

Why Fathers Matter

Summary

Children who live with their fathers have more positive psychological, behavioral, and education outcomes. Also, children who live with their fathers are less likely to be delinquent or abuse drugs and alcohol.

- **Children's Well-Being.** Children living in intact families tend to fare better on cognitive achievement and behavioral outcomes. Among children living in two-parent, two-child families, those living with married biological fathers tended to have higher calculation cognitive achievement test scores and exhibit less behavioral problems compared to peers living with unmarried biological fathers, stepfathers, or mothers' male cohabiting partners. The study controlled for children's gender, age, race, fathers' age, family size, share of the year lived with fathers, whether fathers paid child support, fathers' education, mothers' and fathers' work hours and earnings, and blended family status. Children living in intact families (married-biological-parent families) tended to score the highest on the cognitive achievement test and to have the lowest levels of behavioral problems.¹
- **Adolescents' Psychological Well-Being.** Close relationships between adolescents and their fathers are positively associated with adolescents' psychological well-being. Adolescents who reported having closer relationships with their fathers tended to report lower levels of psychological distress (e.g., how often they feel sad, tense, lonely, excited, happy) compared to peers who reported being less close with their fathers, controlling for family structure, adolescents' age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and relationships with their mothers.²
- **Adolescents' Behavioral Problems.** Adolescents with more involved fathers tend to exhibit lower levels of behavioral problems. The greater the fathers' involvement was, the lower the level of adolescents' behavioral problems, both in terms of aggression and antisocial behavior and negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Fathers' involvement was measured by the frequency with which fathers discussed important decisions with and listened to their adolescents, whether fathers knew who their adolescents were with when not at home, whether fathers missed events or activities that were important to their adolescents, along with adolescents' reports of closeness to their fathers and whether their fathers spent sufficient time with them and how well they shared and communicated with one another.³
- **Youth Delinquency.** Adolescents who report having more positive relationships with their fathers are less likely to engage in delinquency. Adolescents who reported having more positive relationships with their fathers were less likely to be arrested, sell drugs, attack another individual, carry a handgun, belong to a gang, damage or destroy property, steal, run away, or receive/possess/sell stolen property compared to peers who reported having less positive relationships with their fathers. This was true taking into consideration the quality of adolescents' relationships with their mothers, parental

monitoring, mothers' and fathers' parenting styles, fathers' biological status, parental education, parental employment, number of children in the family, whether family received public aid, adolescents' age, gender, race/ethnicity, and school enrollment status. Further analyses showed that the protective effect of a positive father-child relationship appeared to be stronger for adolescent boys than girls as well as when fathers' parenting style was characterized as "strict and not very or somewhat supportive" than when it was characterized as "strict and very supportive."⁴

- **Teen Substance Use. Adolescents who report having more positive relationships with their fathers are less likely to abuse substances.** Adolescents who reported having more positive relationships with their fathers were less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol or use marijuana compared to peers who reported having less positive relationships with their fathers. This was true taking into consideration the quality of adolescents' relationships with their mothers, parental monitoring, mothers' and fathers' parenting styles, fathers' biological status, parental education, parental employment, number of children in the family, whether family received public aid, adolescents' age, gender, race/ethnicity, and school enrollment status. Further analyses showed that the protective effect of a positive father-child relationship appeared to be stronger for adolescent boys than girls as well as when fathers' parenting style was characterized as "strict and not very or somewhat supportive" than when it was characterized as "strict and very supportive."⁵
- **Young Adult's Educational Attainment. Individuals whose fathers showed more involvement in their lives early on tend to attain higher levels of education.** Respondents whose fathers showed more involvement with them at age seven (that is, more outings with fathers, more frequently read to by fathers, more interest shown

by fathers in their education) tended to have higher levels of educational attainment as young adults than peers whose fathers showed less involvement early on. This was true taking into consideration mothers' involvement at age seven and a host of other factors, including respondents' gender, birth weight, family socioeconomic status, parental education, family size, number of times family moved, parental involvement at age seven, and respondents' behavior outcomes measured at age seven, their general ability measured at age 11, and their academic motivation measured at age 16.⁶

- **Young Adults' Incarceration Rates. Growing up without a father appears to be associated with greater likelihood of incarceration later in life.** Throughout childhood (from birth, infancy to age four, age five to nine, age 10 to 14, and age 15 to 17), growing up without a father was associated with higher odds of incarceration later in life, even after controlling for mother's education, whether or not mother gave birth as a teen, race, urban and regional residence, neighborhood socioeconomic status, family income, family size, and age. Individuals who grew up in households without ever experiencing the presence of a father tended to have the highest odds of incarceration.⁷
- **Father-Child Relationships. Adolescents living in intact families tend to report closer relationships with their fathers.** Adolescents living in intact families reported, on average, having closer relationships with their fathers compared to peers living in blended families or in divorced or never-married single-parent families, controlling for adolescents' age, race, gender, and family income. This was true among youth in their early adolescence. Among youth in their middle adolescence, those living in intact families reported, on average, feeling closer to their fathers than peers in never-married or divorced single-parent families, but no more so than peers in blended families.⁸

- **Fathers' Engagement with Children.** Among urban fathers, those who frequently attend religious services tend to be more engaged with their children. Among fathers living in urban areas, those who more frequently attended religious services were more likely to be engaged in activities with their one-year-olds than peers who attended less frequently. Fathers who reduced the frequency of their religious attendance during the first year of their children's lives became, on average, less engaged with their one-year-olds compared to peers who maintained their level of religious attendance.⁹
- **Fathers' Well-Being.** Among disadvantaged fathers, those who increase their engagement with their children report improved well-being. Among a cohort of socio-economically disadvantaged fathers, those who reported increased engagement with their children during the first year of their children's lives also reported, on average, improved general health, less substance abuse, increased religious participation and decreased paid labor force participation.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Sandra L. Joffe, "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being: Investment Versus Selection," *Demography* 43, No. 1 (February 2006): 53-77.
- 2 Christina Falci, "Family Structure, Closeness to Residential and Nonresidential Parents, and Psychological Distress in Early and Middle Adolescence," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (January 2006): 123-146.
- 3 Marcia J. Carlson, "Family Structure, Father Involvement, and Adolescent Behavioral Outcomes," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, No. 1 (February 2006): 137-154.
- 4 Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Kristin A. Moore, "The Father-Child Relationship, Parenting Styles, and Adolescent Risk Behaviors in Intact Families," *Journal of Family Issues* 27, No. 6 (June 2006): 850-881.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Eirini Flouri, "Early Father's and Mother's Involvement and Child's Later Educational Outcomes," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 74, No. 2 (June 2004): 141-153.
- 7 Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14, No. 3 (September 2004): 369-397.
- 8 Christina Falci, "Family Structure," :123-146.
- 9 Richard J. Petts, "Religious Participation, Religious Affiliation, and Engagement with Children among Fathers Experiencing the Birth of a New Child," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 28, No. 9 (September 2007), pp. 1139-1161.
- 10 Chris Knoester and Richard Petts, "Commitments to Fathering and the Well-Being and Social Participation of New, Disadvantaged Fathers," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69, No. 4 (November 2007): 991-1004.



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