

## The Importance of Parental Relationships

We know that quality parent-child relationships contribute to the optimal development of children. We also believe that fathers who are engaged in the lives of their children or parents who are actively involved in their children's education are also key contributors to children's achievement. However, the one factor that has been found to be most important in helping children become healthy, happy adults, and that is the least likely to be addressed by an educational program, is the quality of the parent-parent relationship.<sup>1</sup>

This article will examine further why parental relationships are important to children's development and how service providers whose primary interest is in children can promote healthy relationships between parents for their benefit.

### What Children Learn from Adult Relationships

Children are affected and influenced both directly and indirectly by what is going on around them, including the interactions between other people.

A loving and respectful relationship between parents shapes the environment and the child's sense of self. It contributes to a child's sense of safety and predictability, and becomes the model for the child's future relationships. Some positive outcomes of a successful model include internalized images of closeness, intimacy, expression of emotions, conflict resolution and respect between the sexes.<sup>2</sup>

A positive relationship between parents also benefits the entire home. When parents' personal needs for connection and support are met, especially in ways that cannot be met through casual or social connections alone, they are better able to respond to the needs of others, especially children.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the parents' relationship can have positive effects on children, it can also have a negative effect. When parents have a dysfunctional relationship, children may fail to learn appropriate social interaction skills, mimic the

behaviors to which they are exposed, and act out in attempts to make sense of or cope with their feelings of distress.<sup>2</sup>

Research has shown that frequent, intense parental discord is linked to developmental problems in children such as insecure attachment, poor self-esteem, conduct disorders, antisocial behaviors, depression, anxiety, and academic and achievement problems.

Adult conflict also has indirect effects on children. Disharmony and dissatisfaction undermine the quality of parenting by limiting emotional availability and increasing stress, which can contribute to less effective, and sometimes more aggressive, discipline.<sup>2</sup>

Research indicates that parents in high-conflict relationships tend to be less warm and empathetic to their children, more rejecting, and more harsh. Fathers in high-conflict relationships are more likely to withdraw from their parenting role and from their children and are more likely to feel excluded from parenting functions.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, studies show that on average, parents in higher quality relationships tend to have better-adjusted children who later have quality relationships and marriages of their own.<sup>3</sup>

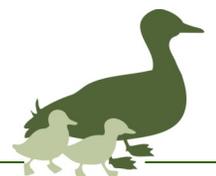
### Parent Education vs. Relationship Education

Parent education sounds inclusive, but according to fatherhood advocate Carey Casey, it more realistically refers to the education of mothers, with father involvement included as an "initiative". Programming most often focuses on parenting education, resources, and family planning. It may take the quality of the parental relationship into consideration in the context of family stability, but not with specific intent to improve child development.

This is unfortunate, because research indicates that the quality of parental relationships is a critical factor in the quality of outcomes for children.



Photo: [www.best-of-web.com](http://www.best-of-web.com)



# PROGRAM NEWS

## THRIVE Home Visitors Receive Safety Baby Shower Training

To date, 50 staff members of the THRIVE Home Visiting programs have been trained to conduct Safety Baby Showers in their communities.

Safety Baby Showers provide baby safety education to young expectant mothers in a fun, shower-themed format. Participants learn about home safety, car safety, sleep safety and the importance of never shaking a baby. They then receive goody bags of related safety products.

In addition to learning to conduct a shower, home visiting staff have discussed the ways the shower program can be used as a community outreach and recruiting tool to build relationships to support the longevity of the program.

Safety products have been provided through a grant from the Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas.



## Local Councils Certified for 2012

Twenty nine Local Councils for the Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect have been certified for 2012.

Local Councils raise awareness of child maltreatment and advocate for prevention through community-based initiatives. The Trust Fund supports these efforts with additional resources and information.

A list of the 2012 Certified Local Councils is available at [www.arkansasctf.org](http://www.arkansasctf.org).

## Home Visiting Network to Expand Programs in Arkansas

The Arkansas Home Visiting Network has been awarded just over \$6 million from the Health Resources and Services Administration to expand home visiting services in Arkansas.

The Children's Trust Fund, which is a member of the network that collaborated on the grant application, will receive approximately \$1.2 million in new funding. The new funds will be used to expand services at nine existing sites and establish services in six additional counties.

Beginning May 1, 2012, home visiting programs in Benton, Conway, Faulkner, Greene, Jefferson, Searcy, Sharp, Van Buren and Washington counties will expand their existing services to new populations. New home visiting programs will be established in Bradley, Carroll, Hempstead, Garland, Little River and Miller counties.

In addition to funding additional programs and services, the grant will be used to provide specific training opportunities for home visitors and to develop a streamlined data collection and evaluation process for all funded programs.

## CTF Distributes Resource Packets

The Arkansas Children's Trust Fund distributed two different resource packets to 29 local prevention councils in April. April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. During this month, many local councils organize or participate in efforts to raise awareness about the issue of child abuse and how it can be prevented. The Trust Fund provided the resource packets to support their ongoing efforts.

The packets contained information and materials to share with families, to guide organizational decision-making, and to initiate conversations about what everyone can do to prevent child abuse. Both packets are available to view or download at

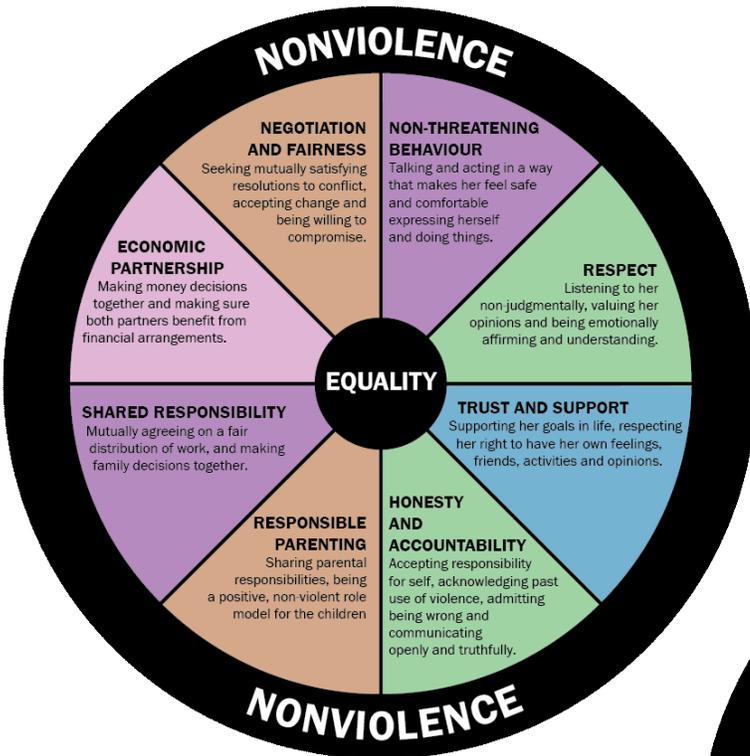
[www.arkansasctf.org](http://www.arkansasctf.org).

A Child's Safety is an  
Adult's Responsibility



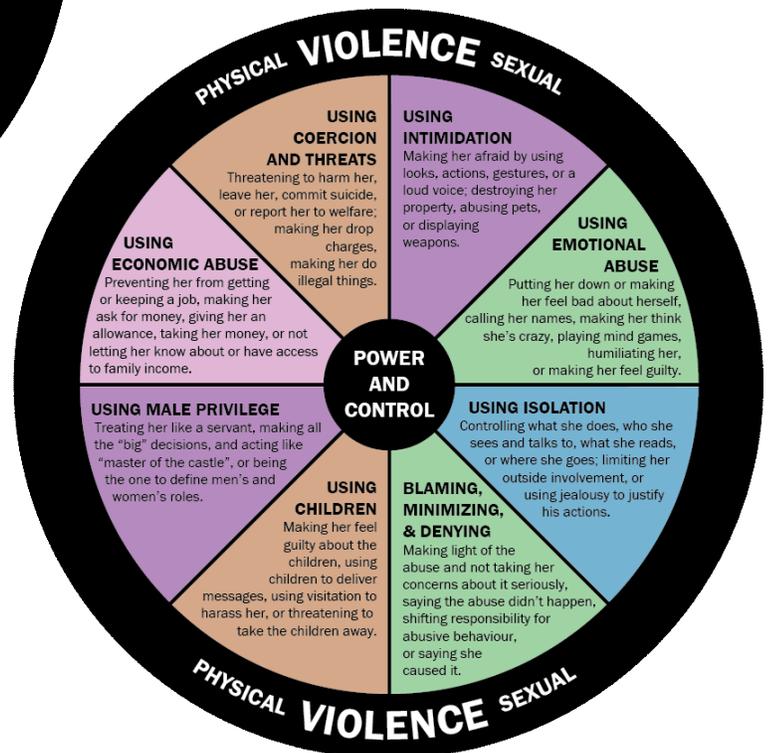
Child Abuse Prevention Month  
Resource Packet  
April 2012

## What Does a Healthy Adult Relationship Look Like?



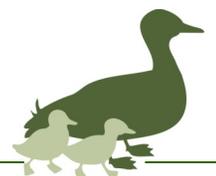
A healthy relationship centers around equality. Participants agree on rules for behavior and accountability for a successful partnership.

An unhealthy relationship relies on the use of negative tactics for one person to maintain power and control over the other.



### NOTE:

This graphic, known as [The Duluth Model](#), was developed as part of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota. It is intended to help adults distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships with other adults. If you are interested in developing a better relationship between an adult and a child, you should seek guidance from a trusted parent education or family service program. Such programs funded or recommended by the Arkansas Children's Trust Fund can be found at [www.arkansasctf.org](http://www.arkansasctf.org).



# RESOURCES

## 2011 State Preschool Yearbook

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University has just released their annual report profiling state-funded prekindergarten programs in the United States. This latest Yearbook covers data on state-funded prekindergarten during the 2010-2011 school year.

<http://www.wlearning.com>

## Infant Mental Health

A good source of information about infant mental health: what it is, why it is important, and how to develop it.

[www.aaimh.org/](http://www.aaimh.org/)

## Summer Safety Resources

Lots of downloads about summer safety in the heat, in the water, at the playground or ball park, etc. to share with families of young children.

[www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org)

## Relationships, cont...

Parent education and family support programs often have a funding mandate to serve a specific population or to implement a certain curriculum. Or they may not have the resources to offer specific programming for fathers or couples, especially relationship education. However, programs that want to encourage optimal child development can still promote healthy parental relationships.

### Promoting Healthy Relationships

First, include both mothers and fathers as much as possible. This conveys to all family members that they are important and have something to contribute to a child's development, both as individuals and as parents.

Second, if necessary, encourage all parents to follow some basic relationship rules, whether or not they are together in a committed relationship. (see What Does a Healthy Adult Relationship Look Like, page 3)

Third, share information with parents about the benefits of healthy adult relationships, even if relationship education itself is not part of your programming. Help them under-

## NOTABLE DATES

Fun and interesting dates to plan a parent group meeting or family activity around:

May 13	Frog Jumping Day
May 23	Lucky Penny Day
May 26	Sally Ride Day
May 31	World No Tobacco Day
June 3	Repeat Day (Repeat Day)
June 15	Smile Power Day
June 23	National Pink Day
June 26	Forgiveness Day
July 10	Teddy Bear Picnic Day
July 17	Yellow Pig Day
July 27	Take Your Pants for a Walk Day
Aug 5	Friendship Day
Aug 10	Lazy Day
Aug 14	National Creamsicle Day

stand that their child's own sense of self and his ability to form healthy relationships of his own is largely based on the models they provide.

Quality parental relationships offer many benefits, both for the parents and for their children. Programs that seek to promote the success of families and children can contribute to this success by acknowledging the importance of parental relationships, and strengthening them when possible.

### References

1. Schleifler, H. (1994). *The Family Law Commentator*, Vol. XX, No 3.
2. Sulmeyer, S. (2010). Child development and the parental relationship—1. Retrieved from <http://www.essentialparenting.com>
3. Moore, K., Kinghorn, A., & Bandy, T. (2011). Parental relationship quality and child outcomes across subgroups. *Child Trends Research Brief* (p.1). Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org>

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