Father Involvement and Early Child Development

Addressing Achievement Gaps Symposium
*The Family: America's Smallest School*
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The Achievement Gap: Two Perspectives and Context

Defined narrowly: Statistical difference on standardized measures of achievement in K-12 schooling between underrepresented minority children and their majority peers

Defined more broadly, Difference in access to and conditions of opportunity experienced by members of marginalized and disadvantaged social groups

Context for the discussion today: Broader definition and its implications for research and practice and a focus on fathers, children, and families in low-income, African American and Latino families
Early Child Development and Parents and Families as Protective Factors

- The issues of father involvement and the implications for children’s educational achievement as located in larger discussions about parent and family involvement and the value of early childhood educational efforts to engage parents and families and, in turn, to minimize discontinuity between home and school (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 1999).
  - Parents as a primary link in the microsystem that serves as a protective factor
  - Parents as bridging the transition from home to school
  - Parents’ ability to support their children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development
  - Race, culture, and class and the ways these intersect with structural barriers and discrimination in society
Framing the Issues of Young Children: Fathers and Families Seven Core Learnings (NCOFF)

1. **Fathers care** even if that care is not always shown in conventional ways.
2. **Father presence matters** in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
3. **Unemployment and Employability**: Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
4. **Systemic Barriers**: Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to provide obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
5. **Co-Parenting**: A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the skills they will need to share the responsibility for parenting.
6. **Role Transitions**: The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.
7. **Intergenerational Learning**: The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices in families of origin.
School Readiness and Readiness for School

- Discussions of school readiness that both reject and presuppose an equal playing field for children at birth, upon entering school, and in terms of the kinds of schools that they will enter.

- Research showing that young children’s social, emotional, and behavioral competencies are linked to subsequent academic performance and that the academic successes or failures are manifest as early as kindergarten and the first grade (Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

- Three pivotal mechanisms to forge the critical links during early childhood: (1) emotional self-regulation, (2) development of sense of self-efficacy in relation to learning competencies, and (3) social interaction skills with peers and adults (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2002).

- The question to be answered: not whether children are ready for school but rather what children are ready to learn and whether schools are ready for children (Stipek, 2002).
The Significance of Poverty

- Many public and academic scholars argue that for poor children, the urgency in responding to barriers to well-being lies in ensuring their preschool preparation and reducing the intergenerational transfer of poverty and hardship. The magnitude of the barriers is clear.
  - It is estimated that one-fifth of all children and more than one-third of all African-American and Latino children will be raised in poverty.
  - A study by Lee and Burkham (2002) shows that kindergartners’ reading and math test scores are directly linked to students’ socioeconomic levels.
Joint Center for Political & Economic Studies, http://www.jointcenter.org/DB/factsheet/chilpovt.htm

Some Commonly Listed Statistics about Fathers

- In approximately 84 percent of cases where a parent is absent, that parent is the father.
- If current trends continue, half of all children born today will live apart from one of their parents, usually their father, at some point before they turn 18.
- Where families (whether intact or with a parent absent) are living in poverty, a significant factor is the father’s lack of job skills.
- Committed and responsible fathering during a child’s infancy and early childhood contributes to the development of emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills.
- An estimated 19,400,000 children (27 percent) live apart from their biological father.
- Forty percent of children under age 18 not living with their biological father have not seen their father even once in the last 12 months, according to national survey data.
Our Realities. . . in studying black families

- Since the 1970s research studies on black families have diverged from early work in three notable ways:
  - Black cultural heritage and practices as contributors to black family life
  - The different contexts in which black families function and the salience of these settings in understanding and supporting the development of black children and families
  - Direct attention to issues of race and racial socialization
What has changed and what hasn’t—How black families are situated

- Despite increased research and shifts in policies, the study of black families continues to be situated at the margins of research on families.
- At the same time, the most compelling analyses on black families are not to be found in child development or even family studies research but in research on poverty and family dysfunction.
The Good News and the Uncertainties

First, the good news:
- There’s increasing evidence of the significance of father involvement, that is, evidence that there is growing involvement of fathers, particularly young fathers, in children’s early child development.
- There are multiple studies (more than 100) that point to the significance of father involvement.
What We Think We Know

- Fathers make contributions to infant/toddler development—on attachment security, emotional regulation, social competence, and cognitive development.
- Fathers’ program (Early Head Start and Head Start) involvement has been associated with positive outcomes for children in interventions with older children, suggesting that father program involvement could contribute to earlier outcomes.
- There is evidence that fathers are present in the lives of their children more often and at higher levels than previously assumed. They are more likely to be involved in the lives of their children during infancy than any other time.
- Programs still vary in how much they involve fathers. A web/mail survey of 261 Early Head Start programs funded from 1995-1999 reported that most programs attempted to involve fathers:
  - 99% of program representatives surveyed said they included resident biological fathers
  - 95% included resident nonbiological fathers
  - 77% reported offering program services to nonresident biological fathers.
- In Early Head Start, fathers were rated as more involved, both with their children and with the program, when they were better educated, less depressed, and more likely to use social support (Roggman et al., 2002)
What We Think We Know—Reconciling Father Absence and Father Presence

- Findings from studies such as the 1997 work by Nord, Brimhall, and West:
  - Children from two-parent families who are moderately or highly involved in school are significantly more likely to have children who receive mostly high marks, enjoy school, and never repeat a grade
  - Fathers are less involved than mothers in all types of school activities, including volunteering and attending class events, parent-teacher conferences, and general school meetings
  - Fathers with less than a high school education were also much less likely to be involved in their child’s school than fathers with higher levels of education
  - While nonresidential fathers were found to be substantially less involved in the child’s schools than residential fathers, their involvement was by no means trivial

- Some of the problems associated with engaging fathers stem from the unavailability of some fathers who serve as the family’s primary breadwinners; in other cases, fathers live outside of the home and are not considered as important by program staff, are difficult to reach, or are not accessible.

- Since many nonresident fathers do not co-reside with children or have antagonistic relationships with the mothers of their children, practitioners are often hesitant to involve fathers or are uncertain of the boundaries of their relationship with families in conflict (Gadsden & Ray, 2002).

- A small body of research suggests that men’s pregnancy intentions and prenatal behaviors may have implications for their levels of involvement with children (McLanahan et al., 2001), but few studies have examined how resident men’s intentions and behaviors prior to the birth of a child shape their post-birth fathering behaviors.
What Issues Persist? The Uncertainties

- We know little about the quality and nature of fathers’ contributions, particularly to emotional regulation and cognitive development.
  - The data that exist tell us something about the ways that another caring adult (the father) may contribute but less about the role of fathers in effecting positive change for children.
  - The data do not tell us much about the specific ways in which children’s educational achievement is supported, though there are several studies speaking to the general contributions. What else should we know, and how do we find it?

- When positive findings are recorded, the data are inconclusive and outcomes can’t be directly related to fathers. For example, it is not known whether the effects on Early Head Start fathers were due to fathers’ direct involvement in the program or if the effects came through the mothers (Raikes et al., 2006).
Data source(s): 60 young African American fathers participating in family literacy/fathering program

Theme throughout interviews: Fathers read and wrote for different purposes at home as well as work, and engaged in literacy activities with their children. Many young fathers report engaging continuous periods of time reading to their children, helping them with their homework, and serving as advocates for them with teachers:

Well, I read to him, and I don’t know how I would feel if I wasn’t able to read to him or if I wasn’t able to read it well. I have a friend who every time he pick up a book to read to his children, he read the same thing. It’s the same thing. And they know its the same book, but he reads it wrong.

Often, as revealed in the father’s comments, some men have a definite understanding of what skills were essential to becoming a good reader or writer and participated in reading activities with their children. They measure themselves and other fathers against clear standards and, as one father pointed out, realized the problems inherent in “Having a child and never expose them to reading and writing and put them in school and expect them to learn.”

- **Data sources:** Quantitative and qualitative data from children, families, and teachers in 48 Head Start classrooms
  - 20 classrooms (400 children) were analyzed around “home connections” and family involvement
  - Surveys regarding level of family involvement
  - Content analyses of weekly “home connections” assignments, completed by child and one family member, typically mother or father
  - Classrooms representing demographic variability of students (e.g., home language use, race, and culture) within the school district’s nine geographic regions

- **Purpose:** Improving children’s cognitive and social-emotional development through intentional curricular activities and creating linkages between home and school.

- For about 50% of the completed 1000 home connections, fathers’ participation in completing the assignment was indicated by signature, denoting fathers’ involvement in the cognitive tasks.
- In documents where children clearly took the lead in completing the task, father presence was denoted through different representations in the completed document (e.g., picture, name, etc.)
- The collaboration that took place between parent and child was encouraging, with improvements in the learning behaviors and literacies of black boys most notably.
- Data from interviews reveal the need to target specific activities in which fathers and mothers can be involved, that reflect fundamental cognitive and learning behaviors that parents can support, and that are reinforced through thoughtful, systematic information to both parents about the significance of the tasks and the importance for their children.
- Literacy and English-language ability were both important factors in determining fathers’ and mothers’ abilities to support their children even when it was clear that they grasped the cognitive and social-emotional tasks.
What the Research Can Tell Us (And What it Has Not)

- What we know is that there is considerable variability among children and the different outcomes to apparently similar support: Certain kinds of support appear to work for certain children, fathers, and families but not for others children, fathers, and families.

- There is considerable diversity of children’s outcomes in two-parent families as well as diversity in lone-parent families. This should not be provocative or new, given the diversity of children in the same families, with the same biological parents. A fundamental question in social science research centers on why children in the same family have different outcomes.

- Not only in the focus on fathers, research on the role of parenting (in child-specific designs) has not been able to tease apart the mechanisms of influence or justify which parenting factors are specific to which child outcomes.
  - For example, in certain groups of children father involvement may be associated with low risk for boys but not for girls (delinquency and homelessness) or for girls but not for boys (education).
  - Findings differ across different socio-economic groups.
Refocusing the Argument

- The argument should be refocused to consider the (un)intended consequences of limited options for children, few supports, and poor quality schooling.

- Consider:
  - Many Black and Latino children are behind when they enter kindergarten. Children know by about the third grade whether they are part of the mainstream or of another, more marginal world. Those who are routinely disciplined or struggle with schoolwork mentally drop out at this point. They actually leave school in the ninth grade, the major exit ramp from the path to college. The ninth grade is also the school year when many youth commit their first criminal offenses.
  - Learning support is important in early childhood while the brain is still growing and behavioral patterns are being formed. A lot of a child’s future life story is written by the third or fourth grade. How do fathers fit into this future life story?
Refocusing the Argument

- Education of and literacy for low-income dads for work and parenting, particularly low-income men of color
- Health and educational disparities and their implications for African American and Latino families in low-income settings
- Incarcerated fathers and their children
- Immigrant and displaced fathers and families
- Fathers making transitions to adulthood
Issues and Questions that Persist

- How can we identify the major themes in father involvement and reconceptualize parent/family involvement in young children’s schooling?
- How do we understand the diversity of families and family forms when we attempt to engage children, fathers, parents, and families?
- How are the issues of father/parent/child engagement constructed?
- What component features of fathers’, parents’, and children’s lives and identities would we need to consider?
- What are the implications for curricular development and the continued professional development of early childhood educators?