

**JUNE 2004:** Good Books about Fathers ■ Boot Camp for New Dads ■ Father Figures



raising  
readers™

A Family Health and Literacy Program  
for Maine Children Ages Birth to 5 years

## Good Books *about fathers!*



### **Reading with Dad**

Written by Richard Jorgensen

Illustrated by Warren Hanson

Waldman House Press, 2000; ISBN 0931674417

Reading together is a constant through the years in the relationship between this loving father and daughter.



### **Dad Mine!**

Written by Jane Kemp, Clare Walters

Illustrated by Dawn Apperley

Little, Brown Children's Books, 2003; ISBN 0316738395

Short, sweet verses and whimsical pictures celebrate Dads.



### **Mister Seahorse**

Written and Illustrated by Eric Carle

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2004; ISBN 0399242694

Award-winning author-illustrator Eric Carle creates an undersea world of dads in this effervescent, educational picture book.



### **Daddy's Lullaby**

Written by Tony Bradman

Illustrated by Jason Cockcroft

Simon & Schuster's Children, 2002; ISBN 0689842953

A father takes his baby on a midnight stroll through the house, trying to get the baby to sleep.

## BOOT CAMP for New Dads

is a national organization helping fathers meet the challenges of being a dad and feel more confident about bringing a new baby home. The interactive session covers baby care, fatherhood and needs of new mothers. The workshop is for first time fathers and is taught by Boot Camp veterans.

Offered by local hospitals and social service agencies, Boot Camp for Dads is available at these Maine locations:

**AUBURN** – Advocates for Children (783-3990)

**AUGUSTA** – Families First (626-3428)

**BANGOR** – Penquis CAP (973-3579)

**BRUNSWICK** – Parkview Adventist Medical Center  
(729-1641, ext. 2144)

**ELLSWORTH** – Downeast Health (800-492-5550, ext. 225)

**SOUTH PARIS** – Community Concepts (743-7716)

**WATERVILLE** – Inland Hospital (877-7621)

For more information about Boot Camp for New Dads, please visit: [www.bcnd.org](http://www.bcnd.org) or contact one of the organizations listed above.

# Father Figures

by Lisa M. Belisle, M.D., M.P.H.  
Physician Advisor, Raising Readers

**H**ILARY CLINTON WASN'T THE first person to claim that "it takes a village to raise a child." Experts have long realized that children benefit from having as many positive influences as possible in their lives. One of the most important predictors of a child's future behavior is her relationship with her early caregivers (*see March 2004 Raising Readers Issue Brief "Who Loves You Baby?"*). While we often think of these caregivers as being women, and more specifically mothers, studies show that fathers have an important role to play in a child's development.

While biological fathers certainly have the potential to be a crucial part of a child's life, DNA is not everything. In a recent report, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) defined the father simply as being "the male identified as most involved in caregiving and committed to the well-being of the child regardless of living situation or biological relation."<sup>1</sup> We will also accept this definition for the purposes of this article. Fathers may be step-parents, foster parents, male relatives or close male friends. The key is that the child recognizes these individuals as being important to her life. According to Dr. Kyle Pruett of the Yale Child Study Center:

*To the child, emotional paternity is what matters, and it is the child who eventually designates emotional paternity. Consequently, "father-effect" research is likely to be more meaningful if we assume that the literature addresses the psychological, or "life" father, rather than the "birth" or biological father.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus, a child who does not have the good fortune to have a healthy relationship with her biological father may still benefit from loving interactions with "father figures."

"Father-effect" research has become increasingly relevant in the face of our changing society. More fathers than ever before have sole responsibility for their children. Between 1998 and 2000, the number of "father-only" households in the United States increased from 2.1 to 4.3 million.<sup>1</sup> Even in two-parent households, fathers have taken on greater child-rearing responsibilities, as more women work outside the home.<sup>3</sup>

**B**Y TAKING ON MORE CHILD-RELATED TASKS, fathers are impacting their children intellectually, socially and even physically. Children bond with their fathers from an early age. Newborns are more likely to turn their heads toward their father's voice than that of a stranger.<sup>2</sup> Fathers likewise feel connected to their children from birth. Those who are present at delivery "more accurately described their babies moods and temperament" than fathers who are not.<sup>2</sup> This connection has been demonstrated to be beneficial in numerous studies:

- Premature babies who are visited by their fathers more frequently gain more weight, and have better adaptive-behavior and social-development test scores.<sup>1</sup>
- Children who felt supported by their fathers "had a stronger sense of social competence and fewer depressive symptoms."<sup>1</sup>
- Schoolchildren whose fathers are a part of parent-



teacher associations attain a higher level of education and have better incomes as adults.<sup>3</sup>

- Adolescents whose fathers are involved in their lives "have higher college entrance examination scores, reach higher economic and education attainment, show less delinquent behavior, and possess greater psychological well-being."<sup>1</sup>

- Boys whose fathers are less involved are "more likely to become fathers themselves when they are teenagers, and to live apart from their children," while girls in this situation are more likely to have sex at a younger age.<sup>3</sup>

**G**IVEN WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT FATHERS, it is important to support them as both caregivers and role models. The AAP encourages health care providers to involve fathers in their children's well-child care, and in discussions about family and medical issues. This begins with making the office more "father-friendly" and by understanding family dynamics (and perhaps less traditional living situations).<sup>1</sup> It also entails reinforcing the support of the mother or parenting partner, and empowering the father to have an ongoing relationship with his children. Providers might make specific suggestions for father-child activities, such as a bedtime snuggle with a Raising Readers book, or spending time outdoors together. It is also helpful to recognize each parent—father and mother figures alike—for the work that they are doing in raising their child.

Raising children is challenging and time-consuming. It can be the most wonderful and the most difficult thing an individual ever attempts. For that reason, we must work to support parents in their efforts. We must emphasize the importance of both father and mother figures in a child's life, and form a village around them.

#### REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup> Coleman, WL et al "Fathers and Pediatricians: Enhancing Men's Roles in the Care and Development of Their Children," *Pediatrics*, Vol 113, No. 5, May 2004, pp. 1406-1411).
- <sup>2</sup> Pruett, K, "How Men and Children Affect Each Other's Development," *Zero to Three Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, August/September 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> "Improving Children's Well-Being: Understanding, Nurturing Fatherhood," *Research on Today's Issues*, Issue No. 9, October 1998.

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