



Engaging Fathers in Breastfeeding Support: Evidence Base

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“The first moment I saw him, my tears welled up. I think he looks like my wife.”
Perapat, 32, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
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Family is a Very Important Influence on Breastfeeding

- ❑ Women often rate partner influence higher than all others (Swanson & Power, 2005)
- ❑ Fathers and other family members influence breastfeeding intentions and efficacy (Yang et al, 2016; Lok et al, 2017)
- ❑ Diverse influence across cultures: e.g. families more supportive in Lebanon than in Ghana or Nigeria (Balogun et al, 2015)



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Why focus on fathers?

- Fathers have biological investment
- Fathers are commonly present
- Fathers often excluded because they are male

What if father absent/abusive?

- Health professionals need to find out the role of the father and other family members in each individual case: who are main assets for breastfeeding?
- Extra support needed for mothers who do not have family support

Observation

- “Experience in the field suggests that failure to include fathers in infant and young child feeding may limit efficacy and effectiveness” of breastfeeding programmes and initiatives.
 - Conclusion of international literature review, mostly from low-income countries.

(Alive & Thrive, 2012)



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What Do Fathers Do?

- Some fathers
 - Refuse to push their own opinion (most)
 - Help in practical and emotional ways
 - Are more positive than the mother
 - Are more negative than the mother
 - Have no opinion at all
 - Become an advocate for BF

(de Montigny et al, 2018)

- In every community there are some fathers who actively support breastfeeding, even if contrary to strong cultural norms.
 - Health professionals can identify these fathers (they are at the health clinics!) and support their stand.



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Influence Of Fathers Not Necessarily Intentional

- Most fathers say they don't want to pressure mother either way, but he can still influence through:
 - His feelings about breastfeeding / breastfeeding in public
 - His presence during the birth
 - His involvement in caring for mother and baby
 - The mother's confidence in him



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(Earle & Hadley, 2018; Maycock et al, 2013; Rempel & Rempel, 2004; Cost et al, 2018; Februhartanty et al., 2020)

Engaging Fathers Works: Systematic Reviews

- Effects of education for fathers on breastfeeding outcomes
- Controlled intervention studies
- All improved at least one outcome
 - Initiation
 - Exclusivity
 - Duration over 6 months
 - Paternal support

(Tadesse, Zelenko, Mulugeta & Gallegos, 2018; Abbass-Dick et al, 2019)

China

- Mother-and-father BF education group outcomes better than mother-only group
 - EBF at 6m 51% compared to 26%
 - Use of infant formula at 1m 6% compared to 24%
 - Use of infant formula at 6m 20% compared to 44%
 - Mothers' attitudes to and knowledge about BF stronger
 - Mothers happier – fathers did more caring, housework and helping when things difficult

(Su & Ouyang, 2016)



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Vietnam

- Provided fathers with information, support, home visits & community work
 - Early initiation of BF 81% compared to 40% in control
 - EBF at 4m 21% compared to 11%

(Bich et al, 2014; Bich et al, 2015; Bich & Cuong, 2017)



Photo supplied by researchers.

The Three Principles of Engaging Fathers:

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- Information
- Mother-father teamwork
- Father-baby bond

Informing Fathers Works

- 2-hour antenatal education session + weekly information postnatally: BF rate at 6w 82% compared to 75% in control (Australian RCT, 699 couples)
- Without education, when fathers were more involved with infant care, BF rates were lower in one Japanese study
- When fathers informed, more BF initiation, more EBF, longer BF duration

(Maycock et al, 2013; Ito et al, 2013; Abbass-Dick et al, 2019)



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But Fathers Rarely Informed

- Many studies find fathers left out.
- Pakistan: even fathers supportive of breastfeeding given no information

(Goodman, 2005; Ingram & Johnson, 2004; Earle & Hadley, 2018, Mithani et al, 2015)



Photo: [Asian Development Bank](#). Creative Commons.

Supporting Mother-Father Teamwork

- Beyond knowledge about BF, it is helpful when fathers:
 - Provide practical support
 - Appreciate the mother
 - Are fully present during BF
 - Are responsive to what is needed (including knowing when help NOT needed)
- only RESPONSIVE support consistently led to longer BF

(Rempel, Rempel & Moore, 2017)



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Mother-Father Teamwork

- ❑ Consider the analogy of highly effective two-person teams (e.g. beach volleyball, doubles badminton)
- ❑ Each partner needs a broad, flexible skillset
- ❑ Partners need to coordinate –observing, communicating, adjusting
- ❑ Partners must know when to step back and let the other handle things



Photo: [Amy the Nurse](#). Creative Commons.

Responsive Support is Key

- Responsive support respects the mother's autonomy
- Teach fathers to provide responsive support.
- Model responsiveness when giving practical advice.
 - If advice is too specific it can crowd out the flexibility needed by the couple to respond to the mother's particular needs.

(Rempel, Rempel & Moore, 2017)



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Oliverio, Veracruz, Mexico

Supporting Father-Baby Bond

- When father-baby bond is stronger, more breastfeeding.
- Taiwan, 72 fathers. One group received hands-on support with skin-to-skin care. NO mention of breastfeeding. EBF at 3m was higher.

(Wang, 2018)



*Rogelio, Mexico City, Mexico.
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The Biology Of Father-Baby Bonding

- When caring for babies, fathers undergo hormonal and neurobiological changes that tune them into care – the more they care, the more their biology and brain changes.
- Even prolactin increases in fathers, particularly if baby is vulnerable.
- This is part of human “community of care”; multiple attachments important for child development.



*Oliverio, Veracruz, Mexico.
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The Biology Of Father-Baby Bonding

- Starts before birth.
- Breastfeeding is one form of caring babies need. All other forms (carrying, cuddling, playing, bathing, comforting) can be done by fathers and create bonds.
- Only a minority of fathers feel “jealous” of breastfeeding.

(de Montigny et al, 2016)



Gabino, Veracruz, Mexico.

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Summary

- Inform fathers
- Support team parenting
- Support father-baby bonding

Vietnam example of integrated approach: Intervention components

- Counselling with fathers by health workers trained in 2-day workshop
 - Prenatal group session and home visit
 - Three postnatal home visits
- Interactive in-hospital session with midwife
- Mass media communication
 - Public loudspeakers in town, flyers, mugs, T-shirts....
- Social activity
 - Fathers' clubs
 - Facebook group
 - Public contest on fathers' knowledge

(Bich et al, 2019; Rempel, Rempel et al, 2020)



Photo from project in Vietnam

Vietnam example of integrated approach: Content

- Inform fathers
 - Breastfeeding information
 - Father infant interaction ideas
- Team parenting
 - Used teamwork analogy - help fathers responsively support the mother and respect her autonomy
 - Helped fathers identify their own unique ways of working together with the mother as a team
- Father-baby bonding
 - Assisted to bond in the hospital session
 - Helped to identify their own unique ways of interacting with their baby



Photo from project in Vietnam

(Rempel, Rempel et al, 2017; Rempel, Rempel et al, 2020)

Vietnam example of integrated approach: Outcomes

- ❑ fathers more responsive and helpful in supporting BF
- ❑ higher EBF rates
- ❑ stronger marital relationship quality
- ❑ More father-infant interaction and stronger attachment
- ❑ Improved infant developmental outcomes at 9 months

(Rempel, Rempel et al, 2017; Rempel, Rempel et al, 2020)



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