

How Involved are Fathers with their Children? A Study of Fatherhood Programs

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Overview

Fatherhood programs promote healthy, engaged relationships between fathers and their children (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser, & Metz, 2012). Responding to public concerns about a "father absence crisis" (Sanders, 2013), these programs provide a range of support for diverse communities of fathers. Some emphasize economic self-sufficiency, and may offer assistance with education and employment. Some focus on fathers' overall emotional wellbeing and healthy behavior. Many prioritize engaged fathering and effective parenting, and healthy romantic and/or coparenting relationships.

In order to encourage strong paternal relationships, fatherhood programs often aim to increase fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Many embrace a three-dimensional approach to this work, drawing on a heuristic model of paternal involvement developed by Lamb, Pleck, Chanov, & Levine (1987; see also Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, &

Lamb, 2000). *Engagement* concerns fathers' direct interaction with their children, including caretaking work and shared activities such as play. *Accessibility* concerns the extent to which fathers are available to their children. *Responsibility* concerns the role that fathers take in regards to parenting, specifically in ensuring that children are cared for and have access to adequate resources such as food and clothing. This model was initially conceived in quantitative terms, measured through the daily hours spent across each dimension. More recently, researchers have highlighted the importance of qualitative aspects of father-child involvement (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015a). There is currently very little information available to practitioners and researchers describing the extent to which fathers who attend fatherhood programs are involved with their children. This study sought to address that gap in the literature, drawing on interviews with low-income fathers enrolled in programs in several locations in the U.S.

We also interviewed a comparison sample of fathers residing in similar communities and circumstances who were not enrolled in fatherhood programs.

Sample Characteristics

We recruited 195 fathers enrolled in 13 different fatherhood programs in 6 northeastern cities¹. Our comparison sample consisted of 387 fathers from the same cities who were not enrolled in such programs. These fathers were recruited from a variety of locations in low-income neighborhoods, including but not limited to grocery stores. While all respondents reported having at least one child with whom they did not reside, some resided specifically with their target child. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of sample characteristics, separated by program participation and residency status with the target child.

The majority of respondents were never married. Thirteen percent of fatherhood program participants and 16% of non-participants resided with their target child. These resident fathers had an average of 3 biological children. Nonresident fathers had an average of 2 biological children, and reported spending an average of 3 to 4 nights with their target child in the previous month.

Approximately half of all nonresident fathers reported an income of \$10,000 or less over the previous 12 months; among resident fathers, 44% of program participants and 32% of non-participants reported an income in this range. While the majority of respondents in all categories had completed high school, resident fathers were more likely to have completed a 2-year college degree or higher (16% vs. 8% for program participants, 15% vs. 11% for non-participants). Approximately 40% of all nonresident fathers were unemployed. Among resident fathers, 28% of those in programs and 18% of those not in programs were unemployed. More than 70% of all respondents identified as Black or African American.

Instrument

The survey instrument for this study was developed by researchers at the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN), based on interview and focus group data from a previous study with 71 low-income men enrolled fatherhood programs (see Fagan & Kaufman, 2015b). As part of a broader survey concerning the experiences of nonresident fathers, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to address paternal involvement.

For this analysis, engagement was assessed through 4 activities that fathers might do with any children under the age of 18: hugging, going for a walk, having a meal, and visiting family. Fathers indicated the frequency with which they engaged in each activity with the target child during the last month, using the following response choices: *never, once during the month, 2-4 times during the month, more than once per week.*

Accessibility was measured in terms of contact. We asked respondents how often they did each of the following in the previous month with the target child: spoke on the phone, sent letters or cards, sent texts, or used FaceTime on Facebook (all fathers);



¹All programs were fatherhood programs serving low-income nonresident (primarily unmarried) fathers. Most programs served fathers who voluntarily signed up for services; a couple programs served court mandated fathers. No fathers were incarcerated.

had face-to-face contact (in person, nonresident fathers only); spent nights in the same residence (nonresident fathers only). Possible responses included: *never, once during the month, 2-4 times during the month, more than once per week.*

Fathers' responsibility was operationalized as their role in decision-making. For this analysis, we focused on decisions regarding where target children attended school or daycare, how much money would be spent on their clothes, and how they would be disciplined. Possible responses included: *the target child's mother (or another adult) always makes these decisions, the mother (or another adult) and father share in decision making, the father always makes these decisions.*

Results

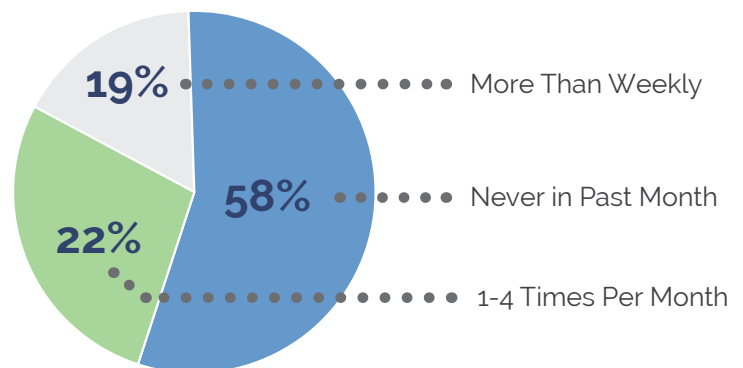
Overall, fathers who resided with target children reported significantly greater involvement than those who did not. Once residency status was taken into account, there were no significant differences in involvement between fathers who were and were not enrolled in programs².

Accessibility. Among nonresident fathers, approximately 28% reported no face-to-face (in-person) contact with their target child in the previous month; 38% of program participants and 46% of non-participants reported more than weekly face-to-face contact (see [Table 2](#)). More than half of nonresident fathers reported spending no nights with the child in the previous month; 19% of program participants and 25% of non-participants reported spending more than one night per week in the same residence. Nonresident fathers were more likely to report having engaged in phone, written, or social media contact than resident fathers. Approximately 80%

of all nonresident fathers (program participants and non-participants) reported this form of contact within the previous month, compared with 68% of program participant and 55% of non-participant resident fathers.

Engagement. Among resident fathers (program participants and non-participants), more than 90% reported hugging their target children more than once per week, more than 70% reported going for walks more than weekly, and more than 90% reported having meals with target children more than weekly (see [Table 3](#)). Among nonresident fathers (program participants and non-participants), over 40% reported hugging target children more than once per week, over 30% reported going for walks more than once per week, and over 40% reported sharing meals more than once per week. However, about one-third of nonresident program participants and non-participants reported not having engaged in these activities at all during the past month.

Nights Spent in Same Residence as Target Child
Nonresidential Fathers Enrolled in Programs (n = 195)



²The effects of program participation and residency status with target children were assessed through multinomial logistic regression. This is a statistical technique that investigates the impact of one or more predictors on a discreet outcome variable that includes 3 or more categories. For example, we investigated the degree to which program participation and residency with the target child predicted the relative likelihood that a father would report never hugging his child during the previous month, hugging his child one to four times in the previous month, or hugging his child more than once per week. As was the case with all outcome variables, we found that residency status with the target child had significant effects, and that program participation did not.



Responsibility. Among resident and nonresident fathers, regardless of program participation, between 64% and 96% of respondents reported shared or sole authority for decision making in regards to how much money is spent on target children's clothing and how target children are disciplined (see [Table 4](#)). Respondents reported less involvement in decisions regarding where target children attend school or daycare. This was particularly pronounced among nonresident fathers (program participants and non-participants), only 40%-45% of whom reported shared or sole authority over these matters.

Discussion

There is currently minimal literature on paternal involvement among fathers enrolled in fatherhood programs. This study provides a cross-sectional look at these fathers' involvement with their children, relative to demographically similar unenrolled fathers. Overall, respondents reported similar levels of accessibility to, engagement with, and responsibility for their children regardless of whether they participated in programs. Residency played a much larger role, with resident fathers reporting consistently higher levels of involvement than nonresident fathers.

At this stage, it is not possible to determine whether the apparent lack of differences between participants and non-participants is due to the overall effects of fatherhood programs. It may be that program participants were initially less involved with their children, but have since managed to become more so. It may be that participants and non-participants were similar to begin with, and that little has changed as a result of enrollment. Alternatively, those who enroll in fatherhood programs may differ more significantly from their peers upon completion of and/or long-term participation in such programs. A longitudinal study might better capture the differences between fatherhood program participants and non-participants.

Our findings show that many nonresident fathers report relatively low levels of involvement with their children, and that this is true of fatherhood program participants and non-participants. This indicates that many unenrolled fathers might benefit from programs that assist in developing father-child relationships. Nonresident fathers often sincerely wish to be part of their children's lives. However, wanting to be involved is not enough; these fathers must also confront the challenges of building and maintaining regular, positive contact with their children (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

Implications for Programs

Providers should target nonresidential fathers to participate in fatherhood programs that aim to increase father-child involvement.

Providers may want to focus on nonresident fathers' coparenting relationships with mothers (and other coparents) in order to encourage shared decision making and responsibility.

Given the relative similarities among program participants and non-participants in terms of demographics and father-child involvement, providers may consider intensifying recruitment. Data from this study suggest that many eligible fathers may not be receiving services.

Implications for Researchers

Longitudinal studies with pre- and post-testing would help to determine the extent to which the similarities in paternal involvement between program participant and non-participant fathers are due to selection issues and/or the overall effectiveness of fatherhood programs.



Table 1. Sample Characteristics*

	Fathers In Programs (n=195)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=387)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=25) % or M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=170)% or M (SD)	Resident with Target Child (n=60) % or M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=327) % or M (SD)
Age of Father (M years)	36.5 (10.9)	38.3 (11.4)	37.0 (11.1)	37.8 (11.6)
Education				
Less than High School	12.0	20.0	10.0	16.8
High School or GED	56.0	54.1	50.0	50.8
Some College	16.0	17.6	25.0	21.1
2-Year Degree or Higher	16.0	8.2	15.0	11.3
Marital Status				
Single, Never Married	72.0	77.1	61.7	81.7
Married	16.0	7.1	28.3	5.5
Separated, Divorced, or Widowed	12.0	15.9	10.0	12.9
Employment				
Unemployed	28.0	39.4	18.3	41.0
Annual Income				
Less than \$5,000	20.0	33.5	20.0	37.3
\$5,001 to \$10,000	24.0	18.2	11.7	12.2
\$10,001 to \$20,000	12.0	20.5	26.7	16.2
More than \$20,000	24.0	13.0	35.0	23.2
Race				
African American	80.0	71.2	71.7	74.0
White	0.0	8.2	11.7	14.4
Other	16.0	10.6	13.3	7.6
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	12.0	17.1	3.3	9.5
Biological Children				
# of Children (M)	2.7 (1.6)	2.4 (1.5)	2.7 (1.5)	2.2 (1.5)
Target Child Age (M years)	5.4 (5.2)	7.9 (5.4)	3.4 (5.3)	7.6 (5.9)
Nights Spent with Target Child in Last Month (M)**	-	3.0 (5.4)	-	3.8 (6.1)

*Response rates for income ranged from 80% for resident, program-participant fathers to 93.3% for nonresident, non-participant fathers. Across all other measures, response rates ranged from 90-100%. Some frequencies do not add up to 100%.

**Only nonresident fathers answered this question.



Table 2. Fathers' Accessibility During the Previous Month*

	Fathers In Programs (n=195)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=387)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=25) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=170) %	Resident with Target Child (n=60) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=327) %
Phone, Written Contact, Online Contact				
Never	32.0	16.5	45.0	19.6
Once per Month	0.0	3.5	1.0	3.1
2-4 Times per Month	0.0	11.2	5.0	15.9
More than Weekly	68.0	68.2	48.3	61.2
Face-to-Face Contact (In Person)**				
Never	-	28.2	-	27.8
Once per Month	-	1.8	-	3.7
2-4 Times per Month	-	30.6	-	22.3
More than Weekly	-	38.2	-	45.6
Spent Night in Same Residence**				
Never	-	58.2	-	55.4
Once per Month	-	1.2	-	3.7
2-4 Times per Month	-	20.1	-	15.6
More than Weekly	-	18.8	-	24.8

*Response rates varied from 98.8% to 100%. Some frequencies do not add up to 100%.

**Only nonresident fathers answered this question.

Multinomial logistic regression analyses found that residency with the target child had a significant effect on reported rates of phone, written, and online contact ($p < .05$). Program participation did not have any significant effects.



Table 3. Fathers' Engagement During the Previous Month*

	Fathers In Programs (n=195)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=387)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=25) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=170) %	Resident with Target Child (n=60) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=327) %
Hugging				
Never	0.0	30.0	1.7	31.2
Once per Month	0.0	3.5	0.0	3.7
2-4 Times per Month	4.0	21.2	1.7	15.6
More than Weekly	96.0	44.1	96.7	48.3
Going for a Walk				
Never	4.0	37.6	5.0	42.8
Once per Month	0.0	5.9	5.0	6.7
2-4 Times per Month	20.0	19.4	11.7	17.1
More than Weekly	72.0	32.9	76.7	31.8
Having a Meal				
Never	0.0	31.2	3.3	33.3
Once per Month	0.0	3.5	0.0	5.2
2-4 Times per Month	0.0	22.9	1.7	15.9
More than Weekly	92.0	40.6	95.0	43.7
Visiting Family				
Never	4.0	40.0	11.7	41.6
Once per Month	0.0	10.6	10.0	8.9
2-4 Times per Month	52.0	27.1	40.0	21.7
More than Weekly	44.0	18.8	38.3	25.4

*Response rates varied from 92% to 100%. Some frequencies do not add up to 100%.

Multinomial logistic regression analyses found that residency with the target child had significant effects on all engagement measures ($p < .05$). Program participation did not have any significant effects.



Table 4. Fathers' Responsibility for Decision-Making*

	Fathers In Programs (n=195)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=387)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=25) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=170) %	Resident with Target Child (n=60) %	Nonresident with Target Child (n=327) %
Where Child Attends School or Daycare				
Mother decides	20.0	54.7	11.7	59.3
Shared decision	40.0	40.6	75.0	35.8
Father decides	36.0	2.9	11.7	3.4
Money to Spend on Children's Clothes				
Mother decides	28.0	33.5	16.7	36.1
Shared decision	36.0	50.0	51.7	48.3
Father decides	32.0	13.5	30.0	13.1
How Child Will Be Disciplined				
Mother decides	4.0	27.6	13.3	33.9
Shared decision	64.0	56.5	66.7	50.8
Father decides	28.0	14.7	18.3	13.8

*Response rates varied from 96% to 100%. Some frequencies do not add up to 100%.

Multinomial logistic regression analyses found that residency with the target child had significant effects on all responsibility measures ($p < .05$). Program participation did not have any significant effects.

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