

The Importance of Fathers to Children and Families

Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Ph.D.



Catholic Charities Fatherhood Programs

August 16, 2007

97 percent of Americans believe that “fathers are just as important as mothers for the proper development of children”

Source: National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005



Facts About Fathers

- Fact 1: Fathers differ from mothers in terms of levels of involvement
- Fact 2: Fathers' involvement differs from mothers' in terms of types of activities with children
- Fact 3: Fathers differentially involved with sons and daughters
- Fact 4: Fathers' involvement changes over the life course and varies by the age of child
- Fact 5: Father involvement has positive effects on child development and well-being
- Fact 6: Fathers affect boys and girls differently
- Fact 7: Fathers' parenting styles influence child well-being

Fact 1: Fathers' involvement is different from that of mothers in terms of levels of involvement

■ Fact 1: Fathers' involvement is different from that of mothers' in terms of levels of involvement

- Fathers are less involved than mothers overall
- Fathers' involvement in two-parent families increased in recent years
- On average, fathers 73% as engaged with young children in physical care, play, and teaching activities and 71% as accessible (available) as mothers
- Fathers' engagement higher in dual-earner than single-earner families
- Positive mother-father relationships let men identify more strongly with father role and become more involved in parenting

Fact 2: Fathers' involvement is different from mothers' in terms of the types of activities in which they engage with children

- Fact 2: Fathers' involvement is different from mothers' in terms of types of activities in which they engage with children
 - Infants: Provide physical and social stimulation, more spontaneous forms of play, more social and active games than mothers
 - Pre-Schoolers: Physical and stimulating play, affectionate and socially engaging, compared to mothers
 - Older Children: Activities that involve physical activity, teamwork, games that involve more competition, independence, and risk taking, compared to mothers

**Fact 3: Fathers are differentially
involved with boys and girls**

■ Fact 3: Fathers are *differentially involved with boys and girls*

- *Boys:* Higher levels of companionship with sons
- *Girls:* More affectionate to daughters
- Research on fathers' *overall* levels of involvement mixed; some finds fathers more engaged with sons, some finds no differences

■ Fact 3: Fathers are *differentially involved with boys and girls*

- Fathers may be more involved with sons than daughters because:
 - Fathers may identify more with same-sex child
 - Fathers may feel they can better and more quickly respond to changes in boys' emotions and moods
 - There may be greater external pressure for fathers to serve as role models for boys

**Fact 4: Fathers' involvement
changes over the life course
*and varies by age of child***

■ Fact 4: Fathers' involvement *changes over the life course and by age of child*

- Father involvement variable over child's life course
- Resident fathers become more engaged with young children as they progress from infancy into preschool
- As children age, fathers become *less* involved in personal care, play, and companionship activities but *more* involved in achievement-related and social activities
- Fathers' interaction and involvement decrease as adolescents age. Patterns similar for mothers.
- Although relationships tend to weaken as children enter and move through adulthood, relationships that were close often remain close, and some not close relationships improve.

Fact 5: Father involvement has positive effects on child development and well-being

■ Fact 5: Father involvement has positive effects on child well-being:

- Cognitive development, academic achievement, educational attainment
- Sex role development
- Peer relationships – perceptions of self, competency for relating to others
- Reduced risky behaviors (drug use, alcohol consumption, crime, early childbearing)
- Fewer behavioral problems
- Better psychological well-being (lower depression, higher self-esteem)
- Economic self-sufficiency in the young adult years
- More positive perceptions of the parenting role as young adults

■ Fact 5: Father involvement has positive effects on child well-being

- Multiple dimensions of nonresident father involvement linked to child and adolescent well-being.
- Nonresident father relationship quality and financial involvement positively associated with:
 - Academic achievement, psychological well-being, and lower risk-taking behaviors
- Child support payments associated with:
 - Cognitive development, academic achievement, and fewer behavior problems among school-aged children
 - Child support's effects greater when agreements reached cooperatively and voluntarily, not through a court order
 - Child support receipt more beneficial for children living apart from fathers than other sources of income

Fact 6: Fathers affect boys and girls differently

■ Fact 6: Fathers affect boys and girls differently

- Father involvement more protective for sons than daughters.
- Among toddlers, boys' development more influenced by father involvement than girls'.
- Adolescent boys, not girls, benefit from high-quality relationship with non-resident fathers (e.g., better grades, less acting out in school).
- Fathers influence boys more than girls in risky behaviors, intimacy, and marital outcomes.
- In emerging adulthood (ages 18-25), fathers more protective for sons than daughters in high school completion, binge drinking, connection to school/work, and the formation of healthy relationships.

**Fact 7: Fathers' parenting styles
have implications for
child well-being**

■ Fact 7: Fathers' parenting styles have implications for child well-being

- Warm but firm parenting has benefits for children
 - Preschool boys whose fathers offer praise/compliments perform better on cognitive achievement tests
 - Fathers who set appropriate limits but give children sufficient autonomy have sons with higher academic achievement
 - Harsh and inconsistent discipline associated with poorer emotional adjustment and classroom behavior for sons, which is related to lower school achievement. Violence and abuse are not good for children at any age.
- Quality of the mother-father relationship has implications for child well-being

Conclusions

- Close relationship with child
- Positive interactions and quality time with child
- Role modeling (especially during adolescence)
- Consistent relationship over time, even if the father's relationship with the mother ends
- An absence of violence, abuse, and harsh discipline



jbronte@childtrends.org
4301 Connecticut Ave, NW
Suite 350
Washington DC, 20008
Phone: (202) 572-6122
Fax: (202) 362-5533
www.childtrends.org
www.childtrendsatabank.org