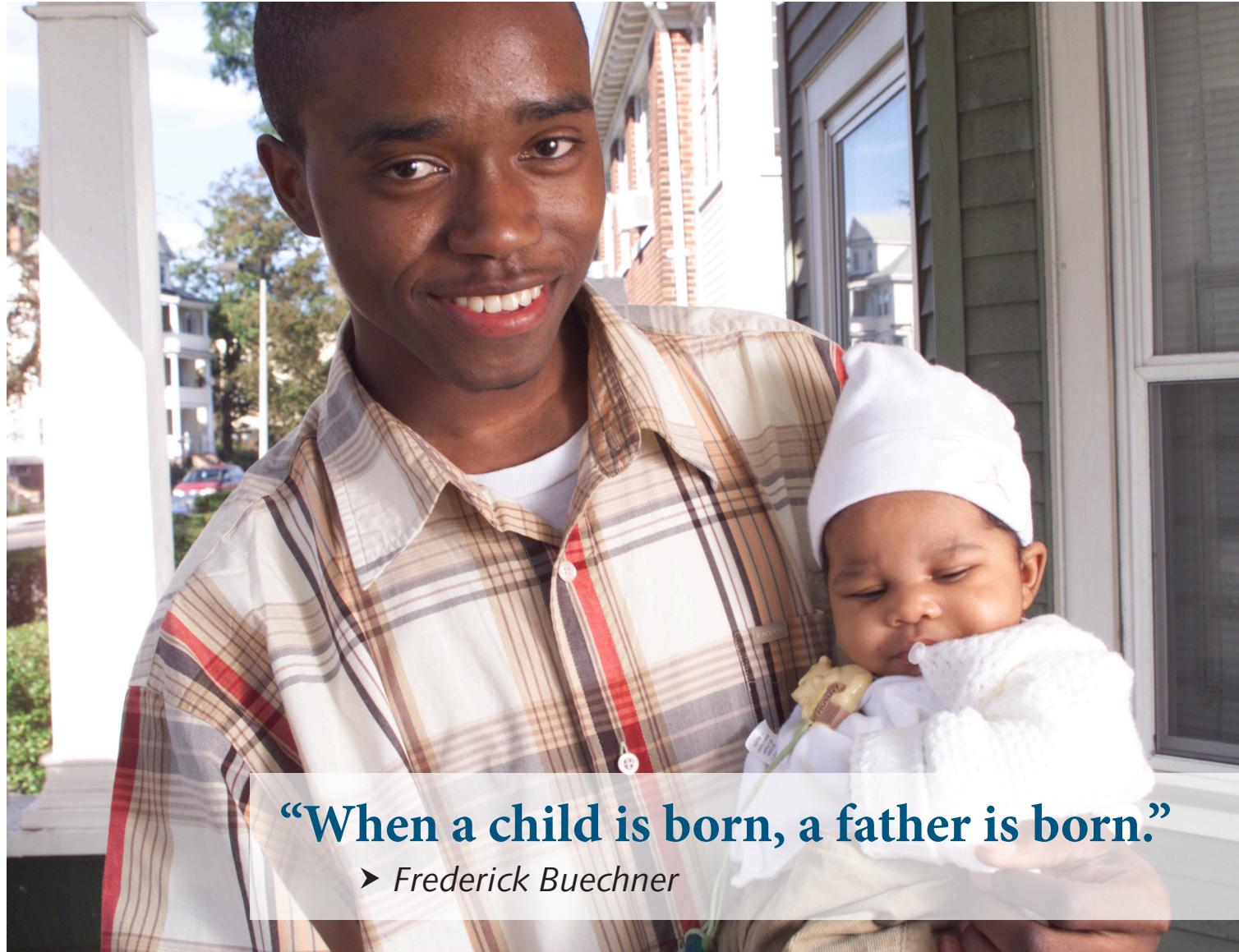


Engaging Fathers – Parenting as Partners

Resource Guide



“When a child is born, a father is born.”

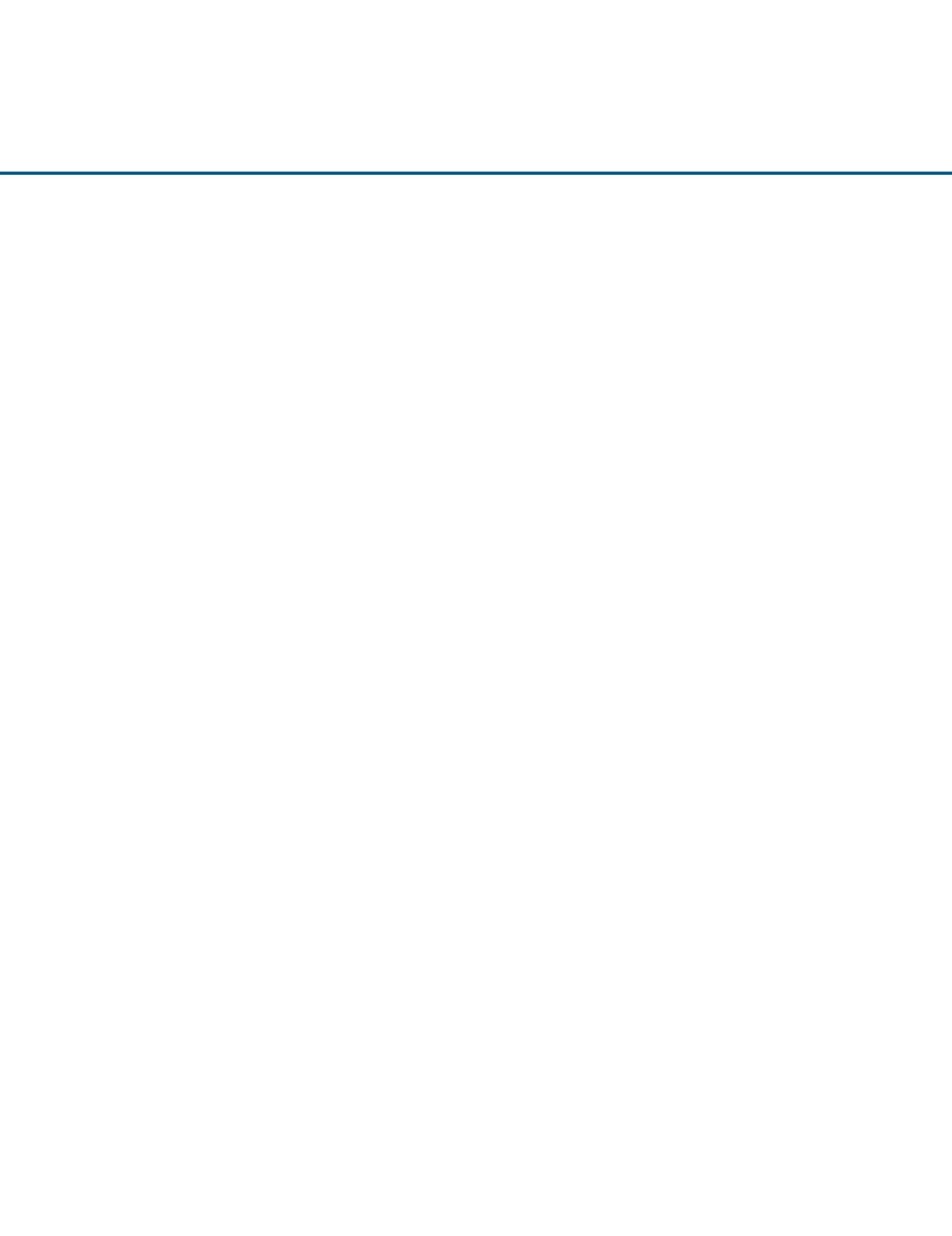
➤ *Frederick Buechner*



Children's Trust Fund

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES • PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE

 **healthy**
families



This series of ten handouts can support Healthy Families programs in gaining skills to engage fathers and encourage cooperative parenting.

Home visitors can discuss each handout with appropriate participants on a regular basis or just use selected handouts to address specific participant needs. A short description of each handout follows to help home visitors determine which handouts are appropriate for which participants. Ultimately questions of appropriateness and other questions that arise during use should be resolved with supervisor support.

All handouts are single sided except "Ground Rules for Communicating Your Message" which is double sided. Handouts are short enough to be discussed during one, or even a part of one, visit. They are also important enough to be referred to again and again to reinforce behavior.

Please direct suggestions for improvements or for additional handouts to Haji Shearer, Director of the Fatherhood Initiative at CTF: haji.shearer@state.ma.us

1. Dad's Vision Statement
2. Men Go on Prenatal Visits
3. Dads Bond with Breastfeeding Baby
4. Nine Ways to Be a Better Dad
5. Honor the Mother of Your Child
6. Qualities of a Healthy Relationship
7. "ABCDE" Problem Solving Model
8. Guidelines for Arguing
9. Ground Rules for Communicating Your Message
10. Parents Need to Nurture Their Relationship

1. Dad's Vision Statement

What it is: Many fathering curriculum use some form of handout as an opening exercise to connect a dad to his child. It is appropriate to use with almost any father.

How you can use it: Ideally, the home visitor (HV) has about 30 minutes alone with dad. HV explains this activity asks dad to think about his own father and acknowledges this might be painful. Walk him through the exercise, probing him to come up with his own qualities. It's fine to do this exercise with dad when mom is present, just make sure he answers for himself. If mom is not present, encourage dad to share his vision with her when they are next together. If HV can't meet with dad because of scheduling conflicts, HV can leave the handout with mom and ask her to have dad complete it before the next HF visit, so mom and HV can discuss how to support dad's vision.

2. Men Go on Prenatal Visits

What it is: Encouragement for young parents to talk about their roles in the medical care of their baby. The title highlights how gender roles have changed in recent years.

How you can use it: Healthy Families supports a mom's right to choose who attends prenatal visits with her. The handout identifies several good reasons for dad to join her. However, we do not want to encourage controlling partners to use abusive influence. So, it is best to ask mom individually first if she would like dad to attend prenatal visits with her. Dad may not be abusive and mom may decline simply from shyness or lack of intimacy with dad. On the other hand, mom may want dad to attend, but would never think of inviting him because she thinks "he's not that kind of guy." This is the perfect time to use this handout to assess dad's feeling and encourage him to be a part of this magical time for all the reasons listed on the handout. It's also an opportunity to review with dad what will happen at the visit and suggest mom introduce dad to the doctor.

3. Dads Bond with Breastfeeding Baby

What it is: This handout helps to normalize breastfeeding for a cultural group that probably associates breasts more with sex than with feeding babies.

How you can use it: Just as we talk with mom about the benefits of breastfeeding we also need to talk with a dad. This handout encourages home visitors to have simple, guided conversations with dads about supporting this great parenting practice. Appropriate for almost all fathers, ideally this handout is discussed first with mom to identify her plans, then with dad. Dad may feel awkward talking about his girlfriend's or ex-girlfriend's breasts with a home visitor. That's okay, helping him stretch his comfort zone can result in concrete benefits for his child. There's a lot of social pressure to see breasts only as sexual objects. This handout encourages dad to broaden his perspective. Gentle reinforcement over time also helps. So, if possible, start the conversation early in the pregnancy.

4. Nine Ways to Be a Better Dad

What it is: A reminder of the qualities dads are striving to demonstrate.

How you can use it: This handout is a low stress conversation starter with all types of fathers. It's good to start the conversation by acknowledging a strength you've seen in dad or heard about from the mother of the baby. If you don't know the family well, it's probably best to go over this handout with dad in person. It's possible that mom might try and shame dad with the handout, i.e., "you don't do any of this." Talk with dad about the list. Ask him which activities he does best now, and which activities he would like to do better. Allow the list to generate specific goals for dad, offer to support him by following up in a couple of weeks. Ask him to start a conversation with mom about which qualities she feels he does best and what areas he may be able to step up a bit.

5. Honor the Mother of Your Child

What it is: A friendly reminder of his partner's awesomeness.

How you can use it: This is best used after you build a few connections with the dad. Make sure you have given him some praise and honored him as father of his child before you start encouraging him to honor the mother of his child. He may feel like this is unnecessary or that the mother gets enough praise from him and other people. The purpose of this handout is not to radically change his behavior – no handout can do that – it's to help dad move in the direction that supports cooperation parenting. Speak with him about what honor, appreciation and respect would look like in this relationship. Help him discuss specific behaviors that demonstrate these feelings and how to put them into place.

6. Qualities of a Healthy Relationship

What it is: A simple framework to help young couples recognize the qualities of a healthy relationship.

How you can use it: This is the first in a series of handouts that are best used after you know the couple a little. Before giving the handout to a participant, it's good to have an idea which bullet they'd like to focus on. Some individuals or couples may feel overwhelmed if you give them this list and they feel like they "do nothing" that's recommended. Try to highlight a quality on the list where they have some success. Then ask which quality, individually or as a couple, they would like to develop. Many couples don't know what they "want" in a relationship; they only know what they don't want. Take some time to explore what they want would look like and help them set short-term goals for making it happen!

Guidelines for Arguing

What it is: Even military battles have rules of engagement. This is a basic code of conduct for when couples inevitably argue.

How you can use it: The second handout in our couples' series, it is good to keep similar guidelines in mind as when using "Qualities of a Healthy Relationship." Ideally, you would have a sense of what types of arguments the couple you're working with engage in. Always be vigilant about signs of violence and the potential to increase risk to the victim by discussing partner abuse individually. Introducing the "no violence" rule in the context of an overall strategy for disagreements may be safer than addressing the topic individually. After you know what behavior causes arguments to spike out of control you can better direct the couple toward specific points that reduce tension.

"ABCDE" Problem Solving Model

What it is: A simple (but not necessarily easy) to use tool that overcomes heated emotions with a detached, rational approach to problem solving.

How to use it: This is the third handout in the couples' series and even more than the first two, it requires you give the parents some personal attention when you first use it. Find a conflict in the family that seems to be going nowhere and get the couples' agreement to try a new method to resolve it. Then slowly help them walk through the steps one by one. In the "Ask" section, take time to describe the problem in detail, making sure they see several different sides of it. Help the couple refrain from immediately criticizing or negating options when brainstorming. Be creative in how you address each idea in "Choose One" and gently back into a potential solution. Many couples make it this far and fail to implement the solution. Offer to help by verifying the timeframes and outcomes the couple agree on. Finally, keep them on track if the plan didn't work out. Remind them how much time they saved and encourage them to try the model again – with more information.

Ground Rules for Communicating Your Message

What it is: A double sided handout with six ground rules for helping a young couple maintain open lines of communication.

How to use it: This handout can be used after getting to know the couple a little. You can start by saying something like, "We could all stand to improve our communication skills." Go over each rule with the couple and ask them to pick examples of when they followed the rule and times they did not. Get them talking about how it would be easier to follow the guidelines. You can also find an example of a rule each person regularly breaks and ask them to describe how they would remind themselves to stay with the guideline.

Parents Need to Nurture Their Relationship

What it is: There are many ways to nurture a relationship. This handout identifies several that encourage young parents to have fun building healthy intimacy.

How to use it: Any couple that is sincerely working toward romantic intimacy can use this handout to spark some ideas and conversations about how to treat each other. This handout may require more maturity and independence to be able to use the suggestions, so it may be a good follow up to some of the other "couple's" handouts.

Vision Statement: The Father I Choose to Be



Successful parenting starts with a vision. Decide the type of father you choose to be and shape your behavior to fit your vision. Even if you fall short of your vision sometimes, it's still better to know what you're aiming for. We all learn something about fathers from our dads. Even if he wasn't around, he was an influence. Begin the process of developing your vision by considering what you want to keep, discard and add to your dad's legacy.

Save Some - *List some aspects of your father's parenting style that you choose to use:*

Throw Some Away - *List some aspects of your father's parenting style that you choose not to use:*

Add Some of My Own - *List any additional parenting qualities you choose to use:*



Men Go on Prenatal Visits



There are many ways to support your partner's pregnancy. One important way could be joining her at prenatal visits and/or childbirth classes. Some moms may not feel comfortable having another person – even the dad – at prenatal visits and it's best to respect her wish whether to attend or not. It's not good for your baby if mom is stressed out during the visit. If mom doesn't invite you, it may be because she thinks you're not interested. Let her know you want to attend. There are several reasons this could be a good idea.

For Your Baby – You help to make sure your baby is growing like it's supposed to. There's a lot for mom to remember at these visits and it's a little hard to keep mentally sharp when someone is examining your cervix, or hooking up medical equipment for tests. With all that going on, it's easy for an expectant mom to forget some of the questions she wanted to ask her obstetrician, or to remember important information she wanted to pass along to you. That's where you come in, and why you have to go to the obstetrician and be her ears and eyes—and advocate for your baby.

For Your Partner – Regardless of whether your partner has had a baby before (and especially if she hasn't) she needs every ounce of moral support you can give her. Going with her to the doctor is tangible support she can see and feel.

For Yourself – Last, but not least, as an expectant dad, you have tons of questions, no previous experience (if this is your first time), and an intense desire to protect your baby. A great antidote to that stress is information, which an obstetrician has plenty of. Another antidote is confidence that someone is looking out for your partner. A good obstetrician does that, too. These are just some of the reasons for an expectant father to develop a good working relationship with the obstetrician. Visiting the obstetrician will also help you feel more comfortable during the birth and infancy of your child.

Dads Bond with Breastfeeding Babies



Studies show the more supportive their partners are, the longer women breastfeed. One dad said, "I can't breastfeed, but I can create an environment that helps his mom breastfeed."

Tips for helping mom breastfeed:

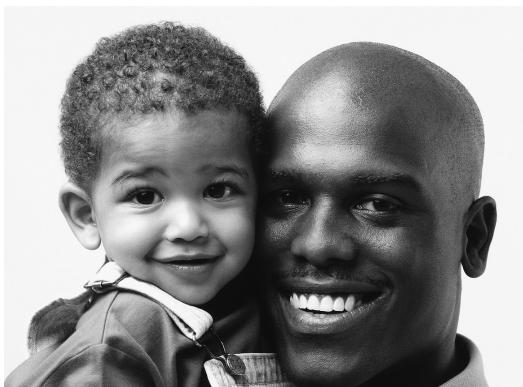
- Be her champion! Remember to tell her she's doing a great job and that breastfeeding is getting your baby off to a great start in life.
- Breastfeeding is hard work. Make it easy for her and take on other chores you don't usually do.
- Run interference about any negative comments about breastfeeding from friends and relatives.
- Later on, you can feed your baby with breast milk in a bottle, but wait at least four weeks so your baby can get comfortable with breastfeeding first.

What's in it for you:

- Breastfeeding is not only healthier and better for your baby and baby's mom, it's easier for you!
- Less baby equipment (bottles, cans) for you to lug around.
- No preparation, no bottles to wash, no night feedings.
- Breast milk is free and never runs out.

Honest, open communication between you and your baby's mom is the surest way to make breastfeeding joyful and positive for everyone. If you run into a problem, talk it out. Let each other know how you're feeling, both good and bad, and how you can help each other.

Nine Ways to Be a Better Dad



What's Happening – Involved fathers can help children lead lives that are happier, healthier and more successful than children whose fathers are absent or uninvolved. Fathers who spend time with their children increase the chances that their children will succeed in school, have fewer behavior problems, and experience better self-esteem and well-being.

What You Can Do

1. **Respect your children's mother** – When children see their parents respecting each other, they are more likely to feel that they are also accepted and respected.
2. **Spend time with your children** – If you always seem too busy for your children, they will feel neglected no matter what you say. Set aside time to for your children.
3. **Earn the right to be heard** – Begin talking with your kids when they are very young and talk to them about all kinds of things. Listen to their ideas and problems.
4. **Discipline with love** – All children need guidance and discipline, not as punishment, but to set reasonable limits and help children learn from logical consequences. Fathers who discipline in a calm, fair and nonviolent manner show their love.
5. **Be a role model** – Fathers are role models whether they realize it or not. A girl with a loving father grows up knowing she deserves to be treated with respect. Fathers can teach sons what is important in life by demonstrating honesty and responsibility.
6. **Be a teacher** – A father who teaches his children about right and wrong and encourages them to do their best will see his children make good choices.
7. **Eat together as a family** – Sharing a meal together can be an important part of healthy family life. It gives children the chance to talk about what they are doing, and it is a good time for fathers to listen and give advice.
8. **Read to your children** – Begin reading to your children when they are very young. Instilling a love of reading is one of the best ways to ensure they will have a lifetime of personal and career growth.
9. **Show affection** – Children need the security that comes from knowing they are wanted, accepted and loved by their family. Showing affection everyday is the best way to let you children know that you love them.

Honor the Mother of Your Child



The more we learn about new mothers, the more we appreciate the contributions and sacrifices they make for our children. Because there are many millions of moms doing what they do, it is simply expected of them. In fact, she herself will take for granted what she does best as a mom, while dwelling on any inadequacies she may feel. (Moms will often feel they are not good mothers if they do not know why their baby is crying, or if they have anything less than saintly thoughts about their screaming baby.)

Therefore, it is up to us to let them know they are doing great things, and we greatly appreciate it. Tell her that you can see the incredible bond she has with your baby, that you are grateful for the sacrifices she is making, and that you understand (some at least) how tough it can be.

Being appreciated by you makes all the difference to her and helps make the downside of motherhood worth it. Your baby will essentially do the same for her, and together you can make her motherhood a beautiful experience. Respecting her as a mom, and loving her for what she does for your child, will also serve as the foundation of your new relationship with her. As your child grows, look for reasons to do so, and you will find them.

You will also find that what goes around comes around. Your honor and respect for her as a mother will result in her doing the same for you. No one can encourage us more as parents than our mates, and the better we both do, the more we appreciate each other, as well as ourselves.

When two people are covering each other's back when they have it coming at them from all directions, they develop a very strong relationship.

Qualities of a Healthy Relationship



1. Accept each other's basic personality exactly the way they are.
Never think you can change someone. However, expect yourselves to change over time as you both mature together.
2. Find and pay attention to what you admire about each other.
3. Nurture feelings of affection for each other.
4. Learn and practice skills to really listen and hear each other.
5. Learn and practice skills for resolving relationship conflicts.
6. Make time to hang out together and have some fun. Do not let conflicts or arguments spoil those times.
7. Take the time to learn how your partner wants you to show your love.
8. Be a team – a united front. Tackle any problems as a team.
Learn and practice skills for solving problems.
9. Learn from your mistakes. Learn to forgive.
10. Honor your commitment – do not put yourself in situations where you might be tempted to mess around with someone else.
11. Recognize when you need support and know where you can find it.

“ABCDE” Approach to Problem Solving

The “ABCDE” Approach

The ABCDE approach can be used as a regular method for addressing issues in the family. When issues arise in the relationship, remind each other that problems can be approached using a system that includes each person's thoughts and feelings.

Address the problems as follows:

- **Ask.** What's the problem? Take time to talk about the problem and how it affects both of you and your child.
- **Brainstorm solutions.** The guidelines for brainstorming are: Set a time limit of 5 – 10 minutes. Encourage each other to share all ideas. No ideas are wrong or bad. You don't have to commit to any action at this point. Record the ideas on a piece of paper. Don't discuss or judge any idea. The ideas don't need to be "realistic," sometimes even a "silly" idea has a germ of wisdom that can lead to a creative solution.
- **Choose one.** Discuss the ideas. Talk about the consequences of trying out various ideas. Ask: Which have the best chance of working to solve the problem?
- **Do it!** The only way you'll know for sure if it's a good idea is to try it. Set a time limit. It should be long enough to give the idea a good trial, short enough to limit the damage if the idea doesn't work.
- **Evaluate.** When the time limit is up, which is usually in a few days or a week, meet to discuss how effective the idea was in addressing the problem. In some cases, you may need to explore the idea and change it a little to make it fully effective. In other cases, you may decide to go back to the list of possible solutions and try another one. If the idea worked, congratulations! Now you can move on other issues.



Guidelines for Arguing



A fight or argument between partners serves a purpose. Arguments are meant to clear the air and express deep feelings in order to break through barriers that hold you back from a better life. Keep your life goals in mind; acknowledge that you are sharing your lives with each other. It is good to remember that this is the same person who parents with me and the one who helps me learn how to love.

No Violence!

If voices get too loud, if you are almost coming to blows, end the discussion and give each other space.

Fight by mutual consent

Do not insist on a fight at a time when one of you cannot handle the strain. A good fight demands two ready participants.

Stick to the present

Do not dredge up past mistakes and faults about which you can do nothing. Keep it current and focused.

Stick to the subject

Limit this fight to one subject. Do not throw every other problem into the mix; take on one issue at a time.

Do not hit below the belt

In your lives together, you discover each other's sensitive areas. Do not throw dirty punches to hit on one of these soft spots.

Respect crying

It is a valid response to how one feels, but do not let the tears sidetrack you.

Respect silence

Give one another time to process things, a moment to consider something in silence. It can cool things down when tempers flare.

Ground Rules for Communicating Your Message



Speaker Rule #1: Pick the right time

While no time is perfect to raise a difficult issue, sometimes are more appropriate than others. Use care in determining what those times may be. Try to pick a time when you and your partner are free of other distractions. For example, this is likely not during a favorite TV show, immediately upon coming home, or during another scheduled activity. You can determine an appropriate time simply by asking when a good time to an important issue is.

Speaker Rule # 2: How You Start is How You'll Finish

The way in which the speaker raises an issue is often a big predictor of how the discussion will go. If you begin the discussion by attacking or blaming your partner, you are likely to have an angry discussion. It's important to avoid creating an environment where the speaker feels they need to defend themselves rather than simply discuss. In these cases, your message is not being heard. Softening the way you begin the conversation with a calm, positive approach will increase the likelihood that your communication will be viewed non-threatening.

Here are examples of harsh and soft beginnings.

Harsh – "You didn't put gas in the car and I was late for work this morning."

Soft – "I appreciate it when you put gas in my car, but when you can't do that let me know so I can make time to stop before work."

Speaker Rule # 3

Stick to talking about how you, the speaker, feels. Also, describe the issue at hand for you, rather than stating why you assume, think or observe to be the problem with your spouse. Use the words "I" and "me" to describe things from your point of view. Beginning a conversation with "you" statements, can feel like an attack or attempt to blame the listener.

Let's use the issue of housework as an example:

"I" statement – I get frustrated when I come home from work and the kitchen is messy. This statement conveys a feeling of frustration about a messy house.

"You" statement – You don't ever clean up after yourself. What have you been doing all day? This statement assigns blame on and attacks the listener.

Ground Rules for Communicating Your Message continued

Speaker Rule #4: Be short and to the Point

Try to tackle one issue at a time. Keep your point specific to issues, observations or feelings and raise only those things happening currently. Do not include negative comments that attack the other. Explain your feelings and concerns simply, avoiding the temptation to use long or drawn-out descriptions of things. Getting to the point gives the listener a manageable amount of information. It provides them a chance to show that they understand your point. Brief keeps the listener engaged in the discussion and makes the less likely to "tune-out."

Speaker Rule #5: It's Not Safe to Assume

You might think that because a person knows you, they should know what you are thinking and feeling. Making assumptions is dangerous in any type of communication. It's up to you to tell the listener what you feel, or how you observe a situation. What may be obvious to you, may not be obvious to the listener. Communicate in specifics, using examples of situations if necessary. Give your listener a frame of reference for what you describe. Don't forget to begin the discussion gently and speak for yourself using "I" statements.



Speaker Rule #6: Stop, Pause, Listen

After you have done your best to follow the speaker rules to get your message across be sure to let the listener paraphrase or summarize what you have said. The only way to know that your listener accurately received your message is to pause and give the listener a chance to respond back to you. This response should include their opinion of what you've said. They should simply restate, in their own words, what you've just shared. It's not uncommon to learn that what we think we said, was actually heard much differently by the listener. Having the listener repeat what you've shared, gives you a chance to know whether your message came across. You can add corrections or clarifications (using the rules) if the listener describes something different than what you intended to communicate.

Parents Need to Nurture Their Relationship



- ♥ Relationships need on-going nurturing to thrive.
Find ways to show your love to each other.
- ♥ Talk with your partner so you understand each other's needs and desires.
- ♥ If you are exhausted and your partner is not, have them care for the baby so you can get some rest.
- ♥ Get someone you trust to watch your baby, so you and your partner can spend some time alone.
- ♥ Understand there may be physical causes that make sex feel different.
- ♥ If you or your partner feels unable to handle the changes of parenthood, ask about seeing a counselor for help.

A good relationship is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and your baby!

