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# The Positive Effects of Fathering and the Negative Effects of a Father's Absence in the Lives of Children from Infancy to Early Adulthood: A Review of the Literature

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**ABSTRACT** *Paternal involvement is a crucial variable in the development of a child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The negative effects of a father's absence present many risk factors for children. This review of the literature seeks to combine the research surrounding the positive effects that paternal involvement yields in the lives of children, the negative effects of a father's absence, the various variables that impede paternal involvement, and the possible interventions or replacements for fathers in the lives of children. Although many impeding factors have been identified, little research has been done to find a possible intervention. According to the research consulted in this review, there is a limited amount of buffers for decreased paternal involvement. Future research should be conducted to discover more effective possible buffers, or to find a therapeutic method that more effectively increases father involvement.*

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The quality of parenting received by children is a critical factor in determining the probability of future behavioral problems in children in their early years and during their development into adulthood (Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996; Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009). As a result of this knowledge, mothering has been a topic of researchers for years; fathering, however, seems to have been understudied in the past as an intervening variable between children and their behavioral problems (see Mezulis, Hyde, & Clark, 2004). There have been many trends in the United States recently that have reduced the number of biological fathers in the homes of their children. Many variables influence the amount of time that fathers spend in their children's lives, which could possibly affect a child's risk for future behavioral maladjustment (Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, 2009).

Because of this shift in paternal involvement, its possible implications, and the lack of research in the past, fathering has been the subject of many recent studies (e.g., Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Mezulis et al., 2004).

These studies have examined a wide variety of variables, including ethnicity (Cabrera, Mitchell, Ryan, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008), nonresidency (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007), paternal depressive symptoms (Reeb & Conger, 2009), and different methods of fathering (Flanders, Leo, Paquette, Pihl, & Séguin, 2009; Jain et al., 1996). These recent studies have individually observed the various effects of fathering and paternal involvement in the lives of infants and adolescents.

With the wide variety of recent literature available, this review provides a broader perspective on the research regarding the effects of fathering on children from the early years of a child's life extending to the time in which the child enters college. It will then explore the complications that are likely to arise without a father in a child's life, and the factors that impede paternal involvement. Finally, this paper will investigate potential buffers or replacements for paternal involvement, and preventative actions that families can take to keep fathers appropriately involved in the lives of their children.

## The Positive Effects

In the earliest stages of an infant's life, the various styles of fathering play an integral role in the development of the child. According to Jain et al. (1996), there are four primary fathering styles. Each of these styles affects infants in different ways, but the fathering role that most likely yields the most positive results is a blend between the playmate-teacher and the caretaker (Jain et al., 1996). The role of a playmate-teacher was associated with a high degree of playtime and teaching activities. The role of a caretaker has been defined as a father who was highly engaged in activities such as feeding, dressing, and providing for the child. The fathers in these two categories had a high amount of positive feelings towards the infant and towards their roles as fathers (Jain et al., 1996). This

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blend of fathering roles has been shown to decrease infant behavioral problems, to increase the infant's prosocial behavior, and to increase the infant's future academic achievement (Mezulis et al., 2004).

For example, Flanders et al. (2009) performed a study in which the role of the playmate-teacher was scrutinized for its effectiveness. They studied a particular form of physical interaction between children and their fathers known as rough-and-tumble play (RTP), which is distinguished by periods of wrestling, chasing, and other physical activities during play time. Mothers do not normally engage in as much RTP as fathers do; therefore, RTP is a unique aspect in which fathers are able to influence their infants regarding their positive behavioral and emotional outcomes (Jain et al., 1996). It was observed that children ages two to six who engaged in RTP with their fathers were more socially competent with their peers at school and were less likely to develop externalizing behavior problems. However, the researchers also exposed a potential risk factor in playmate-teacher fathers. If the father during RTP let the child control the intensity or frequency of RTP instead of the father, the child was at risk to become more physically aggressive towards his or her peers, which also increases the risk for chronic psychopathology later in life. Therefore, the need to care for and play with the child is essential in the development of infants (Jain et al., 1996), but it is important to teach young children social boundaries and self-control (Flanders et al., 2009).

The positive effects of fathers on children do not stop after a child's infancy. It has been observed that parents who help a child find solutions to problems instead of solving problems for them, and who give their child positive feedback have children who are more likely to respond positively to learning experiences (Brody, Pillegrini, & Sigel, 1986). However, until a recent study performed by McBride, Dyer, Liu, Brown, and Hong (2009), the extent to which fathers uniquely influenced their children's academic performance was unknown. McBride et al. observed that parents who established a pattern of high involvement in their children's schoolwork during preschool and kindergarten were still involved in their children's schoolwork later in their academic career. This pattern of high involvement was positively correlated to improved student achievement.

However, a father's increased involvement in a child's schoolwork had a unique impact on their academic achievement. The more fathers were involved in the academics of their child, the worse the child performed in school. This does not necessarily mean that the paternal involvement caused the poor academic performance by

the child. A negative correlation could be explained by the fact that fathers become more involved in their children's schoolwork because their children are performing poorly in school (McBride et al., 2009), but limited research has been done to support this hypothesis. There is a limited amount of research regarding whether increased paternal involvement in their child's academic career does yield long-term positive results, or if fathers truly should be less involved in a child's academic career.

However, learning is not limited only to the realm of academics. Fathers are also essential in helping their children learn how to solve interpersonal conflicts. Children are more responsive to a father's constructive conflict resolutions between the father and mother (Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2007). Children learn how to resolve conflicts by observing their fathers' conflict resolution strategies. The ability to resolve conflicts becomes more important as the child enters adolescence. Adolescents begin having more emotional interactions between themselves and their peers than they did in preceding years. As a result of this increase in emotional interaction, appropriate conflict resolution strategies become more frequently implemented (Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2007).

A father's interaction continues to be a significant variable as the children grow older. A close father-adolescent relationship has been proven to reduce negative externalizing behaviors and increase positive internalizing behaviors (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009), thus making the adolescents more socially adept. By the time that children become undergraduates, the extent to which fathers uniquely influenced their children emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in a positive manner was quite extensive. According to self-reports by a group of undergraduate students, increased paternal involvement is associated with the appropriate development of gender identity, of self-esteem, of individuality, and of morality (Perrin et al., 2009). Therefore, it can be determined that fathers are uniquely influential in the development of their children.

### The Negative Effects of a Father's Absence

If fathers are uniquely important in the development of a child, then the absence of fathers would present many adverse effects in the life of a child. In addition to the lack of the aforementioned benefits of paternal involvement,

reported negative effects of a father's absence in a child's life, whether emotional or physical, include higher dropout rates among high schools, higher rates of teenage pregnancies, unemployment, incarceration, and clinical psychopathology (Flanders et al., 2009; Perrin et al., 2009; McBride et al., 2009).

A low level of paternal involvement results in a much larger risk for adolescent females than adolescent males. In a study performed by Reeb and Conger (2009), gender was studied as a variable regarding how adolescents respond to various levels of paternal involvement. They found that adolescent females are much more affected than adolescent males when the father-child relationship lacked closeness. In fact, these females were much more likely to display a significant increase in depressive symptoms and emotional vulnerability as a result of a lack of paternal involvement. Thus, decreased paternal involvement presents a significant risk in the lives of children.

### **Variables that Impede Paternal Involvement**

As a result of this risk, potential variables that may decrease paternal involvement should be identified and avoided if possible. Gender has been a major factor in the amount of father-child involvement, with fathers being shown to spend more time with their boys than their girls, even in the children's infancy (Jain et al., 1996; Rouyer, Frascarolo, Zaouche-Gaudron, & Lavanchy, 2007). Ethnicity has also been theorized as a possible variable, although Cabrera et al. (2008) have proven that ethnicity is not a significant variable when fathers of the same socio-economic class are considered.

This and other related studies resulted in what is known as the resource theory, which means that fathers who have more resources, such as time and money, are more likely to be involved in their children's lives (Cabrera et al., 2008). A study by Jain et al. (1996) supports this theory. They found that fathers who were more involved in their infants' lives were more educated, had a higher income, and had fewer daily stressors. On the other hand, fathers who had lower incomes, were less educated, and had a higher level of daily stressors were significantly less involved with their infants. However, Cabrera et al. (2008) argue that the resource theory may not necessarily be correct. They found, after controlling for income, age, child gender, and education, that "the fathers' level of resources did not explain the variation in father

involvement" (p. 646). Instead, they proposed that another theory might more fully explain the variance in paternal involvement: the family systems theory.

The family systems theory states that when there are conflicts within the family, paternal involvement is decreased significantly. One common cause of decreased paternal involvement across all of the literature is a negative relationship between the mother and the father of the child (see Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Huston & McHale, 1987; Mezulis et al., 2004; Schacht, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). Children have been known to be angrier, to be more fearful, and to display more aggression when there is marital discord between their parents (Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2007). The health of the relationship between mother and father has been identified as a key factor in a child's mental health (Schacht, Cummings, & Davies, 2009), and it has a direct effect on paternal behavior.

For example, Fagan et al. (2009) explain that the romantic relationship between a father and a mother is a reliable predictor of a father's involvement with their children. This correlation could be explained by a variety of variables, including the mother becoming romantically involved with someone else (Cabrera et al., 2008), the father having multiple children with multiple women (Fagan et al., 2009) and incarceration (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007). However, these particular risk factors are most commonly present in fathers who are not married or were never married to the mother of their children (Fagan et al., 2009).

There are problems that may arise within a married relationship that affect the amount of involvement fathers have with their children as well. Huston and McHale (1987) performed a study in which they observed paternal involvement in single-earner and double-earner families. Although this study may nearly be 30 years old, it is unique because it studied the differences of paternal behaviors among married couples. Huston and McHale found that dual-earner families are at much higher risk of problems with paternal involvement. In dual-earner families, mothers have a decreased amount of time to take care of their children, so they require more assistance in child rearing from the fathers of these children. Fathers who reported that they felt forced to take upon themselves more childrearing responsibilities reported lower levels of marital happiness. This is possibly explained by the reference group theory (see Hutson & McHale, 1987), which states that dual-earner fathers compare themselves to single-earner fathers and feel inadequate as men to fully provide for their families, even though they may have to

work harder and take upon themselves more childrearing responsibilities. This feeling of inadequacy could lead to marital discord, which could lead to depressive symptoms in the father.

These findings are supported in a study performed by Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2007). Their study focused on the paternal mental health hypothesis, which states that a father's mental health is negatively correlated with the amount of marital discord. This study showed that when fathers display depressive symptoms as a result of marital discord, children are much more affected than they are by a display of the mother's depressive symptoms. The researchers supported the father vulnerability hypothesis, or rather that children are more reactive to a father's depressive symptoms as a result of marital discord because of the children's preconceived notion that fathers are emotionally strong and are the head of the family.

These depressive symptoms and marital discord result in a shift in paternal involvement. For example, fathers have been shown to be more emotionally detached in their children's learning experiences, to perform tasks for their children rather than help them learn how to perform such tasks on their own, and have given their children less positive feedback (Brody et al., 1986). Paternal depressive symptoms have also been linked with minor and major alcohol consumption. These drinking problems have been shown to increase the amount of marital discord within the family, to decrease the father's own level of positive parenting, and to decrease the emotional security in his children, which increases the amount of externalizing and behavioral problems in the child (Schacht et al., 2009). If the marital discord increases depression, which in turn increases alcohol consumption, then the overall effects on the children become more dramatic and the cycle is hard to reverse. This study suggests that certain types of behavior performed by fathers are dangerous to a child's development. More research could focus on fathering behaviors that are detrimental to child development and how to avoid such behavior.

Therefore, the variables that affect paternal involvement are varied, but it seems that a physical presence of the father in the home combined with an emotional absence in his children's lives is also detrimental to a child's development. In cases in which the father either leaves the family or becomes emotionally distant, the family systems theory seems to be the most accurate theory in predicting future paternal involvement.

## Replacements or Interventions for a Father's Absence

When looking at what can be done to replace the presence of paternal involvement in the lives of children, the answers are vague. For example, research has shown that when fathers are uninvolved in their children's learning opportunities, mothers can compensate by becoming extra involved, giving the child the positive feedback and motivation. Children have been shown to respond positively to this compensation, asserting that increased mother involvement can yield the same positive results as an average amount of paternal involvement (Brody et al., 1986; McBride et al., 2009).

In contrast, there has also been research that suggests that in the absence of involvement of one parent, the other parent cannot compensate by becoming more involved in the everyday life of the child. The attempt to compensate for a lack of parental involvement has been shown to only diminish the adverse effects of the absence of an uninvolved parent. This compensation cannot yield the positive benefits of both parents' involvement (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009).

Adversely, compensation on the part of the father has also been shown to cause more harm than good in specific cases. Mezulis et al. (2004) studied a group of non-depressed fathers whose wives were depressed and how the situation affected fathering behavior and child outcomes. Surprisingly, an increase in father involvement as a result of a decreased maternal involvement produced more behavioral problems rather than help reduce them, suggesting that there are behavioral problems that occur in children because of a lack of maternal involvement, despite a father's best efforts to compensate.

The results of these three aforementioned studies seem to contradict one another, suggesting that more research is still necessary to find an answer to what a parent should do if the other parent becomes less involved in their child's life. In fact, many researchers have admitted that there is a lack of research with regards to possible buffers or interventions for decreased paternal involvement (see Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2007; Schacht et al., 2009). Rouyer et al. (2007) perhaps explain it best: "Despite a lot of research on paternity, answers are still partial, varied, or even contradictory. In certain positions, professionals are left without the necessary guidelines for designing interventions for families" (p. 232).

## Conclusion

It is evident that paternal involvement usually yields positive results in the realm of child development. Inappropriate fathering behavior, however, can be unhealthy to a child's development. The absence of a father can be extremely dangerous, increasing a number of risk factors in children. There are many variables that could impede a father from being involved in his children's lives. The family systems theory is the most likely source providing an accurate, overarching explanation of why fathers could become less involved with their children.

This review has examined the fact that there has been a large amount of research regarding the positive effects of paternal involvement, the adverse effects of a father's absence, and the variables that impede paternal involvement. However, little research has been done on a possible solution to increase paternal involvement and decrease inappropriate fathering behaviors. Fathers who cannot be as involved as they would like to be in their children's lives have a lack of resources available on possible solutions. The research is very limited with regards to a possible positive therapeutic intervention for uninvolved fathers themselves and their families.

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