



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

January 2004 • Number 21

# Unmarried African-American Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: The Role of Couple Relationships

## Background

There is extensive public rhetoric about the need for unmarried fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children. Research shows that a father's involvement, in terms of time and financial resources, is associated with better cognitive, social, and emotional development for children. Despite the fact that the vast majority of unmarried fathers and mothers want fathers to be actively involved with their children, father involvement diminishes over time, particularly if the parents' romantic relationship ends.

Current policy and program efforts to increase unmarried fathers' involvement with their children have been sobering - unmarried fathers are proving difficult to recruit and retain in programs. The few programs that have been systematically evaluated have shown minimal if any effects on father involvement. It's clear that we need to learn more about the correlates of father involvement in order to improve intervention efforts.

Since the substantial majority of unmarried fathers have contact with their children as infants, we can examine this period to inform our understanding of the processes and characteristics that influence father involvement. This brief looks at the factors that are associated with the variation in levels of fathers' involvement around the time of a child's birth, with special attention paid to the mother-father relationship.

This brief is based on extensive in-person observational data, as well as survey data, from 55 unmarried low-income African-American mothers and fathers who were part of the Fragile Families study. Given that 70 percent of African-American children (compared with one-third of all children) in the U.S. are born to parents who are not married, this is a particularly important group to study. The present study is one of the first to collect in-depth observational and parent-reported data from unmarried mothers and fathers regarding their couple relationship and the fathers' involvement with their infants.

## Measures of Father Involvement and Couple Relationship Quality

Videotaped couple interviews took place in the home approximately seven weeks after the child's birth. The interviews lasted approximately three to four hours and contained both joint and individual interviews.

Observational measures of couple relationships were derived from videotapes of mothers and fathers discussing disagreements. Partners identified two or three topics of active disagreement, were interviewed in front of one another about their perspectives on each topic, and were instructed to discuss these topics for 15 minutes while being videotaped--but without the interviewer present. The videotape data were then coded using the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID). The coded data yielded four measures of relationship quality - mother's positive behaviors, mother's negative behaviors, father's positive behaviors, and father's negative behaviors. These measures can also be broken out into their component parts (problem solving communication, supportiveness, positive affect, verbal aggression, coerciveness, attempts to control, and negativity and conflict).

There were also two measures of self-reported couple relationship quality for each partner. The first was a four-item scale measuring partner supportiveness contained in the full Fragile Families survey instrument. The other was a scale derived from the 16-item Locke-Wallace Brief Marital Adjustment Test, a frequently-used measure of relationship satisfaction.

Father-child involvement was measured in terms of interaction and financial support. The measure of hands-on father involvement is a 23-item scale describing the relative contribution of fathers and mothers in daily child care activities. There are also two measures of financial support representing the relative contribution of fathers and mothers for 1) the child and 2) the household in which the child lives.

**Table 1. Intercorrelations Between Couple Relationship Quality and Father Involvement with Infant Sons (N=29), Daughters (N=26), and Full Sample (N=55)**

| Relationship Quality Measure                       | Child's Sex  | Fathers' Financial Support for Household | Fathers' Financial Support for Infant | Fathers' Hands-on Care of Infants |
|--|--------------|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Mothers' Report:<br>Supportive Couple Relationship | Boys (N=29)  | .27                                      | .32+                                  | .29                               |
|  | Girls (N=26) | .49*                                     | .43*                                  | .40*                              |
|  | All (N=55)   | .36**                                    | .37**                                 | .35**                             |
| Fathers' Report:<br>Supportive Couple Relationship | Boys         | .26                                      | .22                                   | -.03                              |
|  | Girls        | .22                                      | .39*                                  | .11                               |
|  | All          | .24                                      | .30*                                  | .04                               |
| Mothers' Report:<br>Relationship Satisfaction      | Boys         | .11                                      | .28                                   | .32+                              |
|  | Girls        | .28                                      | .35+                                  | .37+                              |
|  | All          | .18                                      | .32*                                  | .34*                              |
| Fathers' Report:<br>Relationship Satisfaction      | Boys         | .28                                      | .29                                   | .29                               |
|  | Girls        | .47*                                     | .46*                                  | .43*                              |
|  | All          | .37**                                    | .38**                                 | .36**                             |

+ =  $p < .10$  \* =  $p < .05$  \*\* =  $p < .01$

In addition to relationship quality measures, child, couple, and individual demographic characteristics and personal economic resources are also examined.

## Findings

When couples report more supportive and satisfying relationships, and independent observers rate fathers as behaving less negatively, fathers are more involved with their infants. They provide more hands-on care, pay more of infant expenses (e.g., diapers and clothing), and pay more of household expenses (e.g., rent and utilities). The analysis does not establish causality, however, it may be that when parents' relationships function better, fathers are more involved with their infants (or that when fathers are more involved with their infants, parents' relationships function better).

It is interesting that demographic characteristics such as fathers' and mothers' age, education, and economic resources, which are typically associated with father involvement, were not associated with father involvement in this study. This lack of association could result from the limited range of these characteristics among this small, primarily low-income sample. But

it may also be that those factors are less important in determining father involvement for fathers who are engaged with their children. Another interesting finding was that although fathers who lived with the child paid more of the household expenses and slightly more of the infant expenses, they did not provide significantly more hands-on care of the child.

There was some evidence of differential processes shaping the link between couple relationships and father involvement depending on the child's sex [See Table 1]. While fathers of infant girls and boys in this study had similar levels of involvement with their seven-week-olds, there was some indication that family dynamics were different for families with infant boys and girls, even at this very early phase of family development. The link between couple relationship quality and father involvement held only for families with infant daughters. For couples with infant daughters, couple relationship quality may have spilled over into fathers' involvement with their infants (or the level of fathers' involvement may have spilled over into how the couple relationships were going). By contrast, for couples with infant sons, couple relationship quality and father involvement appear to have been functioning independently.

An important methodological finding is that the self-reported measures of relationship quality available on some national surveys were both moderately correlated with the observed measures of couple interactions and reasonably good correlates of father involvement. The observational data, however, was especially valuable for identifying specific types of behaviors that were linked to more supportive and satisfying relationships and to greater father involvement. For example, fathers' verbal aggression--insulting, demeaning, and/or otherwise putting-down mothers, as well as fathers' negativity and conflict (disagreeing with and being tense, frustrated, irritated, or angry with mothers)--were associated with lower levels of father involvement with their infants. In contrast, fathers' coerciveness--statements, tones, or body language that threaten or manipulate the mothers, and attempts to control (making direct commands or demands meant to change the mothers' actions, thoughts, or feelings)--were not associated with fathers distancing themselves from their infants.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper used multiple sources of data to investigate the role of parents' demographics, personal resources, family structure, and couple relationship quality in facilitating or hampering the

involvement of fathers with their infants. It shows that couple relationships are important factors in father-child involvement during the child's infancy, while other factors, such as parents' demographics, were of less importance.

Results from this study suggest that how mothers and fathers get along with each other has implications for fathers' involvement with their children. Intervening to improve couples' relationships might be a reasonable approach to increasing father involvement. The specific examples of the types of behaviors that are and are not linked to father involvement garnered from the observational data may provide the type of guidance necessary for the development of theory and clinical interventions.

The lack of connection between fathers' and mothers' demographics (education and income) and father involvement in this and some other studies of unmarried families suggests that low levels of education and income are not, in and of themselves, insurmountable obstacles to fathers' involvement. Additionally, in this study and others, it appears that many fathers who live separately from their young children and the children's mothers are highly involved with their children, thereby dispelling the notion that living separately from children is an insurmountable obstacle to fathers caring and providing for their children.

## Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: [crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies](http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies)

2003-22-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy Dec 2003 "The Effects of State Policies on TANF Participation"

2003-21-FF Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Effects of Child Health on Parents' Relationship Status"

2003-20-FF Hope Corman, Nancy Reichman, Kelly Noonan Dec 2003 "Mothers' Labor Supply in Fragile Families: The Role of Child Health"

2003-19-FF Kelly Noonan, Nancy Reichman, Hope Corman Dec 2003 "New Fathers' Labor Supply: Does Child Health Matter"

2003-17-FF Nancy Reichman, Julien Teitler, Marah Curtis Dec 2003 "Hardships Among Sanctioned Leavers, Non-Sanctioned Leavers, and TANF Stayers"

2003-16-FF Sara McLanahan Dec 2003 "Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda"

2003-15 Angela Fertig Nov 2003 "Healthy Baby, Healthy Marriage? The Effect of Children's Health on Divorce"

2003-14-FF Marcia Carlson, Frank Furstenberg, Jr. Oct 2003 "Complex Families: Documenting the Prevalence and Correlates of Multi-Partnered Fertility in the United States"

2003-13-FF Nancy Cohen Oct 2003 "Unmarried African American Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: The Role of Couple Relationships"

2002-17-FF Angela Fertig, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Oct 2003 "Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence Among Non-Cohabiting Couples"

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2003-12-FF Ariel Kalil Oct 2003 "Fathers' Perceptions of Paternal Roles: Variations by Marital Status and Living Arrangement"

2003-11-FF Catherine Kenney Sept 2003 "Hardship in Marriage and Cohabiting Parent Households: Do Cohabiting Parents Underinvest in Household Public Goods?"

2001-06-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan, Paula England Aug 2003 "Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families"

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2002-05 Leonard Lopoo, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Aug 2003 "Explaining the Trend in Teenage Birth Rates from 1981-1999"

2001-14 Leonard Lopoo Aug 2003 "The Effect of Maternal Employment on Teenage Childbearing"

2001-17-FF Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Sara McLanahan Jul 2003 "For Richer or Poorer?: Marriage as Poverty Alleviation in the United States"

2003-09-FF Cynthia Osborne, Sara McLanahan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Jul 2003 "Is There an Advantage to Being Born to Married versus Cohabiting parents? Differences in Child Behavior"

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## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the role of couple relationships in unmarried African-American fathers' involvement with their infants.

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The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crew.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> or email the CRCW at [crew@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crew@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "Unmarried African American Fathers' Involvement with Their Infants: The Role of Couple Relationships" by Nancy E. Cohen. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crew.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We also thank the Joint Center for Poverty Research for helping to disseminate this brief.