

Insights

Promoting Fathers' Mental Health During Children's Early Childhood



Right from the beginning, fathers play a big role in

their children's health and development. [Studies](#) show that father involvement during the perinatal period and the first year of life leads to children who are more ready for school, have an advanced vocabulary and enhanced social skills, and are better able to regulate their emotions.

Not only that, but father involvement also positively impacts fathers *and* mothers: it increases both parents' confidence, results in both being more responsive to the baby, and it decreases mothers and fathers' potential for mental health issues.

Father involvement, then, has significant benefits for everyone involved. But too often, social expectations about masculinity and structural barriers make it difficult for fathers to get involved, especially during the early years of life.

"There are so many things that shape each person's idea of masculinity, from social norms to cultural influences," says NICHQ VP of Community Engagement, Kenn Harris. "And sometimes it can be difficult to reconcile all these expectations. This is especially true for fathers who face

additional structural barriers—such as employment and economic challenges or living in different housing than their child—which disrupt their ability to connect with their children during the early years of life.”

Trying to navigate these barriers can generate internal stress, explains psychologist and national fathers’ mental health expert Daniel Singley, PhD, ABPP. This stress can then manifest in mental health issues and make it all the more difficult for dads to engage in nurturing, interactive relationships with their children.

“All of this makes one thing clear: we need to do more to support fathers’ mental health,” says Harris, who leads NICHQ’s work on the Supporting Healthy Start Performance Project ([SHSPP](#)). “We know that fathers’ health is directly tied to the health of women and children. That’s why Healthy Start, a national maternal and child health initiative, considers fatherhood a high priority opportunity for improving maternal and infant health outcomes.”

Recently, Singley joined a conversation with the Healthy Start team to share ways to better support fathers’ mental health, especially during their children’s earliest stages of life. Below, we’ve compiled four essential strategies that health care providers, public health professionals, and community advocates can use in their own work.

1. Recognize the prevalence of mental health concerns for fathers

[One in 10](#) fathers get Paternal Postpartum Depression (PPPD); and up to [16 percent](#) of fathers suffer from an anxiety disorder during the perinatal period.

“These are big numbers from a public health perspective,” says Singley. “And men are far less likely to seek help, particularly mental health help, in the perinatal period.”

A Signal of Paternal Depression

A mother experiencing postpartum depression is the [highest indicator](#) that the father is depressed too. Always screen the father if the mother is depressed.

Recognizing when a father’s mental health is suffering can be difficult. Like women, men may mask their symptoms, which in men may manifest as anger, irritability, isolation from those they love, and increased substance use. Depression can also cause physical symptoms, like headaches, muscle complaints, and gastrointestinal problems. Recognizing these symptoms and providing a depression screening during a well child visit is a critical opportunity for helping fathers connect with the supports they need.

Find more opportunities to support maternal and paternal depression in [these fact sheets](#).

2. Connect fathers with a support network

As health professionals, it’s important to let fathers know that they need and deserve support. “This is especially true for new dads... or dads struggling with mental health issues, relationship issues, or working multiple jobs,” says Singley. “*And* they need support beyond what one person can do.”

Too often, fathers end up leaning on their partner for all their social and intimacy needs, which ultimately backfires when their partner, understandably, can't meet all those needs. Because of this, it's important to proactively connect dads with a fuller network of support. Singley has found that fathers are often more comfortable with informal supports, so suggests encouraging dads to engage with online groups; talk to clergy or other community leaders; and connect with other friends who are fathers, who also share their lived experience and understand what they're going through.

Sometimes, fathers may feel uncomfortable talking to health professionals about their mental health, adds Singley. He suggests first talking to fathers about parent education—what it means to be a good parent—and then transitioning to asking them about their social supports and concerns.

3. Build self-efficacy

Health professionals can play an important role in helping dads feel more confident about fatherhood. Building fathers' self-efficacy will ultimately support both the dad's mental health and his child's development.

One way to build confidence is to recommend that fathers do as much as possible with their baby: soothe them to sleep, burp them, read them stories, bathe them, take them on errands... the more activities fathers do with their newborn, the more comfortable they will feel.

Similarly, giving dads concrete information about babies' developmental milestones—cognitive, motor, social and emotional—can help dads realize just how much their interactions matter. And when they feel useful, they're more likely to get involved. Singley likes to use 'scaffolding', where health professionals provide information on the baby's development *and* advice on a specific way to support it. For example, if a baby has learned to grab things but not let go, health professionals can help the dad understand this behavior as a motor phenomenon, and then teach him ways to help his baby learn to let go (such as by giving the baby a spatula and then taking it from the baby in a playful way, like trading it for a spoon).

4. Support the father-partner relationship

"The relationship between parents is one of the really key psychological predictors of both partners' mental health and how their children will do," says Singley. "This is true even if they are not together or are a blended family."

Healthy communication between all parents supports a healthy relationship. Health professionals can help parents develop healthy communication skills by asking them to engage in two weekly meetings: First, a "state of the union" meeting, where they discuss their relationship and what they can do to help one another feel emotionally supported; and then, a family operations meeting, where they go over the upcoming week and allocate responsibilities, including building in time for self-care and, if they're a couple, for their relationship.

Health professionals can also talk with fathers about assertive communication skills, such as asking open-ended questions, actively listening, and re-stating their partners' opinions before

giving theirs. “These skills can help dads be more confident and preserve the relationship,” says Singley.

Interested in learning about more opportunities to support fathers? In [this article](#), NICHQ CEO Scott D. Berns, MD, MPH, FAAP, shares why fathers are powerful allies for maternal and child health and offers suggestions for supporting fathers beginning in pregnancy.