

Implications of Infant Massage for Fathers, Family Life Educators & other Family Professionals

INFANT MASSAGE IS ONE OF THREE EVIDENCE BASED CAREGIVING ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING BONDING AND ATTACHMENT

Aim

To illuminate the results of the the parent study, (2015) as it relates to the importance of fathers and Family Life Educators and other Professionals.

Presenting Issue

Fathers were left out of the attachment & bonding theory research since the beginning in the 1920's. Family Science and other disciplines began to focus on fathering dynamics in the 1990s. Research focused only on the interaction between the mother and the infant for 70 years. Currently, nearly 82% of unmarried fathers are involved with the mother at the time of birth; however, less than 50% are at the time of pre-school (McLanahan, 2000).

Parent Study (Original Research)

First time fathers learned to massage their infants. Results both demonstrated and were indicated through self reports. Fathers demonstrated the constructs of Attachment theory. Fathers indicated feeling *competent* and *confident* after learning to massage their infants. Fathers enjoyed being able to comfort and soothe their infants and reducing the mothers' stress. Fathers valued infant massage as quality time with their infant.

Why Infant Massage?

Infant massage is one of three science based bonding and attachment caregiving activities (breastfeeding, kangaroo care and infant massage). Published benefits include: increased interaction (engagement & entrainment), physical growth, increased sleep time. Decreased times of crying/colic, decreased length of hospital stays and diarrhea. Mothers report less signs of depression symptoms regardless of whether they massaged their infants or watched their infants being massaged by another.

Others who massage infants report feeling more engaged with life.

Other research indicates that infants who were massaged by their fathers began initiating engagement with the fathers. Fathers who participate in caring for their infants have an increase in oxytocin and model behaviors similar to the mothers.

Implications for Fathers

- Father involvement at the birth provides a window of opportunity to bond with the baby and the mother.
- Fathers need to know they too contribute to their child's outcomes. Even though the relationship is built differently than it is with the mother it is no less valuable to the outcomes of their child (Cheng et. al., 2011).
- Fathers contribute to the family ecology by contributing to the infant's well being and the parenting relationship by relieving the mother of full responsibility for the care of the infant.

Implications for Family Life Educators and other Family Professionals

- New fathers typically step into the role of fathering with little support from family systems (McBride, 1989; McBride & Lutz, 2004) and transitioning into this role is often stressful (Sanders, Dittman, Keown, Farruggia & Rose, 2010; Willinger, Diendorfer-Radner, Willnauer, Jorgl, & Hager, 2005).
- Furthermore, the marital relationship is negatively impacted as parents adjust to their new roles (Johns & Belsky, 2010), and this change may also impact attachment to their infant (Green, Furrer & McAllister, 2007).
- Fathers not involved in the parent study revealed after reading the research and after watching the TED talk shared they felt like an interloper when attending the pregnancy appointments and the parenting/caregiving classes. They stated, "No one made eye contact with me."
- Fathers are alienated by "not having a breast," after birth and need encouragement to be involved.
- Caring for families means we need to be almost invisible facilitators to support the newly formed family ecological unit. .

