

Fathers who feed their infants and other facets of early child care involvement among African-American men from low-income families. Borja, JB, Goldman BD, Bentley ME.

Extended abstract:

Current research has challenged the notion that, other than providing socio-economic support, fathers have insignificant influences on child development. Observational studies have shown that quality father-child interactions promote cognitive and behavioral development particularly in low income households^{1,2}. Positive influences have also been attributed to fathers' physical presence³. Understanding the mechanism through which fathers influence child outcomes requires a careful assessment of how their involvement is defined. Certain dimensions of paternal child care participation, particularly among African American men, remain unexplored. For instance, while much is known about father-child interaction at play, we know little about the father's participation in feeding, particularly during infancy. Given the growing trend of absent African-American fathers in homes⁴, children from these families appear disadvantaged. Recent studies, however, have shown that non-resident fathers have maintained contact with their children but it is unclear whether there is any child care involved⁵. This study examines several aspects of fathers' child care involvement and identifies factors that predict involvement.

Data and Methods

We use data from the ongoing Infant Care, Feeding, and Risk of Obesity Study, a longitudinal, observational study of 200 mother-infant pairs. The study recruits low - income African-American mothers from WIC Clinics in North Carolina. Only first-time mothers were included in the study. Data collection began in November 2003 and is expected to be completed in early 2007. This survey collects information on household, caregiver, child, community and day care providers. Home-based interviews and assessments are conducted when the index infants are 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18 months. The main respondent for the study is the mother. Alternate caregivers, persons in or outside the household who feed the infants for 50% of the total feedings are likewise interviewed. Presented here are preliminary data from 149 households obtained at the 3 month visit.

Preliminary Findings

We defined paternal involvement through dichotomous variables (0=No, 1=Yes) indicating that the father: a) takes care of the child (with or without feeding) on a regular basis and b) feeds the infant 50% of total feedings. Any involvement in child care is defined as regularly taking care of the child and/or feeding infant. We also factored in the father's presence in the household in assessing involvement.

Table 1 shows the different dimensions of parental involvement. There were 51 (34%) fathers who lived in the same household as the mother and infant. Among the 51 resident fathers, 24 were involved in any child care. Out of the 93 non-resident fathers, there were 7 who provided care. Of the 23 regular caregivers, 11 were feeding the infants.

The majority (94%) of the fathers were African-Americans. Of the resident fathers: 42% reached college and 80% were currently working. About 65% were single/never married, 29% were married, and the rest were either separated or divorced.

Table 1. Father's child care involvement. (n=149)

Dimensions	n (%)
Involved in any child care	31 (22%)
Regularly takes care of child	23 (16%)
Feeds the child	19 (13%)

Multivariate analysis

Using logistic regression, we examined the influence of individual characteristics on any involvement in child care. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on these variables.

Table 2. Independent variables (n=149)

Characteristics	Mean \pm SD or %
Mother's characteristics	
Age	21.77 \pm 4.02
Some college	41%
Currently working	55%
Father's age	25.65 \pm 6.02
Father living in household with mother-child	34%
Male index infants	49%
Infant still breastfed	21%

Sex of child was included to control for child care gender preferences. We also controlled for current breastfeeding status which is likely to limit paternal involvement particularly with feeding. Given that parents' romantic relationship has been found to be a strong predictor of paternal involvement⁶, we added father's presence in the household as a proxy. About 89% of the mothers were single/never married and 10% were married. The rest were either separated or divorced. In a separate model, we found that having a grandmother in the household (47%) and their providing child care (36%) inhibited father's presence in the household ($p < .10$).

The regression results show that father's presence in the household was a strong predictor for paternal involvement. Mothers who are currently working are 6 times more likely to have fathers involved in child care. Father's age had a negative association with involvement ($p < .10$).

In summary, this study confirms findings that the father's romantic relationship with the child's mother (using father's presence in the household as proxy) has a significant impact on child care involvement. There is some indication of non-resident father's participation in child care, contrary to initially held beliefs about absentee fathers. The results also present another facet of paternal involvement: feeding at early infancy, an area which has never been addressed in intervention strategies. We plan to further explore this involvement with feeding using data obtained from interviews with these fathers. Future plans include studying paternal child care involvement over time spanning child development milestones.

Literature cited:

1. Shannon JD, Tamis-LeMonda CS, London K, Cabrera N. Beyond Rough and Tumble: Low-Income Fathers' Interactions and Children's Cognitive Development at 24 Months. *Parenting*. 2002, 2(2), 77-104.
2. Black MM, Dubowitz H, Starr RH Jr. African American fathers in low income, urban families: development, behavior, and home environment of their three-year-old children. *Child Dev*. 1999 Jul-Aug;70(4):967-78.
3. Coley RL. Children's socialization experiences and functioning in single-mother households: the importance of fathers and other men. *Child Dev*. 1998 Feb;69(1):219-30.
4. Davis, J. E. (1996). *Fathers Care: A Review of the Literature*. National Center on Fathers and Families.
5. Cabrera CJ, Ryan R, Shannon JD, Brooks-Gunn J, Vogel C, Raikes H et al. Fathers in the Early Head Start national research and evaluation study: How are they involved with their children? *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, 2004; 2:5-30.
6. Shannon JD, Tamis-LeMonda CS. Father involvement in infancy: Influences of past and current relationships. *Infancy* 2005; 8(1) 21-41.