



CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOLESCENT FATHERS

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Adolescent fathers are at high risk for decreased levels of involvement with their young children due to a range of risk factors, including low education levels, lack of employment, high rates of anti-social behavior, lack of developmental maturity, and poverty. One of the most significant risk factors for adolescent fathers is the tendency for the adolescent father-mother romantic partnership to dissolve or to go from higher to lower commitment relationship (e.g., cohabiting to friend) shortly following the birth of the child. Researchers have found that transitioning from a higher to lower commitment relationships has a greater negative effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with the child than on adult fathers' engagement (Farrie, Lee, & Fagan, 2011). However, researchers have also found that some adolescent fathers are able to stay involved with their children regardless of their level of commitment to the mother. These fathers are able to continue their involvement because they develop supportive co-parenting relationships, defined as "the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents" (Feinberg, 2003, p. 1499). It is important to understand how positive co-parenting is related to father engagement because studies suggest that young involved fathers can have a significant positive effect on adolescent mothers (Fagan & Lee, 2010) and on children's outcomes (Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011).

Although studies have shown significant associations between the quality of the co-parenting relationship and adolescent father engagement with children, a significant shortcoming with the existing studies is that most researchers have used co-parenting and father engagement measures which were completed by the same parent (mostly fathers). Threats based on shared method variance call into question the validity of the findings regarding the association between co-parenting and father engagement. The first study addresses this shortcoming by examining fathers' perceptions of their own engagement with the child in relation to mothers' perceptions of co-parenting, and mothers' perceptions of father engagement in relation to fathers' perceptions of co-parenting. The use of multiple raters to examine these associations should provide some much needed information about the effects of co-parenting on adolescent fathers' engagement.

The second study compares the effects of supportive co-parenting (and social support) on adolescent fathers compared with adult fathers (Fagan & Lee, 2011). Although recent studies have shown a positive effect of co-parenting and social support on adolescent father engagement with children (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007), studies have not examined whether the effect of co-parenting and social support are greater for adolescent fathers than for adult fathers. Determining whether co-parenting and social support have a greater effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than adult fathers' engagement is relevant to policy makers and practitioners charged with making decisions about which types of programs should be targeted for adolescent and adult fathers. The present study addresses this gap by comparing the effect of co-parenting and social support on fathers' engagement with three-year-olds among adolescent and adult fathers.