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# Father involvement with children and couple relationships

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Within the household there is a network of relationships which cannot be viewed separately. In couple households with children, key relationships are the relationship between the parents and the children and the relationship between the parents themselves. This paper uses data from the UK-wide survey Understanding Society (2009-2011)<sup>1</sup> to investigate father involvement with their children, couple relationships and the interaction between the two.

Firstly we examine the ways in which parents report upon their involvement with their children. The factors associated with paternal and maternal involvement are also explored. Secondly we look at how fathers and mothers report the quality of their relationship with each other and the factors associated with better relationships for each. Finally we seek to answer the question of whether parental relationship quality matters for parents' involvement with their children.

Overall we find a link between more positive couple relationship and more involvement with children, for both fathers and mothers.

Key findings of our analysis are discussed in this paper, while a comprehensive set of tables about parental relationships and father and mother involvement with their children are published separately <http://www.modernfatherhood.org/publications/>

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis in this paper is restricted to fathers who have resident children (aged less than 16 years old) and who are living with a partner or spouse.

## Father involvement and couple relationships

Within the household there is a network of relationships which cannot be viewed separately. The involvement which fathers have with their children is just one relationship and cannot be studied in isolation. In two-parent households the relationship which a father has with the mother is a key relationship and earlier research has found an association between the parental relationship and paternal involvement.

Research suggests that high father involvement with children is associated with a positive couple relationship (Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004<sup>2</sup>) – the better parents are getting along the more likely dads are to be doing things with their children. Recent analysis of the first five years of the Millennium Cohort Study has supported these findings. Jones (2010<sup>3</sup>) found evidence which supported the ‘spillover’ model – that marital conflict affects parenting behaviour which in turn affects children – rather than the ‘compensatory’ model which suggests parents try to compensate for poor partner relationships with good child relationships.

It has also been suggested that the quality of the relationship between the parents is more important for fathers than mothers; Cummings et al. (2004<sup>4</sup>) found that the father-child relationship is more vulnerable than the mother-child relationship to the negative effects of poor parental relationships.

In this paper we are investigating the quality of relationships which fathers and mothers in two-parent families have with their partners and how this is associated with what they do with their children.

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<sup>2</sup> Pleck, J. H., Masciadrelli, B. P., & Lamb, M. E. (2004). Paternal involvement by US residential fathers. In M. E. Lamb (Ed), *The role of the father in child development*, pp. 222-271.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, E. (2010). Parental relationships and parenting. In K. Hansen, H. Joshi and S. Dex (Ed). *Children of the 21st century: The first 5 years*, pp. 53-75.

<sup>4</sup> Cummings, E. M., Goeke-Morey, M. C., & Raymond, J. (2004). Fathers in Family Context: Effects of Marital Quality and Marital Conflict. In M. E. Lamb (Ed), *The role of the father in child development*, pp. 222-271.

## Fathers and their children

There are many ways in which fathers can be involved with their children – Pleck (2010<sup>5</sup>) has suggested five different components of father involvement<sup>6</sup>:

1. Positive engagement activities - such as playing games, looking at books or doing sports together.
2. Warmth and responsiveness - for example hugging children or telling them they are loved and appreciated.
3. Control – particularly decision-making and monitoring children’s behaviour.
4. Indirect care – activities done for children that do not involve direct involvement with the children, such as buying things or booking services for the child.
5. Process responsibility – making sure that the child’s needs are met, although this doesn’t necessarily mean doing these things themselves.

In this briefing paper we focus on the things which parents report they do with their children and their direct involvement with them. The chart below compares the involvement which fathers and mothers living in couples have with their children<sup>7</sup>.

It is clear that mothers report doing all of these things more frequently than fathers. For example, mothers are more likely to say they praise their children very often (89%) than fathers (77%) but they are also more likely to report shouting at their children (70%) than fathers (61%). However, we found that in addition to the sex of the parent other things (e.g. working status) affected the way in which parents are involved with their children.

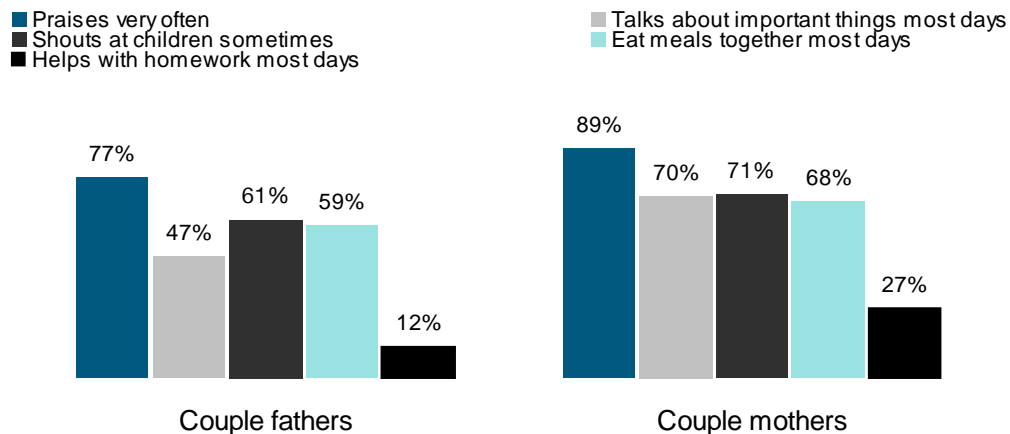
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<sup>5</sup> Pleck, J. H. (2010). Paternal involvement: Revised conceptualization and theoretical linkages with child outcomes. In M. E. Lamb (Ed), *The role of the father in child development*, pp. 58-93.

<sup>6</sup> Pleck has described positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness and control as ‘primary components’ whereas indirect care and process responsibility are ‘auxiliary domains’.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis here is restricted to couple fathers and couple mothers as the focus of this paper is the interaction between the couple relationship and parental involvement. More information about parental involvement of couple and lone parents can be found in our briefing paper [‘Father involvement with children’](#).

## Couple parents' involvement with children



Base: Parents in couple households with dependent children (Father N=4463 Mother N=5899)

The things which parents do with their children, and other aspects of involvement, vary according to a range of factors such as the age of the parent and children, the number of children in the household and whether the parent is working. In order to control for other factors, logistic regression analysis was used to examine the characteristics associated with father and mother involvement.

We focused on three aspects of parent involvement (talking to children about important things, praising children and shouting at children) and found the following things to be associated with involvement<sup>8</sup>:

### Fathers

- **Work status** – unemployed or economically inactive fathers are more likely to talk to their children but also more likely to shout at them.
- **Educational attainment** - fathers with lower qualifications are less likely to praise their children and more likely to shout at them.
- **Marital status** - married fathers are more likely to talk to, praise and shout at their children than cohabiting fathers.

<sup>8</sup> The age of the youngest child, the age of the father and the ethnicity of the father were also statistically significant but there was no clear pattern. Other factors in the models which were not significant were partner's age, partner's work status and partner's educational attainment.

- **Number of children in the household**– the more children in the household the less likely fathers are to talk to or praise their children and more likely they are to shout at them.

### **Mothers**

- **Work status** – unemployed or economically inactive mothers are less likely to shout at their children.
- **Educational attainment** – mothers with lower qualifications are less likely to praise their children.
- **Marital status** - married mothers are more likely to praise their children than cohabiting mothers.
- **Number of children in the household**– the more children the more likely mothers are to shout at them.

Overall we find similar patterns in how different factors are associated with the way in which fathers and mothers interact with their children, with the exception of work status. Whereas unemployed or inactive fathers are more likely to shout at their children we find that unemployed or inactive mothers are less likely to do so. The link between male unemployment and a fractious father-child relationship may be associated with a societal expectation that men are in paid work. For some men unemployment can lead to stress and mental health problems and previous research has found a clear link between male unemployment and depression (McKee-Ryan et al, 2005)<sup>9</sup>.

## **Parental relationships**

The chart below shows some of the ways in which parents describe their relationship with their partner, focusing on three different aspects of relationship quality; having stimulating exchanges of ideas, getting on each others nerves and happiness with the relationship<sup>10</sup>. Overall, fathers and mothers seem to have similar views about quality of their relationship with their partner, although mothers are slightly less positive. They are

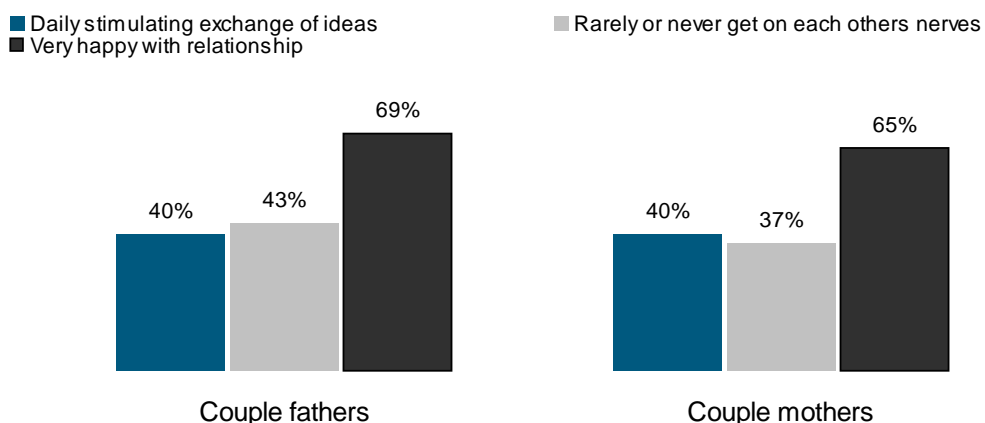
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<sup>9</sup> McKee-Ryan, F., Song, Z., Wanberg, C. R., & Kinicki, A. J. (2005). Psychological and physical well-being during unemployment: a meta-analytic study. *Journal of applied psychology*, 90 (1).

<sup>10</sup> In total parents in couple households were asked ten questions about their relationship with their partner, the answers to just three of these questions are shown here.

less likely to say that they are very happy (65%) and less likely to say their partner never gets on their nerves (37%) than fathers (69% and 43% respectively).

### Couple parents' relationship quality



Base: Parents in couple households with dependent children (Father N=4463 Mother N=5899)

Using the answers given by parents to ten questions about their relationship, we found three underlying 'factors'<sup>11</sup>:

- Couple interaction - doing things with your partner (based on three questions)<sup>12</sup>
- Couple stress - negative relationship factors (based on four questions)<sup>13</sup>
- Couple bliss - positive relationship factors (based on three questions)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Principal-component factor analysis was used to create three separate factor scores which were then used in linear regression and logistic regression analysis.

<sup>12</sup> This factor combines how often partners exchange ideas, how often they calmly discuss things and how often they work on a project together.

<sup>13</sup> This factor combines how often they consider divorce or separation, how often they regret getting married/forming the relationship, how often they quarrel and how often their partner gets on their nerves.

<sup>14</sup> This factor combines how often they kiss, how often they engage in interests together and the level of happiness with relationship.

Regression analysis was used to examine whether fathers' and mothers' social-demographic characteristics were linked to relationship quality. We found the following associations:

### **Fathers**

- **Work status** – unemployed and economically inactive fathers appear to have more negative relationships with their partners than employed fathers.
- **Marital status** - married fathers reported less negative relationships factors and more positive factors than cohabiting fathers.
- **Ethnicity** - Asian fathers are less likely to report negative relationships factors than White fathers, and Black and Asian fathers report less positive relationship factors than White fathers. However, Black fathers are more likely to report doing things with their partners.

### **Mothers**

- **Education** – mothers with higher educational attainment are more likely to do things with their partner and less likely to have negative relationships.
- **Marital status** - married mothers reported less negative relationships factors and more positive factors than cohabiting mothers.
- **Number of children** – mothers with three or more children are more likely to do things with their partner than those with just one child. Mothers with multiple children have less negative relationships than those with one child.
- **Work status of partner** – mothers with unemployed and economically inactive partners have more negative relationships with their partners than those with employed partners.
- **Ethnicity** - Black and Asian mothers report less positive relationship factors than White mothers. However, Black mothers were more likely to report doing things with their partners.

There are some noticeable differences in the socio-demographic characteristics which appear to be associated with relationship quality for fathers and mothers. For example, education and number of children are not significantly related to relationship quality reported by fathers while they are significant factors for mothers. For mothers, their own work status is not linked with relationship quality, but the work status of their partner is.

However, in addition to the socio-demographics outlined here we would expect that relationship quality would be related to a range of other factors which would be more personal and subjective in nature.

## Does the quality of the parental relationship matter for paternal and maternal involvement with children?

We examined whether there was an association between parental relationship quality and involvement with children. This analysis used the three relationship quality factors and focused on three aspects of involvement (talking to children about important things, praising children and shouting at children).

### **Fathers**

- Fathers who have high 'Couple interaction' are **more likely** to report that they praise their children and talk to them daily about important things.
- Fathers who report high 'Couple stress' are **more likely** to shout at their children.
- Father who report high 'Couple bliss' are **more likely** to praise their children.

### **Mothers**

- Mother who have high 'Couple interaction' are **more likely** to talk to their children daily about important things and **less likely** to shout at them<sup>15</sup>.
- Mothers who report high 'Couple stress' are **more likely** to shout at their children and mothers who report fewer negative factors are **more likely** to praise them.
- Mothers who report high 'Couple bliss' are **more likely** to praise their children.

In support of earlier research and the 'spillover model', we found that fathers and mothers who report better quality relationships with their partners are more involved with their children, when controlling for other factors.

For a full set of tables supporting analyses presented in this paper, please see <http://www.modernfatherhood.org/publications/>

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<sup>15</sup> It is borderline significant (at 10% level rather than 5% level) that mothers who do more things with their partner are more likely to praise their children very often.