Focus on ways Dads can Bond with Baby

THIS SECTION INCLUDES TIPS ON:
1. Encouraging Dads to bond with their children.
2. Teaching Dads how to start bonding with their baby early in life.
3. Suggesting tasks for Dads that help them to feel involved in and responsible for child rearing.

1) Encourage Dads to Bond with their Children

WIC staff should encourage men and Dads to build relationships with their children. Use the following suggestions to support father-child relationships:

- Let Dads know the strengths you see in their relationships with their children.
- Suggest that Dads relate to their children by following their child’s lead during play.
- Partner with Dads to identify what their children need and discuss the meaning of children’s behavior.
- Ask questions about a Dad’s perception of his child and share information to build a common understanding about his child’s development.
- Look for opportunities to support Dad’s mastery of their parenting role and to reinforce positive father-child interactions. - Adapted from Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families

2) Teach Dads Ways to Bond with their Children

WIC staff can also offer specific suggestions of how Dads can bond with their children.

- WIC staff can explain to men that Dads can start bonding with their baby before he or she is even born! Suggest that Dads can:
  - Attend prenatal doctor’s appointments.
  - Listen to the baby’s heartbeat and feel the baby kick.
  - Talk, sing or read to the baby while s/he is still in Mom’s belly. This might seem cheesy, but the baby can hear you!
  - Help Mom get ready for the baby: get things like a crib and car seat.

Remember:
There are plenty of ways that Dads can bond with their baby that provide support to Mom and do not interfere with breastfeeding!
After the baby is born, WIC staff can suggest that Dad bond with him/her by:
- Providing comfort, perhaps by holding baby skin-to-skin or doing infant massage.
- Singing or talking to the baby.
- Cuddling and soothing the baby when s/he is upset. This might include waking up with the baby at night for non feeding-related awakenings.
- Gently rocking baby to sleep.
- Burping the baby after breastfeeding.
- Changing diapers or dressing the baby.
- Giving baby a bath.
- Playing with the baby with toys or simple hand games.
- Taking baby for a walk.
- Wearing a carrier that holds baby close to his body.
- Trying to make the baby laugh with funny faces or voices.
- Taking baby to a doctor’s appointment.

As children get older, Dad can bond and help out by:
- Teaching a new activity.
- Listening to their child talk and responding to them.
- Taking the child to daycare/preschool.
- After 6 months, introducing solid foods.
- Doing inexpensive and fun activities with his child(ren) like craft projects, going to the playground or flying kites.
- Including his child in his own activities at an age-appropriate level, such as giving kid-safe tasks in the kitchen or having kids help out with yard work and gardening.

“Many fathers appear to be more comfortable participating in child development services when they are given clearly delineated roles. When working with fathers who hesitate to interact with children, teachers and home visitors can try to direct fathers toward concrete activities while explaining how the activity will benefit their children’s growth. Such activities can include developmentally appropriate play, arts and crafts, help with meals, and reading books.”

-Dedicated to Dads: Lessons from Early Head Start

3) Give Dads Suggestions on How to Contribute to their Child’s Development

Given that Dads may feel more comfortable interacting with their children when they have clearly defined roles, WIC staff could suggest that Dads take charge of some of the following areas of their child’s development:
- Dads can be responsible for interpreting baby behavior.
  - WIC staff can introduce Dads to the California WIC Baby Behavior Campaign (linked in Resources below). Staff can explain to Dads some common behavioral cues, such as:
    - If your newborn is hungry, she might keep her hands near her mouth, bend her arms and legs or make sucking noises.
    - If your baby is full, she might suck slower or stop sucking, relax her hands and arms, push away or fall asleep.
    - If a baby wants to engage, she might have a relaxed face and body, stare at you or follow your voice and face.
    - If a baby wants a change in her environment, she might look away or arch her back, frown, or stiffen her hands, arms and legs.
    - Responding to cues quickly may help the baby to cry less.
  - It can be especially helpful when Mom is first recovering from giving birth for Dad to be knowledgeable about baby behavior.

- Dads can focus on supporting healthy brain development in their child.
  - In order to stimulate their baby’s brain and help with language development, Dads can read, talk and sing to their child.
  - Encourage Dads to take their children to their library and participate in choosing books.
  - Reading programs (such as Little by Little described to the right) could have a special focus on involving Dads in their child’s reading.

  **Spotlight on a Program: “Little by Little”**

  The Little by Little School Readiness Program has been developed by PHFE WIC in Los Angeles, CA. Reading out loud to children is so important for building literacy and preparing children for school, so Little by Little provides age-appropriate children’s books 4 times a year, as well as home safety items. The program also gives developmentally-appropriate handouts that encourage parents to read to their children starting at the end of pregnancy up through the child’s 5th year.

- As their child gets a little bit older, Dads can focus on active play.
  - Dads can bring unique aspects to play: exploration, risk-taking, persistence, and independence.
  - Encourage Dad to gently roughhouse or use his body as a jungle gym.
  - Suggest active games like pillow fights or “sock wrestle” (see Toddlers Need their Dads linked below).
  - Dads can take their kids to parks, playgrounds or open gym time at children’s gyms. Supporting active play from an early age will set up healthy habits for the future.
Resources

- **Fatherhood First**: Father Child Development Activities (Register for the site to access!)
- **Father/Child Development Activities** from Fatherhood First
- **Breastfeeding and Dads** from Maryland WIC
- **Brain Development with Dad** from text4baby
- **Top Tips for Dads on Bonding with your Baby** from BabyCenter
- **Step by Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families** by Best Start Resource Centre: “Step 9: Consider Key Issues” p. 34
- **Little by Little** from PHFE WIC
- **Toddlers Need Their Dads** from Wisconsin WIC
- **Time for Dads** from Preschool Learning Alliance
- **Becoming More Involved as a Dad** from Preschool Learning Alliance
- **14 Ways for Dads to be Engaged** from Best for Babes
- **Getting to Know Your Baby** from California WIC Baby Behavior Campaign
- **Baby Feeding Signs** from Pennsylvania WIC

**ACTION ITEMS FOR WIC STAFF:**

- Support Dads to build relationships with their children.
- Provide suggestions of ways that Dads can bond.
- Teach Dads about interpreting baby behavior.
- Encourage Dads to read to their children.
- Suggest that Dads focus on active play with their kids.