



## ***THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF RESIDENT FATHERS' PARENTING TOWARDS A UNIFIED RESEARCH AGENDA***

**REBECCA M. RYAN, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

Role of fathers in children's lives has changed considerably over last 40 years. With high rates of divorce and still rising rates of nonmarital childbirth, more children than ever before are living apart from their biological fathers. At the same time, resident fathers spend more time caring for and interacting with their children than ever before. Both trends have inspired researchers to identify what it is that *resident* fathers do that matters for child development as a way, in part, to understand how important these trends might be for children's outcomes and, particularly, for gaps in children's outcomes by socioeconomic status, which is so correlated with family structure. One of the most important roles resident fathers play is that of active caregiver. Indeed, the quality of fathers' interactions with children are associated with better socioemotional and cognitive outcomes, as is the frequency with which fathers engage in enriching activities with children.

These findings come from two distinct literatures. In one, researchers ask: 1) *what* do fathers' with children do and how much do they do of it? A question about fathering *quantity*. In another, they ask 2) In what ways and *how well* do they interact with children? A question about fathering *quality*. I think in order to advance our understanding of the importance of resident fathers to child development, we need to bridge these two literatures. To estimate the returns for children of, say, an hour of fathers' time, an hour they might lose if they did not live with their father, we need to estimate the quality of that time, for surely not all hours with all dads are equally beneficial for children. To understand what high quality, sensitive father-child interactions mean for children in two parent families, we need a sense of how much time children spend with more versus less sensitive fathers. Only by answering these questions will we understand the significance of the rise in nonresident fatherhood on the one hand and the increase in resident fathers' time with children on the other for achievement gaps in the next generation.

As a first step towards illustrating this point, I describe two recent projects, one on the quantity of resident fathers' parenting and one on the quality of their parenting. In the first, I apply theory from the quality literature to time diary data drawn from the 2003-2007 American Time Use Surveys (ATUS) to compare levels of "sensitive parenting" across mothers and fathers and across more and less educated parents. In the second, I advance a hypothesis about the influence of fathers' parenting quality on child outcomes: that sensitive father parenting matters more when the quality of mothers' parenting is low. One interpretation of my findings would require quantity data to test.

Both studies suggest that in order to understand the role resident fathers play in children's lives, we need to combine analyses of the quantity and quality of fathers' parenting. In addition to addressing the two questions raised above, this approach could address the extent to which quantity and quality of fathering go together, and, how the quality of fathers' time with children determine the impact of that time on children's well-being. I think only by answering these questions will we understand the significance of the rise in nonresident fatherhood on the one hand and the increase in resident fathers' time with children on the other for the next generation.