

# FATHERING QUALITY, FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP, AND CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

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## Abstract

Fathering has drawn the attention of many scholarly researchers in recent years. Yet little is known about the impact of fathering. The current study examined the impact of fathering on college students' academic and psychosocial development through a survey conducted in a mid-size, Midwestern university. The survey contained 69 questions including students' views of a good father, their perception of their fathers' parenting quality, and their self-reported academic, moral, and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., GPA, ACT scores, self-esteem scale). The sample included 192 college students, 73% of whom were females. While there were no direct relationships found between students' rating of their fathers' parenting quality and their academic performances; significant associations were found between psychosocial outcomes (e.g., self-esteem) and father quality ratings. Possible interpretations and implications of findings as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Key Words:** paternal, parenting, college

## Introduction

In the past few decades, researchers have begun to recognize that father's involvement offers unique contributions to child development. In earlier works on paternal parenting, investigators often compared children of father-present to father-absent families (e.g., Werdinger, 1981; Bannon & Southern, 1980; Schenenga, 1983; Draper and Harpending, 1982). More recently, scholars have altered efforts to include research that defines fatherhood in relation to roles traditionally associated with fathers, such as role model (Townsend, 2003; Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003; Yang, 2000) and provider (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). These efforts offer further perspectives on ways to conceptualize fathering. While many studies address the importance of fathering, examining fathering efforts can prove difficult because fatherhood remains a social construction (Furrow, 1998; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Zoja, 2001) and expectations for fathers could vary depending on the socio-historical context as well as the cultural and political environments. Further, Hakoyama (2006) reported a wide variety of good father views within the same socio-historical and cultural context. Thus, given this complexity, research examining how others assess a father's role lead to mixed results. While many studies attempted to assess fathering quality by examining their children's academic and psychosocial outcomes, little research has examined mediating factors, such as children's perception of their fathers' parenting quality and fathers' influence on children's values and beliefs.

Less research has examined how children's perceptions of their fathers' parenting quality change over time.

### *Influences on Fathering Quality*

In a conceptual model developed by Lamb, Pleck, Chamov and Levine (1987), father involvement was examined through a father's accessibility (i.e., father's availability to his children), engagement (i.e., direct contact with the child), and responsibility (i.e., participation in child-related planning), which has been used to define elements of fathering quality. Other scholarly research has focused solely on father factors that influence such paternal behaviors. Broadly conceived, several factors related to the marital relationship were found to influence father involvement (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; De Luccie, 1995; Hoffman & Moon, 1999; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Fathers with wives who evaluate them positively for their efforts in fathering tended to report higher levels of involvement in child-related activities, and they also considered the father role more important (Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002). In a similar vein, the mother's attitudes (Beitel & Parke, 1998), role as a gatekeeper (De Luccie, 1995) and perception of her husband's competence as a parent (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999) significantly impacted father involvement. In fact, mothers with nontraditional, egalitarian gender role attitudes were more likely to support father involvement than were their counterparts with traditional attitudes (Hoffman & Moon, 1999). Mothers' work hours and father involvement in childcare (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Pleck, 1997), as well as positive marital relationship quality and sufficient

economic resources were also associated with good fathering (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). These studies identified multiple factors that impact fathering quality.

Individual factors also influence father involvement. For instance, self-esteem, self-confidence and ethnicity of the father help predict the level of father involvement (Sanderson, 2000). Additionally, lower socioeconomic status and education levels correlate with lower levels of father involvement (Bogenschneider, Ming-Weh, Raffaelli, & Tsay, 1998). Fathers who experience problems with drug and alcohol abuse also tended to engage less with their children (Fagan, et. al, 2009). Finally, emotional or physical health problems also negatively impacted involvement and the father's quality of interaction with the child (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000).

### ***Importance of Father-child Relationship on Child Outcomes***

In recent years, researchers have placed increased emphasis on the impact of paternal parenting on child development (e.g., Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Hoffman & Moon, 1999; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). The closeness of the father-child relationship predicted better outcomes for children in both two-biological-parent families and nonresident-father families (Booth, Scott & King, 2010). It is believed that emotionally close relationships benefit child's well-being because fathers can more effectively monitor, communicate with, and teach children the characteristics they value (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). For example, during interaction with their children, fathers tended to place more importance than did mothers on encouraging assertive,

independent and goal-oriented behavior (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). These attributes tend to fit in stereotypical gender roles and may partly explain why men place an emphasis on these behaviors. Regardless, children, independent of the closeness with their mother, appear happier, more satisfied and less distressed when closer to their fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Jones (2004) who focused on father-son relationship quality examined paternal impact on children's performance and found a positive correlation between quality of father-son relationship and academic achievement. Agronick (2001) focused on parental impact on daughters and found that good father-daughter rapport was associated with a decrease in negative emotionality from young to middle adulthood, which suggested that the mother and the father were important in different ways. Other studies that examined paternal effects on behavioral outcomes in children showed similar results. In their efforts to understand the possible effect of fathers or father figures on child behavioral problems, Marshall, English and Stewart (2001) conducted a longitudinal study and found that while no apparent impact occurred at age 4, children at age 6 showed lower levels of aggression as well as depression when a father or father-like figure established a presence in the child's life. Additionally, Sanders (1996) focused on African American families and concluded that having a father or father figure in the family was strongly associated with successful academic achievement of African American males.

These findings suggest the father's influence on multiple aspects of his child's development. However, it is frequently difficult to highlight paternal influence because of lack of appropriate measures of fatherhood (Lewis & Lamb, 2003).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

#### ***Ecological theories.***

Undoubtedly, multiple factors shape a person's developmental processes, which impact personality, behaviors, and other developmental outcomes. Ecological perspectives proposed by multiple scholars pay attention not only to the person's biological and direct relationship factors but also to multiple levels of environmental factors that either directly or indirectly impact the development of the person (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Griffore & Phenice, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner (1979), in his ecological theory, proposed multiple levels of environmental forces that shape a person's development. He labeled four environmental levels as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief.

The mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the relations between home and school). In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems. The exosystem

encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (e.g., for a child, the relation between the home and the parent's work place; for a parent, the relation between the school and the neighborhood group). The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal schema for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context.

Bronfenbrenner, in his revised theory in 1989, emphasized that development is a function of the person and the environment she is in, which he expressed with the formula  $D=f(PE)$ . Bronfenbrenner (1997), in his efforts to better illustrate interactions between biological factors and environmental factors that shape a person's development, expanded his theory, which he called "bioecological model."

In this bioecological model, development refers to stability and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings over the life course and across generations. Bronfenbrenner described four basic components: process (more specifically proximal process, particular forms of interaction between organism and environment), person (characteristics of the developing person), environmental contexts (both immediate and remote), and the time (period in which the proximal processes take place). Developmental outcomes, therefore, are results of complicated interactions of these components.

***Social cognitive theory.***

Bandura's social cognitive theory (2003) discusses reciprocal causal relationships among personal, behavioral and environmental factors on developmental outcomes. Bandura also describes how children acquire certain behaviors through modeling and observational learning. Parents being children's major role models, it is expected that parents and children share, to some extent, similar values and behavioral patterns.

**The Current Study**

Applying the bio-ecological and socio-cognitive theoretical approaches, the current study focused on examining multiple father characteristics and environmental factors that are associated with children's perception of their fathers' parenting quality and father-child relationships. This study further examined impact of fathering quality and father-child relationship quality on children's developmental outcomes. Multiple rating scales were utilized to assess these relationships. It is hypothesized that a positive father quality rating will help predict a strong father-child relationship. It is also hypothesized that a high father quality rating and strong father-child relationship will lead to better academic performance and psychosocial outcomes for the college student. Further, it is predicted that the higher the fathering quality and father-child relationship ratings, the more similar the values between the father and the child.

## Method

### *Survey Instrument*

An anonymous survey was developed to assess college students' views on fathering and their perceptions of their own fathers' parenting quality. The survey contained approximately 70 questions. There were several open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their views on fathering and to explain reasons for their rating of their own fathers. The survey also contained several questions that assessed students' developmental outcomes, including self-esteem, GPA, ACT scores, and behavioral characteristics such as smoking, hours spent for studying, and tendency to engage in risky behavior.

The survey included questions that asked student's father's demographic and behavioral characteristics, which included age, ethnicity, education level, annual income, hours spent at work, smoking, and drinking. Other questions examined father-child relationships, the father's relationship with the mother, father as a role model, living environment, influential family members, and father availability. There was also a question that assessed how similar students' views and beliefs were to those of their fathers'.

### *Procedure*

Survey instruments were distributed to students enrolled in multiple courses in Human Development and Family Studies as an option to earn extra credit. Students were given a few days to fill out the survey and submit to the designated place. It took

30-40 minutes to fill out the survey. In order for the survey to remain anonymous yet for students to receive extra credit, a separate sheet was provided, to which each participant provided their name and class. Students were given an alternative assignment to earn extra credit. SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data.

### *Participants*

Of the nearly 300 students who were offered to participate in this survey, 192 students completed the survey; 73.4% of which were female and 85.7% White. Nearly three quarters were age 20 or younger (mean = 19.72, SD = 1.340). Approximately 40% reported that they were freshmen while 15.4% reported that they were seniors. All but one reported to be fulltime students; 44.2% had a part time or fulltime job.

## **Results**

### *Fathering Quality*

Students' perception of their fathers' parenting quality was assessed by creating a composite score based on multiple Likert scale questions that asked them their fathers' parenting quality. Fathering quality was assessed in four stages: childhood (age 0-11), adolescence (age 12-18), past one year, and overall. Students' perception of their fathers' parenting quality dropped during adolescence and then was restored as they entered college. There was a significant difference in the fathering quality score between childhood and adolescence,  $t(189) = 4.069, p = .000$ , and between adolescence and the past year,  $t(187) = -5.224, p = .000$ .

Father factors that influenced children's perceptions of their father's parenting quality were examined. Based on the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1997), along with demographic and behavioral characteristics, multiple levels of environmental factors were considered. Of the several demographic and behavioral characteristics considered, father's education level, annual income, drinking habits and availability predicted the child's perception of fathering quality. Of the physical environmental factors that impact the child's proximal process, two neighborhood characteristics (safety and friendliness) were associated with students' rating of fathering quality. Marital relationship, a mesosystem, also predicted the child's perception of fathering quality. These seven factors (father's education level, annual income, drinking habit, father availability in need, safety of the neighborhood, friendliness of the neighborhood, and parents' marital relationship) explained 74.4% of the variance in children's perception of fathering quality,  $F(58, 125) = 10.191, p=.000$ .

When children perceived that their fathers were available when needed, their perception of fathering quality was higher. Higher income, especially more than \$60,000 per year, was associated with higher fathering quality. Fathers with some college education were associated with higher fathering quality than their counterparts with lower or higher education level. While drinking frequency of the father was not significantly associated with fathering quality, frequency of excessive drinking (getting drunk) was associated with children's perception of fathering quality. The more frequently the father got drunk, the lower the child's fathering quality rating was. The

higher the availability rating, the higher the father quality rating was. Similarly, the higher the marital relationship rating, the higher the father quality rating was. Also, father quality rating was positively correlated with father availability rating,  $p = .684$ ,  $p = .000$ , and with marital relationship rating,  $p = .497$ ,  $p = .000$ . Safety and friendliness of the community of child's residence also predicted fathering quality rating. Perceived safety and friendliness of the neighborhood of the residence both were positively correlated with the child's rating of his/her father's parenting quality,  $r = .168$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $r = .175$ ,  $p = .020$ , respectively.

### ***Father-Child Relationship***

Father-child relationship was assessed by creating a composite score based on multiple Likert scale questions that asked students their perception of father-child relationship quality. Similar to fathering quality, students' perception of their father-child relationship quality also dropped significantly during adolescence,  $t(189) = 5.313$ ,  $p = .000$ , and was restored once again as children were in college,  $t(187) = -6.618$ ,  $p = .000$ .

Of multiple father demographic factors examined, education level was associated with father-child relationship quality. Children's perception of fathering quality and father availability in need also contributed to father-child relationship quality. These three factors explained 76.2% of the variance in father-child relationship,  $F(4, 183) = 150.495$ ,  $p = .000$ . Also, father-child relationship rating was strongly correlated with fathering quality rating,  $p = .860$ ,  $p = .000$ , and with father availability,  $p = .775$ ,  $p = .000$ .

Similar to patterns revealed in the fathering quality analysis, father-child relationship rating was the highest among fathers with some college education. Father's higher education (bachelor's degree or higher) tended to adversely influence students' perception of father-child relationship.

### *Father as a Role Model*

A Likert-scale question was used to assess students' perceptions of their fathers as role models. Students were asked to rate their fathers as role models in terms of being a responsible adult in a 7-point Likert scale: 7 "Very good," 1 "Not at all good." More than two thirds (69%) rated 6 or 7 while only 7.4% rated 1 or 2 (mean = 5.72, SD = 1.684). No significant association was found between father-as-a-role-model rating and gender. However, father-as-a-role-model rating was significantly correlated with fathering quality,  $p = .788$ ,  $p = .000$ , with father availability,  $p = .699$ ,  $p = .000$ , with excessive drinking frequency,  $r = -.340$ ,  $p = .000$ , and with income,  $r = .334$ ,  $p = .000$ . Further, these four variables predicted 71% or the variance in the father-as-a-role-model rating,  $F(25, 116) = 14.777$ ,  $p = .000$ .

### *Child's Developmental Outcomes*

Relationships between father quality and multiple aspects of child's developmental outcomes were examined (e.g., academic, moral and psychosocial). In order to assess moral attitude of the student, students were asked to respond in a Likert scale to a set of statements (e.g., I think I make right/rational/logical decisions most times, I think I am a conscientious person). Students' academic performance was

assessed by students' self-reported GPA in college, GPA in high school and ACT score. Students' academic attitude was assessed by multiple questions that asked students about their behaviors related to academic pursuit (e.g., hours spent for studying, attendance, assignment submission). The ten-question Rosenberg self-esteem scale was utilized to assess the self-esteem of the student.

Along with fathering impact, child factors were also considered. Student's class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) and work status were associated with the self-esteem score of the student. Four factors (fathering quality, father-child relationship, class standing and work status) explained 12.1% of the variance in the self-esteem of the student,  $F(13, 171) = 2.946, p = .001$ . Higher father quality rating and father-child relationship as well as having a job positively contributed to self-esteem of the student.

As for class standing, sophomores scored significantly higher self-esteem score than did freshmen. While the mean difference were (on their self-esteem scale being a sophomore positively influenced self-esteem of the student while being a junior tended to influence self-esteem most negatively. No significant association was found between fathering quality and child's academic performance or moral attitude.

### *Transmission of Values from Father to Child*

A set of Likert-scale questions was utilized to assess how similar values were between father and child. Values examined include moral, political, religious, educational, leisure, social relationship, and community. A composite score was created

to assess overall value similarity. Student's overall value similarity rating was significantly associated with fathering quality, father-child relationship, father as a role model and father availability in need  $F(4, 183) = 72.250, p = .000$ ). The higher the students' assessment of their fathers' parenting quality, father-child relationship, father as a role model and father availability; the more similar the child's overall value was with his/her father. These four variables explained 61.2% of the variance in father-child similarity.

### **Discussion**

When college students assessed their fathers' parenting efforts over time, they clearly viewed their fathers' quality much lower during adolescence than during childhood. However, their ratings were restored as the children became college students. Similarly, students' perception of father-child relationship quality declined during adolescence and rose again when in college. These outcomes are congruent with findings of a previous study that indicated that parent-child interaction and the sense of emotional closeness both declined as children became teenagers (Updegraff, Helms, McHale, Crouter, Thayer, & Sales, 2004). As Bronfenbrenner (1997) pointed out, changes in the pattern of proximal process that took place during adolescence appeared to have impacted the child's perception of fathering quality as well as the father-child relationship. However, both father quality and father-child relationship improved as children became college students and overall fathering quality and father-child relationship remained high. The teenage years might have brought more hostility in the

father-child relationship and, as a result, the respondents might have rated father quality and father-child relationship lower during adolescence than at other stages in their life. Considering that students' perception of both fathering quality and father-child relationship was restored when in college to the point higher than during childhood, this negative perception during adolescence appears to be temporary and has no serious long-term impact.

Four father factors (education level, income, excessive drinking frequency, and father availability to the child when in need) and three contextual factors (safety and friendliness of the neighborhood, and marital relationship) predicted fathering quality rating. It was not whether or not their fathers drink frequently, but it was excessive drinking that influenced students' assessment of their fathers' parenting quality. The more frequently fathers got drunk, the more likely their children rated their fathers' quality as parents lower. This falls in line with previous research that suggests that alcohol or drug abuse inhibits fathering (Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, 2009). Consistent with previous findings (Bogenschneider, Wu, Raffaelli, & Tsay, 1998), higher income predicted higher fathering quality. Similarly, fathers with some college education scored higher fathering quality than their counterparts with high school education or lower. However, inconsistent with previous findings (Bogenschneider, Wu, Raffaelli, & Tsay, 1998), students' rating of their fathering quality rating declined when their fathers had a bachelor's degree or higher. It is conceivable that fathers who have attended college for multiple years but did not graduate wish that they had earned

a degree. They probably understand what it is like to be a college student and also perceive that it is difficult for their children to manage the responsibilities of college. Therefore, they may have a strong desire for their children to complete their college education. This may motivate them to be supportive and express more outward praise to their college-age children. On the other hand, fathers who have successfully completed college may not see college life to be as difficult as those who did not finish; they overlook their child's needs for support while in college.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's model (1997), multiple contextual factors also contributed to fathering quality. Findings in this study supported previous research (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000) that the marital relationship, one of the influential mesosystems, predicted fathering quality. In addition, the current study revealed that fathering quality was associated with two environmental characteristics: safety and friendliness of the environment. It may be argued that physical environment is irrelevant in assessing fathering quality. However, as Christiansen and Palkovitz (2001) pointed out, being a provider is considered an important paternal role essential to healthy child development. Providing a safe, healthy environment to reside, as well as sufficient income that allow the father to be a good provider to his family, can be considered as one of the important paternal responsibilities.

Contradictory to previous findings (Jones, 2004; Sanders, 1996; Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 1998), neither fathering quality nor father-child relationship predicted

children's academic attitude or performance of the participants in this study. On the other hand, consistent with previous studies that emphasized the importance of fathering quality on the child's self-esteem (Sclafani, 2004; Summers, et. al., 2006), fathering quality and father-child relationship in this study, along with child factors, explained the variance in the students' self-esteem. Class standing and work status of the student also explained a part of the variance. However, other predictive factors need to be considered in examining self-esteem of the student as the identified factors in the GLM model in this study explained only a small portion of the variance.

Bandura (2003) suggested, in his triadic reciprocal causation model, that multiple factors reciprocally influence developmental processes of the child. While fathering quality rating and father availability were identified as predictors of father-child relationship quality, these factors are likely to reciprocally influence one another, resulting in strong correlational associations.

Furthermore, it was revealed that more than two-thirds of the students in this study viewed their fathers as good role models. Results in this study also suggest that, for being a role model for to be a responsible adult, the father influenced both male and female children equally. These father factors were also found to play a role in the transmission of values from the father to the child. It was revealed that the higher the rating for fathering quality, father-child relationship, father as a role model, and the father's availability to the child, the more similar the father and child were on their overall values.

With regards to fathering quality and its connection to the father-child relationship, it is possible that the child associates positive feelings with the father and is then more likely to ascribe to the values that he holds. Alternatively, it is also possible that because the father had such an impact on the child's development, he was able to successfully teach his child lessons and values that he wanted the child to acquire.

### **Conclusion**

Bronfenbrenner (1997) emphasized the importance of factors that are closely associated with the developing child's proximal process. Bandura (2003) described the impact of the process of modeling and observational learning which, though the process may not necessarily be conscious, influence learning of the child. Along with the transmission of values from the father to the child, findings associated with fathering quality, father-child relationship, and student's self-esteem all support fathering efforts to be influential in their children's developmental processes.

Participants in this study, however, were largely homogenous in their ethnic and SES backgrounds, which, to some degree, hindered exploring the impact of these factors.

As mentioned above, fatherhood remains a social construction (Furrow, 1998; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Zoja, 2001) and expectations for fathers could vary depending on the socio-historical context as well as the cultural and political environments. As such, individuals from different cultural environments will have

outside influences that shape their opinions on how fathers should be involved with their children and this, in turn, will likely influence how one assess their father's paternal quality and the quality of the relationship with their father. In the context of this particular study, however, due to the homogenous sample, the findings may be generalized only to the white, middle class population. Future studies should attempt to include a more diverse sample that explore these factors from the lenses of various ethnic and SES backgrounds and compare gender influences.

The present study also has other limitations that likely need to be addressed in future research. Contradictory to previous findings, fathering efforts did not influence academic performance of the child. Further, while several qualitative questions were addressed to better understand the relationships between fathering efforts and developmental outcomes of the child, the current study was limited to examination of quantitative data. Also, the current study focused solely on paternal impact. It would be beneficial to examine how influence of paternal parenting may be different from maternal parenting. Future study with a larger scale that incorporates these shortcomings should clarify some of the unanswered questions on paternal parenting.

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