

Fathers' involvement with children

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Having a dad around has a huge impact on the development and wellbeing of children. Here we give an overview of the routine family activities mums and dads do with their children and the emotions between parents and children – as reported by parents – using data from the UK-wide survey Understanding Society (2009-2011).¹

Where we could, we have looked at comparisons between fathers and mothers, between parents who live with a partner and those living on their own as a lone parent. We have also looked at how things might change with children at different ages, how many children there are in the family and whether the parent is working.

There are a lot of similarities in how involved mothers and fathers are in the lives of their children; however, mothers tend to perform routine family activities and report being involved with their children's emotions more often than fathers.

¹ Analysis in this paper is restricted to parents who have resident children who are aged less than 16 years old. Some questions are asked of parents who have children belonging to a narrower age range.

It is very important to remember how very different families can be and how these differences can have an impact on what parents do with their children. For example, fathers are much more likely than mothers to work full-time (www.modernfatherhood.org/themes/fathers-and-work). This limits dads' time at home and affects their involvement in routine activities with their children.

Leisure activities

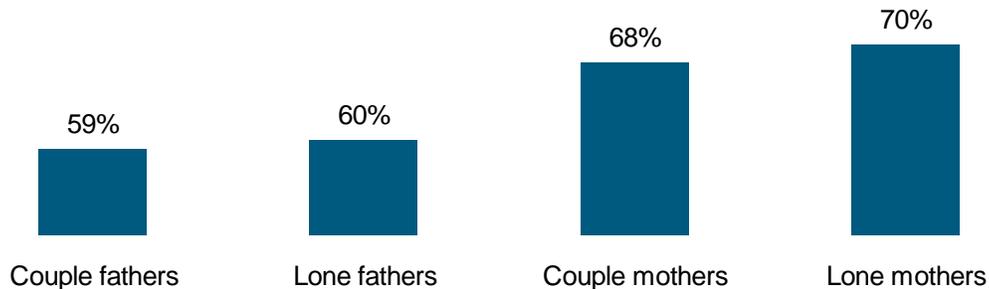
Over a third (36%) of parents take part in leisure activities with their children (for example, going to the park or zoo, the movies, picnics, taking part in sports, etc.) several times a week. Mums are more likely than dads to do this. Mothers who live with a partner are the most likely to report doing these types of things with their children several times a week (40%), and they are followed by lone mums (33%) and dads who live with a partner (33%). Lone fathers are only slightly less likely to report doing these things (31%). Whether a parent is working is important; parents who are in work are less likely to do these things with their child (34%) than parents who are not (41%). Given that dads are more likely to be working than mums, this offers some explanation as to why they are not doing as many leisure activities with their children.

Families with older children are less likely to be involved in these activities with their children. Also, perhaps because of cost or the dynamics of having more children - the more children there are in the family, the less likely parents are to take part in leisure activities with them. The smaller the family the more likely parents are to take part in leisure activities - 42% of parents who have one child only reported taking their children for leisure activities several times a week. This compares with 27% of parents with three or more children.

Eating meals

Mums are slightly more likely to say they eat their meals with their children - seven in ten do this every or most days compared with six in ten fathers. This probably is because fathers in couples and lone dads are more likely than mums to work full-time, which reduces the time they spend at home. Eating meals with children most days does not vary by whether the parent is in a couple, by the age of youngest child in the household or by the number of children in the household.

Eating meals with children most days



Base: Parents of resident children aged under 16 (N=13794)

Quarrelling

Asking about quarrelling with their children splits parents. A quarter of parents (25%) say that they do this most days and just over a quarter (30%) say hardly ever.

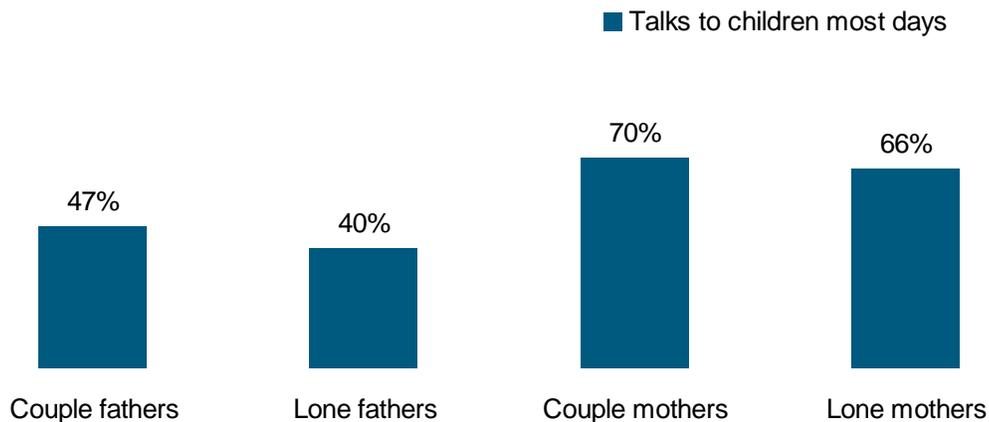
Lone mums are slightly more likely to quarrel with children most days (30%) than mums in couples (28%) and lone fathers (27%). Dads in couples are the least likely to quarrel with their children (20%). Somewhat surprisingly, parents with older children were less likely to report quarrelling – but the more children there are in the household, the more quarrelling there is.

Talking to their children

There is a clear difference between how often parents report talking to their children about things which matter to them. Mums are much more likely to say they do this most days.

Lone fathers are the least likely to report talking to their children. This may be related to the fact that lone dads tend to have fewer children on average than fathers in two parent families (www.modernfatherhood.org/themes/who-are-fathers): we found that the more children there are in the family, the more likely parents are to say they talk to them. However, we also found that parents with older children tend to talk to them more often than those with younger children; and children living with lone fathers tend to be older (www.modernfatherhood.org/themes/who-are-fathers).

Talking to their children



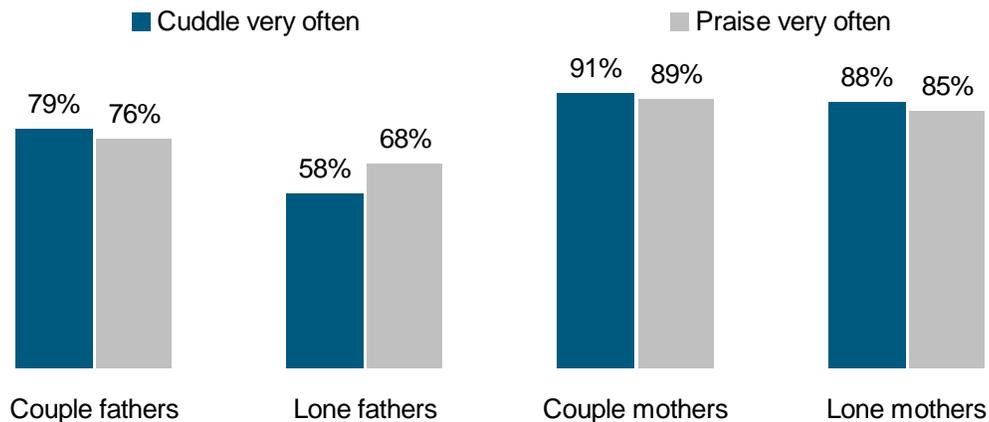
Base: Parents of resident children aged 5-15 (N=10206)

Parents who are not in paid employment are more likely to report talking with their children every day (65%) than working parents (57%), which is probably related to the fact that working parents have less opportunity to talk with their children. This offers some explanation of the difference between fathers and mothers: fathers are more likely to be working and therefore have less time available for their family.

Cuddling and praising

The vast majority of parents say that they cuddle and praise their children very often (85%). Mums are more likely to cuddle and praise their children than dads. Unsurprisingly, parents with older children report cuddling them less than those with younger children. Praising children follows a similar pattern. This offers some explanation of why lone fathers may be cuddling and praising their children less often than fathers living with a partner: the children who live with lone dads tend to be older than children in two parent families (www.modernfatherhood.org/themes/who-are-fathers).

Cuddling and praising children



Base: Parents of resident children aged under 16 (N=13799)

Shouting

Just under half of parents (48%) say that they sometimes shout at their children, and a further 18% report doing this very often. Lone parents are somewhat more likely than coupled parents to say they shout at their children very often, and fathers are somewhat less likely to shout at their children very often than mothers:

- 15% of fathers who live with a partner
- 17% of lone fathers
- 20% of mothers who live with a partner
- 23% of lone mothers

Parents are far more likely to report frequent shouting when there are three or more children in the household than when there is just one child.

Slapping or spanking

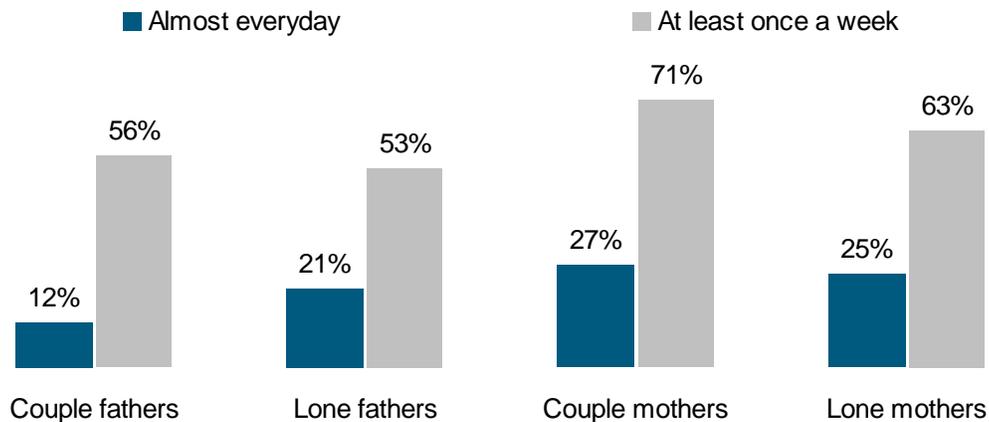
Three-quarters of all parents report never slapping or spanking their children (74%). Less than one in five say that they only seldom do this (19%). Just 1% of parents say they slap or spank their children very often. There is little difference in behaviour reported by mothers and fathers.

Parents with younger children report slapping or spanking their children more often than parents of older children. The more children in the household, the more likely parents are to report that they slap or spank them: 17% of parents in households with one child do this (seldom or more frequently) compared with 37% of parents in households with three or more children.

Homework

There was a range of responses to how often the parent helps their 10-15 years old children with their homework, although just under two-thirds of parents help at least once a week. Overall, mums are more likely to report helping with homework than dads. 71% of mums in couples help with homework at least once a week compared with 56% of dads in couples.

Helping children with homework



Base: Parents of resident children aged 10-15 (N=6641)