

# How do dads fit in? Engaging fathers in family-centered early intervention services for children

August 2 2017

---

Early intervention services for children with disabilities or developmental delays are focused on being family centered and are ideally conducted in the home setting. Even so, fathers—custodial or noncustodial—are often left out of the process.

Brent McBride, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois wanted to find out how early intervention providers perceive [fathers](#) and their role in such services. McBride also wanted to learn about possible barriers, from the providers' perspective, that keep fathers from being engaged or included in intervention services for their children.

In a study published in the *Journal of Early Intervention*, McBride found that while therapists or providers see the potential that fathers may have in positively affecting their children's development, providers are also hesitant to include fathers in intervention services because of significant, perceived barriers.

Ultimately, McBride says he hopes the study will help to break down some of the barriers, and inform future training needs of service providers to better target or include fathers in intervention plans.

"The whole idea of doing this study was to find out from the voices of people working in the field their perceptions of what's going on. As

much as possible, services should be provided in the most naturally occurring environment. For the birth to 3 years population that would be the home setting. And providers want parents to be engaged and to receive those services, not just the [child](#).

"A physical therapist, for example, can do things with the kids, but if you can teach the parents to do the same thing that you're doing as a PT, the same thing will be replicated when the PT is not there. The whole premise of early intervention is [family](#)-centered programming, but that is a misnomer. It's not family centered, it's mother-centric programming. We wanted to start unpacking why that is and what are the barriers that limit it," McBride says.

Early intervention service providers include physical therapists, nutritionists, speech therapists, mental health professionals, and others. When services are not provided in the child's home setting, McBride says they are provided in [child care centers](#) or schools, which is one possible barrier in involving fathers: availability issues due to work schedules.

Research over the last few decades has shown that not only does father involvement have a positive impact on typically developing children, but more recent research shows that father involvement also has a positive impact on children with disabilities or [developmental delays](#) and their families.

One reason this is true, McBride explains, is the partnership in sharing in the challenging context of parenting a child with a disability or developmental delay.

"It's tough to parent a child with a disability or developmental delay. We know from literature on family functioning and family well-being that mothers bear a disproportionate brunt of the burden of that challenging

context. When mothers are raising children with disabilities they tend to be more isolated and experience greater levels of stress and depression. They typically drop out of the workforce, which adds further to their isolation and contributes to their own lack of feeling like a fully functioning, contributing member of the family. When that happens, the quality of the mother's parenting goes down.

"And we really need optimal parenting because of the challenges the disability is presenting. Anytime you can get men engaged in that process, it is going to have an impact. Not only will it impact the child, positive engagement—whether that man is the parent, a cousin, extended family member, or a neighbor—has an impact on the child but it also has such a huge impact on the family context, which then helps smooth things out."

Citing previous research from his lab, McBride adds that the higher the level of engagement men play in parenting tasks, the lower the depression and stress mothers experience. "In that paper we present a very powerful argument for why men can't be on the sidelines and why they can't be forgotten about as we think about supporting, because they play such a critical role. When confronted with the challenging parenting contexts, men do change their parenting behaviors. So the stereotype that they will absent themselves from the context is just that, a stereotype."

In the current study, results from surveys of over 500 early intervention service providers show that the providers predominantly agreed with this; that fathers do play an important role and should be involved in services.

So why aren't fathers more involved with these services?

McBride says there is a disconnect between perception and reality. Regardless of the type of service they perform, providers affirmed the

potential of fathers in such services, but were hesitant to target fathers in these interventions because of several barriers.

Some of the perceived barriers include father absence—whether it was because fathers were at work, disengaged, or noncustodial. Some providers cited traditional gender roles, in that men work and women care for the children, and social norms and societal expectations that mothers (women ) are better equipped to take care of young children's needs. Some providers don't believe that fathers understand the developmental processes a child goes through or that they are willing to recognize that their children have a disability.

McBride says that he hopes the results of the study can help inform training of early [intervention](#) service providers as to how they can better involve fathers in the process. One example he gives, is specifically writing instructions a father will perform, as opposed to just writing "parents," in a child's individualized family service plan, a 6-month plan in which all therapists or providers state goals for the child.

"The idea is to take this information and make recommendations for professional development and training on how to break down some of these barriers. Like the quantitative data suggested, these providers, no matter who they are, whether speech therapist or developmental therapist, they all think that fathers or men can make a difference in the lives of the [children](#)."

The paper, "Father involvement in [early intervention](#): Exploring the gap between [service](#) providers' perceptions and practices," is published in the *Journal of Early Intervention*.

**More information:** "Father involvement in early intervention: Exploring the gap between service providers' perceptions and practices," *Journal of Early Intervention*

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: How do dads fit in? Engaging fathers in family-centered early intervention services for children (2017, August 2) retrieved 4 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-08-dads-engaging-fathers-family-centered-early.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.