

Why Do Fathers Matter for Children's Development?

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“Fathers are biological necessities, but social accidents”
Attributed to Margaret Mead in H. A. Minden's (1982) *Two hugs for survival* (p. 22).

Margaret Mead's writings in the 1980s about the importance of fathers to the development of their children have not been completely discarded today. Although most would disagree that fathers are unnecessary and do not contribute to their children's development, the precise ways in which they matter for children remains far from fully understood. The question of exactly how fathers matter for children's development has dominated much of the emerging research on fatherhood and has produced some promising findings. A good example of this work is the study conducted by Ron Mincy and colleagues and presented at Penn State's 22nd Annual Symposium on Family Issues. My task is to provide a commentary of this work. Toward this end, I organize this commentary as follows: (1) provide a brief review of the theoretical underpinnings of what fathers do and how it matters for children; (2) discuss Mincy and colleague's findings in the context of the brief review of how fathers matter; and (3) conclude with some directions for future research.

What Do Fathers Do? How and Why Do They Matter?

Efforts to understand what fathers do inevitably lead us to the decades-old question: Are fathers different from mothers? Are they the same? Are they different or similar in all domains, or do they vary by domain and developmental period? Early research, largely based on middle-class samples, showed more similarities than differences between mothers and fathers. A review of this literature comparing

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father–child and mother–child interactions concluded that there were no consistent stylistic differences on a variety of measures, including in the co-parenting system (Cabrera, Scott, Fagan, Steward-Streng, & Chien, 2012; Lamb & Lewis, 2004). Importantly, children seem to benefit from high-quality parental support regardless of which parent provides it (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Roggman, 2004; Ryan, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006).

Research stressing differences between parents has noted that fathers are more likely to tease their children, engage in rough-and-tumble play, encourage risk-taking, and socialize gender roles (Fletcher, St George, & Freeman, 2013; Grossmann, Grossmann, Kindler, & Zimmermann, 2008; Paquette & Dumont, 2013). These findings suggest that differences between maternal and paternal behavior likely reflect individual differences related to personality, family structure, education, cultural beliefs, and values. The differences might also reflect frequency and amount rather than substance (e.g., more fathers than mothers engage in rough-and-tumble play, especially with sons; Panksepp, Burgdorf, Turner, & Gordon, 2002). Also, fathers, more so than mothers, may encourage their children to take risks in their play (Hagan & Kuebli, 2007) and encourage them to deal with scary experiences (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). A recent review of the literature suggests that the dimensions (e.g., skills, beliefs, and behaviors) of mothers and fathers are not conceptually unique (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014). Being a sensitive parent, regardless of gender, seems to be important for children's development.

Other differences between parents may emerge over time as parents and children grow and change, but the precise time in which these differences emerge is not well understood. Maternal sensitivity wanes over time, but it is unclear whether this shift also happens with fathers (Laursen, DeLay, & Adams, 2010). The father–child relationship may have stronger effects on some aspects of children's development (e.g., social skills) than the mother–child relationship does (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). There may also be gender differences in the way boys and girls respond to certain types of behavior displayed by fathers, for example, intrusiveness (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Shannon, & Hancock, 2012; Eagly & Wood, 2013). In some contexts, children's sociability might be uniquely related to fathers' sociability (Bogels & Perotti, 2011). Altogether these findings suggest that gender (of both children and parents) and dispositional characteristics may influence parent–child relationships and their effects on both the other parent and children (Sameroff, 2010). Future research should examine additional domains and contexts in an effort to delineate differences in how fathers engage their children and how it matters for different developmental periods.

This brief discussion on similarities and differences in paternal and maternal parenting behaviors suggests a system of complementarity in the family. Mothers' and fathers' behaviors might complement (or interact with) each other. This conclusion supports Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model that a wide diversity of factors can come into play across time and settings; factors that might lead to both mothers and fathers taking on a wide diversity of roles in childrearing. For example, more fathers than mothers may encourage their children to take risks in play, but mothers more often than fathers may encourage children to take account of the reactions of others during play (Power, McGrath, Hughes, & Manire, 1994).

Further, support for both similarity and difference in paternal and maternal parenting comes from transactional models of human development, which suggest multidirectional effects. Thus, simple additive contributions to children's development are not entirely adequate (Fitzgerald & Bradley, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Sameroff, 2010). The reactions of each member of the dyad reflect the multiplicity of interconnections present in the total family system and generate family system characteristics that challenge reductionist efforts to model fathering or mothering (see also Cabrera Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014). Moreover, these transactions occur over time and may have different outcomes for each individual within a particular system. There is a relatively new body of research that focuses on the interactive or multiplicative effects of mothers' and fathers' contributions to children's development (Lewin, Mitchell, Hodgkinson, Waters, Beers, & Gilmore, 2014; Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999).

Overall, the findings briefly discussed above offer compelling support for the view that reciprocal and interactive models are best suited for understanding how fathering might be different from mothering (in form or effect). The findings also suggest that compensation effects (positive fathering buffering the negative effects of environmental risk on children) might be domain specific and vary by child's age. Potential interactive effects are hypothesized within theoretical systemic traditions. The Cabrera et al. (2014) model captures the complexities of fathering and mothering (e.g., unique versus multiplicative influences, direct versus indirect influences). The model takes into consideration contextual and individual factors that may move fathers to being more like or more different from mothers and vice versa. In the next section, I use this model to discuss the work of Mincy and his colleagues (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") on the effects of father engagement and children's behaviors.

Understanding How Fathers' Involvement Influences Children's Behaviors

As of yet, there is no comprehensive framework that can be used to understand why fathers parent in the manner they do and how they shape their children's development (Cabrera et al., 2014; Paquette & Dumont, 2013). In efforts to address this gap, Cabrera et al. (2014) expanded their 2007 model of father involvement resulting in a revised model, *The Ecology of Father-Child Relationships: An Expanded Model* (see Fig. 1, herein referred to as the expanded model; Cabrera et al., 2014). The expanded model is grounded in dynamic systems concepts, as well as transactional and dialectic processes, and presents fathering as broadly contextualized, embedded in dynamic systems, and involving reciprocal processes that evolve through time in cultural contexts. That is, parent-child relationships are embedded in complex, dynamic systems that change over time. The expanded model provides a framework for viewing changes over time, as parents and children age, families reconfigure, and contexts change. This heuristic model is informed by recent research showing the importance of context to understanding what fathers do and why it matters

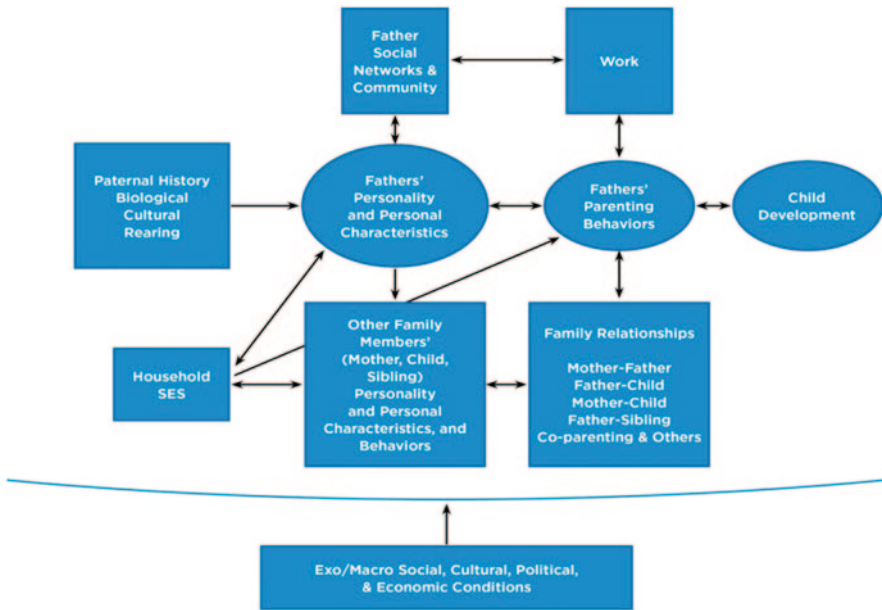


Fig. 1 The ecology of father-child relationships: An expanded model (Cabrera et al., 2014)

(e.g., Cabrera, Cook, McFadden, & Bradley, 2012; Jia, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012; Lamb, McHale, & Crouter, 2013). According to this model, fathers' behaviors are directly and indirectly related to children's behaviors through other family relationships and other contextual factors. Moreover, the child is an active participant in his own development and the resulting interaction is reciprocal between the father-child dyads.

Father Engagement and Children's Behaviors: A Longitudinal Analysis

I use the expanded model of father relationships (Cabrera et al., 2014) to present a critical analysis of Mincy and colleague's study (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") of the association between what fathers do and their children's behaviors. This work is timely and of critical importance because it highlights the state of the research on fathering, which is trying to unpack the ways in which fathers are important for children's development. As parents, fathers' contribution to their children's development extends beyond economic to encompass other dimensions (or investments) of parenting including providing safety and sustenance, structure of the home environment, socioemotional support, and cognitive stimulation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004).

Mincy and his colleagues (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") use the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing dataset to estimate the independent effects of father engagement in a broad range of child-focused activities with 5-year-old children on children's behavior when they are 9. Mincy and colleagues argue that it is important to understand how the effects of paternal engagement might differ from the effects of maternal engagement with children at this critical juncture and thus model paternal and maternal involvement. The inclusion of both parents and the use of this rich dataset are strengths of this work.

What did Mincy and colleagues find? Consistent with previous studies, mothers reported spending above average portions of their time engaged in literacy activities, whereas fathers were reported as being engaged in more physical play. (The study relied on mother's reports of engagement by fathers.) The children whose fathers were reported as engaging with them more at age 5 had fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems than children of their counterparts. However, when paternal engagement was entered into the model, maternal engagement was no longer statistically significant suggesting that these effects might be dependent.

These results are interesting but must be interpreted with caution. First, it is unclear why engaging in literacy activities, as measured by Mincy and colleagues would result in better behavior outcomes for children. The parenting literature suggests specificity of parenting practices/behaviors to outcomes. Thus, we would expect literacy activities to relate mostly to literacy/language outcomes. Perhaps, a better way to test this model is to include measures of social interactions between fathers and children that are related to social skills. Second, engaging in positive activities, such as reading, facilitates emerging self-regulation, which, in turn, promotes social competencies. This would suggest that father engagement in literacy activities as measured in Mincy and colleagues' study might be related to behavior problems through its effects on self-regulation. This mediational hypothesis getting at mechanism of engagement can move us forward to understand how to intervene. Third, the finding that mothers and fathers are different in terms of the frequency with which they read to their children is not in itself a new finding. We know from previous studies that fathers' language skills are more predictive of children's vocabulary than are mothers' language skills (Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004; Pancsofar, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2010). So, frequency of reading alone does not tell us that fathers' contribution to children's literacy skills is minimal. It rather suggests that we should look to other ways in which fathers promote children's language skills. Fourth, it is important to examine differences by race and ethnicity. Ecological theory emphasizes that the context of fathering is important. Mincy and his colleagues found that Hispanic children's behavior problems were lower than for other children. This finding begs the question of whether other cultural aspects (e.g., beliefs expectations, immigration status) might moderate associations between fathers' behaviors and children's outcomes. Fifth, the dependence of mothers' and fathers' associations is not supported by other studies that show unique and independent effects of mothers and fathers. This finding needs to be furthered examined. Sixth, the reliance on maternal report of fathers' engagement is a step backward to understanding how fathers matter. Although I recognize

that this might be a limitation of the dataset, it is important to acknowledge that maternal report of paternal behaviors (just as relying on paternal reports of maternal behaviors) does not help us to understand why fathers matter.

Conclusion

Fathers, like mothers, are capable of engaging in responsive and nurturing behavior that promotes their children's development. Although there are no conceptual differences between what fathers and mothers do with their children, there is evidence that fathers and mothers may engage with their children in different ways that vary in frequency and intensity, and with characteristics of children and other contextual factors. The question of whether fathers matter for children seems to have been answered by researchers, to some extent. The question that deserves more attention is *how fathers matter?* Answering this question requires that we appeal to theoretical models that can help us to understand the processes by which fathers' behaviors predict children's outcomes. A possible heuristic model is the ecology of father-child relationships: expanded model, demonstrating fathers' influence is contextual and dynamic (Cabrera et al., 2014). For example fathers' engagement with children might relate to children's outcomes through changes in the child (e.g., self-regulation) or through changes in the family systems (e.g., mother-child relationships). Mincy and his colleagues show that fathers' and mothers' engagement in literacy activities is different in amount and dependent on the other parent's engagement. Future studies should build on these findings to examine how different types of father engagement are related to specific child outcomes and whether these effects are mediated through other family processes or through other changes in children's behaviors.

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