

**Measuring Father Involvement and Social Fathering:
An Overview**

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Introduction

The objective of this session is to define and to compare estimates of father engagement, accessibility, responsibility, and positive emotional involvement across several recent data sets and across different ages and characteristics of children and their families. We address the following six questions in this introductory paper: What is a father? What are the father types in which we are interested? How should we identify social fathers? What is father involvement? What other factors may affect father involvement? Who reports the information?

What is a Father?

The increased diversity of fathers today leads to the first question: “what is a father?” We divided fathers arbitrarily into two groups – residential and nonresidential – and focused on the residential father. This was a source of disagreement among us. Child development studies tend to focus upon biological fathers, regardless of residence, whereas sociological and economic studies focus upon residential fathers, regardless of biology.

The argument for studying biological fathers, regardless of residence, is that residence changes over time. Stepfathers and boyfriends may come and go; you may not even know whether it is the same male that lives with the child over time. The biological father will continue to be relevant to his children regardless of residence.

The argument on the other side is that biology is not destiny. Is the biological father the most important one? The biological father may have very little input or link to the child after leaving the residence. In fact, residential males may have a big impact on

children (positive or negative) because they are living with the child 24/7. The risk of physical or sexual abuse is much higher with stepfathers than with biological fathers. Compared with biological children, stepchildren have 40 times the likelihood of being abused. Abuse may have a very long-term impact on children (Daly & Wilson, 1998).

The second point is that, over time, biological fathers leave households and nonbiological fathers enter. Marriage between cohabiting partners may also occur. The relationships of children to household members do not remain constant. Although children are very likely to be living with both biological parents at or around the time of birth (78% of children under 3 years of age), the proportion living with both biological parents declines sharply as children age. Treating the cross-sectional sample in the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID-CDS) as a synthetic cohort, Table 1 shows that 70% of 3-5 year-olds, 66% of 3-8 year-olds and 65% of 9-12 year-olds live with two biological parents. Similarly, the proportion living with a biological mother and a stepfather increases from 1% to 6%. The proportion living with a single mother or father increases from 17% to 23% between ages 0 to 2 and ages 6 to 8, but then declines slightly to age 9 to 12 again as single mothers marry or remarry. As an example of the implications of changes in family structure over time, the NLSY97 has no adolescent children living with a mother and a cohabiting partner. Such arrangements are likely to have led to marriage or the relationship broke up prior to the child entering adolescence.

The involvement of the nonresidential father also changes over time. Only one-third had not been in touch with their biological father in the past year, however, and half had been in touch in the past month. I did not have easily accessible information on

changes in contact as children age, though could get this. The involvement of the nonresidential father is likely to decline over time as the father develops new attachments and perhaps a new family.

The third point is that residential fathers spend a substantial amount of time accessible to children or engaged with them. Over 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, this time adds up. Stepfathers spend about 9 hours engaged with children and even cohabitating fathers spend 10 hours a week with residential children of the partner and another 15 hours accessible to them. In comparison, nonresidential fathers may spend an hour or two with their children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). In contrast, the amount of contact of children with nonresidential fathers is on the order of an hour per week, on average. Half of children are in contact once a month or more.

My conclusion is that, although we want information on both fathers, both biological and residential fathers, the residential father is extremely important. This session focuses on the residential father.

What are the Father Types in which we are Interested?

This session compares the fathering behavior of fathers by their marital relationship to the mother and their biological relationship to the child, specifically, married biological fathers, biological fathers who are cohabiting with the mother, stepfathers married to the mother, and unmarried partners to the mother. Two of the studies also include a category for residential “father-figures.” The important point is that our discussion is not restricted to married fathers residing with the biological children of both parents, on whom the bulk of prior research is based. Increased out of wedlock

childbearing and divorce have led to higher proportions of children living with a stepfather and increases in cohabitation over the past several decades have led to increases in residence with two unmarried biological parents and with a biological mother and her partner (Smock, 2000). However, some of the studies in the session did not collect sufficient information on residential fathers to provide a picture of their parenting. From these studies we can only compare the parenting of residential biological fathers who are married or not married to the mother.

Why compare across these dimensions? Research has shown that the differential level of commitment leads to differential investments in children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Comparisons that ignore this crucial dimension will be unable to compare fathers on the other dimensions that may affect investments. Therefore throughout the analyses we consistently break the sample into these four general types.

How Should we Identify Social Fathers?

A third question is “how should we identify social fathers?” For the present paper we have four family types: married biological father and mother, unmarried biological father and mother, stepfather and biological mother, and bio mother and cohabiting partner of mother (other father-figure). The PSID- CDS included a few adoptive children along with biological children, but not foster children. The PSID-CDS only includes children living with their biological mother. The 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) does not include adoptive or foster children in biological. Stepfather include men who may or may not have adopted their stepchildren. The PSID-CDS’s definition of father-figures includes both relatives or non-relatives. In addition, the

NLSY97 has a question that identifies two types of father figures – “a relative who is like a father to you” and “someone else who is like a father to you.” In this analysis, the NLSY97 includes only related father-figures, not unrelated ones.

What is Father Involvement?

A major part of children’s learning occurs through interacting with and observing parents. We selected five key factors: engagement, availability, responsibility, and warmth and monitoring/control. The first three concepts come from Lamb and Pleck’s framework (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov & Levine, 1985; Pleck, 1997). Paternal engagement includes direct interaction with children and accessibility includes time the father is available to children, but not directly interacting with them. The degree of responsibility a father assumes for his children encompasses the management of the child’s welfare—making sure that the child is fed, clothed, housed, monitored, managed, examined by physicians, and cared for when needed.

Most developmental psychologists argue that the quality of parenting and the parent-child relationship are crucial to developing competent children and Pleck (Pleck, 1997) has also discussed the quality of the father-child relationship as crucial. A combination of responsiveness and high control is believed to create the best environment for child development (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In the present study, warmth measures responsiveness by providing information on the emotional content of the interaction between parent and child. Monitoring and control measure the demands of the parent on the child.

What are the Types of Factors that may Affect Father Involvement?

Besides type of father, discussed above, we expected differences by income of the family. Higher income families may be able to adjust their schedules so fathers can spend more time with children. Alternatively, high-income fathers may be less involved with children because of time commitments to their jobs. Additionally, our samples differ in income levels; Early Head Start, Fragile Families, and the Three-city Study represent low-income populations. The NLSY97 and PSID-CDS are nationally representative. We can better compare father involvement across these studies when examining similar income groupings.

Better-educated fathers may place a higher value on involvement with their children and may spend more time with and be warmer with them. While any father can show warmth to children, educated fathers may better understand the importance of this aspect of expression to child development and act on their understanding (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001).

Age of child is important to take into account. Parental involvement, including warmth, tends to decline as children age. Comparisons should be based upon similar age groups.

We adjust for race of child; different data sets have different ethnic/race mixes. To be able to compare with other data, we need to make sure either that our ethnic mixes are similar or that race/ethnicity does not matter.

Since we are examining nonbiological as well as biological fathers, it is important to consider how long this particular dad has lived with the child. Unfortunately, this variable is not an easy one to calculate or determine. To do this either the questions

would have to be asked directly or unique identifiers would need to be attached to each family member so that individuals could be identified across data collection points and their total time in the family determined. This variable is only available for children in the PSID-CDS as we have residential information for children from birth up to 1997.

Who Reports the Information?

The last question is “who is the reporter of the information?” This depends on the ages of the children, of course. In the NLSY97, children were 12-17 in 1997; father involvement measures come from the youth report. In the PSID-CDS, children were ages 0 to 13 in 1997. For estimates of father’s time with children, data come from mother reports of time in activities (and who was doing the activity with the child) for young children and mother and child reports for older children. For the measures of warmth, activities, and responsibility, residential biological fathers, stepfathers, and cohabiting partners reported on their own behavior. The children in the Three City Study were 0-4 or 10-14 in 1999. Respondents were mothers, who reported on biological father behavior. The Early Head Start data focused on children at age 2 and at age 3. In this case, the reporter was the biological father. The Fragile Families study selected a sample of families at the birth of a child and children averaged 6 months at wave 1 data collection.

Results

In presenting our results, Natasha Cabrera will focus on Early Head Start, Marcy Carlson on Fragile Families, Rebekah Levine Coley on the Three-City Study, Randy Day

on the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and Sandy Hofferth on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement.

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Table 1: Percent in Family Type by Age of Child, 1997 PSID-CDS

Age	2 biological parents	biological mother and stepfather	stepmother and biological father	cohabiting mother	single mother	single father	other	Total
0-2	69.39	1.34	0.37	1.95	25.49	0.49	0.98	100.01
3-5	60.35	3.93	0.46	2.77	28.09	1.39	3.01	100.00
6-8	58.90	5.13	1.15	3.59	27.02	1.79	2.43	100.01
9-12	57.00	6.95	1.19	3.66	25.25	2.74	3.20	99.99