

ECECD Home Visiting Tips and Resources

Fathers, Babies, and the Butterfly Effect

Despite decades of efforts to engage fathers, many home visiting programs continue to experience a familiar pattern: fathers are invited and materials are available, yet meaningful engagement remains inconsistent. Drawing from infant mental health, occupational science, and over 30 years of pediatric and infant–family work, we know that small relational shifts can create a disproportionate developmental impact — a kind of “butterfly effect” within early relationships. The presence (or absence) of fathers shapes the relational ecology around babies, and the provider’s stance, sequencing, and micro-interactions influence whether fathers feel peripheral or essential.

What We Know About Fathers, Relationships, and Development

Fathers’ Relationships Begin Early

- Fathers’ relationships with their children begin prenatally and are influenced by the relational ecology within their “developmental container.”

Inclusion Encourages Engagement

- Fathers are more likely to engage when they feel welcomed, respected, and intentionally included during visits.
- Small gestures from providers—such as inviting their perspective or noticing their interactions with the baby—can support their sense of belonging.

Provider Stance Shapes the Visit

- The way providers structure and guide conversations during visits shapes the relational climate.
- When fathers are acknowledged early in the interaction, they are more likely to participate and share observations about their child.

Participation vs. Involvement

- Father participation refers to fathers being present during home visits.
- Father involvement reflects active, meaningful engagement in supporting the child’s development.

The Butterfly Effect in Relationships

- Small relational moments—such as a father sharing observations or interacting with the baby during a visit—can have lasting impacts on a child’s sense of security and social-emotional development.

Helpful Hints for Engaging Fathers in Home Visits

Notice small relational moments. Look for opportunities to connect with fathers. For example: “What’s the most amazing thing your baby did this month?”

Invite fathers’ observations early. Ask questions such as “What have you noticed your baby enjoys most right now?” to open the conversation and support engagement.

Start with what feels comfortable. When using the Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) approach, some fathers may feel more comfortable beginning with observations about the baby or daily experiences rather than conversations focused on emotions.

Encourage father–child interaction. Create opportunities during the visit for fathers to hold, talk, play, or respond to their baby’s cues.

Name fathers’ strengths. Move beyond “Good job” by describing what you observed and explaining how the interaction supports the child’s development.

Honor different ways fathers connect. Fathers may engage through play, movement, problem-solving, or caregiving routines.

Stay curious about fathers’ experiences. Questions such as “What has surprised you the most about being a father?” can encourage reflection and strengthen engagement.

Resources

- [Click here for The Dad Projects](#)
- [Click here for Home Visiting Community of Learners - Father Engagement \(March 14, 2023\).](#)
- [Click here for Considering Fathers in Home Visiting, Rachel Morsbach, \(October 2021\).](#)
- [Click here for National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse \(Fatherhood.gov\)](#)
- [Click here for NCPMI–Family Engagement Resources \(Pyramid Model\)](#)

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