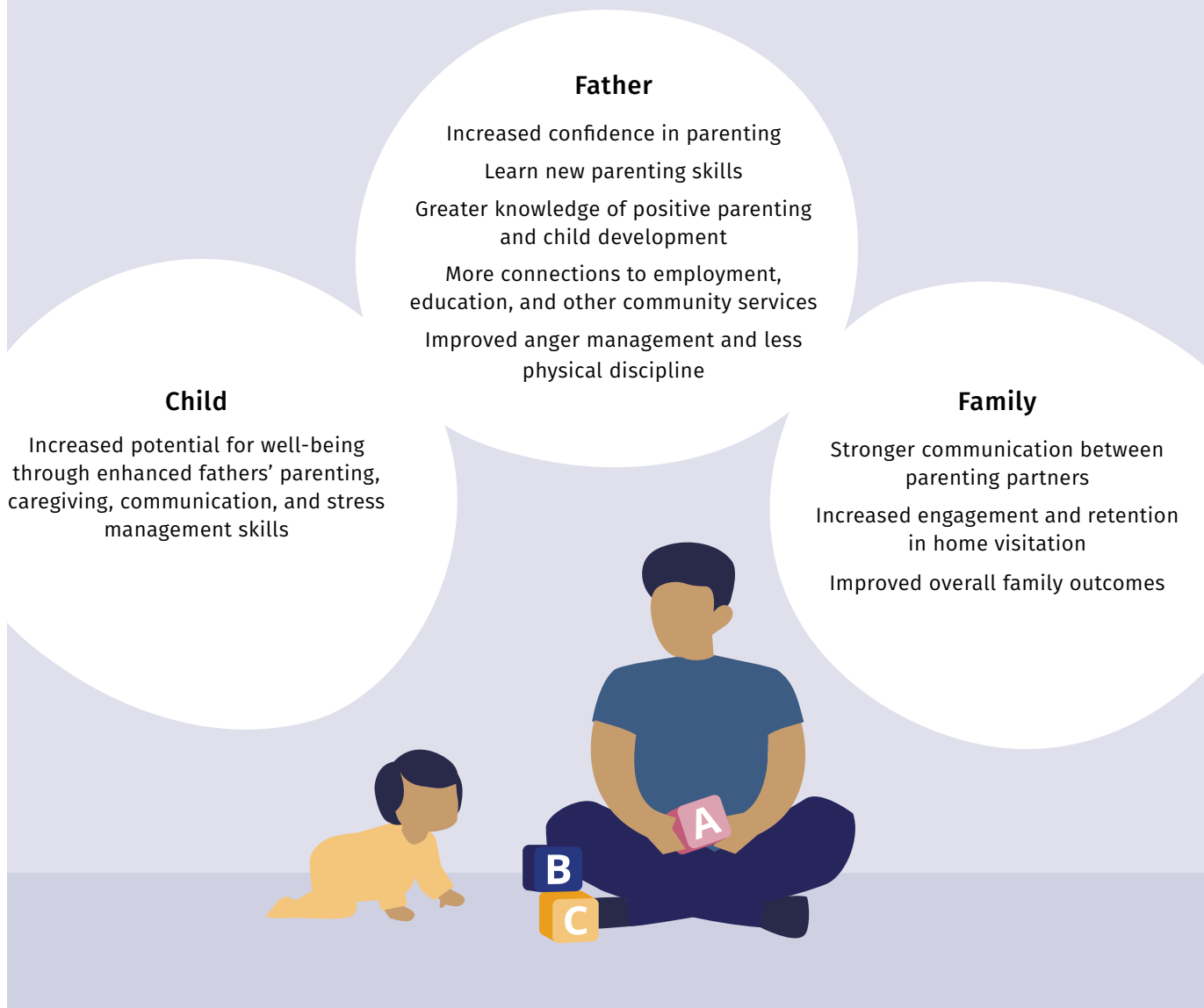
Although this guidance focuses on strategies and the evidence related to engaging fathers (he/him) in home visiting, it is important to acknowledge that there are many different types of family structures. Infants and children may be raised by one or two parents, grandparents or other caregivers. There are also children who are raised by parents/caregivers of the same gender or by parents who may use pronouns other than she/her and he/him.



Fathers could also be negatively involved with their family. Public health nurses play a critical role in thoughtfully engaging fathers, which will allow for more fully assessing the family’s needs and intervening if risks are identified.

Positive fathering behaviours	Negative fathering behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warmth and responsiveness • Positive and sensitive approach • Encouragement • Ability to read and interpret child’s cues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harsh parenting • Rejection • Neglect or other forms of maltreatment • Antisocial or violent behaviours

Benefits of engaging fathers in home visitation programs^{2,3}



Four unique patterns of how fathers engage in home visiting:

In a process evaluation exploring how the Nurse-Family Partnership home visitation program was implemented and delivered across five health authorities in British Columbia, Canada, public health nurses spoke about the different ways and patterns in which the fathers of infants enrolled in the program engage and participate in home visits.⁶ Recognizing that there are different patterns of father (or partner) engagement can assist nurses in tailoring their care and interventions to meet a family's unique and specific needs.

	Physically present	Physically not present
Engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks the nurse questions • Knows baby's routine and actively participates in it • Can speak to developmental milestones • Interested in understanding their role and motivated to be a 'better' father • Mother is comfortable that father is present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working or at school • Shows interest by leaving questions for mom to ask the nurse • May ask for information that the nurse can leave for him • May connect with nurse on his own (e.g., via text) • Evident that mother and father discuss information between visits
Not engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In room or nearby, engaged in other activities (e.g., watching TV, playing video games) and may be 'watching' the visit • Not actively engaged in visit or conversation; minimal attempts to increase knowledge re: parenting, child development etc. • Surveillance or 'controlling gatekeeper' • Mother may phone or video call father in to 'watch' visit • Nurse might consider this as a "red flag" for the presence of intimate partner violence or coercive control in the relationship • Nurse may consider initiating an indicator-based assessment for intimate partner violence (in a safe and private setting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother does not have a current partner • Mother not in contact with father of baby • Encourage involvement, based on mother's input and permission, of a friend or family member in the visit

Principles to promote father engagement

These four principles can be applied broadly across all home visiting programs and when there are not safety concerns for the mother or the child(ren).

- 1 Engage fathers early
- 2 Continuously seek to engage fathers
- 3 Foster a culture of father engagement
- 4 Provide organizational supports for staff

High level summary of the benefits of engaging fathers

- Fathers play a critical and unique role in the lives of their children
- All family members benefit when fathers are safely engaged in home visiting programs
- Fathers could develop improved parenting skills from being engaged in home visitation programs
- When fathers have increased participation in home visiting programs, there are better reported outcomes of mother and child well-being⁵
- Fathers engage in home visiting in different ways. Public health nurses should complete further assessments and use their judgment regarding client safety

References

¹Guterman, N.B., Bellamy, J.L. & Banman, A. (2018). Promoting father involvement in early home visiting services for vulnerable families: Findings from a pilot study of “Dads matter”. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 76, 261-272.

²Bellamy, J.L., Banman, A., Harty, J.S., Mirque-Morales, S., Jaccard, J. & Guterman, N.B. (2023). The effects of dads matter-HV on father engagement in home visiting services. *Prevention Science*, 24, 137-149.

³Sandstrom, H., & Lauderback, E. (2019, April). Father engagement in home visiting: Benefits, challenges, and promising strategies. National Home Visiting Resource Center Research Snapshot Brief. Arlington, VA: James Bell Associates and Urban Institute.

⁴Bellamy, J. (2020). Engaging Fathers in Home Visiting Programs. [Information Brief.] National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. Accessed from www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/engaging-fathers-home-visiting-program

⁵Bellamy, J. L., Harty, J., Guterman, N., Banman, A., Morales-Mirque, S. & Massey Combs, K. (2020). The engagement of fathers in home visiting services: Learning from the Dads Matter-HV Study. Fatherhood Research and Practice Network. Accessed from https://www.frpn.org/sites/default/files/FRPN_DadsMatter_FullReport_012020_R3-1.pdf

⁶Jack, S.M., Gonzalez, A., Campbell, K., Catherine, N.L.A., Kurtz Landy C., MacKinnon, K., MacMillan, H.L., Marcellus, L., Sheehan, D., Tonmyr, L., Van Borek, N., Varcoe, C., & Waddell, C., (2020). Implementation and delivery of Nurse- Family Partnership in British Columbia, Canada: A synthesis of selected findings from the British Columbia Healthy Connections Project Process Evaluation (2013-2018). Hamilton, ON: School of Nursing, McMaster University.

Citation: Richter, B., & Jack, S.M. on behalf of the PHN-PREP Project Team [2022]. The Benefits of Engaging Fathers in Home Visits [Professional Resource]. School of Nursing, McMaster University.

In creating the content for this Professional Resource, McMaster University led by Susan Jack engaged in research, analysis and synthesis of existing resources, guidelines, tacit professional knowledge as well as any available research evidence to date. McMaster University makes every reasonable effort to ensure that the information is accurate at the time of posting. We cannot guarantee the reliability of any information posted. This Professional Resource is for information and education purposes only and should not substitute any local policies and legislative and professional responsibilities required by your licensing body. In the event of any conflict, please follow your local policies and legislative and professional responsibilities. This material has been prepared with the support of the Province of Ontario but the views expressed in the document are those of McMaster University, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.