

“Fathers’ Involvement and Fathers’ Wellbeing over Children’s First Five Years”

Marcia J. Carlson and Kimberly Turner
(University of Wisconsin-Madison)

The past four decades have witnessed a dramatic change in the nature of fathers’ involvement with children, as fathering has moved beyond ‘breadwinning’ (i.e., providing economic support) to include other aspects of parenting such as nurturing and caregiving; engaging in leisure and play activities; providing the child’s mother with emotional or practical support; providing moral guidance and discipline; ensuring the safety of the child; taking responsibility for coordinating the child’s care and activities; and connecting the child to his extended family, community members and resources (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, and Lamb 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb 2000; Palkovitz 2002). As a result, a growing literature has examined the nature and consequences of fatherhood and father involvement in family life.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to father involvement, the consequences *for men* of being fathers have been little explored (Eggebeen 2002; Eggebeen and Knoester 2001). Most studies have focused on whether and how father involvement affects children (e.g., Amato and Rivera 1999; King 1994; Seltzer 1991). Yet, since family relationships are dynamic, affect each other, and influence individual-level change (Bronfenbrenner 1986; King 1994; O'Brien 2005), one would expect that fathers’ investments in children—and the affective quality of relationship that results (whether close, distant or contentious)—could potentially affect fathers’ own health, mental health, social relationships, and economic activity. Qualitative evidence signals that for low-income men, fatherhood is a key turning point in their lives, prompting a major change in lifestyle and priorities (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004), suggesting that men who embrace this role and are more engaged as fathers will have higher (and potentially increasing) levels of wellbeing.

In this paper, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how the level of and change in fathers’ involvement with children is associated with men’s own wellbeing with respect to health, mental health, social relationships and socioeconomic status. The Fragile Families Study is a longitudinal study of births (with an oversample of nonmarital births) that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in large U.S. cities. The study includes 4,897 births—3,710 unmarried and 1,187 married, and the weighted sample is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers took place in 75 hospitals in 20 cities just after the baby’s birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted at one, three, and five years after the birth. Response rates at baseline were 75% for unmarried fathers and 89% for married fathers, and 88% of unmarried fathers were interviewed at least once over the first five years.

In this paper, we include both fathers that were unmarried and married at the time of the focal child’s birth, and we follow them through the five-year survey. We examine resident and non-resident fathers separately, since the nature and meaning of father involvement differ across residential contexts. For both resident and non-resident fathers, we measure father involvement as the frequency that fathers spend one or more hours per day with the child and the frequency of engaging in various activities such as reading to the child and playing with toys. For non-resident fathers, we also measure the number of days per month that the father sees the child. Our outcome measures include a range of socioeconomic

capacities and social-behavioral characteristics reported by fathers (or by mothers about fathers) at the one-, three- and five-year surveys, including educational attainment, employment, earnings, income, physical health, depression, substance use, religious attendance and whether ever incarcerated. We use two primary analytic techniques with pooled data across waves. First, we use random effects models to examine how the level of fathers' involvement is associated with fathers' wellbeing—considering variation both between and within fathers. Second, we use fixed effects models to examine how *changes* in father involvement among the same men over time are associated with increases or decreases in their own wellbeing. This more conservative technique reduces bias in the estimates by controlling for unobserved individual characteristics that do not change over time and that may be associated with fathers' involvement and wellbeing (Greene 2003; Snijders 2005).

Preliminary results for several outcome variables suggest that resident fathers have higher levels of wellbeing than non-resident fathers across all survey waves with respect to depression, substance use, employment, earnings, and poverty status (but not physical health). Resident fathers also spend more time with children and have higher levels of engagement in father-child activities. With respect to how father involvement and wellbeing are linked, we find a different pattern by residential status. For non-resident fathers, the only consistent finding across both random and fixed effects models is that fathers who are more involved with children have lower church attendance, and when the same fathers become more involved, their church attendance declines. Among the socioeconomic variables, where there are statistically significant estimates, they suggest a positive correlation—non-resident fathers that are more involved have higher reported work hours per week, work weeks per year, and earnings. By contrast, for resident fathers, there is no link between church attendance and involvement, but there are strong associations between father involvement and socioeconomic variables in the opposite direction—higher levels of involvement are negatively related to employment and earnings. This is true in random effects models and in the more conservative fixed effects models that use only within-father change.

This paper will further examine the link between fathering and fathers' wellbeing, including factors that may drive the differences by residential status and considering the role of mothers. For example, for non-resident fathers, providing financially may be a necessary criterion to 'be able' (in his own eyes, or the child's mother's eyes) to be involved and spend time with the child. Whereas for fathers living with their child (and the child's mother), there may be higher levels of gender specialization between household and market work such that fathers provide income instead of spending more time with their children (while mothers do the opposite). Our findings can shed light on the contemporary role of fathers in family life and how paternal involvement shapes men's own identities and wellbeing. We discuss the implications of our results for future research and public policy.

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