

# A PEATC

Do You Know....



## Fact Sheet for Virginia's Professionals Fathers' Role in Childhood Development and Outcomes

### The Role of Fathers has Been Changing

A 2016 report from the **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)** showed fathers' involvement in their children's lives and their influence **on the health and development of their children has increased in recent years. This strengthened involvement has many positive effects on a child's well-being**, particularly on diet/nutrition, exercise, play, and parenting behaviors (e.g. reading, discipline). Attention to the importance of father involvement has also led to positive changes in the role of fathers. One example is the **stereotype of the father as "bread-winner"** has dissipated as women now have equal or greater educational achievement and are equal participants in the workforce.

### Who is a Father?

The *AAP report* defines a father as *"the male or males identified as most involved in caregiving and committed to the well-being of the child, regardless of the living situation, marital status, or biological relation."* A father may be a biological, foster, or adoptive father; a stepfather; or a grandfather, with or without legal custody.

### The Influence of Fathers and Benefits of Father Involvement

The degree of **involvement of fathers in their child's life can vary** according to the father's age, race or ethnicity, level of education, employment status, how far they live from their child, their mental health status, their relationship to the child's mother, and whether social supports are available and accessed.

**Barriers** to involvement can include **working conditions** (lack of flexible hours, required overtime, lack of vacation or personal leave time). Another barrier is the **negative career effects** for fathers who do take time off (although family leave policies are growing significantly more flexible). **Parent relationships** with one another, as noted above, can also be a factor. Fathers who are not in or have a negative relationship with the mother and/or who do not share custody may not be able to be as involved.

According to the *AAP report*, a father's **prenatal involvement and residence at birth are the strongest predictors of paternal involvement by the time the child reaches 5 years.** A father is more likely to play with the infant than the mother, and the father's play tends to be more stimulating, vigorous, and arousing. Benefits of involvement follow:

### Resources on Father Involvement

**American Academy of Pediatrics**  
*Fathers Role in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians*  
<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/1/e20161128>

**National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse**  
*Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field*  
<https://www.fatherhood.gov/toolkit/work/special-needs> and

*Father Involvement-Children with Disabilities*  
<https://bit.ly/2XTpeWw>



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# Fact Sheet for Virginia's Professional

## Perinatal and Newborn Period

- ✓ Mothers are 1.5 times more likely to receive first-trimester prenatal care
- ✓ Reduced prematurity and infant mortality
- ✓ Reduced smoking among mothers (36%)

## Early Childhood

- ✓ Decreased mental health issues at 9 years of age when fathers were more involved (caring, playing, communicating) in infancy.
- ✓ Decreased behavior problems and higher tolerance for change
- ✓ Enhanced social competence

## Adolescents

- ✓ Decreased likelihood of adolescent risk behaviors (more strongly for boys)
- ✓ Decreased incidence of depression and delinquency
- ✓ Enhanced cognitive development and reduced behavioral problems in boys
- ✓ Decreased risk of early puberty, early sexual experiences, teen pregnancy, and psychological problems in girls
- ✓ Decreased economic disadvantage in families of low socioeconomic status

## What about Fathers of Children with Disabilities?

There is a **much less research on fathers of children with disabilities** and most focuses on the impact of the disability on the father vs. the father/child relationship. According to *Fatherhood.gov*, studies have shown **mixed results** about the impact of the child's disability. Examples of some **contradictory findings** are noted below.

Fathers of children with disabilities **have lower self-esteem** than other fathers. Fathers may **report feelings of guilt, disappointment, lack of control, and isolation**. They report being **cut off from social support and resentful** to others. They are worried about **financial costs and experience more stress** which affects the marriage and family life.

Other research shows the opposite. Several studies **have not found significant differences in stress levels** for fathers of children with disabilities. Fathers report **increased personal growth** and **positive impact on the family** and do not experience more marital discord. They take **equal part** in the care of their child.

## More Findings on Fatherhood and Children with Disabilities

"Studies suggest that **fathers who receive professional support** related to raising a child with a disability (e.g., by attending support groups for fathers of special-needs children) experience more positive adaptation and well-being than do fathers who lack such support."

"One study that directly examined the influence of father involvement on outcomes for children with disabilities found these children experience **greater cognitive benefits from high levels of paternal engagement than do typically developing children**, suggesting that father involvement may be especially important for children with special needs."

*Fatherhood.gov*



PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

For more information about us, please contact:

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