The Role of Fathers in Child Development

Evidence from Family Relationship Focused Research

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Parental Influences on Children: A Synopsis

• Historical debate as to parental influences on children
  – Nature (genetic influences) vs., Nurture (rearing environment influences)
    • Nature (mothers AND fathers)
    • Nurture (rearing environment - parenting)

• Parenting research traditions
  – Attachment theory (Bowlby)
    • Nurturant caregiving (0-3 years) determines long-term development
    • Not as deterministic as once proposed
  – Parenting style (Maccoby)
    • Authoritarian, authoritative, permissive
  – Predominant maternal-child focus
    • Role of the father expressly absent from early developmental theories
    • Practice and policy applications as a result (default position that the mother-child relationship matters more for children than the father-child relationship e.g. judicial decision making)

• Contemporary research evidence
  – Fathers play a significant role in children’s healthy emotional, behavioural, social and academic development
Contextualising Paternal Influences on Children

• Where it all starts
  – Maternal influences on children (genetic, intrauterine, and postnatal)
  – Paternal influences (genetic, postnatal – although limited past research)
  – What does evidence tell us about the role of fathers?

• Early paternal influences
  – Quality of paternal parenting = reduces maternal stress, reduces child stress, promotes early development (e.g. sleep, brain development)
  – Quality of partner relationship = reduced prenatal stress for mother (and child); improved parenting/caregiving in early (and later) years for BOTH parents

• Are Father effects only indirect (i.e. via/linked to mother-child relationship)
  – No
  – Direct effects of father’s parenting on children (positive – negative)
  – Balance of maternal and paternal factors seems important (co-parenting)
  – Effects vary by child age and child sex (fathers matter)
  – Sustained effects of paternal relationship with mother on children
  – Sustained effects of paternal parenting on children (infancy, childhood, adolescence)
Parents, Children and Mental Health

• **Depression**
  – Depression will be the leading cause of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY’s) by 2020

• **Conduct disorder**
  – Conduct disorder (5-15 years) accounts for 30% of all crime at a cost of £22 billion/year

• **Family Factors**
  – Economic pressure/poverty
  – Parent mental health
  – Parenting behaviour/practices
  – Inter-parental conflict, domestic violence
  – Parental separation-divorce
A Process Model of Family Relationship Influences on Child Psychopathology

- Economic or Work pressure
- Paternal Depression
- Maternal Depression
- Interparental Conflict
- Parent-Child Problems
- Child Symptoms

Conger and colleagues 1989-2007
Caveats of Past Research

• Salience of the family environment?
  – Predominantly conducted with biologically related parents and children
  – Limited examination of maternal versus paternal parenting influences on children

• What if it is all in the genes?
  – Associations between maternal and paternal behaviour (e.g. parenting) and child behaviour is BECAUSE children share genes with their parents??

• Disentangling genetic factors from rearing environment factors (e.g. parenting) separately for mothers and fathers
  – Unique research designs (Wales/UK)
Inter-Parental Conflict, Hostile Parenting and Children’s Conduct Problems

Cardiff In Vitro Fertilization Study (An Adoption at Conception Design)

• **Children born through *in-vitro* fertilisation (IVF)**
  o 20 fertility centres within the UK (1 in US)
    • 1019 families
      – Homologous IVF \( N = 485 \)
      – Sperm donation \( N = 255 \)
      – Egg donation \( N = 220 \)
      – Embryo donation \( N = 36 \)
      – Gestational surrogacy \( N = 23 \)

  o Families who had a live birth (1994 – 2002)
    • Children aged between 4 – 10 years (mean = 6.80 yrs, SD=1.23)
    • Demographics (family income, parent education, ethnicity)
    • Present sample included children aged 5-8 years old \( m = 6.49, sd = .85 \)

• **Genetically related versus unrelated groups**
  o Genetically Related
    • Mothers \( N = 546 \): Homologous, sperm donation, surrogacy
    • Fathers \( N = 531 \): Homologous, egg donation, surrogacy
  o Genetically Unrelated
    • Mothers \( N = 160 \): Egg and embryo donation
    • Fathers \( N = 173 \): Sperm and embryo donation
Maternal versus Paternal Influences (Gen/Not Gen)

Mother-Child Hostility

- Inter-parental Conflict
  - .33**/.37*
- Child Conduct Problems
  - .31**/.28**

Child Conduct Problems

Father-Child Hostility

- Inter-parental Conflict
  - .45***/.58***
- Child Conduct Problems
  - .37***/.38***

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Summary and Considerations

• Mother-child versus father-child influences on children
  – Inter-parental conflict affects children’s conduct problems through disrupted mother-child AND father-child parenting (genetically related or not!)
  – Inter-parental conflict as a context may have a STRONGER disruptive influence on father-child compared to mother-child parenting practices
    • Separation-divorce; remarriage; adoption; foster-care – PARENTING MATTERS!

• Further supporting evidence
  – Parenting/Intervention studies
    • Maternal focused parenting interventions show stronger effects on child behaviour WHEN fathers are part of intervention (W-Stratton; Incredible Years)
    • Couple focused programmes (“becoming a parent”; “starting school”) > parenting focused programmes
  – Maternal depression
    • Effects of maternal depression on children (offspring) reduced when paternal supportive parenting (supportive partner behaviour) is high

• Bottom Line
  – The quality of the father-child relationship PROMOTES positive child development WHEN the relationship is positive (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood)
  – Programmes that promote positive father-child relationships pay significant dividends in the long-term (child health, mental health, child education)
  – Evidence is robust; father-child relationship matters for child development
  – Implications for policy £££ - afford to ignore the evidence in promoting children’s best interests?