

The Effects of Involved Fatherhood on Families, and How Fathers can be Supported both at the Workplace and in the Home

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Abstract

There is copious research supporting the notion that involved fatherhood is crucial for the development of healthy, well-functioning families. In this paper, we review the empirical research on (a) the effects of involved fatherhood on the well-being of children, women and families, (b) the predictors of and barriers to paternal involvement, and (c) how family-supportive public and employer-based policy can better support fathers so they can succeed both at the workplace and in their families. We conclude with suggestions for further research, public policy and business practice.

Introduction

Empirical evidence has made abundantly clear that involved and caring fathers are important to the optimal development of children. Whether it is biological, adoptive or stepfathers, living in or outside of the home, fathers impact their children at every stage of development, and their absence has long last repercussions. However, simply knowing that fathers are instrumental in their children's lives is not sufficient to guarantee such involvement: research has also brought attention to the many barriers to parenting that men experience, as well as key areas in which men need encouragement in order to be the type of involved and caring parent their children need. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the diverse outcomes of father involvement for both children and women, to discuss the barriers to involvement that exist, and to explore ways in which men can be encouraged to be more involved fathers.

The Impact of Father Involvement on Children

The diverse effects father involvement has on child development can be grouped together in four categories: behavioral, emotional/psychological, social and cognitive/academic. In regards to emotional and psychological development, Children with warm and emotionally responsive fathers are less emotionally reactive (Byrd-Craven, Auer, Granger, & Massey, 2012), have higher levels of overall well-being (Amato, 1994) and experience less depression (Culpin, Heron, Araya, Melotti, & Joinson, 2013) and mood and anxiety disorders (Goodwin & Styron, 2012). Involvement with children at age seven reduces risk of psychological maladjustment, and involvement at age sixteen predicts less psychological distress in adulthood (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Involvement benefits children socially, as children with warm fathers have been found to relate better with other children (Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2011) and to exhibit more prosocial

behaviors towards others (Flouri, 2005). Behaviorally, father involvement impacts children by decreasing externalizing behavior (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009), hyperactivity and dysregulation (Flouri, 2008), and increasing behavioral self-regulation (Owen et al., 2013). In the area of cognitive function and academics, children with involved fathers have higher IQs on average (Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995), have increased executive function (Meuwissen & Carlson, 2015), improved school conduct (Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993) and scholastic self-concept (DuBois, Eitel, & Felner, 1994).

The Impact of Father Involvement on Women

Involved fathers' effect on children has been one major area of focus in the last three decades of fathering research, but their effect on women has only recently become a growing area of interest. Women whose partners are involved prenatally use more health services on average, experience lighter workloads, and have a lower risk of post-partum depression (Levtov, van der Gaag, Green, Kaufman, & Barker, 2015). The wage gap between genders has been well-established, with women earning significantly less than men in the majority of developed nations (Levtov et al, 2015). The wage gap becomes larger when men and women have children, with men's wages increasing after they have children, and women's wages decreasing (Kmec, 2011), but in countries where fathers hold more egalitarian views towards childrearing and non-paid care, the wage gap is smaller (Andringa, Nieuwenhuis, & van Gerven, 2015). Fathers who are more involved in the home also promote future generations of involvement and gender equality: their daughters are more likely to have higher career aspirations (Croft, Schmader, Block, & Baron, 2014) and their sons are more likely to engage in more gender equal behaviors in their own relationships (Levtov, et al 2015).

Other Impacts of Father Involvement

One overlooked beneficiary of involved fatherhood are fathers themselves. In fact, research shows that involved fatherhood makes men happier and healthier (Levtov, et al 2015). Meaningful involvement with their children is reported by fathers to be among their most important sources of well-being and happiness (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Studies find that fathers who report close, non-violent connections with their children live longer, have fewer mental and physical health problems, are less likely to abuse drugs, are more productive at work, and report being happier than men who do not have this strong connection (e.g., Burgess, 2006). Further, men who are fathers are more likely to be involved in their neighborhoods, more likely to regularly attend religious service, and more likely to engage in community service (Eggebeen, Knoester, & McDaniel, 2013). Most fathers aspire to success not just as financial providers and in their careers, but also as involved, loving fathers (Behson, 2015b).

In addition, considering the aforementioned impact of father involvement of gender equity at work and on women's paid work participation rates, support for fathers has been seen as bringing economic benefits to a country. In fact, it is estimated that if women participated in the labor force at the same rate as men, it could lead to substantial increases to Gross Domestic Product, ranging from 5% in the US to 9% in Japan and 34% in Egypt (OECD, 2012). Finally, both men and women who report higher satisfaction with their work-family balance tend to be absent less and quit less often, as well as become more engaged and productive at work (Ladge,

Humberd, Watkins, & Harrington, 2015). Employer support for working fathers, in terms of leave and flexibility, leads to better balance for both men and their working spouses, and therefore, can and have been linked to improved business results.

Predictors of Father Involvement

As a whole, men's involvement in parenting activities is susceptible to a wide amount of variation, due to a number of factors. The largest and most consistent predictors of involvement can be broken into two categories: employment, and the relationship with the mother, both of which are highly interrelated with gender roles and norms. Despite overall increasing gender equality, a survey of 20 countries found that both men and women named financial provision as the primary responsibility of fathers (Munoz Boudet, Petesch, Turk, & Thumala, 2013). In essence, this makes employment the minimum requirement for father involvement – which is particularly problematic for low-income men (see Nelson, 2004) – and in more traditional settings, the only requirement. Several other predictors of a father's involvement stem from the relationship he has with the child's mother: maternal gatekeeping, or mothers acting in ways to discourage or promote father-child interactions (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008), relationship satisfaction (Erel & Burman, 1995), coparenting (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009) and family structure (Hofferth, Pleck, Goldscheider, Curtin, & Hrapczynski, 2013).

Further, fathers who are not married to their child's mother, as well as divorced non-custodial fathers are often prevented from being as involved with their children as they would like to be, based on a pervasive post-divorce preference for awarding primary custody to mothers, and by policies that make paternal access to children dependent upon financial provision. For men with lower income potential or with barriers to employment, such as a past criminal record, these barriers may be insurmountable. Such obstacles are often at odds with the purported standard of "best interest of the child" when adjudicating post-divorce arrangements (Raub, Carson, Cook, Wyshak, & Hauser, 2013).

Both categories of predictors (employment and the maternal relationship) are highly related to societal norms regarding gender roles held by both men and women. Men with more traditional views of the provisional father role tend to work longer hours and experience greater amounts of work-family conflict (Huffman, Olson, O'Gara, & King, 2014), and mothers' work hours are more predictive of father involvement than fathers' work hours (Norman, Elliot, & Fagan, 2014), indicating that women's decision to work or stay home has a large influence on men's involvement as well. Parents' views on gender roles play a large part in how the maternal relationship impacts father involvement. Maternal gatekeeping might be viewed as, at least in part, a result of the belief that the woman is the primary caregiver and men have a more auxiliary role. Indeed, both mothers' (Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2001) and father's (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999) perceptions of the fathers' ability to parent have a large impact on whether he gets involved or not. Because role norms are often reinforced ubiquitously, and because of their inherent effect on men's involvement with their children, a multifaceted approach – both in the workplace and in the home – is required to encourage greater participation from men with their children and families.

From a more global perspective, gender norms range from relatively egalitarian societies to societies that exhibit high gender differentiation, hierarchy, and masculine orientation. In the latter cultures, the roles of men and women are particularly separate, leading to wider division of household labor, lowered female labor force participation and lower father involvement in day-to-day parenting and household management (e.g. Fuwa, 2004)

Paternal Leave and Encouragement of Involvement in the Home

Recent research on the effects of paternal leave has depicted experiences unfolding similarly among young couples awaiting their first child. Even after establishing equal divisions of domestic work and intending these patterns of behavior to continue after the baby is born, parents slowly end up taking on more traditional roles of parenting (Miller, 2011). In the U.S., this is due to the fact that women typically have at least three weeks of unpaid maternity leave while the father may take a day or two off of work. The mother begins to establish new patterns of primary care for the child, while the father's attempts at care slowly wane when his performance is seen as not on par with mother's (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Granting paternity leave has been proven to prevent this slide into gendered parenting and promote more equality in childrearing. Fathers who take any paternity leave at all are much more likely to change diapers, feed the baby, and get up in the night with the child than fathers who do not (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Conversely, Tanaka and Waldfogel also found that fathers who work longer hours report a decrease in these activities. Rehel (2014) summed it up rather succinctly in her report on paternal leave, stating that "when the transition to parenthood is structured for fathers in ways comparable to mothers, fathers come to think about and enact parenting in ways that are similar to mothers" (p. 111). In other words, fathers are not simply engaging in more caretaking activities, they are embracing the attitudes and behaviors that come with being an equal partner in parenting.

It should be noted that making paternity leave available to men is not in and of itself sufficient. Although men who are offered paternity leave are five times more likely to take leave after childbirth than men to whom it is not available (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007), there are often larger factors at play. Even in households with equitable parenting and work attitudes between mothers and fathers, there are stigmas surrounding extended leave that perhaps influence men differently than women. One study found that for women, the main consideration for the length of leave was her level of family orientation and the centrality of her role as a mother. For men, however, the primary influence on leave duration was the economic impact it would have (Duvander, 2014). Put differently, the costs involved in parental leave may be much higher for men than women.

In a more global context, while there are only two OECD countries that do not provide for some amount of maternity leave, only 67 of the 167 countries studied by the International Labour Office (Addati, Cassirer, & Gilchrist, 2014) provide for some form of paternity leave, and only 16 provide for leaves greater than 16 days. However, there has been considerable progress in many countries in extending parental leave to fathers, either by including wage replacement, setting aside "use it or lose it": leave designated for fathers (as in Portugal), or by allocating certain amount of leave for a couple to divide between themselves for an arrangement

that works best for them (as in Scandinavia). For example, the rates at which fathers utilized available paternity leave rose dramatically in Quebec, Canada and California, USA once there was a provision of partial wage replacement (Rehel, 2014). As mentioned earlier, paternity leave can increase father family involvement, and this involvement is associated with benefits for children, women, fathers, business, economies and societies (Behson, 2015a).

The Father-Friendly Work Environment

Workplaces that enact policies to encourage father involvement provide mutually beneficial results to both parties involved. Companies benefit because involved fathers work harder (Astone, Dariotis, Sonenstein, Pleck, & Hynes, 2010), show more loyalty (Leschyshyn & Minnotte, 2014) and have higher job satisfaction and less work-family conflict (Ladge, Humberd, Watkins, & Harrington, 2015). Other benefits include advantages in recruiting talented employees and even a short-term increase in stock prices when leave policies are announced (Behson, 2015a). Fathers and their families benefit because they live more healthily (Astone & Peters, 2014), engage in less risky behaviors (Weitoft, Burström, & Rosén, 2004), behave more altruistically in social relationships (Eggebeen, Dew, & Knoester, 2010) and attain higher incomes (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010). Men with flexible schedules report higher levels of involvement with their children, which is true even for low-income and nonresident fathers (Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2012). Fathers with rigid schedules and low levels of work-family balance report higher amounts of stress, which impacts the work-family balance of working mothers (Fagan & Press, 2008), further disrupting family well-being.

Despite the benefits of supportive workplaces to both businesses and families, there exist many stigmas which prevent companies from providing flexibility to working fathers. In a study comparing the acceptability between flextime and flexplace arrangements, the majority of respondents said that flextime was much more favorable. If flexplace opportunities were requested, respondents viewed fathers' requests most highly, followed by mothers and then men with not children (Singley & Hynes, 2005). These social norms are perpetuated outside of organizational settings as well: self-employed fathers were much more likely than self-employed mothers to work outside of the home (Craig, Powell, & Cortis, 2012). Additionally, both fathers and mothers alike are viewed as less agentic and less committed to employment than non-parents, though fathers are held to less strict standards than mothers and childless men (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004).

Recent research (Harrington, et al, 2011, 2014) demonstrate that when it is offered, US men are increasingly taking two paid weeks of paternity leave. It is further reported that 89% of US men consider paid paternity leave at least somewhat important when evaluating employers and potential employers. Despite these encouraging statistics, other research has found that US men who use paternity leave or other workplace accommodations for family face considerable stigma at their employers (Behson, 2015b). Many are reluctant to use paternity leave for fear of being seen as uncommitted and unmanly, which perceptions are linked to lower performance evaluations, increased risks of being demoted or downsized, and reduced pay and rewards (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Men also fear potential career consequences (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013): specifically, fathers who are seen by bosses and coworkers as

engaging in higher than average levels of childcare are subject to more workplace harassment and more general mistreatment as compared to their low-caregiving or childless counterparts (Berdahl & Moon, 2013). Finally, men who interrupt their employment for family reasons earn significantly less after returning to work (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013). Thus, even US employees who can take paternity leave often feel social pressure at work that dissuades them. And, in the US, the lack of federal policy on this matter means only about 14% of private-sector employees are offered paid paternity leave.

In some countries, workplace environments have made significant progress. In Germany, for example, men who took parental leave were rated as more likeable and suffered no decrease in respect or competence (Fleischmann & Sieverding, 2015), independent of whether they took 2-, 4-, or 12-month leaves. Other countries have made significant progress in some areas while lagging in others. For instance, in Sweden, flexible work arrangements and support of leave are much more acceptable in white-collar jobs than in working-class jobs (Haas & Hwang, 2009). There has been repeated calls for companies to move beyond policy and accelerate cultural change to truly support working fathers.

Recommendations for Research, Policy and Practice

Based on the extant research, we recommend the following in order to support fathers for maximum benefit to fathers, mothers, children, families, societies and employers.

Public Policy

- Increased provision of parental leave geared specifically to men which includes partial wage replacement
- Greater parity between the amount of parental leave provided to women and men
- Laws and precedent for equally-shared custody of children as the default position for divorcing couples
- Efforts to promote the role of fathers throughout pregnancy and early parenthood by including them in pre-natal medical visits, classes and education
- Federal programs and initiatives for encouraging gender equality at home and in the workplace

Business Practice

- Greater parity between the amount of parental leave provided to women and men
- Expanded use of workplace flexibility, alternate scheduling and other family-supportive practices for both female and male employees
- Changing workplace cultures and supervisory attitudes to reduce the flexibility stigma associated with men who prioritize family
- The promotion of women and of men who have faced work-family challenges to positions of leadership provide a more diverse and empathetic policy-making when it comes to matters of work-life balance.

Research

- Understanding of the factors that influence greater father attitudes and role centrality

- Evaluation of the effectiveness of father education in changing men's attitudes toward gender roles
- Case studies of the US companies who have begun offering leave and the effects it is having
- Reports of economic impact and feasibility studies of the implementation of federally mandated leave policies in the US
- Better understanding of the men and families who benefit most from paternal leave

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