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## Dads can do that!

### Strategies to involve fathers in child feeding

People have long argued that in most countries, feeding a child is not an individual mother's "behavior." The words and actions of many family and community members all determine how a child is fed.

How does knowing that translate into program decisions, in practical terms? Alive & Thrive (A&T) offers a look at how interventions can shape the role a father plays in determining breast-feeding and complementary feeding practices.

This innovation brief guides you through the case study kit on A&T's

experiences with challenging traditional gender roles and engaging fathers in child feeding. The brief:

- Offers a way to determine if a focus on fathers is right for your program
- Introduces 6 strategies you can use to ensure your fathers' program is more likely to change behaviors
- Provides examples from Alive & Thrive interventions that engage fathers in child feeding
- Links you to tested program activities and materials that you may tailor for your own setting



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## Deciding to focus on fathers

As you consider whether to invest in engaging fathers for better child feeding, 3 criteria will be helpful:

**Criterion 1.** Fathers in your community/culture could play a strong role in deciding how the baby is fed

**Criterion 2.** Fathers would be willing and able to take some simple actions in support of breastfeeding and/or improved complementary feeding practices

**Criterion 3.** Fathers are easily reached through the channels you would use



Your formative research should engage both fathers and key stakeholders who have insights into the local culture. To answer Criterion 1, explore:

- What feeding practices need to change to have the greatest impact on children's nutrition during the first 2 years of life?
- What are fathers' current roles in child feeding?
- Do fathers recognize the impact that their words and actions have on how their children are fed?
- What value do fathers place on nutrition?
- What are some benefits that are meaningful to fathers?
- What facts about child feeding do fathers already know?
- What gender-based constraints hinder fathers' involvement?
- What are the gender-based opportunities for involving fathers in child feeding? Explore fathers' access to assets and their power and decision making.

To determine fathers' willingness to act (Criterion 2), test out clear, simple actions that fathers might take in support of improved feeding practices. For example, ask fathers whether they would be willing to speak to the baby's grandmothers in support of exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months. Or ask fathers how likely they would be to keep an egg to feed to the baby instead of selling all the eggs at the market.

And to weigh Criterion 3, on channels to reach fathers, ask about fathers' attendance at certain community or entertainment events, use of specific mass media channels, and participation at the health center.

With data, you can determine whether a focus on fathers will enhance your behavior change campaign and lead to improved infant and young child feeding practices.

## How we did it: Using data and simple criteria to decide to focus on fathers

Alive & Thrive's staff in Ethiopia considered whether to devote resources to reaching out to fathers. From in-depth interviews and household observations, we learned that a baby's grandmothers and father all play a role in determining how the child is fed. Fathers were most commonly viewed as influencing child feeding practices only indirectly, primarily in their roles as provider and as the one who controls family finances.

We included focus groups with men in our formative research. We learned that while fathers generally do not consider themselves to play a direct role in child feeding, they expressed interest in learning more. Mothers and health workers told us that men's words and actions do influence mothers' decisions about feeding. *Criterion 1* was met: Fathers play an important role and are interested in becoming more explicitly involved.

A rapid assessment our Ethiopia staff conducted with fathers indicated that there were a number of possible actions they would be willing to take in support of improved feeding practices – *Criterion 2*.

As for *Criterion 3*, channels to reach fathers, we had data showing that in Ethiopia, men have much more access to both radio and TV than women do. We decided to focus the mass media component of our program on fathers. Men are also involved through activities with religious leaders and through the community outreach component, called Smart & Strong Family.

### Literature Review

The accompanying literature review provides a perspective on studies others have conducted and on child feeding interventions that have been tested with fathers.



Alive & Thrive tested concepts for a TV spot that would appeal to fathers' emotions. For more on that concept test, visit [aliveandthrive.org/research-to-action](http://aliveandthrive.org/research-to-action).

## 6 strategies that work

Alive & Thrive is learning about how to involve fathers in child feeding. Our experience has led us to 6 strategies we believe will help ensure effective interventions. Consider these strategies as you develop your own fathers' programs.

### Strategy 1: Grab them with emotion.

First we feel. Then we think.

A&T has successfully used emotions – especially positive emotions – to draw fathers in. Positive feelings can influence social behavior. Studies confirm that when people receive messages that evoke positive feelings, they:

- Are more receptive to the message
- Recall the message better
- Are more likely to comply with the message<sup>1</sup>

An infectious music video in Ethiopia draws in listeners through beautiful visuals, smiling children, and a positive, can-do feel. It opens with a line that evokes 'emotion: "Who does not want to enjoy his harvest and kiss his child?" It continues:

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*Let's not distinguish between father and mother  
Let's feed him so we can celebrate the hope  
A child's health is the country's health  
Let him grow to be a light for generations*

A small intervention study in Viet Nam, supported through Alive & Thrive, showed that fathers will speak up for improved breastfeeding practices. A photo of a loving young couple and their breastfeeding baby, featured on a poster and a brochure, draws men in to focus on the campaign's messages.

### How we did it: Testing concepts to find compelling and emotion-based approaches

Based on data, A&T had determined that its Bangladesh mass media campaign should feature fathers – as well as grandmothers and doctors. In fact, one of the six TV spots would address fathers directly. The creative team developed three possible concepts for that spot to test with the target audience.

To the surprise of staff, an emotion-packed storyline with a child saving his father from a house fire was more compelling than a spot featuring a renowned cricket player.

In another spot, the father of a newborn supports his wife when she insists on offering their baby the breast

within the first hour after birth. His observation, "I'm lucky the mother of my baby is so intelligent," is an emotional draw for viewers. Visuals, sound effects, and music all add to the emotion and drama.

### Strategy 2. Ease the way by busting stereotypes

In most cultures, feeding children is seen as women's concern, even though fathers ultimately control the purse strings. Fathers are often unconscious of the role they play, yet what they do and say is exerting an influence on household decisions about feeding.

Alive & Thrive's national program in Viet Nam makes counseling on infant and young child feeding (IYCF) widely available through a social franchise model. Fathers are welcome in the IYCF counseling sessions. Several of the illustrated counseling cards (job aids to ensure that counselors cover critical points) portray fathers taking an active role in child feeding. Fathers' presence in these illustrations works subtly to help shift social norms, making it seem natural for men to be involved in child feeding.

Gender roles are deeply embedded in culture, but sometimes it takes just a little humor or a surprising fact to help fathers take an active role in child feeding.

Alive & Thrive's national program in Viet Nam produced counseling cards with images of fathers supporting their wives in feeding their children. These illustrations (as pictured on right) work subtly to help shift social norms, making it seem natural for men to be involved in feeding matters.



### How we did it: Making it “a man’s job” to lead the family to support 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding

In the Viet Nam breastfeeding study, humor helps open the door. A cartoon image of a breast on a ceramic mug gets dads laughing and coming back to the clinic to request more mugs. In a society where fathers traditionally leave decisions about breastfeeding to the baby’s mother and grandmothers, the fathers who participate in this program quickly begin speaking up for exclusive breastfeeding. It helps that they can join with other dads. An imaginative contest with the feel of a reality TV show helps make it seem okay for a man to support breastfeeding. Teams of fathers compete to show “Who loves their wife and children most?” by demonstrating what they know about the value of breastfeeding and making the most convincing pro-breastfeeding argument.

### Strategy 3. Find fathers where they already are

Every community has its gathering spots for men. Successful fathers’ programs meet men where they are. And in addition to where fathers “physically” are, we can meet them where they are in their knowledge and beliefs.

### How we did it: Investing in channels that already reach fathers

Bangladesh’s first-ever chance to host games for the Cricket World Cup coincided with A&T’s media campaign launch. What better place to reach men – one of our main target audiences – than in the tea rooms and homes where they would gather to celebrate the national sport? It was costly, but A&T purchased air time during the games, and reached men nationwide.

In both Bangladesh and Ethiopia, A&T engages male religious leaders to spread specific messages about infant and young child feeding, especially among fathers. In the Viet Nam intervention study, staff adjust their schedules so they can find men at home for face-to-face



A cartoon image of a breast on a ceramic mug gets dads laughing and coming back to the clinic to request more mugs.



TV spots in Ethiopia appeal to male farmers by using agrarian themes and analogies, meeting men where they “are.”

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counseling visits. They schedule group counseling for fathers at the clinic on monthly immunization days, when fathers are already accompanying their wives and babies to the clinic.

Meeting fathers where they “are” in terms of their knowledge and beliefs is just good behavior change practice. The Ethiopia mass media campaign is built upon analogies related to farming, in the hope that these will be meaningful to fathers. A TV spot to promote a varied diet links the value of giving baby a variety of nutritional foods with the farmer’s value of rotating crops for a better harvest.



**With a husband's help,  
your child breastfeeds more.**

There are some things only a husband  
can do to help his wife breastfeed.

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**Alive & Thrive’s grantee in Viet Nam, at Hanoi School of Public Health, produced a brochure with a set of clear actions for fathers to take to help their wives breastfeed. For the list of fathers’ actions, visit [aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief](http://aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief).**

### Strategy 4. Provide crystal-clear direction for actions fathers can take

For real changes in behavior, program planners need to be explicit about what the audience members can *do* to make a difference. We may teach a father the value of a specific improved feeding practice, but that knowledge goes nowhere unless he knows what he can do to support the practice. We borrow the phrase “provide crystal-clear direction” from the authors of *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. The authors recommend “scripting the critical moves and thinking in terms of specific behaviors.” As they say, “Change is easier when you know where you’re going and why it’s worth it.”<sup>2</sup>

Leaders in behavior change have shown the value of naming “small, doable actions” – things people can easily do that will lead to better health. For fathers, that may mean actions they can take that support improved feeding practices – even if someone else is doing the feeding.

To be on that list of small, doable actions the program should promote among fathers, the action must:

- Clearly support the priority feeding practice
- Be something fathers are willing and able to do

### How we did it: Naming clear and simple actions fathers can take

One of the strengths of the Viet Nam study is its crystal-clear direction for dads. A specific and detailed list encourages fathers to take steps that support **breast-feeding**. This sample list may be a good starting point as you begin to name actions that fathers in your setting can do.

This “menu” of actions is central to the Vietnamese campaign, appearing in the colorful brochure and on a large poster displayed at the clinic. The actions are also promoted in counseling sessions and during the men’s contest.

The list doesn’t stop at suggesting that dads “help with house chores.” It goes on to offer **specific steps**, “such

as, going to the market; cooking; doing laundry; looking after the older children..." and a reason why: "...so your wife can maintain milk production and have enough energy to focus on taking care of your baby."

How did staff on the Viet Nam fathers' project develop this list of actions? They report on the criteria they used: the actions for fathers should be "simple, doable, and effective." They drew upon several sources:

- Information from the literature, including a study on fathers' involvement and child development they had previously conducted in the same area of the country
- Data from their project's baseline study, carried out before the intervention was implemented
- The research team's practical experience and knowledge about breastfeeding and local culture

The A&T Ethiopia campaign also promotes actions fathers can take to support **complementary feeding**. A critical feeding practice to prevent child stunting is adding animal source foods, like milk, eggs, and meat, to baby's diet, beginning at 6 months of age.

Formative research in Ethiopia helped us see that even in poor households, a few chickens may roam the yard. Families told us they could easily be convinced to keep an egg to add to baby's porridge rather than sell all at the market. A TV spot encourages fathers to keep an egg for the baby. Other actions promoted include specific ways to supervise their children's feeding:

- Make sure special foods like milk, powdered meat, and eggs are added to child's porridge
- Make sure baby is given a variety of foods
- Make sure baby eats thick porridge and not thin gruel

### Strategy 5. Give fathers practice

Even though you've selected actions that are "small" and "doable," the actions you are asking fathers to take are still likely to be new, strange, and possibly uncomfortable for them – at least until they have some practice.



In the Viet Nam study, video scenarios give fathers practice in speaking up for breastfeeding. In one scenario, a young mother buys infant formula as she prepares to return to work. Fathers are challenged to fill in the "ending" of the scenario – in favor of exclusive breastfeeding.

### How we did it: Designing materials that make fathers interact and that "model" the new actions

Activities and materials that are designed to be truly interactive can give fathers the chance to practice speaking up for improved child feeding practices. In the Viet Nam contest to promote breastfeeding, teams of fathers compete to see who can come up with the most supportive response to a scenario presented in a short video.

In one scenario, a young husband comes home to find his wife wistfully trying to find a dress that will still fit her. She proposes that she will cut back on breastfeeding so she can fit into her clothes. What is a husband to say? That's the challenge fathers face in the contest – to offer a strong "ending" for the scenario. The team can win points by formulating a response that supports both the wife and breastfeeding wins points. The contest helps men to be ready for a similar challenge at home.

Even "passive" communication materials, like TV or radio spots, can give fathers "vicarious" practice by modeling the actions we want them to take. Seeing how a father in a TV spot handles a situation could make it easier for the



For a list of the materials for involving fathers, visit: [aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief](http://aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief)

View full case study kit: [aliveandthrive.org/fathers](http://aliveandthrive.org/fathers)

## References

<sup>1</sup>Monahan, Jennifer L. "Thinking positively: Using positive affect when designing health messages." In Maibach, Edward, Roxanne Louise Parrott, editors. *Designing health messages: Approaches from communication theory and public health practice*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995. 81-98.

<sup>2</sup>Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. New York: Broadway, 2010.



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viewer to imagine himself doing the same thing. In one of our Bangladesh spots, the father responds to the doctor's advice by saying, "Now I understand. I can help with chores to give my wife time to feed our baby." In other campaign spots, the father doesn't say a word, but is seen actively playing with his baby or cheering his child on during feeding time. (View the spots on "Animal Foods" and "Poor Appetite" at [aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief](http://aliveandthrive.org/fathersbrief).) The silent message is clear: A father needs to be involved in the family's concerns about feeding.

## Strategy 6. Show fathers a benefit that they care about

All good behavior change interventions promote the benefits that people care about, things that are meaningful to them personally. Sometimes these benefits go beyond the health benefits of the behavior.

### How we did it: Finding the "sweet spot," the benefit that makes the change seem irresistible

An outcome that's easy to promote for many recommended feeding practices is "intelligence." All parents care about raising a smart child, and our formative research in Ethiopia confirmed that the child's education and intelligence are a top priority for most fathers. A&T's community outreach activities in that country are promoted as "Smart & Strong Families." Fathers and mothers have a chance to earn a "Smart & Strong" certificate when they adopt the priority feeding practices.

Another powerful driver of behavior in any culture is feeling in line with social norms and expectations – that you are doing is what is expected of you. In Viet Nam, feeling part of a community or team effort appeals to fathers. The social aspects of the fathers' group counseling sessions and contest cannot be underestimated. The intervention paid off. Preliminary findings indicate that fathers in the intervention are more likely to take specific actions in support of breastfeeding. And their wives' rates of exclusive breastfeeding are greater than in the control group.

### Fathers make a difference

Alive & Thrive's field experience is teaching us ways to ensure that fathers can play an active role in improving the ways their children are nourished in their first 2 years of life. And our preliminary findings indicate that those fathers' actions can lead to real improvements in nutrition.

You, too, can design programs that involve fathers – and improve feeding practices – by applying these 6 strategies:

1. Grab their attention with emotion
2. Ease the way by busting stereotypes
3. Find fathers where they already are
4. "Provide crystal-clear direction" for actions fathers can take
5. Give fathers practice
6. Show fathers a benefit that they care about