

Theoretical Approach to Understanding Father Involvement: Testing a Model

Chair: Natasha J. Cabrera

Presenters: Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Lisa Boyce, Natasha J. Cabrera

Cabrera: Ten years ago researchers began examining the way in which fathers matter in the lives of their children. At the time there were no theories and no measures particularly suited for fathers. Originally measurement in the field used a template developed for mothers, which began to be modified over time. The result of the preliminary work was the realization that there is still not a theory or a model that can help us understand why and how fathers matter.

Currently we continue to think about and struggle with models or theories that are already in the field. The idea is to bring together all those theoretical models of how fathers matter in relationships with children and attempt to develop a heuristic model to help guide research

Research focuses on what constitutes father involvement and how that matters for their children. The research began with very broad categories including reading history, cultural history, and biological history as important factors influencing father involvement. In conjunction with other family characteristics, such as maternal employment and mother-father relation quality, the model hypothesizes that the father characteristics have a direct effect on father involvement.

Fitzgerald: The model does not look for a theory in the sense of attachment theory. Instead, the research is looking for a way to organize the body of literature on fathers in a systematic way. The three major sources of variation that contribute to a father's characteristics are his own environment, his cultural history, and his biological history. This way of compartmentalizing and organizing influences might lead to theoretical aspects unique to fathers; however it is much more likely that it will lead to theoretical issues about family dynamics.

Cabrera: The heuristic model implies an organizing model that tries to incorporate everything learned so far about what affects fathering and how fathering leads to child outcomes.

Fitzgerald: There are 600 or 700 fathers that are part of the National Evaluation of Early Head Start Sub-Study on Fathers. Ethnically this group is representative of Early Head Start, but there is a broader range in socioeconomic status because family income is defined by maternal characteristics.

This study first examined the impact of fathers' antisocial behavior on children's developmental functioning. The first 3 years of the study have shown that there is an impact, which is stronger in the area of emotion and behavior regulation than it is in cognitive functioning. The second part of that same study examines 4 different groups; fathers who are high in antisocial behavior, fathers low in antisocial behavior, and then fathers living in neighborhoods that they perceived as either high or low in violence exposure. It is unknown whether or not the neighborhood was actually high or low in violence.

Findings show that involvement by fathers who are high in antisocial behavior and perceive themselves to be living in high violence environments tended not to have any differences in

outcomes related to their children. There were differences found with fathers who were low in antisocial behavior but who perceive their environment to be high violence. They were much harsher in disciplining their children, and much more likely to use stern forms of physical punishment. Even though they may not be inclined to do that because they were low in antisocial behavior, it is speculated that if they perceive the environment that their child is going to be engaging in as violent, fathers might adopt different forms of discipline in order to try to rein them in.

Using data from a recent study published in *Zero to Three*, fathers who became fathers when they were a teenager were compared with fathers who were older when they became fathers. Researchers found that teenaged fathers have difficulty functioning on their own. They tended to have more negatives in their backgrounds and also tend to use harsh discipline much more often. Interestingly, when examining time spent with the child and enjoyment of the child, teenager fathers scored much higher than nonteenage fathers. They see their children as playmates and probably discipline and react to their child, in terms of physical interaction and discipline, in the same way that they would towards a peer.

Another study screened for alcohol use to determine if there was a correlation between a diagnosis of alcoholism and children's performance and found that children whose fathers were positive for alcoholism had much poorer emotional and behavior regulation than do the children whose fathers did not have that diagnosis. Fathers who screen for alcoholism show very different perceptions of their sons and daughters. They perceive their daughters to be much more effective, much more in control, much brighter, more engaged, and more socially competent. In contrast, they perceive their sons to be hyperactive and out of control. If a father perceives his son to be out of control then he is more inclined to use physical punishment.

It is not possible to understand the impact of Early Head Start if the impact of the environments that children live in is not fully understood. Often programs have been labeled as ineffective when they have now controlled for other contributing factors.

Boyce: Researchers were particularly interested in exploring what factors contribute to father involvement, and the impact of father involvement on child cognitive outcomes. The model used when the child was age 3 was father depression and the father involvement measure was play. At age 3 it was found that fatherhood depression and Early Head Start had an impact on child cognitive outcomes.

What happened at age 2 was more complex. This model was helpful in guiding analyses and what we were able to discuss with the program. There were several ways that Early Head Start influenced father-toddler play directly. Fathers and children in the program played at a higher level than those in the comparison group. There was also an indirect effect where Early Head Start influenced the father-toddler play and father-toddler play influenced the academic and cognitive outcomes at age 2. Depression was a significant negative predictor for father-toddler play for the comparison group, but not for the treatment group. Father-toddler play was an important significant predictor for child cognitive outcomes at age 2.

The model helped us develop statistically different analyses to test for the different age groups. It

was possible to show that effort being put into father involvement specialists is paying off, especially for those fathers who are depressed. Cabrera stated that not all sites have father involvement programs so it is not possible to look nationally at how Head Start programs impact children's outcomes because not all the sites had a father program in place.

Cabrera: Using the model, researchers wanted to look at teenage fathers' involvement. Accessibility is one definition of father involvement, so researchers looked at what predicts fathers' accessibility through prekindergarten and how teenage fathers report their engagement with the children at 24 months. In this case prenatal involvement is looked at as a measure of father characteristics and a predictor to father accessibility and engagement. The less involved that fathers are prenatally, the least likely they are to be accessible to the child later on.

Teenager fathers in this study come from an ethnically diverse population. The majority of the fathers are nonresident. The majority of these are black, do not have a high school diploma, and are not in school training. Based on maternal reports, most fathers are accessible to and have contact with the children by pre-K. Survival functions predict accessibility over time. Teenager fathers who were prenatally involved were resident at 14 months, had a high school diploma, and were more likely to be accessible to the children at pre-K. Most accessible teenage fathers see their children every day. Mothers report that the majority of fathers provide help in caring for the children. Surprisingly, nonresident fathers who were romantically involved with mothers reported seeing their children most often and providing more help than resident fathers.

Comments: Concern was expressed that the presentation seemed to imply that fathers do not have a strong influence on children's cognitive development. Fitzgerald clarified that he was referring to antisocial fathers or fathers who are high risk for alcoholism, but that the negative effects of these fathers' involvement was mostly on social and emotional regulation. Tamis-LeMonda added that there have been at least three papers published showing a very positive effect of fathers' involvement on cognitive development and language. It has been found that fathers' affects are actually more powerful than previously thought with consistently stronger associations of children's cognition and language than for mothers.

Cabrera: The majority of fathers who were accessible to the children 3 years later were the ones who had a romantic relationship with the mother. Only a small percentage of fathers who had no relationship with the mother still maintained contact with their children.

Question: A statement was made by an audience member regarding how some fathers are more controlling in the more dangerous environment and how they think highly of the girls. Is there any research being done looking at how these variables might interact to serve as a protective factor for girls' positive social and emotional outcomes over time? Fitzgerald commented that that is where the research is going.