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Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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Couple Relationship Quality and Father Involvement

The quality of parents' romantic relationship has important implications for a father's involvement with his child. Both the quality of the mother-father relationship and the level and type of father involvement are critical for children's positive development.

Definitions

Couple relationship quality refers to the quality of a relationship between two married or romantically involved people. A more positive relationship is characterized by low levels of hostility and conflict and by high levels of support and satisfaction within the relationship.

Father involvement refers to the type and level of a father's involvement with his children. Father involvement has been thought of as having three main dimensions: engagement (a father's involvement in activities with his child), accessibility (a father's availability to his child), and responsibility (the extent to which a father provides his child with resources, including financial support).^{21,22}

Importance and Implications of Relationship Quality for Father Involvement

Research on relationship quality and father involvement has generally found that better relationship quality is associated with better parenting, higher levels of father involvement, and increased child well-being.

Implications for Fathers

Relationship quality is associated with men's well-being in the parenting role, as well as in other areas of their lives.

- Marital happiness is associated with lower levels of parenting stress for fathers.¹¹ High quality marital relationships are also associated with increased enjoyment and satisfaction in the parenting role – perceptions of the parent-child relationship, of how their relationship with their children has changed over time, and of their satisfaction with their children.^{11,28}
- Marital quality is associated with men's physical and mental well-being. For example, changes in marital quality are associated with changes in men's physical health,³³ and marital strain and discord are associated with higher levels of depression.^{20,32}

Implications of Relationship Quality for Fathers' Involvement With Children

- The quality of the marital relationship has been shown to "spill over" into the parent-child relationship.^{4,8}
 - Parents who have supportive relationships tend to be more sensitive and responsive to their children, whereas parents who have high levels of hostility, negativity, and conflict in their relationships tend to be less attentive and more negative towards their children.^{1,7}
 - Some studies have found that this "spillover" effect is more marked for fathers than for mothers – that is, fathers in hostile or conflicted relationships are more likely than are mothers in hostile or conflicted relationships to carry these feelings into their parenting.^{6,24,26} Other research, however, has found no differences between fathers and mothers in this regard.^{4,8}

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- Relationship quality also has implications for the overall level of men's involvement with their children.^{9,10}
 - Fathers of adolescents tend to become less emotionally and physically involved with their children as marital conflict increases.¹⁵ However, mothers do not become less involved with their children as marital conflict increases.¹⁵
 - For parents of young children, fathers whose relationships are more hostile are more likely to withdraw from children in situations involving the mother, father, and child.^{18,19}
 - Fathers in more hostile relationships are less likely to be involved with their children years later, even when marital quality is measured before a child is born.²³
 - Fathers may withdraw from their children in stressful or conflictual situations because the father's role is less clearly defined by society than is the mother's role. Also, a man may find it more difficult to differentiate between his role as a husband and his role as a father than a woman finds it to differentiate between being a wife and being a mother.⁴
- For both fathers and mothers, relationship quality is also associated with a number of specific parenting behaviors.
 - High quality romantic relationships are associated with better limit setting for children and warmer, more responsive parenting.¹² For parents with infants, marital harmony also predicts fathers' helpful and supportive parenting.¹¹
 - Fathers in distressed and hostile marriages are more intrusive and provide less positive feedback to young children.^{3,18,19}
 - For parents of school-aged children and adolescents, conflict is associated with less positive disciplinary beliefs and techniques – for example, greater use of physical punishment or inconsistent discipline.³⁰ This finding is more common among fathers than it is among mothers.
 - For school-aged children and adolescents, marital conflict is associated with poorer father-child relationship quality² and with less involved parenting.⁵

Implications for Children

A large body of evidence suggests that the quality of the mother-father relationship is associated with child well-being.

- Studies show that even children as young as two are highly aware of whether there is conflict in the father-mother relationship and that this perception is associated with higher levels of behavioral problems.^{13,14}
- Father-mother relationship quality is associated with a host of negative emotional and social outcomes.
 - For school-aged children and adolescents, marital conflict is associated with internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, immaturity, hostility, aggression, hyperactivity, impulsivity, delinquency, antisocial behavior, anxiety, depression, poor social competence, conduct disorder, anxiety, withdrawal, low self-esteem, and suicide.^{13,14,17,18}
 - These outcomes are especially common among children living in households in which there is overt marital conflict, such as fighting in front of the children.¹³
 - The quality of the mother-father relationship before a child's birth is also associated with whether the child is securely attached to his or her parents during toddlerhood.¹⁶
 - The reasons for these poorer outcomes may differ by gender.
 - For adolescent girls living with married parents, high levels of mother-father conflict reduce parents' level of warmth, which leads to higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, and trouble with peers.
 - For adolescent boys living with married parents, parental warmth is less important. Instead, relationship conflict is directly associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and trouble with peers.³¹
- Father-mother relationship quality is also associated with children's and adolescents' cognitive and academic development.
 - Among adolescents, hostility and conflict in the mother-father relationship are associated with lower educational and employment attainment.¹⁵

- Overt marital conflict is also associated with poorer cognitive competence and poorer GPAs.¹³
- Father-mother relationship quality is associated with children’s and adolescents’ physical health.
 - Among adolescents, higher quality mother-father relationships are associated with receiving higher quality health care.²⁹
 - Children whose mothers report less satisfying marital relationships have poorer physical health.^{12,29}
 - Teenagers in high-conflict families headed by two married parents have higher levels of health problems than do teenagers in low-conflict families in which parents are divorced.²⁵

Relationship Quality and Father Involvement in Early Childhood

Figure 1 and Table 1 show that fathers have significantly higher levels of involvement with children when they report happier father-mother relationships. This pattern is consistent as children get older.

Figure 1. Level of Father Involvement by Quality of Father-Mother Relationship over Time

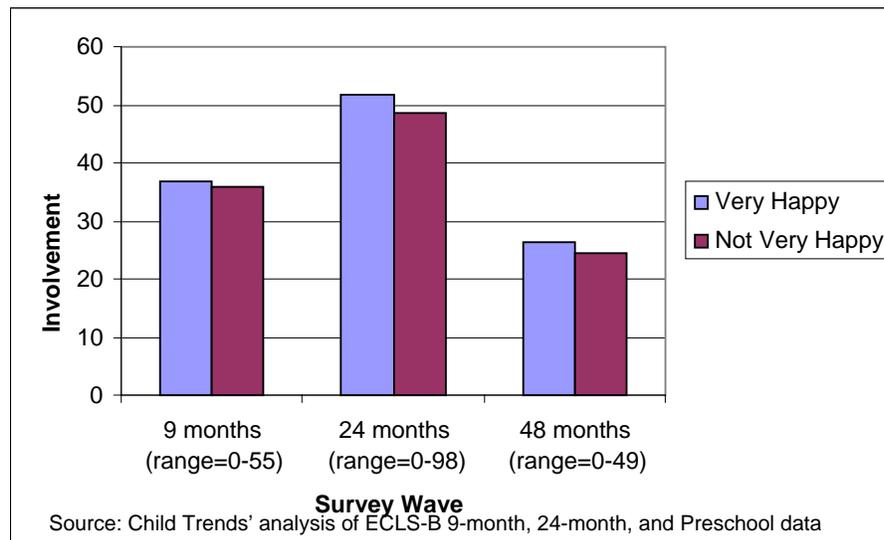


Table 1. Father Involvement by Quality of Father-Mother Relationship

Survey Wave	Very Happy	Fairly Happy	Not Very Happy
9 months	36.8	35.8 ^a	0 – 55
24 months	51.7	48.8 ^a	0 – 98
48 months	26.4	24.6 ^a	0 – 49

Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ECLS-B data
a = significantly different from “very happy”

Differences in Relationship Quality and Father Involvement by Subgroup

The following estimates are for fathers of toddlers (24-month-old children).

Differences by Poverty Status

Figure 2 and Table 2 show that in households both above and below the poverty line, fathers of toddlers are significantly more involved if they report being in “very happy” relationships than if they are in “fairly”

or “not very” happy relationships. This pattern is slightly more noticeable among fathers in households with incomes below the poverty line.

Figure 2. Level of Father Involvement by Poverty Status and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship

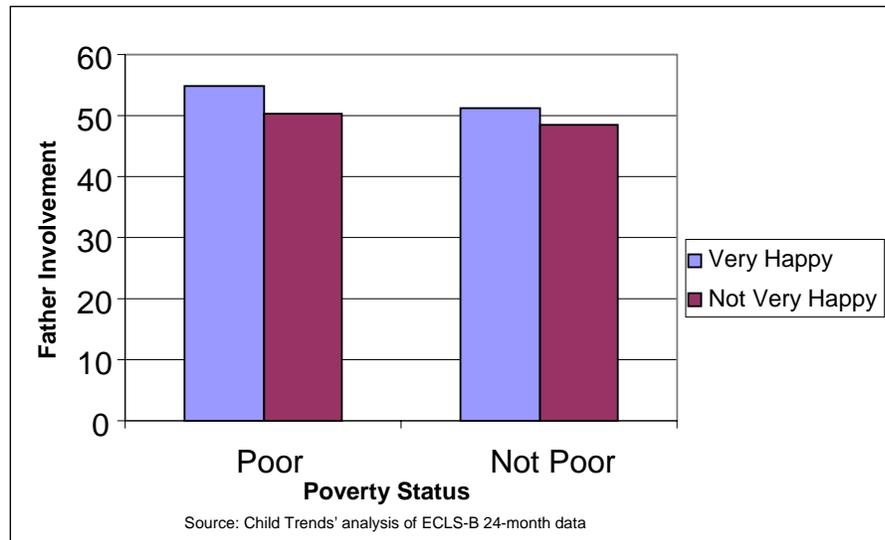


Table 2. Father Involvement by Poverty Status and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

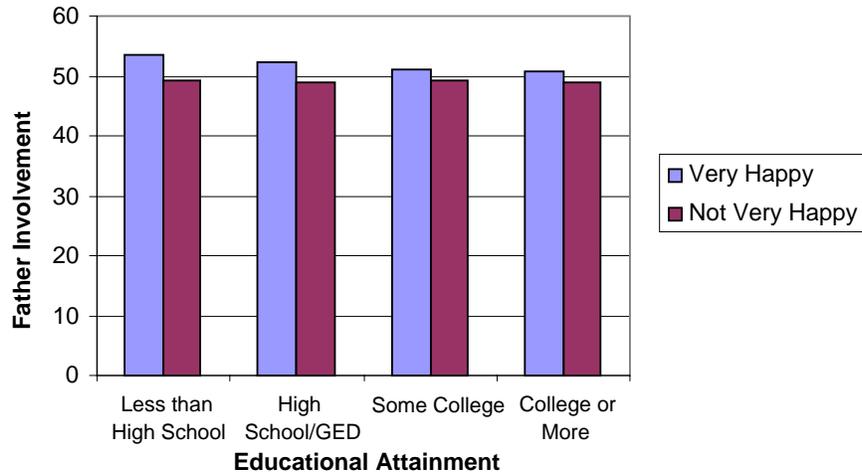
Poverty Status	Very Happy	Not Very Happy	95% CI
Poor	55.0	50.2 ^a	0-98
Not Poor	51.2	48.4 ^a	0-98

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data
 a = significantly different from “very happy”

Differences by Educational Attainment

Figure 3 and **Table 3** show that fathers with less than a high school diploma, with a high school diploma/GED, or with a college degree or more are significantly more involved with their children when they report being in “very happy” relationships. This pattern is especially evident among fathers with less than a high school education or with a high school diploma/GED.

Figure 3. Level of Father Involvement by Educational Attainment and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

Table 3. Father Involvement by Educational Attainment and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

Educational Attainment	Very Happy	Not Very Happy	95% CI
Less than High School	53.4	49.1 ^a	0-98
High School/GED	52.3	48.9 ^a	0-98
Some College	51.0	49.4	0-98
College Degree or More	50.9	48.8 ^a	0-98

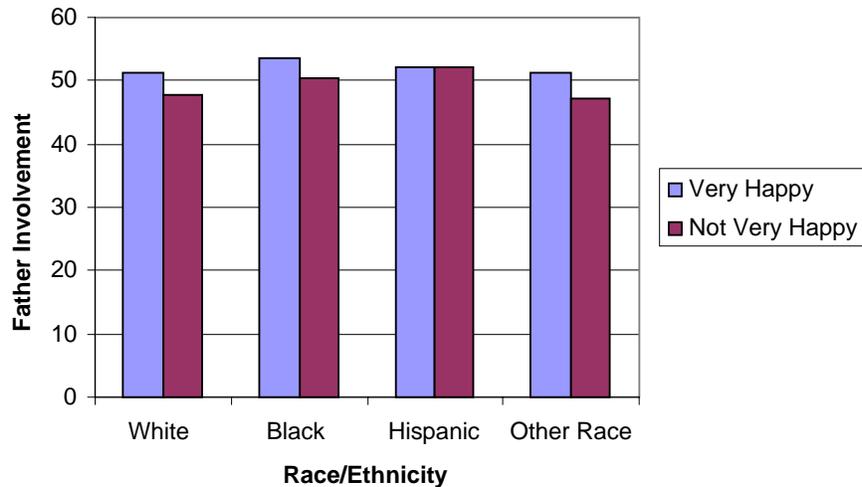
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 4 and **Table 4** show that non-Hispanic White fathers and fathers in the "other" race /ethnicity category (e.g., Asian or Native American) are significantly more involved with their children when they report being in "very happy" relationships. Non-Hispanic Black fathers are slightly more involved with their children when they are in "very happy" relationships. Hispanic fathers' involvement remains roughly the same whether they are in "very happy" or "not very happy" relationships.

Figure 4. Level of Father Involvement by Race/Ethnicity and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-

Table 4. Father Involvement by Race/Ethnicity and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

Race/Ethnicity	Very Happy	Not Very Happy	95% CI
White	51.4	47.8 ^a	0-98
Black	53.5	50.4	0-98
Hispanic	52.1	52.2	0-98
Other	51.2	47.2 ^a	0-98

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

Definitions and Measurement

Fathers who said that their relationship with their spouse or partner was "very happy" were classified as being in a very happy relationship, and fathers who said that their relationship was "fairly happy" or "not very happy" were classified as being in a "not very happy" relationship.

Father involvement was measured by adding together scores from a series of questions about the frequency with which fathers take part in various activities with their children. These activities included reading books, singing songs, telling stories, going on errands, playing chasing games, preparing meals, changing diapers, giving the child a ride on shoulders, playing indoors, putting the child to sleep, bathing the child, playing outside, helping the child get dressed, going out to eat, helping the child eat, helping the child brush teeth, taking the child to religious services, soothing an upset child, staying home with an ill child, or taking the child to day care.

Data Sources

Tables and charts documenting relationship happiness and father involvement among resident fathers came from Child Trends' analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ELCS-B) 9-month, 24-month, and 48-month surveys. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of American children born in 2001. The ECLS-B includes 10,688 children and their caregivers, and it follows these children from infancy until the time that they enter first grade. Data were collected through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers. Data were collected by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Data Limitations

Because fathers are asked a different series of questions about involvement with children at each survey wave, the measure of father involvement differs slightly at each time point.

Resources

- The **National Healthy Marriage Resource Center** provides research-based information about marriage in the United States and about programs designed to improve relationship quality: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>
- The **United States Department of Health and Human Services** supports programs and research about fatherhood development and the importance of fathers for children: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>
- The **National Center on Fathers and Families** provides research-based information on father involvement and child well-being aimed at improving children's lives through the positive participation of their fathers: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>

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