**Father involvement and parental relationship quality among new parents:
A reciprocal relationship?**

Over recent decades the rise in nonmarital births and decline in marriage have led to increased interest in both father involvement and parental relationship quality. This interest is exemplified in state and federal initiatives to promote marriage and healthy relationships among unmarried parents. A presumption behind such initiatives is that a healthy and positive parental relationship both will promote economic and family stability, and also will significantly enhance fathers' connections to and involvement with their children.

Past research indicates that parental relationship quality is a significant correlate of fathers' positive involvement with their children, and parental conflict and hostility serves as a substantial barrier to father involvement, particularly among unmarried and nonresidential fathers. However, other research suggests that fathers' involvement and commitment to their children may enhance parents' desires or efforts to continue a supportive and low-conflict relationship with each other. This bidirectional view, in which parental relationship quality and father involvement with children influence each other, fits squarely into transactional models of relationships which posit that dyads and larger groups such as families function as dynamic, interactive systems. And yet very little research has directly assessed such transactional models in young parents. The goals of this paper are to assess the longitudinal, transactional relationships between parental relationship quality and father involvement with children within new unmarried-parent families. In short, analyses seek to explicate the relative strength of how (1) early mother-father relationship quality predicts fathers' involvement over time with their children (controlling for earlier involvement), and (2) early father involvement predicts later mother-father relationship quality (controlling for earlier relationship quality).

Methods

Data for this study are drawn from the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*, a longitudinal study that examines the conditions and capabilities of new parents and the well-being of their children. The study follows 4700 families (3600 unmarried and 1100 married couples) in 20 cities, with the full sample being representative of nonmarital births in cities where population exceeds 200,000. Mothers and fathers were interviewed separately soon after birth of their children, and again at 12, 30, and 48 months from the child's birth (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan, 2001). These analyses focus on mothers and fathers who were unmarried at the time of the child's birth and who participated in the first and second rounds of interviews and provided information on father involvement and couple relationship quality ($N = 1382$).

The sample consists of 1382 unmarried couples, 68% of whom were cohabitating at the first interview. Fathers averaged 27.5 years at the first wave; 52% were Black, 29% Hispanic, and 15% White. The sample is primarily working class: fathers averaged a

GED for educational level, and 80% percent of fathers worked in the week prior to the first interview. Mothers were approximately 3 years younger than fathers and also on average had attained a GED.

Measures

All primary constructs of interest were reported by both mothers and fathers at the baseline and wave 2 interviews. Data from both reporters are used to decrease concerns over shared method variance and reporter bias.

Father Involvement. At time of birth, both parents reported on several dichotomous measures (1=yes, 0=no) that were factor analyzed separately for fathers and mothers and rotated using promax rotation into two factors for each parent. For each reporter these factors represent whether the father was involved during pregnancy/time of birth (e.g. gave the mother money during pregnancy or bought things for the baby; was present at birth), and his intent to continue to being involved (e.g. father's last name will be on birth certificate; father wants to be involved in raising child). Items were averaged to create four composite scores which were used to create a latent construct of father involvement at time 1.

At 12 months, both parents reported on how many days a week the father engaged in a variety of caretaking activities with the child. Factor analyses created two factors for each reporter, capturing physical play/care (e.g. playing games like peek-a-boo; showing physical affection; putting child to bed) and cognitive play (e.g. singing songs; reading stories). Items were averaged into two subscales each for mothers and fathers and then used to create a latent composite of father involvement at time 2.

Parental relationship quality. At baseline, mothers and fathers reported on relationship quality through a number of items scored on 3-point Likert scales from never to often. Factor analyses determined two factors for each reporter, one focused on parental support (e.g. the other parent is fair and willing to compromise, expresses affection/love) and the other on parental conflict (e.g. the other parent hits/slaps, and insults/criticizes). Items were averaged into scores of support and conflict for mothers and for fathers.

Similar questions were reported on at the second wave, and again parental support and conflict subscales were created separately from mother and father reports. At each wave, mother and father reports were combined into a latent construct representing more positive relationship quality.

Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. A number of demographic variables were reported by mothers or fathers and are used in analyses to control factors found in other research to be associated with parental relationship quality and father involvement, in order to partial out their effects from the primary constructs of interest. Control variables include child's age and gender; mother age and education; and father age, race/ethnicity, employment, education, and income.   Finally, parental relationship status

at wave 2 (coresiding, not coresiding, or no longer in a romantic relationship) was assessed.

Statistical Approach. Structural equation modeling (SEM, using the program AMOS 4.0; Arbuckle, 1999) was used to analyze longitudinal path models of father involvement and relationship quality from both father and mother reports (see Figure 1). The model also controlled for numerous child, mother, father, and family demographic and economic characteristics which have been associated with father involvement and relationship quality in previous research. Structural equation modeling has numerous advantages over traditional analytical techniques. First, SEM allows researchers to use observed variables to construct unobserved (latent) constructs, which have the strength of correcting for measurement error and thus creating a "true score" of a construct. Second, using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation, SEM simultaneously calculates parameter estimates for multiple variables in a model that have unidirectional, cross-lagged, or bidirectional paths. Thus, transactional relationships are able to be investigated more clearly through SEM than through other analytic techniques which model only unidirectional relationships.

Results

Figure 1 presents results from the SEM model assessing longitudinal, transactional relationships between father involvement and couple relationship quality. The model shows a good fit [χ^2 (145, N = 1382) = 418.34, GFI = .97, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .04], indicating that the proposed model fits the data well. Results suggest that following: (1) At each wave, relationship quality and father involvement are strongly correlated, indicating the enmeshed nature of these two aspects of family relationships. (2) Over time, there is continuity of both relationship quality and father involvement. The continuity of relationship quality is much stronger and more significant than that of father involvement; however, because the later construct was measured in a very different manner at the two waves, this comparison is difficult to interpret. (3) Controlling for earlier involvement, parental relationship quality predicts a relative increase over time in father involvement, with a small to moderate effect size. (4) Controlling for earlier relationship quality, greater father involvement at the time of the child's birth predicts a relative decline in parental relationship quality one year later, again with a small to moderate effect size. These relationships are similar whether or not changes over time in parents' status and residence are covaried. Further analyses will assess whether this later predictive relationship, that is that father involvement at the time of birth predicts a relative decline in relationship quality, is driven by particular subsets of parents (e.g., highly involved but nonresidential fathers or fathers who moved out of residence between waves). Results will be discussed in terms of implications for policy initiatives concerning relationship quality and fathers' contributions to children.

Figure 1 Path Model of Father Involvement and Parental Relationship Quality ($n = 1382$)
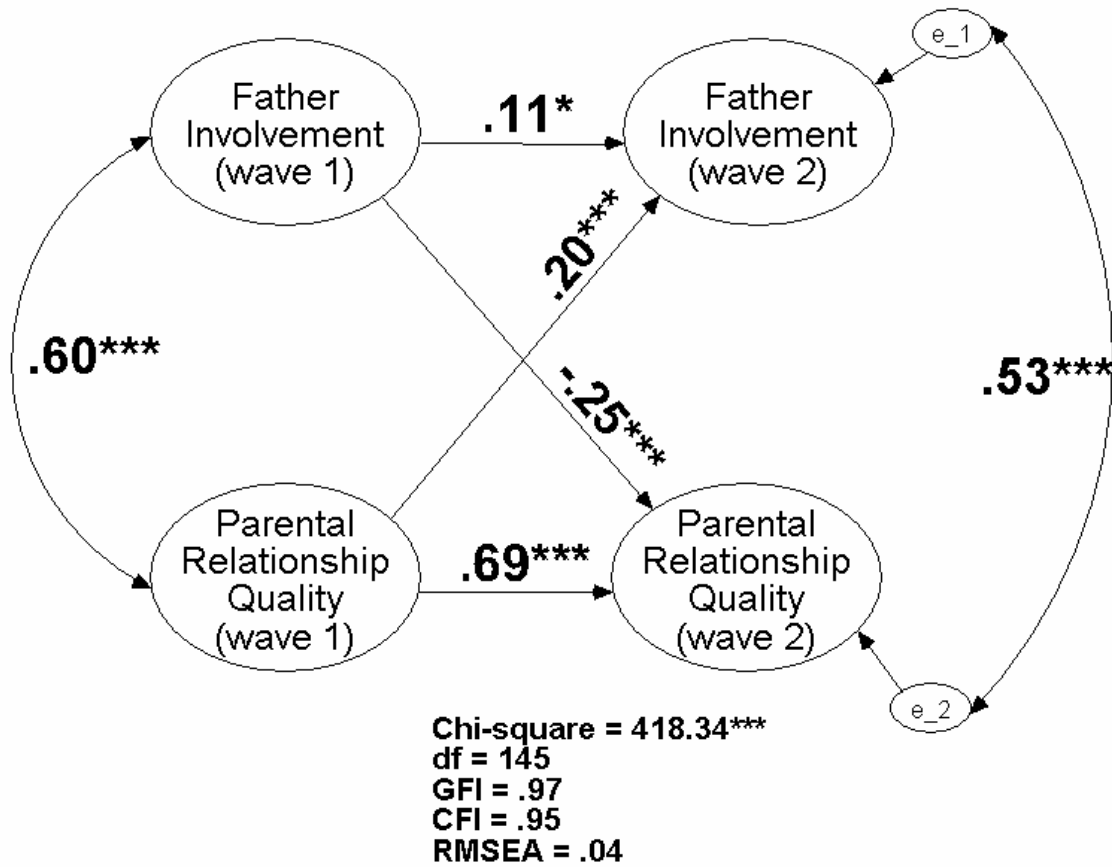
Note: Numbers represent standardized coefficients. *$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.