

Fathers' involvement with their secondary-school-aged children

This large-scale study, by a team from Oxford University, explored fathers' levels of involvement with their secondary-school-aged children, the nature of fathering and its impact on children. More than two thousand children and their parents took part in a survey and 26 co-resident parents and their children were interviewed. The study asked children to identify a 'father figure' (who might or might not be living with them and who might or might not be their biological father) and the term 'fathers' refers to these definitions throughout.

The survey revealed that:

-  Resident fathers were more likely to be involved if the mothers were involved with the children, if the father held egalitarian attitudes to gender roles and if the children were well-adjusted.
-  Non-resident fathers were more likely to be involved with children if the resident mother was involved, if the separation was more recent and if there were low levels of conflict between the separated parents.
-  Children living with the person they identified as their father were likely to be better adjusted if they were living with their biological father and if their father had good mental health, was well-educated and highly involved.
-  Children were more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties if there were high levels of conflict between the parents.
-  Children with non-resident fathers were likely to be less well-adjusted if there were high levels of conflict between parents and if the mother was not very involved with them.
-  Surprisingly, there was no association between non-resident fathers' involvement and children's well-being. However, this finding may be due to the nature of the sample and the recruitment process.
-  The survey located families on a continuum of parental involvement and family well-being. Overall, those parents with fewer social and emotional resources were less involved with their children.

The in-depth interviews showed that:

-  Families held fairly traditional views of fathering. The father's role was 'to be there' and to provide for and guide his children.
-  Many fathers claimed that fathering 'came naturally' but they also admitted that they often lacked the confidence or skills to form close relationships with their children.
-  Fathers' involvement took place against the backdrop of a mutually supportive relationship with the mother. Fathers in supportive relationships tended to be more involved with their children.

Background

Although there has been a considerable amount of research into fatherhood, reviews have shown that much confusion remains about the nature and significance of fathers' involvement in family life. Fathers are expected to be involved with their children's upbringing and to continue their involvement if the relationship with the children's mother breaks down. This research set out to explore fathers' involvement from the perspective of both parents and their children in intact and separated families. The study examined:

- what fathers' involvement means to mothers, fathers and their children;
- how involved resident and non-resident fathers are;
- what promotes or hinders fathers' involvement;
- the relationship between a father's involvement and his child's well-being.

The research involved a web-consultation with secondary-school-aged children to obtain their views about what fathers do. The findings were then used in the development of a large-scale survey of children in three secondary schools and their parents. The survey was complemented by in-depth interviews with 26 'intact' families (where both biological parents were living with the child). Children were asked to identify a 'father figure' (who might or might not be living with them and who might or might not be their biological father) and the term 'fathers' refers to these definitions throughout.

Because of problems obtaining responses from non-resident fathers and from all three members of the family, sub-samples of respondents were used for different aspects of the analysis. This dependence on 'select' groups may have affected the findings.

The level and nature of fathers' involvement

Survey findings based on responses from 2,218 teenagers. Children completed an 'Inventory of Fathers'

Involvement' (based on Hawkins et al.), covering nine dimensions of fathering. Overall, they rated resident fathers as more involved than non-resident fathers, although the difference was relatively small (109 and 96 respectively, out of a maximum of 130 and a minimum of 26). However, the ratings of non-resident fathers' involvement varied widely; some non-resident fathers were rated higher than resident fathers.

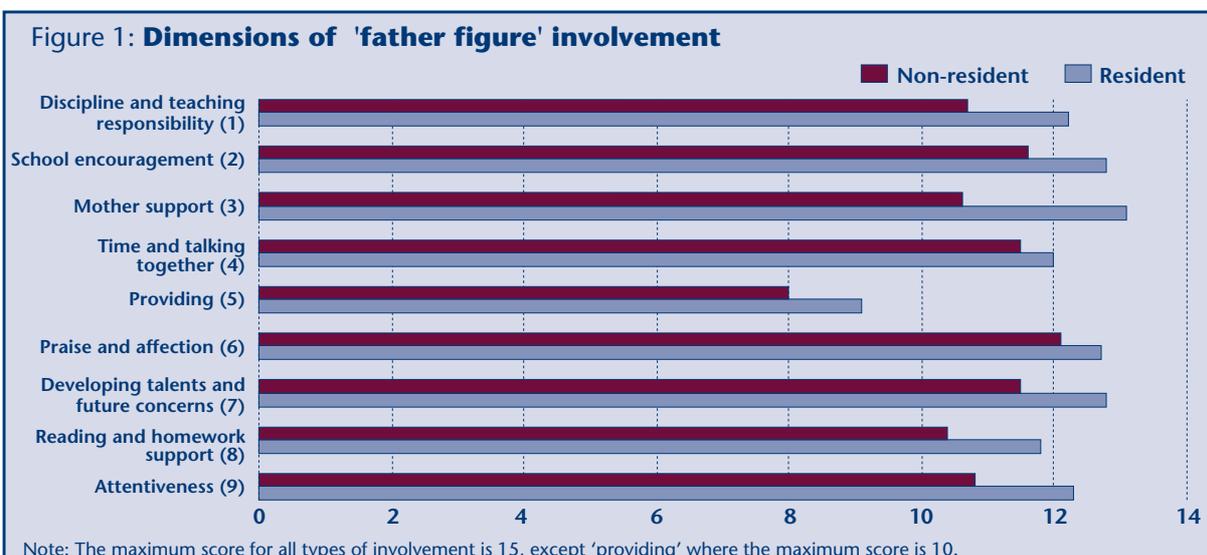
Sixteen per cent of children with a non-resident father did not give a rating on their fathers. This suggests that they had no contact with their father. Ratings also varied by the level of conflict between parents and by a family's financial situation. Children in families with high levels of conflict and in families where children received free school meals rated father involvement lower.

Resident fathers were scored more highly than non-resident fathers on each dimension, although on only one dimension was there more than one point difference between the mean scores. This was on the extent to which fathers supported mothers ('mother support'), where, as might be expected, children with non-resident fathers scored them much lower than did those with resident fathers. Although non-resident fathers were rated as less involved, many children in step-families still considered their non-resident father as their main father figure (5 per cent of the 11 per cent of children in step-families).

Resident fathers

Findings based on in-depth interviews with 26 intact families.

The interviews echoed the findings of other research and revealed a fairly traditional view of fathering, with fathers more involved in the broader or overseeing aspects of their children's lives rather than the particular details of day-to-day living. Families described fathers' responsibilities as 'being there', providing for the family, planning and guiding. Relatively few fathers took responsibility for their children's everyday lives.



Most fathers were emotionally close to their children and knew the type of things their children liked to do, even if they were not involved in regular activities with them. Many fathers claimed that fathering just came 'naturally' but some admitted they lacked the confidence or the necessary skills to form close relationships with their children.

"I think your personality moulds the way you are, if you've got to work at being or behaving in a particular way, it's false." (Resident father)

"I am just not a very good talker, and I find that with the kids as well really." (Resident father)

In some cases, communication was constrained because of the father's 'jokey' approach, although mothers and children expressed considerable appreciation of fathers who 'made the house happy'. Some fathers admitted that they often found it difficult to understand their teenagers' moods and behaviour.

Links between resident fathers' involvement and children's well-being

Survey findings based on responses from 409 resident fathers.

Children with resident fathers were slightly better adjusted than children with non-resident fathers. Multiple regression analysis revealed that:

- Children in families with a resident father were better adjusted if they were living with their biological father, their father had good mental health, and highly involved. The better educated the resident father, the better adjusted the children were.
- Children were more likely to be experiencing emotional and behavioural problems if there was conflict between the parents.
- Fathers perceived sons to be more difficult than daughters.

Overall, factors associated with the 'character' of the family (such as family members' mental health) were more closely related to child well-being than poverty (as measured by receipt of free school meals) and family size, which are factors associated with the family environment.

Non-resident fathers' involvement and their children's well-being

Survey findings based on responses from 520 children with non-resident fathers.

The analysis of families with a non-resident father showed that:

- Children were more likely to be experiencing emotional and behavioural problems if there was a high level of conflict between the resident and non-

resident parent and if the mother was not very involved with them.

- The analysis also revealed an unexpected finding. Whereas a resident mother's involvement was significantly associated with greater child well-being, non-resident father involvement was not. (However, caution needs to be exercised in interpreting this finding. It is possible that it reflects the study's recruitment process and potential biases in the sample. For example, because few non-resident fathers completed a questionnaire the analysis was based on children's reports of their fathers' involvement and some measures, such as father's mental health, could not be included in the analysis.)

What affects resident fathers' involvement?

Survey findings based on responses from 233 mothers, fathers and children.

Resident fathers were more likely to be involved with their children if the mother was involved, if the father held egalitarian attitudes to gender roles and if the children were well-adjusted. The more difficult fathers believed their children to be, the less likely fathers were to be involved.

What underlies the factors associated with fathers' involvement?

The survey identified a continuum of involvement and family well-being. Families at one end of the continuum have highly involved parents with egalitarian attitudes, high levels of self-esteem and a supportive and amicable relationship. The interviews with 26 intact families added to this picture, showing how the parents' relationship helped fathers to be involved because of the mutual support each parent provided. The better educated the father, the more likely they were to be involved; this was not the case for mothers. This is a surprising finding that is inconsistent with the other factors characterising 'involved' parents and requires further research.

While the survey highlighted the importance of mothers' self-esteem, the interviews revealed that more confident fathers who were more skilled in communication felt more able to get involved with their children. Some fathers also held strong views about fathering, seeing it as something that comes naturally and that is not amenable to change. For fathers lacking confidence these fixed views may make it difficult to offer support or interventions to improve their skills and confidence.

Along the other end of the continuum are families characterised by relatively uninvolved parents who argue frequently and hold inequitable gender attitudes. In these families, the father is more likely to be poorly educated and both parents and children are likely to have low self-esteem or mental health difficulties. Their children are also more likely to be experiencing

adjustment problems. The interviews with 26 intact families pointed to the difficulties fathers faced in getting involved as their children went through adolescence.

Children who found the transition to adulthood more difficult than their peers often had a less involved father. Less involved fathers were also likely to be in conflict with the child's mother: they seemed to lack the supportive relationship that the interviews showed boosted fathers' confidence in and knowledge of getting involved. As one mother reported:

" 'Supporting you as a parent' ... I am not sure he stops and thinks about this as being a very serious question a lot of the time ... I do feel that I am undermined a lot in that he might make a joke about me or I might say something and behind my back he will you know, laugh and point, in front of the children" (Mother)

By contrast, another said:

"I think we discuss it because we sort of cling to each other, for mutual support I think. We put together ideas and there are some things that William will feel very strongly about and there will be things that I feel very strongly about." (Mother)

The family's socio-economic circumstances made little difference to the levels of involvement, although the proxy measure for poverty – free school meals – may not have been sufficiently sensitive to differentiate between them.

What affects non-resident fathers' involvement?

Survey findings based on responses from 520 children with non-resident fathers.

Levels of contact in the sample were higher than those reported by other studies. For example, 43 per cent of the children saw their fathers at least once a week. Fathers were more likely to be involved when the mother was highly involved and if the parents had separated recently. Conflict between the parents militated against fathers' involvement. The insight into resident fathers' involvement permitted by the interviews points to the obstacles non-resident fathers face in being a part of their children's lives. Because a large part of the 'being there' role is not available to them, non-resident fathers have to establish new roles and relationships if their contact is to be rewarding and effective.

Policy implications

The researchers conclude that the findings indicate that promoting better father-child relationships is

about enhancing whole family well-being. Targeting one problem or one family relationship is not enough. Potential avenues for intervention include:

- helping parents to build mutually supportive relationships and to reduce conflict both before and after separation;
- measures to improve children's mental health;
- helping parents to understand the impact of their behaviour and their relationship on each others' parenting;
- helping fathers to develop confidence in their parenting and communication skills.

About the project

The study was conducted by an interdisciplinary team from Oxford University comprising: Eirini Flouri and Ann Buchanan (psychologists), Elaine Welsh (a sociologist) and Jane Lewis (a social policy analyst). 3,500 children in three schools (inner city, suburban and rural) and their parents were invited to complete a questionnaire comprising standardised measures of father involvement and family well-being. Questionnaires were received from 2,218 children (aged 11-18) and 1,058 parents. In-depth interviews were conducted in the home with a small sub-sample of survey respondents comprising 26 intact families (mother, father, child). The data was collected in 2001.

The Inventory of Fathers' Involvement is based on Hawkins, A.J., et al. (2002), 'The inventory of father involvement: A pilot study of a new measure of father involvement', *Journal of Men's Studies*, 10, 183-196.

How to get further information

The full report, '**Involved' fathering and child well-being: Fathers' involvement with secondary school age children** by Elaine Welsh, Ann Buchanan, Eirini Flouri and Jane Lewis, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau as part of the Parenting in Practice series (ISBN 1 904787 24 X, price £12.95).