

UNDERSTANDING FATHERS' ROLES: AN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE  
GUIDE FOR FAMILY THERAPISTS

by

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## **Abstract**

Although the processes by which fathers' presence in the home affect children's development is not known exactly, ongoing research is making strides toward a greater understanding of this concept (Lamb, 2000). Much of the research conducted on fathering came from researchers' applying measures and concepts developed to understand mothering. This comparison of fathering and mothering has yielded little understanding of the processes by which father involvement can influence child development and, only in recent decades, has fathering begun to be studied using separate measures designed specifically to understand the unique aspects of fathering (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2001). To date, the effects of father involvement in families have been highlighted as a key factor in child growth and development, prevention of poverty, and as a buffer against adolescent risk-taking behaviors (Day & Lamb, 2004). However, in some cases, father involvement can have a very negative effect on children in families, and counter examples of research, showing the deleterious effects of negative father involvement, add an important aspect to fathering studies (Pleck, 2003). Unfortunately, the contradictory opinions and information found in research literature offer practitioners limited information upon which to base their work with fathers and their families. The following is a review of current research literature on father involvement, with an emphasis on families with adolescents.

Recent improvements in researchers' understanding and measurement of father involvement offer practical information for mental health practitioners. The written portion of this report will review current research on father involvement with adolescent children, and then in the presentation, offer suggestions for applying current fathering research to counseling practice. The goal of this report is to offer information that will narrow the research to practice gap for those working with adolescents and their families. Despite the flurry of research on father involvement in recent decades, little appears to have been done to make this research readily available to practitioners. Thus, current practices are limited, in that they are not benefiting from past research on father involvement and are not evolving with improved conceptualization and measurement of fathering activities.

Given the current emphasis on evidence-based practice, this report is meant to be an added resource for practitioners, intending to help fathers in families with adolescents. In addition to a critical review of key works focusing on the effects of father involvement on adolescent children, this report will add insight to the work that clinicians do by discussing current perspectives in the fathering literature and offering suggestions for applying these ideas in the talk-therapy arena. Father influence on children during adolescence is the focus of this report due to research evidence showing that fathers influence may become increasingly important in the later stages of child development. (Amato, 1994; Faber, Edwards, Bauer, & Wetchler, 2003).

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 - Fathering Literature.....	1
Current Fathering Knowledge.....	1
Moral guide.....	2
Breadwinner.....	5
Sex-role model.....	8
New Nurturant Fathers.....	10
Marital Supporter.....	12
Chapter 2 - Working with Fathers in Therapy.....	*
Chapter 3 - When Fathers are Absent.....	*
Chapter 4 - Future Research.....	*
References.....	15

To the Reader,

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Thank you for your interest,  
Mathew Bean

## **CHAPTER 1 - Fathering Literature**

Fathering is a rich and diverse concept, but historically fathers' involvement in their families has been measured according to the dominant cultural motif of fatherhood during the time when research was conducted. According to Lamb (2000), fathers have historically been cast in one of four main roles: moral guide, breadwinner, sex-role model, and, most recently, nurturer. Lamb also points out the salience of fathers involvement in a marital relationship as a key determinant of the father's involvement in parenting. Pleck and Pleck (1997) pointed out flaws in the generalizations made about fathers, stating that diverse styles of fathering and diverse ideals of fatherhood have always coexisted in American history (p. 47). Although the societal majority may have dictated norms in research and public thinking, they do not appear to have dictated fathering behaviors. Over time fathers appear to have occupied multiple roles simultaneously in spite of social and political emphasis on any one of those roles. They explain that fathering ideals have been shaped by the political, financial, and intellectual majority (p. 47). In recent years, researchers acknowledged the discrepancy between ideals and behavior and are working to formulate more realistic theoretical models of who fathers are and how they influence, and are influenced by, their children (Marsiglio et al., 2001; Palkowitz, 2002).

### **Current Fathering Knowledge**

Instead of occupying only the individual roles emphasized over time in social and political arenas, fathers appear to have occupied a more dynamic role in families. This role incorporates the individual aspects of fathering and perhaps other elements of parenting into fathers' involvement with their families. Initial research has shown that fathers' role performance varies within individual family cultures and the family activities in which they choose to involve themselves are ever-changing. Factors such as the time period in which a family lives, the children's ages, spousal influence, and the

larger community within which the family is embedded, have created wide differences between and within groups of fathers (Booth & Crouter, 2001).

Rather than seeing the dynamic role that fathers play in families as a single entity, contemporary social scientists have focused on its diverse aspects: moral guide, breadwinner, sex-role model, and the new nurturing fathers of recent years. Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda (2004) pointed out that "researchers, theorists, and practitioners no longer cling to the simplistic belief that fathers fill a unidimensional and universal role in their families. Instead they recognize that fathers play a number of significant roles . . . whose relative importance varies across historical epochs and sub-cultural groups" (p. 3). Current research efforts are aimed at developing measures that will provide a more dynamic understanding of fathers, based on how they define themselves rather than how researchers define them (Finley & Schwartz, 2004). Due to the past emphasis on fathers' various roles and the ongoing emphasis on these roles in the literature, this report will review current research reflecting the four main roles of fatherhood: moral guide, breadwinner, sex-role model, and the new nurturing father. Finally, based on the literature reviewed, recommendations on how and when to involve fathers in therapy will be given.

### *Moral guide*

The earliest conceptualizations of American fathers and their involvement with children centered on colonial fathers. They were often thought of as distant disciplinarians who approached their children as necessary farm labor to whom they were morally obligated to teach correct principles. Pleck and Pleck (1997) summarized historical accounts of fathers this way:

Virtually all colonists in every region believed fathers, not mothers, provided the best examples of proper moral character for girls as well as boys. Women, it was held, were excessively fond of their children and governed by their passions rather than by reason. Maternal love was not regarded as an essential ingredient in child rearing. In the colonial period, ministers and others writing on the subject of childrearing addressed themselves to either fathers or both parents, rarely singling out mothers. Some writers gave men and women equal responsibility for child discipline, whereas others set a lower value on mothers' contributions than on fathers'. The qualities considered essential to good child rearing rationality, self-control, and theological understanding were believed to reside in men, rather than women (p. 36).

More recent research appears to be representative of a swing to women's ability to rear children, although men continue to be thought of as family moral guides. In addition to improving our understanding of women's contributions to child rearing, researchers have developed a richer understanding of fathers' influence on children. Although fathers' role is no longer thought to be solely moral guidance, current conceptualizations of fathers include that function as one of multiple roles, reflecting modern societies' investment in fathers as teachers of proper moral character. For example, in his delineation of ways fathers can be involved with their children, Palkowitz (1997) included teaching and monitoring in a relatively comprehensive list of fathering activities. In a review of fathering literature, Halle and Le Menestrel (1999) noted that monitoring and disciplining children are viewed as key roles by fathers of intact families. Marsiglio et al. (2001, p. 393) noted the ongoing social debate regarding fathers' rights and responsibilities and representative arguments in the academic realm, regarding fathers' influence on childhood delinquency, development, and overall health and well being. Almost all of the

research focusing on fatherhood involvement incorporates principles that are not often discussed as moral guidance but that represent fathers as agents, who mediate or hinder children's ability to develop appropriately and to make positive choices. Also, new instruments being developed to measure father involvement include explicit categories of moral father involvement, including mentoring, teaching, and discipline roles (Finley & Schwartz, 2004).

Whether or not researchers are attempting expressly to measure the effects of fathers' moral guidance on their children, this aspect of fathering is often reflected in the results of fathering studies. Several studies show that increased father involvement is associated with decreased delinquency and increased moral development in children (Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998; Forehand & Nousiansen, 1993; Palkowitz, 2002). In a recent review of literature on paternal acceptance/rejection, Rohner and Veneziano (2001) found a significant body of research showing that father love is associated negatively with aggression, substance abuse, conduct problems, and delinquency in youth. Later research has replicated the findings of the individual studies cited in Rohner and Veneziano's extensive review of fathering literature, thereby supporting further the conclusion that positive father involvement is associated negatively with children making poor choices. Of course, this body of research can be used to show that fathers' rejection of their offspring and subsequent lack of involvement or negative involvement has the opposite effect on children. Specific examples of these negative effects can be seen in the large body of research that shows increases in risk-taking behaviors and delinquency and a decrease in school achievement and psychological well-being that are correlated with negative father involvement (Lamb & Lewis 2004).

Where moral implications are present, conflicting ideologies inevitably arise and the debate in the parenting literature is ongoing as to whether the sex of a parent matters, what children truly need, and whether or not researchers should consider questions related to morality. An explicit example of this debate can be seen in an article written by Doherty et al. (1998) in which the authors argued that children need active and involved fathers throughout their childhood and adolescence (p. 279). In response to this article, Walker and McGraw (2000) wrote a critique of the conceptual framework created by Doherty et al. (1998) and discouraged researchers and practitioners from applying the framework, based on the moral overtones of the research and a lack of empirical evidence for specific levels of father involvement. This set of articles demonstrates how differently individuals interpret the same body of literature, based on personal ideologies. Differing ideologies do not strip fathers of their moral influence on children. While it would be inappropriate for researchers to advocate any one moral code through their research, it is important that fathers' moral influence on children be understood. Future research could address this gap in the literature by asking fathers to determine first their moral code and then to test whether this has an influence on father involvement and related child outcomes.

### ***Breadwinner***

Providing economic means for the family is one of the oldest conceptualizations of what fathers do and why they are important to their offspring. Recent efforts have expanded the view of providing monetary resources to include emotional implications and other ways that providing economic means may influence fathers' ability to fulfill other aspects of parenting. Calls for further empirical work include the critique that

current literature does not reflect an understanding of how the various domains of fathering interact (Christiansen & Palkowitz, 2001). Changes in household structure in recent decades have opened a new chapter in studies of how fathers influence their children's financial well being. The traditional provider role, although still considered an important element of fathering, is no longer exclusively men's domain and is researched less often than in the past as a measure of fathers' direct involvement with their children (Christenson & Palkowitz, 2001). The provider role is most often recognized in research when other elements of fathering are diminished by the lack of men's presence in the home. Extensive research on divorce and single parenthood has shown that fathers' economic contributions to families buffer children significantly from poverty, especially in comparison to single-parent families (Doherty et al., 1998).

Providing for their families has also been shown to be a factor that contributes to men's feelings of efficacy and is related to their ability to pass on social and financial capital to their children (Day & Acock, 2004). Research on factors contributing to ongoing poverty has shown that there is a generational pattern to how wealth is passed on (McCord & Joan, 1992). Fathers who are better educated and who have better social connections are able to provide their children with opportunities to obtain similar status. In comparison, research has shown the effects of poverty on men's involvement with their children. For example, Kost (2001), through a qualitative analysis of twenty poor men, found that their relationships with their children and their own fathers were affected detrimentally by the difficulty these men had establishing their identity as fathers and becoming involved with their children in a meaningful way. This author noted that a lack of money caused difficulty for these men in providing and in exhibiting a positive role

model for their children. Kost also noted that poor men struggle to have time to spend with their children because they need to spend a majority of their time pursuing sufficient financial means. Similar to many in larger society, the children of the men surveyed were often being raised by their poor, unwed mothers (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2001).

Other authors have noted that too much involvement in work can be detrimental to father involvement in financially stable families. Crouter, Bumpas, Head, and McHale (2001) surveyed a large population of fathers of high school children and concluded that, similar to (and perhaps in relation to) marital quality, the quality of relationships that men have with their children is related inversely to men's working excessive hours. Other research showed that in dual-income families, although children may be adequately provided for, their relationships with their fathers (but not necessarily their mothers) suffers as a function of fathers' working extended hours (Bonney, Kelly, & Levant, 1999).

This research suggests that, despite the importance of men's ability to provide for their families, if this role becomes too consuming, other aspects of men's involvement with their children may suffer. These results may be a result of the cognitive and affective aspects of providing that Christensen and Palkowitz (2001) argued are important aspects of the provider role. According to them, these aspects are [central] to fathers' identity and fathers' unspoken way of taking responsibility and showing care (p. 91). Father involvement is, therefore, a matter of balance between men's ability to financially provide for their children and their availability to be involved with them in other meaningful ways.

### *Sex-role model*

Due to their relative inability to act as breadwinners during the Great Depression and their absence during World War II, fathers' meaningful involvement' came to be conceptualized in terms of acting as a sex-role model for his children. In a review of the history of fathering measures, Lamb (2000) observed that following the Depression and New Deal Era and moving into WWII, public focus shifted to father absence and the inadequacies of fathers. This focus, in combination with the postwar emphasis on the need for strong families, led to new conceptualizations of fathers as sex-role models for their children. Current research reflects the ideal of fathers as sex-role models by investigating the influence of father involvement on developmental outcomes such as children's identity formation, psychological adjustment, and relational development with peers and significant others.

According to Brooks and Gilbert (1995), fathers as sex-role model[s] served as the equivalent of the much earlier view of the father as the moral pedagogue (p. 269). They also noted that research about fathers as sex-role models, represented a shift in focus from the damage of father absence to the positive influence of father presence. Fathering literature focused on fathers as models of gendered behavior, suggesting that positive fathering has similar effects to those noted for fathers as positive moral guides. Much like the role of moral pedagogue, fathers as sex-role models are not often researched explicitly, although, similar to moral guidance, this aspect of fathering can be seen in a good deal of the current fathering literature.

Emphasis on how men and women relate differently to their children, and the effects of this differing relationship, is ever present in parenting studies that control for gender of the parent and child. This research has concluded almost unanimously that as

children age, men and women spend a greater amount of time with children of their same sex, although the children continue to be influenced by both parents (Lamb, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002).

In a lengthy review of research on paternal involvement in U.S. residential fathers, Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) concluded that research which controls for mother involvement has shown a correlation between father involvement and adolescent psychological well-being and identity formation. They discussed several longitudinal studies, drawn from independent-source data that do not control for mother involvement, as replicating these results. In a similar review of fathers in intact families, Yeung, Duncan, and Hill (2000) cited an extensive body of research showing correlations between positive father involvement, school achievement, self-esteem, self control and social and cognitive competence.

Pruett (2003) discussed father nurturing in comparison to maternal nurturing and concluded that male nurturing is as broad in scope as female nurturing. In his discussion of developmental research literature, Pruett concluded that father influence is important to children in ways other than as a support to mothering and that fathering has a significant effect (either positive or negative, depending on the nature of the involvement) on children's later life outcomes. Yeung et al. (2000) stated further that there appear to be differences for sons and daughters in levels and influence of fathers' interaction (p. 101). Fathering research concludes almost universally that fathers interact differently with their children, based on sex of the child (LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). This finding, in conjunction with the conclusion that positive father influence is correlated with positive adolescent outcomes, lends strong support to the argument that

fathers have the potential to make unique and important contributions to children's growth and development.

Research results emphasizing the negative impacts of fathers as poor sex-role models show also the lack of father involvement to be associated with negative child outcomes. Higher rates of delinquency, early sexual intercourse, and drinking, along with reduced rates of school achievement and poor levels of well-being, have been associated with diminished father involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2001). Deficit perspectives, emphasizing the damage done by father absence, have contributed to a large body of research showing the damage done to child development and later life outcomes when fathers are not present in the home (Hawkins & Palkowitz, 1999; Lamb 2004). This research appears to divide fathers into good and bad categories, yet, as researchers and society have come to see fathers as more critical to child development, their roles have expanded and been seen as more parallel with mothering (Pleck, 2003).

### *New Nurturant Fathers*

According to Pleck and Pleck (1997), the idea of co-parent father was a response to feminism, the growth of maternal employment, and the concomitant demand from employed women that husbands share the housework and childcare (p. 45). As men have been required to take on a greater role in what was considered previously to be women's work, societal views of fathers have expanded to meet these new demands. Lamb (1981) noted that father influence, measured according to this paradigm, has shown that fathers' influence is similar in many ways to mothers' influence. Knijn (1995) furthered this observation when he noted that the change in fathers' roles is an historical process and that fathers in general are beginning to be more divergent in their parenting styles due to

varied rates of conformity to norms and in response to varied social contexts. The new paradigm of fathers as nurturing parents represents a shift in research and popular understanding of fathers to include a much less limited view of what fathers do to influence their children. Although not a complete view of fathers, this shift represents efforts to look at fathering as a whole, instead of through the prism of a particular role. In a discussion of the roles fathers have been viewed as occupying over time, Pleck and Pleck (1997) stated although varying emphasis has changed how we view fathers and the information we have gathered about them, these roles appear to be more convergent than conformity to changing ideals . . . [and] changes in behavior lag far behind changes in ideals (pp. 47-48; see also Coltrane & Parker, 1998).

Research that has come out of the new emphasis on father involvement in child nurturing has compared fathers who are primary caregivers or who are highly involved, to those in families where women are the primary child care providers (Lamb, 1998). This research has shown that children in families where fathers are more involved in child care have the same increases in psychological well being, school achievement, and so on that has been found for other dimensions of father involvement. Furthermore, research on father involvement indicates that a lack of father involvement according to the societal prescription leads to increases in delinquency and risk-taking behaviors and an overall decline in mental health and well-being (Pleck, 2003). One example of a broad review of the fathering literature with this new paradigm in mind is a research article written by Rohner and Veneziano (2001) in which they review the measured effects of father love on child outcomes. In this article, father love is defined broadly to include almost all forms of care-giving by fathers. It includes an historical review of the roles in

which fathers have been cast and the representative father love expressed through the fulfillment of those roles. From their review, Rohner and Veneziano concluded that father love influences children in a myriad of ways, including mediating mother love independently, when controlling for mothers' influence, and when correlated with specific outcomes. Articles like this could not have come into being prior to the conceptualization of fathers as nurturant parents with multiple roles to fulfill.

Perhaps for the first time in history, fathers are now expected to do many of the things mothers do in addition to maintaining traditional fathering roles. The emphasis on fathers as nurturers has brought about a new comparison of fathers and mothers. As their roles converge, so has research on how each parent affects children (see Amato, 1994; Paley, Conger, & Harold, 2000; and Updegraff et al., 2001). Measures being developed currently include this broader understanding of fathers and account for the impact of father involvement beyond traditional roles and as defined by fathers and their children (Finley and Schwartz, 2004). It is hoped that this ongoing research will provide practitioners with an improved understanding of how family systems function to influence adolescent outcomes. Fathers and mothers' conceptualization as a parenting system in which each has a unique impact is a progressive model of parental influence on children and stands to help researchers and practitioners understand better the influence of each parent (and of parents in general) on child and adolescent outcomes.

### ***Marital Supporter***

Although it is beyond the scope of this report, fathers' relationships with children's mothers is important to mention in light of how several key aspects of this relationship affect the influence of father involvement. One issue discussed widely is

marital/relational instability and its effect on paternal residential status. Another is mothers' ability to play a gate keeping role. Perhaps most studied is the interaction of mother and father roles and how they influence each other. For example, a large body of research literature exists in which parents' spousal relationship quality is related to child outcomes (Peterson, 2005). Additionally, much of the parenting literature suggests that mothers' and fathers' roles cannot be studied in isolation of one another and to do so diminishes understanding of both parents' influence on child development (Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005).

Perhaps most important among these factors is mothers' potential to act as gatekeepers to fathers' involvement. Research shows that mothers' opinion of fathering in general and of their children's father, specifically, is correlated with their support of (and subsequent levels of) father involvement. It indicates how primary the co-parental relationship is to father involvement (Backett, 1982).

For example, Harriss, Furstenberg, and Marmer (1998) conducted a correlational analysis using data from a national survey of children to investigate the influence of fathers over children's life course. They found that children who came from families in which marital conflict and poverty were low and measures of father involvement and parents education were rated higher, were generally more likely to have positive outcomes over their life course. Other studies that have controlled for similar variables in parents' relationship and measured father involvement with children, have replicated these results, showing that greater father involvement and the subsequent improvement in adolescent outcomes is correlated with measures of improved marital relationships (e.g., Yeung et al. 2000; Updegraff, Mchale, Crouter, & Kupanoff, 2001).

A dramatic decline in the influence of father involvement has been shown to be correlated with fathers' maintaining a residence other than that of their children (Amato & Soblewski, 2004). Large bodies of research have been amassed to show that the father's relationship with the children's mother, and access to spending time with their offspring in general (usually via custody arrangements), has significant predictive power when it comes to differing levels of father involvement (McBride, Schoppe, Ho, & Rane, 2004). The salience of these factors will be considered further in the presentation portion of this report, in which recommendations for improving father involvement are made.

Father's role, according to the historical model of this paper, is one that contains the individual roles of moral guide, breadwinner, sex-role model, nurturer and marital supporter in one person. The presentation portion of this report will look at how the conceptualizations and measures of fathering can be used to improve therapy. To make these recommendations, the status of men as clients in family therapy will be reviewed to show how old stereotypes appear to be playing out in therapy. This report will then focus on ways to apply new concepts of father involvement with and without fathers being present for therapy. Finally, future recommendations for research specific to fathers in family therapy will be discussed.

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