



RESEARCH BRIEF

PATTERNS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT AMONG FAMILIES WITH LOW INCOME

Our findings suggest that actively engaging fathers in parenting interventions, with a particular focus on enhancing fathers' involvement in cognitive stimulation and positive parenting, may be critical to promote optimal development of children in families with low income.

About this Study

Father involvement is a key family protective factor that is crucial to children's healthy development. Identifying distinctive patterns of father involvement and their contributions to diverse aspects of child development among low-income families is an important focus of inquiry that can inform the development of interventions to promote healthy development in vulnerable children. The current study aimed to discover various patterns of father involvement and their unique relations to social, behavioral, and cognitive development of children in low-income families.

We conducted a secondary data analysis using data from the Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM) program, which is a multisite, voluntary marriage education program for low-income couples who had a child under 18 years old or were expecting a child. A latent class analysis was conducted on a sample of 2,650 fathers (Mage = 29.35 years).

Latent class analysis revealed four father involvement patterns: (a) High positive involvement; (b) engaged but harsh discipline; (c) low cognitive stimulation; and (d) lower involvement.

- The high positive involvement class (47.48%): High probabilities of positive involvement (e.g., time spent with child, warmth, engagement activities) and low probabilities of harsh emotional and physical discipline.
- The engaged but harsh discipline class (42.01%): High probabilities of positive involvement (e.g., warmth, engagement activities), but also had the highest probabilities of harsh discipline out of all the classes.
- The low cognitive stimulation class (8.27%): Lowest probabilities of paternal cognitive stimulation, but also moderately high probabilities of other aspects of positive involvement (e.g., time spent with child, warmth).
- The lower involvement class (2.04%): Low to moderate probabilities of all dimensions of father involvement examined in the study.

KEY FINDINGS

- *Latent class analysis revealed four distinct patterns of father involvement among low-income fathers: (1) High positive involvement (48%); (2) engaged but harsh discipline (42%); (3) low cognitive stimulation (8%); and (4) lower involvement (2%).*
- *The low cognitive stimulation pattern was associated with greater father- and mother-reported child behavior problems and lower child socioemotional and cognitive functioning.*
- *The engaged but harsh discipline pattern was associated with more father-reported child behavior problems.*



FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

About this Study (cont.)

Children in the low cognitive stimulation class had significantly lower levels of socioemotional functioning class compared to those in the high positive involvement class or the engaged but harsh discipline class. For both internalizing and externalizing problems, children in the low cognitive stimulation class showed the highest levels of behavior problems among the four classes. Additionally, children in the engaged but harsh discipline class showed significantly higher levels of father-reported internalizing problems than the high positive involvement and lower involvement classes, as well as significantly higher levels of father-reported externalizing problems than the high positive involvement class.



Conclusion

The findings of the study contribute to a body of emerging research examining patterns of father involvement among families with low income. Given that our findings highlight the pivotal role of positive father involvement, such as paternal cognitive stimulation, on healthy child development, researchers and clinicians developing interventions for positive child development should consider actively engaging fathers in intervention programs and services. Finally, future research should explore potential differences and diversity in patterns of father involvement across different racial/ethnic groups and different developmental stages of children.

About the Research

This paper is a part of a larger research project titled “Child and Family Resilience among Low-Income Families: The Roles of Father Involvement, Co-Parenting, and Family Violence” funded by The Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE). Grant # 90PR0015-01.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Susan Yoon is an associate professor of social work at The Ohio State University (OSU). Her research seeks to promote resilience and well-being in children who have experienced childhood trauma, including child maltreatment. **Dr. Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan** is a professor of psychology at OSU whose research focuses on coparenting, father-child relationships, and the transition to parenthood. **Dr. Minjung Kim** is an assistant professor in the OSU College of Education and Human Ecology whose research interests include quantitative methods including Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Multilevel Modeling (MLM). **Dr. Joyce Lee** is an assistant professor of social work at OSU and her research seeks to promote child welfare and family strengthening through preventing child maltreatment, promoting the health and well-being of foster children, and supporting positive parenting practices. **Junyeong Yang, Jingyi Wang, Anika Latelle, and Yiran Zhang** participated in this research through their roles as graduate research assistants.

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