

Celebrating Fatherhood

by Liz Pickett

We know how important it is for a father to be present in his children's lives, and how much of a role his involvement plays in their development. Being a father means more than just paying the bills. Men need to embrace the full responsibilities of fatherhood so that their children will benefit the most

As early as infancy, dads play a special role with their newborns. Since breastfeeding mothers are the sole source of nutrition for their babies, dads need to have their own special time with the baby as well. Dad can learn how to bathe or massage baby so this becomes their time together to bond and learn from each other. Dads should also be encouraged to have "skin to skin" time with the baby – babies will learn about the difference in voice, skin texture and smells. Even wearing the baby in a sling for an hour a day and going for a walk can be a wonderful bonding experience. According to a study done by the National Fatherhood Initiative, infants whose fathers spent time playing with them had better cognitive outcomes at age three.

Regardless of whether or not dad is living in the home with his children full time, it is important to be there for the child as much as possible. Doctor visits, parent-teacher nights, homework help and soccer games are all perfect times to be involved. Studies have repeatedly shown that kids say that they want to have more time with their dads – so, give it to them as much as possible. Financial support is important, but taking part in all aspects of your child's life is just as crucial - take pride in being a father! Remember that you don't have to be restricted to gender specific roles. Dads- cook with your kids, show your sons that they can help do the housework, teach your daughter to change a tire and, most importantly, give lots of hugs and kisses.

Your involvement in their early years will pay off in their adolescence. According to the National Center For Fathering, children whose fathers are absent are more likely to become sexually active too soon, practice risky behaviors, have more absences from school, and their daughters are more likely to become single parents themselves. Teens were also more likely to use drugs when there was no father in their lives.

Fathering is even important during pregnancy. Studies also show that pregnant women with no partner were more likely to smoke, and less likely to get early prenatal care. There is also a direct correlation on the impact of absent fathers and postpartum depression. New mothers who didn't have appropriate support from their partner were much more likely to fall victim to perinatal mood disorders.

This year, celebrate Father's Day by taking pride in being a father while enjoying this important role in your child's life. You will be setting a great example about how to be the best father you can be, and the bond will last a lifetime!

Liz Pickett is the perinatal health educator for Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children. For more information about free or low cost health insurance for children and families, or to register for our free childbirth classes, visit www.misn-ny.org or call 1-800-453-4666.