

What Do Fathers Contribute to Children's Well-Being?

This brief summarizes key research findings on the relationship between father involvement and child outcomes. As rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing have increased in recent decades, the percentage of children and fathers who live apart from one another has also increased. Yet our knowledge of how father involvement affects children's well-being in these situations is quite limited, since most research on fathers and children has focused on intact families. This brief summarizes that larger body of research, as well as the relatively small group of studies that consider fathers who live apart from their children.

Children benefit from positive relationships with their fathers.

- Warmth, closeness, and nurturance are important aspects of a healthy parent-child relationship regardless of whether the parent is a mother or father.¹ But research also suggests that fathers contribute to their children's healthy development in ways that are unique from mothers. For example, in one study of young children's cognitive development, fathers promoted their child's intellectual development and social competence through physical play, whereas mothers promoted these skills through verbal expressions and teaching activities.²

Fathers can positively influence their children's development by assuming a significant amount of the child care tasks.

- Several studies have found that when fathers spend more time on child care tasks, children benefit. For instance, in

one study, preschool-age children whose fathers were responsible for 40 percent or more of the family's child care tasks had higher scores on assessments of cognitive development, had more of a sense of mastery over their environments, and exhibited more empathy than those children whose fathers were less involved.³

- Care by fathers may be particularly influential in the first year of life. In another study, children who were cared for by their father in their first year had higher scores on assessments of cognitive development than those children who were cared for in child care centers. On the other hand, children who were cared for by their fathers during their second and third years had lower scores than children in child care centers on the same child outcomes measures.⁴

A father's parenting style has implications for child well-being.

- A warm but firm parenting style benefits children. For example, in one study of

preschoolers, boys whose fathers offered praise and compliments performed better on tests of cognitive achievement than boys whose fathers were cool and aloof.⁵ In another study, fathers who were able to set appropriate limits for children and also give them sufficient autonomy had sons with higher academic achievement.⁶ In a later study, fathers' use of harsh and inconsistent discipline had a negative effect on their sons' emotional adjustment and classroom behavior, which was related to lower school achievement.⁷

Fathers' involvement can affect children's social development, cognitive development, and academic achievement.

- Higher levels of father involvement in activities with their children, such as eating meals together, going on outings, and helping with homework, are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and a high level of school performance among children and adolescents.⁸
- In two-parent families, when both fathers and mothers are involved in children's schooling (by volunteering at school and attending school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and class events), there is a higher likelihood that children in first through twelfth grades will get high grades and enjoy school, and a reduced likelihood that a child will repeat a grade.
- However, father involvement has been found to be a more important predictor than mother involvement of the likelihood of getting high grades. For children in first through twelfth grades living in single-father families, higher father involvement is associated with getting high grades and enjoying school, and a

lower chance of suspension or expulsion from school.⁹

Limited research has been conducted on the relationship between child outcomes and involvement of fathers who do not live with their children.

- Most research on nonresident fathers has focused on the provision of formal child support and the frequency of father-child contact.
- Divorce and nonmarital childbearing do not preclude fathers from being actively involved in their children's lives. While the percentage of children living apart from their fathers has increased in recent decades, little national-level research has been conducted on the role that fathers living apart from their children play in their lives, and the relationship between nonresident father involvement and child outcomes.

Provision of child support is related to children's cognitive development, academic achievement, and behavior.

- Several research studies have documented a positive relationship between the provision of child support and the well-being of school-age children, particularly their cognitive development, academic achievement and behavior.¹⁰ However, there is some evidence that the beneficial effects of child support are greater when the child support agreement is reached cooperatively rather than by court order.¹¹
- Several studies of children living apart from their biological fathers find that receipt of child support is associated with more positive outcomes for children than other sources of income.¹²

- Very few studies have addressed the relationship between child well-being and the provision of informal child support (such as giving money directly to the mother or purchasing items such as clothes, groceries, or diapers).

Research findings on the association between frequency of father-child contact and child outcomes are mixed.

- In general, large-scale studies find no relationship between father-child contact and child outcomes, such as cognitive development, academic achievement, behavior, and perceptions of academic competence and self-worth.¹³
- Some research suggests that contact between children and fathers who do not live together is associated with fewer behavior problems and improved psychological well-being.¹⁴ However, other studies have found that father contact has a detrimental effect on children's math scores, delinquency, and behavior problems.¹⁵ This suggests that frequency of contact may be less important to child well-being than the quality of the father-child relationship.

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