

Fathers Matter: Relationship Focused Parenting Groups for Men

Presented by:

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Objectives:

- Attendees will learn the basic elements of attachment theory and research. They will be able to identify the benefits to children of having a secure attachment with at least one parent.
- Attendees will learn the two ways in which memory is encoded in the brain and how implicit memories, in particular, play a role in parental behavior and emotional regulation.

Outline:

- Introduction: Covers basic principles of attachment theory and research. How secure attachment benefits parents and children. The significance of the concept of rupture and repair in secure relationships.
- Categories of attachment relationships between parent and child: secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent, and disorganized.
- Adult attachment categories and patterns and how they influence parenting: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and disorganized.
- Two ways memory is encoded in the brain: Implicit and explicit memories. The role attachment plays in forming memories and how those memories can influence an individual's parenting behavior.
- Two modes of interaction with children: The "high road" and the "low road." How the low road interferes with effective parenting. How to teach fathers to recognize and avoid the "low road."
- Self regulation: Children learn to manage their emotions from interactions with their parents. Ways in which fathers can regulate themselves when engaged with their infants. How an individual's experiences as a child plays an important role in the way he fathers his children.
- Empathy and attunement: Exercises to give fathers that will help them learn and practice the essential skills of empathy and attunement.

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Exercises for Fathers

Help new dads learn and practice the essential skills of empathy and attunement:

- For 5 minutes, focus on just “being” with your infant in his or her experiences. Try, for just these few minutes, to see the world through his or her eyes. What might your child be feeling? What seems especially important or interesting to your child in these moments?
- Try this again later and this time try to be aware of your own experiences while also focusing on your child. Notice everything you can about this experience. Did you feel close to your child? Why or why not? If you did feel close or “attuned” to your child, what were the two of you doing specifically at that moment? What was happening if you felt out of sync?
- During your interactions with your infant, notice if you become out of sorts—feeling angry, impatient, distressed, or otherwise uncomfortable. What are the particular situations or interactions that bring on these feelings? What might be the common theme for you?
- Pay attention to how you can soothe *yourself* when your infant is distressed—such as regular, slow breathing or rocking or singing or listening to music. Notice what happens to your infant when you calm yourself.
- Practice playing “follow the leader” and let your infant lead. Play close attention to determine what he or she wants in the moment, from you. Playfulness? Quiet? Soothing?

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WHY CHILDREN NEED FATHERS

Richness of Care

Children benefit from *more* caring, as well as a *variety* of caring styles when both mom and dad are present. Fathers who do not live with their children simply are less available to nurture, guide, and provide for their children.

1. Infants with involved fathers tend to score higher on tests of thinking skills and brain development. (Radin, 1994)
2. Many babies, as they grow older, actually come to prefer playing with their fathers who provide unpredictable, stimulating, and exciting interaction. Such play fosters social, emotional, and intellectual development (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Crawley & Shorrod, 1984; Lamb, 1977).

Empathy, Emotional Intelligence, and Interpersonal Relationships

1. Primary school children scored higher on tests of empathy if they had secure attachments to their fathers during infancy. These children were able to recognize how other children felt and took steps to make them feel better (Biller, 1993).
2. When children have fathers who are emotionally involved, they score higher on tests of “emotional intelligence.” Moreover, they tend to have better relationships with other children and behave less aggressively (Koestner, Franz, & Weinberger, 1990).
3. Adolescents who felt their fathers were “available” to them had fewer conflicts with their friends (Lieberman, Doyle, and Markiewicka, 1999).

Intellectual Development

1. Generally speaking, the more actively involved and interested a father is in his children's care and education, the more intellectually developed his children are (Radin, 1994; Radin, 1986; Radin, 1981; Nugent 1991; Snary, 1993).
2. When fathers are supportive, their children have fewer problems at school such as excessive absences and poor exam results. This holds true even after taking into

consideration the influence of the children's mothers (Brown & Rife, 1991; Amato, 1997; Franz, McClelland, & Weinberger, 1991; Snary, 1993).

3. Evidence is beginning to show that fathers differentially impact brain development. Without the father's more arousing and energetic play behavior, development of the child's left hemisphere is negatively impacted (Schore & McIntosh, 2011).

Emotional Regulation

1. Although mothers are often critical to the fear regulation of infants, fathers are critically important during a child's second year of life in regulating aggression. This is so for both boys and girls (Schore & McIntosh, 2011).
2. Children who identify strongly and positively with their fathers exhibit better self control and are less aggressive when compared with children who do not identify strongly with their father (Hoffman, 1975, 1981; Mischel, 1961)

WHY ATTACHMENT MATTERS

Resilience

1. All children are malleable for better or worse, but not all are resilient. Resilience in the face of stress is the *outcome* of secure attachment. *All* infants are vulnerable to attachment trauma and may suffer both emotionally and cognitively if their primary attachment relationship is sufficiently disrupted (Schore & McIntosh, 2011).
2. No one is resilient in isolation. Resilient children are always buttressed by positive, encouraging relationships with others (Black, 2004).
3. A secure attachment laid in the first years of life sets a child up for being able to handle difficult experiences to come. And the opposite is true—a child brought up in a high stress situation will be vulnerable to later stress, especially in adolescence (Siegel, 2011)

Attachment drives brain development

1. Attachment security is one of the very few human characteristics that is not genetically influenced (Siegel, 2011).
2. Developmental psychology and neuroscience confirm that attachment relationships are central to a child's development, with far-reaching implications.

Attachment especially influences a child's (and later the adult's) capacity to know, express and regulate his or her emotional world (McIntosh, 2011).

3. Attachment interactions between parent and infant during the first year of life are happening at a time of remarkable brain development. Total brain volume increases by 101% and the volume of the subcortical areas by 130% in that first year (Schoore, 2010).

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