

**Fathers' Involvement and Young Children's Behavior
in Fragile Families**

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Extended Abstract
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Major changes in family structure along with growing diversity in fathers' roles in the past half century have increased attention to the nature and consequences of fathers' involvement with children. Beyond their continued provision of economic resources, fathers today—particularly those who live with their children—are often directly involved in childrearing, including nurturing and caregiving, engaging in play and leisure activities, monitoring children's activities and whereabouts, and providing emotional and practical support to the child's mother (Bianchi, 2000; Cabrera et al., 2000). There is a growing recognition that high-quality father involvement—particularly by residential fathers—may offer important benefits for children's wellbeing (Marsiglio et al., 2000). At the same time, the rising number of children who live away from their fathers raises questions about the role of non-residential fathers and whether/how fathers' involvement may attenuate the disadvantages associated with 'non-traditional' family formation.

Despite the growth in studies of fatherhood and fathers' influence on children's development and wellbeing, important gaps in the literature remain. In particular, our knowledge about how non-resident father involvement affects children's development remains limited (Cabrera et al., 2000). Although some recent studies suggest that non-resident father involvement can positively affect children's wellbeing (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; King & Sobolewski, 2006), a recent review notes that most studies have focused on the payment of child support or the frequency of visitation, as opposed to more nuanced measures of emotional closeness and authoritative parenting (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

In addition, many studies of non-resident fathers have used small and non-random samples, have examined older children, and/or have focused solely or primarily on divorced fathers (as opposed to unmarried fathers) (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). With more than one-third of all births today occurring outside of marriage (Hamilton et al., 2005) and over three-fifths of these unwed fathers living away from their children by the child's fifth birthday (Carlson et al., 2007), many children born to unwed parents will spend the majority of their childhood living apart from their biological father. Therefore, understanding how various aspects of involvement by unwed non-resident fathers affect children's wellbeing, particularly at young ages, merits further investigation.

In this paper, we use new data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how father involvement for both resident and non-resident fathers affects young children's behavioral outcomes; this is an important outcome measure, since behavioral problems during childhood and early adolescence have been linked to high-school dropout (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004) and mental health and conduct disorder problems later in life (Harrington et al., 1990). We contribute to the existing literature in five ways: First, our sample includes a large number of nonmarital births which have been little explored in previous studies of father involvement. Second, we include measures on multiple domains of father involvement—spending time, engaging in activities, and sharing responsibility—to understand more about various aspects of involvement, and how they are inter-related, when fathers live either with or away from their children. Third, we focus on involvement during early childhood, which is known to be an important period in child development (Heckman, 2006) but which has been less examined at least with respect to non-resident fathering. Fourth, we evaluate a range of factors that previous research has suggested may moderate the effect of father involvement on child behavior, including fathers' behavioral characteristics, parents' relationship quality, co-parenting, and marital status at birth. Finally, we explicitly consider the reciprocal effects of fathers' involvement and child behavior over time.

We use data from the baseline, one-, three- and five-year Fragile Families surveys, including information reported by both mothers and fathers. Response rates for the baseline survey among eligible parents are 87% for unmarried mothers and 75% for unmarried fathers. The one-year (three-year) follow-up interviews were completed with 90% (88%) of eligible unmarried mothers and 70% (68%) of eligible unmarried fathers; eligibility at the one- and three-year surveys is based on having a completed baseline mother interview. At the five-year survey, 84% of eligible unmarried mothers were interviewed again. Our sample includes 3,066 fathers—1,223 co-resident fathers, 1,158 non-resident fathers, and 685 fathers that moved in or out of the child’s household between one and five years after the birth. We focus on the two stable residential groups and examine the frequency of fathers’ time with children, the extent to which fathers share parenting responsibilities with mothers, and the frequency that fathers engage with children in specific activities. We use OLS regression models, fixed effects models, and cross-lagged structural equation models. These methods enable us to consider both unobserved heterogeneity (selection) and potential reciprocal effects between fathers’ involvement and children’s behavior. In subsequent analyses we will use multiple imputation methods to determine whether sample attrition alters our results.

Overall, we find strong and consistent evidence that greater involvement by co-residential fathers at children’s age three is associated with fewer behavioral problems at age five across all measures of involvement—spending time with children, sharing responsibility for child and household tasks, and engaging in father-child activities. However, for non-resident fathers, involvement is not significantly associated with child behavioral problems for the sample overall, regardless of which involvement measure is used. We find that the benefits of non-residential father involvement for children appear to depend on fathers’ anti-social behavior: when the father has spent time in jail or prison, his greater involvement yields no benefit to children, whereas greater involvement by never-incarcerated fathers is significantly linked to children’s lower behavioral problems. Also, for either

resident or non-resident fathers, we find little evidence of reciprocal effects operating from children's behavior to fathers' involvement.

This paper provides new information about the consequences of fathers' involvement in their young children's lives and important sources of difference across fathers. Our findings suggest that co-resident fathers can have an important influence on their children's social development, but that non-resident father involvement is of little benefit for children's behavioral problems, except in certain situations. Future research will shed light on the extent to which the overall lack of effects is due to the selectivity of unwed fathers (compared to married fathers), as well as whether greater effects of non-resident father involvement may emerge at older child ages.

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