

Patterns of Mother and Father Involvement in Day Care

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ABSTRACT: Twenty-eight dual-earner couples were interviewed 10 times each to determine their involvement in their young child's day care center. Mothers picked up the child significantly more often than did fathers. Mothers and fathers spent about equal amounts of time in the center during their visits. In comparison to fathers, mothers were significantly more communicative with caregivers and the director. There were many similarities between mothers and fathers in the topics they discussed with staff.

The past several decades have witnessed a striking increase in the number of mothers with young children who are working outside of the home. More than 50 percent of mothers with infants work in the labor force or are looking for work. In 1993, the majority of married mothers (59.6%) and many single mothers (47.4%) with children under six years of age were in the labor force (U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1994).

These dramatic changes in mothers' participation in paid labor have prompted researchers to examine a variety of questions about mother and father involvement with children. One area that has received much attention is the involvement of parents with their children in the home environment (Bryant & Zick, 1996; Coltrane, 1996; Marsiglio, 1991). The present study explores an aspect of mother and father involvement which has received less attention than parent involvement at home—mother and father involvement in day care.

Most early childhood educators and professionals agree that parent involvement is an important component of day care (Berger, 1995; Bredekamp, 1987; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Caldwell, 1985; Powell, 1989). The benefits of parent involvement are likely to be experienced by both parents and their children. Parent involvement can help to

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insure that there is consistency in the way that adults provide care to children (Becher, 1986). Taylor and Machida (1994) found that maternal involvement in Head Start correlated with children's learning skills and classroom behavior. Parents may benefit from the support and information about parenting and child development provided by caregivers (Hughes, 1985). Frequent involvement also may help parents of infants and toddlers to experience less guilt and anxiety about working outside of the home, thus increasing parents' sense of well-being (Fagan, 1994a). Empowerment of parents has been another goal of some early childhood programs (Cochran, 1988). Furthermore, the frequency of communication between parents and caregivers has been shown to be positively correlated with the quality of the day care program (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994).

Despite the evidence regarding the significance of parent involvement, there has been a dearth of research describing how parents are involved in their child's center. Most studies of parent involvement in day care have focussed on variables such as the frequency and content of parent-caregiver communication, the types of activities that parents participate in, and the amount of time that parents spend in the center (Endsley & Minish, 1991; Leavitt, 1995; Powell, 1978; Zigler & Turner, 1982). Much of the information that is available pertains to mothers' participation in day care (Powell, 1989).

The present study focuses on patterns of mother and father involvement in day care. Information on such patterns is important primarily because mothers assume much of the responsibility for children in child care arrangements (Peterson & Gerson, 1992). Responsibility for day care may be an especially burdensome aspect of parenting among mothers working in the paid labor force because of potential conflicts and interference with the demands of employment (Peterson & Gerson, 1992). While it is clear from the literature that mothers assume much of the responsibility for child care arrangements (Coltrane, 1996), it is not clear how mothers and fathers compare on specific patterns of involvement. Information about specific patterns could help to suggest ways in which fathers could share more of the responsibilities of child care arrangements.

With respect to what is already known about parent involvement in day care, mother-caregiver communication has probably received the greatest attention in the research literature (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994; Powell, 1989). Mothers frequently report that they place a high value on communication with providers (Leavitt, 1995), although caregivers have rated communication as more important than have mothers (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994). Most communication between mothers and caregivers focuses on the child, including topics such as the child's health, progress in toilet training, child-peer relations,

child-caregiver relations, and eating and sleeping routines (Leavitt, 1995; Powell, 1978). Researchers have also found that mother-caregiver communication usually occurs during drop-offs and pick-ups and is short in duration (Ensley & Minish, 1991; Zigler & Turner, 1982). In a study of middle and upper-middle class mothers, Fagan (1994b) noted that there was no significant difference in the frequency of mother-caregiver communication between mothers who worked more than one mile from the day care center and mothers who worked less than three city blocks from the center.

A small number of studies have examined the amount of time mothers spend in the center and maternal involvement in caregiving activities in the center, such as feeding, holding, changing diapers, playing, and changing clothing. In their study of programs serving children from infancy to preschool-age, Zigler and Turner (1982) found that parents spent on average 7.4 minutes per day visiting the center. Fagan (1994b) reported that mothers who worked three or fewer city blocks from the center spent on average 52.53 minutes per day in the center with their young children, and mothers who worked more than one mile from the center spent 18.82 minutes per day. Furthermore, mothers who worked nearby participated on average in 1.52 caregiving activities per day. Mothers who worked at greater distances engaged in 0.82 activities per day.

Very few studies have compared mother and father involvement in day care. Atkinson (1987) reported that a higher percentage of mothers than fathers communicate with family day care providers. Fagan (1994c) found that mothers were significantly more involved than fathers in their child's day care center. This study was conducted with controlling for the parent's occupational status and distance between the center and the parent's workplace. Parent involvement was a composite variable consisting of the amount of time spent in the center, communication frequency, number of mid-day visits, playing with the child in the center, and holding the child.

The fatherhood literature illuminates possible differences in fathers' and mothers' involvement in the center. A substantial body of literature has shown that mothers typically engage in work-related activities when they are involved with their children (i.e., feeding, grooming, dressing, changing diapers) whereas fathers typically engage their children in play activities (Lamb, 1981, 1986). Recent studies have shown that fathers in dual-earner families now contribute more time to child care activities than they did in previous decades (Dancer & Gilbert, 1993; Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Jump & Haas, 1987; Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989). However, mothers still spend more time than fathers in childrearing tasks and other forms of family work (Coltrane, 1995; Hochschild, 1989; McBride &

Mills, 1993). Furthermore, fathers seldom assume responsibility for noticing when child-related tasks should be carried out and for making sure that those tasks are performed (Coltrane, 1995). Fathers also tend to be less nurturing of young children than are mothers (Bentley & Fox, 1991; Lamb, 1986).

Based on the literature on fatherhood, it seems plausible to suggest that fathers will visit the child's day care center less frequently and they will spend less time in the center than mothers. More specifically, this study hypothesized that fathers will participate in significantly fewer drop-offs, pick-ups, and mid-day visits than mothers. Furthermore, fathers will spend less time in the center than mothers when they actually drop off, pick up, or visit during the middle of the day. Fathers are also less likely than mothers to participate in work-related child care activities, such as feeding children, when they actually visit the center. Instead, it is hypothesized that they will spend more time than mothers playing with the child. Since mothers are generally more responsible for children in the home and day care environments, it seems likely that they will also communicate more frequently with caregivers than fathers. Finally, this study explored differences between mothers and fathers in the specific content of their communications with caregivers.

Variation in the patterns of involvement in day care among mothers and fathers may be influenced by other factors which are also related to the gender of the parent. One such variable is the distance between the day care center and the parent's workplace. In a recent study of parent involvement in day care centers, Fagan (1994c) reported that mothers and fathers who worked less than one mile from the child's center spent significantly more time at the program than did parents who worked more than one mile from the center. Furthermore, mothers were significantly more likely than fathers to work near the center. It is, therefore, important to control for the distance variable in studies which compare mother and father involvement.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were recruited from eight day care centers located in or near a Northeastern city between October, 1991, and May, 1992. Four of the centers were located in the main business district of this city, and the other four programs were situated in suburban communities. The urban and suburban settings did not differ significantly from one another on measures of family income or staff-

child ratio. The method for calculating staff-child ratio was described in an earlier study using the same sample of parents (Fagan, 1994c). All participating day care centers had open door policies regarding parent involvement. Subjects were invited to participate if the child was between the ages of four and 19 months, both parents were married to each other and cohabiting, and both parents worked a minimum of 30 hours per week outside of the home. Only married parents were selected for this study because of the many variations in family structure that occur when parents are separated or divorced, and the impact that these structures have on the involvement of both the resident and nonresident parents. The exploratory nature of this study seemed to justify the use of a convenience sample.

A total of 28 married couples agreed to participate in this study. The average age of the mothers was 32.4 years ($SD=4.01$), and of the fathers 34.0 years ($SD=6.30$). Children were on the average 11.8 months of age ($SD=3.71$). Eighteen of the children were females and 10 were males. The median level of the parents' education was four years of post-secondary school. The median income of the families ranged from \$70,000 to \$90,000 per year. Ten fathers in the study worked less than one mile from the day care center; 18 fathers worked more than one mile from the program. Fifteen mothers worked less than one mile from the center, and 13 mothers worked more than one mile from the center.

Procedure

Parents completed 10 telephone interviews during a four- to five-week period of time. Parents were not informed about the days when the interviews would take place. Telephone interviews were used rather than have observers in the center in order to avoid any influence that an observer might have on the parents' involvement in the center. Each five-minute interview was conducted on a weekday and only if both parents were available. All interviews were conducted by a graduate student who was trained to do interviewing and who had worked as a clinical social worker for several years. A packet of questionnaires was sent home to parents after the seventh telephone interview.

Instruments

The author developed a questionnaire to obtain data about parent involvement in the day care center. Three categories of information were addressed: (a) frequency of drop-offs, pick-ups, and mid-day meetings; (b) amount of time that parents spend in the center at

drop-off, pick-up, and mid-day visit; (c) parental activities carried out while in the center; and (d) conversation topics between parents and caregivers. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about the parent's involvement on the same day that the instrument was administered.

In order to determine the amount of time spent in the center during visits, parents indicated the times when they entered and left the center during each visit (i.e., drop-off). These data were used to calculate the average daily amount of time that parents spent in the center during drop-off, pick-up, and mid-day visit on those days when the parent actually dropped off, picked up, or visited during mid-day.

Coltrane (1996) has suggested that fathers are more likely than mothers to overestimate their involvement in household tasks and child care activities because higher levels of participation enhance fathers' self-image as an involved and caring parent and spouse. It was therefore decided to examine the correlations between mothers' and fathers' reports of the amount of time spent in the center during shared drop-offs, pick-ups, and mid-day visits as a means of determining the reliability of parents' reports. A total of 48 instances occurred in which mothers and fathers entered and left the day care center at the same time. There was a strong correlation between mothers' and fathers' reports of the amount of time spent in the center, $r(47) = 0.81, p < .001$

A checklist of parent activities in the center was developed by interviewing six non-study parents prior to this study. Table 2 contains the final list of activities included during each telephone interview. The list of activities was read aloud to mothers and fathers during each telephone interview. Parents indicated which, if any, activities they participated in at the center that day. A mean frequency score for each activity was calculated by dividing the total number of days that the parent participated in an activity by the number of days that the parent actually visited the center.

In order to measure parent-caregiver communication, a checklist of child-related topics was developed with the six previously mentioned non-study parents (see Table 3). The interviewer read aloud the list of topics to study participants during the telephone interviews if the parent and caregiver had a conversation that was more than a simple greeting that day. The respondents then indicated which topics on the checklist were discussed. These data were used to determine the average number of days (frequency) in which each topic was discussed by parents and caregivers on days when the parent and caregiver actually had a conversation.

A family background questionnaire was sent to the parents following the seventh telephone interview. This survey form contained

questions about the following: (a) age of the parents, (b) age of the child, (c) highest level of education completed by parents, (d) total family income during the previous year, (e) number of hours worked outside of the home, and (g) distance between the day care center and the workplace. Most of the information from this questionnaire was used to describe the demographics of the families. The item regarding distance between the center and workplace provided data to be used as a covariate in the analyses comparing mother and father involvement in day care.

Data Analysis

Analysis of covariance was used to address all of the research questions. Separate analyses were conducted using the following dependent variables: (a) average amount of time per day spent in the center during drop-off, pick-up, and mid-day visit; (b) average frequency of activities (i.e., conversations with caregivers) carried out in the center on those days when the parent actually visited the center; and (c) average frequency of parent-caregiver communication topics discussed on those days when the parent actually had a conversation with a caregiver. The independent variable in each analysis was parent gender. Distance between the center and the parent's workplace was entered as a covariate in each equation because fathers in this study tended to work at greater distances from the center than did mothers, $\chi^2(1, N=56)=1.81, p=.18$.

Results

Drop-offs, Pick-ups, and Mid-day Visits

There was no significant difference between mothers and fathers in the frequency of drop-offs at the center, after statistically controlling for distance between the parent's workplace and the center (see Table 1). The distance between the center and workplace was significantly associated with frequency of drop-offs, $F(1,53)=10.95, p<.01$. Parents who worked one mile or less from the center were more likely to drop the child off. There was a significant difference between mothers and fathers in the frequency of pick-ups from the center. Mothers picked up their children twice as often as fathers, with controlling for distance between the job site and center. Distance between sites was also significantly related to pick-ups, $F(1,53)=5.10, p<.05$. Parents who worked nearby were more likely to pick up than parents who worked at greater distances. There was no significant difference be-

Table 1
ANCOVA's Comparing the Frequency and Amount of Time of Mothers' and Fathers' Visits to the Center at Drop-off, Pick-up, and Mid-day Visits

Variable	Mother	Father	<i>F</i>
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Frequency of drop-offs	7.60 (3.70)	4.80 (4.30)	3.61
Frequency of pick-ups	7.80 (3.10)	3.60 (3.60)	17.08*
Frequency of mid-day visits	3.20 (4.10)	.90 (2.00)	2.15
Amount of time during drop-off	15.04 (5.92)	12.58 (4.96)	1.15
Amount of time during pick-up	14.54 (6.65)	16.95 (13.02)	.88
Amount of time during mid-day visit	29.93 (15.74)	27.17 (18.50)	.08

Note. The variables measuring frequency refer to the frequency over the course of 10 interviews. The variables measuring amount of time refer to the average number of minutes spent in the center on those days when the parent dropped off, picked up, or made a mid-day visit. Distance between the parent's workplace and the center was entered as a covariate in each analysis.

* $p < .001$

tween mothers and fathers in the frequency of mid-day visits to the center. However, parents who worked one mile or less from the center visited significantly more often during mid-day than parents who worked at greater distances, $F(1,53) = 51.11, p < .001$.

There were no significant differences between mothers and fathers in the amount of time spent in the center during drop-offs, pick-ups, or mid-day visits. It was also noteworthy that mothers and fathers spent approximately the same amount of time in the center during drop-offs and pick-ups (on average, about one quarter of an hour) and mid-day visits (on average, a little less than one half of an hour).

Parent Involvement Activities

The most frequent parent involvement activity among mothers and fathers was talking with caregivers (see Table 2). On average, mothers talked with caregivers almost every day that they visited the center.

Table 2
ANCOVA's Comparing Mother and Father Engagement in
Activities in the Day Care Center

Activity	Mother	Father	F
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Talking with caregiver	.90 (.13)	.66 (.33)	13.30**
Playing with child	.55 (.29)	.55 (.39)	.03
Holding the child	.30 (.32)	.26 (.29)	.18
Talking with other parents	.24 (.23)	.19 (.19)	.19
Observing	.20 (.24)	.17 (.25)	.05
Talking with director	.16 (.15)	.04 (.08)	9.83*
Feeding solid food	.13 (.25)	.05 (.15)	1.13
Helping staff	.07 (.21)	.02 (.07)	1.42
Giving a bottle	.06 (.11)	.04 (.09)	.05
Giving medication	.04 (.15)	.01 (.06)	.40

Note. The means and standard deviations refer to the frequency of the activity on days when the parent visited the center. Distance between the parent's workplace and the center was entered as a covariate in each analysis.

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Fathers talked with caregivers slightly more than half the time that they visited the center. Mothers talked with caregivers significantly more often than did fathers, after statistically controlling for distance between the parent's workplace and the day care. Playing with children in the center was the second most frequent activity. On average, mothers and fathers played with their children 0.55 days. The third most frequent activity was holding the child, followed by talking with other parents in the center and observing the child.

Mothers and fathers occasionally talked to the day care center director and fed solid food to the child in the center. Mothers engaged in significantly more talks with the director than did fathers. Mothers and fathers seldom helped staff, gave a bottle, or gave medication to their child.

Communication with Caregivers

The most frequent topics of conversation between parents (mothers and fathers) and caregivers were feeding/eating, activities for chil-

dren in the center, sleeping, the child's motor development, mood, peer relationships, and health (see Table 3). Mothers and fathers occasionally talked with caregivers about the child's play behavior, clothing, speech/language development, supervision by staff, separation anxiety, bowel movements, room and staff changes in the center, and the child's growth. Parents seldom discussed the child's relationship with staff, biting, teething, weight, and crying. Mothers and fa-

Table 3
ANCOVA's Comparing Mother and Father Conversation
Topics with Caregivers

Conversation Topic	Mother	Father	F
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
feeding/eating	.53 (.30)	.32 (.29)	5.32*
activities in center	.31 (.24)	.22 (.24)	.92
sleeping	.28 (.21)	.17 (.16)	4.47*
child's health	.20 (.15)	.15 (.16)	1.43
motor development	.21 (.22)	.08 (.12)	4.29*
child's mood	.14 (.15)	.10 (.13)	1.15
peer relations	.14 (.20)	.09 (.13)	1.41
play behavior	.08 (.10)	.04 (.09)	2.07
clothing	.07 (.08)	.06 (.12)	.05
speech/language	.07 (.10)	.04 (.08)	1.56
supervision by staff	.06 (.09)	.00 (.02)	5.72*
separation anxiety	.05 (.08)	.04 (.08)	.01
bowel movements	.05 (.08)	.03 (.06)	3.71
room or staff changes in the center	.05 (.14)	.12 (.44)	1.06
child's growth	.05 (.09)	.03 (.08)	1.22
child's relationship with staff	.03 (.10)	.02 (.06)	.00
biting	.03 (.06)	.03 (.09)	.04
teething	.02 (.04)	.05 (.11)	2.63
child's weight	.01 (.03)	.00 (.00)	.52
crying	.01 (.03)	.00 (.00)	.52

Note. Distance between the parents' workplace and the center was entered as a covariate in each analysis.

* $p < .05$.

thers differed significantly on only four topics of conversation with caregivers. Mothers spoke with caregivers more often than fathers about feeding/eating, sleeping, motor development, and supervision by staff.

Discussion

The present study showed that there were some significant differences, but many similarities between mothers and fathers in the ways that they became involved in their child's day care center. After controlling for distance between the day care center and the workplace, mothers did not drop off their children at the center significantly more often than fathers, as was hypothesized, but mothers did pick up their children significantly more often than fathers. Mothers and fathers also did not differ significantly in the frequency of mid-day visits. Contrary to what was hypothesized, fathers spent about the same amount of time as mothers during drop-off, pick-up, or mid-day visit. Coltrane (1995) has noted that fathers typically work three more hours per week than mothers in paid labor. Longer hours of non-family work among fathers may explain the tendency of mothers to pick up their children from day care. Of course, it is also possible that many mothers still view themselves as having primary responsibility, and fathers view themselves as having secondary responsibility, for child care outside of the home (Starrels, 1992). Mothers may feel that picking up the child at the end of the day provides them with the opportunity to assume those responsibilities.

Mothers and fathers engaged in similar activities in the center. Frequent activities included playing with, holding, and observing the child. Mothers and fathers often talked with other parents in the center. Mothers did not engage in significantly more work-related activities—such as feeding, giving medicine, or giving a bottle to children—than fathers. Contrary to expectation, fathers did not spend significantly more time than mothers playing with children when they visited the center. With respect to the most frequent activity—communication with caregivers—mothers were significantly more communicative than fathers. The infrequency of father-staff communication may reflect the tendency of mothers rather than fathers to assume responsibility for child care in the home and day care (Peterson & Gerson, 1992). Frequent communication may be necessary in order for mothers to have the information that is needed to assume responsibility for children. Another explanation may be that caregivers have been slow to respond to the increased involvement of fathers (Meyerhoff, 1994). Caregivers may communicate with mothers

rather than fathers simply because that is what they have done in the past.

It is also possible that fathers are avoiding what they perceive as a feminine task—talking with caregivers about topics such as toileting, child development, and feeding behavior. The findings from this study do not, however, support this explanation. Although mothers communicated with caregivers more frequently than fathers, both parents discussed many of the same topics when conversations occurred. For example, there was little difference between mothers and fathers in the frequency of their communications about the child's mood, activities in the center, the child's health, peer relationships, and clothing. Furthermore, there did not appear to be any particular pattern with regards to those topics (feeding/eating, sleeping, motor development, and supervision by staff) that mothers discussed at a significantly greater rate than fathers.

Caution should be used in drawing conclusions from this study. It is difficult to generalize from the respondents in this study, who were primarily Caucasian and middle or upper-middle income, to other populations of parents. Larger scale studies with more representative samples are necessary to confirm the findings reported in this investigation. It will also be necessary to replicate the findings of this study using methods such as observation of mothers and fathers in the day care center.

Despite the limitations of this study, however, the findings may have implications for day care practitioners. First, fathers in dual-earner families should be encouraged to increase their communication with caregivers. There are many strategies that can be used to increase fathers' communication. For example, administrators and staff can inform parents at the time of enrollment that, whenever possible, mothers and fathers should talk with caregivers. Day care practitioners should also make every effort to direct their daily communications to fathers as well as mothers. Practitioners should be particularly attentive to interactions in which fathers attend to children's needs while mothers communicate with caregivers. Staff can intervene by encouraging fathers to join in the dialogue.

Second, the findings of the present study seem to suggest that fathers are more likely to visit the day care center during drop-off. Caregivers should make a special effort to communicate with fathers during this time because they may not return for pick-up. Staff may also want to plan special fathers' days when fathers are encouraged to drop-off their children and stay for coffee.

Third, caregivers should make every effort to establish rapport with fathers. This involves caregivers setting a tone in which fathers feel comfortable communicating with them. Staff can facilitate rapport-

building by making small talk, encouraging fathers to express concerns about the center, asking about the child's weekend, or commenting about a father's positive interactional style with his child. Higher levels of paternal communication with caregivers may not only help to decrease the the burdensome aspect of parenting among mothers working in the paid labor force resulting from potential conflicts and interference with the demands of employment, but it may also support fathers in their attempts to care for the next generation.

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