Institute for American Values

Center for Marriage and Families

Research Brief No. 14, October 2008

Do Fathers Matter Uniquely for Adolescent Well-Being?

David Eggebeen

THE EVIDENCE IS IN AND IT IS CLEAR THAT FATHERS DO MATTER FOR THE LIVES OF CHILDREN. Hundreds of studies over the past two decades have consistently demonstrated that fathers have a measureable impact on children.[1] Studies show that infants are positively affected by the interactions and care given by their fathers.[2] Research has also established the importance of fathers for older children's well-being. Good studies have found that the quality of parenting exhibited by the father as well as the resources fathers bring or don't bring to their families predict children's behavior problems, depression, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction.[3] The reach of fathers has been shown to extend to adolescents and young adults, as research shows adolescents function best when their fathers are engaged and involved in their lives.[4] Finally, there is good evidence that fathers play an important role in helping their children make the transition to adulthood.[5]

Much remains that we do not know about the link between fathers and their children. Yet the first "stage" of work, that of establishing that fathers matter, is well advanced. The next stage, exploring the unique contributions of fathers as compared with mothers or other adults, remains less well developed. To date, debates about whether fathers are essential to optimal child development have taken place without much anchor in empirical research.[6] Assessing the unique effects of fathers on children is important for several reasons.

First, high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing mean that about half of children today are likely to live some of their childhood in a home where their father does not live.[7] As of 2007, 19.2 million children were not living with a biological or adoptive father or stepfather, compared to 9.5 million children living in fatherless homes in 1970.[8] While many nonresident fathers work hard to provide for their children and take parenting seriously, research shows that responsible, involved nonresident fathers remain rare. In a large number of cases, nonresident fathers are largely absent from the lives of their children.[9] Given this demographic reality, it remains imperative for family scholars to continue to research the full "cost" of fatherlessness for children.

Second, an increasing number of children are growing up in households that differ in important ways from two biological-parent households as well as female-headed households. Certainly, the numbers of children in multigenerational households, cohabiting-couple households, and other nontraditional living arrangements can no longer be ignored. Put another way, do children develop optimally when raised by their father and their mother? Or can any number of adults, regardless of their gender, parent as effectively as a father and a mother?

Finally, there is considerable cultural pressure today for fathers to be involved in the lives of their children. What exactly this "involvement" means, however, remains unclear. Should fathers act like mothers to their children? What does it mean that children might be better off if "there is a man around"?[10] Research on the similarities and differences between mothers and fathers in characteristics, behavior, and parenting may help parents better appreciate the distinctive parenting contributions of their spouse or child's parent.

To date, research attempts to disentangle the effects of mothers and fathers have been thin. One review of the literature on the effects of fathers on children identified only 8 of 72 studies that took into account the relationship between the mother and the child when assessing the effects of father involvement.[11] Most of these studies have simply "controlled for" (or taken out) the effects of the mother's characteristics in their assessment of whether fathers matter. The relationship between the mother's and the father's characteristics and behavior on a particular outcome, however, can potentially take three forms.[12] First, the father's effects may be *additive*; that is, what fathers do may have an effect on adolescent outcomes over and above what mothers do. It is also possible, however, that the father's and the mother's involvement or characteristics are *redundant*; that is, children benefit from a father or mother—it doesn't matter which one—engaging in certain behaviors or possessing certain characteristics. Finally, it is possible that fathers have a *unique* effect on certain outcomes; that is, fathers, but not mothers, are important for distinct outcomes. Little is yet understood about how the father's influence is distributed across these possibilities.

In this research brief, I explore the importance of fathers and mothers for a nationally representative sample of teenagers, specifically examining whether a father's human capital, social capital, and role modeling may uniquely influence his adolescent's self-identity and behavior.

Sociological Perspectives on Fatherhood

When sociologists think about what fathers do and how they might make unique contributions to the welfare of their children beyond that of mothers, they focus less on the particulars of how fathers interact with their children (the province of psychologists) and more on what resources fathers directly or indirectly provide. Much of the sociologically oriented research concentrates on using survey data to compare children living in married-couple families with children in mother-headed families. While this approach has been useful for understanding the advantages for children of growing up in a two-parent family, it is not very useful for understanding the precise role fathers play because researchers are comparing unlike situations: children reared by one parent instead of two.[13] To better understand the unique roles of fathers and mothers, this brief compares the contributions of fathers and mothers within two-parent heterosexual families to determine if they are unique.

From a sociological perspective, what kinds of contributions to children might we expect from fathers? To answer this question, sociologists tend to think about what kinds of human capital and social capital fathers possess and how this might uniquely affect children. Also, because sociologists see both parents as the primary agents of socialization, they look at the role modeling of both mothers and fathers as important influences on children.

Human Capital

How mothers and fathers care for their children is strongly influenced by their human capital—the skills, knowledge, and values that they possess and that are associated with occupational success in American society. Parents with high levels of human capital, typically indicated by years of education, are more likely to do the kinds of things that enhance their children's cognitive abilities and school performance. They are likely to provide a stimulating home environment by limiting television and encouraging reading. They are more likely to take their children to museums, libraries, plays, and other enriching activities. They may choose to live in communities with good schools or sacrifice to send their children to strong private or parochial schools. Mothers and fathers with high human capital not only encourage high occupational aspirations in their children but also promote the kinds of behavior in their children that are associated with success in school.

Research that has examined the parenting practices of both mothers and fathers has been relatively rare.

Most, but not all, studies show mothers and fathers with high education levels have children who do well in school.[14] Furthermore, most of these studies find that a father's education affects children independently from a mother's education. Although less studied, where fathers have good education, families have also been found in some studies to have children with positive self-esteem, life skills, social competence, and cooperativeness.[15] In short, there is consistent evidence that children benefit from the human capital characteristics of *both* their parents.

Social Capital

In a classic article in 1988, sociologist James Coleman identified "social capital" as resources embedded in family and community relationships. The quality of the relationship between each parent and child represents one important component of social capital.[16] A large number of studies that investigated associations between paternal supportive behavior and child outcomes found that the overwhelming majority showed significant associations between father support and measures of child well-being. Only a few studies, however, took into account characteristics of mothers, and among those that did, the evidence for father effects was weaker.[17]

Role Modeling

Beyond their resources and relationships, fathers and mothers influence their children simply by who they are and how they act. Children learn by observing those around them—and parents are the most visible adults in their world. Children who observe fathers and mothers treating others with respect, handling conflict in effective ways, and engaging in responsible and appropriate behavior are likely to emulate these behaviors themselves. On the other hand, children learn quite different lessons about themselves, how to behave or treat others, when parents treat each other badly, are neglectful or abusive to their children, or engage in inappropriate or illegal behavior. In addition, fathers and mothers uniquely model to their children what it means to be a man and a woman. The importance of parental modeling has been shown in a large number of studies, although only a few studies attempted to assess the effects of both mothers and fathers simultaneously. Two recent studies that did account for the role-modeling behaviors of both mothers and fathers show that each parent's psychological health, drinking behavior, availability, as well as the degree of marital conflict all influence the child's self-image and behavior.[18] More research needs to be done to understand the relative importance of mothers and fathers as role models.

An Analysis Using the National Study of Adolescent Health

Data drawn from the National Study of Adolescent Health (or "Add Health") provides an excellent opportunity to examine these theoretical ideas. The Add Health survey is a long-term nationally representative sample of 20,745 middle and high school students first interviewed in 1995–1996. A second wave of interviews was conducted one year later, and a third round of 15,170 persons was interviewed in 2001.[19] I looked only at respondents who were living with both biological parents during the first round of interviews.[20] I focused on the link between mothers and fathers and two adolescent outcomes: poor mental health (indicated by the number of symptoms of depression) and bad behavior (indicated by participation in violent or delinquent activity in the past year). Both depression and delinquent behavior become significantly more common during adolescence and represent major risk factors for poor school performance, drug and alcohol abuse, and risky sexual behavior.[21]

I used two indicators of the mother's and father's human capital: education levels and whether or not they had worked full time in the previous year. I used two indicators of the father's and mother's social capital: adolescent reports of the relationship quality with their parent and how close they feel to their parent. Finally, I looked at three indicators of the mother's and father's role-modeling behavior: the number of activities they did with their adolescent, whether they were available for the adolescent at certain times of the day, and whether the parent engaged in excessive drinking.[22]

Fathers and Adolescent Depression and Delinquent Behavior

I found that the father's levels of social and human capital, as well as some role-modeling behaviors, are strong predictors of the likelihood his child will show depression symptoms. Furthermore, the father's characteristics and behavior remain statistically significant even when the mother's human and social capital characteristics and her role-modeling behavior are taken into account. Specifically, if the father has a poor relationship with his adolescent, the adolescent reports lack of closeness, the father has a low education level, and the father does few activities with his adolescent, the more likely both male and female adolescents are to show depression symptoms, regardless of the mother's characteristics.

Research indicates that teens with healthy, close relationships to their fathers are less likely to exhibit delinquent behavior.

Fathers also matter a great deal when it comes to delinquent behavior. The higher the father's social capital (quality of father-child relationship and closeness) the less likely both boys and girls are to engage in delinquency. In addition, the father's lack of education is associated with the son's delinquency, and the father's lack of availability increases the likelihood of the daughter's delinquent behavior. All these indications of the father's influence appear to exist regardless of the mother's social and human capital and her role-modeling behavior.

Fathers as Complementary and Unique

In my analysis, I found that fathers typically make additional or complementary contributions beyond that of mothers to adolescent well-being. In almost all of these cases, the human and social capital of mothers and fathers tended to be additive in nature. In other words, two parents are better than one. In a few instances, adolescents benefit from having at least one parent modeling appropriate behavior—or suffer if one parent models bad behavior. For example, lack of one parent's availability tended to increase the likelihood of the boy's delinquency, and one parent's excessive drinking tended to increase the likelihood of the girl's delinquency. In addition, I found evidence that mothers and fathers make unique contributions to parenting depending on the gender of the adolescent, most often by their particular role modeling. For example, the father's, but not mother's, lack of involvement in the adolescent's activities was associated with the girl's depression symptoms, and the mother's lack of involvement in her child's activities uniquely predicted the boy's delinquency. The mother's, but not the father's, lack of availability and excessive drinking were associated with the boy's depression symptoms.

Research suggests that teen girls are less likely to be depressed when their fathers are available and involved in their activities.

Conclusion

What these analyses clearly show is that mothers *and* fathers *both* make vital contributions to adolescent well-being. In a few instances, fathers and mothers appear to be interchangeable. There are more instances, however, in which mothers and fathers complement each other in their characteristics or behavior in ways that benefit children, and in most cases fathers make positive contributions to the well-being of their children beyond what mothers do.

While this research demonstrates that the well-being of adolescents living with their biological parents is influenced by both mothers and fathers, significant questions remain. Very little is known about how the parenting practices, parent-child relationships, and characteristics of the parents or other adults who care for children in cohabiting-couple families or other nontraditional family arrangements are similar to, or different from, married-couple families. Until careful, methodologically rigorous studies based on reasonably representative samples are conducted, we cannot be confident that these nontraditional arrangements offer the same potential benefits to children as growing up with involved, educated, and responsible mothers and fathers.

Endnotes

1. For recent reviews of this large literature, see William Marsiglio et al., "Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 1173–1191; Daniel Paquette, "Theorizing the Father-Child Relationship: Mechanisms and Developmental Outcomes," *Human Development* 47 (2004): 193–219; Ross D. Parke, "Fathers and Families" in *The Handbook of Parenting,* 2nd ed., vol. 3, *Being and Becoming a Parent*, ed. Mark H. Bornstein (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 27–74.

2. Frank A. Pedersen, *The Father-Infant Relationship: Observational Studies in a Family Setting* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Michael W. Yogman, "Games Fathers and Mothers Play with Their Infants," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 2 (1981): 241–248.

3. Marsiglio et al., "Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond."

4. Cheryl Buehler, Mark J. Benson, and Jean M. Gerard, "Interparental Hostility and Early Adolescent Problem Behavior: The Mediating Role of Specific Aspects of Parenting," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 16, no. 2 (2006): 265–292.

5. Paul Amato, "Father-Child Relations, Mother-Child Relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-Being in Early Adulthood," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56 (1994): 1031–1042.

6. Joseph H. Pleck, "Why Could Father Involvement Benefit Children? Theoretical Perspectives," *Applied Developmental Science* 11, no. 4 (2007): 196–202; David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Pressler Press, 1996); Louis B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach, "Deconstructing the Essential Father," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 6 (1999): 397–407.

7. Larry L. Bumpass and R. Kelly Raley, "Redefining Single-Parent Families: Cohabitation and Changing Family Reality," *Demography* 32 (1995): 97–109.

8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2007 and earlier, retrieved 8/20/2008 at http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2007.html. Census data does not distinguish among fathers as biological, adoptive, or stepfathers.

9. Kathleen Mullan Harris and Suzanne Ryan, "Father Involvement and the Diversity of Family Context" in *Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement*, ed. Randal D. Day and Michael E. Lamb (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 293–319; Daniel N. Hawkins, Paul R. Amato, and Valerie King, "Parent-Adolescent Involvement: The Relative Influence of Parent Gender and Residence," *Journal of Marriage and Family,* vol. no. 68 (2006): 125–136.

10. For a fascinating account of the tendency for lesbian mothers to want a male to be involved in their children's lives, see Abbie E. Goldberg and Katherine R. Allen, "Imagining Men: Lesbian Mothers' Perceptions of Male Involvement During the Transition to Parenthood," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (May 2007): 352–365.

11. Marsiglio et al., "Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond."

12. For a related discussion of these issues, see Jeffrey T. Cookston and Andrea K. Finlay, "Father Involvement and Adolescent Adjustment: Longitudinal Findings from Add Health," *Fathering* 4 (2006): 137–158.

13. Pleck, "Why Could Father Involvement Benefit Children?" 200.

14. See Paul Amato, "More Than Money? Men's Contributions to Their Children's Lives" in *Men in Families: When Do They Get Involved? What Difference Does It Make?* ed. Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998), 241–278.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 245.

17. Ibid., 253–255.

18. D. Wayne Osgood et al., "Routine Activities and Individual Deviant Behavior," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): 635–655; Lauren M. Papp, E. Mark Cummings, and Alice C. Schermerhorn, "Pathways Among Marital Distress, Parental Symptomatology, and Child Adjustment," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (2004): 368–384; Benjamin W. Voorhess et al., "Protective and Vulnerability Factors Predicting New-Onset Depressive Episode in a Representative of U.S. Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2008): 605–616.

19. A more detailed description of the data can be found in Kathy M. Harris et al., "The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health: Research Design" (2003), available at http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/design.

20. N=5,494.

21. Robert D. Ketterlinus, Michael E. Lamb, and Katherine A. Nitz, "Adolescent Nonsexual and Sex-Related Problem Behaviors: Their Prevalence, Consequences, and Co-Occurrence" in *Adolescent Problem Behaviors,* ed. Robert D. Ketterlinus and Michael E. Lamb (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 17–39; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003).

22. Ordinary Least Squares regression was used to estimate the models. Besides the mother and father variables, all the models included the respondent's age and race, family income, and parent's marital status as control variables. These analyses were all weighted using the wave 1 sample weights, adjusting the sample to be nationally representative.

About the Author

David Eggebeen is Associate Professor of Human Development and Sociology; Senior Research Associate, Population Research Institute, Pennsylvania State University.

Institute for American Values
1841 Broadway, Suite 211
New York, NY 10023

Center for Marriage and Families
Research Brief No. 14

This research brief was commissioned by National Fatherhood Initiative and supported by Grant No. 2006-DD-BX-K003 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not represent the official position or policies of the United States Department of Justice.

About National Fatherhood Initiative

The premier fatherhood renewal organization in the country, the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) works in every sector and at every level of society to engage fathers in the lives of their children. NFI is one of the leading producers of research on the causes and consequences of father absence, public opinion on family issues, and trends in family structure and marriage. NFI's national public service advertising campaign promoting fatherhood has generated television, radio, print, Internet, and outdoor advertising valued at over $500 million. Through its resource center, FatherSOURCE, NFI offers a wide range of innovative resources to assist fathers and organizations interested in reaching and supporting fathers. Learn more by visiting www.fatherhood.org.

About the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values

Directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values issues research briefs, fact sheets, and other material related to marriage, families, and children. Its Scholarly Advisory Board includes William Doherty, University of Minnesota; Norval Glenn, University of Texas; Linda Waite, University of Chicago; W. Bradford Wilcox, University of Virginia; and James Q. Wilson, UCLA (Emeritus).

The Institute for American Values is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. The Institute brings together approximately 100 leading scholars—from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum—for interdisciplinary deliberation, collaborative research, and joint public statements on the challenges facing families and civil society. In all of its work, the Institute seeks to bring fresh analyses and new research to the attention of policymakers in government, opinion makers in the media, and decision makers in the private sector.

The Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023. Tel: (212) 246-3942. Fax: (212) 541-6665. Email: info@americanvalues.org. Web: center.americanvalues.org.