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Involved Fathering and Child Development: Advancing Our Understanding of Good Fathering

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The purpose of this chapter is to review theoretical and empirical literature to two questions that have generated growing attention and debate past 40 years. The interrelated questions are: (1) What do we mean when we say “more father involvement” and “less father involvement”? and (2) What are the effects of varying degrees of father involvement on child development?

On the surface, these questions sound relatively straightforward, and years of increasingly focused interest, theory, instrumentation, and research, straightforward answers would be expected. We have amassed hundreds of research studies that address these questions to greater and greater degrees, and through selected lenses, the answers are relatively clear cut. As the theories, data and public discourse have unfolded across time, what to be simple questions have proven to have elusive answers complicated by an intricately interdependent array of definitional, methodological, and sociopolitical issues. Because these questions are not as straightforward as they initially appear through a different set of lenses, we do not have much in the way of definitive answers. The first question will receive primary attention in this chapter, and the second will be briefly discussed in relation to the first.

In an introductory chapter to a recent collection of papers on fatherhood, Palkovitz and Day (2000, p. 1) noted that despite strong and persistent interest in

about fathers, we are far from understanding the complex ways in which fathers make contributions to their families and children. In order to consider the two central questions of this chapter with the integrity that they deserve, it is first necessary to explicitly address some of the issues inherent in the questions. In a brief analysis, this chapter will demonstrate that it is first necessary to consider the diversity of contexts and qualities of father involvement. To understand father involvement, we must consider who fathers are. Further, we must take into account many aspects of the demographics, the father's personal characteristics, developmental status, and preparation for fatherhood as well as the child's (or children's) characteristics. In considering what is meant by more or less involvement, I will argue that, in actuality, it is not the amount of involvement that is crucial for our understanding. Rather, the more critical factor is the overall quality of father involvement over time. I will further demonstrate that though the zeitgeist suggests that "more father involvement is better" for child development outcomes, in individual cases or under specific circumstances, the "more is better" perspective represents serious misconceptions. I will demonstrate that the generalized discussion of "more involved fathering" is really a proxy for "good fathering." We currently have the data to describe good fathering and to demonstrate that good fathering is correlated with positive child development outcomes. Thus, I will argue that what is needed is not more involvement; what is most beneficial is "good fathering."

WHO ARE FATHERS?

Marsiglio, Day, and Lamb (2000) recognized that definitions of fatherhood and conceptualizations of paternal involvement are inextricably interwoven. If we are to advance our conceptualization of fatherhood and paternal involvement while improving our understanding of its implications for children and families, we must update our perception of the diverse forms of fatherhood and the complex ways in which conceptualizations affect paternal involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2000). When we ask questions regarding father involvement as though fathers are a homogenous group, we mask the great diversity of fathers, the contexts of their involvement, their developmental characteristics, the challenges they face, and their responses to these variables at any given time as well as patterns across time. Peterson and Steinmetz (2000) eloquently stated that "diversity has become the norm that defines our domestic relations" (p. 316). Other writers have urged that policies and interventions for fathers must respect the enormous socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic diversity among fathers (see Hewlett, 2000). Peterson and Steinmetz (2000) summarize the diversity of fatherhood, fatherhood meanings, and fathering contexts by noting that

fatherhood is no simple phenomenon, but a complex tapestry of many things . . . the reality [is] that fatherhood is not a static phenomenon, but more like a moving target, only some of which has constant meaning. (p. 315)

The "seemingly simple and somewhat rhetorical question" of "Who are fathers?" is "fraught with conceptual ambiguity" because considering the question from biological, social, psychological, and legal perspectives brings different issues into play (Marsiglio et al., 2000, p. 273). Independent of disciplinary boundaries, fathers are only fathers because of relationships. A man becomes a biological father as a result of a relationship to the child's birth mother. Biological fathering is the result of a biological act with differing degrees of planning, intentionality, emotion, and commitment across different relationships. However, becoming a social father, making the transition to fatherhood (Cowan, 1991), is a different process, entailing different functions and dynamics (Daniels & Weingarten, 1988). A father is only a social father in relation to a child. Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) assert that sociological and historical analyses clearly establish that, beyond insemination, fathering is "fundamentally a social construction" (p. 278), with each cohort shaping its own conception of fatherhood. Garbarino (2000) observed that we are currently reinventing social fatherhood.

Social fathering is a decision that can be made independent of biological status. To embrace social fathering, a man must engage in a significant reorganization of both identity and role enactment (Cowan, 1991). LaRossa (1988) noted the discrepancy between the ideals that cohorts set forth (the culture of fatherhood) and the ways that fathering roles are actually enacted (the conduct of fatherhood). Similarly, Lamb (2000) noted the discrepancies between images of nurturant and active fathers presented by journalists and filmmakers and the diversity of role conceptualizations and enactments of fathers in everyday activities.

Demographic analyses indicate that the prevalence of social fatherhood is increasing as a growing array of men are being perceived to have fatherlike roles in children's lives, in part because increasing numbers of biological fathers are disengaging from their children or were never actively involved (Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Involved fathering across time is a commitment that reflects an ongoing set of decisions that have behavioral, cognitive, and affective components (Palkovitz, 1997) as well as developmental consequences for both fathers and their children across time and contexts (Palkovitz, 1996).

The distinctions between biological and social fathers, residential and nonresidential, and legal fathers and men with no legal fathering rights are elucidated elsewhere in this volume (see chap. 3); the important point for our focus in this chapter is that fathering, at its core, entails relationships. Because scientific inquiry involves collection and analysis of data, it has been necessary to operationalize involvement in ways that yield observable categories and frequencies of behavior. This is artificially reductionistic because involvement is a component of relationships between a father and a child. Relationships are dynamic, developmentally fluid, contextually embedded, multifaceted, and complex. They have a developmental history and changing meaning over time (Palkovitz, 1996) as well as across cohorts (Hareven, 2000). Though the father's primary relationship is in regard to one or more children, fathering is significantly affected by other rela-

tionships, most notably to the children's mother, other family members, and other persons (e.g., friends, neighbors, coworkers). The supports and roadblocks that are introduced through these relationships influence both the culture and the conduct of father involvement for individual men.

DIVERSITY OF FATHERING CONTEXTS

The variability in contexts of father involvement is quite extensive. Men engaging in fathering roles vary by marital status, marital quality, type of fathering relationship to child, legality of paternal status, residential status, educational level, employment status, income, relationship with own father, supports and hindrances toward involvement, personality, health, range and types of involvement engaged in, predominant parenting style, beliefs about the fathers' role, cultural background, individual skill levels, and motivation. Although this list is not exhaustive, it does represent variables that are frequently reported in various studies of father involvement and begins to show the reasons that answers to our questions regarding father involvement and child development are complex and require careful consideration. Table 5.1 depicts some of the characteristics which affect fathers' involvement across time. Thus, when answering the question, "What does it mean when we say that a father is more or less involved?" the answer to the question partially depends on the current status of an individual father at the time that we are assessing his involvement in an interdependent and dynamic array of relationships to the child and others in the family and community context.

WHAT IS FATHER INVOLVEMENT?

Ross Parke (2000) posits that a "key element is to recognize how difficult it is to define the complexities of father involvement" (p. 43). Palm (1993) reduces much of the complexity by stating that men who are involved in the day-to-day responsibilities of parenting and value the importance of these activities are considered involved fathers. The literature on father involvement spanning the past 40 years is filled with different definitions of this central term and different strategies for measurement of involvement. Part of the variability in conceptualization and metrication is attributable to multidisciplinary interest in father involvement. Marsiglio et al. (2000) observed that "anthropologists, economists, family scientists, legal scholars, developmental psychologists, and sociologists specializing in family and gender studies tend to approach father involvement in unique ways, emphasizing certain features while downplaying others" (p. 276). Yet even within disciplinary boundaries, different studies employ different conceptualizations and different metrics on nonrepresentative samples in varying

TABLE 5.1
A Partial Listing of Sources of Variability in
Father Involvement Contexts

Child Characteristics	Father's Personal Factors
Age	Functionality
Gender	Preparation for Fatherhood
Developmental Status	Experience in Caregiving
Health	Knowledge of Child Development
Personality	Relational Style
	Authoritative
	Authoritarian
Father's Demographic Factors	Indulgent/Permissive
Age	Indifferent
Education	Motivation
Income	Personality
Adequacy	Skills/Abilities
Percentage of Family Provision	View of Father Role
Contributed	Cultural Background
Other Support Obligations	Fathering Identity
Alimony	
Child Support	
Marital Status	Competing or Complementary Role
Single	Demands
Cohabiting	Family
Engaged	Husband
Married	Son
Separated	Brother
Divorced	Uncle
Recohabiting	Work
Remarried	Hours Working
Relationship to Child(ren)	Job Security
Biological Father	Job-Related Stress
Social Father	Community
Legality	Involvement in Organizations
Residential Status	
Coresidential	Relational Factors
Nonresident, but nearby	Partner/Significant Other
Nonresident and distant	Marital Status
Timing of Transition to Fatherhood	Relational Quality
Early	Degree of Gatekeeping
On-Time	Relationship with Own Father
Late	Primacy of Modeling vs. Reworking
Employment Status	Degree of Warmth vs. Emotional
Voluntarily Unemployed	Distance
Involuntarily Unemployed	Level of Conflict
Part-Time Employed	Siblings/Extended Family
Full-Time Employed	Social Supports
Multiple Jobs	
Cultural Identity	Father Involvement
Religiosity	Frequencies
	Range of Behaviors
	Quality of Interactions
	Meaning of Involvement

contexts. Some studies distinguish between absolute levels of father involvement versus involvement relative to other caregivers (Parke, 2000), whereas others focus on the quality versus the quantity of paternal involvement (Palm, 1985; Parke, 2000).

In the past decade, the conceptualization and measurement of father involvement has received increasing attention. To give full consideration to this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter. Several recent reviews and conceptual papers have encapsulated the primary issues (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Lamb, 2000; Palkovitz, 1997; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 1997). A fair summary would be that although our understanding and our operationalization of fatherhood and father involvement have changed over time, fatherhood has always been a multifaceted concept (Lamb, 2000). The net result is that father involvement has been viewed and indexed in different ways at different times and in different studies, making comparisons across studies difficult at best.

Much of the research on father involvement has been focused on elucidating relationships between patterns of paternal behavior and child development outcomes. Pioneering research in the field of developmental psychology linked patterns of paternal behavior and infant development. For that reason, conceptualizations and measures of father involvement focused on fathers' overtly observable behaviors—behaviors that have meaning to a sensorimotor stage child and behaviors that can reasonably be measured and quantified by observers or captured through time diaries (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999).

Recently, however, Palkovitz and his colleagues (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Palkovitz, 1994, 1997) have pointed out the limitations of conceptualizations and measures that narrowly focus on paternal behaviors while ignoring the cognitive and affective domains of father involvement. Moreover, the *meaning* of various forms of father involvement has been highlighted as a needed focus for researchers and theorists to develop more fully (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). The greatest point of consensus at this time is that further conceptualization is needed regarding the nature, origins, sources, and meanings of paternal involvement (Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 1997). Developing appropriate metrics is yet another challenge.

There are no widely accepted conceptual frameworks of paternal involvement that have been translated into extensively used, psychometrically reliable and valid measures. Though conceptualization has rapidly advanced in recent years, our understanding of important components of father involvement have far outstripped standardized metrics for tapping these dimensions. Significant measure development efforts have been launched by interdisciplinary teams of scholars working from emerging conceptual models (see Hawkins et al., 1999), but initial data from nationally representative samples of fathers indicate that the measures require significant refinement to capture the variability that we know exists in father involvement across diverse contexts.

Clearly, family scientists continue to struggle with what it means to be an involved father. One of the factors that has prolonged this struggle is the common failure to distinguish between structural or demographic variables that are proxies for residential status or economic provision and the social construction of fathering, which is more centered on the nature and quality of father-child interactions. Men having the same value on demographic variables (e.g., residential, full-time employed) can be at opposite ends of a continuum regarding the social construction of fathering (e.g., highly functional, authoritative vs. dysfunctional, authoritarian). Grouping fathers by similarity in structural or demographic variables masks variability in involvement levels and paternal styles. Though large-scale, nationally representative data sets are valuable resources in many regards, they have lacked qualitatively meaningful measures of father involvement. As advances are made in our understanding of meanings and contexts of father involvement, it will be crucial for family scientists to incorporate measures of paternal style and quality into large, representative samples of fathers varying across contexts. We currently know more about quantities of father involvement than we do regarding qualities of father involvement.

One of the most frequently cited and utilized frameworks for studying father involvement was proposed by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985, 1987). It conceives father involvement as including three components: (a) *paternal engagement* (direct personal interaction with the child in the form of caretaking, play, teaching, or leisure); (b) *accessibility or availability* to the child (i.e., temporal and proximal positioning that would allow the child to enter into engagement if desired or necessary); and (c) *responsibility* for the care of the child (making plans and arrangements for care as distinct from the performance of the care). Prior to the formulation of this tripartite construction, one line of research regarding the paternal behaviors and characteristics studied in father-present families tended to focus on "qualitative ones such as masculinity, power, control, warmth, responsiveness, independence training, playfulness, and the like" (Pleck, 1997, p. 67). A distinctly separate line of research considered father's engagement in specific caregiving tasks (e.g., the number of diapers changed, time spent in verbal interaction, amount of physical contact between fathers and children) (see Palkovitz, 1980; Rebelsky & Hanks, 1971). By comparison, employing the categories of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility allows a content-free construction of involvement, concerning only the quantity of fathers' behavior, time, or responsibility with their children (Pleck, 1997).

The fact remains that most empirical studies focus primary attention on a limited range of father-child interactions that are a subset of the category of engagement (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Palkovitz, 1997). Although we have a growing body of literature that looks at distinctions between various components of father involvement, the database is limited and does not comprehensively address the cognitive and affective domains of involvement or the meanings of involvement. Furthermore, studies have not systematically assessed the degree to which each of

these components make unique contributions to children's developmental outcomes (Parke, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999).

Because involvement takes place in the context of relationships, the meaning of involvement can be quite different to the different parties involved. A father may provide what he perceives to be a high degree of involvement, whereas in his spouse's or partner's view, he contributes only a small amount of involvement. Further, what may be of primary importance from the child's perspective may not be the degree of involvement but the *quality* of father-child interaction. (Was the interaction happy? Was it fun? Did the interaction make the child feel good or competent? Conversely, did the encounter bring emotional pain, isolation, or embarrassment?) The texture of father-child interactions and their meanings are influenced by fluctuating emotional currents across time, as well as moods, expectations, and perceived needs. Thus, the developmental contributions of father involvement are cumulative, irregular, and change and compound across time with the development of the father, the child, and others in the relational context. Though we have the conceptual sophistication to recognize this, existing measures of father involvement have not captured each of these characteristics, masking some of the meanings and effects of involved fathering. Perhaps considerations such as these contributed to Joseph Pleck's (1997, p. 66) question, "How good is the evidence that fathers' *amount* of involvement, without taking into account its content and quality, is consequential for children, mothers, or fathers themselves?"

WHAT IS MEANT BY MORE OR LESS FATHER INVOLVEMENT?

Because of the lack of a universally accepted conceptualization of father involvement, answers to this question vary from study to study. However, because of the nature of the bulk of the available data, when social scientists discuss "more involvement," we commonly mean more time (Blair & Hardesty, 1994; McBride, 1990), higher frequencies of behavior (Marsiglio, 1991), or greater levels of engagement, accessibility, and/or responsibility (Lamb et al., 1985).

However, because father involvement also carries an array of significant qualitative components—the quality, sensitivity, developmental appropriateness, emotional climate, degree of connection, mutual delight, and meaning—more involvement is not always better (Palkovitz, 1994, 1997; Parke, 2000). It is theoretically possible for fathers and children to hit developmental ceiling effects or saturation points where more father involvement does not yield enhanced child development but is simply redundant (see Palkovitz, 1996, for an expanded discussion of these concepts). In such instances, more involvement represents a drain on resources of fathers' time and energy that may be more fruitfully invested elsewhere. The contexts and temporal fluctuations of paternal involvement need further consideration in future investigations.

These concerns notwithstanding, the term *more involvement* has been used to mean a wide variety of things, including more time invested in child-centered activities (Kotelchuck, 1976; McBride & Mills, 1993), more father-child contact (Palkovitz, 1980), more financial support (U.S. Census Bureau, 1987), more activities engaged in (Palkovitz, 1980), more caregiving (Haas, 1993), and more father-child play (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; MacDonald & Parke, 1986). More involvement can also mean more thinking, planning, feeling, caring, monitoring, evaluating, and praying; more energy invested; and more worrying (Palkovitz, 1997, 2000). It can also mean more priority, greater commitment, more responsibility, more of a place in the overall scheme of roles and facets of the self, more father identity (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993). More involvement often means more relationship. More involvement has meant more affection, more touch, more smiles, more warmth (Palkovitz, 1980). More involvement has been conceptualized as more commitment, more sacrifice, more other-centeredness, and more investment in the next generation (Dollahite et al., 1997; Snarey, 1993). More involvement is often associated with more sensitivity to subtle signals (Nash & Feldman, 1981); more willingness to work at "getting it right"; and more motivation to build relationships, encourage children, and facilitate development (Palkovitz, 1980). More involvement can mean more mutuality, interdependence, intimacy, and resources, both psychologically (Biller & Kimp-ton, 1997) and economically (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Because more involvement usually entails more time in relationships across various contexts, more involvement can mean more diversity in relational styles experienced, greater potential for redundancy in meeting developmental needs, more occasions for discrimination learning (Palkovitz, 1987), and more occasions for children to model instead of engaging in reworking (Snarey, 1993) because there is a greater sample of paternal behavior from which to choose. More involvement can mean more life satisfaction for both fathers (Palkovitz, 2000) and children (Biller, 1974). More involvement can help to establish a secure base for exploration (Cohen & Campos, 1974) with different realms of movement and activity (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981) and new and different styles and worlds to explore. More involvement can mean more training, more teaching, more coaching, more instruction, more discipline, and more exposure to different contexts and perspectives for both fathers and children (Field, 1978).

From children's viewpoints, more involvement means more resources, more contrast, different styles, new perspectives, opportunities, caring, security, and encouragement. More involvement is more likely to build trust, to encourage initiative, to support industry, to enhance identity, to support the attainability of intimacy, and to create the potential for generativity (Snarey, 1993). In some studies, more father involvement has been associated with enhanced social skills (MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Pedersen, Rubenstein, & Yarrow, 1979), cognitive ability (Snarey, 1983), self-confidence (Amato, 1987), and exploration (Lamb & Sherrod, 1981) in children. Caution needs to be exercised in compiling such a list of

findings because the studies reported implicitly and explicitly address only a subset of paternal involvement as described. Nonetheless, in each of these studies, more involvement tends to be characterized as developmentally facilitative for children. A key question would be, "What are the mechanisms by which these patterns of father involvement affect children's development?"

All of these characterizations assume that fathers are coming to the relationship with positive, developmentally facilitative interactions. In short, studies publishing the listed meanings of more involvement assume that positive qualities are operating in the father (Pleck, 1997) and that they are present in sufficient quantity to be passed on to his child. Even the best of fathers has flaws and weaknesses, aspects that need development, healing, working through, enhancement, or extraction. Clearly, more father involvement would provide a context for greater harm, greater detriment, and higher risk when men are functioning poorly, when they manifest multiple deficits, or when they model negative behaviors and inflict physical or psychological injury. Under these conditions, more involvement is not better. There is also a point where some levels and styles of involvement may become "overinvolvement," enmeshment, "smothering," "sheltering" or overly protective. When involvement reaches these levels, it may hinder children's development by suppressing appropriate independence, responsibility, and opportunities to practice competencies for themselves.

In contrast, less involvement has been used to denote less engagement, accessibility, and responsibility; lack of resources—time, confidence, ability, skill, motivation; less role fulfillment; and less interdependence, identity, intimacy, and generativity (Snarey, 1993). Less involvement often reflects and results in more emotional and relational woundedness, both in fathers and children. Less involvement means less enjoyment and less development for both parties. Less involvement implies missed opportunities, unreached potential, and unfulfilled needs. Less involvement can mean deficits in resources for both fathers and children.

In contrast to the predominant usages in the professional literature, what is meant by the term *more involvement* has only tenuous ties to frequencies or durations of involvement—its meaning has more to do with the quality, texture, depth, character, centrality, consistency, pervasiveness, and relational qualities of fathering, call them what you will. Snarey's (1993) four-decade study of how fathers care for the next generation brought Erikson's (1963) construct of generativity and the associated virtue—care—to the attention of fathering scholars. In short, fathers who are more involved are characterized as more caring. Doherty and his colleagues (1998) and Dollahite et al. (1997) have emphasized an array of ethical components of involved fathering. The qualitative work of Cohen and Dolgin (1997) highlighted various psychological (e.g., degree of identification and prioritization of fathering roles) and affective components (e.g., depth of perceived closeness between fathers and children) of father involvement. Pasley and her colleagues (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993; Minton & Pasley, 1996) have linked identity theory and father involvement to explore men's internal conceptions of appro-

appropriate paternal behavior. These studies have drawn attention to the salience of father identity and men's commitment to that identity in juxtaposition with men's engagement in directly observable interaction or time invested in their children. These perspectives, when coupled with qualitative investigations of the perceived effects of fatherhood on men's development (Palkovitz, 2000), demonstrate that men think of father involvement as multidimensional, relationally based, encompassing an array of indirect and less-observable components, multiply determined, and contextually and temporally influenced. Clearly, it is reductionistic to focus primarily on directly observable frequency tallies or time spent in direct engagement while ignoring the meaning, salience, and appropriateness of fathers' involvement with their children (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Palkovitz, 1997). However, most empirical studies report data that portray father involvement in time or frequency counts (Palkovitz, 1997). Such portrayals can lead to the "more involvement is better" perspective that is prevalent in ongoing prescriptions for fathers' engagement with their children.

In regard to father involvement, the reason that the "more is better" myth is so pervasive in our culture is because: (a) the studies that report positive relationships between father involvement and child development outcomes are grounded in the assumption that involvement is positive in quality (Pleck, 1997) and (b) so many of our children are not getting a perceived minimum daily requirement of involvement from a positively engaged father. It is true that many children would benefit from more father involvement, but only if it was appropriate, positive, building, developmentally facilitative, loving, warm, and sensitive. When we assess the relationships between varying levels and styles of paternal involvement and child development, we draw on data that reflect developmental outcome models.

WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES?

A long-established tradition of developmental psychologists is to assess the maturation and adaptability of people as indicators of well-being, success, or appropriate development. Because it has long been the assumption that parental influence on child development is of paramount importance, one way to assess the quality of fathering a child receives is to assess the child's developmental outcomes.

Developmental outcomes are reports of maturational or adaptive status at a particular time of data collection and are often empirically linked to another factor such as father involvement. Though most linkages reflect correlational data due to design complexities and ethical considerations, we frequently make causal inferences regarding the relationship between children's current developmental status and patterns of past or concurrent paternal involvement. In making such

assessments, both the child's developmental status and the degree and/or quality of paternal involvement must be conceptualized and measured before statistical relationships between the two can be assessed.

Because significant variability exists in constructions and measures of involvement and because development is multiply determined and plastic (Magnusson & Cairns, 1996), it is somewhat hazardous to get too specific regarding relationships between patterns of paternal involvement and child development outcomes. In focusing on child outcomes, we often ignore the fact that patterns of father involvement are only one factor in a large and diverse array of possible contributors to developmental outcomes. Clearly, children's development is influenced by mothers, teachers, siblings, peers, other caregivers, other relatives, and countless other socialization agents. Beyond persons as socialization agents, other contextual factors contribute significantly to children's developmental status. The existing database does not allow us to conclusively partial out the effects of father involvement on child outcome variables.

In the same way that we evaluate the performance of other roles by product outcome evaluations (e.g., a good mechanic reliably repairs and maintains my automobile, a good teacher has students who demonstrate mastery of the subjects they have been taught), a good father has children who "turn out" well. That is, good fathers produce children who manifest positive developmental characteristics and reach achievement levels that indicate success. Looking at children's achievement in school, popularity, adjustment to friendships, and histories with penal and mental health systems is a common metric for gauging success in regard to developmental outcomes.

WHAT DO THE DATA TELL US?

What are the relationships between more and less father involvement and children's developmental outcomes? It is no longer possible to comprehensively review the literature on the effects of father involvement on child development in a chapter-length manuscript. Despite the already enormous and rapidly growing volume of published work examining the relationship between father involvement and child development, we still have a long way to go before we can confidently elucidate what is really happening. The truth is that precisely articulated relationships that hold across fathering types, child characteristics, and father-child relationship contexts are only available at "global," demographic or qualitative levels—and those answers look remarkably like common sense, conventional wisdom, and family centered ideologies.

There is a strong consensus among developmentalists who have reviewed father-involvement literature that the more extensive a father's emotional investment, attachment, provision of resources, and involvement with his children, the more beneficial it is for children in terms of cognitive competence, school per-

formance, empathy, self-esteem, self-control, well-being, life skills and social competence (see Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio et al., 2000, MacDonald & Parke, 1984; McKeown, Ferguson, & Rooney, 1998; Pleck, 1997; Pruett, 1983; Radin, 1982, 1994). "Conversely, children are less likely to become involved in delinquent behavior if their fathers are sensitive and attentive to them; even the children of fathers who have a criminal record are less likely to become delinquent if the father spends a lot of time with them" (McKeown et al., 1998, pp. 86-87).

Parke and Brott (1999) state that "researchers over the past two decades have been nearly unanimous in their findings: "Fathers matter. And they matter a lot" (p. 5). Although no one completely understands the processes involved (Palkovitz, 1996; Parke & Brott, 1999; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999), involved fathering clearly benefits children, mothers, and fathers themselves (Palkovitz, 1996; Parke & Brott, 1999). Thus, encouraging fathers to be positively involved—and supporting them in their efforts to do so—is an investment that could yield important psychosocial dividends for all stakeholders.

Again, it is important to reiterate that the quality of father involvement influences the direction of child development outcomes. Pleck (1997) observes that the "more is better" nature of these findings result from defining father involvement that really reflects what he calls positive father involvement. McKeown et al. (1998) focus on the quality of fathering received as well by pointing out that:

"authoritative" fathering, which involves providing consistent values and boundaries and relating to the child with warmth and confidence, is beneficial to the child but "authoritarian" fathering, which involves excessive discipline, control and aloofness from the child, is not. (p. 87)

In a similar vein, Parke and Brott (1999) emphasize that the quality of a father's involvement is crucial.

Simply being there is not enough; being available and involved is what really counts. . . . kids whose fathers are cold and authoritarian, derogatory, and intrusive have the hardest time with grades and social relationships. They are, says John Gottman, even worse off than kids who live in homes with no father at all. Kids with nonsupportive dads and dads who humiliate them were the ones most likely to be headed for trouble, he says. They were the ones who displayed aggressive behavior toward their friends, they were the ones who had trouble in school, and they were the ones with problems often linked to delinquency and youth violence. (pp. 9-10)

Lamb (1997) refocuses our attention on the broader family system by asserting that "the benefits obtained by children with highly involved fathers are largely attributable to the fact that high levels of paternal involvement created family contexts in which parents felt good about their marriages and the child care arrangements they had been able to work out" (p. 12). This summary reflects the interdependent nature of fathering relationships with other relational contexts. Fathers

who have histories of high levels of ongoing involvement with their children have maintained social supports and circumstances that are facilitative of high paternal involvement or they have made necessary adjustments and have overcome obstacles in their contexts. It is likely that men who are highly motivated to remain actively engaged in their children's lives and who have resilient personalities have greater capacities to accommodate changes and challenges to their involvement than less-motivated or resilient men.

WHY IS FATHER INVOLVEMENT SUCH A CHARGED TOPIC?

In recent years, growing attention has focused on father involvement as a central issue in impassioned discussions of gender equity (see Coltrane, 1996) and "family decline" (see Popenoe, 1993). In both contexts, increased father involvement has been forwarded as a fundamental part of the solution to social injustices. In regard to gender equity, men's contributions to child care and household labor as fathers are compared to women's investments as mothers. In the family decline discussions, father absence is associated with a range of negative child outcomes and challenging living conditions for families. In these contexts, arguments have been advanced to imply that, in general, men are not sufficiently engaged in father involvement. Though such assessments may be warranted in some cases, discussions of more and less father involvement can also reflect the value-charged issues of gender bias, racism, classism, or cultural elitism. Discussion of how men exceed or fall short of idealized levels of father involvement brings an evaluative component that can be threatening to families because the status quo is challenged, and the implication is that *someone* is not performing their role adequately. In short, the discussion of father involvement is inescapably value laden.

Some social scientists would charge that reviewing the data in a manner that emphasizes quality and relational contexts is prescriptive and insensitive to individual differences in fathering styles or contexts. Such views stand in stark contradiction to our tendencies as developmentalists to embrace postformal reasoning during adulthood as an achievement that furthers cognitive adaptability (King & Kitchener, 1994). Kail and Cavanaugh (2000) state that

Postformal thought is characterized by a recognition that the truth (the correct answer) may vary from situation to situation, that solutions must be realistic in order to be reasonable, that ambiguity and contradiction are the rule rather than the exception, and that emotion and subjective factors usually play a role in thinking. (p. 342)

In postformal thinking, developmentalists esteem the superiority of the integration of multiple perspectives and the integration of cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Positive value is placed on reasoning that goes beyond available data and integrates cognitive and emotional components. In short, postformal reason-

ing is viewed to be a hallmark of a well-functioning adult mind (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000). Yet, at times, when we apply this manner of thinking to social science questions, we may be accused of forwarding personal agendas. Because of the variety of conceptualizations of father involvement, the plethora of measures, and the diversity of fathering contexts studied, in the end, the only conclusions that are meaningful result from meta-analysis. Perhaps it is time that we look beyond the traditional discourse and engage in some postformal reasoning with regard to this field.

In different sectors of parenting literature, we have terms that are associated with positive outcomes in children's development: authoritative, highly warm, moderately controlling, positive role modeling, responsible fathering, provision, connectedness, sensitivity, involvement, engagement, generativity, marital stability, and coparental cooperation. If we looked at these terms through a slightly different lens, it would appear that prescriptions for ethical relationships bear good fruit, whereas violating them brings harm. After reviewing all of this literature, in my view, the "best" level of father involvement is one that mirrors a high degree of direct interaction, instruction, and relating, coupled with intangibles such as love, mutual respect, and mutual delight (having fun), all in a manner that is consistent with ethical principles of the "golden rule" adjusted for developmental differences between fathers and children and tailored to the individual needs of each child. Men who consistently do this across time and contexts are "good fathers" who tend to have children who are developing positively.

ADVANCING AN UNDERSTANDING OF "GOOD FATHERING"

The term *involved father* is a historically derived proxy for the broader term *good father*. This is clear from the prevalence of the discourse regarding more involvement as a panacea and the assumption implicit in the literature that the involvement that fathers provide is positive (Pleck, 1997). Social scientists have avoided defining "good fathering" because such a label may be argued to be prescriptive, moralistic, and value laden. Though social scientists have been reticent to use the term, laypersons frequently employ it in statements such as, "Paul is a good dad." If pressed, they are also able to elaborate on the specific qualities that resulted in the assessment.

In fact, there has already been a call for researchers to elaborate on this construction in the professional literature. Marsiglio et al. (2000), stated:

Researchers should also strive to develop a more systematic portrait of how men, women, and children from different family structure, class, and race/ethnic backgrounds view aspects of fatherhood. How is "good" fathering defined and how are these definitions conditioned by individual, interpersonal, and more macro or cultural level factors? (p. 288)

Taking into account variability in contextual and developmental resources and norms, we are now in a position to begin to synthesize the various definitions and meanings of father involvement, good dads and bad dads (Furstenberg, 1988), responsible fathering (Doherty et al., 1998), and generative fathering (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) and to couple them with practice that we know to be developmentally facilitative, such as authoritative styles and parenting characteristics associated with secure attachments, and to outline components that are central to defining "good fathering." Although there is undoubtedly considerable variability in what may merit such a label overall, there is a core cluster of features that are positively valued. It is essential to recognize that no father will exhibit all of these characteristics, and that considerable variability would exist in what components individual men value and aspire to achieve. The bottom line is that when men do "enough" of the things in this list and when they achieve above expectation for the resources they have or for the norms of their community, they are viewed in "heroic" manner and called "good dads"—who are venerated as models for others in similar circumstances to emulate.

Though different people hold different definitions of "good fathering," and some would assert that even naming such a construct is inappropriate, most people operate on implicit assumptions about good fathering. They would prefer to have a good dad for a father, a partner, and a father of their children. They would readily recognize one when they saw him, and they would, on reflection, be able to specify the attributes that make the individual a "good dad." Though there has been great resistance to making these values explicit, an honest assessment of the contemporary literature reveals a less-explicit and value laden content as well. Specifically, the language of involved fatherhood is couched in terms that already reflect these underlying values to varying degrees.

We are quick to talk about respecting differences and about the political correctness of various constructions of involvement, but responsible people would not espouse that "whatever a man wants to do is acceptable." Extreme examples would be that physical abuse is not tolerable, nor is teaching children drug dependence tolerable. It is easy to espouse the position that we must respect diversity and individual choice, but we really mean that we respect those values within limits that are determined by other cultural norms and a sense of ethics and values. Such norms and values shape the way we view "positive involvement," "developmentally appropriate practice," "generative fathering," and other constructs that bear on this discussion.

Fathering scholars have begun to make their assumptions more explicit. Pleck (1997) elaborated on Lamb et al. (1985) construct of the "involved father" to advance the concept of positive involvement. Doherty and his colleagues (1998) have discussed responsible fathering. Dollahite et al. (1997) have advanced the notion of generative fathering. Doherty et al. (1998) used the term *responsible fathering*, originally used by the Department of Health and Human Services in commissioning their work, to describe some elements of what I would more

inclusively label "good fathering." Doherty et al. (1998) assert that their use of this term reflects a contemporary shift away from "value-free" language and suggest an "ought," a "set of desired norms," a "moral meaning," and an explicit statement of long-standing and often implicit values that men should be more committed, nurturant, and involved in children's lives. Some social scientists justify the use of these terms by virtue of their association with positively valued outcomes such as social competence, fairness, and fewer behavior problems—outcomes that would be endorsed quite unanimously. These are value judgments as well.

Other writers have begun to espouse values regarding father involvement as well. Marsiglio et al. (2000) conceptualized father involvement by "emphasizing men's positive, wide-ranging, and active participation in their children's lives" (p. 276). Pleck (1997) noted that

The development most affecting the study of both sources and consequences [of paternal involvement] is the tacit shift in measurement noted throughout this chapter from paternal involvement per se to positive paternal involvement. . . . Since most measures used currently incorporate a substantial component of positive content, they actually assess positive paternal involvement. These measures tap the dimension of paternal behavior that actually should be of primary interest. Positive paternal involvement means high engagement, accessibility and responsibility with positive engagement behaviors and stylistic characteristics. In essence, positive involvement means not just "going through the motions" of fatherhood. (p. 102)

In one of the most clear and explicit statements of values regarding father involvement, Dollahite et al. (1997) set forth a "conceptual ethic" of generative fathering. In doing so, they clearly stated that generative fathering is meant to be viewed as a framework that is intended to suggest what is possible and desirable. Generative fathering is presented as a moral call for men to meet the needs of their children.

"Good fathering" reflects the synthesis of the affective, cognitive, and behavioral attributes of involved fathering just reviewed, positive father involvement, responsible fathering, and generative fathering. These characteristics and relational qualities characterize the practice of good fathering in behavior, affect, and cognitions across time and contexts (Palkovitz, 1997). In short, good fathering is characterized by a high degree of engagement with, accessibility to, and responsibility for children, each of which reflects fathers' sensitivity, mutual delight, developmentally facilitative practice, and other-centered ethics. Good fathering entails men investing in ongoing, adaptive relationships with their children in an appropriate level (quantity) of child-centered (quality) care. Good fathering is reflective of child-centered developmentally appropriate and developmentally facilitative practice.

Recent qualitative data have documented that men who have made the commitment to good fathering and who persevere across time, contexts, and life's

inevitable hurdles tend to consider the costs inconsequential in comparison to the overall gains for children, families, self, and communities (Palkovitz, 2000). For some, the decision is deliberate, carefully weighed, and well-articulated and becomes an enduring and central role and prescription for ongoing involvement. Good fathering becomes a central organizing tendency, a prime objective, a principal value. For others, the commitment to good fathering that seemed clear and promising at one time in their lives loses its luster in the face of deteriorating relationships with former spouses or partners, hurdles, pain, failures, substance abuse, or other ongoing issues. Instead of embracing a vision of good fathering and operationalizing it through making it a life rule or central value, some men have merely glimpsed it as a good idea or an ancillary to marriage, cohabitation, employment, or residential status. Perhaps some families can be helped by programs that assist men in making plans and decisions about how to maintain positive involvement across time and contexts in the face of great challenges. In a manner that parallels the literature on "good marriages," what appears to be most needed for good fathering is a value for relationships that endure and transcend shifting contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of research literature could lead to the mistaken belief that by listing all of the external characteristics associated with good fathering, we can "build a better dad." Placing men into the external conditions or contexts that recreate positive contexts for fathering will ultimately not be a panacea. Contexts of development certainly facilitate or hinder the expression of father involvement, but good fathering reflects a commitment to building enduring and positive relationships. Social fathering requires an ongoing set of decisions. Putting a man in a residential, married context may enhance the likelihood of expression of certain paternal behaviors, but the context is neither necessary nor sufficient. Countless men, despite being neither married nor coresidential, nonetheless exhibit exemplary paternal involvement (whether they are biological fathers or not, or legal fathers or not). Marital and residential status are not sufficient to elicit good fathering because untold numbers of wives and children in homes with resident married fathers suffer from lack of father involvement, neglect, or harmful patterns of father involvement. Although active, good fathering is undoubtedly easier to maintain in some sets of circumstances (e.g., happy marriages, residential status, employment with a living wage, education, health) than others (e.g., divorce, illness, unemployment, nonresidential status, low educational attainment), good fathering can be maintained without these supports if there is sufficient motivation and perseverance. We have all observed men in challenging circumstances who overcome roadblocks and persist in good fathering. We have seen the developmental benefits in the lives of their children, regardless of age, gender, or developmental status.

These facts would lead us to conclude that, although contexts of fathering can support good fathering, there are factors beyond context that play a determinative role. Perhaps it would serve us well to study men who view good fathering along the lines of a "calling," a "destiny," an axis mundi, or a "regula" that produces consistently positive paternal involvement across contexts, time, and developing and changing relationships.

In specifying the characteristics of father involvement that potentially yield positive developmental outcomes for children, it is important that we not mask individual variability in what is needed in specific relationships. Though we can delineate the general qualities associated with good fathering, it is imperative that we do not apply the constructs in a universal "recipe," ignoring the unique relational characteristics and cultural and contextual distinctives. Further, it is essential to recognize that there are costs associated with good fathering. Good relationships can be costly—to the self, to individualism, to independence, to spontaneity, to responsibility, to order, to predictability, to control, to disposable cash, to leisure time, and to educational and career attainment, among other dimensions. Involved fathers are able to articulate the costs and benefits of engagement in their children's lives, but involved fathers perceive that the costs of not engaging in good fathering are even more costly (Palkovitz, 2000).

There are legitimate reasons to want to know what different patterns of paternal involvement contribute to the development of children so that we can provide training and supports for the corequisite skills, so that we can enhance contexts for father-child relationships, and so that we can create policies that will yield the greatest probability for positive outcomes. But in the end, there are a lot of qualitative intangibles that are not reducible to numbers and that are not predictable in the realm of social science. Some would argue that these have little bearing in the scope of scientific writing. But the quality of life, the changing texture of relationships, and the fruit that they bear, are the fabric that make up families and our society.

Many components of good fathering are largely a matter of the heart. Explicit statements concerning the value of good fathering for children, for families, for men, and for communities may bring shifts in the culture of fatherhood that will forerun parallel shifts in the conduct of good fathering.

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