

Complexities in Research on Fathering: Illustrations from the Tufts Study of Young Fathers

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Theory and research suggest that the transition to parenthood is a major life transition, and that adaptation to the parenting role is influenced by a complex set of factors, including the relationship with the child's mother, family of origin, and how the father is situated within sociocultural contexts. The father–mother relationship is particularly important for men making the transition to fatherhood. This study examined patterns of fathering among young fathers (15–24 years) and investigated how fathers' relationships with the mothers of their young children (infants and toddlers) were related to fathering. In general, higher quality father–mother relationships were related to greater father involvement with children; when mothers were perceived as barriers to involved fathering fathers also had less accurate and adaptive parenting knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Person-centered analyses revealed quite complex relations between father–mother relationships and father–child interaction. One pattern showed strong positive father–mother relationships associated with a disengaged pattern of father–child interaction, while another pattern showed sensitive and positive father–child engagement in the context of negative or distant father–mother relationships. Four patterns of association between fathering and mother–father relationships were demonstrated. Results highlight the complexity of understanding fathering and family relationships among young fathers.

Studying “fathering” is a dynamic, complicated task, as fathering itself is the product of multiple individuals, relationships, and contexts. Parke (2002) underscored the need for a “multilevel and dynamic approach to studying father–child relationships.” One understudied area is the linkage between the developmental trajectories of children, their fathers, and the larger family context. For example, very little is known about fathering among men who make the transition to parenthood at an early age.

Becoming a father is a major life transition for all men, perhaps particularly so for young men. Since the first years of parenting set the path for long-term adjustment (Cowan & Cowan, 1990) to parenthood, it is important to understand factors that support fathers' role adaptation. These determinants of father involvement and fathering “styles” are complex, and include characteristics

of the man's personality, his family of origin, the nature of the father–mother relationship, socio-economic factors, family structure, child factors, and sociocultural influences.

Close relationships, particularly the father–mother relationship, serve as key supports for fathers (Beitel & Parke, 1998). A positive marital relationship provides fuel (emotional, material, and informational) to engage in sensitive parenting (Cowan & Cowan, 1990; Easterbrooks & Goldberg, 1984). For several reasons, fathers' parenting is particularly influenced by this relationship. First, mothers may act as “gatekeepers,” controlling fathers' access to spending time with their children, or information about them. Second, the paternal role is not well-defined by society and marital support helps to define it, so that men know “how to be” as fathers. Finally, men often rely on, and benefit from, informational support from mothers because of fewer practice and socialization opportunities for parenting among men (Parke, 2002).

Because of the strong links between the mother–father relationship and aspects of fathering, Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson (1998) argued

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that a key element of responsible fathering is maintaining a harmonious working relationship with the child’s mother. For young men, however, romantic relationships and marriages tend to be highly unstable, heightening the importance of understanding their role in supporting positive fathering (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Thus, both qualitative aspects of father–mother relationships, such as support, and structural factors, such as marital and residential status, should be included in investigations of fathering. This is particularly the case in studying early off-time fathering, in part because the number of children whose parents are unmarried or not sharing the same residence has increased dramatically.

The *Tufts Young Fathers Study* was designed to examine patterns of fathering among men making an early off-time transition to fatherhood. We aimed to examine fathering from multiple perspectives (e.g., quantitative and qualitative indicators of involvement and interaction), and to understand ways in which fathering was related to aspects of the mother–father relationship.

Method

Sample

Participants were 100 fathers who experienced early, off-time fatherhood; average father age at

birth of the child was 20 years (ranging from 15 to 24 years). The sample reflects the diversity of young parents in Massachusetts. Race/ethnicity data were obtained through self-identified census categories; 18% of the fathers described themselves as African American, 41% European American, 25% Hispanic, and 16% biracial or “other.” Half (52%) of fathers had completed high school; 36% were high school dropouts; the rest currently were in high school or GED programs. Most (82%) of fathers were employed, 65% full time. In general, families were low income; many participants (47%) reported income of \$15,000 or less; 23% earned between \$15,001 and \$25,000 and 30% of fathers reported more than \$25,000 in annual earnings.

Father age ranged from 16 to 29 years old at the initial interview; children averaged 17 months of age. Most (95%) fathers were parenting their first-born. At the initial interview, 68% of the men lived with their child and the child’s mother, compared to 58% at Time 2, six months later.

Measures and Procedures

Fathers and their children were visited in fathers’ homes on two occasions, separated by six months. Fathers were asked about their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about fatherhood,

Table 1. *Study Constructs and Measures Study Constructs and Measures*

Construct	Measure	Description
Father Involvement	Structured interviews and questionnaires	Time spent with child; financial and emotional support to child’s mother; physical caregiving; distribution of time with child or in family triad; barriers to father involvement
Parenting Attitudes	Adult–Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) (Bavolek, 1984)	Four Subscales: Parental expectations, empathy, corporal punishment, and role reversal
Parenting Knowledge	The Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI) (MacPhee, 1981)	Knowledge of parental practices, developmental processes, and norms for infant behavior
Parenting Stress	Parenting Stress Index (PSI) (Abidin, 1983)	Parenting stress: general, dysfunctional parent–child relationship, difficult child
Parenting strategies	Modified Myers-Walls’ (personal communication) Parenting vignettes	Proportion of positive and negative parenting strategy responses to: child needs attention, child cries and won’t stop, child “bugging” you
Father–child interaction	Emotional Availability Scales (EAS) (Biringen, et al, 1998)	Observations of parent–child interaction in teaching and play: parent sensitivity, hostility, structuring, and intrusiveness, child responsiveness and involvement
Father–mother relationship quality	Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991)	Relationship support, depth, and conflict in father–mother relationship
Father–mother relationship status	Structured interviews	Marital status; committed relationship status, residential status, whether mother is mentioned as a barrier to father involvement and positive fathering
Depression	Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977)	Self report questionnaire of depressive symptoms.

their relationship with the mother of their child, and their mental health, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Fathers and their children were observed interacting together in play and teaching contexts. Measures are presented in Table 1.

Results

Analyses were conducted to examine a) relations between the father–mother relationship and aspects of fathering, and b) whether there were patterns of father–child interaction that were related to relationship and contextual factors. Table 2 presents mean data for quantitative aspects of father involvement.

Father–Mother Relationship and Father Involvement

Quality of the father–mother relationship was related to several aspects of father involvement: daily involvement, extent of emotional support to the child’s mother, and distribution of time spent with child. When mother–father relationships were more positive (supportive, deeper, less conflict), fathers were more likely to be involved with their children on a daily basis, to provide greater emotional support for the mother, and to spend a greater proportion of their father–child time within the family triad ($F > 5.15, p < .05$).

Analyses examining mother–father relationship status (committed: married or engaged vs. not committed) and father residential status showed that fathers who were in committed relationships were more likely to spend daily time with their children, and provide greater emotional support to the child’s mother (all $X^2 > 4.0, p < .05$). Residential status also showed these patterns; residential fathers also provided more frequent

physical caregiving and greater financial support for their children than did nonresidential fathers (\$138 per week vs. \$84 per week).

During interviews, fathers were asked about what factors served as supports or barriers to positive father involvement. Regardless of residential status, when fathers perceived mothers to be a barrier to father involvement, they were less likely to be involved on a daily basis, and spent proportionally less time in the family triad (all $X^2(1, N = 95) > 3.86, p < .05$).

Father–Mother Relationship and Fathering Behavior

Relationship quality was related to multiple aspects of fathering behavior; fathers with better father–mother relationships were less likely to experience parenting stress and were more likely to report positive parenting strategies. On the other hand, they also were *less* likely to show optimal behavior in freeplay. Greater father–mother conflict was related to greater parenting distress and sensitivity (all $r > .22, p < .05$).

Fathers who mentioned difficulties with the child’s mothers as problematic to fathering held less appropriate attitudes about role reversal (AAPI), were less knowledgeable about child development (KIDI), and reported fewer positive parenting strategies. Their interactions with their children also were characterized by greater hostility (during freeplay interactions) and less optimal structuring (during teaching task interactions); (all F ’s $> 4.01, p < .05$).

Relationship Status and Fathering

There were few significant ANOVAs linking marital status, relationship commitment and quality of fathering. Men who were married at Time 1 reported more inappropriate expectations about their child, $F(1,94) = 4.89, p < .05$; at Time

Table 2. *Father Involvement in Tufts Young Fathers Study*

	Time 1	Time 2
Father Involvement Daily		
Emotional Support to Baby’s Mother	72%	72%
Daily	51%	49%
Weekly	27%	24%
< Weekly	22%	28%
Dollars Contributed to Child’s Care per Week	\$116	\$110
Physical Care for Child		
Daily	69%	69%
Weekly	26%	21%
< Weekly	5%	9%
Percentage of Sample “Depressed”		33%

2, married men reported less parenting stress related to a difficult child, $F(1,60) = 4.02$, $p < .05$. Residential status was related only to father sensitivity in teaching task interactions; residential fathers were more sensitive in play (Time 1, $F(1,41) = 8.46$, $p < .01$; Time 2, $F(1,40) = 7.70$, $p < .01$).

Analysis of Relationship Patterns

Analyses of individual indicators of fathering tell part of the story, but understanding father-child relationships may be enhanced by looking dyadic patterns as opposed to individual attitudes and behaviors. Rather than focus on variables, a person-oriented approach allows us to examine whether there were characteristics that differentiated groups of fathers and children. The technique of cluster analysis (Magnusson & Bergman, 1990) is a person-centered, as opposed to a variable-centered (Hart, Atkins, & Fegley, 2003) analytic approach that allows for the individual or dyad to be the focus.

K-means cluster analysis was used to detect patterns of dyadic interactions between fathers and children by classifying dyads, based on emotional availability of fathers and children, into groups (clusters) that are internally homogeneous but externally heterogeneous (different from members of other clusters). The two child EA scales, responsiveness and involvement, were highly correlated ($r < .75$, $p < .000$), and were combined. Following identification of the clusters, the different groups of father-child dyads were examined in relation to aspects of fathering and the father-mother relationship using analysis of variance techniques.

Cluster analyses revealed the heterogeneity of fathering among this group of young men. The four patterns are depicted graphically in

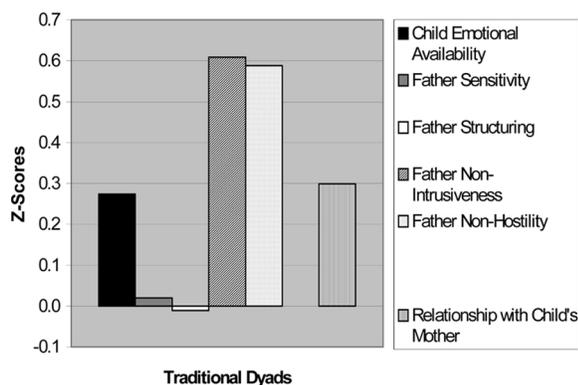


Figure 1. Characteristics of "Traditional" dyads. Tufts Young Fathers Study.

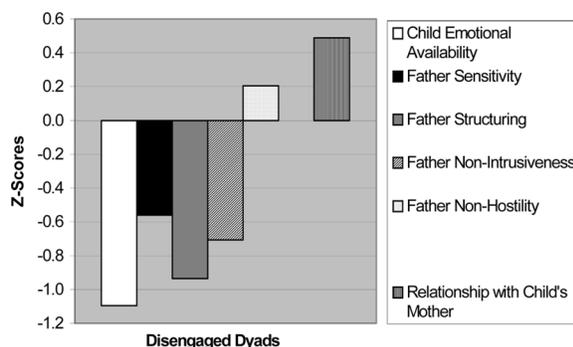


Figure 2. Characteristics of "Disengaged" dyads. Tufts Young Fathers Study.

Figures 1–4. One pattern (approximately 1/3 of the sample) showed father-child dyads that we characterized as "traditional" (for lack of a better term). In father-child interactions, fathers were average in sensitivity, and children were positively engaged. These men were in committed, positive relationships with their children's mothers, saw their children daily, but for few hours; fathers reported that the lack of time with their children was due to time spent in school or employment, stating this as the biggest barrier to involved fathering.

A second pattern, "disengaged dyads" (approximately 1/4 of the sample), was characterized by fathers and children whose interactions were low in engagement and emotional availability. These fathers, also, were in committed and positive relationships with the mothers of their children, and spent considerable amounts of time with their children, who were younger than children in the other three groups. We conjecture that these men may be more focused on the "couple relationship" with the child's mother than on the father-child bond. After all, forming romantic relationships and couple bonds is "developmentally appropriate" for young men of this age. Another thought is that these men may more

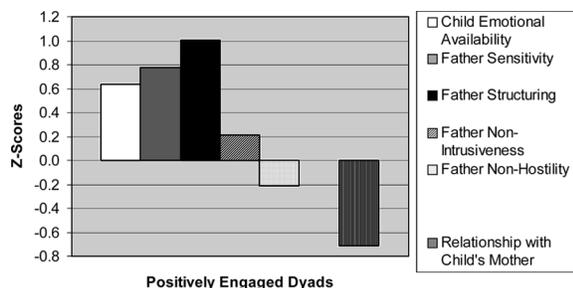


Figure 3. Characteristics of "Positively Engaged" dyads. Tufts Young Fathers Study.

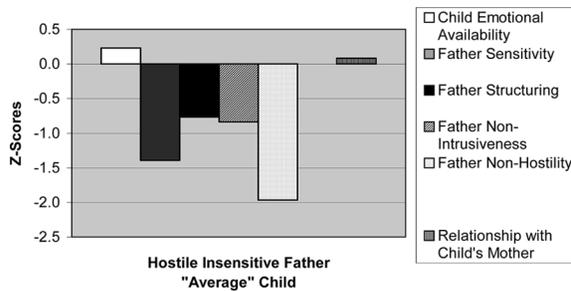


Figure 4. Characteristics of "Hostile/Insensitive Father and Average Child" dyads. Tufts Young Fathers Study.

slowly be making the transition to fatherhood and developing the skills and identity in the father role than other fathers.

Fathers in third dyadic pattern, the "positively engaged dyads" (1/3 of the sample) reported less positive and committed mother–father relationships. Father involvement was characterized by disagreement on the child's care, less than daily involvement, and a greater proportion of father–child time spent in the father–mother–child triad. Mothers were cited as the greatest barrier to involved fathering, highlighting the notion of "maternal gatekeeping." At the same time, these men were sensitive in interactions with their children, and their children were positively engaged with them. Fathers in the fourth dyadic pattern "hostile-insensitive father/average child" (8% of the sample) also reported conflictual, less committed father–mother relationships, and maternal gatekeeping. These men, however, reported fewer positive parenting strategies, were more likely to be depressed, and interacted with their children in more insensitive and hostile ways.

Contextualizing the Findings From the Tufts Young Fathers Study

Descriptive data from the Tufts Young Fathers Study counter the notion that young, unmarried fathers are uninvolved with their children. Most men (72%) were involved with their children daily, contributed to their physical care, and provided financial support for their children. Only about half, however, reported providing daily emotional support to their child's mother, and some mother–father relationships were characterized by low support and high conflict. For some young men, developing successful intimate relationships and parenting styles while making the transition to adulthood is challenging.

The data from our study suggest that among young fathers, the relationship with their baby's

mother is linked with fathering in quite complex ways. In general, when father–mother relationships were more positive (deeper, more supportive, less conflict) fathers were more likely to be involved with their children daily, and they spent more of this time in the family triad with mother and child. In turn, they provided greater emotional support to their child's mother. As a group, fathers who reported greater depth and support in the father–mother relationship were less stressed as parents, and reported a higher proportion of positive parenting strategies, such as the use of reasoning, or attending to the child's needs, as opposed to physical punishment, threats, or isolation. When mothers were perceived as barriers to fathering, fathers had less accurate and adaptive parenting knowledge and attitudes, parenting strategies and behaviors.

These findings are relatively consistent with the view that when mothers serve as gatekeepers to father involvement (Beitel & Parke, 1998), fathers may not have ample opportunities to develop confident and sensitive parenting attitudes, knowledge and behaviors. Moreover, the notion of "spillover effects" among relationships (in this case between father–mother and father–child) is in concert with much of the literature on marital relationships, and on the impact of parental mental health on parenting (Owen & Carter, 2005). Evidence of this was apparent in the dyads where there was a confluence of conflictual mother–father relationships and lack of emotional availability in father–child play interactions. In these dyads, fathers were less sensitive and more hostile with their children, and they reported significantly greater symptoms of depression than did other young fathers. This may suggest, then, that investing in the development of strong father–mother bonds will facilitate positive father–child relationships. And it will, in many cases—but it is likely not quite so straightforward. In some of our father–child dyads where the father–mother relationship was strong and positive both fathers and children showed "disengaged" patterns of emotional availability. There also were cases in which the mother–father relationship was negative, distant, or conflictual, and where the father–child interaction was a source of delight, with very eager and positive engagement of fathers and children.

Perhaps, in some cases, a focus on the father–mother relationship hinders young fathers' opportunities to develop optimal interaction styles with their infants. It also may be that some fathers with poorer relationships with their child's mother develop a more optimal interaction style because

they have father–child time alone, without mother mediating their interactions. Alternatively, some of these men may be highly motivated fathers, “making the most” of their time with their children.

The present study has both limitations and advantages. The sample was diverse racially, and representative of the young father population in this state. Much of the literature on fathering has not included representative samples, making comparisons difficult. However, we had only short observations of father–child interaction at home; while short observations of this nature have been related to attachment and other aspects of maternal functioning we know less about how representative they are of father–child relationships. Home observations provide a naturalistic basis to the interactions, but are complicated by non-standardization of settings across families. Further, we are not able to make strong statements about the direction of effects in our investigation. While mother–father and fathering relationships, for example, were linked with each other, two scenarios are possible. On the one hand, poor or conflictual relationships between couples may lead to lower father involvement and poorer quality fathering; the reverse is also possible. Uninvolved or unskillful fathering may cause conflict between the parents of the child, leading to poorer quality mother–father relationships.

Conclusion

A multidimensional and dynamic view of fathering (Parke, 2002) is likely to yield information about processes and mechanisms of influence in father–child relationships. This is a “next step” in contextualizing father–child relationships. Conceptualizing and measuring fathering as only quantitative measures of “father involvement” necessarily limits our understanding of the complexities, or dynamic nature, of fathering. Few studies of mothering or mother–child relationships rely heavily on information about the amount of time that mothers spend with their children, likely because this information is limited in terms of informing prevention or intervention efforts to support positive parenting. Instead, studies of mothering are more likely to address factors that help us understand the mechanisms of influence within parent–child and family relationships. Understanding the internal processes that underlie parenting may be critical since representations of the fathering role and of the child and family influence father–child interactions (Beitel & Parke, 1998). Although this research

has not yet been conducted with fathers, theory predicts that paternal insight into the child’s feelings, thoughts, and motives would be associated with children’s emotional regulation and attachment, as has been found with regard to maternal representations and mother–child interactions (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991).

The study of fatherhood is complex, and embracing a broad, comprehensive view of fathering will allow us to understand the more challenging questions about how patterns of fathering develop over time, the contextual influences on fathering, and the critical features of fathering that influence children’s development. Investigations of fathering have matured in concepts, methods/measurement, and analysis—from measuring the amount of time fathers spend with their children (by asking mothers) to a more multidimensional view of fathering.

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