

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

The Importance of Father Involvement

Healthy father involvement is associated with better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing. Over the past several decades, fathers have nearly tripled the time they spend with their children.¹ However, some fathers face barriers that prevent or reduce involvement in their child's life, including a difficult coparenting relationship, economic challenges, or personal difficulties.² For children of married parents, father involvement is often a given; however, for children of unmarried parents, the father-child relationship may be more tenuous, particularly if a father does not live with their child. This brief highlights the importance of helping fathers maintain a healthy relationship with their children by describing the links between father involvement and positive child outcomes across the life course, and helps organizations think about how to support father involvement.

What does father involvement mean?

Father involvement describes a supportive relationship with high-quality interactions between a father and child. Studies measure father involvement in different ways; however, most research-based definitions of father involvement include accessibility, engagement, and responsibility:³

- **Accessibility:** The extent to which a father interacts with his child, including the number of times a father saw his child during a set period of time.
- **Engagement:** The quality of the relationship between father and child, including caregiving, play, teaching, and other shared activities.
- **Responsibility:** A father's involvement in taking care of the daily needs and welfare of their child, including tending to their child's health or childcare, or having a role in major decision-making about their child's life.

Promoting all aspects of father involvement, including accessibility, engagement, and responsibility, is critical to supporting children and families.

Research links healthy father involvement to better outcomes for children's wellbeing and healthy development

Over the past several decades, father involvement has increased dramatically.⁴ Since 1965, fathers have nearly tripled the time they spend with their children.⁵ Fathers' roles in their families also evolved, with old conceptions of the father as "distant breadwinner" or "male role model" giving way to a more holistic role as "equal co-parent."⁶ Alongside these changes, researchers and academics developed a growing interest in studying the role that fathers play in their children's lives.

Research links father involvement to numerous benefits for children and families. A father's presence at birth is a key predictor for maternal and child wellbeing.⁷ Father involvement can provide encouragement and support for maternal breastfeeding,⁸ and father involvement is associated with a reduction in the negative effects of maternal depressive behaviors on children.⁹ Additionally, research links father involvement to better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing, from cognitive development and academic achievement to self-esteem and pro-social behavior.¹⁰

Benefits of Father Involvement

From academic success to healthy behaviors, father involvement is associated with a range of better outcomes for children's wellbeing and healthy development. When children begin school, father involvement is linked to higher levels of academic preparedness and fewer school-related challenges.¹¹ Father involvement is also associated with a reduction in the chances that a child will repeat a grade, be suspended or expelled from school, or drop out of high school.¹² During adolescence, positive father involvement is linked to a reduction in the risk of delinquent activity and can serve as a protective factor for drug and alcohol use.¹³ As children grow, father involvement is also connected to later academic achievement and the increased likelihood children go to college or find stable employment after high school.¹⁴

One of the ways father involvement supports children's cognitive development and academic achievement is through the emotional support fathers provide to their children. Fathers who develop supportive relationships with their child can help their child become more emotionally stable, and emotional stability is associated with helping children develop stronger peer relationships and a lower likelihood the child will have behavioral challenges in school.¹⁵ Moreover, father involvement is connected to helping children develop less gendered beliefs and increasing their self-esteem,¹⁶ which may prevent later antisocial or aggressive behaviors.¹⁷

Healthy father involvement can also serve as a protective factor against child abuse and neglect. Research connects household economic hardships, unemployment, family stress, parenting stress, and social isolation to an increased risk of child abuse and neglect.¹⁸ Protective factors within a household, such as supportive family environments, parental employment, and stable family relationships may reduce the chances of child abuse and neglect occurring.¹⁹ Fathers who nurture their infant children and take on other early important parenting responsibilities develop

connections with their children that may reduce the occurrence of child abuse or neglect.²⁰ Additionally, when parents are in a romantic relationship, a father's engagement with their child, participation in child-related chores, and how more cooperative coparenting with the child's mother can decrease overall maternal parenting stress,²¹ which may lessen the risk of child abuse and neglect.²² Finally, the economic support fathers contribute to their household may decrease the overall household economic strain and risk of child abuse and neglect.²³

Barriers to Father Involvement

Some fathers experience barriers that prevent or limit involvement in their child's life. Research demonstrates that the status and quality of the parents' coparenting relationship serves as an important predictor for father involvement.²⁴ When coparents positively work together to raise their children, the quality and quantity of father involvement are enhanced.²⁵ Economic instability can also make it difficult for fathers to be involved in their child's life.²⁶ Among fathers who live with their children, men who are unemployed or feel that they are inadequate providers are less involved with their children and use fewer positive parenting behaviors.²⁷ Nonresident fathers who provide either formal or informal support tend to have more contact with their children.²⁸ However, child support arrears can reduce fathers' willingness or ability to engage with their children, and the consequences of child support debt can inhibit fathers' ability to spend time with their children and to regain economic stability.²⁹

Personal factors can also pose as barriers to a father's involvement in their child's life. A history of incarceration,³⁰ abusive behavior,³¹ or drug and alcohol problems³² are each associated with a decrease in positive father-child interactions and less maintained father-child contact over time. Negative comments from others about their abilities, experiences with poor examples of fathers, and/or not feeling prepared to care for their child also greatly impede a father's involvement with their child.³³ Other personal risk factors that may limit father involvement include multipartner fertility,³⁴ depressive symptoms,³⁵ stress,³⁶ unintended pregnancy or low prenatal involvement,³⁷ and young age at the birth of the child.³⁸ However, fathers' resilience in the context of these risk factors is associated with fathers' involvement with their children. Fathers' components of resiliency include: employment, completion of education, and family and social supports.³⁹

Consequences of Limited Father Involvement

Father absence can have serious consequences for children. Children who grow up without involved fathers are at a greater risk of adverse life experiences.⁴⁰ Infants whose father is absent at birth are at an increased risk of having health complications compared to infants with a father present at birth.⁴¹ Fathers who are absent at birth are less likely to have supported mothers prenatally, impacting maternal stress and their child's health.⁴² Additionally, growing up without an involved father is linked to the likelihood that children will exhibit behavioral problems in school.⁴³ In adolescence, father absence is associated with increases in the chances daughters will engage in sexual activity and become teen parents.⁴⁴ Moreover, limited father involvement is connected to a higher likelihood that teens will not graduate from high school.⁴⁵

Beyond the increased risk of adverse outcomes faced by children who grow up with absent fathers or limited father involvement, adult men also described the lasting emotional effects of having an absent father during childhood. Men in this study described how they spent substantial time wondering why their fathers were not present, and that father absence created emotional difficulties for them, such as periods of sadness or depression and even “difficulty forming trusting relationships.”⁴⁶

Promoting Father Involvement

Understanding the barriers that keep fathers from healthy involvement with their children and the protective factors that can facilitate involvement paves the way for organizations and programs that work with fathers to understand how to best serve fathers. Programs can support fathers in their role as parents by cultivating strong bonds with fathers and demonstrating that they see both parents as important role models and caregivers in their children’s lives. By targeting areas that reduce risk factors and promote protective factors, organizations and programs can help fathers play the role in their children’s life that they want to play. Specifically, organizations committed to promoting healthy father involvement can target their work to support positive coparenting relationships; increase financial stability; reduce risky and criminal behavior; and increase fathers’ parenting confidence, knowledge, and skills.⁴⁷ Father involvement benefits fathers as well as their children. Involved fathers feel more important in their child’s lives and they are more confident and effective parents.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Fathers directly and indirectly influence their child’s wellbeing and development. Involved fathers spend time with their children, have high-quality father-child interactions, and are responsible for their child’s daily needs and welfare. Children with involved fathers have better health and wellbeing outcomes, and healthy father involvement is a protective factor against child abuse, child neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences. A father’s coparenting relationship with their child’s mother, their financial situation, and personal factors can greatly affect their involvement with their child. Organizations and programs that support father involvement play an important role in reducing barriers to involvement and facilitating improved outcomes for children and families. To promote father involvement, organizations can encourage positive coparenting relationships; support fathers to become more financially stable; help fathers reduce risky and criminal behavior; and develop fathers’ parenting confidence, knowledge, and skills.

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