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# Working with Fathers...

## Father Attachment: Helping Fathers Build a Close Relationship

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"I want to be there for my kids" and "I want to feel close to my son" are statements that I frequently hear as I talk to fathers. These quotes reflect the strong desire of fathers to create a close relationship with their children. This interest appears in a diverse group of men in a variety of family circumstances. The strength and pervasiveness of this interest has been reinforced the last couple of weeks as I have been interviewing men in a correctional facility. This motivation seems to grow out of an emotional void or a "hole in the heart" of men that comes from the absence of a close relationship with their own fathers. As one dad described, "I just seen how growing up being without a real father (felt),...my step-father didn't care (either), I realized what that put me through and I don't want to put anyone else through that." Men have started to talk about the importance of the father-child relationship and are searching for ways to create and maintain a close relationship with their children.

Attachment theory and research have focused primarily on mothers and children. However, research has also documented that infants often form a special relationship with their fathers (see Lamb, 1976; Park, 1981). The attachment process is described as a reciprocal relationship, yet, little attention has been focused on fathers' perceptions and experiences of this relationship with their young children. The early research on fathers and infants provided evidence that infants form an attachment relationship with fathers. The next line of research began to investigate what kinds of fathers involvement was important to children (e.g., Lamb, Pleck and Levine, 1986). While a critical amount of involvement is necessary to spark and maintain a healthy father-child relationship, involvement by itself may not be enough. This article will focus on father's understanding and experiences of attachment based on recent research by the author (Palm, & Joyce, 1994). The application of this research will be shared as a lesson plan for helping fathers to understand and build a close relationship with their child.

### What are Fathers' Models of Attachment Relationships?

This research project was conducted to understand more about how fathers think and feel about the father-child attachment relationship and how they begin to construct a positive relationship with their young children. The research project included a number of focus groups of fathers who had at least one child under the age of five. The population consisted of 40 men from a variety of SES backgrounds with some cultural diversity (25% of the men were Hispanic). The focus groups which met for 1 1/2 to 2 hours were facilitated by the author and audio recordings were made and then transcribed. The results presented here reflect a summary of the important themes that were gleaned from an analysis of the transcripts. The basic research question addressed here is: "What are fathers' models of attachment relationships?"

### Descriptions of Attachment

There were three different patterns of attachment that were described by fathers. The patterns are not mutually exclusive, instead, they appear to focus on areas of concern to fathers: *Bonded at Birth*, *Triangle Tension*, and *Relationship Roller Coaster*.

### *Bonded at Birth*

This pattern was reported by a number of men who described their feelings and actions shortly after birth. These men focused on the baby. For example, "I wanted to carry him and I didn't want to let go. I brought him up and they said they were gonna wash him and I said I wanted to wash him, I am doing the

## Triangle Tension

cleaning and the bathing...I just didn't want to put him down. I couldn't put him down." The image that emerges is a bond that is similar to "super glue." The bond begins immediately after birth and has been strong and permanent since then. The descriptions are similar to those reported by Greenberg (1985) as engrossment. Not all fathers reported this experience of instant bonding. Some men seemed more attuned to the pain and needs of the mother and others reported that it took some time to "warm-in" to the relationship.

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Fathers reported a second pattern that reflects the attachment relationship in the context of the family. Many fathers reported tension in their relationships with their children based on their interactions with the mother-infant relationship that seemed to exclude them. Some examples of this pattern were: "I don't really feel attached. She is now a year-and-a-half and she is still very much mommy's girl" and "I play second fiddle to both my kids...if they need or want anything it is mom, always mom." Fathers described a feeling of helplessness and inability to comfort children as part of this pattern. A few suggested that it was hard for them to form a close attachment until after the child had been weaned. This theme of a triangle continues for some fathers past the stage of infancy. Two of the coping mechanisms for addressing this situation were to compete with mom for attention or to distance oneself for protection. The tension described in this pattern could be seen as a typical reaction to this stage, however, it appears that it can also solidify into a long term issue that makes attachment more difficult for fathers.

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## Relationship Roller Coaster

A third pattern of attachment reflects a developmental perspective of the father-child relationship. This pattern includes two different cycles. The first is the long term cycle of attachment spurred on by the development of the child. For example, the child being able to talk and say "Daddy, I love you" was an important breakthrough for some fathers to feeling more connected to their children. The transition of infants to toddlers also was reported as a time when dad's behavior changed as they began to "set limits" and play the role of the "heavy." As they took on this role it was more difficult to maintain a feeling of close connection. The second cycle of ups and downs that was described was the weekly schedule of work during the week with weekends at home. Some of the men talked about the difficulty of 'reconnecting' with children after a week of work. "She gets really attached to me if I can get the momentum going. It gets broken off again and then I have to start over." This roller coaster image was described by actor Steve Martin's character in the movie *Parenthood*. This image appears to be a realistic description of the ebb and flow of father-child relationships through different cycles.

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These patterns may all be experienced by fathers of young children as they move through the early years of establishing some stable relationship patterns. The research raises many questions about the differences between mothers and fathers as they attempt to build a close relationship with their child. Do mothers and fathers start from different places and have different paths to attachment? Do mothers and fathers have different styles of relating/interacting that create different kinds of relationships? While fathers may be very motivated to be attached, they may have limited models for positive father-child attachment. Will greater involvement by itself help men to form a positive relationship, or do men need more than some critical amount of involvement? The following lesson plan can be used to address some of these questions with groups of fathers. The research on patterns of attachment is used as a base for increasing understanding of the father-child relationship and exploring strategies that fathers use to both create close relationships and to overcome the barriers that fathers face.



# Lesson Plan on Building A Close Relationship

## Learner Outcomes

- Fathers will understand some of the typical attachment patterns/dynamics between fathers and children.
- Fathers will identify some of the barriers to forming close relationships with their children.
- Fathers will share some effective strategies for building close relationships with their children.

## References:

Key Words: fathering, relationship building (father-child), attachment (father-child)



## I. Introduction

Use the following questions to initiate a discussion on father attachment.

- What does attachment mean to you?
- When does it start?
- What are male and female differences in paths to relationships?
- What are starting places for mothers versus fathers?

The emphasis in this session is on the father's view and experience of attachment. Attachment is a two-way relationship, yet most of the emphasis has been on child behavior. This session looks at the father's perspective and experience of this relationship.

## II. Summary of Research of Attachment (mini-lecture)

Share the three different paths described in the article.

1. Bonded at birth
2. Triangle Tensions
3. Roller coaster

Discussion questions: How do these descriptions fit your experiences? How can you use these descriptions to anticipate possible developmental pathways for father-child relationships?

**III. Small Groups** — What gets in the way of close relationships with your child? Suggest three different sources to explore in groups of 3-4.

- Self
- Mother
- Child
- Other sources

Share some of the barriers in the large group. Record them and talk about ways to manage or circumvent these barriers.

**IV. Brainstorm Strategies** — The large group can add to some of the ideas from the study. Introduce the idea of strategies and mention 2-3 from the study listed below. Have fathers as a large group brainstorm a longer list.

- Direct one-to-one interaction
- Making self available
- Teaching a new skill

This brainstormed list can be copied and shared with the group at a future date

## V. Summary

- Remember that the father-child relationship is an ongoing process.
- Lessons from quality time research
  - Make time available — not all time can be planned
  - Use a variety of activities to connect to children
  - Focus on the relationship as the outcome, not the tasks

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