Father Engagement and Children’s Social Development: Evidence from Early to Middle Childhood

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Do Fathers Matter for children’s social and emotional development?
YES!
Critical Development Transitions

• **Prenatal through Early Childhood** (0 to 5 years)
  – Rapid physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development
  – Neurobiological, behavioral, mental
  – Foundation established for transition from home to school

• **Middle Childhood/Early Adolescence** (10 to 15 years)
  – Rapid biological and psychological changes
  – More autonomy and skill development but increased exposure to risk
  – Sets trajectory for success in high school

• **Late Adolescence/Early Adulthood** (18 to 25 years)
  – Transition from home and school to post-secondary education, employment, and self-sufficiency
  – Must acquire skills and attitudes to be successful in rapidly changing workplace
Fathers’ Influences on Infants and Toddlers are

Positive and Negative

- Emotion Regulation
- Social Competence
- Moral Development (antisocial)
- Academic and cognitive Achievement

Short and Long Term
Why Social and Emotional Development?

- Social and emotional development begins during infancy in the context of an ecological network of social and reciprocal relationships.

- The *quality child’s early experiences* with his/her caregivers, including fathers, are critical for future relationships.
Social and Emotional Development

- Children who are **socially competent** display behaviors that suggest a *certain set of values, positive self-identity, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, planning and decision-making,* and display **cultural competence**

- Children who are **emotionally competent** are able to express, understand, and recognize emotions as well as learn the causes and consequences of emotions
Emotional regulation

Behavior problems

Sustained attention
Fathers and their Infants

• Today, fathers are more involved in caregiving and physical play than they used to be (Cabrera, Hofferth, & Schae, 2011) BUT are less engaged in cognitive stimulating activities during infancy.

• Dads become more involved as their children reach the 2 to 6 age range (Belsky, Rovine, & Fish, 1989).
Evidence Clearly Indicates that Father Absence is Associated with:

- Poor school achievement
- Lower scores on intelligence tests
- Lower grade point averages
- Trouble with mathematical and puzzle tasks
- Difficulties paying attention
- Higher likelihood of being expelled, drop out
- Lower higher education attainment
- Poor moral development
- Delaying gratification
- More impulsivity
- Social and emotional maladjustment
- Conduct and anxiety disorders
- Suicide
- Deviant peer group selections
- High rates of aggression, bullying, and antisocial behavior
- Higher rates of physical and sexual abuse
- Higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system
- Higher rates of alcohol and other drug problems
- Earlier onset of sexual intercourse, smoking, AUD
- Higher probability of possessing weapons
How about father presence?

Research question:

How do fathers *directly and indirectly* influence their children’s social and emotional development?
Data Sources

• **EHS National Father Research Consortium**
  • 3000 families in random-control design
  • Mother and father interviews and videotaping at 14, 24, 36 mos and Pre-K
  • Study of newborns

• **ECLS-B**
  • Nationally representative sample of 10,688 children born in 2001
  • 9, 24, & 48 months surveys collected from children, mothers, and fathers.
Attachment Theory

- Beginning at infancy, the early childhood period is a significant period where caregivers establish close relationships with the baby that form the foundation for child well being and development.

- Family systems are dynamic change over time as family adjusts to child.

- Family subsystems are interdependent and influence one another.
Typology of Father Involvement

Engagement

Accessibility

Responsibility
Direct Effects
EHS data: Quality of father play and children’s social and emotional development

Fathers who allowed their toddlers to explore and refrained from overly dictating the child’s activities had children who exhibited fewer behavioral problems (Shears & Robins, 2005)

When fathers exhibited high levels of physical play and used less coercive tactics, their children were rated as less aggressive (McDowell & Parke, 2009)

In context of rough and tumble play, children learn to regulate their behaviors and impulses (Paquette, 2008)
Low-Income Fathers’ Influence on Their Children’s Emotional Development: From Toddlers to Pre-K

EHS sample of resident biological father
  • n=290 2 and 3 year olds
  • n=313 pre-k

Measures
  • Child Assessments: Bayley, PPVT
  • Parent characteristics
  • Father- and mother-child videotaped play interactions

Findings

• Although children in our study scored .5 to 1.0 SD below national norms of cognitive tests, they were highly regulated across ages (i.e., attentive, able to stay on task)

• Father supportiveness coded in the context of play was positively associated with children’s emotional regulation at 2 years

National data: Long-term effect of fathers engagement on children’s sustained attention

ECLSB:
• 3,550 children and their fathers and mothers
• Sample includes children in some type of child care with two biological resident parents

Measures:
• Fathers and mothers literacy levels
• Child care setting literacy Levels

Findings

Shared book reading by mothers and fathers had same effect on SR

• Shared book reading by fathers was uniquely related to sustained attention and other school readiness skills

• Effects of mother and father reading were multiplicative –
  • mothers who read frequently to their children had a stronger effect on children’s sustained attention when fathers also read frequently to their children
EHS data: Middle school children’s perceptions of their relationship with their fathers and behavioral problems and peer relationships

EHS sample of children and their fathers

- n=508 children

Measures

- Father reported on residence (age 2- pre K);
- Mothers reported on CBCL and father residence 5th grade;
- 5th graders reported on quality of relationships with fathers and peers

Findings

Early father residence predicted 5th graders’ perception of their relationship with their fathers but did not predict to social adjustment.

Children’s report on their relationship with their father predicted children’s social adjustment:

- Children who said they had and have a close relationship with dad had fewer externalizing behaviors

- Children who said they had a close relationship with their dads said they had more friends
Father Relationships and Child Social Adjustment

Bar chart showing:
- **Close Relationship to Father**
  - Externalizing Behaviors
  - Positive Peer Relationships
- **Not Close Relationship to Father**
  - Externalizing Behaviors
  - Positive Peer Relationships
But father engagement is not always good...
Quality of mother and father interactions: Contributions to aggression in girls and boys

EHS sample of resident biological father
• N=588 pre-K

Measures
• Mothers and fathers report of aggression
• Maternal supportiveness and intrusiveness
• Paternal supportiveness and intrusiveness

Findings

• For girls
  – Maternal intrusiveness and spanking predicted to aggressive behavior

• For boys
  – Mom and dad spanking predicted to aggressive behavior
  – And also chaos in the home

• In another study, father intrusiveness was inversely related to less emotional regulation (Cabrera et al., 2007)
Father Antisocial Behavior and Child Outcomes

Father Antisocial Behavior and Child Aggression

SUMMARY:

Evidence clearly indicates that fathers independently have positive influences on:

- Behavior Regulation (esp. with boys)
- Emotion Regulation (esp. with girls)
- Stronger attachment relationships
- Social Competence more stress tolerance
  better internal locus of control
- Social Maturity more likely to take initiative, use self-direction, less impulsivity
WHAT are the PATHWAYS through which Fathers INFLUENCE Children?
Dynamic Model of Paternal Influences on Children over the Life Course

Father presence

Family Characteristics
Mother-child interactions
Father-child interactions
Mother-father relationship

Father Involvement

Child Social Development

Examining the indirect association among fathers’ risk (mothers’ and child's risk) and social behaviors at 24 months

ECLS-B n =4,200 on toddlers and their mothers and fathers

Measures:
- Father engagement
- Mother-child support
- Observed child social behaviors
Findings

• Although mother and father risk are linked to negative social behaviors, the pathways are different.

• Fathers with higher levels of risk had children with fewer social behaviors (attention, engagement) because mothers were less sensitive.

• Fathers are less engaged in cognitive stimulating activities when their partners and children have higher levels of risk.
Early father residence predicted the quality of the father-child relationship in 5th grade and was mediated by father residence during 5th grade (Cabrera et al., 2012)

• Fathers’ resources such as education are linked to children’s social behaviors through maternal support and father engagement (Cabrera et al., under review)
Conclusions

The early childhood period is an important context for fathers to contribute to their children’s social and emotional development.

During middle childhood, being close to dads reduces behavior problems.

Fathers’ contribution is unique and independent.

These father effects are long-term and are linked to children’s social adjustment.

Fathers effects are transactional.
Next Steps

Need research that places men IN families and in a cultural context

We need to move beyond one-single parent approach – to look at how mothers and fathers parent: additive and multiplicative effects

Include other family processes – expand view of family, including child and others

Mechanisms – How??

More interdisciplinary research
Thank You!
Barriers to Father Involvement

HANDBOOK OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES
SECOND EDITION

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