

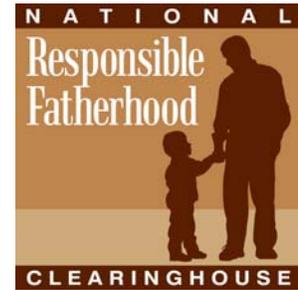


U.S. Department of Health  
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Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

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# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Stepfather Involvement

Research shows that, overall, children who are raised with stepfathers fare no better than children who are raised by single parents and less well than children in homes with two biological parents. However, studies suggest that stepfathers who are positively involved with their stepchildren can have a beneficial influence on both the children and children's mothers.

### 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).<sup>43, 44</sup>

### Importance and Implications of Stepfather Involvement

Research on stepfather involvement with children suggests that although stepfathers are generally less involved with children than are biological fathers, they can have positive impacts on child and maternal outcomes.

#### *Implications for Fathers and Their Partners*

- Men who become stepfathers may struggle with the ambiguity of the stepfather role and with finding their own identity as a stepfather and negotiating their place in a family that has previously established norms, roles, and routines.<sup>22, 47</sup>
- There seems to be little difference in reported marital satisfaction among couples in first marriages versus couples in remarriages.<sup>6, 53</sup>
- Compared with couples in first marriages, remarried couples tend to rate their marriages as more pragmatic, less romantic, more communicative, more willing to deal with conflict, and more egalitarian in terms of roles.<sup>17, 26, 27, 40, 28, 29, 35, 41</sup>
- The addition of a stepfather's income has benefits for his partner; remarriage is the most effective way for single mothers to overcome poverty.<sup>37</sup>
- Stepfathers may also serve as a positive source of support for mothers.<sup>15</sup>
- However, the strains associated with remarriage (e.g., conflicts regarding childrearing, economic responsibilities, establishing new roles, conflict with ex-spouses) are often substantial, and remarriages have a higher divorce rate than do first marriages.<sup>32, 37, 49</sup>

#### *Implications for Father Involvement*

- Most studies find that stepfathers are generally less involved with children than are resident biological fathers.<sup>8, 20, 45</sup>
  - Stepfathers typically are less likely to monitor and try to exert control over children, compared with biological fathers.<sup>2, 24, 37, 38</sup>
  - Stepfathers show more disengaged parenting styles, compared with biological fathers.<sup>35, 37</sup>

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- Stepfathers typically show low levels of positive demeanor toward children<sup>37</sup> and are less likely to express positive feelings toward or be supportive of children.<sup>2, 58</sup>
- Stepfathers show lower levels of active involvement, interest in their children's lives, and closeness with children, and are less likely to discipline them, compared with biological fathers.<sup>37</sup>
- Stepfathers participate in fewer shared activities with children, compared with resident biological fathers.<sup>20, 33, 58</sup>
- Stepfathers are perceived as being less warm, less controlling, and less successful at parenting than are biological fathers.<sup>16</sup>
- The quality of stepfathers' parenting tends to be lower than the quality of parenting exhibited by resident biological fathers.<sup>4, 19, 39, 52</sup>
- Resident stepfathers have been found to be more involved with children than are nonresident biological fathers.<sup>6</sup>
- Several possible reasons for the low levels of involvement by stepfathers have been suggested.
  - Evolutionary perspectives suggest that stepfathers may be less motivated to become invested in the well-being of stepchildren than biological children because stepchildren do not carry on a man's genetic line.<sup>21, 33</sup>
  - Low levels of stepfather involvement may be due to ambiguity in the stepfather role or resistance by stepchildren.<sup>37</sup>
    - Stepfathers' roles in the family and the appropriate type and amount of involvement that they should have with stepchildren are often difficult to define.<sup>22, 46</sup> However, most stepfathers view themselves as playing a father-like role in the family and report having a positive perception of this role.<sup>46</sup>
  - Research shows that although stepfathers are expected to provide financial support for their stepchildren,<sup>30</sup> they are often expected to be less involved than are biological parents in childrearing activities.<sup>13, 22, 23</sup>
- Not all stepfathers exhibit low levels of involvement with children, however. Stepfather involvement varies according to a number of factors.
  - Evidence shows that the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship is higher when stepfathers enter the family when children are younger,<sup>38</sup> perhaps because stepfathers are involved for a larger proportion of the child's life<sup>59</sup> or because older children and adolescents have more difficulty adjusting to the new family situation.<sup>10, 22, 38</sup>
  - In blended families that include both stepchildren and biological children, stepfathers typically display less warmth, supportiveness, and monitoring of stepchildren than of their biological children.<sup>38</sup> However, overall levels of father engagement tend to be higher in stepfamilies that include both the fathers' biological and stepchildren, compared with families that only include the fathers' stepchildren.<sup>45</sup>
  - Stepfathers may be less involved if children's biological fathers are still part of their children's lives, perhaps because there is less of a need for them to take on an active father-figure role.<sup>10, 13, 60</sup>
  - The quality of the relationship between mothers and stepfathers is positively related to the amount and quality of involvement stepfathers have with their stepchildren.<sup>1, 11, 37</sup>
  - Research suggests that children's behavior is an important determinant of stepfather involvement with children. Moreover, evidence shows that the parenting behaviors of parents in stepfamilies seem to be more influenced by children's behavior than is the case in families that have not experienced divorce.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Implications for Children*

- Overall, research has found that children who are raised with stepfathers fare no better than children who are raised in single-parent families and that stepchildren typically have poorer outcomes than do children in families headed by two biological parents.<sup>19, 37</sup>
  - Children in stepfamilies are as likely as are children in single-parent families to exhibit behavioral or emotional problems<sup>35, 63</sup> and to drop out of school or repeat a grade.<sup>37, 63</sup>



- Compared with children from two-parent families that have not experienced divorce, stepchildren experience more negative developmental outcomes, including difficulties with social relationships, lower academic achievement, and more internalizing and externalizing problems.<sup>9, 11, 12, 35, 38, 64</sup>
- Children raised with stepfathers have rates of high school dropout, adolescent childbearing, and adult productivity that are similar to rates seen among children from single-parent homes, and these rates are higher than those seen among children who are raised in households headed by two biological parents.<sup>50</sup>
- Some research suggests that children in stepfamilies have lower levels of psychological adjustment than do children in single-parent families.<sup>3</sup>
- Even after controlling for levels of paternal involvement, stepfathers report higher levels of total problems, conduct problems, and hyperactivity in their children, compared with resident biological fathers.<sup>25</sup>
- These findings suggest that stress factors related to remarriage, may offset some of the potential benefits of having a stepfather. Among these factors are problems in the stepfather-child relationship, residential mobility, instability in household structure, difficulty adjusting to changing rules and routines, and differences in parenting behaviors (e.g., levels of involvement, warmth, supervision, and investment)<sup>2, 15, 19, 20, 38, 50, 57, 58</sup>
- However, despite the higher risk for negative outcomes, the majority of children in stepparent families do not experience severe or prolonged problems,<sup>37</sup> and research suggests that stepfathers can have a positive effect on child outcomes if the quality of their involvement with children is high.
  - Most scholars agree that stepfathers can serve as important role models and substitute parents who can have a significant influence (either positive or negative) on children's emotional, social, intellectual, and financial well-being.<sup>9, 18, 34, 46</sup>
  - Children who live with a stepfather may benefit because they tend to have higher household incomes than do children in single-parent homes.<sup>50, 56</sup>
  - Children with stepfathers may also benefit from the presence of a second adult who can serve as a source of monitoring and supervision<sup>56</sup> and help out with the family.<sup>16</sup>
  - High-quality parenting by stepfathers may be associated with more positive child outcomes.
    - High levels of engagement and authoritative parenting by stepfathers have been found to be associated with fewer behavioral problems in children.<sup>34</sup>
    - Children who report positive, close relationships with stepfathers have fewer internalizing and externalizing problems than do children who report lower-quality relationships with stepfathers.<sup>42, 54, 60</sup>
    - Adolescents who have close relationships with stepfathers have higher self-esteem than do adolescents who report less closeness with their stepfathers.<sup>7</sup>
    - Adolescents who report having close relationships with their stepfathers are less likely to receive failing grades in school than are adolescents who report less positive relationships with stepfathers.<sup>42</sup>
    - Adolescents who believe that they matter to their stepfathers have lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problems than do adolescents who believe that they do not matter much to stepfathers.<sup>55</sup>
- However, the adjustment of children in stepfamilies varies by a number of important factors
  - Children's own temperaments and the structural and material resources available to them influence whether children will experience positive or negative outcomes associated with being raised with stepfathers. Examples of these resources include the amount of time parents devote to children, the number of adults available to care for them, parents' education and income levels, and the available educational resources.<sup>38</sup>
  - Sons may benefit more from stepfathers than daughters in that stepfathers may serve as important male role models and companions for boys, especially if the nonresident

- biological father is no longer involved. Girls, on the other hand, often view stepfathers as a threat to the closeness of their relationship with their mothers.<sup>35, 37, 38</sup>
- Children who are younger when their parents remarry have more positive relationships with their stepfathers and fare better than do children whose mothers remarry when they are older. Remarriages that occur during early adolescence seem to be especially difficult for children.<sup>35, 37, 38, 46</sup>
- African American adolescents may benefit more than youth of other races from the presence of a stepfather
  - African American teenagers are less likely to drop out of school or to become teen parents if a stepfather is present in the home, compared with adolescents in single-parent homes.<sup>50</sup> More positive stepfather-stepchild relationships are also reported among African-Americans.<sup>46</sup>
- Children who gain a stepfather following a divorce tend to have better outcomes than do children who previously lived with a single mother, suggesting that characteristics of earlier family structures may be important for predicting outcomes.<sup>56</sup>

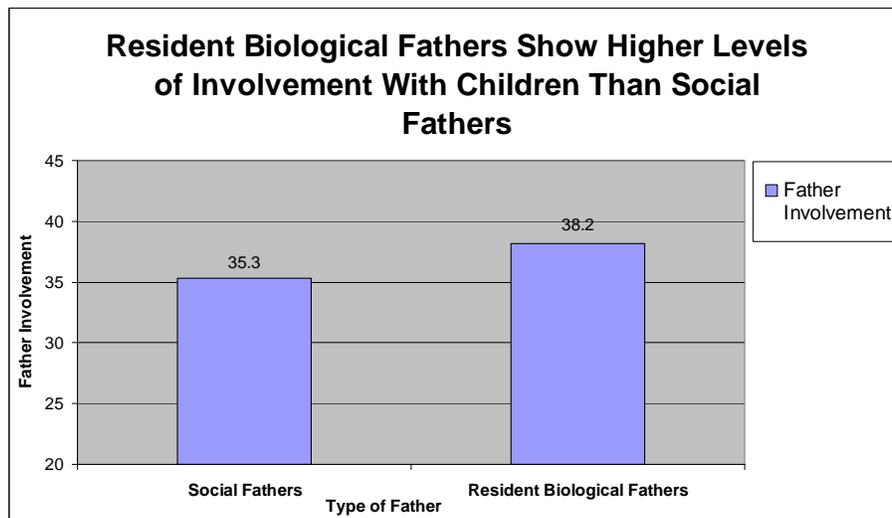
### Father Involvement Among “Social Fathers” Versus Resident Biological Fathers

The following estimates are for fathers of infants (12-month-old children).

#### Gender Differences in Father Involvement by Father Type

**Figure 1** and **Table 1** show that resident biological fathers showed significantly higher overall levels of involvement with children, compared with *social fathers*. The data source on which this brief is based uses this term for nonbiological fathers, both stepfathers married to the mother and mother’s cohabiting partners.

**Figure 1. Levels of Involvement Among Social and Resident Biological Fathers of Infants**



Source: Child Trends’ analysis of Fragile Families Baseline and 12-month data

**Table 1. Levels of Involvement Among Social and Resident Biological Fathers of Infants**

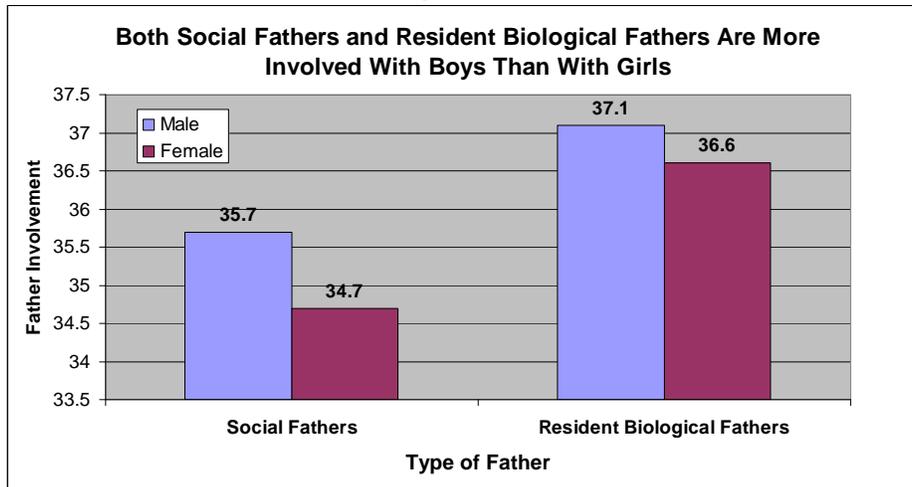
	Social Fathers	Resident Biological Fathers	Possible Range
Father Involvement	35.3	38.2 <sup>a</sup>	0-56

a = significantly different from social fathers

Source: Child Trends’ analysis of Fragile Families Baseline and 12-month data

**Figure 2** and **Table 2** show that resident biological fathers were more involved than were social fathers with both boys and girls, and that both types of fathers were more involved with boys than with girls. The differences, however, were not statistically significant

**Figure 2. Father Involvement Among Social and Resident Biological Fathers of Infants by Child Gender**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of Fragile Families Baseline and 12-month data

**Table 2. Father Involvement Among Social and Resident Biological Fathers of Infants by Child Gender**

Male	35.7	37.1	0-56
Female	34.7	36.6	0-56

a = significantly different from social fathers

### Definitions and Measurement

Father involvement (father-child activities) was measured using an eight-item summative index that assesses, at the 12-month follow-up, how many times per week (0-7) the father reports participating in a number of activities with the focal child. These activities included singing songs, hugging or showing physical affection, telling the child that he loves him/her, letting the child help with household chores, playing imaginary games, reading and telling stories, playing inside with toys, telling the child something she or he did is appreciated, taking the child to visit relatives, going out to eat with the child, assisting the child with eating, and putting the child to bed. A higher score indicates fathers being more engaged in activities with the focal child.

### Data Sources

The tables and charts in this brief documenting social and resident father involvement are based on Child Trends' analyses of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study 12-month surveys. Fragile Families is a national, longitudinal survey that provides information on the characteristics of fathers and mothers, on their relationships with one another at the time of their child's birth, and on the influence of public policies, such as welfare reform, on parents' behaviors and living arrangements. As part of the study, mothers were interviewed in person in the hospital within two days of giving birth, and fathers were interviewed following the birth, either in the hospital or elsewhere. Baseline survey data were collected between 1998 and 2000 for 4,898 families in 20 cities in the United States. The study includes 3,712

unmarried couples and 1,186 married couples who were interviewed at the birth of their child. Further interviews with parents, including nonresident fathers, have been completed or are scheduled for when the child is one, three, and five years old. These data are representative of births in U.S. cities with populations of more than 200,000.

### Data Limitations

The Fragile Families dataset does not differentiate between social fathers who are married to children's mothers and social fathers who cohabit with children's mothers. Thus, the data presented here include both married stepfathers and mothers' cohabiting partners, who are compared with resident (married or unmarried) biological fathers.

### 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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