

## Brief

# Evidence on the Effects of **Engaging Fathers** **on Reducing Violence Against Children in** **the Home and even Intimate Partner** **Violence**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Men and fathers are biologically wired to care for infants.
- Engaging men in gender-based violence prevention is a promising response in development contexts.
- Social norms that improve or hinder the engagement of the father.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Developing new norms through practicing new behavior.
- Provide education and awareness about the importance of fathers' involvement in parenting.

## OVERVIEW

Violence in the home has become a pressing issue today, and it is a problem that affects families worldwide. Engaging fathers in reducing violence at home has been found to be an effective strategy. This brief lays out the evidence showing that some changes happen to men's brains upon becoming fathers. It highlights the importance of Fathers' involvement, even those who experienced violence during childhood, and how it can improve the paternal connection. It offers concrete examples of how social norms improve or hinder the father's engagement.


In this brief, the term father refers to fathers and male role models who play a significant role in raising a child. This person may be a biological, adoptive, or stepfather. He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother's significant other. He may be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

## 1. Man's Brain and Becoming a Father

Fathers' involvement in child rearing has dramatically increased, yet little is known about the brain basis of human fatherhood, its comparability with the maternal brain, and its sensitivity to caregiving experiences. Although men do not go through pregnancy and hormonal changes they are biologically wired to care for infants.

Several studies revealed that a man's brain undergoes several changes in the first weeks of fatherhood <sup>1</sup>. A man's testosterone and cortisol levels decrease and oxytocin, estrogen, and prolactin levels surge, promoting an important bonding experience between a father and his newborn child. Brain neural networks linked to emotional arousal and social bonding are also activated where mothers reflect activation of the emotional processing networks and fathers in the socio-cognitive circuits <sup>2,3,4</sup>. Moreover, other physical changes to the male's brain linked to attachment, nurturing, and empathy showed more gray and white matter in later tests. This increase and change in the brain reflect a storming of parental skills in new fathers. This anatomical change in the brain may support the fathers' gradual learning experience over a period of many months <sup>5</sup>.

When talking about nature and nurture, babies make their own oxytocin and get it from their mother's milk, a harmonious relationship that allows the mother-child bond to form. Studies <sup>6</sup> show that in infants who don't receive this oxytocin-producing care, the level of the stress hormone cortisol is much higher. This chemical is shown to be associated with permanent brain changes that lead to increased levels of stress throughout life, as well as higher blood pressure and heart rate. According to experts, early experiences have a profound impact on the brain, because maltreatment or abandonment causes deficits in the development of brain regions such as the orbitofrontal cortex and corpus callosum, because of the toxic effects of the release of stress hormones in the developing brain. There is also a sort of innate predisposition in human adults to respond to infants' signals, to satisfy their need and allow them to survive and become young adults capable of taking care of themselves <sup>7</sup>.

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1. Taking care of a child reshapes a dad's brain by activating the brain networks linked to emotional processing and social understanding.
  2. Dads experience hormonal changes too.
  3. A puff of oxytocin boosts dad-baby bond. Fathers who participate in childcare show an increase in oxytocin level.

Furthermore, stress plays an important role in early brain development. The stresses to which individuals are exposed early in life modify their ability to moderate and control responses to stress later in life. So, adults who were poorly nurtured in early life tend to retain sustained levels of stress hormones long after situations that cause arousal. Insufficient stimulation and neglect experienced early in life can affect the development of the brain and predispose lifelong emotional and cognitive problems.

## 2. Fathers' Involvement and Experience of Violence During Childhood

Research across a range of disciplines suggests that involved fathers can have a unique positive influence on their children's social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. Such positive early experience builds a healthy child's brain. Brain Studies also find that mothers and fathers themselves also benefit when fathers are involved in child-rearing<sup>8</sup>. Involved fathering is sensitive, warm, close, friendly, supportive, affectionate, nurturing, encouraging, comforting, and accepting<sup>9</sup>. Children with involved fathers have higher levels of academic achievement, and greater self-esteem, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as drug abuse and criminal activity. Additionally, children with involved fathers are more likely to form healthy relationships later in life, as they have had positive role models in their fathers. Therefore, it is essential to involve fathers in parenting practices.

Fathers' supportive (or abusive) behaviour can influence maternal attachment to their baby, and the quality of the partner relationship often predicts how both parents will respond to the needs of their child. Other researchers built on the Involved Fatherhood Model to include fathers' provision of indirect care, such as providing financial support, and direct care, such as caregiving and play. Numerous rigorous studies also point to negative effects of father absence, including lower children's educational attainment, especially high school graduation; less social-emotional adjustment; and more mental health issues in adulthood than seen in people who had an involved father<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, a wide range of literature is available on engaging men and boys against VAWG. Developmental studies, research on humanitarian action, evaluation of practices, tools, case studies, and review of programs and ways forward cover a broad range of topics. In addition, a few capacity-building tools exist on how to engage youth, communities, and religious leaders, or how to work on gender norms. Thus, engaging men and boys against VAWG can have several objectives: mitigating the risks, preventing the violence from happening, or acting to change the social norms that allow the violence from happening.

The concept of masculinities has been also used in the field of men's and boys' engagement against VAWG to promote change toward gender equality. It helps to point out the negative and

positive aspects of gendered social constructions and launch thinking around gender roles. Involving boys and youth in activities that promote gender equality and non-violent behaviour is critical to prevent VAWG. Indeed, engaging children at an early age has a strong impact on social norms and gender equality, and therefore within VAWG prevention.

Evidence suggests that fathers are important to a child's social, behavioural, and moral development,<sup>9</sup> by fulfilling positive roles pertaining to psychological health, cognitive functioning, and capacity for empathy,<sup>10,11</sup> especially in contexts of violence and social adversity<sup>11,12</sup>. There is also evidence that responsive caregiving, including that of fathers, is associated with physiological, epigenetic, and neuroplastic changes in the body and the brain<sup>13</sup>. Thus, in the fields of education, health, and peacebuilding, studies have often found that programs are more impactful if they engage with fathers, as opposed to mothers exclusively, as shown in the following examples of intervention research<sup>14</sup>.

In Lebanon, a clinical trial done by the Arab Resource Collective (ARC) of ACEV's Mother Child Education Program showed that paternal involvement in child-rearing and education was associated with a higher level of maternal well-being and lower distress, in addition to better synchrony between the mother and child<sup>15</sup>. While relying on maternal reports of father involvement, rather than working directly with men, the study concluded that fathers can be an important source of support for mothers in low-resource settings and those affected by conflict, displacement, and marginalization, particularly by promoting a sense of self and community-efficacy and connectedness.

Furthermore, it has been widely recognized that fathers can play a key role in the development and well-being of young children. In many cases, however, fathers still have limited involvement in the early years' of education of their children and their voices are yet unheard. In a study<sup>16</sup> examining the belief of practices of Jordanian fathers of kindergarten children regarding their involvement in kindergarten-based activities (KBA), results indicated that fathers exhibited a moderate level of belief regarding the involvement in KBA, whereas fathers' perceptions of their own practices in KBA were rather low. In addition, the results revealed that there was a significant and positive relationship between fathers' beliefs and their actual practices.

### 3. Social Norms Improve or Hinder Father's Engagement

Violent discipline at home is the most common form of violence experienced by children in the Middle East and North Africa. Some of the countries in this region such as Egypt and Tunisia have levels of violent discipline that are among the highest in the world. Although 7 in 10 children experience physical punishment in the home in the Middle East and North Africa, only 1 in 4 caregivers think it is a necessary form of discipline.<sup>17</sup>

Although paternal behaviours and roles vary across and within sociocultural contexts, without a doubt, fathers and men matter a lot to children's development. Research findings confirm that young children raised by involved and nurturing fathers:

- develop better linguistic and cognitive skills, including academic readiness,
- are more emotionally secure,
- have better social connections with peers as they get older,<sup>18</sup>
- have stronger, mental, and physical health, self-esteem, resilience, social skills and levels of empathy and respect,
- as well as foster psychological wellbeing of the child reflecting different outcomes between boys and girls,<sup>19</sup>
- higher long-lasting academic achievement from pre-kindergarten to early adulthood<sup>20</sup>.

Additionally, boys who grow up in households where there is active involvement of fathers and male caregivers are less likely to use violence against partners later in adulthood<sup>21</sup>.

Men's engagement is important not only for early childhood development and maternal health and well-being. It is key to transforming gendered relationships, roles within communities and societies, and gender socialization processes. This helps girls and boys to grow up free from limiting and stereotypical gendered attitudes and expectations about how they should be and behave.<sup>22</sup>

Young children usually imitate their parents and learn from them the social expectations, attitudes, and behaviours they should conform to according to their sex. Gender norms are then at the core of parenting. And harmful gender norms and societal values are drivers of violence in the house against children, women, and girls. Boys and girls who witness gender-based violence in their homes are more likely to replicate violent relationships as adults, either as perpetrators or victims.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the importance of involving fathers in parenting, there are several challenges to engaging fathers in the region. One of the main challenges is cultural norms and societal expectations. Traditional gender roles dictate that fathers are the primary breadwinners and mothers are responsible for childcare. This expectation is deeply ingrained in Arab culture, and fathers may feel uncomfortable taking on a more active role in parenting.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, some fathers may feel that their involvement in parenting may be perceived as a sign of weakness or inadequacy. Another challenge to engaging fathers is the lack of support and resources for fathers. While there are several organizations and resources available to support mothers in the region, there are fewer resources available for fathers. This lack of support can make fathers feel isolated and unsupported in their parenting roles, which can make it more difficult to engage them in parenting practices.<sup>24</sup>

The Gender Transformative Parenting resource package developed by UNICEF MENARO and ISSA in 2022 suggests the formation of parenting alliances. They focus on the mother and father agreeing together on 1) how to raise the child, 2) the parenting style, 3) how to divide responsibilities, 4) the values adopted, and 5) how partners can support each other.<sup>25</sup> The aim is to enhance the participation of the father on the basis of communication and equal partnership, hence balancing the power dynamics and focusing on healthy and positive values and norms.

Male engagement is also beneficial for men themselves. Men who are actively involved with the care and development of their children are more likely to feel satisfied with their lives, adopt health-promoting behaviours, and consume less alcohol and drugs. They are also more likely to experience less stress, get sick less, have fewer accidents, and to live longer, as well as have greater involvement in their community.



Men's positive engagement in nurturing care and ECD, unpaid care work, and maternal health has the potential to bring multiple benefits to young children as well as to women, families, and men themselves. But in many countries, men's engagement in ECD remains limited, and men who are interested in engaging may face multiple barriers to doing so.



## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Developing new norms through practicing new behavior.**

Helping parents communicate more effectively with their children, through developing new norms around parent-child communication, by practicing communication skills through role-plays, and practicing talking with adolescents and adults is a good approach to reducing parent violence against children.

- **Provide education and awareness about the importance of father involvement in parenting.**

Providing education and awareness about the importance of father involvement in parenting can help to break down cultural norms and expectations that limit fathers' involvement. This can be done through parenting classes, workshops, and seminars. Create father-friendly environments, engage fathers in decision-making around parenting practices, provide peer support, and celebrate fathers' achievements.

In conclusion, engaging fathers in parenting practices is essential for promoting the overall well-being and development of children. However, there are several challenges to engaging fathers including cultural norms and societal expectations, and a lack of support and resources for fathers. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to develop test practices and programs development that are inclusive and supportive of fathers.



## 5. End Notes

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