



# Why Fathers Matter to Their Children's Literacy

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## Introduction

Research in the last three decades has established a clear link between parental involvement and children's educational attainment (e.g. Fan and Chen, 2001; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003). While most of what we know is based on mother-child interactions (Waldfogel, 2006), increased attention has been paid to the specific influences fathers<sup>1</sup> and other male caregivers have on their children's development.

Indeed, there has been a surge of interest in the relationship between father involvement and the well-being of their children. This is reflected in the number of books, reports and articles published on this subject, as well as the number of websites dedicated to fathers and their children, and the number of conferences or seminars that have been, or will be, held on this issue. For an overview of projects that seek to involve fathers in the UK see Akerman (2006).

This paper briefly summarises the findings from the field of father involvement that also address the issue of children's literacy practices. Since the literature on father involvement and children's literacy outcomes is limited, the focus of the paper has been broadened to encompass evidence regarding father involvement and general child outcomes. This short overview is organised around the following areas:

1. What is the level of fathers' involvement in their children's literacy practices and how are fathers involved? Are mothers and fathers differently involved? Do specific types of involvement at one stage of development result in particular outcomes later in childhood or adolescence?
2. What is known about the influence of father involvement on children's literacy practices? What is the influence of father involvement on child outcomes over and above that of mothers? And is father involvement equally beneficial to boys and girls?

## Changing outlook on fatherhood

The ideas of fatherhood have changed. Surveys that have explored public perceptions of father involvement found that there are high social expectations for fathers to spend time with their children as evidenced by recent workplace provisions of paternity leave and flexitime (e.g. Andrews et al., 2004; for a UK study on the uptake of paternity leave see Smeaton, 2006). For example, 43% of British fathers take paternity leave and 50% some annual leave around the birth of their child (Dex and Ward, 2007), while the percentage of new fathers in the UK who work flexitime to spend more time with their children rose from 11% to 31% between 2002 and 2005 (Smeaton, 2006).

Not only are there greater expectations on men to become involved fathers in their child's upbringing (McBride and Rane, 1997; O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003), but young men today uphold fewer traditional gender roles (Scott et al., 1998) and wish to

<sup>1</sup> In this document the word "father" refers to biological fathers, father-figures and other significant male caregivers or role models.

participate more fully in family life (Henwood and Procter, 2003; Lewis, 2000). According to Daly (1996, p. 474),

*This generation [of fathers] expresses a strong, family-based temporal conscience that keeps them vigilant in their fathering commitment. The value of spending time with the children has not been inherited from their own fathers but, rather, has been embraced in response to a new set of cultural conditions.*

## Obstacles to family time

While fathers might want to increase the amount of time they spend with their children, there are familial, personal, structural and cultural barriers that may hinder increased involvement in family work (for a detailed overview see Goldman, 2005). For example, men frequently say that they are not involved because they do not have time because of work commitments. Indeed, the provider role remains a powerful source of identity (Henwood and Procter, 2003), particularly for working class men (Warin et al., 1999). Research indicates the importance of economic support of fathers to children's lives, with fathers' earnings being uniquely linked to various outcomes for children, even when mothers' earnings are taken into account (Burghes, Clark and Cronin, 1997; see also Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001).

Another potential barrier relates to the psychology of selflessness and autonomy, and values relating to fairness and equity in child care (Henwood and Procter's (2003). Several studies have indicated that fathers are uncertain about their role in their children's learning. Karther (2002) in an interview study found that fathers deferred to their wives on the major responsibility of reading to children. This was primarily because they viewed the wife as the primary teacher and caregiver or because of their own low reading achievement in school. Ortiz and Stile (1996) also reported that even fathers who were involved in literacy activities were uncertain of where to start reading with their children.

This example shows how men may be discouraged from becoming involved in literacy activities because of preconceived gender roles, feelings of inadequacy in their own literacy, and prioritising their own needs and abilities and interests (Fletcher and Daly, 2002). It has also been suggested that literacy practices may not hold the same value for men (Fletcher and Daly, 2002) and that mothers may have stronger beliefs than fathers in their own ability to help to improve children's reading skills (Lynch, 2002).

Lastly, another powerful barrier is structural. In a national audit of family services in England and Wales, Henricson and colleagues (2001) concluded that fathers "are generally not perceived to be in the mainstream of parenting". Similarly, when analysing father and child protection services Milner (1993, p. 184) found that fathers "not only disappear from the system but are frequently excluded by the terms of the initial enquiry".

Initially some people hypothesised that fathers are less sensitive to and caring towards children because they lack experience with children and childcare (see Lamb, 1997). However, in a review of the literature on father involvement, Lamb (1997) concluded

that fathers are as capable as mothers of behaving responsively and sensitively in interactions with their children (see also Fagan and Iglesias, 1999).

Indeed, a growing body of research has indicated that fathers make an important contribution to the lives of their children (for a recent review see Sarkadi et al. 2008). Children who grow up with actively involved fathers benefit in numerous ways, including increased cognitive abilities (e.g. Yogman et al., 1995); higher self-esteem (Flouri, 2005); increased social competence (e.g. Lamb, 1997); healthier relationships with peers both as adolescents and adults; access to greater financial resources (e.g. Lamb, 1997), and better health outcomes (Ball and Moselle, 2007).

### **A note of caution**

When looking at the influence of father involvement on child outcomes it is often difficult to disentangle father involvement from the effects of social class and family structure (Allen and Daly, 2007), as well as family access to resources and other cultural and economic conditions that shape children's well-being (Hewlett, 2000).

While reading the rest of the document, it is perhaps worth keeping in mind the following caution by Palkovitz (2002):

*Because development is multiply determined, it is somewhat hazardous to get too specific regarding relationships between patterns of paternal involvement and child development outcomes. In focusing on child outcomes we often ignore the fact that patterns of father involvement are only one factor in a large and diverse array of possible contributors to developmental outcomes. The existing database does not allow us to conclusively partial out the effects of father involvement on child outcome variables.*

## **Fathers' involvement in literacy**

As outlined above, the role fathers play in their children's lives has been widely emphasised. While much of the debate about father involvement and child outcomes has focused on educational attainment, both in the UK (e.g. Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Goldman, 2005; Lewis et al., 1982) and internationally (e.g. Allen and Daly, 2007; Lamb, 1997, 2004), the relationship between father's involvement and children's literacy outcomes has rarely been explored in detail (Nichols, 1994).

As mentioned before, the evidence base for the importance of families being involved in their children's education rests heavily on studies that have focused on the mother. This problem is magnified in studies that explore the importance of families being involved in their children's literacy, which have almost exclusively centred on mother-child interactions.

This is surprising since fathers' reading habits can have a substantial influence on their children's ability to read, their levels of interest and their reading choices (Llyod, 1999). Shared literacy activities can also strengthen the bond between fathers and their children.

A recent NLT study (Clark, Osborne and Dugdale, 2009) showed that children and young people indicate that fathers are the second most important person to inspire reading, second only to mothers. Despite this, it has been suggested that the lack of male role models involved in reading and other literacy-related activities during children's early years is one of the possible causes for the declining rates of school achievement for boys (e.g. Trent and Slade, 2001, Wragg et al., 1998). Indeed, Millard (1997) noted the different ways in which boys and girls approach reading and argued that boys do not frequently see their fathers engaged in the kind of reading that reflects the kind of reading done in school.

### **Something else to bear in mind**

There are several methodological issues with the father involvement literature that affect how easily findings from these studies can be used to inform opinion on engagement and literacy issues. The most important factors, which mirror those identified in the parental involvement field in general (e.g. Fan and Chen, 2001), are:

- A lack of empirical studies, and lack of quantitative studies with adequate sample sizes, meaning that evidence on this issue is, to a large part, qualitative. Only rarely have studies investigated the robustness of father involvement by controlling for other variables, such as mother involvement, marital relationship, socio-economic status.
- Data are derived primarily from US studies, which raises issues with generalisation to the UK context.
- Data are mainly based on self-report, which raises issues of validity. There is ample evidence that parents may under- or over-report their level of involvement in something, such as child care. To make matters worse, the extent of father involvement is often based on mother's report.
- Infrequent recourse to theoretical frameworks, although there are some well-known models (e.g. Lamb et al, 1985) that stress the multi-dimensionality of the father involvement construct.
- Inconsistent operationalisation of father involvement (uni-dimensional vs. multi-dimensional) – linked to problems with definitions and results in potentially inconsistent results across studies.
- Inconsistent measurement of father involvement – for example, time spent together versus quality of the relationship. For a review see Allen and Daly (2007)
- Variations in outcome measures, i.e. different tests are used to measure an outcome variable such as literacy status or self-esteem.

# How are fathers involved with their children's literacy activities?

## Family life in Britain

The time parents in Britain spend with their children has increased steadily since the 1960s, and has shown a particularly high rate in recent decades (Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999). Analysing UK time-use studies, Fisher et al. (1999) reported that the average time spent in child-related activities had risen from less than 30 minutes in the 1970s to more than one hour per day in the 1990s.

In addition to indicating that spending time with their children has increasingly become important to parents, other reasons for this marked increase in parental involvement may include a reduction in the pressures of domestic work and changes in domestic technology (e.g. pre-cooked meals, washing machines and dish washers; Fisher et al., 1999). Robinson and Godbey (1997) also speculated that the rise in parental involvement may be related to parents' increasing fear of the external environment (e.g. traffic and perceptions of increased threat of harm from adults), which may restrict the time children spend playing unsupervised.

While mothers in the UK still assume overriding responsibility for their children's education (e.g. West et al., 1998), the amount of time that fathers spend with their young children has also increased dramatically over the past 20 years (Gershuny, 2001; Fisher et al., 1999). Women continue to devote twice as much time as men to caring for children under four (approx. 4 hours per day compared to 2 hours for men), but men's involvement in child-related activities has increased from less than 15 minutes in the 1970s to almost 2 hours in the 1990s.

Indeed, fathers find some time for childcare irrespective of the hours they work. On average, fathers of under fives spend 1 hour and 20 minutes a day on childcare activities during the week and 2 hours and 30 minutes a day at weekends (Hurrell and Davies, 2005). More specifically, fathers of under fives spend about the same amount of time than mothers (1:10/day) on reading, playing and talking with their children at weekends (Hurrell and Davies, 2005).

Similar findings were also made by a BMRB (Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002) report, which found that 24% of full-time working fathers felt very involved in child's school life compared to 26% of full-time working mothers. In addition, 24% of resident fathers compared to 37% of mothers reported helping with the child's homework "every time", and only 14% of full-time working fathers and 16% of full-time working mothers helped out in classrooms.

A 2007 Scottish survey (South Lanarkshire Home School Partnership) indicated that the majority of fathers are involved in their children's education. More specifically, 60% of respondents helped out with their child's homework or schoolwork often. 86% said that they read books/ newspapers with their children at home. Other main activities that respondents were involved in with their children at home are eating meals, watching TV, and playing physical games.

Although this increase in father involvement may indicate a greater commitment to fatherhood, it could also be related to a concurrent rise in maternal employment rates (Warin, Solomon, Lewis and Langford, 1999). While Thompson and colleagues (2005) suggest that the majority of fathers of young children reject the idea that their primary role is one of breadwinner, some studies appear to indicate little change in the traditional role taken by fathers within families (e.g. Smeaton, 2006), where the father's role as provider is contrasted to the mother's caring role (Gershuny, 2001; Warin et al., 1999).

It should be noted that the above figures only speak about fathers that *are* involved with their children's upbringing and do not indicate how many fathers are involved. There is some indication that more fathers now spend more time with their children than they used to in the 1960s and 70s, but no specific figures were provided in the report (Fisher et al., 1999).

## Fathers' involvement in literacy

Early literacy development is a significant part of preparing children to enjoy reading and to achieve academically. Indeed, it has been suggested that the lack of fathers/male role models involved in reading and other literacy-related activities during children's early years is responsible for the increase in boys' underachievement in school (e.g. Wragg et al., 1998). However, there is little direct quantitative evidence from the UK of the extent to which fathers engage with their children in literacy-related activities.

According to NCDS 1965 data, 37% of resident fathers read to their children most weeks. Similarly, when asked who read most with your children, 40% of fathers conceded that their partners were more likely to read more with their children than they would be (only 15% of fathers declared that they were reading more with the children). However, 37% reported that they themselves and their partners both read to their children in equal amounts (Millard and Hunter, 2001).

A survey for Reading Connects (Clark and Foster, 2005) found that mothers were more engaged with their children's reading than fathers were. Not only were fathers less likely than mothers to encourage children to read more, but fathers were also seen to be reading less than mothers. Also, when asked who they thought had taught them to read, children reported that it had been their mother, followed by their teacher and then their father who had taught them. These findings from children's reports are comparable to those of other studies. For example, interviewing 148 children about their literacy at home, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) reported that 39% of the children said that their father was involved in some literacy activities at home (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003)

A survey for the National Year of Reading (2008) showed that fathers read less with their children and if they read to them, they do so less frequently than mothers. Almost half the fathers in this survey (49%) said that they do not read to their child (aged 8-16). This high proportion could have been due to the age of the child as evidence shows that fathers of young children (age 0 – 7) read to them more frequently. Indeed, the age of the child was mentioned as a barrier to reading by 62%, while lack of interest by the child was mentioned by 18% and lack of time by 15%.



A similar pattern of interaction was found in an analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study (Jones and Smith, 2008). When asked how often they read to their child, 16% of fathers said that they read to their children every day, while 34% said that they read to them several times a week. Only three percent of fathers said that they do not read to their children. Levels of interaction with their children were related to father's levels of qualification, with fathers with higher qualifications reading to their children more than fathers with lower qualification levels. Fathers' interaction with their children was also related to their employment status, with a greater proportion of unemployed fathers reading to their children every day than employed ones (19% versus 15%). However, a greater proportion of unemployed fathers than employed ones also do not read to their children at all (8% versus 3%).

Exploring family involvement in a northern English city, Morgan and colleagues (2009) found that fathers were involved in four key roles: providing literacy *opportunities*, showing *recognition* of their children's achievements, *interacting* with their children around literacy and being a *model* of a literacy user. However, fathers tended to be less involved in providing literacy *opportunities* than mothers. Father involvement was linked to socio-economic background as fathers who were not involved in their children's literacy were significantly more likely to be on a low income than those who were reported to be engaged in home literacy activities.

These UK findings are backed up by international data. For example, similar levels of engagement were found by a US 1997 Panel Study, which showed that 39% of resident fathers looked at books with their children at least once a week (Nord et al., 1997). More recent data paints a more involved picture. Avenilla and colleagues (2006) reported on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and found that among 9-month-old children with resident fathers 72% were read to by their fathers at least once a week, 71% had fathers who told them stories at least once a week, and 89% had fathers who sang songs to them at least once a week.

Nichol's (2000) Australian study explored mothers' and fathers' views about bed-time story-reading and reported significant differences in parents' involvement in book-reading activity. Mothers were more likely than fathers to recognise the importance of early exposure to books and reading and were more likely to initiate book-reading at various times throughout the day. By contrast, fathers were more likely to read to children only at bedtime, which was frequently supervised by mothers (please note that this differential related to time. Fathers were in full-time jobs, mothers were mostly at home).

In addition to time-constraints, fathers may also not see that they have a role to play: one study found that they tended to give the child's mother the main responsibility for reading with children, usually because they viewed her as the main teacher and caregiver (Karther, 2002).

## Defining literacy

Research frequently indicates that fathers are generally less inclined to participate in conventional print-related literacy activities than mothers (e.g. Millard, 1997). Instead, Ortiz, Stile and Brown (1999) listed a variety of activities in which fathers report they

have participated, which included reading environmental print (e.g. road signs, logos, billboards), reading newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, maps, manuals and bed-time stories, spelling and defining words, spelling names, colouring and tracing letters and making use of the computer for spelling or writing activities.

Whilst men might be reluctant to participate in print-related activities, fathers may make valuable contributions to their child's literacy development through other types of interactions. For example, Diaz et al. (2000) have argued that the current emphasis on literacy in early childhood has incorporated "narrow and traditional views of book-based literacy practices", which do not include "alternative" literacy practices, such as technology literacy, popular culture or languages other than English.

However, it should be kept in mind that evidence on this issue is largely anecdotal and from small studies and needs to be backed up by more rigorous research.

## **Mother vs. father involvement**

Only a few studies have explored whether mothers and fathers are differently involved in their children's literacy. Generally speaking, studies indicate that mothers and fathers communicate with their children in similar ways. For example, Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda (2004) suggest that mothers and fathers use similar methods and ways to influence their children.

However, there is also evidence that mother-child and father-child language interactions show some interesting differences. Indeed, Nord and West (2001) argue that fathers, perhaps as a result of their gender or different notions of parenting, contribute to their children's literacy in different ways than mothers do. Magill-Evans and Harrison (2001) also suggest that fathers and mothers may play different roles in children's language experiences that potentially impact later language development.

For example, there is some evidence that suggests that fathers use more challenging vocabulary than mothers do. Fathers have been shown to use more abstract words when interacting with their children (Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda, 2004) or different words altogether, which significantly predict child language (Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans, 2006).

LaBounty and colleagues (2008) also found differences between mothers and fathers in their use of emotional language and its impact on children's social-cognitive understanding. More specifically, they found that mothers referred more frequently to emotions, which predicted children's emotional understanding, while fathers referred more frequently to causal explanatory language, which predicated children's theory of mind.

## **Involvement at different stages**

A father's level of engagement and the influence of that engagement will differ at different points in the child's development (Pleck, 1997). However, there is contradictory evidence as to whether fathers are more or less engaged with infants than with school

children. For example, Marsiglio (1991) found that with the exception of reading, US fathers were less engaged with school children than they were in the child's early years.

By contrast, several studies suggest that fathers are less involved with very young children (e.g. Bailey, 1994). Whatever may be the case, there is evidence that fathers interact with their children in a different way than mothers do in that fathers engage in more playful social interactions than in practical caretaking tasks (Yeung et al., 2001).

Due to lack of evidence in this area, what therefore is needed is a systematic review of the extent to which specific child outcomes are affected by specific forms of father involvement at particular stages in development (Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera, 1999).

## **The benefits of father involvement**

The picture that emerges is one where fathers are involved in their children's literacy but they tend to be involved to a lesser degree than mothers. This section will explore how children and fathers themselves might benefit from their involvement.

### **The effects of father involvement on educational attainment and on literacy in particular**

Research shows that parental involvement in their children's learning positively affects the child's academic performance (Fan and Chen, 2001) in both primary and secondary schools (Feinstein and Symons, 1999), leading to higher academic achievement, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioural problems at school (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

Similar impacts have also been identified with regards to literacy practices (for an overview, see Clark, 2005). For example, involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, and Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).

Analysis of NCDS data, which has followed a cohort of children born in 1958 to now, showed that children whose father spends time with them, in terms of reading or going on outings, have higher IQs and were more socially mobile than those who had received little attention; the differences in life chances were still detectable by the age of 42 (Nettle, 2008).

The same study by Flouri and Buchanan (2004), who analysed NCDS data to explore the role of early father and mother involvement in children's educational attainment in later life, also found that father and mother involvement at age 7 independently predicted educational attainment when the child was 20. They also found that the link between parents' involvement was the same for sons as for daughters and that father involvement was not more important for later educational attainment when mother

involvement was low rather than high. More importantly, they found that early father involvement with a child was associated with continued involvement throughout childhood and adolescence, which led them to conclude that “engaging fathers in their children’s lives from an early age should guarantee that they remain involved throughout their children’s childhood” (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003, p. 95).

## The benefits at large

A growing body of research has led to an awareness of the important role that fathers can occupy in their children's development (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb, 2000), especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Burgess, 2005). Children who grow up with actively involved fathers<sup>2</sup> benefit in numerous ways (for a review see Allen and Daly, 2002, note that this review does not mention literacy in its long list), such as greater cognitive competence, higher IQs, greater problem-solving skills, better grades, more qualifications, enjoy school more, participation in more extra-curricular activities, better school attendance, fewer behavioural problems at school, greater economic success, greater educational success, occupational competence, greater attachment to father, more resilience to stress, more curious, open to strangers, more trusting, more life satisfaction, less depression, less emotional distress, fewer phobias, more resourceful, greater internal locus of control, greater self-direction, greater self-control, less impulsivity, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, less aggression, more pro-social sibling interactions, more tolerant, more successful marriages, more empathic, less delinquent behaviour, less substance abuse. Overall, children of involved fathers were more likely to live in cognitively stimulating homes (Williams and Sternberg, 2002) and to become economically and educationally successful (Harris et al., 1998).

While the majority of studies have explored the effects of father involvement on general children outcomes, only a few studies have focused specifically on the impact fathers can have on their children’s literacy behaviours. In one of the earliest U.S. studies of the effects of fathers on young children’s literacy activities in primary school, Durkin (1966) attempted to interview both parents regarding their reading practices. However, few fathers attended the interview sessions due to work commitments, which led Durkin to coin the phrase “the vanishing American father”. Nevertheless, the mothers and fathers who were interviewed suggested a positive relationship between father involvement and children’s reading practices.

Gallimore and colleagues (1991) reported a positive relationship between the amounts of literacy fathers engage in for their personal use and their children's reading test scores, while other studies have found that the time a father spent reading with his child was the strategy that predicted emergent literacy outcomes most consistently (e.g. Brooks, 2005).

Similarly, interviewing 55 boys and 22 fathers in the UK, Lloyd (1999) found that fathers’ reading habits can have substantial influences on boys’ ability to read, their levels of interest and their reading choices. This study also found that although mothers were

<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested that it is not so much the involvement of the father *per se* that mediates this relationship. Rather, a father’s involvement in two-parent families should be viewed as an indicator of how harmonious relationships are within the family.

often mentioned as having taught boys to read, fathers were more likely to be monitoring and evaluating their sons' reading. However, fathers also stated that they did not know what to do when their sons were reluctant readers. Overall, fathers saw reading as a way to maintain a relationship with their children and believed that having books in the home and being seen reading by their children as important.

A study that investigated the impact of father involvement on children of teenage mothers found that children with greater levels of father contact had fewer behavioural problems and had higher reading scores – associations that held after maternal risk factors were controlled for (Howard, Lefever, Borkowski and Whitman, 2006).

Other studies have also suggested a positive relationship between children's literacy skills and fathers' work literacy practices (e.g. Gallimore et al., 1991). However, it appears that it is not the use of literacy at work by fathers *per se* that impacts on children's literacy development but rather that it is the way in which job-related literacy impacted on the home literacy environment where children's development was being fostered that made a difference (e.g. Reese, Gallimore and Goldenberg, 1999).

## **Benefits for fathers**

Only a few studies have explored the benefit of involvement to the fathers themselves. These studies have reported numerous benefits for the fathers themselves, including greater skill acquisition, greater confidence and self-esteem, a better father-child relationship, and increased engagement with learning (e.g. Lewis et al., 1982; Stile and Ortiz, 1999).

## **The effect of father involvement over and above that of maternal involvement**

Only a limited amount of UK (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004) and international data (Nord et al., 1997) has explored this question to date. Even studies that have explored both father and mother involvement have not necessarily controlled for the effect of one in addition to the other.

Reviewing studies that controlled for maternal involvement, both Amato and Rivera, 1999 and Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) found that the majority of studies indicated significant positive correlations between father involvement and children's development. Regarding literacy, there is only indirect evidence that fathers have more of an effect on their son's reading skills than mothers have (e.g. Laosa, 1982).

Flouri and Buchanan (2002), analysing UK data from the NCDS, found that positive engagement by both the father and the mother contributed significantly and independently to children's attitudes towards school.

A recent study by McBride and colleagues (2009) provides partial support for a differential relationship between fathers' and mothers' early parenting behaviours, school involvement and their child's later academic achievement. Perhaps intriguingly, they found that neither fathers' nor mothers' early parenting behaviours were directly related to later academic achievement. However, they also found that fathers' later

school involvement was negatively related to student achievement, whereas mothers' school involvement was positively related to student achievement.

### **She said, he said**

Accounts of father involvement frequently are based on the mother's estimate of the extent of the father's involvement. Some evidence is accumulating that shows that this might not be the most reliable strategy.

Studies that have compared mother and father reports of fathers' involvement have shown that father and mother reports of fathers' involvement differ significantly. For example, fathers report spending 17.6% more time engaged in 11 activities with their young children than mothers report (Mikelson, 2008). Furthermore, exploring predictive power for children's reading and maths skills, Hernandez and Coley (2007) found that father reports of father involvement showed more consistent predictive validity than mother reports of father involvement.

## **Is father involvement equally good for boys and girls?**

Lastly, a number of studies have explored differences in interactions between fathers and their sons and daughters during the early childhood years<sup>3</sup>. The evidence that fathers relate to their sons and daughters differently is inconclusive (e.g. Lytton and Romney, 1991). Studies indicate that fathers are generally more involved with their sons than their daughters (Aldous et al., 1998; Laosa, 1982; Pleck, 1997), whilst others report that fathers are equally involved (timewise) with both (Fagan and Iglesias, 1999).

For example, Fagan and Iglesias in their US study of mainly African-American or Hispanic-American found that father involvement was equally beneficial for both their sons and daughters, i.e. there were no significant differences in father involvement on their sons' and daughters' academic readiness or social skills. Further evidence that this impact is not restricted to sons comes from studies that have shown that both sons and daughters of fathers who are involved in their child's school activity are more likely to complete school and have higher incomes than children whose fathers are not involved (e.g. Berger, 1998).

However, other studies have also reported that this differential in father involvement with sons and daughters grows larger as children age (Roopnarine and Ahmeduzzaman, 1993). For example, Lewis (1997) proposed that a father's style of interaction may become more sex-stereotyped during later preschool period than during the early preschool years. Similarly, Yeung et al. (2001) found that fathers spend more time with older boys in play and companionship activities.

An interesting qualification to this finding was made by Fagan (1999), who found that whilst fathers spent more time with their sons than they did with their daughters, fathers

<sup>3</sup> There is little evidence that mothers are differentially involved in the care of their sons and daughters (Lytton and Romney, 1991).

did not perceive themselves to be differentially engaged with their children. Fagan also points out that fathers' attitudes and beliefs about their involvement with boys and girls has received little attention in the research literature and may be an important factor for further study.

In addition, there is also some indication that fathers engage in different activities with their sons and daughters. For example, Levy-Shiff and Isrealashvilli (1988) found that fathers engaged in more play activity with their sons than with their daughters. However, the same research also showed that there was little difference in the amount of time a father spent with their sons or daughters in caretaking.

## Conclusion

The literature reviewed here indicates that fathers have an important role to play in their children's literacy development. However, involving fathers in their children's literacy activities not only benefits their children. There are also numerous benefits that have been reported for the fathers themselves, including greater skill acquisition, greater confidence and self-esteem, a better father-child relationship, and increased engagement with learning.

Finally, a finding by Fagan and Iglesias (1999) is worth keeping in mind when studying father involvement. They found that actual changes in the *quality* of paternal behaviour are necessary for significant outcomes to come about, suggesting that an emphasis on increased father involvement alone may not be sufficient for bringing about change or beneficial impacts.

## Further information

While this brief review has focused on the link between father involvement and their children's literacy, a wealth of information exists about the role of fathers in their child's development and life. Much of this is summarised succinctly on the Father Institute website: <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>.

Of interest is also Canada's Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA): <http://www.fira.ca/>, which is a pan-Canadian alliance of individuals, organisations and institutions dedicated to the development and sharing of knowledge focusing on father involvement, and the building of a community-university research alliance supporting this work.

Australia also hosts a Fatherhood Research Network that pulls together research evidence from across the globe on a variety of topics: [www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/efp/afnrn.html](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/efp/afnrn.html)

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