Do Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Benefit Children?: Recent Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey

Ronald Mincy
Columbia University, School of Social Work
Among Industrialized Countries The U.S. is Not a Leader in the Level or Growth in
Percent of Children Born Outside Marriage

- Japan
- Italy
- Netherlands
- France
- Germany
- Denmark
- Norway
- Sweden
- Ireland
- Canada
- UK
- US

- 1980
- 1998
That last figure has risen in the last 7 years, now

37 PERCENT OF BIRTHS ARE TO UNMARRIED PARENTS
# Children of Married Parents Do Better (Five Years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Cohab</th>
<th>Visit</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Birth Weight</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive Scores</strong> (mean)</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asthma</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Obesity</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior Problems</strong> (mean)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious/Depressed</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Health (Fair or Poor)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And relationship stability varies by marital Status At birth

• Most married parents stay together
• Few unmarried parents transition to marriage
• Most unmarried parents break up
## Relationship Stability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>1 Year %</th>
<th>3 Years %</th>
<th>5 Years %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Married at birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken up</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cohabiting at birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken up</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visiting at birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken up</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After Parents Break up
They Enter New
Relationships and Have
New Non-Marital Births
New Partnerships (Five Years)

[Bar chart showing data on living with a new partner and having a child with a new partner, categorized by marital status (Married, Cohab, Visit, No Rel).]
Thus, Most Children will be raised in Households with

- Mothers and Social Fathers in (33% of all children and 20% of 5-year old children)
  - Cohabiting Unions
  - Marital Unions

- Single Mothers and
  - Involved or
  - Uninvolved Fathers
For these reasons FFCWS researchers have turned to some new questions that inform your work

- How does relationship quality among resident parents, including biological and social fathers, affect parental engagement with children?
- How do union status (marriage vs. cohabitation) and biological connection (natural vs. social fatherhood) affect parental engagement with children?
- How much visitation by non-residential fathers occurs?
- Does visitation by non-residential fathers affect child well-being?
Relationship Quality and Parental Engagement Among Resident Parents

Carlson, McClanahan, Brooks-Gunn (2006)
Measures

• **Relationship quality?**
  
  Fair and willing to compromise during disagreements? (Fair)
  How often does he expresses affection or love (AFF)
  Insults or criticizes her or her ideas (Insu)
  Encourage or helps her do things she feels are important (Enc)
  Listen when she needs someone to talk (Lis)
  Really understands your hurts and joys (Und)

• **Parental engagement?**
  
  How often does the parent
  Read to the child (Read)
  Tell stories to the child (Tell)
  Play peek-a-boo with the Child
  Sing to the child (Sing)
  Play games w/the child (Play)
Key Conclusions

• Mothers and Fathers in higher quality relationships are more engaged with their children when their children are 1 and 3 years old.

• Mothers and Fathers in higher quality relationships at 1 year are more engaged with their children when their children are 3 years old.

• There is no relationship between mothers’ or fathers’ engagement with their 1-year old child and couples’ relationship quality at 3 years.

• Couples in higher quality relationships at 1 year are also in higher quality relationships at 3 years.
These findings

• Support the “spillover effect” findings from previous studies on smaller samples of white or middle class parents

• Do not differ by whether the couples are married or cohabiting at birth, despite substantial differences in socio-demographic characteristics of these two groups of parents

• Only for couples who stay together over 1st 3 years.

• Support the idea that promoting improved relationship quality can also improve parenting behaviors and outcomes for children.

• Suggest that parenting programs should focus on
  Both parents
  Responsible fatherhood should engage cohabiting and married fathers
Marriage, Biology and Parenting Among Resident Fathers

Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, Obsorne (2007)
Measuring Parenting By Fathers

• (P) Paternal engagement- How often does the father?
  Read to the child (Read)
  Tell stories to the child (Tell)
  Play peek-a-boo with the Child
  Sing to the child (Sing)
  Play games w/ the child (Play)
  Telling the child he appreciated something the child did
  Taking the child on outings
  Watching TV or a video w/ the child.

• Responsibility- How often does the father share responsibility w/ mom by?
  Looking after the child and
  Taking the child to appointments
Measuring Parenting By Fathers (Cont’d)

- **(Coop) Cooperation w/ Mother** How often does the father?
  - act like the kind of parent she would want for child;
  - can be trusted to take care of the child;
  - respect her schedules and rules for the child;
  - supports her in the way he wants to raise the child;
  - talks with her about problems related to raising the child;
  - can be counted on to look after the child for a few hours

- **(Trust)** How much the mother trusts the father to take good care of the child if she had to go away for one week (not at all - very much)
What kind of fathers?

- Married biological fathers (MB)
- Married social fathers (MS)
- Cohabiting biological fathers (CB)
- Cohabiting social fathers (MB)
Little Support for the Importance of Biology

• Unlike what was expected married and cohabiting social fathers exhibit equal or higher parenting practices when compared to married biological fathers.
  
  The former engage in more cooperative parenting than the latter.

• Although mothers trust cohabiting biological fathers more than cohabiting social fathers, they exhibit equal levels of trust of married biological and social fathers.
Some support for the importance of Marriage

• Married social fathers have higher parenting behaviors than cohabiting social fathers on all domains;
• However, they are less engaged and less responsible than cohabiting biological fathers.
• Moreover, cohabiting biological fathers are more cooperative and trustworthy than cohabiting social fathers.
Marriage is especially important when there is a social father

- While married biological fathers are more cooperative than cohabiting social fathers, the two are no different in the other domains of parenting behavior
- However, married social fathers exhibit better parenting behaviors than cohabiting social fathers
These findings

• Lack a clear meaning for biological fathers for several reasons;

  Biological fathers may be more focused on the breadwinning role
  May not feel that they have to prove themselves as good fathers of their own children; while surrogate fathers may feel they prove themselves to be good fathers of her children
  Biological fathers are in the later stages of their relationships w/ mothers, but the relationships between mothers and surrogate fathers are still in the “honeymoon” years.

Emphasizing healthy marriage is extremely in new partnerships, involving surrogate fathers, which are common

Emphasizing healthy relationships can help biological fathers reorient their thinking about sustaining their marriage, financial security, and access to their children.
HOW MUCH ARE NON-RESIDENT FATHERS INVOLVED WITH THEIR CHILDREN?
*Hourly Visitation by Non-resident Fathers at 60 Months

Never, 49%

Rarely, 7%

Monthly, 15%

Weekly, 14%

Daily, 15%

*Percent of Unwed, Non-resident Fathers who had at Least One Hour of Contact Per Day With Their Child

Source: Mincy, R and K. Mowdy, Visitation by Non-Resident Fathers When Non-Marital Children Begin School
Does Involvement by Non-resident Fathers Benefit Children?

Mincy, Nepomnyachy, and Brooks-Gunn (2008)
Measuring how non-resident father involvement might benefit children has been difficult?

- Financial and human capital of mothers and fathers is highly correlated, so does one include measures of both.
- Social capital intra and inter-disciplinary disagreement
  Sociology (Furstenberg)- Social norms and cultural understandings, especially difficult to measure when fathers are non-resident
  Psychology (Amato)- Dyadic relationships
  But difficult to measure father-child relationships, especially for non-resident fathers
Approaches to measuring Father Involvement

- Lamb/Pleck (1985)
  - Accessibility - Presence and availability
  - Engagement - What father’s do with children?
  - Responsibility - Meeting children’s core needs
- For non-resident fathers studies have gone little beyond accessibility
Prior Literature

• Previous studies based on large sample surveys have found little evidence that visitation by nonresident fathers has a significant effect on child well-being.

• Despite these findings, policymakers have shown great interest in increasing involvement of nonresident fathers in the lives of children?
Interpretation

- Frequency of contact cannot detect statistically significant associations between father involvement and child well-being, because

  Wrong measure - Amato (1999) the father behaviors (measures of engagement) that really matter for children (e.g. socialization, authoritative parenting, feelings of closeness) vary widely even among nonresident fathers who visit their children often.

Critique

- Most studies of the association between frequency of contact and child-well-being, using large surveys, have focused on divorced fathers and school aged children, especially adolescents.
- Non-resident fathers may contribute to the well-being of preschoolers through behaviors for which frequency of contact is a reasonably good proxy.
- Large sample survey now have measures of possible moderators.
Hypothesis I

• Children who see their nonresident fathers more frequently are less likely to exhibit clinical levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.

• Children who have more overnight visits during the first year of life with their fathers clinical levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.
Hypothesis II

- Children who have more frequent visits with their non-violent, supportive, and substance abuse free non-resident fathers are less likely than other children to exhibit clinical levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.
Responsible Fatherhood Measures

- Father saw child in past 30 days - asked of mother at 1-year survey
  All Cohabiters at 1-year assigned to yes = 1
- # of days in past 30 (0, 1-14, 15+)
- Any overnight visits since child’s birth – asked at 1-year survey
  Not asked of cohabiters at 1-year, so assigned to yes = 1
- # of overnight visits since child’s birth
  (0, 1-10, 11-59, 60+)
  Cohabitors at 1-year excluded from analysis
Covariates - Baseline Interview

- Father’s capacity for parenting
  Age, education, race/ethnicity, disability, drug/alcohol problem
- Mother’s capacity for parenting
  Age, education, race/ethnicity, health, drug/alcohol problem, help from friends and family
- Parents’ co-parenting relationship
  Father supportive of mother (index), father visited in the hospital, father contributed cash/inkind during pregnancy, father intended to contribute financially, mother wanted father involved, father hit or slapped mother
- Child characteristics
  Age at assessment, gender, whether low birth weight
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Original Results from Prior Table</strong></th>
<th>Anxious/ depressed</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad saw child in last 30 days</td>
<td>-0.054 (2.88)</td>
<td>-0.033 (1.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father had overnight visit since birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Dropping those who cohabited either at baseline or 1-year</strong></th>
<th>Anxious/ depressed</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad saw child in last 30 days ($N = 717$)</td>
<td>-0.053 (2.13)</td>
<td>-0.056 (2.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father had overnight visit since birth ($N = 635$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Controlling for Formal Child Support Payments (1-year Survey)</strong></th>
<th>Anxious/ depressed</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad saw child in last 30 days</td>
<td>-0.056 (2.95)</td>
<td>-0.032 (1.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father had overnight visit since birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father paid formal support to mom</td>
<td>0 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.027 (1.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Controlling for Informal Child Support Payments (1-year Survey)</strong></th>
<th>Anxious/ depressed</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad saw child in last 30 days</td>
<td>-0.068 (3.16)</td>
<td>-0.038 (1.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father had overnight visit since birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father paid informal support to mom</td>
<td>0.032 (1.48)</td>
<td>0.003 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visits from Fathers With Alcohol Problems Triples The Probability But Visits from Fathers Without Alcohol Problems Reduces Probability by 1 Percentage Point
Overnight Visits From a Highly Supportive Father Has Not Affect But Such Visits From an Unsupportive Father Doubles The Probability
Conclusion

• In contrast to the previous literature, using large sample survey, we find that
  more frequent contact is significantly associated with lower levels of internalizing behavior
  overnight visits are associated with less aggressive behavior (marginally significant)
• Both effects in the expected direction
• Moreover, we also find that alcohol abuse moderates or mediates the effect of visitation on Withdrawn Behavior and Supportiveness moderates/mediates this effect
• We think these differ from other studies because they are focused on behaviors through which fathers contribute to preschool child behavior for which frequency of contact is a reasonably good proxy
  Attachment
Limitations

- Frequency of contact in last 30 and overnight visits need to be taken from fathers’ survey to address “same source bias”
- Better handle on discontinuities in CBCL, should use national norms
- Explore the fathers’ household roster to see if other caregivers may help explain results of overnight visits.
Implications

- If these results hold up, suggests support for parenting programs for non-resident fathers to
  - Increase frequency of contact
  - Reduce father behaviors (e.g., substance abuse) that have harmful consequences for children
  - Increase father’s supportiveness of mothers.