

Communicating Dads

Communicating Dads is designed to help family professionals encourage fathers¹ to communicate more with children from birth to three. Research shows that dads play a crucial role in young children's development - and that the early years are particularly important for creating a father-child bond and developing a child's communication skills. Fathers have a unique impact - when both parents engage children tend to do better. For example, when dads are trained in infant communication, babies' intellectual development is greater than when only mums are trained.

Children whose fathers are highly involved in their upbringing from their earliest years are more likely to succeed academically, be more stable emotionally, and are less likely to become involved in crime and other anti-social behaviours. Today's dads spend much more time with their young children than fathers did 30 years ago. *The State of the Modern Family* report reveals that fathers whose babies were born during 2000 were heavily involved with them at age three: half read to them daily and over three-quarters played with them daily².



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This pack includes a range of resources to help you get dads involved and communicating with their babies and toddlers. It contains:

- Making it happen – getting dads involved
- Activities/Ideas
- The Dad Quiz
- Dads – Talk To Your Baby (leaflet)
- Further resources

Like mothers, fathers' needs vary, depending on background, personality and circumstances. Some dads take to infant care/communication like ducks to water; others find it a challenge. Some work long hours, or live in other households, or think mothers' input matters most. Others are very available and are clear about their own importance. Few like to think they need 'support'. And fathers of all kinds, and from all ethnic groups, are most likely to become 'hands on' when they come to understand how this will *benefit their children*.

¹ By 'fathers' or 'dads' we mean men who play the fathering role within a family

² The State of the Modern Family, EOC, March 2007

- **The Fatherhood Institute** is a UK fatherhood think tank whose vision is to give all children a strong and positive relationship with their father and any father-figures. Visit www.fatherhoodinstitute.org
- **Talk To Your Baby** is the National Literacy Trust's early years language campaign to encourage parents and carers to talk more to their children from birth to three. Visit www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk

Making it happen – getting dads involved

It is vital to reach out deliberately to fathers and give them ownership and a sense of belonging to the early years community, as it may not be an environment to which they feel they belong. Here are a few simple ways to make your early years setting more inviting to fathers and male carers, and to draw the men in.



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- Do you KNOW the dads? Think carefully about your registration forms: is there a place for the father's name and contact details?³
 - In setting up your first meeting with the parents stress how important it is that fathers attend. Offer home visits out of hours if that's the only way to meet them.
 - Make sure to address your remarks to both parents – and encourage both to ask questions. Also address fathers directly on material sent to parents – use 'mums, dads and carers' instead of 'parents/carers'.
 - If dads come to drop off or collect their baby/toddler, invite them into the building and welcome them. Talk with them and their child about the day. If dads can't come to meet you then send material home especially for them.
- Invite fathers to specific events where you can model talking and communicating with the babies and toddlers. If possible, think about holding this at the weekend when more fathers and working mothers might be able to attend.

Display a range of pictures of men with babies/toddlers in the early years setting – not in a 'dads' corner' but integrated with other images; and make sure 'boys' toys' have their place.

- Make sure ALL staff are on board with engaging fathers.
- It is important to vocalise to mothers as well as fathers and other service users how important fathers are. Be positive about their role in communicating with their baby. Emphasise how good it is for children to hear a male voice that is different from their mother. Babies are sociable and love to communicate, so encourage dads to understand that by talking to their babies they are creating a bond, whilst also helping their child's language development AND helping their brains develop.
- Ask fathers what they would like to see from their early years settings, or how they could be made to feel more involved.

- If dads do not live with their baby or young child, gather their details, make serious efforts to meet them, send information routinely to them - and be supportive and encouraging about the importance of playing and talking with their baby when they spend time together.

³ Did you know that under the Data Protection Act you are permitted to gather these details from mum? Then you must contact the dad to check the details are correct and ask whether he's happy for you to hold them (and BINGO! you're talking to him – a great beginning!)

Activities/Ideas

Below are a few suggestions to help dads and male carers understand how important it is that they communicate directly even with very young babies. Modelling this is extremely powerful and a great learning tool for parents, so remember to include this in all your activities.



- Hold a specific event to 'honour' fathers (perhaps around fathers' day) or 'themed' in a way that might appeal to a lot of dads (how about a 'sailing day' in the nursery, or jungle exploration?) Make it a breakfast (many dads can work a bit flexibly), an evening or a weekend event. 'Dads only' events can be tried, but don't be surprised if fewer dads show up. Many prefer 'family' events which mums can attend, too.
- Once dad feels 'at home' in the nursery, invite him in for a specific activity (a singing session may NOT be the place to start! – a 'making things' session is likely to be less threatening). Use themes that are more likely to appeal to dads such as transport or animals. Making a dad and baby hand or footprint with paints to take home to keep could follow on from a session where dads get time to play and

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bond with their child. Highlight that all these activities are helping introduce new vocabulary, encourage social interaction and learn turn-taking – and develop the child's IQ. When fathers understand that these activities are helping them 'raise a clever kid' you're on to a winner.

- Look around for books with positive fathers and father-figures, and send these home for dad to read with their child (when you see him next time, you can ask him how it went).
- Hold a story-telling session, inviting dads and male carers to attend, to hear a story with their child. Think carefully about the choice of story, making sure that it is something that might appeal to all those involved (see further resources for suggestions). Invite dads to bring in their own favourite book that they might read with their baby/toddler and that they are happy to talk about with others. If possible, link this in with a visit to the local library, or see if a member of the library staff who looks after early years is available to come and join you.
- Consider holding an event outdoors – perhaps a picnic, bringing together the local community, to which dads are specifically invited. Encourage babies and toddlers to be out of buggies as much as possible, helping fathers bond with close contact. Structured activities such as a nature trail, or watching what goes on in the park, or feeding the ducks, encourages conversation naturally between babies and fathers. This will help emphasise how babies learn through stimulation and engagement.

Running REGULAR activities at specific times on specific days that fathers are specifically encouraged to attend, can gradually build attendance. However, very few fathers will ever attend a 'fathers only' group. EXPECTING regular attendance can turn them off - especially at the beginning.

Communicating Dad resources

- TTYB Quiz
- TTYB Quiz answers
- Dads – Talk To Your Baby (leaflet)



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The TTYB Quiz is a useful way of engaging fathers as well as mothers in the issue of communication. It helps to introduce the facts of the topic and challenges participants to think about what they already know. The quiz could be used with dads and male carers, perhaps as an introductory session. It can be done competitively, in teams or individually. Try using it before giving out any information or facts on communication to have maximum impact.



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Dads – Talk To Your Baby (leaflet) can be given out at an event, used as a follow-on from the quiz or sent home as a handout. It has been designed specifically with a male audience in mind, and for all ages.

There is also a section on the TTYB website on fathers for parents and practitioners. Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/menandmalecarers.html (parents) www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/menandfathers1.html (practitioners)

Test your knowledge – the TTYB Quiz

1. When should you start talking to babies?

- a) From the moment they are born
- b) After six weeks
- c) When they smile at you

ANSWER

2. Babies can hear your voice before they are born. True or false

ANSWER

3. When does the majority of brain development occur in children?

- a) In the first four weeks
- b) From birth to age two
- c) When they start school

ANSWER

4. When do babies start to communicate?

- a) Before they start talking
- b) After they start talking
- c) As soon as they've said their first word

ANSWER

5. You need to be an expert to help children develop good communication skills. True or false?

ANSWER

6. What percentage of brain development occurs in the first two years?

- a) 75%
- b) 25%
- c) 55%

ANSWER



7. If a young child says something incorrectly, what should you do?

- a) Nod in agreement
- b) Say it back the right way
- c) Write down the correct word

ANSWER

8. Is it ok for young children to watch television?

- a) Never
- b) As often as they like
- c) For limited periods

ANSWER

9. Watching different programmes is more beneficial than watching the same programme/dvd repetitively. True or false

ANSWER

10. When should you talk to children?

- a) At a set time each day
- b) At any time
- c) Before feeding

ANSWER

11. It is important to listen to babies and to respond to them when they speak, babble or smile at you. True or false?

ANSWER

12. Why is responding to babies good for them?

- a) It motivates them to keep talking
- b) It is good manners
- c) It develops their listening

ANSWER

13. Why is talking to babies good for them?

- a) It stops them from crying
- b) It distracts them
- c) It helps develop their communication and social skills

ANSWER

Test Your Knowledge – the TTYB Quiz Answer Sheet

1. a

2. True

3. b

4. a

5. False

6. a

7. b

8. c

9. False

10. b

11. True

12. a, b and c

13. c

Dads – Talk To Your Baby: it will make a difference!

The facts:



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- Gazing directly into your baby's eyes, talking to him and waiting for his responses, stimulates your baby's brain, helping to strengthen the connections that make learning possible.
- This also helps him learn to talk, as it is from listening to your voice that he will learn to use language.
- Good speaking and listening skills help him to become a good reader and writer, because language skills form the foundation for literacy.

- Communicating, talking and interaction helps develop social skills and good relationships.
- This will show that you love and respect him, enhancing self-esteem.
- Spending time talking with him will help the two of you form a close bond - communication is the basis of your relationship with each other.
- Most brain development occurs from birth to age two, so babies and toddlers need stimulation as much as they need nourishing food. The best way to stimulate babies' brains is to connect with them through 'mutual gaze' and talk to them from the moment they are born.

The chat:

- Whilst out, talk about the things you see when you're on the bus, in the car or walking to the shops.
- In the evenings chat to her during bath time, or sing to her (it doesn't have to be a nursery rhyme!) while changing her nappy.
- The supermarket is a good place to talk to her and introduce new words, as she is sitting in the trolley facing you. Gain her attention and then describe some of the items as you put them in the trolley.
- Try not to ask her too many questions. Instead, tell her about things, especially the things she shows an interest in, like a favourite toy.
- Talk with her when she is watching TV programmes, about what you see and what's happening.

You don't need to be an expert to help your child develop good communication skills. All you need is a listening ear and the willingness to chat to your child whenever you can.



Talk To Your Baby

Dads – Talk To Your Baby may be photocopied. For more information visit www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk. Talk To Your Baby is an initiative of the National Literacy Trust.

Further information and resources

Recommended books:

For a list of stories that involve dads and male carers to share with babies and toddlers, visit the Booktrust website: www.booktrusted.co.uk/books/booklists.php4 and search for keyword 'fathers' and age range 'under five'.

Resources:

Top Dads: working with young fathers - a toolkit, produced by ContinYou, which provides advice on setting up and sustaining projects with young fathers. There are also other resources on working with fathers available on the website. For more information visit www.continyou.org.uk

'Early Years' DAD cards – a fold-out just-larger-than-credit-card-sized 'Z' card packed with information for fathers of young children. It refers dads to the website www.dad.info where they can register their child's birth date and receive regular emails about their child's development as they grow. Contact: duncan@dad.info

Fathers Matter: ideas and practical tips for involving fathers in your setting – a downloadable leaflet from the Pre-school Learning Alliance. Visit www.pre-school.org.uk

Getting the Blokes on Board – a magazine from the National Literacy Trust with ideas and case studies for professionals who work with dads. Download from www.literacytrust.org.uk/familyreading/Blokes.html

Sure Start Children's Centres Practice Guidance is produced by the Department of Children, Schools and Families to promote good practice in children's centres. It includes a section on how services can be tailored to meet needs of particular groups, one of which is fathers. To download the guidance visit www.surestart.gov.uk/publications (see chapter 14 for the section on fathers)