Father involvement and preschool behavior: Do involved dads make a difference?

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FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND PRESCHOOL BEHAVIOR:
DO INVOLVED DADS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not father involvement in child care has an effect on preschool behavior. Data were provided by a kindergarten readiness study conducted by the Primary Mental Health Project (PMHP) in Rochester, New York. Participants voluntarily completed background questionnaires including an item regarding the degree of father involvement in care of the children. A randomly-selected sample of 121 four- and five-year-old urban preschool children (61 males, 60 females) with low to high father involvement were rated on five behaviors and five social competencies by their teachers using the Teacher-Child Rating Scale, the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales -- Classroom Edition (Socialization Domain), and the Kohn Social Competence Scale. The majority of families in the PMHP study were African American, with low household incomes.

Results suggested an interaction effect between father involvement and mother education for assertive social skills and peer social skills only. For children whose mothers had greater than 12 years of schooling, father involvement had a positive effect on assertiveness and peer social skills. For children whose mothers had less than 12 years of schooling, father involvement negatively affected assertiveness skills. Father involvement did not positively or negatively affect any other behaviors or social competencies measured. The results of this study suggest that, within an urban, low-income population, father involvement may not affect the development of positive behaviors and social competencies of preschoolers with low maternal education, and, in fact, may have a negative effect on their assertiveness skills. For children in this population whose mothers are better-educated, father involvement may lead to increased assertiveness and peer social skills, but does not appear to affect other behaviors. Although these results differ from
many previous father involvement research findings, they support previous studies finding father involvement to have different effects for different populations, and to be relatively ineffective in shielding children from the effects of poverty.
Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Due to rapidly rising rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, nearly one in four American children now reside in female-headed households (Louv, 1993). For many of these children, contact with their fathers is minimal (Bronstein, Stoll, Clauson, Abrams, & Briones, 1994; Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; Stephens, 1996). Even in two-parent families, fathers are less involved in child care than are mothers (Bailey, 1994; Curtner-Smith, 1995; Harris & Marmer, 1996; Minton & Pasley, 1996).

Children who have very little contact with their fathers are often thought to be at risk for behavior problems – a belief that is based, in part, on traditional values upholding the two-parent nuclear family. Magazine articles such as “Life Without Father” (Davidson, 1990) and “The Crisis of the Absent Father” (Louv, 1993a) indicate a growing popular concern surrounding this topic. In a recent television interview, basketball star Michael Jordan credited much of his success to having two involved parents, stating that “it’s very easy to skip something or lose something” when raising children alone (Finan, 1996).

It is possible that early father involvement can make a difference in how a child copes with family disruption and other stressful life events. Several studies report direct relationships between father involvement and positive child behaviors (Bronstein et al., 1994; Harris & Marmer, 1996; Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995). In addition, researchers have pointed out that single mothers who have emotional support systems (such as those provided by fathers) are more likely to demonstrate better parenting skills, with resulting positive outcomes for children.

However, some studies have reported father involvement to be associated with negative outcomes (Baydar, 1988; King, 1994b), and others have reported no effect (King, 1994a;
Williams & Radin, 1993). In fact, Rehberg and Richman (1989) cite several studies indicating beneficial effects of father absence, including increased emotional intimacy, cooperation, and comforting behaviors, and decreased aggression and competitiveness. They postulate that single parent status necessitates an increased sharing of responsibilities between mother and child, enabling the child to be more helpful to others, and that parents who share more emotions with their children facilitate the child’s understanding of others’ feelings. The combination of responsibility and understanding, they believe, may lead to the development of empathy.

The presence of conflicting findings makes it difficult to judge the importance of father involvement. However, since the majority of studies do link father involvement with positive behaviors and improved parenting, as well as linking father absence and uninvolvement with negative behaviors and higher maternal stress, it seems reasonable to assume that the effects of father involvement at home would be positive and would “spill over” into the preschool classroom.

Importance of the Study

Although in recent years there has been an increase in the number of empirical studies regarding fatherhood, father involvement is just beginning to be investigated. Early family research focused predominantly on the mother-child relationship (for example, Ainsworth, as cited in Campbell, 1995). More recently, there has been an increasing number of studies on divorce, single mothers, and absent fathers. Most divorce studies have failed to explore the quality of the father-child relationship, focusing instead on the family structure itself, or on the effects of father absence (Demo & Acock, 1988; Hardesty, Wenk, & Morgan, 1995). Single parent studies do not completely address father involvement either, for a number of reasons. First, a number of children of single mothers do receive regular care from their fathers (Bristol, 1987). Second, father
involvement cannot be presumed merely by father presence, since actual father involvement in child care is often low, even in dual-parent households (Russell & Radin, as cited in King, 1994a). Third, family structure is not stable. Approximately half of all children will live in a single-parent family at some time during their childhood (Bumpus, 1984, as cited in Vaden-Kiernan, Ialongo, Pearson, & Kellam, 1995). As Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985) have noted, approximately 80% of divorced men and 75% of divorced women eventually remarry. Because a child may live in a single-parent household one day and a dual-parent household the next, the construct of family structure seems to be built on shifting sands. Therefore, father involvement studies that rely on number of parents present at home as a measure of involvement may be misleading.

Even in studies that do focus on father involvement, the nature of that involvement often is not thoroughly explored, and variables such as SES, changes in marital status, and age and gender of the child can make it difficult to draw conclusions from the data. Better-designed and better-controlled research on the effects of father involvement on young children’s development and behavior is needed.

This study focuses on the involvement of fathers in child care during their children’s preschool years. There is a remarkable scarcity of this kind of research. Yet, if early positive effects of father involvement can be ascertained, fathers may be encouraged to remain involved with their children. Regardless of results, a better understanding of father involvement can lead to the development of more effective parent education and prevention programs, and to a decrease in preschool behavior problems. This can have long-term effects, since behavior problems identified in the preschool years often persist (Campbell & Ewing, 1990).
Order of Presentation

The thesis begins with a literature review that includes father involvement research as well as the related topics of family structure, divorce, single-parenting, and father absence. A methods section follows, including a description of subjects, instruments, and procedures. Results are presented and discussed, and conclusions and limitations noted.

Literature Review

Family structure. The traditional two-parent family has been considered by many to be the most stable and healthy environment in which to raise children (Bronstein et al., 1994; Kellam, Ensminger, & Turner, 1977). Child development theories have contributed toward this idea. The theoretical models of Freud, Erikson, Bandura and Walters, and others have included important roles for both mothers and fathers (Curtner-Smith, 1995). Freud (1962) stressed the task of boys' identification with their fathers, and Bandura and Walters (1963) proposed that children learn through imitation of role-models. However, several scholars have raised criticisms of family research due to its past focus on traditional family structures such as marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and because of the low representation of minorities in samples (Acock & Kiecolt, 1989; Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; King, 1994a, 1994b).

Throughout American history, high percentages of non-traditional families have been reported. For example, in New England in the 1700s, 35% of European-American couples expecting children were unmarried, and in the 1800s, 25% of Mexican-American households in the southwest were female headed (Altenbaugh, 1991; Demos, as cited in Emery & Kitzmann, 1995). Today, a variety of family structures can be found in all ethnic groups. Table 1 provides the family status of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian children in the United States as of 1988.
In addition to these structures, many households include additional adults such as grandparents or other relatives. "Kinship" networks existing within the African American community have been traced to extended family relationships in West Africa at the time of slavery in the United States (Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Kinship meant that the entire community was responsible for its children, and hence the African phrase, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." In 1990, about 400,000 children in the child welfare system were living in kinship care arrangements -- with relatives rather than with parents (Center for the Study of Social Policy, as cited in Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Unofficially, however, it has been estimated that 1.3 million African American children live with relatives in homes where neither parent was present (National Commission on Family Foster Care, as cited in Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

According to a number of researchers, processes within the family have a stronger effect on child outcomes than does family structure (Carlson, 1995; Clark & Barber, 1994; Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; Hess & Camara, 1979). In Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis of 92 studies comparing children of divorce and single-parent families with children of two-parent families, recent, better-designed studies were found to show fewer effects from divorce than did older, less methodologically sound studies. They also found that the effects of divorce have diminished over the years as divorce has become more common. As a result, rather than focusing on family status or structure, researchers are instead beginning to investigate family processes such as parent involvement in order to better understand child behavior.

Father involvement. Father involvement in child care can manifest itself in several ways. In a study of Israeli fathers, Sagi (1982) reports that highly involved fathers include both "expressive" (nurturant) and "instrumental" (decision-making and socialization) components (p. 214). Lamb (1986, as cited in Fagan, 1996), has identified three types of father involvement:
interaction (one-on-one care), accessibility (physical availability), and responsibility (such as arranging for doctor appointments or purchasing clothing). Jain et al. (as cited in Minton & Pasley, 1996), in a sample of 46 fathers, identified four types of father involvement: playmate fathers (14%), disciplinarian fathers (14%), disengaged fathers (36%), and all-around fathers (36%). It is generally believed that fathers and mothers interact in different ways with their children. Fathers have been found to interact less frequently with their offspring, to be less involved in caregiving, and to be more involved in play than are mothers (Fagan, 1996; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi (1982); Minton & Pasley; Tiedje & Darling-Fisher, 1993).

Researchers have identified several factors that seem to encourage father involvement. A father’s role identification, self-esteem, previous marital status, education, and openness and sensitivity to experiences have all been found to be associated with greater involvement in caregiving (Fagan, 1996; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993; Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988; Seltzer, as cited in King, 1994a; Tiedje & Darling-Fisher, 1993). However, in this research, it is important to realize that it is often difficult to distinguish causes from effects. For example, it is not clear whether father’s self-esteem encourages greater involvement or whether increased involvement leads to greater self-esteem.

Father-child interaction has been found to be associated with positive child behaviors and attributes. Oyserman, Radin, and Benn (1993) state that there is “strong evidence” (p. 564) that father involvement has a positive effect on children’s cognitive and social development. Harris and Marmer (1996), citing studies by Biller, by Wenk, Hardesty, Morgan, and Blair, and by Young, Miller, Norton, and Hill, report that father behaviors such as affection, nurturance, interest, and companionship have been found to increase children’s self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social and cognitive competence. Fagan (1996), drawing on research by Kennedy, as well as
by MacDonald, indicates that play is linked to the development of secure attachment bonds in infancy, leading to increased social/emotional competence. Children of fathers who were more nurturing and non-controlling were found to have more egalitarian attitudes (Hardesty et al., 1995). Father involvement is associated with the development of internal locus of control (Radin, 1982), better academic performance, especially for boys (Bronstein et al., 1994), and popularity with peers for girls (Bronstein et al). Father involvement has even been found to have a positive effect on more serious problem behaviors such as delinquency and adolescent drinking, according to Harris and Marmer (1996), citing the work of several others (Barnes & Farrell; Sampson & Laub; Smons, Johnson, & Conger). Father involvement may serve to buffer children from the ill-effects of insecure maternal attachment and from the impact of divorce (Bronstein, et al., 1994; Campbell, 1995). Likewise, lack of father involvement has been postulated to have negative effects. For example, Greenberg and Speltz, as cited in Campbell (1995), believe that aggressive and noncompliant behavior in preschoolers may be an attempt to get the attention of uninvolved parents. And Curtner-Smith (1995) hypothesizes that low parental involvement can lead to insecure attachment, which in turn may contribute to later problems establishing intimate relationships with others.

Fathers have symbolic importance to children. Children of divorce who see their fathers infrequently still list them as members of their families, and children with absent fathers still need to think about and internalize them (Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; Furman, 1992; Gill, 1991). Evidence of the symbolic importance of fathers is provided by Munroe, Munroe, Suppe, and Muhm (1993), who found that children in four different cultures who were subject to paternal deprivation attended disproportionately to other male adults. The perception of father involvement may be more critical than specific actions on the part of the father. In a study by
Clark and Barber (1994), perceived father interest was more important to adolescent self-esteem than was actual father presence. Similarly, Grolnick, Ryan, and Deci’s (1991) study of motivation and children’s perceptions of their parents indicated that children’s perceptions of father involvement may be more critical than objective ratings suggest, and that the influence of fathers may be complex.

However, some studies have found father involvement to be inconsequential. In a study of children living with coresident adult males in maritally disrupted families, Hawkins and Eggebeen (1991) found results that support the position that fathers “are peripheral” (p. 958) to children’s well-being. Booth (1987) feels that the mother-child bond dominates the family, influences children’s attitudes toward males and male roles, and results in fathers’ having an “incidental role” (p. 430) within the family.

Harris and Marmer (1996) advise that father involvement be studied within the context of mother involvement, citing research by Belsky et al., as well as by Harris and Morgan, that indicates a relationship between mother involvement, father involvement, and marital quality, with mother involvement encouraging father involvement. Father involvement may affect children indirectly, by affecting the mother’s parenting style. The increase in the number of working mothers has resulted in changes in the way that fathers’ roles are perceived. More is expected of fathers in terms of child care than ever before, but since the majority of fathers still participate less than mothers in child care, a lack of involvement can lead to marital conflict, stress, and work-family conflicts (Harris & Marmer, 1996; LaRossa, as cited in McBride & Darragh, 1995).

Oyserman et al. (1993) suggest that parents can have mediating effects on each other, noting that associations have been found to exist between supportive fathers and sensitive maternal
interaction, between supportive fathers and positive child outcomes, and between father involvement in child-related housework and the quality of family dynamics.

Harris and Marmen (1996) report that both mother and father involvement are beneficial, but in different ways for different populations. They found that in poor families, although fathers’ increased emotional involvement reduced delinquency, mother involvement had an even greater impact than did father involvement. In non-poor families, father involvement improved educational and economic attainment and emotional well-being, while mother involvement reduced the likelihood of delinquency and teen child bearing. The authors conclude that, although involvement of both parents is beneficial, mother involvement is most effective in shielding children from the effects of poverty.

Maternal education has been found to be correlated with, and is postulated to moderate the effects of, father involvement, and father involvement may be more critical when the mother’s educational and financial resources are limited (Acock & Kiecolt, 1989; King, 1994b). In a study of white, middle-class families, past maternal employment was a more powerful predictor of children’s academic performance than was amount of father involvement; part-time maternal employment appeared to be optimal for academic expectations (Williams & Radin, 1993). Maternal employment was also found to help determine the degree of father involvement in both child care and social interaction with the child (Bailey, 1994).

Father involvement among African Americans also has been a subject of study. Furstenberg and Talvite (in King, 1994b) found that nonresident, African American fathers who had never married were similar to divorced fathers in terms of contact with the child. However, Stier and Tienda (1993, as cited in Fagan, 1996) state that noncustodial African American fathers have more contact with their children than do noncustodial Caucasian, Mexican-American and
Puerto Rican fathers. Miller (1994) found that African American adolescent fathers reported higher levels of father involvement than are generally perceived by the public.

Criticisms raised against traditional family research have been applied to father involvement research as well. King (1994b) cautions that many father involvement studies have failed to take into account factors such as race and SES, concluding that "it may be that father involvement is beneficial only under certain circumstances or for certain groups of children" (p. 964). King (1994b) found that, for African American children, father visitation was actually associated with higher levels of reported behavior problems, and she believes that father involvement is more related to payment of child support than it is to child well-being. Bronstein et al.'s (1994) study of fathering after divorce or separation similarly concluded that income was more critical to child adjustment outcomes than was father involvement.

**Divorce.** Longitudinal studies (Block et al., 1986; Cherlin et al., 1991) have found that many problems of children of divorce actually begin in the pre-divorce period, with family stress leading up to the divorce having the most detrimental impact. However, the divorce itself often is followed by a decrease in father involvement. Therefore, a brief review of the relevant findings from divorce studies may contribute to a better understanding of father involvement.

Numerous studies have reported relationships between divorce and child maladjustment (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Santrock, 1972; Stanley, Weikel, & Wilson, 1986). Some studies have addressed the relationship between divorce and externalizing behaviors in boys (Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLoughlin, as cited in Hetherington et al., 1985; Hetherington et al., 1985) and between divorce and internalizing behaviors in girls (Hetherington et al., 1985). Block, Block, and Gjerde (1986)
found that marital conflict appeared to affect boys more strongly than girls, but they caution that the effects may merely be more subtle or latent for girls. Other studies suggest fewer gender differences than were suspected in the past (Acock & Kiecolt, 1989; Amato & Keith, 1991).

Results of early divorce studies have been disputed by some scholars on the basis of methodological weaknesses such as small or non-representative samples, poor controls, and restricted measurements (Bronstein et al., 1994; Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985). Alternative explanations for child behavior problems have been offered by some researchers. For example, Camara and Resnick (1989) found the level of conflict in the “spouse” role to be less predictive of child adjustment than was the style of conflict resolution and degree of cooperation in the “parent” role.

In contrast to earlier research indicating detrimental effects of divorce, a meta-analytic review by Amato and Keith (1991) found only slight differences between children from married and divorced families. Similarly, in an analysis of a sample of over 17,000 children included in a 1988 national survey, Dawson (1991) found almost no differences among children from divorced, never-married, or re-married mothers. From these results, she concludes that family structure per se does not dictate child outcomes, but that it is “essentially a proxy” (p. 574) for other processes occurring within the family, such as communication, affection/interest, and supervision. Campbell (1995) believes that it is the perseverance of adversity rather than the adversity itself that causes childhood behavior problems to persist.

Many studies report post-divorce father involvement to be effective in ameliorating the consequences of divorce. Peterson and Zill (1986) found negative effects of marital disruption to be lessened by continuation of either: (a) residence with the same-sex parent, or (b) maintenance of good relationships with one or both parents. This indicates that continuing father involvement
may have a beneficial effect, especially for boys who live with mothers with whom they do not have a positive relationship. In contrast, however, Kline, Johnston, and Tschann (1991) report that the effects of conflict before and after divorce can be lessened by the mother-child relationship but not by the father-child relationship.

Erel and Burman (1995) believe that enhancing the parent-child relationship does not buffer the child from the effects of marital discord. In their meta-analysis of 68 studies, they found the parent-parent relationship to be more significant than the parent-child relationship, and the quality of the marital relationship to have a "spillover" effect onto the parent-child relationship. As a result of their research review, they advocate placing the primary clinical focus on improving the marital relationship.

Although recent research tends to minimize the effects of divorce, and to focus instead on the resilience of children, Emery and Kitzmann (1995) note that children exhibit both resiliency and distress in response to changes in family structure. While acknowledging that family structure is not critical to children's long-term emotional adjustment, they emphasize that family disruptions are "far from innocuous" and can result in "subclinical distress" — characterized by uncertainty, unhappiness, and a longing for different circumstances (p. 3).

Single-parent studies. In 1990, 27% of all births in the United States were to unmarried women, a 500% increase in 30 years (Louv, 1993b). This unprecedented rise has resulted in several studies on the effects of single-parenthood on children, including reduced father involvement in parenting.

Results of these studies are mixed. Several studies have reported more behavior problems among children from single-mother families as compared to those from two-parent families (Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Kellam et al., 1977; Peterson &
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Zill, 1986; Vaden-Kiernan et al., 1995; also see Achenbach et al., and Haurin, as cited in Vaden-Kiernan et al, 1995). These problems have been identified as early as preschool age (Campbell et al., 1991; also Koot, and Loeber, Trembley, Gagnon & Charlebois, as cited in Campbell, 1995).

However, some studies report neutral, and even beneficial, effects of single parenthood. Children of single parents have been found to be more cooperative and father-absent boys to be less aggressive and competitive (Biller, 1968; Deutsch, as cited in Rehberg & Richman, 1989; Hetherington, 1966; both as cited in Rehberg & Richman, 1989). Rehberg and Richman (1989) found evidence of greater comforting behaviors among father-absent boys (mean age 57 months) as compared to father-present boys, and also as compared to girls from either family structure.

These researchers theorize that single mothers encourage helpfulness in their children and are more nurturing toward sons than toward daughters.

Although Weinraub and Wolf (as cited in Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995) reported no increase in behavior problems associated with single parenthood, they did find evidence of increased stress and fewer social supports. Gringlas and Weinraub (1995) studied the same sample seven years later and found that pre-adolescent children of single mothers did have more behavior problems, lower social competence, and poorer school performance than children of married mothers, and also that maternal stress moderated the effects of family status on child outcomes. Pearson, Ialongo, Hunter, and Kellam (1994) cite research indicating that children in single-mother families are more at risk for behavior problems due to decreased supervision, fewer financial resources, and increased stress. Thus, it appears that, although children from single-parent households might not exhibit clinically identifiable behavior problems early on, and may even develop positive compensating behaviors, ongoing stress within the child and the family may cause more subtle problems later.
Diminished parenting has been associated with single-parent families in the literature. Some scholars discuss single-parenting styles in terms of Baumrind’s (1967, as cited in Baumrind, 1971) classifications: authoritative (warmth, firm but fair control, and the use of explanations and reasoning), authoritarian (detached, less warm, and controlling), and permissive (noncontrolling, nondemanding). Of the three parenting styles, authoritative parenting has been linked to child attributes such as self-reliance, compliance, explorativeness, and self-control (Baumrind, 1971; Campbell, 1995). Gringlas and Weinraub (1995) state that divorced mothers tend to be less affectionate, less in control, and less consistent with their children, implying a non-authoritative, and even permissive, parenting style. Carlson (1995) concurs, citing research by Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, and Fraleigh indicating that single parents are more vulnerable to being permissive parents. Stress-producing circumstances such as reduced finances may also impact the divorced or single mother’s parenting style. Hall, Gurley, Sachs, and Kryscio (1991) report that single mothers with available social supports used more appropriate parenting behaviors than did single mothers who lacked close friends or close family relationships. Similarly, Taylor et al. (as cited in Emery & Kitzmann, 1995) found kin social support among single African American parents to be associated with increased authoritative parenting.

More than 1 out of 5 children now live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995, as cited in Harris & Marmer, 1996), and single, female-headed households make up almost half of this group. Blum, et al. (1988) report that, although children of single-parent households are at slightly increased risk for poor psychiatric and academic outcomes, this risk becomes statistically insignificant when SES and family dysfunction are controlled, implying that it is not household structure per se but, rather, SES and family functioning that cause poor outcomes. The protective effects for two-parent families were found to disappear among low-income families.
(McCarthy, Gersten, & Langner, 1982; Pearson et al., 1994). Acock and Kiecolt (1989) agree that family income is more responsible for child well-being than family structure. However, other studies refute these findings (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Achenbach et al., 1991; Pearson et al., 1994), lending support to the importance of fathers beyond their financial contributions.

Children residing with "father surrogates" (stepfathers, male relatives, and unrelated males) may be more likely to experience increased behavioral difficulties (McCarthy et al., 1982). Protective effects of an additional adult may depend on that person's relationship with the family. Achenbach et al. (1991) found that as the number of related adults in a household increased, even beyond two, child behavior problems decreased. However, problems increased as the number of unrelated adults increased. Similarly, Haurin (1992) found that residence with a step-parent was correlated with negative behavior outcomes.

The addition of an adult to the household of a single mother has, in some instances, been associated with improved outcomes (Dornbusch et al., 1985). It is possible that the second adult helps with child care and alleviates some of the stress experienced by the mother. Vaden-Kiernan et al. (1995) found that boys in mother-male partner families were rated less aggressive by teachers than were boys in single-mother families, and other studies agree that two-adult households are beneficial (Kellam, et al., 1977; Person et al., 1994). However, Vaden-Kiernan hypothesize that their study may have shown better results for the mother-male partner group because of a two-year delay between the addition of the male partner to the household and the sampling of behaviors, during which time the families may have had time to adjust to their new status.

The majority of teen mothers reside with relatives, usually their own parents, while only 19-25% of biological fathers of teens' babies live with them or are highly involved in their care
(Oyserman et al., 1993). Thus, the effect of grandparents as surrogate parents should not be overlooked. Resident grandfathers were reported to be correlated with better behaviors (Oyserman et al.; Pearson et al., 1994). Interestingly, grandmothers were found to have no effect in two studies (Oyserman et al.; Vaden-Kiernan et al., 1995), although Vaden-Kiernan notes that this is contrary to previous research involving younger, primarily poor, African American children. In Vaden-Kiernan’s study, subjects were older and were also ethnically and economically diverse. It is possible that the effect of grandmothers is the greatest for poorer, younger children.

Father absence studies. Louv (1993b) reports that 40% of single-parent children have not seen their fathers in at least a year, and of the remaining 60%, only one in five sleep one night a month in their father’s home. Only about one-quarter of newly divorced or separated fathers see their children at least weekly, and of the 18% of newly divorced fathers who had not seen their children in the previous year, only 10% of these wrote or telephoned their children during that year (Seltzer, and Seltzer & Bianchi, as cited in Bronstein et al., 1994).

Much of the research on father absence indicates an association between father absence and maladjustment. Stanley, et al. (1986) examined interpersonal problem-solving skills of nursery school children from intact families and father-absent families, and found that the father-absent group scored lower on problem solving skills. Dunn and Tucker (1993) found that father absence was predictive of maladaptive functioning in African American households. Santrock (1972) reported that father-absent boys performed more poorly than father-absent girls and father-present boys on IQ and achievement tests. This is not to say that father contact is always beneficial. Amato and Rezac (as cited in King, 1994b) found that, if parental conflict was high, contact with a nonresident parent actually increased behavior problems in boys.
It has been argued that most father absence studies have failed to control for the effects of SES, race, age and sex of child, and the conditions of father absence (McCarthy et al., 1982, referring to articles by Spray, Herzog & Sudia, and Bleckman; Santrock, 1972). Therefore, methodological limitations should be kept in mind when considering father absence research.

Summary: A review of the literature on father involvement, father absence, divorce, and single parenthood indicates that father involvement is a complex interaction warranting further study. The majority of research indicates correlations between father involvement and positive behaviors, and also between lack of father involvement and negative behaviors. In addition, interactions between parent relationships and parent-child relationships are complex. Research indicates that single parents with emotional, financial, and functional support systems around them are more likely to demonstrate authoritative parenting skills. It seems likely that involved fathers would simplify the tasks inherent in this type of parenting style by sharing responsibility for child care with the mother.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are postulated for the present study:

1. Children with more involved fathers will exhibit fewer classroom problem behaviors than will children with less involved fathers, and

2. Children with more involved fathers will exhibit greater classroom social competencies than will children with less involved fathers.

In addition, possible effects of child gender and maternal education will be explored.

Method

Data for this study were obtained from another study (Rochester Early Enhancement Program [REEP] Evaluation) conducted by the Primary Mental Health Project (PMHP) during the school year 1994-95. The purpose of the PMHP study was to investigate the extent that
REEP preschool programs prepare children for entry into kindergarten. Participants were informed, in a cover letter, that information collected would be kept strictly confidential, and that participation was voluntary. No identifying information regarding parents, caregivers, or students was made available to this researcher.

Subjects: Data on father involvement were obtained for 61 boys and 60 girls randomly selected from among seven REEP preschool classes within the Rochester City School District. Of the total 121 children, 107 were age four and 14 were age five, with an age range from 4.00 to 5.07. Of those with reported household incomes, almost half (41.9%) had household incomes below $10,000. Since income data was not initially included in the data provided by PMHP, maternal educational level was also examined as an estimate of socio-economic status. The subjects’ mean maternal educational level was 12.38 years, with a standard deviation of 1.64 years. Reported ethnic background of families in the REEP evaluation was predominantly African-American (77.1%).

Design: Demographic information was obtained through a background questionnaire developed by PMHP and completed by REEP evaluation participants (see Appendix). The questionnaire included a Likert-type item regarding degree of father involvement. Specifically, the question asked, “Is the father directly involved in caring for the children?” Five response choices ranging from “no” to “very much so” were provided. The five levels of father involvement were later collapsed into two levels by combining responses of “not at all,” “a little bit,” and “a moderate amount” into Level 1 (Low Involvement), and combining responses of “quite a bit” and “very much so” into Level 2 (High Involvement). Percentages of fathers by involvement are shown in Table 2. The background questionnaire also asked, “How many years
of schooling has the child’s mother completed?” and ten choices were given, ranging from less than 8 years to more than 18 years.

In addition, PMHP personnel administered individual assessment measures to children, teachers completed three assessment measures, and parents completed one measure. Each measure was administered during October-November, 1994 (before implementation of a social competence program intervention), and again in April and May, 1995 (post-intervention). All data included in this thesis are from the pre-intervention phase only, in order to eliminate possible confounding effects of the social competence program intervention. Teachers were not aware of parent responses to any of the background questionnaire items.

**Measures:** Problem behavior scores and social competency scores were obtained by the following teacher-rating scales:

*The Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS)* is a 38-item questionnaire completed by the classroom teacher and measures the child’s classroom adjustment in two areas (problem behaviors and competencies). Specifically, problem behaviors were measured by the acting out, shy/anxious, and learning difficulties items. Social competencies were measured by assertive social skills, peer social skills, task orientation, and frustration tolerance items. The T-CRS has high validity and reliability for children of all ages, ranging from .82 to .97.

*The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales - Classroom Edition (VABS)* is a measure of adaptive behavior completed by the classroom teacher. Only one of the four domains, Socialization, was administered. This domain consists of 53 items, each describing a social activity or behavior in which a child might engage, such as “Follows rules in games without being reminded.” The median alpha reliability for the Socialization score is reported at .94.
The Kohn Social Competence Scale (KSC) is designed for teacher assessment of the social and emotional functioning of preschool and kindergarten children, and consists of 64 statements describing positive and negative types of social-emotional behaviors (e.g., “Child seeks adult attention by crying”). The KSC yields an Apathy-Withdrawal score (Factor I) gauging the child’s level of interest, curiosity, and assertiveness, vs. shyness, passivity, and isolation from classroom activities. The KSC also provides an Anger-Defiance score (Factor II) measuring the child’s defiance and hostile peer interactions vs. compliance and cooperation. The alpha reliabilities for the KSC are reported to be .95 for Factor I and .96 for Factor II.

Results

A general linear models (regression) procedure was performed for each of the outcome variables suspected to be associated with father involvement (apathy/withdrawal, anger/defiance, acting out behaviors, shy/anxious behaviors, learning difficulties, assertive social skills, frustration tolerance, peer social skills, task orientation, and socialization), with father involvement, child sex (dummy coded) and mother education (a proxy for SES) as independent variables in a full-factorial design.

No main or interaction effects were obtained except as follows. For the outcome variable of assertiveness, a significant interaction effect obtained for father involvement and mother education (F(1,101)=5.58, p=.02); the variance accounted for by the model was small to moderate ($r^2=.14$). For peer social skills, a significant main effect for father involvement (F(1,101)=4.15, p=.04) and for mother education (F(1,101)=5.00, p=.03) obtained. A marginal (F(1,101)=3.66, p=.06) interaction effect obtained. The variance accounted for by the model was small ($r^2=.09$).
In order to further investigate the effects of father involvement within levels of mother education, data for father involvement were collapsed into two levels (“no,” “little,” or “moderate” = 1; “quite a bit” or “very much” = 2), and mother education was trichotomized (less than 12 years = 1; 12 years = 2; and greater than 12 years = 3). A 2 x 3 factorial ANOVA was then performed. No main effects were obtained whatsoever, but a marginal interaction effect for assertiveness \( (F(2,115)=2.79, \ p=.07) \) was obtained, as well as a significant interaction effect for peer social skills \( (F(2, 115)=4.79, \ p=.01) \). Means, standard deviations and ns for these cells are presented in Table 3 (assertiveness) and Table 4 (peer social skills).

Post-hoc contrast analysis was performed on these means. As father involvement increased, assertiveness scores decreased for children with low mother education (<12 years), but increased for children with high mother education (>12 years) \( (t(115)=2.32, \ p=.01, \text{ contrast } r=+.21, \text{ for the } +1, -1, 0, 0, -1, +1 \text{ contrast}) \). For peer social skills, results were somewhat similar. As father involvement increased, peer social skills scores increased only for children with high maternal education (>12 years) \( (t(115)=2.73, \ p=.004, \text{ contrast } r=+.25, \text{ for the } 0, 0, 0, 0, -1, +1 \text{ contrast}) \). Due to the post-hoc nature of these analyses, these results should be viewed as suggestive only.

**Discussion**

**Discussion of Results.** It was hypothesized that father involvement would have a beneficial effect on behaviors and social competencies of preschool children. However, the analysis of the data does not strongly support these hypotheses. Instead, three general findings emerged from the data: (1) the positive effects of father involvement were less than expected, (2) there was an interaction effect with maternal education, and (3) father involvement affected different groups within the sample differently. Each of these findings is discussed below.
Out of ten behavior and social competency areas, only two (assertiveness and peer social skills, both social competencies) emerged as sensitive to father involvement, and only in the high maternal education group was this sensitivity in a positive direction. This finding is contrary to many studies which have found that father involvement is helpful in fostering positive behaviors. However, it supports some studies that have found father involvement to be of little relative importance, especially among poor populations. It also supports at least one study that found father involvement to have negative consequences under certain conditions.

Assertiveness was measured by five items on the T-CRS, specifically: (1) defends own views under group pressure, (2) comfortable as a leader, (3) participates in class discussions, (4) expresses ideas willingly, and (5) questions rules that seem unfair/unclear. Peer social skills was also measured by five T-CRS items: (1) has many friends, (2) is friendly toward peers, (3) makes friends easily, (4) classmates wish to sit near this child, and (5) well liked by classmates. Both of these areas would seem to be bolstered by the ability to express oneself verbally as well as by having self-confidence in one’s abilities. Having a mother who has attended college may increase the likelihood that a child will possess these characteristics. A mother who has elected to attend college may be more likely to be more verbal and self-confident herself, qualities that could be inherited or modeled. Better-educated mothers may be more likely to choose better-educated partners and hence the quality of father involvement in these families may be different. Perhaps the children of more highly-educated mothers have fathers who engage in different types of activities with the child. For example, they may be more verbal, read more to the child, and use different methods of discipline. The mothers as well as the fathers of these children may have more time, energy, or financial resources to devote to the child.
Also, the way father involvement is perceived by mothers may vary depending on the mother’s education. Mothers with less than a high school diploma may perceive that fathers are very involved if they make regular visitation or if they contribute financially to the child’s care. Their expectations for more involvement may be lower. On the other hand, mothers who are better-educated may expect that fathers will take more of an active role in the child’s education, leisure, playtime, and other activities as part of how they define “caring for the children.”

Some researchers have used maternal education as a proxy for SES when income data was not available (Rehberg & Richman, 1989; Tiedje & Darling-Fisher, 1993). Assuming that low maternal education implies relatively lower SES within the subjects of this study, then these results also support previous research indicating that father involvement is not successful in ameliorating the effects of poverty.

Maternal education may also determine, to some extent, mother’s employment, which in turn may affect the type of father involvement. For example, if the mother is in a professional position or another position requiring long hours, the father may be required to take on a greater number and variety of child care responsibilities, whereas if the mother is unemployed, the father may be expected to be less involved.

The fact that father involvement had conflicting effects for different groups supports previous research indicating that father involvement is a complex issue that should be studied in the context of mother involvement and SES. One implication of this finding is that there is no simple answer to the question, “Do Dads Make a Difference?” This is important for professionals in education, psychology, and social work to realize. Children with limited resources may benefit more from financial and kinship support than from father involvement. Perhaps parent education should be the foundation upon which parent involvement is built.
It is important to stress that the results of this study are suggestive rather than conclusive. Also, it is possible that, although effects of father involvement were not apparent in the preschool years, there may be more long-term effects on the child that could appear during a later developmental stage. Perhaps, as indicated by some studies, actual involvement is less essential than the child’s perception of that involvement, and perhaps this perception is not possible in the preschool stage of development.

Limitations. Father involvement was assessed by means of only one item on a questionnaire. Since the terms “involved” and “caring for the children” were not defined, the nature of this involvement was not ascertained. A better means of assessing the degree of father involvement would have been a measure such as the Parent Involvement Scale used by Bronstein et al. (1994), which included different areas of involvement such as attending functions, providing comfort, and participating in activities. However, this longer checklist may have reduced the number of respondents in this study.

It is possible that non-random selection occurs for father involvement groups as well as for maternal education groups. In other words, families with low father involvement could possess certain genetic traits that affect temperament, behavior, cognitive and social abilities, etc., which may result in a tendency for their children to exhibit more behavior problems. In addition, father involvement may be governed by the child’s behavior. Perhaps children who are more assertive or socially outgoing encourage an increase in father involvement.

The fact that the children in this study were enrolled in REEP preschool programs may have had an unknown effect on classroom behavior ratings. The teachers, curriculum, classroom structure, or other factors inherent in the REEP programs may have fostered positive behaviors and made effects of father involvement less apparent in school.
Although teachers were not aware of parent responses to the background questionnaire, it is possible that they had some knowledge of the degree of father involvement and of the level of the mother’s education through informal discussions with caregivers. It is possible that any such knowledge may have influenced their behavior ratings of children.

The sample size for this study was relatively small, especially within father involvement/child gender/maternal education cells. This, in addition to the post-hoc nature of the analysis, limited the statistical treatment of the data, and greatly limits the ability to draw strong conclusions.

Although the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of household income, making it possible to make general statements about the findings’ applicability to low-income populations, specific household income data for each subject was not available, and therefore conclusions regarding the impact of SES on the effectiveness of father involvement cannot be drawn. As a proxy for SES, however, maternal education was used.

Implications for future research. Large, well-designed, longitudinal studies of father involvement may clarify whether or not children benefit from father involvement. Factors that should be studied in relation to father involvement include the child’s perception of father involvement, mother involvement, maternal education, paternal education, and SES. Father involvement should be clearly defined. Possible differences in father involvement among different educational and income levels should be investigated. Alternative research designs such as interviews may help determine how father involvement is perceived by parents and children.

This study investigated behaviors within the preschool setting only, as perceived by teachers. Data regarding behavior at home, as perceived by parents, was not analyzed. Although
an analysis of the possible effects of father involvement on home behavior falls outside of the scope of this study, it warrants further attention.

Fathers can be an important resource to the future of our society, but it appears that their role is far from understood. Further research on father involvement is essential in order to ascertain how fathers can be most helpful to their children.
Father Involvement

References


Father Involvement


Table 1.

With Whom Do Children Live? Percentages by Ethnic Group, 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Both Parents</th>
<th>Single Mother</th>
<th>Single Father</th>
<th>Neither Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SCCYF, 1989, as cited in Emery & Kitzmann, 1995)
Table 2.

**Reported Degree of Biological Father Involvement in Child Care**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Involvement</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13.1 (n=8)</td>
<td>11.7 (n=7)</td>
<td>12.4 (n=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little bit</td>
<td>9.8 (n=6)</td>
<td>10.0 (n=6)</td>
<td>9.9 (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A moderate amount</td>
<td>8.2 (n=5)</td>
<td>11.7 (n=7)</td>
<td>9.9 (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a bit</td>
<td>21.3 (n=13)</td>
<td>13.3 (n=8)</td>
<td>17.4 (n=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very much so</td>
<td>47.5 (n=29)</td>
<td>53.3 (n=32)</td>
<td>50.4 (n=61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.

**T-CRS Assertive Social Skills Raw Scores by Father Involvement and Mother Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother Education</th>
<th>Father Involvement</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;12 years</td>
<td>16.58</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;12 years</td>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.

T-CRS Peer Social Skills Raw Scores by Father Involvement and Mother Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother Education</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean S.D.</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;12 years</td>
<td>16.25 5.86</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>18.06 5.23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;12 years</td>
<td>12.80 4.94</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BACKGROUND FORM

The information you write in this form is strictly confidential and will not affect in any way the service you receive. We use this information to better understand the people we serve. We appreciate your cooperation in helping us to improve the quality of our future services.

1. How many years of schooling has the child’s mother completed?
   - less than 8  ___ 9  ___ 10  ___ 11  ___ 12  ___ 13  ___ 14  ___ 15  ___ 16  ___ 18 or more
   High school or G.E.D. completed?  Yes  ___ No  ___
   List other degrees or skills the child’s mother possesses:

2. Is the mother directly involved in caring for the children?
   - No  ___ A little bit  ___ A moderate amount  ___ Quite a bit  ___ very much so.

3. How many years of schooling has the child’s father completed?
   - less than 8  ___ 9  ___ 10  ___ 11  ___ 12  ___ 13  ___ 14  ___ 15  ___ 16  ___ 18 or more
   High school or G.E.D. completed?  Yes  ___ No  ___
   List other degrees or skills the child’s father possesses:

4. Is the father directly involved in caring for the children?
   - No  ___ A little bit  ___ A moderate amount  ___ Quite a bit  ___ very much so.

5. How do you rate your educational experience?
   - Positive  ___ Somewhat Positive  ___ Somewhat Negative  ___ Negative

6. Why are you enrolling yourself (or your child(ren)) in this REEP agency/program?

7. Please mark which of the following best describes your employment situation:
   - Work  ___ School  ___ Work & School  ___ Work at home  ___ Unemployed

8. Is your family in the middle of a crisis situation?  ___ Yes  ___ No
   If you answer yes and wish to share the nature of your crisis please feel free to discuss it with an agency/program’s staff member.
REGISTRATION FORM

Today's Date: __________
Name of Person Completing this form: ________________________________
Your relation to the person(s) enrolling in the agency/program (example: Mom, self):
______________________________________________________________
Address: ____________________________ Home Phone: ________________
2nd Phone: _________________________

Please indicate the REEP agency/program that you are joining today (see footnote for a complete list of REEP agencies/programs).

Have you ever being involved with a REEP agency before? __Yes __No
If yes, please indicate which agency/program and approximate dates. This information improves our record keeping.

Please provide the following information for those members of your family joining a REEP program today:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Persons Joining a REEP Program/Agency Today</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relation to you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If your child is joining a REEP program/agency today please answer the following two questions:

Is this your first child? __Yes __No
How many other children younger than this one do you have? ______
Primary language spoken at home: ______ Other languages spoken: ______

How did you find out about this agency/program?

Because we are interested in knowing the health care you need, please answer the following questions:

Do you have health insurance? __Yes __No
Do you feel you have access to health care when you need it? __Yes __No
Do you have a primary health provider? __Yes __No
Do you have a dental care provider? __Yes __No
Do you have a concern about your child's or your vision or hearing? __Yes __No.

---
1 REEP agencies include: Healthy Moms (HM), Baby Love, Monroe County Health Department (MCHD), Southwest family resource center (SWFRC), Northeast family resource center (NEFRC), Rochester Preschool Parent Program (RPPP), Southwest Cooperative Nursery School (SWCNS), Westside Health Services (WHS), Southwest Area Neighborhood (SWAN), 14621 Neighborhood Association, Primary Mental Health Project (PMHP), and the YMCA.