

This Magic Moment: Predictors of Non-Resident Father Involvement in Parenting

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Fatherhood and the nature of the paternal role have undergone dramatic structural transformations over the last few decades. A significant growth in non-marital births has caused a fundamental shift in the workings and makeup of the family (Cherlin, 2004; McLanahan, 2004). At the same time expectations for the role of fathers have changed, moving beyond normative ideas of simply providing financially for a family to include a variety of parenting activities (Palkovitz, 1997).

As a result of these shifts in both the make up of the family and in norms about the role of fathers in parenting, the large existing literature on paternal financial support (Furstenberg, Sherwood & Sullivan, 1992; McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Robins, 1994) has been joined by a growing interest in father involvement in direct care activities.

A large body of evidence demonstrates that children in non-married families are more likely to experience behavioral problems than children living in two-parent married families (McLanahan & Sandefeur, 1994). Growing up in a household with non-married parents has been shown to be associated with lower levels of school engagement, as well as behavioral and emotional problems (Brown, 2004). Similar work has found that children who spend time in cohabiting families are at risk for poor cognitive and behavioral outcomes, while children brought up in single-parent homes face the greatest levels of risk (Amato, 1994; Carlson & Corcaran, 2001; Hofferth, 2006; Magnuson & Berger 2009; Wu, Cherlin, & Bumpass, 1996).

Scholars have intermittently focused on the potential role of fathers' prenatal support and presence at birth on later parenting engagement. A number of early works identified the potential effect of father-infant attachment on later engagement that can occur within hours of birth (Chandler & Field, 1997; Palkovitz, 1982; Rodholm, 1981). More recent work by Cabrerra and colleagues (2008) has shown that prenatal involvement is strongly associated with higher levels of paternal parenting engagement one and three years after birth, though this work has generally focused on comparing unmarried (single and cohabiting) and married families.

Though findings are somewhat mixed, it seems possible that encouraging father involvement beginning at birth may be a pathway for later parenting engagement (Cabrera, Hofferth, & Chae, 2011; Carlson, 2006; Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Additionally, while this literature has grouped prenatal involvement and support and presence at and around the time of birth together, the psychological and life transitions literature indicates that the effects of these actions on later engagement may work through separate mechanisms, with presence at birth potentially more greatly associated with infant-father attachment (Grossman, et al, 2002; Grossman & Volkmer, 1984; Klein, et. al, 1981; Sternberg & Morris, 1974).

I add to this work in a number of ways. First, I focus on fathers who are consistently unmarried and nonresident across the 5 waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). These fathers are much less likely to be involved parents and the predictors and mechanisms that lead to parenting engagement are potentially quite different for them. Second, I separate prenatal and at hospital involvement. Prior research indicates that these predictors may be distinct from one another, and nearly 30% of non-resident fathers in the FFCWS were absent at their child's birth. Third, I include a wide range of controls, including whether either parent thought about having an abortion, which has been shown to have large effects on father engagement (Bronte-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, & Moore, 2007). Fourth, I estimate paternal parenting engagement across 5 domains of parenting. Last, I compare mothers' and fathers' reports of fathers' baseline predictors of involvement.

I employ a series of progressively controlled OLS and logistic regressions models to estimate the extent to which baseline characteristics predict paternal parenting activities when the child is one to 9 years old. Parenting activities include: play activities; direct care; in-kind support; time spent with child; and cash support. I find that paternal and maternal conceptions of the paternal role, as well as father/mother family background are largely not predictive of later involvement. Surprisingly,

I find that fathers presence in the hospital at the time of birth or soon after is strongly predictive of paternal parenting in later waves; these results remain even when controlling for a robust set of father and mother characteristics, birth histories, relationship quality, new partners, and new births.