

Lessons Learned from Early Head Start for Fatherhood Research and Program Development

Robert H. Bradley, Jeffrey K. Shears, Lori A. Roggman,
and Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda

SYNOPSIS

This Special Issue presents a series of studies on men who functioned as fathers in the Early Head Start National Evaluation Study. The pieces focused on how these men viewed themselves as fathers, what they did with and for their children, how that mattered in the lives of children, and what Early Head Start programs were doing to try to foster positive involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. This final article reflects on those efforts and tries to place them in the broader literature on family life among the poor and governmental efforts to assist those families. Special attention is given to the complexity of family life in the 21st century and to the challenges that face men who are often trying to parent in highly uncertain and unstable conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In this Special Issue of *Parenting: Science and Practice*, we have presented a set of interrelated studies conducted by the Father Studies Workgroup of the Early Head Start Research Consortium. The focus was on fathers of infants who are living in circumstances of poverty. These studies arose out of our commitment to understanding fathers' early influences in children's lives as well as the value of Early Head Start as an intervention to support families in promoting the optimal development of their infants and toddlers. Furthermore, we wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to study fathers from diverse cultures and circumstances in multiple regions of the United States.

Our hope in the father studies component of the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project was to try to better understand the men who were functioning as fathers to Early Head Start children, how they thought of themselves as fathers, what they did with and for their

children, what kinds of relationships they formed with their children, how the characteristics of the men themselves and the context of parenting affected what they did and the quality of those relationships, and how the behavior of fathers mattered in the lives of the children. It is to those ends that the particular studies represented in this Special Issue were directed. Using various research methods (quantitative and qualitative as well as observed and self-reported) with diverse samples (urban, rural, multiple ethnicities), the studies presented in this Special Issue fall into three broad categories: fathers' involvement with their children, paternal influence on children's development, and fathers' participation in Early Head Start programs.

It was partly because of the rapidly changing world of family life that the father studies component of the Early Head Start National Evaluation Study was initiated. In these circumstances, men with limited resources who are uncertain of the future are particularly challenged to identify precisely the role they should play in the lives of their children. Likewise, society as a whole is being challenged to construct a clear, consistent, and productive perspective on low-income fathers. On the one side, there is a recurrent belief that fathers are important to family life and child well-being and that society should do its utmost to support men in their roles as fathers. On the other side, there is a belief that men have become marginal members of families and are often detrimental to family functioning (e.g., deadbeat dads, abusive fathers, inconsistent parenting), and that society should simply force these fathers to pay their fair share of financial support for children.

A systems view of family life and child development led us to believe that clearly defined roles for fathers and tight connections between what fathers do and how children function would not likely emerge for families that are attempting to confront adversity and instability with limited resources. Neither did it seem likely that social institutions could readily provide the kinds of supports needed to quickly change the balance in favor of productive engagements and strong positive impacts. It is not surprising, then, that there is a sense of inchoate purpose expressed by many men in the article by Summers, Boller, Schiffman, and Raikes (this issue). Men clearly want to "be there" for their children and for their families, but they are sometimes hard pressed to specify exactly what being there means in terms of activities, behaviors, and contributions to family life. The voices describing their experiences and perceptions of "good fathering" highlight four major roles: stability, teaching, physical interaction, and emotional support. Evidence from other survey studies indicates that fathers, on average, spend relatively modest amounts of time with their children and that mothers retain the lion's share of re-

sponsibility for most things pertaining to children (excepting financial responsibility; Hofferth, Stueve, Pleck, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002). Accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising that no matter how the researchers in this Special Issue attempted to classify fathers, by behavior or by relationship, no single pattern emerged as predominant. This diffusion of paternal roles and responsibilities is one reason that family scholars have become skeptical about the value of equating the sheer amount of time fathers spend with children or the exact nature of their activities as evidence of the quality of their involvement (Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2002). Good fathering could entail quite different sets of activities and even quite varied amounts of time in different families and communities.

FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT AND INFLUENCE

A major goal of the father's component of the Early Head Start national evaluation study was to explicate how low-income fathers matter in the lives of their children. This has proven no mean feat as it has been devilishly difficult to construct a system for precisely classifying the nature of participating fathers' relationships to child and family — good explanatory science benefits from precise classification of those factors and processes one wants to explain. The report by Vogel, Bradley, Raikes, Boller, and Shears (this issue) brings to mind the difficulty of classifying the exact nature of men's connections to their children and families. Fathers' relationships and proximity to their children and their children's mothers were diverse and often unstable. The diversity of relationships between fathers and other family members who participated in the Early Head Start National Evaluation Study, and the instability present in many homes, may have led to a less consistent organization of parenting behavior among Early Head Start fathers than is often seen in studies of middle-class parents.

Fathers' own descriptions of involvement with their children indicate a great deal of variability in how low-income men focus their parenting role (Summers et al., this issue). The report by Ryan, Martin, and Brooks-Gunn (this issue) shows that, although mothers' parenting and fathers' parenting tend to be organized similarly, the connections among various aspects of parenting behavior are tighter for mothers than fathers. The study by Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, and Cabrera (this issue) likewise found that the factor structure of paternal behavior accounted for less than 50% of the variance when children were 6 months old and barely more than one third of the variance when children were 14 months old. These findings are predictable from dynamic systems theory. Specifically, if one assumes that

men's roles as parents are not strongly and consistently prescribed and supported within a society, then their behavior as parents is unlikely to be tightly organized around a small number of central "attractors" (to use dynamic systems terminology). The links to attractors such as nurturer or teacher, for example, might be less strong than is the case for mothers. As well, for fathers there may be additional attractors (e.g., buddy, liaison) depending on context and circumstances. When disturbances to the father's life or the family system occur (or even just at the point of developmental transitions for the child), it is likely that fathers' behavior will become disorganized temporarily, only to gradually reorganize around a new set of attractors. Previous studies have shown that paternal behavior is multidimensional rather than being tightly organized around a small number of central roles (Bader, 1995; England & Folbre, 2002; Graham & Beller, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Palkovitz, 2002; Rodhalm & Larson 1982).

The contributions of fathers to infant development also appear to be somewhat less consistent than is the case for mothers. Similar to much father research over the last few decades, the results of studies reported in this Special Issue suggest that, although fathers may play an important role in early infant development, their contributions often appear less direct than the contributions of mothers (Lamb, 1997; Yogman, 1981). In both the Ryan et al. (this issue) and Shannon et al. (this issue) studies, positive fathering behaviors were associated with positive child functioning; but the amount of variance accounted for was relatively small. In the Ryan et al. study (this issue), the data suggest that the same parenting behaviors in fathers and mothers contribute to child outcomes, yet fathers may have less of an impact. However, it would be a mistake, based on such findings, to conclude that fathers do not matter that much in the lives of low-income children. Rather, the principles of dynamic systems theory would suggest that researchers carefully examine the conditions impinging on father and family and not generalize findings across developmental domains or even across developmental periods within domains. In some cases, "effects" are likely to be more pronounced when the overall system is in a highly stable state and when there is tight alignment of system components directed toward a particular end state. In other cases, powerful effects emerge as a by-product of major shifts or realignments within systems — what did not matter before the transition suddenly matters a lot. Finally, it is important to remember the "butterfly" effect; that is, a small action at one point in time and space starts a process that results in considerable change somewhere downstream (e.g., dad reading to a 3-year-old may have only a marginal impact on early literacy but a much more pronounced impact on college success).

The failure to observe consistent, strong connections between what fathers do and children's adaptive functioning in the studies included in this

Special Issue may also be due to the diversity of participants in the Early Head Start national evaluation sample. Evidence of fathers' contributions to infant development has more consistently emerged in studies of European American middle-class intact families in which the fathers are traditional residential biological fathers (Vogel et al., this issue); that is, in generally more stable, well buttressed systems as predicted by systems theory. The fathers enrolled in the Early Head Start study were, by contrast, mostly low-income ethnic and racial minorities, and many were nonresidential or social father figures. Such men are often less well connected to and less well supported by the larger communities in which they reside and the social and economic institutions of those communities. Results from the study by Vogel and colleagues (this issue) suggest that children residing with a biological father score higher on developmental indicators, but this pattern was consistent only for European Americans. Inconsistent findings among African American and Latin American fathers suggest possible different dynamics in those groups that should be examined further.

In complex systems such as families, important functional relations can be difficult to detect. Accordingly, it was especially significant that evidence of a complex relation emerged in the report by Ryan et al. (this issue). Their investigation was aimed at answering questions such as "Can one parent's positive attitude and behavior counter the negative attitude and behavior of the other parent? Or, do children with two positive parents display higher levels of positive responses than children from mixed dyad or two negative parents?" The answers to these questions, according to Ryan et al., suggest that the presence of two positive parents contributes more to child well-being than when one parent displays a negative parenting style, regardless of which parent it is. Father presence thus had a similar effect on the child to mother presence, providing a partial counter to findings that the amount of variance in child outcomes explained by mothers' behavior is greater than the amount attributable to fathers' behavior. Even so, the overall impact of fathers' behavior was modest. From the vantage point of systems theory, such small effects are not surprising. In simple systems, powerful effects of one system element on another are commonplace. By contrast, in complex systems (such as is the case for most low-income families living in America), large effects are rarely observed.

Several factors likely contribute to the relatively modest observed association between paternal behavior and children's early development. First, fathers on average spend less time with children than do mothers, so if a kind of dose-response effect operates for any particular type of parenting behavior, one would anticipate a smaller father effect (Hofferth et al., 2002). Second, the effect of any particular parenting behavior is partly determined by the overall context of parenting and home life in which it is

embedded (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). If one positive aspect of parenting behavior frequently co-occurs with other good or mutually supportive types of parenting behavior, the greater the likely impact connected to the former (and the same is true for mutually occurring bad behaviors). Because there is a higher degree of co-occurrence among good behaviors for mothers, a tighter alignment of positive parenting behaviors, the likelihood of significant impact for mothers is greater. Third, there is greater likelihood of significant impact if behavior is stable through time (Bloom, 1964). As the study by Shannon et al. (this issue) shows, there is only modest stability of father behavior across time and no predictability from 6-month father behavior to 14-month child behavior. Together, these factors suggest that less time spent with the child + less consistency or alignment of father behaviors within time + less stability over time = less impact on the child. These general principles accepted, it would be a mistake to apply them too readily to everything pertaining to low-income fathers. In complex, dynamic systems, it is not unusual for "effects" to be disproportionate to inputs from specific system components.

FATHERS' PARTICIPATION IN EARLY HEAD START

The article by Raikes and Bellotti (this issue) indicates that Head Start and Early Head Start agencies, although they have a long history of working with poor families, are struggling to figure out how to engage poor fathers. A majority of the children enrolled in Early Head Start had a father or father-figure, and the majority of these fathers or father-figures were residing with the child, but fathers remained noticeably less involved than mothers in most programs. Historically, institutions focused on involving parents were mostly trying to involve mothers. This focus on mothers could be explained partly by the socially accepted parenting role. Recent shifts in fathering roles, as highlighted by Summers et al. (this issue), suggests a move from a more traditional role toward a more contemporary fathering role that is complex and dynamic. In response, Early Head Start programs are attempting to provide services and activities to increase father participation in the program. Unfortunately, there is yet no clear road map to help set directions; and even the most mature programs (in terms of working with fathers) have yielded only modest success. Such findings are not surprising. Most efforts by social and governmental institutions to engage and support fathers have been only marginally successful.

There is, at best, only a loose connection between most low-income men and the social institutions involved with the care of children (churches are perhaps something of an exception; Mincy & Pouncy, 2002). There is a long

history of mutual disregard. Accordingly, the beliefs, goals, and practices of many institutions are not aligned with the habits, dispositions, and needs of fathers. Neither is in good position to be maximally supportive of the other, meaning that the desires of individual men to “be there” in some positive way for their children may not be promoted to any great degree by most social institutions as they currently operate. But the information contained in the Raikes and Bellotti (this issue) article also contains seeds of optimism, suggesting that Early Head Start programs are moving along a track that is connecting them more to the needs of low-income men — albeit slowly. The Early Head Start father-involvement demonstration programs, funded specifically to increase father involvement, were more successful in involving all fathers, especially nonresidential fathers, than the Early Head Start programs in the national study. Having male staff members, particularly a father involvement coordinator, was characteristic of programs with greater father participation. The role models male staff members provide may be especially important to young fathers with little prior experience with children or to those who lacked a father or father-figure growing up.

Other findings from the studies reported in this Special Issue may inform productive program practice for institutions, such as Head Start, interested in successfully engaging fathers. The first recommendation is that almost assuredly a “one size fits all” model is not likely to be the most productive way to gain meaningful participation from fathers. Rather than a rigid procedure for intervention approaches to father involvement, programs are likely to benefit from a more open-ended approach that allows flexibility in services depending on family structure, relationships, and culture. Not only does the Vogel et al. (this issue) study show that there is a diversity of relationships between father-figures and their children and families, but it also shows that those patterns of relationships are associated with child outcomes differentially depending on ethnic group. No single template for what to focus on or how to focus on it emerges about relationships between father and child. Likewise, the studies by Shannon et al. (this issue), Ryan et al. (this issue), and Fitzgerald, McKelvey, Schiffman, & Montañez (this issue) show that some low-income fathers play against type; that is, they are very stimulating and also very responsive to their children. Generally, competent fathers may be interested in some targeted skill-building classes pertaining to certain aspects of parenting, but may not be good candidates for the omnibus, packaged “good parenting practices” class. Programs involving fathers of young infants should benefit from understanding why fathers are involved in their child’s life and the various types of involvement that are valued by individual fathers as important to being a “good father.”

The findings by Ryan et al. (this issue) further suggest that it may be important to understand more about coparenting and what the mother is doing as well to provide effective early interventions that involve fathers. The study by Fitzgerald et al. (this issue), addressing neighborhood violence and fathers' antisocial behaviors as they interact to affect children's development, particularly reveals the need to individualize programming for fathers. Their study shows that fathers struggle more and parent less well when they live in violent neighborhoods; but that fathers' responses to violence depends on their own level of antisocial behavior. When children are exposed both to violence and to their fathers' antisocial behaviors, such as drug use or being arrested, the children have lower scores on emotional regulation and cognitive functioning. These findings suggest that prevention programs in poor economic areas should involve fathers as part of the intervention if there are to be optimal effects on child outcomes. The pattern of supports needed, and the focus of intervention needed, are likely to be different depending on both community factors and the father's own personality. These findings, although again not surprising in light of the broader literature showing that both parental personality and family context affect parenting, may help to identify key aspects of community conditions and parental personality in need of more flexible and creative approaches by social institutions such as Early Head Start.

Results from the studies reported by Raikes and Bellotti (this issue), together with findings from other studies, suggest that service agencies may need to have a rather broad package of possible service options available and that any "core" program should be rather slim and basic. The results reported by Raikes and Bellotti intimate that the core should perhaps focus on social network building. The diversity of fathers and families also suggests that the core should perhaps include a family assessment, which is followed either by individually father-prescribed activities or by program components selected from a rather broad menu of options (based on the capacity of the agency to offer such an array of options). Given the general lack of connection between fathers and social institutions and the various stresses on family life, it may be better that most core interventions be brief, followed by additional components selected at the father's and family's discretion. Interventions for fathers may work best when they remain flexible and ready to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves.

Findings from the practitioners' study lead to another recommendation for social agencies: namely, they may wish to use a different pitch with fathers than would typically be used with mothers. It is not that mothers and fathers have entirely different agenda for their children, but mothers tend to be more tightly focused on addressing immediate needs, a focus which

is largely aligned with program agenda for most early childhood agencies. Fathers, by contrast, have agenda that are somewhat more distal and long term. In the Summers et al. (this issue) piece, fathers talked about their role as exposing children to the world, inculcating social values, being a good “role model,” and building self-reliance and even a work ethic. Finding ways to connect to these agenda and presenting ideas and activities that seem to support such proclivities may find fathers more willing partners in common enterprises. To be a bit more concrete, some fathers may be less interested in learning to be sensitive than in learning techniques for fostering self-respect and self-reliance — although those techniques may involve being sensitive enough to help children learn to self-regulate.

METHODS FOR STUDYING FATHERS

Our attempts to meet these challenges in a large-scale, multisite study were unprecedented when we began, but have since influenced other large-scale studies to attempt large-scale studies of low-income fathers (Three City Study, 2006). The research reported in this Special Issue began with well-developed “tight” methods developed over many decades for studying mothers, but then also included newer, less well-developed techniques to explore other aspects of father behavior and to ask fathers more directly about their experiences as fathers and their reflections about their roles and their involvement with their children, and to observe them in less structured situations.

One of our first methodological challenges was recruitment and retention. Our researchers followed fathers through the eyes of their children, therefore identifying a man “most like a father” to the child when the child’s biological father was not involved. This approach is unlike that of policy researchers who have tracked biological fathers over time to see when fathers stay and when they leave in relation to economic support of families. Our approach was also unlike that of adult development researchers who have studied fatherhood’s influence on men’s psychological development. Recruitment and retention have been particularly challenging for the studies reported in this Special Issue because recruitment efforts for the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project targeted mothers who either were pregnant or had a young infant. Not all fathers were present in the household with mother and child. Despite program efforts to involve fathers, some mothers were unwilling to invite the father’s involvement in the Early Head Start program. This tension between mothers and fathers in some families challenged researchers to contact and track mobile fathers over their infants’ lives, and it was therefore

difficult to obtain high response rates. Although we were able to track enough fathers over repeated measurement time points to analyze changes over time in their involvement, the efforts to locate and contact fathers took considerable resources. Such difficulties are commonplace in studies of low-income families, so much so that the Three City Study (2006) discontinued its father study component because of poor response rates (Coley & Schindler, 2003).

Historically, much of what we know about fathers has been from mothers' reports. Consequently, there is need to focus specifically and systematically on father issues with more direct reports from fathers (Tanfer & Mott, 1998). The studies reported in this Special Issue relied primarily on data collected directly from fathers. That said, many of our interview questions were originally developed for mothers; thus, the findings may still lack the precision needed to reveal the full story of fathers. Ryan et al. (this issue) report behaviors of both fathers and mothers when interacting with their children, as directly observed by researchers. This data collection method is important, as it gives researchers directly observed data on parental supportiveness, intrusiveness, detachment, and both negative and positive regard, but even these behaviors were selected based on what is known of mothers' contributions to development and were rated based on past research on the range of mother's behaviors.

The measurement tools needed to penetrate the meaning of paternal beliefs and actions have lagged behind those designed for mothers because scholars are just beginning to define distinct dimensions of the fathering role (Cherlin & Griffith, 1998). The modest, inconsistent relations observed between paternal behavior and child functioning may, to some extent, be an artifact of the lingering use of procedures more appropriate for mothers. Perhaps the rich descriptions offered by the fathers in the Summers et al. (this issue) article may help to address gaps in the measurement of fathering behavior. Fathers' own narrative descriptions of their involvement and their views of the fathering role (Summers et al., this issue) provide elaboration of their self-reports of their interactions with their infants (Shannon et al., this issue) and direct observations of those interactions (Ryan et al., this issue). These rich descriptions also suggest new directions for studying father involvement.

The roles fathers described in more open-ended, qualitative interviews (Summers et al., this issue) suggest domains for future measurement of how fathers provide unique sources of stability and physical interaction not typically studied in mothers, in addition to their own styles of teaching and emotional support that are traditionally observed in mothers. The more flexible approach to descriptions of father involvement such as took place in the qualitative component of the father's studies might eventually

result in a tighter definition of fathering that would then reveal tighter links to children's outcomes. Some of this flexibility is evidenced in more extensive qualitative interviews and from unstructured observations of father – child interactions with the fathers in these studies that have not yet been fully analyzed.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge to our research with fathers has been the lack of a tight theoretical perspective to generate hypotheses and guide our methodological approaches to studying key aspects of fathers and fathering. Conceptual frameworks that are relevant to the lives of real fathers in their current circumstances are badly needed as are theories that can ground methods that are engaging to fathers in a wide variety of contexts. We encourage those studying fathers of infants and young children, whether their participants are in circumstances of poverty or privilege, to develop methods and approaches that involve and engage fathers from the beginning and to contribute to building theories about fathers and their roles across families that take into account their diverse cultures and circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with findings from the Summers et al. (this issue) study, Shannon et al. (this issue) cite numerous studies attesting to fathers' desire to be there for their children at the time of birth and during the early years of life. Some fathers, however, are more likely than others to remain present in their children's lives. Shannon and colleagues found that the fathers who continued "being there" were more likely to be older and more educated, with higher levels of income and a better relationship with the children's mothers — probably in more stable situations. The literature shows that the tendency to be involved wanes with time, but studies in this Special Issue show that a significant percentage of low-income fathers remain productively engaged with their children at least through age 3. The studies in this Special Issue also demonstrate that the quality of parenting observed in fathers is connected to the quality of the circumstances surrounding family life (Fitzgerald et al., this issue). High-risk conditions that produce harsh parenting in fathers also produce depression in fathers and higher levels of family conflict.

The continuing macrolevel changes in American culture, together with the volatility that often pervades life among the poor, make it likely that fatherhood for low-income men will continue to be characterized by a diffusion of responsibilities as members of the family. Nonetheless, principles of dynamic systems theory foretell occasional nexus nodes in which father-

ing behavior and child functioning will come together. Many low-income fathers have a quite clear sense of their role within the family and a considerable impact on their children's adaptive functioning. Likewise, some programs are finding good success in connecting with fathers and meeting their parenting needs. To bring these patterns into clearer resolution against a background of inconsistent associations may require that researchers spend more time investigating nonlinear relations and interaction effects. It may also be of benefit to consider the use of more person-centered approaches to analysis and to examine the impact of change over time. A good example of the latter was intimated in the findings by Shannon et al. (this issue); namely, that children of fathers whose parenting improved from 6 to 14 months showed better self-regulation. Finally, it is important to reiterate what several of the authors in this Special Issue stipulated as a potential limitation for their studies: findings pertaining to father behavior and father effects may be a bit optimistic in that almost all the studies involved use of selective samples — presumably men with greater interest in their children and their own roles as fathers.

The articles in this Special Issue cannot fully answer the questions that drove the Early Head Start team of researchers to include a father component in the national study, and they cannot fully adjudicate the debate about the role of fathers in low-income families, whether as essential contributors to infant development or only as sources of financial support. However, these studies, along with others focused on low-income fathers, should help point the way to more incisive studies of this diverse group of American families who often live in unstable and adverse circumstances.

AFFILIATIONS AND ADDRESSES

Robert H. Bradley, Center for Applied Studies in Education, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 S. University Avenue, Little Rock, AR 72204-1099. E-mail: rhbradley@ualr.edu. Jeffrey K. Shears is at Colorado State University. Lori A. Roggman is at Utah State University. Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda is at New York University.

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