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Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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Father Involvement and Child Gender

The gender of a child has important implications for father involvement. Both the quantity and type of father involvement vary by gender, and this involvement may affect sons and daughters differently as well.

Definitions

Father involvement refers to the type and level of a father's involvement with his children. The concept encompasses 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).^{26, 27}

Importance and Implications of Child Gender for Father Involvement

Research on father involvement with sons and daughters shows that both the quantity and type of father involvement vary by child gender and that the effects of father involvement may be different for sons than for daughters.

Implications for Fathers' Involvement With Children

Research shows that there are differences in the *quantity* of involvement that fathers exhibit with their sons, versus their daughters.

- Studies suggest that father-son relationships are stronger and involve more closeness than do father-daughter relationships.^{57, 59, 64}
- Overall, studies suggest that fathers differentiate between male and female children more so than mothers^{35, 54} and that fathers are more involved with male children than with female children.^{6, 7, 33, 18}
 - A number of analyses have demonstrated that fathers are more available to and spend more time with sons than with daughters.^{2, 21, 24, 36, 46, 61}
 - Fathers spend more time in caregiving (e.g., feeding, bathing, putting children to bed) and play activities with sons than with daughters.^{27, 36, 44, 45}
 - Fathers exhibit higher levels of attentiveness, emotional engagement, and nurturing with boys.^{18, 57}
 - Fathers are more likely to discipline boys than girls.^{9, 40, 57}
 - Fathers show higher levels of material investment if they have sons than if they have daughters, working harder and earning more money in the former case.^{10, 33}
 - Fathers have been shown to have higher expectations for their daughters' achievement in the preschool years than for their preschool-aged sons.³⁷
 - Studies have found that fathers are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce if they have sons than if they have daughters. Thus, fathers are more likely to be present in the lives of their sons.^{18, 46}
 - Unmarried fathers are more likely to legally recognize the birth of a son than of a daughter (e.g., have their name placed on the birth certificate) and to share custody of sons.^{34, 46}

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

- Research suggests that fathers may be more involved with sons than with daughters because they may feel they can identify more with a same-sex child and may perceive greater incentives and rewards from active involvement with boys. Fathers may believe that they are better equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to be involved with their sons than with their daughters.³⁸ In addition, fathers may face greater external pressures and expectations to spend more time with boys and serve as role models for them.^{11, 24, 43, 46}
- However, some studies examining father involvement have failed to find differences in levels of involvement according to child gender.^{3, 35, 42, 52}
 - Some research suggests that fathers are more involved with daughters if sons are also present in the family; the more sons a father has, the higher his level of involvement with daughters. Thus, the presence of a son may draw a father into more active parenting and increase involvement for all children in the family.^{18, 24}
 - Differences in father involvement by child gender may vary by the age of the child.¹² Some studies have failed to find gender differences for very young children, suggesting that differences in father involvement by child gender may only be present for older children.^{8, 45, 53, 63}

In addition to differences in the *quantity* of involvement that fathers have with sons and daughters, studies have also found that the *type* of father involvement differs by child gender.¹²

- Fathers are more likely than are mothers to encourage sex-typed behaviors and traditional gender roles in children.³⁵ Numerous studies indicate that fathers differentiate between sons and daughters in terms of gender roles and play a key role in socializing sex-typed behavior in children. For example, fathers are more likely to encourage participation in housework, to discourage aggression, and to display warmth with girls than with boys. Fathers also tend to encourage children to play with gender specific toys (e.g., trains for boys versus dolls for girls).^{28, 35, 46, 51}
- In the realm of discipline, fathers are gentler with girls and firmer, harsher, stricter, and more directive with boys.^{28, 54, 55}
- In terms of play, fathers are more likely to engage in physical, rough-and-tumble play with boys and more “pretend” play with girls. Further, fathers are more likely to encourage assertiveness, exploration, and independence in boys and to emphasize relationship-enhancing skills in girls.^{15, 22, 30, 31, 54, 55}
- When engaging in interactive teaching activities with young children (e.g., helping them complete a jigsaw puzzle), fathers’ behaviors differ by child gender. Fathers are more directive, more likely to express approval or disapproval, and more likely to emphasize general problem-solving strategies with sons. They are more cooperative, concrete, and specific with daughters, and are more likely to give girls feedback about their performance.¹⁶
- Fathers are more likely to discuss emotions (e.g., sadness, dislike) with girls than with boys.¹
- Fathers’ perceptions of their children also differ by gender. Regardless of children’s actual characteristics, fathers tend to view infant boys as being stronger and harder than infant girls, whom they view as being smaller, quieter, weaker, less coordinated, more beautiful, and more delicate.^{54, 60} In addition, fathers tend to hold more stereotyped views of boys and girls than do mothers, believing, for example, that it is more appropriate for girls to express sadness and for boys to express anger.¹⁴

Implications for Children

Several studies have suggested that fathers may play a stronger role in sons’ development than in daughters’.^{25, 18, 19, 56}

- Some evidence suggests that boys are more strongly influenced by father involvement than are girls in the realm of cognitive development (e.g., measured by IQ scores, Bayley Scales of Infant Outcomes⁴).^{5, 13, 47}
- Several studies have shown that father involvement has a stronger influence on the behavioral outcomes of male than of female children.^{41, 20} For example, studies have shown that the quality

of the father-child relationship is more protective of risk and antisocial behaviors (e.g., delinquency, substance use) for males than for females.^{6, 7, 23}

- Father involvement has been found to have a stronger influence on the quality of children’s peer relationships (e.g., intimacy, negativity) for boys than for girls.⁶³
- Fathers may also be more influential for boys than for girls when it comes to intimacy and the development of marital attitudes during adolescence.⁵⁰
- High levels of father involvement have been found to increase academic achievement among school-aged and adolescent girls but not among their male counterparts.^{29, 62}
- Research also suggests that paternal levels of caring and closeness are strongly associated with higher self-esteem for adolescent boys, but less so for adolescent girls.⁴⁸
- Fathers’ gender-role attitudes and beliefs have been shown to be associated with the development of children’s sex-typed attitudes and behaviors, with some studies showing stronger effects for boys than for girls.^{17, 28, 30}

Child Gender and Father Involvement in Early Childhood

The following estimates are for fathers of infants (9-month-old children).

Table 1 shows that there were statistically significant differences by child gender in four out of five types of father involvement. Fathers engaged in more caregiving, physical care, and nurturing activities with boys than with girls. Alternatively, they engaged in more cognitively stimulating activities with girls than with boys. There were no differences in levels of father warmth by child gender.

Table 1: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Child Gender

Type of Involvement	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Caregiving	12.2	12.0 ^a	0-15
Physical Care	10.5	10.1 ^a	0-20
Cognitive Stimulation	3.9	4.0 ^a	0-9
Warmth	9.7	9.7	0-10
Nurturing	9.1	9.0 ^a	0-16

a = significantly different from fathers of boys

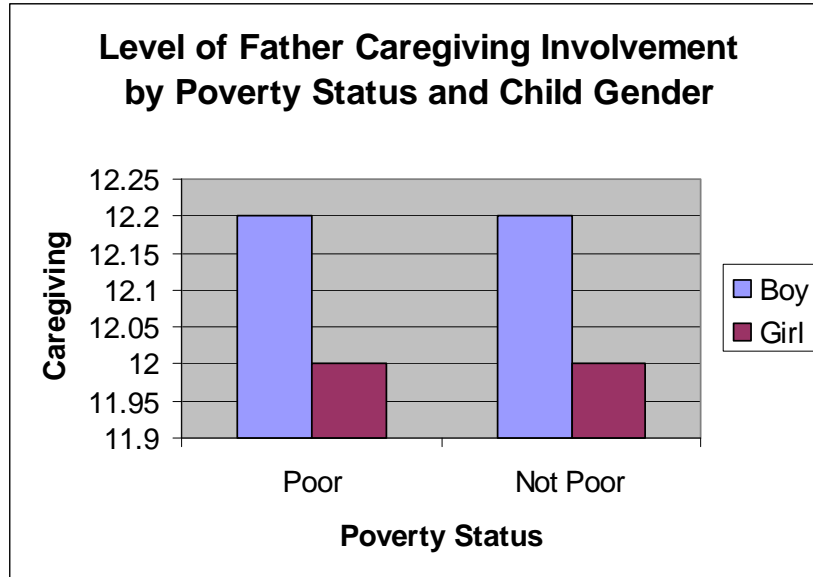
Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Differences in Father Involvement With Sons and Daughters by Subgroup

Gender Differences in Father Involvement by Poverty Status

Figure 1 and **Table 2** show that for both households above and below the poverty line, fathers’ involvement in caregiving activities was higher for boys than for girls, though the difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 1. Level of Fathers' Caregiving Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 2. Father Caregiving Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender

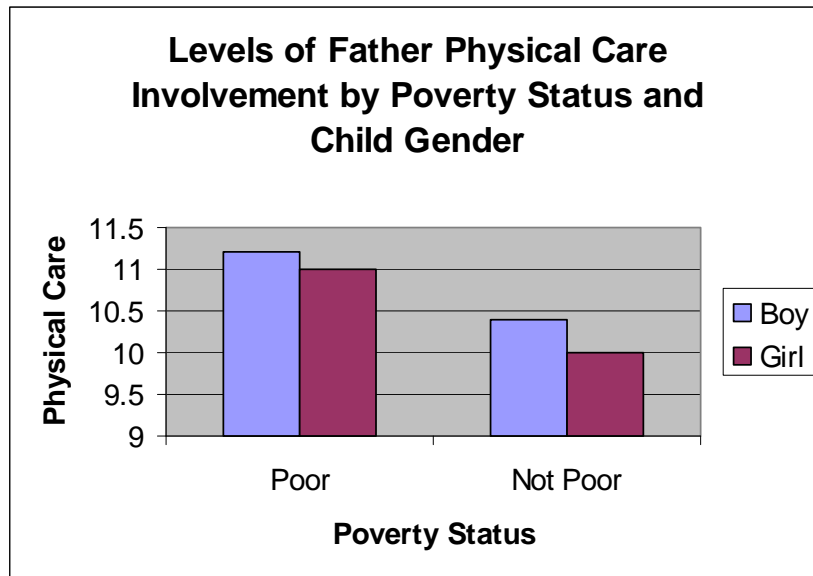
Poverty Status	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Poor	12.2	12.0	0-15
Not Poor	12.2	12.0	0-15

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 2 and **Table 3** show that in both poor and nonpoor households, fathers engaged in more physical care activities with boys than with girls. The differences, however, were only statistically significant in households above the poverty line.

Figure 2. Level of Fathers' Physical Care by Poverty Status and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 3. Father Physical Care Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender

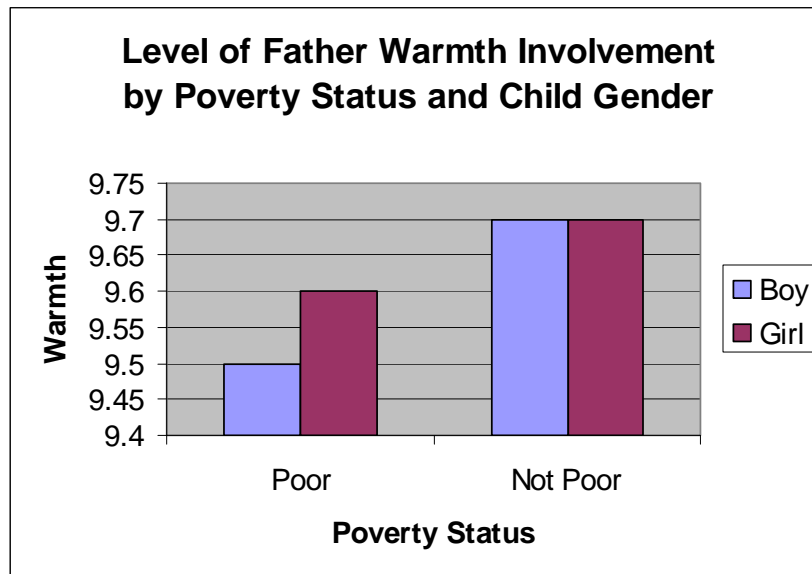
Poverty Status	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Poor	11.2	11.0	0-20
Not Poor	10.4	10.0 ^a	0-20

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 3 and **Table 4** show that in households below the poverty line, fathers showed higher levels of warmth with girls than with boys, though the differences were not statistically significant. In households above the poverty line, there were no differences in the levels of paternal warmth by child gender.

Figure 3. Level of Fathers' Warmth by Poverty Status and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 4. Father Warmth Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender

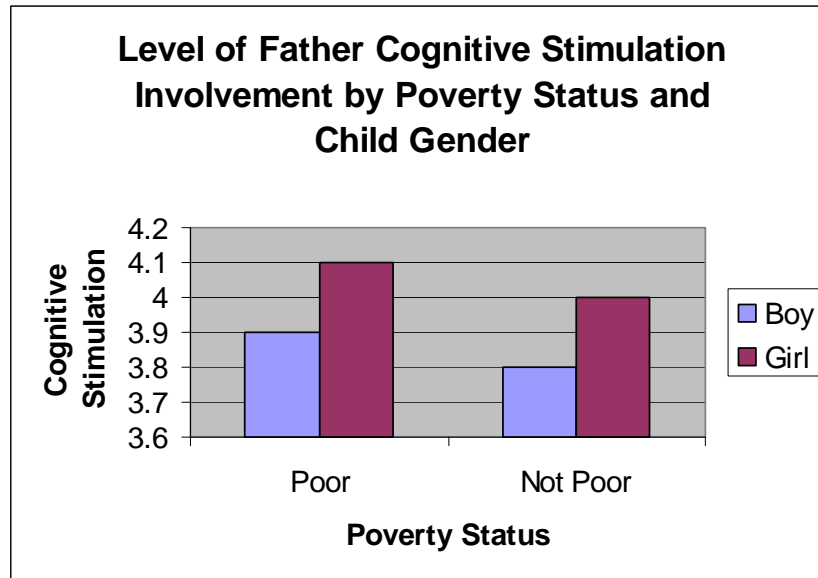
Poverty Status	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Poor	9.5	9.6	0-10
Not Poor	9.7	9.7	0-10

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 4 and **Table 5** show that in both poor and nonpoor households, fathers engaged in higher levels of cognitively stimulating activities with girls than with boys. The differences were only statistically significant in households above the poverty line, however.

Figure 4. Level of Fathers' Cognitive Stimulation by Poverty Status and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 5. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender

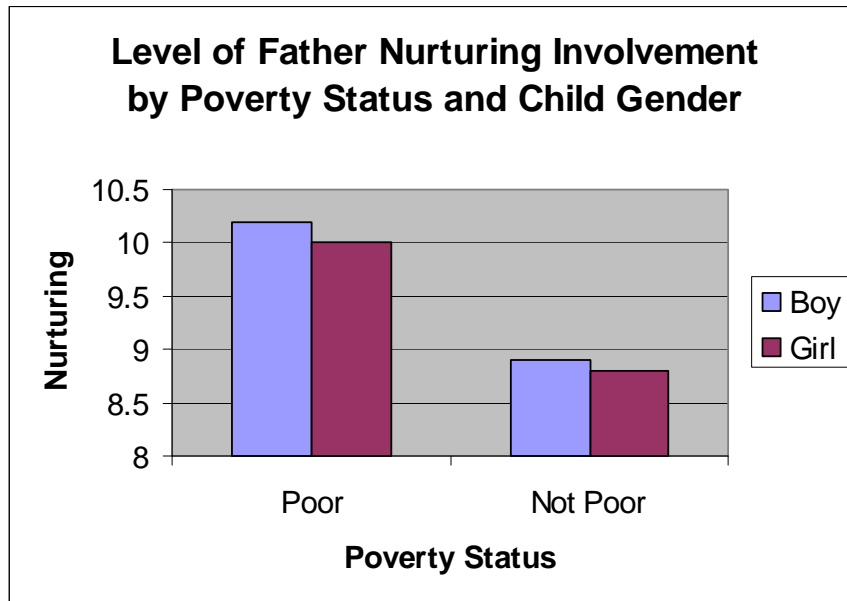
Poverty Status	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Poor	3.9	4.1	0-9
Not Poor	3.8	4.0 ^a	0-9

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 5 and Table 6 show that in both poor and nonpoor households, fathers showed slightly higher levels of nurturing toward boys than toward girls. However, the differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 5. Level of Fathers' Nurturing by Poverty Status and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 6. Father Nurturing Involvement by Poverty Status and Child Gender

Poverty Status	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
Poor	10.2	10.0	0-16
Not Poor	8.9	8.8	0-16

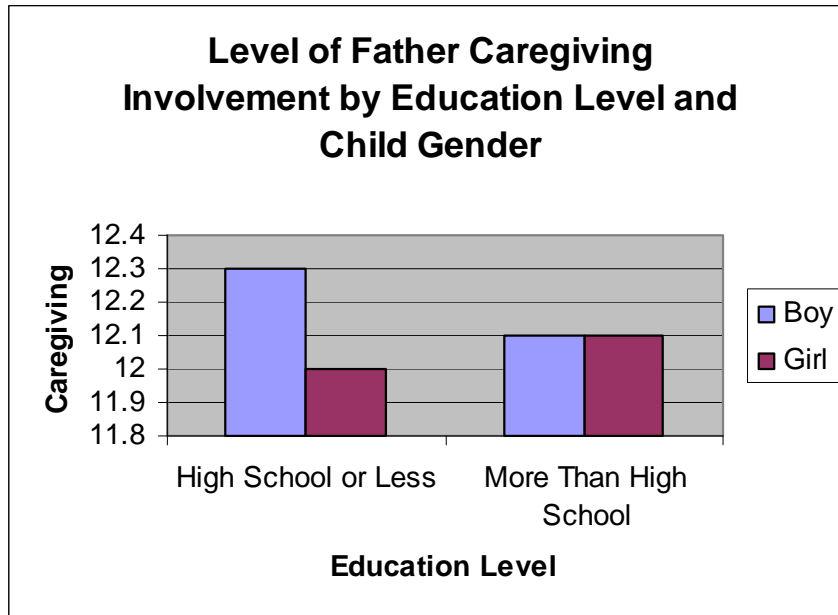
a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Differences by Educational Attainment

Figure 6 and **Table 7** show that fathers with a high school diploma or less engaged in significantly higher levels of caregiving activities with boys than with girls. However, for fathers with more than a high school education, levels of caregiving did not differ by child gender.

Figure 6. Level of Fathers' Caregiving Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 7. Father Caregiving Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender

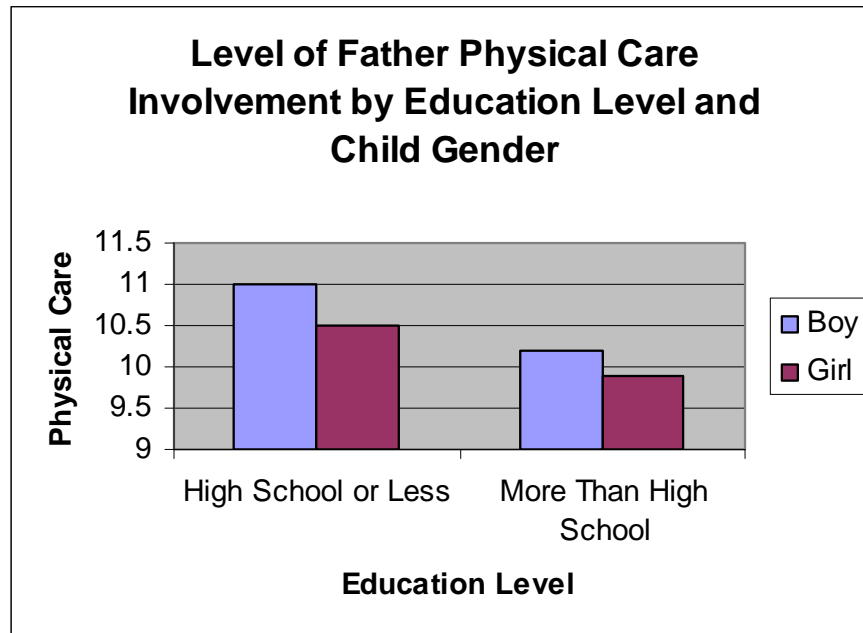
Education Level	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
High School or Less	12.3	12.0 ^a	0-15
More Than High School	12.1	12.1	0-15

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 7 and Table 8 show that regardless of educational attainment, fathers' levels of physical care were significantly higher for boys than for girls.

Figure 7. Level of Fathers' Physical Care Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 8. Father Physical Care Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender

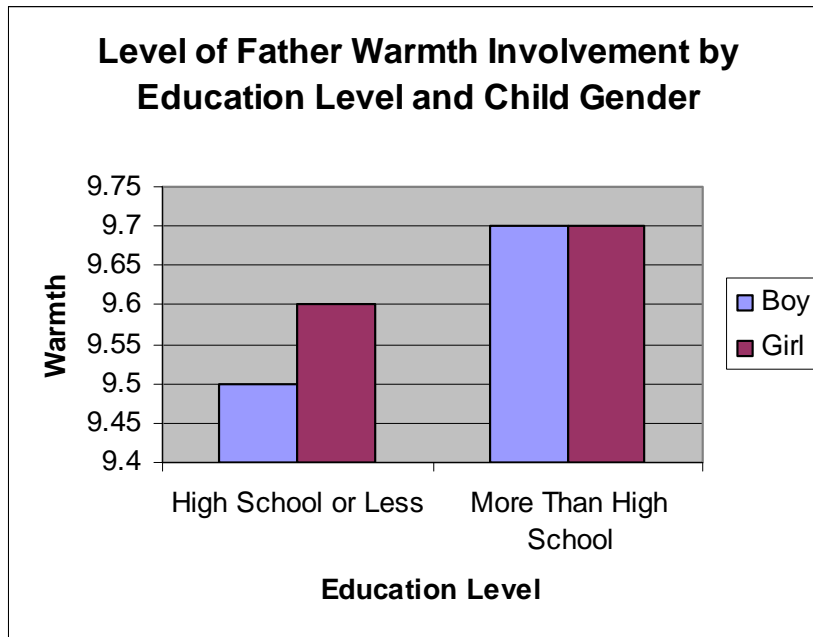
Education Level	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
High School or Less	11.0	10.5 ^a	0-20
More Than High School	10.2	9.9 ^a	0-20

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 8 and **Table 9** show that fathers with a high school diploma or less showed higher levels of warmth toward boys than toward girls, though results were not statistically significant. However, for fathers with more than a high school education, levels of warmth did not differ by child gender.

Figure 8. Level of Fathers' Warmth by Education Level and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 9. Father Warmth Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender

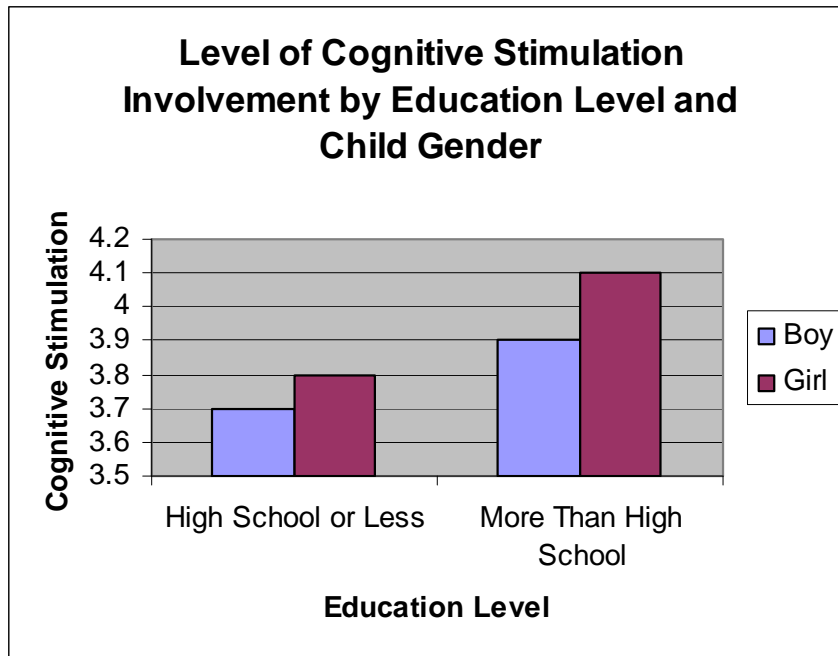
Education Level	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
High School or Less	9.5	9.6	0-10
More Than High School	9.7	9.7	0-10

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 9 and Table 10 show that regardless of educational attainment, fathers engaged in more cognitively stimulating activities with girls than with boys. However, these differences were only statistically significant for fathers with more than a high school level of education.

Figure 9. Level of Fathers' Cognitive Stimulation by Education Level and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 10. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender

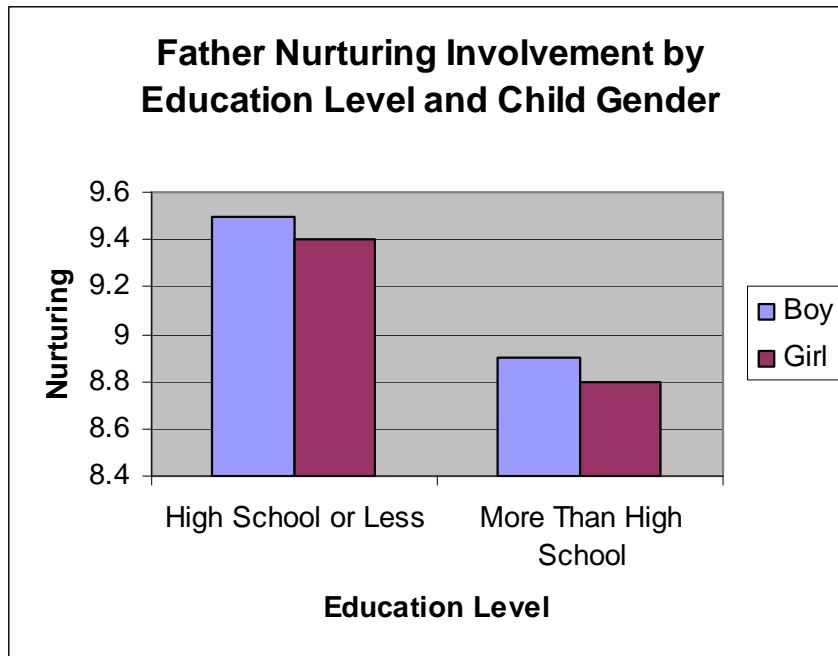
Education Level	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
High School or Less	3.7	3.8	0-9
More Than High School	3.9	4.1 ^a	0-9

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 10 and Table 11 show that regardless of educational attainment, fathers exhibited higher levels of nurturing with boys than with girls. The differences in levels of nurturing were not statistically significant, however.

Figure 10. Level of Fathers' Nurturing by Education Level and Child Gender



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Table 11. Father Nurturing Involvement by Education Level and Child Gender

Education Level	Boy	Girl	Possible Range
High School or Less	9.5	9.4	0-16
More Than High School	8.9	8.8	0-16

a = significantly different from boys

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Definitions and Measurement

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

The tables and charts in this brief documenting relationship happiness and father involvement among resident fathers are based on Child Trends' analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-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 they enter first grade. Data were collected through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers. The National Center for Education Statistics collected the data.

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 **U. S. Department of Health and Human Services** funds 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 about 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/>
- The **National Center for Fathering** conducts research and provides resources to increase involvement of fathers in the lives of children: <http://www.fathers.com>

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