BOOT CAMP FOR NEW DADS

The Importance of Infant-Father Attachment

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ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON, Maria goes to visit her sister. Steve bottle-feeds Lucia, their 3-month-old daughter. Then he prepares snacks for watching a football game with an old friend and a new one—a "veteran" father he met at Boot Camp for New Dads. When the guys arrive, Steve lays Lucia on a blanket on the floor beside his chair. She plays with small rattles for a while, then whimpers and begins to cry. Steve wonders what's wrong. He knows Lucia can't be hungry. Listening closer, he realizes it is a diaper cry (something he learned in the new dads' class). Lucia needs to be changed. Steve picks her up and holds her close as he goes after a diaper. Lucia stops crying and gazes at her father's face. Everything is OK.

Early childhood professionals know that good fathering has a profound impact on children. Research confirms what we have learned in our dealings with families and children: When fathers are involved in the lives of their children, we can expect positive outcomes; when fathers are not involved in their children's lives, we unfortunately tend to see more negative outcomes (Amato 2000; Carlson & Corcoran 2001).

Fathers can play an integral role as attachment figures in the lives of young children. How men perceive their role is crucial in good parenting. Positive perceptions of fathering are consistently and significantly associated with caregiving activities, paternal warmth, nurturing activities, physical care, and cognitively stimulating activities, such as singing, reading, or telling stories to their child (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, & Guzman 2006). Men who identify with the father role and view being a dad as important tend to be more invested and actively engaged with their children than are men who do not strongly identify themselves as fathers (Parke 2000; Rane & McBride 2000).

Boot Camp for New Dads, a program for expectant fathers, instills confidence and pride in being a father. Men learn how to make the home safe and secure for the newborn, support their partners before and after birth, and prepare to bond with the baby.

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Father-infant bonding/attachment

Before Lucia was born, people told Steve that it might be at least six months before his baby would cue in on him and develop an attachment. The veteran fathers at the Boot Camp for New Dads tell him he doesn't have to settle for that. They suggest that the baby might recognize him a lot earlier if he talks to the baby in the womb. That evening after class, Steve begins a nightly ritual. He bends down close to Maria's bulging belly and talks. It doesn't matter what he says; he just talks.

The day his daughter is born, Steve's mother-in-law holds her in the hospital room while Maria rests and the new father walks some friends and family to their cars. When Steve returns, he asks, "Where's my baby girl?" The newborn immediately turns her head toward him, as if to say, "Who is that talking to me? I know him!"

For decades, attachment theory, and in particular the work of John Bowlby ([1969] 1982) and Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (1978), has been a foundation of infant and child development. While the mother is typically the attachment figure (primary caregiver), children are capable of forming an attachment to the father (Caldera 2004; Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby 2005). Sue Wallace eloquently articulates the role and importance of the father:

> A father's role in a child's life is indispensable and utterly important in helping to determine the healthy development of a child. Every child born into this world possesses a set of genes that were specially combined through a reproductive process. Half of a child's genes come from her mother and half from her father. It only makes sense that the presence of both a father and a mother are crucially important in helping to determine the well-being of their child. Notwithstanding the permutations of modern families, a child ideally needs both a father and a mother. (2001, 1)

Other researchers have investigated attachment between father and child (for example, Shears, Robinson, & Emde 2002; Lamb 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, & Cabrera 2004).

Many expectant dads are told or assume that father-infant attachment cannot and will not occur until the baby is at least 6 months old. Based on the following research and the personal testimonies of the fathers we work with, we believe that fathers can begin to form attachments seconds after birth, if not before. For example, after a cesarean birth, the mother is unable to place the newborn on her bare chest (Erlandsson et al. 2007). When newborns in a study were placed on the fathers' chests, they stopped crying, grew calmer, and became drowsier faster than did babies in the control group who did not have skin-to-skin contact. Becoming drowsier faster is a positive outcome because sleep is important as the baby recovers from being born. The researchers conclude, "The father can facilitate the development of the infant's prefeeding behavior in this important period . . . and should thus be regarded as the primary caregiver for the infant during the separation of mother and baby" (Erlandsson et al. 2007, 105).

Fathers tend to interact with babies and young children differently than mothers; for example, fathers generally try to excite their child while mothers tend to contain, and fathers engage in more physical play and play that is characterized as unpredictable or idiosyncratic (Paquette 2004). This dissimilarity should not be thought of as better or worse, just different. In a 16-year longitudinal study, Grossman and colleagues (2002) talked about the notion that both parents

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What the Research Says

- School-age children with good relationships with their fathers were less likely to exhibit disruptive behavior, experience depression, or lie, and were more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior (Mosley & Thompson 1995).
- A survey of over 20,000 parents found that when fathers are more involved in their children's education, including attending school meetings and volunteering at school, children are more likely to get *A*s, enjoy school, and participate in extracurricular activities, and were less likely to repeat a grade (National Center for Education Statistics 1997).
- Children who grew up with involved fathers were more comfortable exploring the world around them and were more likely to exhibit self-control and prosocial behavior (Parke 1996).
- Early positive father-child interaction reduced cognitive delay in infants (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2008).
- Children of highly involved fathers had greater gains in math readiness (Fagan & Iglesias 1999).
- Involved fathers showed higher levels of cognitive growth-fostering behaviors, such as waiting for the child to attempt a task, verbally describing a task, and modeling a task (Boechler, Harrison, & Magill-Evans 2003).
- Highly involved biological fathers had children who were 43 percent more likely to earn mostly *A*s than other children (Nord & West 2001).

have a unique role in shaping their child's psychological security. Paquette (2004) stresses that we should take into account both the father-child and mother-child relationship. It seems as if science is documenting what we as early childhood educators see every day—that fathers can play an integral role as an attachment figure in the lives of their children.

Boot Camp for New Dads

Steve finds the right classroom. He chooses a seat outside a circle of chairs in the middle of the room. Other dads-to-be soon arrive and also gravitate to seats outside the inner circle. When the coach enters, he encourages the men to sit in the circle. Another man arrives, cradling a baby and smiling. The coach introduces this father as a "veteran." The men take turns holding the baby, awkwardly, tentatively. The baby seems content, as if he understands their anxieties.

As the men introduce themselves, a few common threads appear. Manuel confides, "My wife signed me up for this. I have to admit, I'm not all that eager to take another damn parenting class, but what the hell, I'm here. Excuse my language." The coach reassures him. "It's OK," he says, adding, "It's even OK to say that your pregnant wife may be acting a bit crazy these days!" The men share a laugh and begin to open up. They have embarked on the exciting journey to fatherhood, and it feels good.

Male friends kept asking Greg Bishop, a California father of four and brother of 12, for advice on being a good new father. So, in 1990 Bishop introduced the first Boot Camp for New Dads. He invited first-time fathers-to-be ("rookies") and fathers with infants ("veterans"). He also asked a few men to bring their babies to class. In the all-male format, the participants tended to the babies, shared their parental concerns, and received solid tips and information on fathering.

Now 20 years later, Boot Camp for New Dads is a nonprofit organization offering workshops in 44 states and on U.S. military bases. As the nation's largest program for new fathers, it has guided more than 200,000 men on their fatherhood journeys. It is even going international.

A typical class session

Coaches typically begin a Boot Camp for New Dads by describing what the men can expect during the session. The veteran dads then talk to the rookie dads about some important concepts or traits, such as patience and flexibility. Next, the rookie dads voice their questions or concerns. The coach writes their questions on an easel or chalkboard.

One of the most significant exercises comes next. With the coach going first, each man talks about his own childhood experiences with his father. Some men tell of the pain and resentment they still feel toward absent fathers. Others talk about having a great dad and wanting to be like him. From this exercise the men learn that they are on a long journey in which they will use many past experiences and new relationships to create their own model of fatherhood.

At this point the class shifts into following the current and future timeline of the arrival of the baby. Discussions center on supporting the mom right now, preparations for the hospital stay, what to do during delivery, bonding with the newborn at the hospital, adjustments at home and in family responsibilities, and bringing the baby home.

The unspoken curriculum throughout the class is the babies themselves. Feeding, crying, diapering, and playing, which may interrupt the class at anytime, are perfect teachable moments. The fathers-to-be learn that they can carry on normal activities with a baby on their arm. After about an hour's discussion, the class turns its full attention to the children. The rookies gradually relax as the veteran dads guide their interactions, answer questions, and share tried-and-true fathering approaches.

Boot Camp for New Dads—Principles

All guys. In an all-male setting, rookie dads feel comfortable and ask whatever questions they want without the risk of looking dumb or foolish.

Men mentoring men. Veteran fathers pass on to other men what they know about being a good father.

What men want. The program responds to what the rookie and veteran fathers indicate they want to learn about. It is not a format adapted from what is successful with mothers.

Children are present. Veteran fathers get to share their children and their love of their children with other men. The rookie fathers who are unfamiliar with babies get a chance to hold one for the first time.

Hands on. Many men tend to learn better when they can *do* something, not just talk about it. Their interactions with the veterans' babies speak to this learning style.

When men want it. Classes are scheduled when the men can come, not at the convenience of the coach's schedule.

Multi-agency support. Successful programs get support from more than one agency and draw from a wide population base. Partnerships also invite a better response from the community.

Catchy name. Rookie fathers can understand just from the name what Boot Camp for New Dads is about.

Diversity. The program is designed to be accessible to expectant fathers of all ages, economic levels, social strata, and cultural backgrounds. (An all-Spanish-speaking class is available.)

Ownership. Although many of the men are directed to the class by expectant moms, once in class, the rookie dads are expected to take ownership of their role as new fathers.

The last hour focuses on an infant's first months at home. The men discuss safety, pets, car seats, diapering, crying, accepting help, and community resources. They also touch on postpartum depression and child abuse, including shaken baby syndrome. The coach checks the list compiled at the beginning of the class to make sure all of the questions have been answered. He asks the veteran dads for parting advice and sometimes asks the rookies for one or two things they will tell the moms-to-be about the class.

Finally, the coach passes out certificates, books (for example, *Hit the Ground Crawling: Lessons from 150,000 New Fathers,* by G. Bishop), materials, and an evaluation form for the rookies to fill out. He issues an invitation for the fathers-to-be to return to class as veteran dads with their babies when the children are anywhere from 2 to 6 months old. (About one-third of the new fathers accept this opportunity to share their experiences and advice.)

The program's content

Much of the father-specific content of Boot Camp for New Dads is from *Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child,* by Dr. Kyle D. Pruett (2000), who is also a consultant to the program. The Boot Camp program also relies on its partnerships with organizations—for example, Postpartum International, Prevent Child Abuse America, and the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome—for much of the research and evidence-based practices used in the sessions.

Follow-ups indicate that fathers who completed the program overwhelmingly feel that the class had a positive impact on how they bonded with their babies.

Curriculum Resources for New Fathers

Boot Camp for New Dads: **www.bootcampfornewdads.org**

Center for Successful Fathering: **www.fathering.org**

Fathers' Forum Online: **www.fathersforum.com**

Fathers Network: **www.fathersnetwork.org**

It's My Child Too! **www.ces.purdue.edu/CFS/topics/HD/guides-mychildtoo.htm**

MenTeach (early education): **www.MenTeach.org**

National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome: **www.dontshake.org**

National Fatherhood Initiative: **www.fatherhood.org**

Nurturing Father's Program: **www.nurturingfathers.com**

Parents as Teachers National Center: **www.parentsasteachers.org**

Postpartum Support International: **www.postpartum.net**

Prevent Child Abuse America: **www.preventchildabuse.org**

All coaches follow a game plan set forth by the Boot Camp program and contained in the coaches' resource guide, with a sample schedule. The program relies heavily on input from the coaches during Web conferences and conference calls.

Conclusion

When Lucia is 3 months old, Steve returns to Boot Camp for New Dads as a veteran, his daughter in his arms. He cannot believe that just six months earlier, he was an indifferent expectant father. Now he is back in a class session, telling a new crop of rookie dads that they too can be good fathers. Steve is proud of his daughter, proud of his wife, and proud of himself for stepping up to be a good parent—and now a mentor.

Survey results show Boot Camp for New Dads is effective (Exempla Saint Joseph Hospital 2004). Follow-ups indicate that fathers who completed the program overwhelmingly feel that the class had a positive impact on how they bonded with their babies. By applying the research showing that father involvement is important for children's healthy development, the program nurtures dads-to-be in their quest to give their children the best start in life.

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