

A first report on the  
**TALKING TO  
DADS  
ABOUT BONDING  
(ATTACHMENT)  
Project**

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*A joint initiative of the Australian Fatherhood Research Network  
and the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle*

*January 2012*

## First report of the *Talking to Dads about Bonding (attachment) Project*

Late in 2011 we asked practitioners to write in with answers to these questions:

- How exactly do practitioners explain attachment to fathers?
- How do they start the conversation?
- What examples seem to work?
- How are differences between mother-infant and father-infant attachment framed?

### **The first responses**

The examples came from everywhere, across states and regions and from different work areas. Both female and male practitioners sent descriptions of their conversations with dads. The settings were from child psychiatry, early intervention, fathers groups, youth services, Family Relationship Centres, antenatal programs, Foster care services, parenting programs from non-government organizations and prisons. The dads were of all ages and some had teenage children.

Many accounts were of one-on-one conversations; however some described a group situation.

Below is a brief summary of some of the first responses. All of the contributors have checked and approved the excerpts used in this update. It is expected that as more contributions are made we will be able to publish a solid collection of experiences in this important work.

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**Here are some examples of explaining attachment to fathers:**

### **a) with prisoners**

We started by asking if they knew what the words 'bonding' and 'attachment' meant, to which they all said 'dunno, isn't that the mother baby thing' We talked about the feelings around the first time they held their babies. Were they at the births? What were their early experiences when they thought they really connected with their babies?

Sadly they had no memories of this due to the drugs and alcohol and when they did, they'd left it to the mothers and criticised her, if she wasn't meeting the needs of the baby. We challenged this after the first couple of family days because if this was true, they wouldn't have the relationships they have with their children. Out of the five dads, three had their children come in, all were varying ages from 16 months to 14 years, they all admit that now they know what quality time means when they are with their children.

Our dad's don't cry. Given where they are, their body language, leaving the room, slowly moving their chairs out of the circle and either leaning forward or backwards on their chairs are great indicators of where they are in their thought processes. These indicators tell us more than actual tears. We offer one-on-ones, and it is in these session they may become 'choked' up and take some time to compose themselves again before we move forward.

Female co-facilitator non-government parenting program

### **b) with a dad going through separation**

I was asked to do a child consult for two teenagers aged 12 (Male) and 15 (Female). Mum and dad had separated approx 18 months ago. Dad was older and recently retired. Mum had most of the care of the children. During this consult both kids talked about how strict, rigid and angry dad was. Due to dad's rigidness, the daughter did not want to spend much time with him and was making the decision not to. The son was still spending time with dad but dad's anger issues and intolerance were impacting on him. He tearfully told me how hard it was to put his sadness and fear aside and walk into the school grounds with his mates.

Both parents were informed about the process of a child consultation and the importance of not interrogating the children was stressed. An appointment time to give the feedback from the child consultation was made. Unfortunately the father could not keep to this commitment and rang both the children the night of the child consult wanting to know what they said.

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The appointment was cancelled but dad presented to the office before he could be contacted.

Dad was furious that the feedback would not be going ahead. He would not listen nor take responsibility for his actions of ringing the children and towered over us in a very intimidating way. I then understood firsthand about the children's fear – particularly his son's.

This was a moment that I had to 'think on my feet' – and in an attempt to calm dad, I used immediacy and stated that even though we have decided not to share the children's feedback, I let him know that his tone and manner was quite intimidating and scary and that his son had shared a story that this anger really frightened him and that he often felt scared, teary, lonely and sad before he entered the school ground. But I told dad that his son had learnt to 'suck in his feelings, hold back the tears and enter the school ground acting like nothing was wrong'

I was watching dad carefully as I relayed this story – he had tears in his eyes and I said to him ' You know just what your son goes through at the school gates- I bet you had to do the same thing'

With that, dad burst into tears and shared his own stories of a very strict dad and how lonely and sad he felt about this particularly when he entered school. This was all happening in the foyer of the office and I felt that even though we did not go through with the formal process of parental feedback – the message that needed to be heard, had been heard. Dad asked what he could do to help his son and I suggested that he attend counselling to maybe look at this 'angry' behaviour. He quickly agreed to complete our one on one anger management program – for his son.

Female Child Consultant in a Family Relationship Centre

### **c) with biological fathers in a fathering program**

Dads in the group were discussing the birth and infancy of their first child in response to learning that our program would be facilitating ante-natal classes.

I was discussing my unrealistic expectations of immediate bonding and attachment of my first son upon his birth. I told of my feelings of failure and disappointment after not having felt any sense of love and attachment after the first week of his life.

The dads responded by asking the question "when did bonding occur"? I replied by stating that ... "bonding is not something that we can automatically summon upon the birth of our children. It happens over time as your relationship with your child grows". I also mentioned that there is a correlation between the time you invest in the relationship and the time span that bonding will occur over. "There may not be a definitive moment when you realise that you are bonding with your child, although some fathers that attend

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our programs can site a specific moment that this occurred". The fathers either nodded or verbalised general agreement towards my views on bonding. Some of them probably had an understanding of this concept already, whilst for others this would have been new information.

There was definitely a period of reflection and contemplation from some of the fathers in the group following this discussion. I presume that some of the fathers were thinking back to their own experiences with their newborns, or their current father/child circumstances.

Male fathers program group leader

### **d) with dads seen in perinatal mental health care**

If a dad brings his children along, we have a great opportunity to see attachment in action. I look for evidence in the room, signs to which I can draw the father's attention, then use Attachment Theory as a scaffold for explaining and examining the behaviour I observe.

One common and simple example is the older baby or young toddler who is brought into my office in Dad's arms. She turns away from the stranger, burying her face in a big, comforting chest. Straight away, as part of greeting the child, I can say something like 'oh, that's sensible, good idea, you've not met me before, have you? We'll give you a chance to decide if I'm OK. You take your time there on Dad's chest, that looks like a safe spot.' I can then return to this evidence of Dad as a secure base for his daughter later in the session, when in most cases the child is by now playing at the toybox: 'did you see how she needed you close at first? But now she's quite happy over there exploring.'

A second good example occurs when the child falls or gets a fright while cruising around my office. She cries and reaches for or moves back towards Dad. I can say to the child 'oh dear, now you've come a cropper. And look, Dad's there, and that helps a lot, doesn't it? Oh, good, you're feeling better now, back to playing again.' I can then ask Dad 'what was that like for you?' or 'is this what happens at home?'

*'What was that like for you?'*

If I thought Dad was ready to reflect on his experience in the here-and-now, I would go for that, as it can be the most powerful approach. He might say 'Well, for a moment, I didn't want to go to her, because I guess I wanted her to sort it out for herself.' This could lead to talking about encouraging exploration versus providing comfort, which is a balance all parents have to strike, and can be a very personal, intuitive matter. Exploring in the room with Dad could then take place around how he arrived at his particular parenting profile with regard to allowing distance for exploration, and allowing closeness for comfort. Can he recall how he played when young? What was his parents' approach?

*Straight to the theory*

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Some dads seem uncomfortable with storytelling and reflection. Some openly ask early on for straightforward answers, or practical advice. If I have a sense that a dad is not up for telling me much about home or how he feels, I can take us out of the room, into some story that's more universal – a theory of human life. This can take the focus off Dad and his problems, off our interactions and relationship, and sometimes that's what we need. I might say 'What your daughter did just then reminds me of something. It's thought that in the wild, when we were living in tribal groups, something that kept kids safe was their ability to seek us adults out when they felt uncertain or afraid. If they knew the adults were watching or at least remembering where they were, the kids could get on with checking out their environment – exploring, playing. That's how they would learn.' If this seemed to resonate with Dad, I could then move up a rung, and try 'so, is what we saw with your daughter before, what happens at home?'

Male perinatal psychiatrist

**e) with a dads' group being filmed to make a documentary for young parents (this edited except is taken from the unedited transcript)**

Years and years ago when I was a Dad, when I was a young Dad, when I was first a Dad, my wife kept saying to me: "read to the kids" and we only had a baby and he was about 2 or 3 months old and she'd say: "read to him", and I'd think well, this is stupid because he can't even talk, why should I read to him? So I did, just because she said so and actually for months I just wondered why the heck I was doing it. But in the end, it worked because he grew up and he turned out to be a journalist and now he travels around with the Australian Cricket team to many countries in the world.

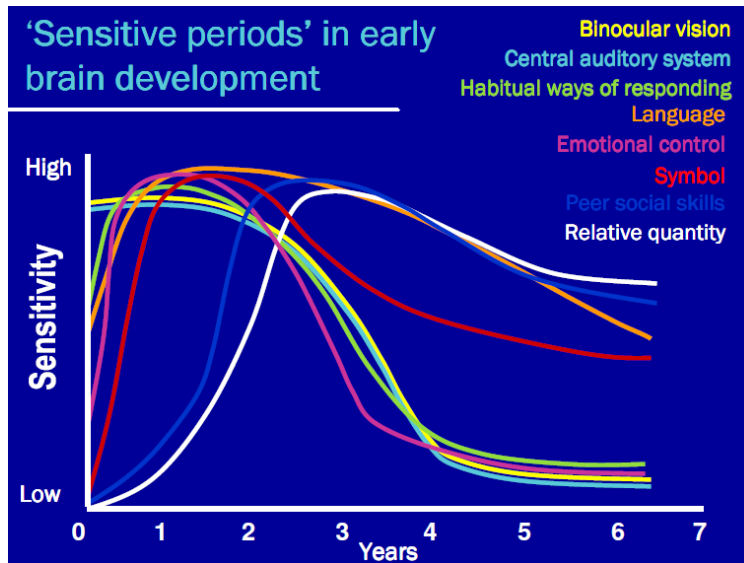
*That's wonderful.*

So there you go it worked.

*Free tickets for you, eh?*

Not yet (laughs)

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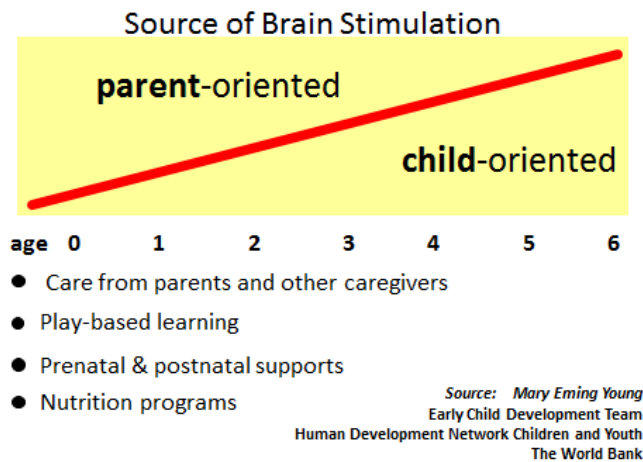


If you look at this graph, the first three years are just so incredibly important. That's how sensitive your brain is to learning things and down the bottom here are the years that go from 0-7. But most things happen in the first three years, particularly stuff like your emotional development, emotional control, your language and all that sort of stuff. Emotional control is how you control your anger and then you control your fear and all those sorts of things and that's a really important thing. In the first three years it's pretty much decided your brain works out how to do that. So what happens in those first three years of your child's life is so, so important and that's, I guess, only been, you know, we've only found that out through research in the last (probably) 15-20 years how important – we sort of always knew but now we know that it's really important.

00:02:46:00

The only thing that's really important is playing with the children. But, with play, the thing is – what's so important about that, is that in the first three years of a child's life, it's the input from the parents that have so much effect on how the children learn. If you look at this graph, for the first six years you can see here that once your child gets to 2, 3, 4, 5 years they starts playing and learning to play by themselves.

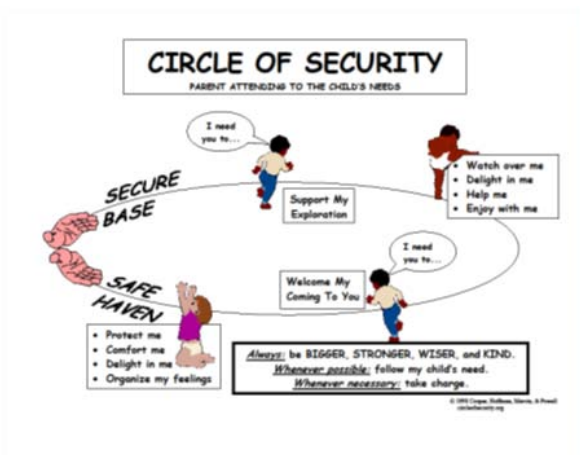
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So start taking control?

00:03:56:00

They start taking control gradually as the years get from 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. But in the first 2-3 you can see it's what the parents do with them, determines pretty much how their brain is going to be. And I guess the other thing that's really important is this one here: There are two things that usually happen with parents. One is that Mum is very protective and the other one is that Dad is very "she'll be right, mate", and you can see that both are really important.

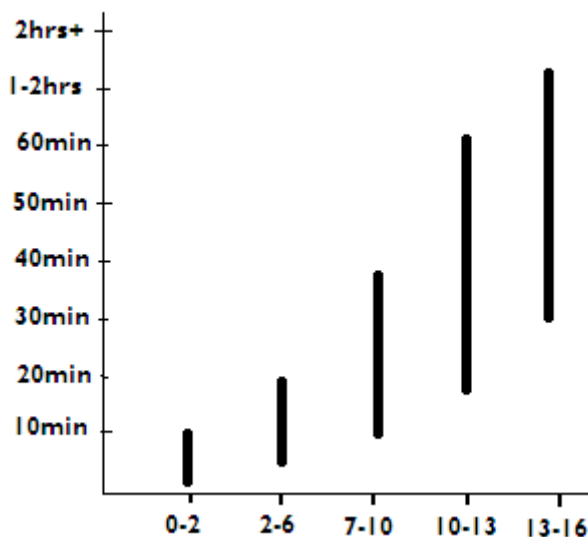


I don't know whether you've seen this before but a child needs a secure base and it needs to be able to know that safety is there with their parents, but they can go out and explore and they can fall over and get picked up. When they fall over and get picked up they need to be protected. So you really need both. Like you need the father who perhaps is a bit more of a risk-taker – just go out and play and explore and the other thing is you need the mum who is more protective usually (it can be the other way around), to pick up the kids when they cry, go with them and look after them. Pretty much that's the way it is, that's the way I certainly found it is.

**f) with young men under 25 expecting their first child or currently fathers in a 6 week group program**

I start off by talking about the benefits of having a good relationship (pass on values and beliefs, child more likely to respect your decisions and more likely to cooperate, makes parenting more enjoyable, teaches kids new skills). After a while without love, they will start to feel hungry and seek out your attention/time to get a feed. If they don't get it they turn into Bear Grills – survival experts in a landscape barren of love, they seek out tasty morsels of frogs and slugs to survive on and by slugs and frogs I mean bad attention, getting in trouble.

Then I show this graph of time able to play independently by age (I made it)



Then I describe that they will be ok to play for a while by themselves, but are going to need a feed of love. Sometimes I use the term 'Love tank/bucket' (a term Danny Silk used in 'Loving on Purpose'). The love bucket has holes in it so it needs topping up constantly. I say kids most easily equate love with observable things like your time, attention or a gift.

I have a video of a traffic intersection possibly in Vietnam but there it looks quite deadly/chaotic with bikes travelling perpendicular to each other without stopping. I show it to the guys and ask them what they think. Usual responses are along the lines of 'I wouldn't go there' or 'stuff that' etc. Then I draw comparison to the need to be consistent and responsive to children so they know what's going to happen and feel safe/protected. Clear boundaries (white lines on road) know what can and can't be done (traffic rules) know

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when to stop (red lights) and know that someone (dad) is going to enforce the rules and keep them safe (like police).

For example

I was relaying this info to a dad who has three children in a dads parenting group. He commented “So that’s why, when I was at the TAB the other day reading the paper, I could see them walking back and forth in front of me all the time, like they wanted me to look”

I said “Yes, they were checking if you were looking and were possibly a bit bored”. He commented “Well they always keep bugging me when the races are on” so I added “they’re love bucket is empty, they need some dad time again”

A few weeks later I met Michael again, he said the love bucket idea had stuck with him “I remember that love bucket and now I know”.

Male Young Dads worker

### **g) with a foster dad**

I spoke to a carer of a 9 month old baby girl. She was just transitioning to their home and her foster father was new to parenting. I was trying to talk to him about ensuing the baby was not passed around their family and extended family. I explained to him that in temporary care the child has many visits and lots of people involved in their lives.

I said that this is not ideal however we need the child to feel comfortable going to new people as we cannot guarantee the same worker will be available for each visit. I said that I knew that this made his job harder as a carer with a child with a non discriminate attachment. He said that he had not considered this but it made sense. I asked that in the first few months of the placement that they carefully consider who they will allow to hold the baby. I said that it was good for them to plan for this prior to being in an environment with everyone asking. He said this would be hard because they already have people calling regularly who are so excited as everyone knows they have waited so long for a baby. I agreed with this and explained that the long term picture is brighter if we take it slow and steady to begin with. Together we decided on specific people who could hold the baby and when she would be introduced to them.

We came up with a plan of when they would invite extended family members over. I encouraged him to be open about it and say that they have an exciting time with many changes in their home and while they can’t wait to introduce their new family member to everyone they need some time to form as a family.

I talked about the time before they are born that babies have in their mother’s tummy to familiarise themselves with sounds around them. I said that with a new born people may come to visit in hospital but understand that they may not be able to hold the baby. We

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particularly focused on how this experience would be for the baby being with new carers in a new home and passed from one family member to another. He eventually was able to talk about how they needed to put their immediate family's needs before the expectations of extended family and friends. In the end they followed the plan for the first 3-4 weeks and then relaxed with it more. We are still working on this and trying to promote age appropriate stranger danger for the child.

Female caseworker in foster care program

**h) with a separated father of 5 month old after their child was returned to the mother's care**

**Me:** do you understand the reasons why the child was returned to the mother?

**Fa:** No. She used drugs like I did.

**Me:** yes, but she hasn't used for some time and you are still using drugs. Apart from the he-said-she-said allegations and until there is evidence provided, there is one reason only as to why the child was returned to the mother.

**Fa:** so what's that?

**Me:** the child's attachment to the mother. When I say attachment I don't mean as in attaching for breast feeding...not that sort of attachment. What I mean is where the child feels, safe, secure and where they have their emotional needs met, primarily by the one carer.

**Fa:** I've been there too. I've done night feeds and changed nappies too.

**Me:** It's not so much about practical things like changing nappies; it's more about emotional attunement to the child. For example, it's about making eye contact and speaking to the child while you change their nappy or give them a bath. It's about tuning into the child's needs so when they are crying you can determine what the cry is about. Like if they're hungry as opposed to tired as opposed to in pain.

**Fa:** What....so only mother's can do that?

**Me:** No at all. Sometimes when mothers suffer postnatal depression they are unable to meet the emotional needs of the child and so sometimes the child's secure attachment is the father or is a grandparent. I have seen cases where the secure attachment is an older sibling.

**Fa:** Like a baby cares. As long as they get fed and have a clean bum, then they're happy.

**Me:** and that can be the case. Some babies appear to be happy and content with just a bottle and clean bum as you say, but sometimes those children have been neglected emotionally and they tend to give up because they quickly come to realise that there is no emotional connection from their caregiver, that there is no nurturing and little emotional warmth, so it does not matter how much they protest the primary caregiver just doesn't respond with any great affection other than to put a bottle in the baby's mouth, prop it

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up and move away. What happens then is that because the baby isn't being held by the caregiver, it means there is no eye contact, there is no stroking of the baby's head or cheeks, there is no talking to the baby.

Female Family Consultant at The Family Court

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Everyone sent in a condensed version of what happened so my emails back were pretty much along the same lines. I was asking for more detail, more explanation of what had happened, what the dads said or how they reacted.

*Please send in your own version of talking to dads about bonding and ask your colleagues to do the same.*

If you have any questions please contact me at [richard.fletcher@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:richard.fletcher@newcastle.edu.au)