Fathers, Babies, and the Butterfly Effect

Small Relational Shifts That Change Developmental Trajectories

Nicholas "Nick" Kasovac, MSOT, OTR/L, IMH-E

Nick@TheDadProjects.com

www.TheDadProjects.com

1

Land Acknowledgement

Taquoma

(təqʷuʔməʔ)

aka Mt Rainier

- I join you today from the traditional lands of the **Puyallup Tribe**, among the **Coast Salish peoples** of the Pacific Northwest. I offer gratitude for their enduring relationship with this land, these waters, and the communities they continue to sustain.
- I also acknowledge the many Indigenous Nations whose homelands make up what we now call **New Mexico**, including the **Pueblo peoples**, **Diné (Navajo)**, and **Apache** Nations, whose cultures and communities remain deeply rooted in these lands.
- As we spend time today reflecting on the relationships that shape children and families, I hold respect for the long traditions of relational life Indigenous peoples maintain with land, kinship, and community—traditions that continue despite generations of displacement and injustice.

2

Acknowledgment on Language & Inclusion

In this presentation, we often use words like *dad, father, paternal,* and similar terms. We recognize that language is imperfect, and that not everyone who shows up in a parenting role identifies with these words.

When we say *dad* or *father*, we mean to include **all self-identified dads, fathers, father-figures, paternal caregivers, or non-birth parent** — across gender identities, family structures, and cultural traditions.

Our goal is to create a space where everyone who takes on a fathering role feels seen, valued, and supported in the important work of caring for their newborn.

3

4

5

The "Home Visiting" Pattern

Programs are thoughtful

Fathers are invited, maybe even present

Yet still.... **father participation** varies

6

The Usual Question

How do we get fathers more involved?

We often use the term “father involvement” …..

Try using different terms (it’ll take some practice):

- *Fathering*
- *Parenting*
- *Co-parenting*
- *Participation*
- *Engagement*
- *Contribution*

7

Why Some Fathers Stay Quiet

Many fathers experience uncertainty:

“I keep being told I’m doing it wrong.”

“I don’t want to look like a bumbling idiot.”

“She (HV) knows more than I do.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

8

Why Some Fathers Disappear

Some fathers “drift” toward the edge or periphery of being “present”

Not because they don't care

But because they don’t know how or where to fit in

It could be:

- Cultural
- Societal
- Familial
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal

9

A Different Question

How do everyday interactions shape father participation?

10

The Butterfly Effect

"One small change…

…that can change everything"

From "The Hello It's Me" Project with Dr. Claudia Gold, MD

11

12

Developmental Container & Relational Ecology

Babies develop inside relationships

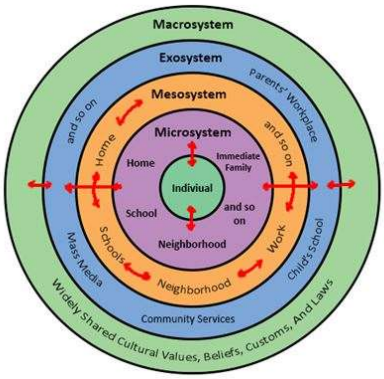
baby ↔ mom

baby ↔ dad

mom ↔ dad

provider ↔ family

family ↔ community



These interactions shape both the baby and the parent

13

Who else is growing & developing?

14

Relational Ecology & Two-way Development

As you watch, consider:

What is the baby doing?

What is Dad doing?

How are they influencing each other?

15

16

Developmental Container & Relational Ecology

What Did You Notice?

Dad shaping baby

Baby shaping Dad

Moment by moment

Every interaction is shaping both the baby and the dad

17

There's More Than One Experience in the Room

Storytime

Neda & Kristijan*

Tacoma IT Guy

Costco Dad & Daughter

**names changed*

18

The Strength of Home Visitors

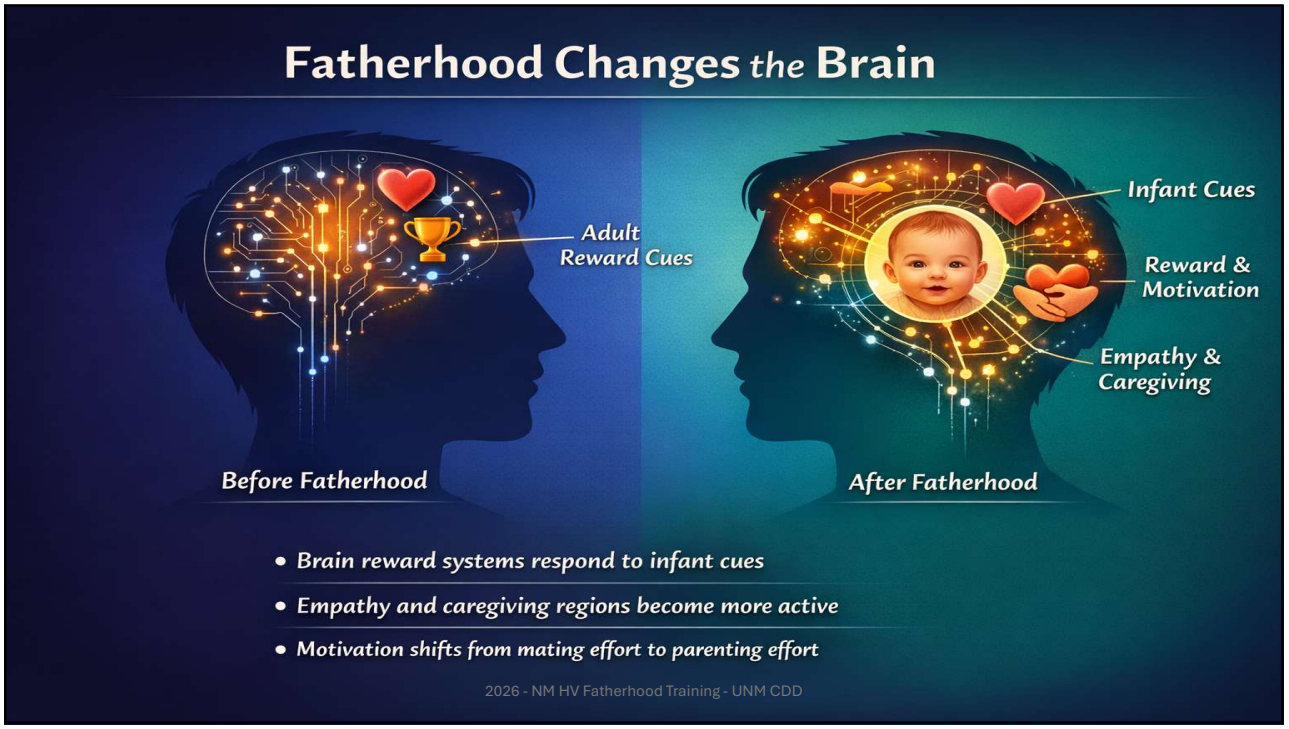
Home visitors already bring powerful relational skills:

curiosity
observation
attunement
relationship building

Now why does that sound so familiar???

The tools for father inclusion are the same tools you already use with families.

19



20

Assumptions

I invite you to reflect on this periodically

Do we assume:

- Fathers need direction?
- Fathers need to be brought in?
- Father need a defined role?

21

Reframe

Fathers already have a relationship with their baby

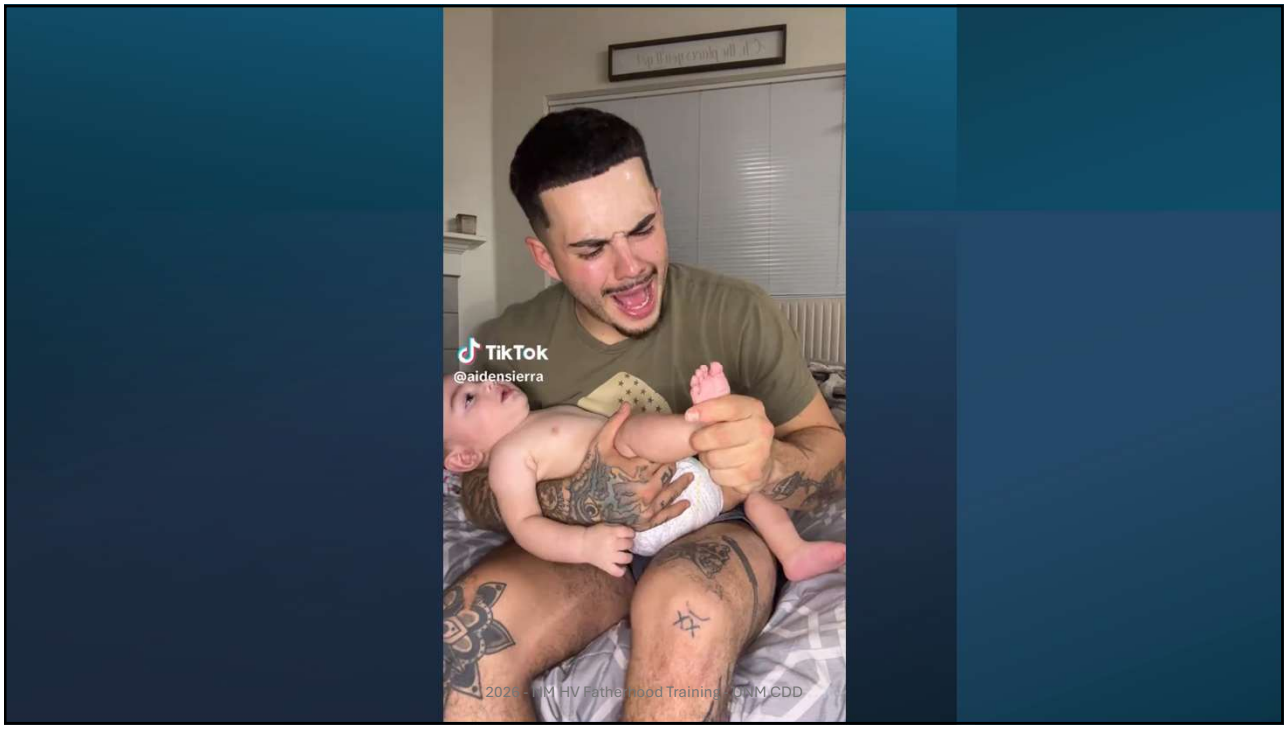
They observe

They respond

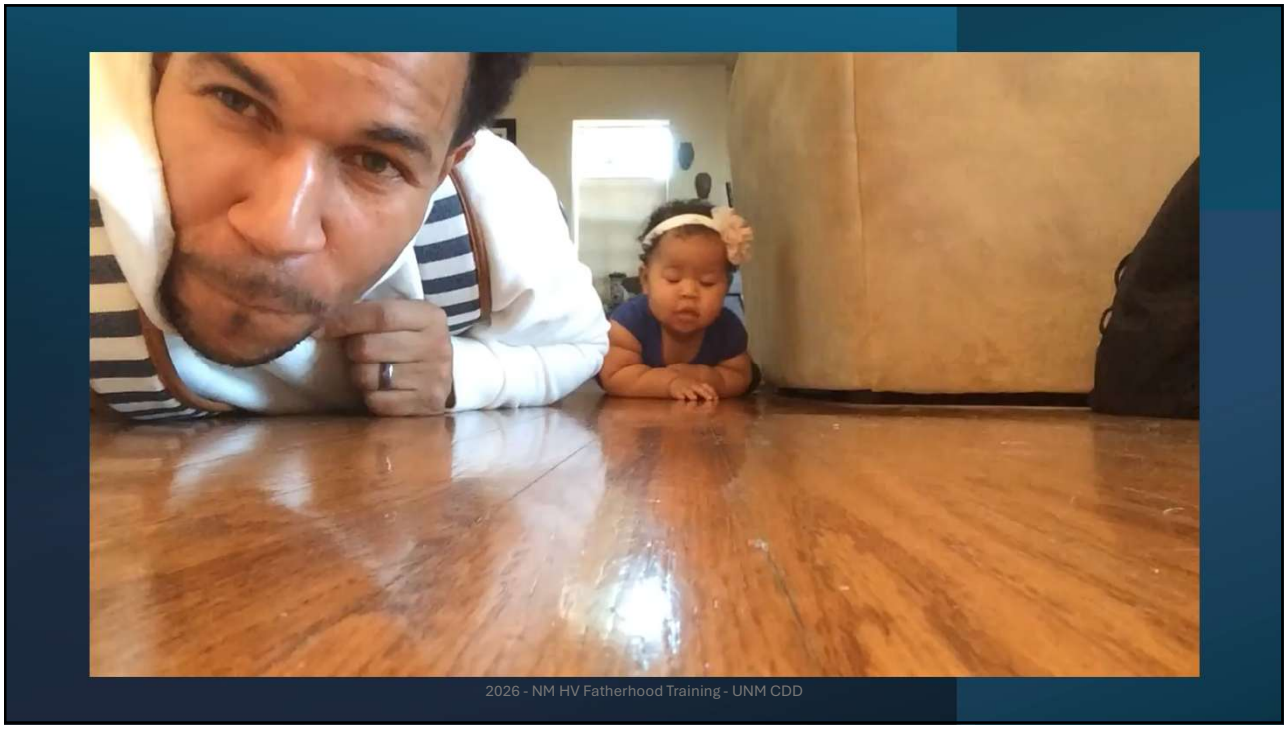
They learn

They connect

22


TikTok
@aidensierra
2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

23


2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

24

Micro-Moments: Language

Early invitations can shift the relational space

Examples:

"I'm really glad you're here today."
"I wanted to ask you something too."
"I already asked Mom — I'd love your perspective."
"What have you noticed about the baby this week?"

25

Micro-Moments: Listening

Small moments shape:

- whose voice is followed
  whose observations are explored
  whose experience becomes visible

Common Pattern

- Dad speaks → ***brief*** response
  Mom speaks → expanded response
- Over time.....Dad participates less

26

Practice Shift

"I have a few questions for both of you. I'll start with Dad, then ask Mom."	Try: Dad ↔ Mom ↔ Dad ↔ Mom	**Questions**	How did you choose your baby's name?
What's your favorite thing about your baby?	What is the most amazing thing your baby did this week? (I'll probably ask you each visit, so just giving you a heads up!)	What have you found that helps baby calm and soothe?	Do you have a favorite activity with your baby?

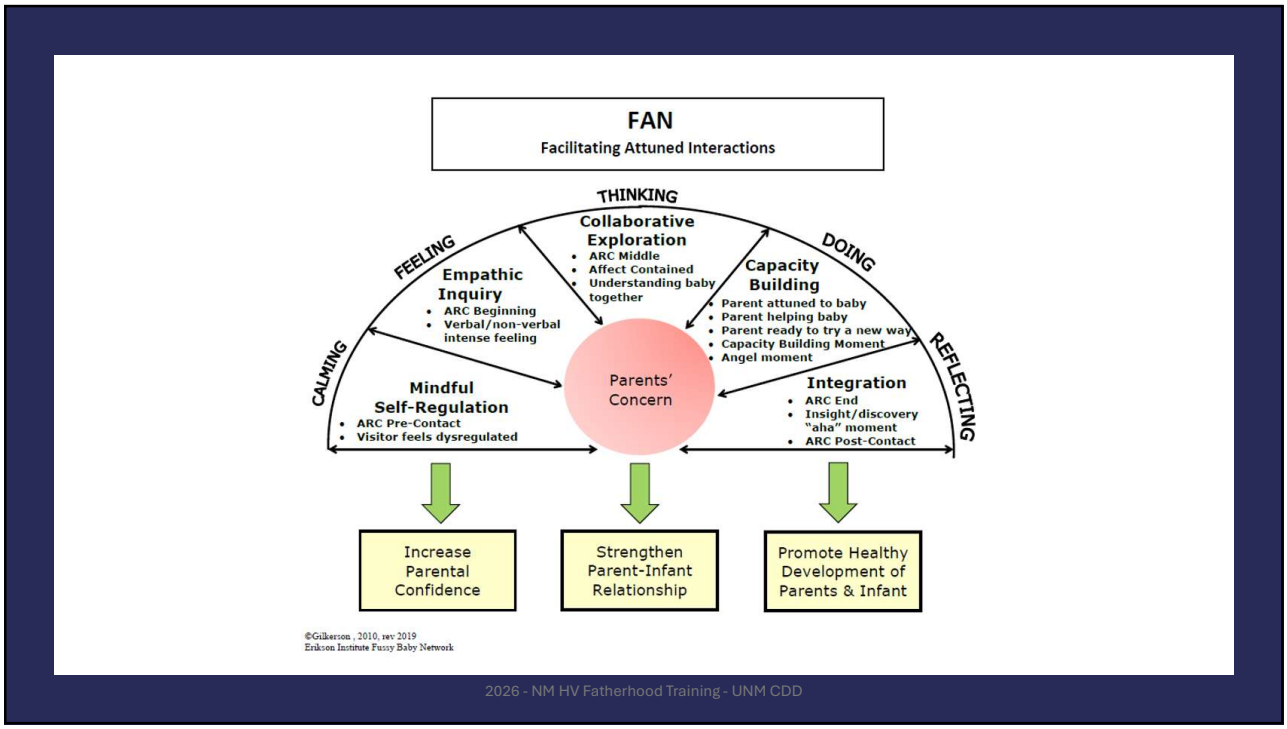
27

Focus on Strength

Name what you see:

- He really settles with you.
  You noticed that quickly.
- She looks so content when you hold her.
- It looks like you and your partner are working together as a team.
- From what mom has told me, it sounds like you've been very supportive and attentive to her as well. Are you taking care of yourself too?

28



29

FAN Refresher

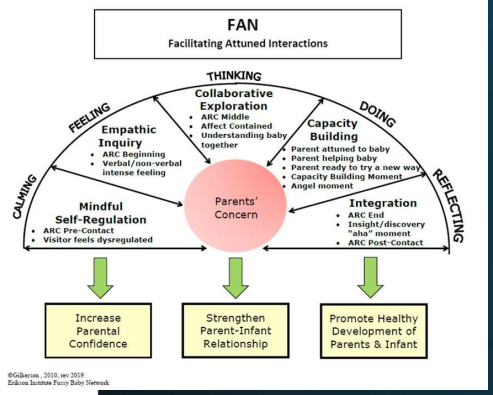
FAN as a Relational Lens

Self-Regulation
- *What am I noticing in myself?*

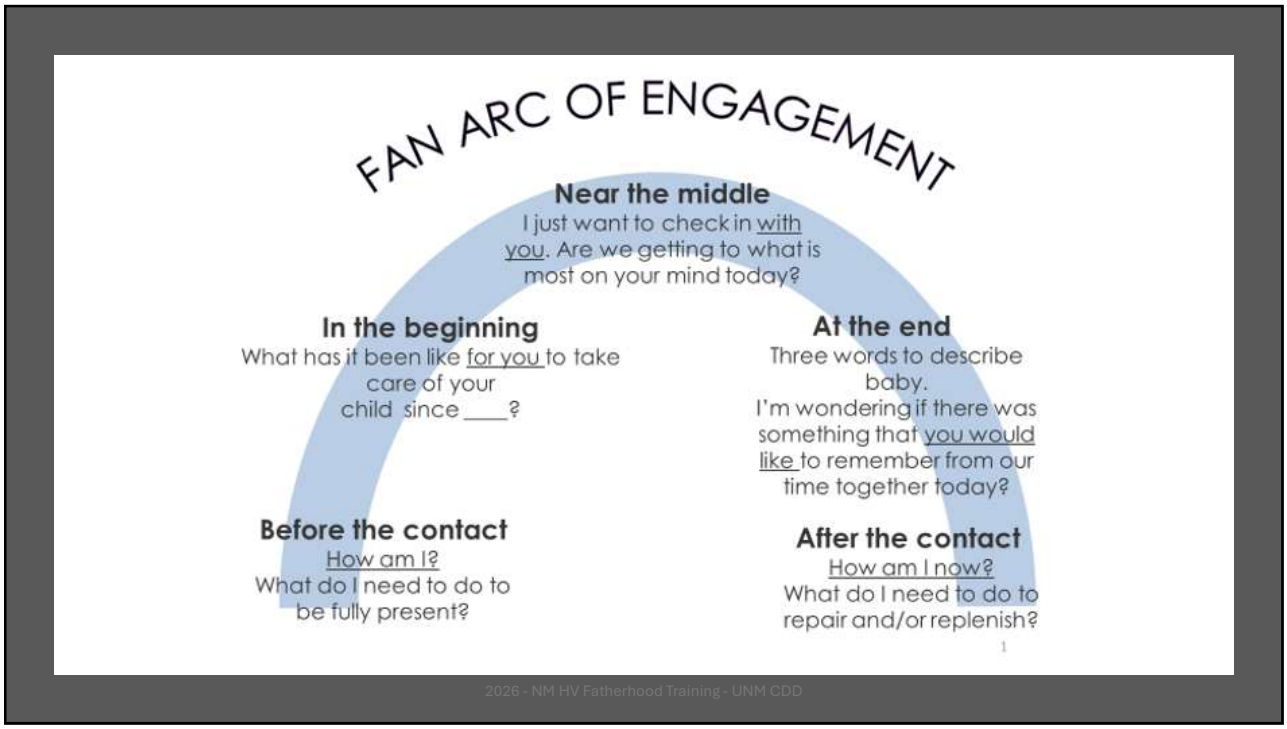
Empathic Inquiry
- *What might each person be experiencing?*

Collaborative Exploration
- *What can I stay curious about?*

Capacity Building
- *What strengths are already here?*



30



31

Breakout Exercise

Let's explore real home visiting scenarios in small groups

Instructions

1. Choose a facilitator, a scribe, and a spokesperson
2. Read the scenario and discuss the following:
   - What's happening relationally?
   - What might Dad be experiencing?
   - What's one small shift you could try?
3. Feel free to talk about how you might have responded in the past and if something has changed, what changed for you

2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

32

Group Reflection

What surprised your group?

What relational shifts did you notice?

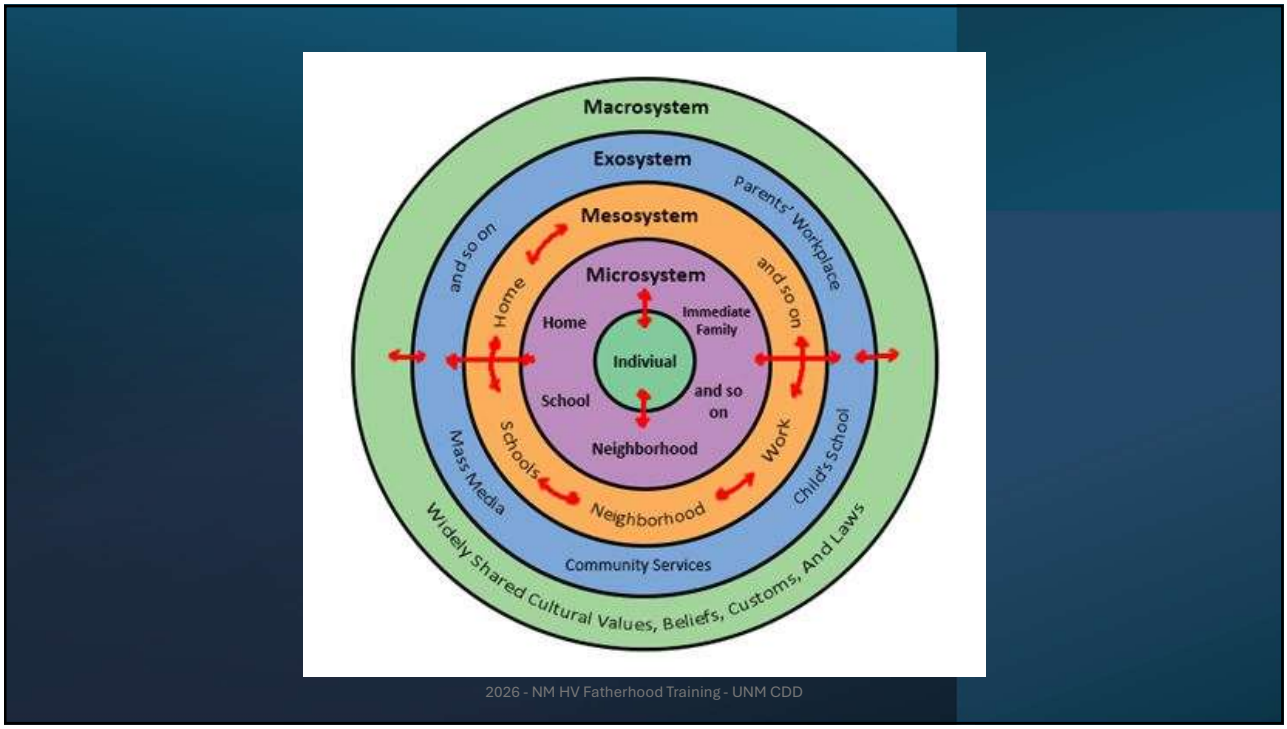
Did anyone recognize a shift within themselves?

33

Expanding the Relational Ecology

- Father participation doesn't only happen during visits
- Can you think of other possibilities?
- Within your program?
- Within the community?
- Within neighborhoods?

34



35

Dad & Baby Spaces

Examples:

dad-baby play groups
stroller walks/ “walk & talks”
“Daddy Olympics”
Saturday morning dad gatherings

Benefits:

father-baby connection
father-father learning & socialization
confidence building

self-identification within a cultural group

36

I WILL NEVER GIVE UP.
PROGRESS NOT EXCUSE
2026 - NM HIV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

37

The DAD Projects
Dads & Development
2026 - NM HIV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

38

Community Partnerships

- Potential partners:
- public libraries
- parks departments
- community centers
- fatherhood organizations
- YMCA
- Boys & Girls Clubs

39

Libraries as Hidden Allies

- Children's librarians often:
- host early childhood programming
- welcome community partnerships
- support parent learning
- Possible collaborations:
- dad-baby story time
- father meetups
- parenting discussions for dads

40

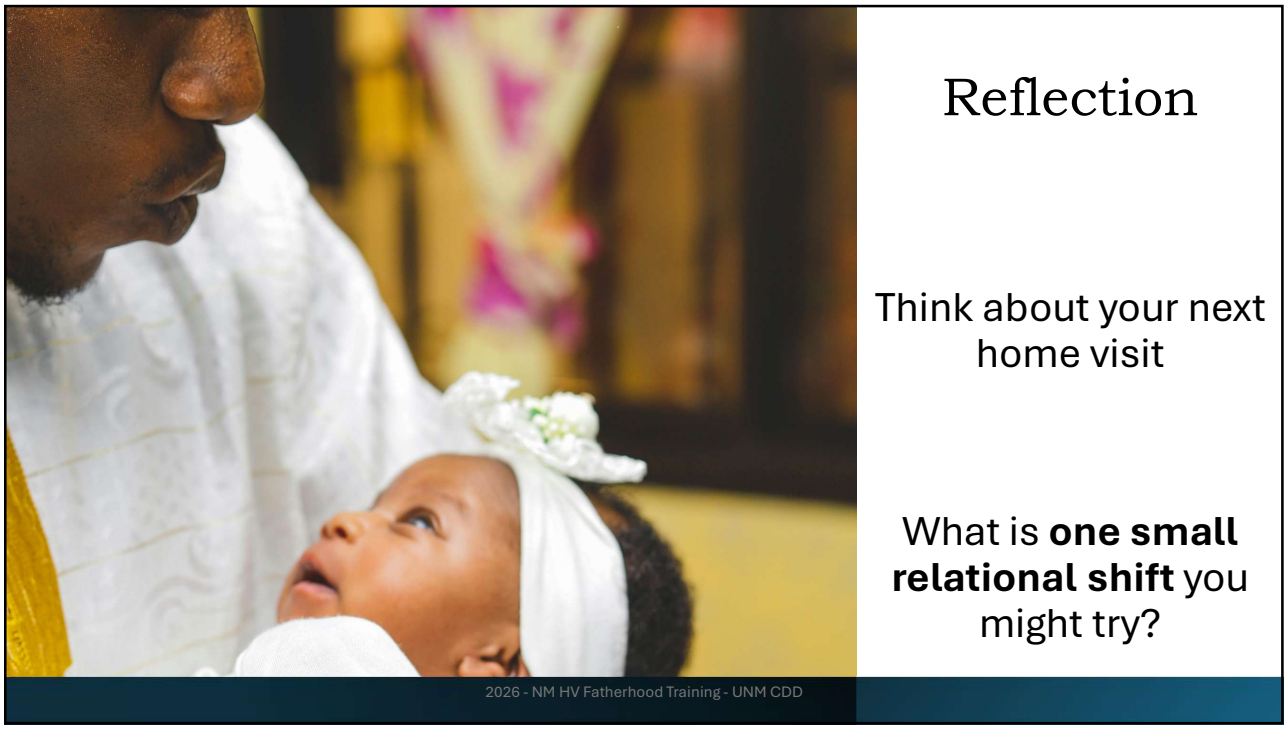
41

The Butterfly Effect

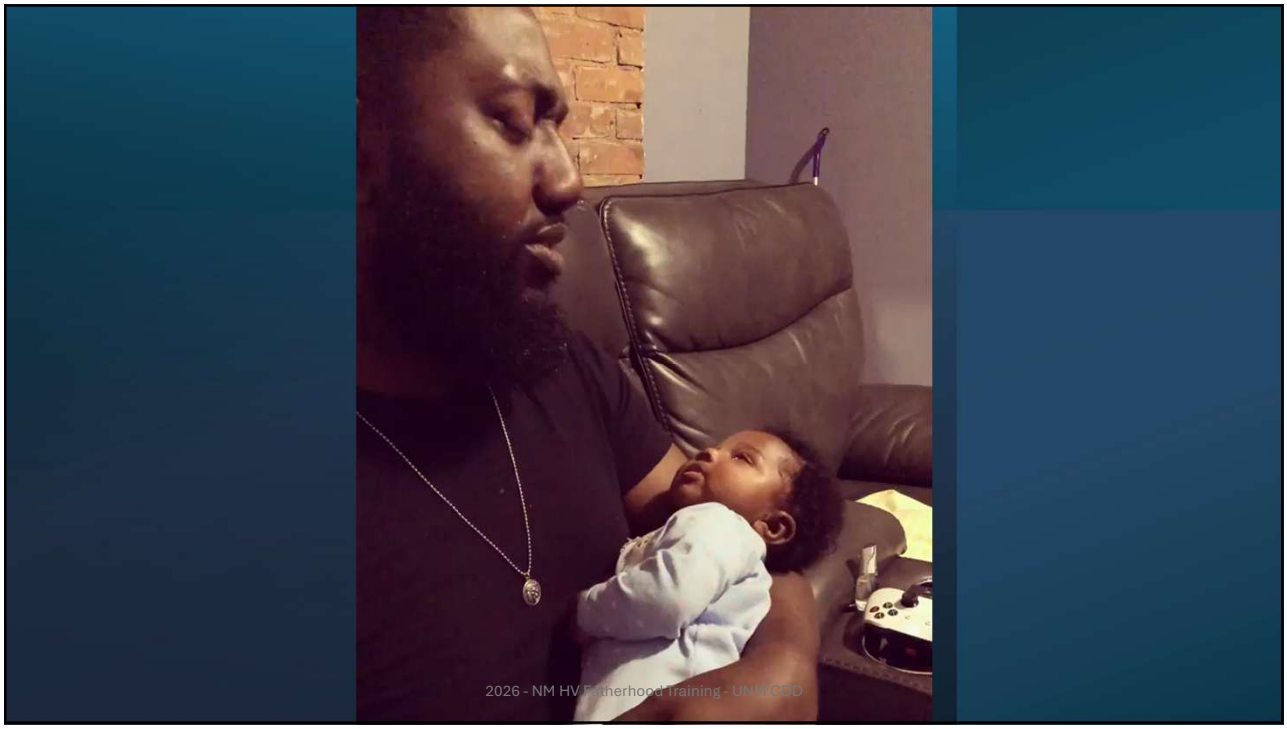
Small relational shifts can influence:

- father confidence
- co-parenting dynamics
- infant regulation
- long-term development

42


Reflection
Think about your next home visit
What is **one small relational shift** you might try?
2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

43


2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

44

Closing

This work is not a technique
It's about shaping the relational environment around families

What is one, small change that you can make……

…..that will change everything?

45

Thank you!

Nick Kasovac
www.TheDadProjects.com
Nick@TheDadProjects.com

46

2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

47

#THEKABSFAMILY
This is my song
2026 - NM HV Fatherhood Training - UNM CDD

48