

# Baby Elmo Leads Dads Back to the Nursery: How a Relationship-Based Intervention for Fathers Enhances Father and Child Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Although children’s contact with involved, committed, nonresidential fathers can improve social, emotional, cognitive, and academic outcomes, fathers have largely been absent from parenting interventions that overlook men’s role as a critical parenting partner. This article details research showing that young incarcerated fathers’ attitudes about—and communication and responsiveness to—their very young children improved following a brief psychoeducational intervention and describes a second pilot project with child-welfare-involved fathers and families. The projects enrolling high-risk, difficult-to-engage parents yielded promising findings, demonstrating how building interventions that are inclusive of fathers stands to benefit child outcomes.

Incarcerated teen fathers in juvenile halls express a deep desire to develop a strong, positive relationship with their children, but they struggle to overcome systemic barriers. When sporadic visitation is possible, interactions typically take place in loud, intimidating areas that increase the baby’s stress and stranger anxiety, leaving the father with the impression that the baby has “forgotten about him” and that he has no connection with his child.

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program (Barr et al. 2014; Youth Law Center, 2012) focuses on assisting these two extremely vulnerable populations—incarcerated teen fathers and their young children—by offering parenting classes paired with visits from his child to help the teen father and child develop a positive relationship with one another.

The curriculum is written simply, so that no technical background is needed to put it into service. It is straightforward and effective. As most incarcerated teens read at a fourth-grade level,

the bulk of instruction is conveyed through videos, produced by *Sesame Street*’s Early Childhood Education Department, that give clear, visual examples of the parenting skill to be taught. Youth and families are already comfortable with media and the *Sesame Street* characters, making this a strengths-based approach to intervening with this specific population.

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program is a research-based intervention developed by ZERO TO THREE fellows Rachel Barr of Georgetown University and Carole Shauffer of the Youth Law Center (San Francisco, CA). The program is inexpensive and easy to implement, and it can be integrated into other mental health and education programs within the facilities. Most important, it fits with the rehabilitative mission of these institutions. Trainers and teens are invested in the success of these visits, which are often the only bright spot for the fathers during their incarceration. As one of our participants in Southern California told staff, “I know it was only for an hour, but I’m telling you, it was like I wasn’t even at the hall!”



Teaching incarcerated fathers to provide warm, supportive parenting could prove extremely beneficial for children, as several studies have shown that contact with involved, committed, nonresidential fathers can improve child outcomes.

## Population Description

A large and increasing proportion of incarcerated juveniles are parents. Twenty percent of youth in custody have or are expecting a child, and 15% of males in custody are fathers (Sedlak & Bruce, 2010). Many of these incarcerated teen fathers describe a strong motivation to remain involved in their children's lives and to parent effectively. Shade, Kools, Pinderhughes, and Weiss (2013) conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 19 fathers in a juvenile detention center and found that a majority of them said they hoped to play an active and positive role in their children's lives, serving as better role models than their own fathers had been for them. However, few of the fathers could describe a specific strategy for improving their children's lives or their own future prospects, discussing only vague goals like finding a job and providing financial support to the child.

### WHY ARE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AN IMPORTANT TARGET FOR INTERVENTION?

Teaching incarcerated fathers to provide warm, supportive parenting could prove extremely beneficial for children, as several studies have shown that contact with involved, committed, nonresidential fathers can improve child outcomes. For instance, low-income children who remain in contact with their biological fathers early in life show (a) better emotion regulation, academic achievement, and father-child relationships later and (b) less aggressive or criminal behavior than those with absent fathers (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Vogel, Bradley, Raike, Boller, & Shears, 2006). Children with a positively engaged father also have better cognitive and social outcomes than do children without an involved father, and these effects are largest if the father takes an active role in the child's life and exhibits sensitive, supportive parenting practices (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Father sensitivity to the child's emotional state is an important

predictor of positive outcomes, including more complex play and later language achievement (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, & Jones, 2004), and sensitive treatment at 5 years old predicts social competence at 8 years old (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Quality of play predicts self-worth, social relationships, and academic achievement. Children whose fathers support their autonomy in play at 2 years old have higher reading and math scores at 6 to 8 years old (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2008). An interaction characterized by playfulness, patience, and understanding on the father's part is associated with lower levels of child aggression (Hart et al., 1998). Warm, affectionate fathers produce children who grow up to be well-adjusted adults (Franz, McClelland, Weinberger, & Peterson, 1994). Similarly, children's later popularity is predicted by (a) a low level of intrusiveness by fathers during play and (b) children engaging in physically playful, affectionate social interactions with their fathers (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Parke et al., 2004; Parke & O'Neil, 2000). By contrast, frequent interaction with a harsh, intrusive, or disengaged father actually proved detrimental to children and increased the likelihood of an insecure paternal attachment (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007). Therefore, interventions incorporating visitation to teach fathers to behave sensitively and warmly and improve parent-child interaction quality could capitalize on fathers' high levels of motivation in order to promote positive developmental outcomes for their children.

## Intervention Design

Interventions have been developed to repair relationships between incarcerated fathers in adult facilities and their children (Bayse, Allgood, & Van Wyk, 1991; Harrison, 1997; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998). Harrison, for example, compared a 6-week parent education and behavior management training program for incarcerated adult fathers with a control group of fathers who did not receive instruction. The fathers in the former group demonstrated improved attitudes in child rearing, but their children's self-perceptions showed no evidence of change. Landreth and Lobaugh (1998) developed a 10-session program for incarcerated fathers that focused on the development of child-centered play. The goals were to increase fathers' sensitivity to children, help fathers understand their children's emotional needs and be empathic, teach fathers to follow the child's lead, and practice therapeutic limit-setting. This intervention modeled positive parent-child interactions through role play and videos and then asked the fathers to practice in their own role plays. Finally, the fathers were required to practice these skills with their children and report back to the group. Although Landreth and Lobaugh's intervention successfully incorporated visitation and used a control-group design, only self-report data were collected, and father-child visits were not directly observed. However, its findings were promising: Fathers reported an increased acceptance of the child's feelings, a sense of unconditional love, improved recognition of the child's autonomy, a growing sense of competence with the child, and decreased feelings of parenting stress. Upon follow-up, they

reported increased contact with their children and fewer child behavioral problems. The program also directly affected children, with participating children reporting an improved self-concept and a sense of empowerment, although there were no child reports from the control group.

## The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program began in 2008 as a partnership between the Youth Law Center and Georgetown University to provide structured visitation to one incarcerated mother who was serving time in a Los Angeles jail. Six years later, the program has expanded to 10 county juvenile halls and commitment facilities in California, one commitment facility in Connecticut, and one correctional facility in Ohio. In this time, the program has served more than 300 fathers.

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program is designed to create a positive relationship between the incarcerated father and his child. Rather than presenting information in an overly didactic manner focused on learning new skills, the program focuses on the importance of the connection between the father and child. High-quality play during a parent–child interaction is an essential component of quality parenting interventions and is central to developing a lasting positive and warm attitude. On the basis of extensive pilot testing, the program now includes five unique sessions, each centered on how to improve upon a different aspect of the father–child relationship. The sessions are composed of a teaching portion followed by a contact visit where the youth is able to practice the skills learned during instruction.

The five-session curriculum is delivered once a week. In the initial session, the youth learns the basics of attachment theory and stranger anxiety. The next sessions expand upon the initial interactions with the baby. Session 2 introduces the idea of following the baby’s lead to help encourage synchrony. The father learns to engage with the child in activities that the child chooses. In Session 3, the father learns how to incorporate language in play time by labeling objects with which the baby is playing. In Session 4, the father learns to praise his child to show his affection. In Session 5, the father reviews and practices all the skills that he has learned.

Members of the correctional staff, trained by the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program manager during a full-day training, lead the instructional sessions so that the youth receives instruction from someone with whom he already has a strong relationship. The regular visits with his child make the youth view himself as a father—not simply as an incarcerated youth or gang member.

Each visit lasts for approximately 60 minutes. Participants are encouraged to incorporate into the visit those skills that they have learned in the instructional component. The visits take place in a room designed by the facility and by the young fathers to be baby friendly: There are *Sesame Street* characters painted on the walls, and there are floor mats, fire trucks, mirrors, and other

toys meant for the dyad’s use. Activities range from “tummy time” with infants to “tag” with older toddlers.

These visits are crucial to the success of the program. The relationship that develops from this visitation structure promotes the positive effects of “experience-dependent” development (Siegel, 2001). Parenting is like driving a car; it takes direct instruction and hands-on experience to really get the hang of it. One trainer in Ohio asks fathers to hold the baby to their chest and feel the baby’s heartbeat with theirs during the first visit. After that initial contact, the fathers are ready to learn.

After each of the visits, the father and trainer debrief. The trainer highlights positive parenting techniques that the father has demonstrated and asks about any difficulties that he may have experienced. The tone of the debrief is encouraging, focusing on what went well and how the father can continue his success next time. After the five training sessions and the accompanying visits are completed, visits between the father and child continue until the father leaves the correctional facility.

The program is completely voluntary. Participants are recruited from nine juvenile detention centers located in five California counties—Sacramento (one site), San Bernardino (three sites), Fresno (one site), Orange (one site), and Yolo (one site)—and in Cuyahoga County, Ohio (one site) and Middlesex County, Connecticut (one site). Of the nine centers, five are long-term commitment facilities serving post-dispositional youth, and four are traditional juvenile halls serving youth awaiting hearing. At entry into each facility, incarcerated teen fathers self-identified either during an intake conducted by staff asking whether he had children or in response to an advertisement of the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program. Inclusion criteria for the study sample were that the incarcerated teen father had no direct involvement with child protective services for any of his children and that the caregiver (most frequently, the mother or paternal grandmother) consented to bringing the child into the facility to participate in the study. The incarcerated fathers ranged from 14 to 20 years old, and the children ranged from 2 to 36 months.



Photo: Michelle Coit

Father sensitivity to the child’s emotional state is an important predictor of positive outcomes, including more complex play and later language achievement.

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

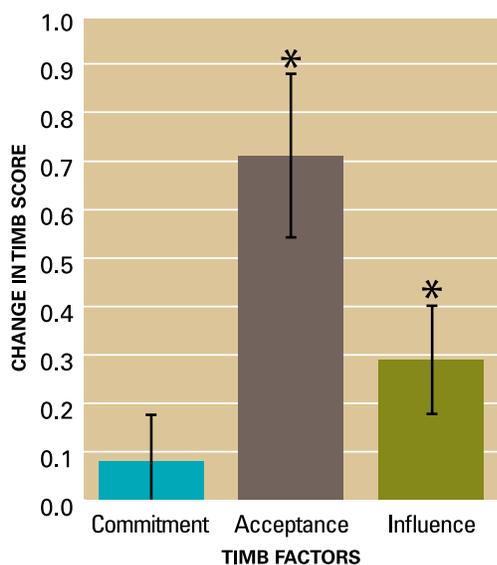
Each facility participates in ongoing evaluation of the program. Evaluations include measures of change in father attitude and interactional quality between fathers and their children during the visit sessions. Changes of behavior in the facilities have been examined as well.

### Father's Attitude Change

A subset of 19 fathers from four California facilities (Sacramento, San Bernardino, Fresno, and Yolo counties) completed the entrance and exit "This Is My Baby" (TIMB; Bates & Dozier, 1998) interviews. The TIMB, a 10-minute semistructured interview, consists of eight questions that address parents' perceptions of their child and of the parent-child relationship. The TIMB interviews are administered before and after the intervention. They are scored on three dimensions: (a) *commitment*, which assesses how strongly the parent considers the child his own and strives to build an enduring relationship; (b) *acceptance*, which measures the extent to which the parent views the child as a positive, unique individual; and (c) *influence*, which evaluates how fully the parent recognizes the immediate and long-term effects of his actions on the child's psychological and emotional development. Commitment, acceptance, and influence dimensions were assigned scores between 1 (lowest score) and 5 (highest score), including midpoints, by reliable coders (between-coder reliability: commitment,  $r = .74$ ; acceptance,  $r = .87$ ; influence,  $r = .91$ ). Figure 1 depicts the extent of pre- to post-intervention changes in the fathers' three scores.

Fathers' attitudes at the beginning and end of the intervention were also compared using paired-samples  $t$  tests. Analyses revealed that acceptance scores ( $M_{pre} = 1.97$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.64$ ) and

FIGURE 1. Pre- to post-intervention change in TIMB scores ( $\pm 1$  SE) for each dimension.



Error bars represent standard error (SE). \* $p < .05$ , indicating that change is significant pre- to post-intervention. TIMB = This Is My Baby (Bates & Dozier, 1998).

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*High-quality play during a parent-child interaction is an essential component of quality parenting interventions and is central to developing a lasting positive and warm attitude.*

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influence scores ( $M_{pre} = 1.44$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.67$ ) were significantly higher at post-intervention than they were at pre-intervention,  $t(17) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $t(17) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .03$ , respectively. Fathers' commitment scores ( $M_{pre} = 2.44$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.50$ ) did not differ significantly between program entry and exit,  $t(17) = 0.77$ ,  $p = .45$ . These findings indicate that during the course of the program, fathers developed more specific and positive knowledge of their children's personalities and a greater understanding of their impact on the children's futures.

### Facility's Attitude Change

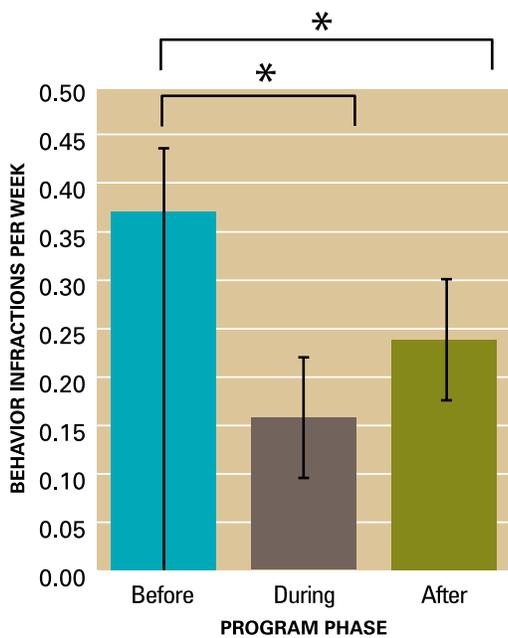
Facilities also became more "father friendly" after the introduction of the program. Some facilities have invited families to graduation celebrations, holiday family gatherings, and even a family christening to bring families and incarcerated teens together. These events increase family engagement with the facility and help these young fathers reinvent their self-image.

### Father's Behavior in the Facility

Four facilities (in Fresno [CA], Orange [CA], Sacramento [CA], and Cuyahoga [OH] counties) reported the number of behavioral infractions committed by program participants before, during, and after program participation. The infractions were all Level 1 offenses, which are minor forms of misconduct, such as failure to comply with facility staff or disruptive behavior in school. Two of these facilities recorded the number of incidents committed by 37 program participants at three different time points: (a) for 8 weeks prior to program entry, (b) for the duration of program participation, and (c) for 4 weeks after program completion. To account for the differing lengths of these time periods, we calculated the number of infractions per week. Paired-samples  $t$  tests were conducted to determine whether the number of behavioral infractions per week prior to program participation differed significantly from the number of weekly infractions during and after the intervention (see Figure 2).

Participants committed significantly fewer behavioral infractions during the intervention than they had done prior to program entry,  $t(35) = 3.01$ ,  $p = .004$ . The analysis comparing pre- to post-program infractions revealed a trend approaching significance, indicating that for as long as infant-father visits continued, a decline in behavioral incidents was maintained even after program completion,  $t(35) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .055$ . This pattern shows that fathers' negative behavior in facilities decreased upon program entry and that the positive change was sustained after program completion, providing preliminary evidence that the intervention

**FIGURE 2. Average number of behavioral infractions per week before, during, and after participation in the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program.**



Error bars represent standard error. \* $p < .05$ , indicating a decrease from before to during the program and a decrease from before to after the program ended.

participation was associated with improvements in fathers’ behavior outside of the parent–child relationship. The pattern of results at the other two facilities was the same, with the number of incident reports similarly decreasing by 50% upon program entry. Hence, establishing a more positive relationship between an incarcerated father and his child also had reverberating effects in relationships between the father and others in the institution.

Taken together, evaluations of the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program have shown positive changes in the quality of father–child interactions for children 3–36 months old, an overall reduction in fathers’ misconduct (this report), and increases in fathers’ acceptance and awareness of their influence on their children (this report).

### Involving the Child’s Co-Parent: The Fresno Fathering Program

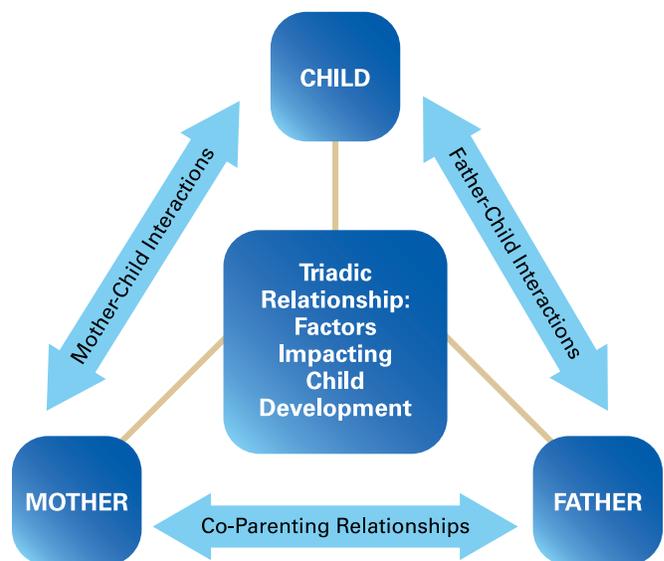
The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program can easily be integrated into existing programs. One, the Fresno Fathering Program (FFP), combined elements of the Supporting Father Involvement Program (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Gillette, 2014; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009) and the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program (Barr et al., 2011, 2013). The project was conceived on the basis of one consistent finding—that the single best predictor of fathers’ family involvement across the economic spectrum is the quality of the father’s relationship with his co-parent (Carlson, Pilkauskas, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn,

*Children with a positively engaged father have better cognitive and social outcomes than do children without an involved father.*

2011). This finding holds for married, cohabiting, separated, and divorced co-parents (Pruett & Johnston, 2004). The quality of the co-parent relationship provides a context for mothers and fathers to be more effective parents—more responsive and better able to set limits—and for children to show higher levels of academic achievement, fewer symptoms of depression, and less angry and aggressive behavior (Cowan & Cowan, 2014).

The FFP was a couples-focused group intervention that sought to help fathers develop relationships not only with their child but also with their child’s co-parent. The intervention connected the mother–father co-parent relationship to the father–child relationship to form a triad, the family unit that is most important to the child’s well-being and development (Gaskin-Butler et al., this issue, p. 49; McHale & Phares, this issue, p. 2; see Figure 3). The program was piloted at the Fresno County Department of Social Services with seven co-residential families who had an active child protective services case. Twelve 2-hour group sessions were run by one male and one female facilitator. Four 15- to 20-minute play sessions were built into the curriculum, giving parents a chance to practice the child development and co-parenting communication skills that they had learned in class. Play sessions were followed by a group debrief, where the facilitators and parents could reflect on what went well and what was challenging during the play session. Two

**FIGURE 3. In the Fresno Fathering Program (FFP), the focus is on multiple relationships within the family.**



separate ongoing groups were conducted, one with three couples and one with four couples.

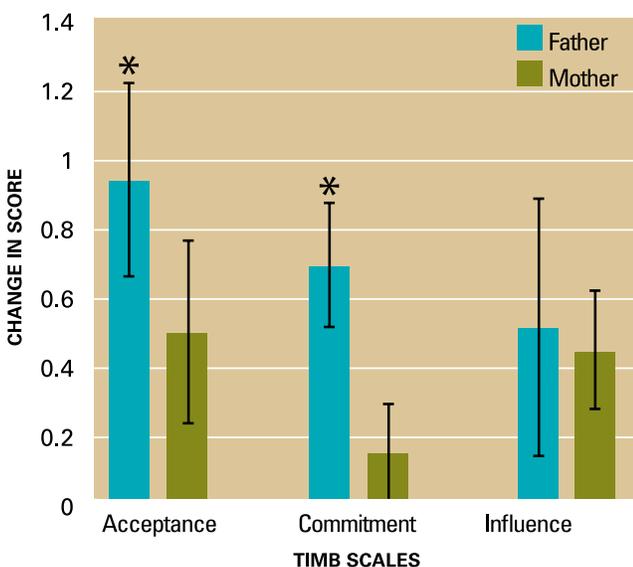
### TIMB FINDINGS

Figure 4 shows pre- to post-intervention changes in the three TIMB scores by fathers and mothers in the seven families in this pilot intervention.

Data suggested an improvement in fathers' ability to form relationships with their children and to successfully co-parent. As in the Just Beginning "Baby Elmo" Program, the seven FFP fathers, across both groups, showed significant increases in TIMB interview acceptance scores,  $t(6) = 3.54, p < .02, Mpre = 3.18, Mpost = 4.17$ , and in TIMB interview commitment scores,  $t(6) = 4.14, p < .001, Mpre = 3.67, Mpost = 4.36$ , between pre- and post-intervention. No significant differences were found in TIMB interview influence scores,  $t(6) = 1.36, ns, Mpre = 3.64, Mpost = 4.14$ . Unlike fathers, mothers' TIMB interview scores remained stable across the intervention: acceptance,  $Mpre = 3.55, Mpost = 4.03$ ; commitment,  $Mpre = 3.78, Mpost = 3.91$ ; and influence,  $Mpre = 3.67, Mpost = 4.10$  (see Figure 4). These findings indicate that over the course of the program, fathers developed more specific and positive knowledge of their children's personalities and expressed a greater commitment to continuing their involvement in the future.

In previous large-scale studies using the TIMB measure, Bernard and Dozier (2011) found that foster parents with higher commitment scores displayed more positive affect while playing, praised their children more frequently, and attempted to engage their children in interaction more often. Higher commitment scores

FIGURE 4. Change in TIMB dimensions ( $\pm 1$  SE) in the Fresno Fathering Program



Error bars signify standard error (SE). TIMB = This Is My Baby (Bates & Dozier, 1998). \* $p < .05$ , indicating a significant increase in fathers' acceptance and commitment scores over the course of the intervention.

*During the course of the program, fathers developed more specific and positive knowledge of their children's personalities and a greater understanding of their impact on the children's futures.*

were also related to higher rates of adoption by foster parents. Ackerman and Dozier (2005) administered the TIMB interview to foster parents when children were 2 years old; the authors used the acceptance and commitment scores to index caregiver investment. TIMB acceptance at 2 years old was positively correlated with children's self-esteem and their ability to find adaptive coping strategies at 5 years old, even after controlling for behavior and IQ at 5. These studies of foster parents demonstrate that scores on the TIMB interview tap into attitudes that influence parental behavior during interactions, which in turn predicts children's later developmental outcomes. By extension, the increases that fathers showed in both acceptance and commitment scores in our work suggest the possibility of higher paternal investment and thus are promising for both child and father outcomes.

### COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTIONAL QUALITY FINDINGS

Videos of parent-child visits were coded for conversational and business talk, praise and complex language, interactional quality (using the Individual Growth and Development Indicators for Infants and Toddlers; Baggett & Carta, 2006), and presence of triadic play—that is, interactions that involved both the parents and child in shared activities. For each parent, based on their respective levels of communication during the play sessions, we calculated ratio of conversational talk to business talk, percentage of conversational talk, percentage of complex labels, and percentage of expressed praise. Given the small sample size of only seven families, we cannot provide full statistical analyses of the data, but we did run preliminary growth linear models to assess whether there were changes across play sessions on communication and interactional quality.

Examination of these preliminary models suggested increases in communication and supportive interactions between parents and their children across play sessions. Models for changes in communication showed similar small but significant increases or strong trends for improvements across the play sessions on the ratio of conversational talk to business talk, the percentage of expressed praise and of complex labels. The percentage of time spent in triadic play remained stable across sessions. Scores on the Parent Support Index (range = 0–3) increased across sessions, and a subanalysis revealed statistically significant changes in the "Follows the Child's Lead" component of the Parent Support Index. Paired  $t$  tests from pre- to post-intervention similarly showed significant changes in overall levels of parental support,  $t(13) = 3.15, p < .01$ , and the subcomponent of "Follows the

Child's Lead,"  $t(13) = 2.59, p < .03$ , as well as significant trends for change in percentage of expressed praise,  $t(13) = 1.79, p < .10$ , and percentage of complex labels,  $t(13) = 2.06, p < .06$ . The means are shown in Table 1.

In comparing parent-child conversational talk in high- versus low-income families, Hart and Risley (1995) found a 30-million-word gap that accounted for differences in children's language ability and later school success. In these preliminary analyses of the FFP, parents showed increases in the ratio of conversational talk to business talk and in the number of complex labels and praise words. As in the Just Beginning "Baby Elmo" Program, parents in the FFP pilot program also showed improvements in sensitivity and responsivity to their children, particularly in following the child's lead. Overall, this pattern of results shows increasing quality of communication and parent-child interactions during the course of the intervention, which may help promote children's language and cognitive development.

### INDIVIDUAL AND CO-PARENT CHANGES

Before the first group meeting and at the last group meeting, parents filled out several brief questionnaires to assess how they viewed themselves and their relationship. Surveys included (a) the Center for Epidemiological Studies in Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), a nationally standardized measure of symptoms of depression; (b) the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983), a six-item inventory that assesses marital satisfaction using broad items such as "Overall, I feel very satisfied in my marriage"; (c) a scale measuring how well the parents were working together to resolve disagreements (Couple Communication Questionnaire; Cowan & Cowan, 1990); and (d) the Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Loyd & Abidin, 1985) assessing the amount of stress encountered in parenting the youngest child. The difficult child subscale of the PSI was analyzed separately. Analyses revealed important improvement on these measures during the 3 months of the intervention. Given the small sample size of just seven families, we report analyses where  $p$  values were  $< .05$  as well as trends of  $p = .10$  or less as indications of positive change.

Significant decreases were seen in fathers' reports of depression on the CES-D,  $t(6) = 2.69, p < .05, Mpre = 14.71, Mpost = 10.14$ , and in mothers' reports of parenting stress,  $t(6) = 3.08, p < .05, Mpre = 71.95, Mpost = 61.86$ . In analyses combining maternal and paternal reports, parents also described their children as showing fewer difficult behaviors,  $t(12) = 2.81, p < .05, Mpre = 27.79, Mpost = 23.29$ . There was a trend approaching significance in analyses combining maternal and paternal QMI reports, which suggested that parents perceived more satisfaction in their relationship with one another,  $t(12) = 2.11, p < .08, Mpre = 36.14, Mpost = 39.36$ . Another trend was in fathers' reports of more couple collaboration in resolving disagreements,  $t(6) = 2, p < .09, Mpre = 2.80, Mpost = 4.14$ . Finally, combined maternal and paternal reports on division of household labor showed a positive change on a 1-9 scale (1 = mother does all the work, 5 = equal sharing, 9 = father does all the work), from  $Mpre = 4.20$  to  $Mpost = 4.60$ , although the extent of change fell short of traditional levels of significance,  $t(12) = 1.66, p < .14$ .

Taken together, these findings suggest that parents made gains in the program and that they reported improvements for their children. Fathers' attitudes toward and involvement with their children improved. There was a trend for the parents to report more satisfaction in their co-parenting relationship, and there were positive changes in parent-child interaction quality. The program allowed each enrolled father to engage in process-oriented learning that helped him develop a relationship with both his co-parent and his child. Attendance was very good—all seven families started and completed the entire program—and participants expressed interest in continuing to meet together as a group after the program ended to build on a positive social network to support their new parenting goals. These observations support the idea that father involvement can be improved by helping the father negotiate how he interacts with his child within a co-parenting group framework. That is, engaged fathering emerged in the context of a family and peer relationship system. Given the small sample sizes, these results should be interpreted cautiously; however, they support the concept that a

TABLE 1. Means (standard deviations) of communication and parent-child interactional quality measures as a function of play session.

Play session	Ratio of conversational talk to business talk	Complex labels (%)	Praise (%)	Triadic play between parents and children (%)	IGDI Supportive Parenting Index	IGDI Follow the Child's Lead
1	2.47 (1.42)	0.60 (0.75)	4.13 (3.35)	33.6 (28.6)	0.35 (0.17)	0.27 (0.39)
2	2.47 (1.42)	1.26 (1.67)	3.04 (2.17)	35.67 (22.95)	0.37 (0.24)	0.34 (0.42)
3	2.24 (0.78)	1.88 (2.06)	6.10 (4.96)	44.76 (28.77)	0.72 (0.21)	0.75 (0.44)
4	3.21 (1.53)	2.19 (2.60)	9.19 (10.44)	25.94 (9.10)	0.64 (0.40)	0.67 (0.68)

Note. Italics represent standard deviations. IGDI = individual growth and development indicator. (Baggett & Carta, 2006)



The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program is designed to create a positive relationship between the incarcerated father and his child.

co-parenting program and a play-focused fatherhood program can be successfully integrated, with gains exhibited across multiple domains.

## Developing an Integrated Re-Entry Program for Incarcerated Fathers

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program is developing a relationship-based re-entry intervention that can be used to assist young fathers in their transition back into the community. Community providers who help with fatherhood mentoring, relationship counseling, employment, and legal advice will meet with the youth while they are incarcerated to develop a relationship that will continue once they re-enter the community. In this way, young fathers will have a connection to community resources and will be motivated to take advantage of them. As one of our instructors said, “These fathers really want to walk down the right path, but sometimes they need someone to hold their hand at the beginning.” In planned new work, we will be partnering with the Healthy Fathering Collaborative of Cleveland, the Cleveland Department of Social Services, and Cuyahoga County Probation to develop and implement the intervention. The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program will be combined with tested co-parenting and mentoring programs that focus on conflict

### Learn More

More information on the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program and other programs is provided by the Youth Law Center, an advocacy group: <http://www.ylc.org/>

Other research on early learning and memory development can be found at [www.elp.georgetown.edu](http://www.elp.georgetown.edu)

resolution, communication skills with co-parents, and the establishment of parental rights and visitation schedules. In addition, the youth will connect with the Department of Children and Family Services and community agencies to help with job placement and other social supports for the participants. The success of the program will be evaluated across time using TIMB to assess changes in paternal attitudes and father-child contact postrelease.

## Conclusion

The traditional view of the father as family provider has become outdated. At-risk fathers often drift from their families at a young age because they are unable to provide for their children. Even if they do want to stay involved, it is difficult to do so if the mother or the mother’s family shields the child from contact with the father. Compounding matters is the fact that child support systems mandate that fathers pay mothers money to support their child but fail to acknowledge how fathers can make equally helpful contributions to the family in other ways, particularly in building a significant, positive relationship with the child. Neither the filial systems nor the government support systems have been able to adopt a broader definition of what it means for an at-risk father to contribute to the family, thus alienating a significant population of fathers who would otherwise want to be involved in their child’s life.

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program and the FFP Program focus on building fathers’ involvement by broadening the definition of *fatherhood* beyond men’s financial contributions. In juvenile correctional facilities, child development research principles were used to develop strategies to enhance father-child relationships. This experience-based learning resulted in improvements in interactional quality and paternal perceptions of acceptance and influence on their children. Of note, youth involved in the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program demonstrated improved behavior in the correctional facility and became more receptive to rehabilitative programming. In the FFP Program, a co-parenting component was successfully added to the “Baby Elmo” intervention, and both parents improved their interactional quality as well as their communication skills. In both interventions, trained staff facilitators provided feedback to enhance father-child interactions. A strengths-based approach delivered by institutional staff well known to families in turn enhances interactions between family and staff. The high-risk fathers whom we serve face many challenges as they strive to become supportive parents, but our participants have taken a powerful first step to a lifelong relationship with their children. As the saying goes, any man can be a father, but it takes a special person (with a little help sometimes) to be a dad. (See box Views From the Fathers, p. 33.)

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the participation of the detention facilities in the California counties of Fresno, San Bernardino, Orange, Yolo, Santa Barbara, and Sacramento and in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. We are especially grateful to Jaime Alvarado, Michelle Coit, Susan

## Views From the Fathers

Direct feedback from fathers who have participated in both programs has been positive and illustrative as outlined below.

### The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” Program teaches young fathers to care and feel deep love for their children. Most of the youth have never cared more about someone or something than they care about themselves. Being responsible for another human being, so helpless and tiny, without getting anything other than the intrinsic benefit, is the greatest teacher. The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program creates an opportunity for youth to open their eyes to this fact of life.

The Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program offers an opportunity for youth to learn about their roles as parents, but just as important, it provides facility staff with the reward of teaching a curriculum and seeing the benefits firsthand when the youth visit with their children. The Program provides youth with the opportunity to truly bond with their children, despite living in a locked facility. That time with their children is so important to them that it acts as an incentive and encourages appropriate behavior in custody. This is best shown through some examples, which are detailed below.

One program participant said, “Thank you for all you’ve done for me to have a stronger relationship with my daughter.” In an interview about how the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program helped him, he said, “With ‘Follow the Lead,’ they can explore, and you go along with it. You follow their lead, and basically, you’re the baby, and you let them teach you.” He said that, without the Just Beginning “Baby Elmo” program, he would not have had the opportunity to explore with his daughter and learn from her. The program has changed him and helped him grow. When asked about his future plans with his daughter, he stated, “I just hope to have a good relationship with her, no matter what happens. I just want to be a part of her life.”

One young father in Orange County was getting into a fight every 2 weeks. After completing the program, he achieved the highest standard of behavior in the facility. Education and visits with his child allowed him to reimagine himself as a father instead of a gang member.

Another youth from Orange County, when talking about his plans with his child upon release, said, “I want to take him to the beach, and camping, because my dad never took me those places, and I want to give that to my son.” Constructive relationship-building allows the incarcerated father to envision a life with his child that extends beyond the world that the father has come to know.

### The Fresno Fatherhood Program

At the beginning of the Fresno Fatherhood Program (FFP), Bob appeared to be skeptical of how the classes were going to help him. He asked the trainers on two different occasions about their credentials and associated work experience. His participation during the early sessions seemed to show his somewhat closed-mindedness and tendency to focus only on his own perceptions. However, there was a moment in the second half of the program when something changed. It started when, during a play session, he experienced his daughter crawling for the first time instead of scooting on her bottom.

Bob gained insight into his own parenting style during the session when we discussed the parenting style in which he was raised. It appeared that within a couple of weeks of that session, Bob discovered that a good portion of his frustration with his elementary school-aged son was due to the type of role that he was playing with his co-parent, Susan. Bob initially felt that he was the breadwinner and that Susan, as the mother, should deal with the discipline as well as any issues that arose with the children. Bob and Susan’s frustration was voiced in one weekly session, but by the following week it had significantly decreased. Bob stated that he successfully communicated with Susan about how they should work together to discipline their son and back each other up.

At the end of the intervention, Bob commented that when he was on the verge of being mean, disrespectful, or angry toward Susan and the family, he would hear the facilitator’s voice in his head telling him to make a better choice.

Coleman, Kathy Hayden, Laurie Holbrook, Nancy McCormack, Don Meyer, Lauri Moore, Manuel Romero, Doug Sanger, and Manuel Silva. Funding for the program has been provided by the California First Five Commissions; the Van Loben Sels Rembe Rock Foundation; California Wellness Foundation; the Georgetown University Reflective Engagement Initiative Grant; the Raymond A. and Rosalee G. Weiss Innovative Research and Programs Grant, the American Psychological Foundation Visionary Grant; the KIND “Do the Kind Thing” program; and the Fresno County Department of Social Services. In particular, we thank the fathers, mothers, caregivers, and babies for their participation.

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**Carolyn Pape Cowan, PhD**, an adjunct professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, has research and clinical interests that center on couple, parent-child, and family relationships, as well as marital and child development and intervention evaluation. Philip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan created the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) intervention with Marsha Kline Pruett, PhD, from Smith College School of Social Work, and Kyle Pruett, MD, from Yale University Medical School.

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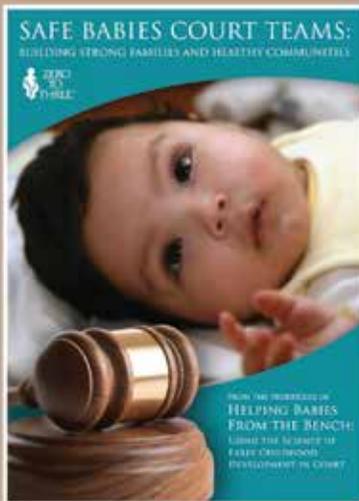
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