



Does early paternal involvement predict offspring developmental diagnoses?



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ABSTRACT

Background: A long line of research has illustrated that fathers play an important role in the development of their children. Few studies, however, have examined the impact of paternal involvement at the earliest stages of life on developmental diagnoses in childhood.

Aims: The present study extends this line of research by exploring the possibility that paternal involvement prenatally, postnatally, and at the time of birth may influence offspring risk for various diagnoses in childhood.

Study design: A quasi-experimental, propensity score matching design was used to create treatment and control groups to assess the relationship between paternal involvement at each stage of development and developmental diagnoses.

Subjects: Approximately 6000 children, and a subsample of fathers, who participated in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

Outcome measures: Activity, attention and learning, speech or language, and other diagnoses in early childhood, and overall number of diagnoses at 4 years of age.

Results: We find no consistent evidence that low paternal involvement prenatally or postnatally increases the risk of various developmental diagnoses by age 4. However, children whose fathers were absent at the time of their birth were at significantly greater risk of incurring various developmental diagnoses, as well as a significantly greater number of developmental diagnoses.

Conclusions: The findings expand our understanding of exactly how early paternal influence begins and the specific dimensions of early father behaviors that are related to the risk of various developmental diagnoses. Ultimately, these results have important implications concerning father involvement during the earliest stages of the life course.

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1. Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests that fathers play an important role in the development of their children. For instance, fathers often provide financial, emotional, and practical support to their offspring, which would be expected to improve the child's developmental trajectory and life chances. Research on the relationship between father involvement and child wellbeing has indicated that fathers can have a profound and unique influence on various dimensions of offspring development, including cognitive [1,2] social [3,4] emotional [5], and behavioral [6,7] development. Ultimately, the general consensus in the literature is that fathers can have a long-lasting influence on the life trajectory of their offspring.

Although the body of research examining the influence of paternal traits and behaviors on offspring development is extensive, the majority of studies focus on fathering at a single stage of the life course, typically from late infancy onward [2,3,6,7]. While some research has considered the role of father involvement during pregnancy on child outcomes [8], most of these studies explore whether paternal prenatal support predicts maternal wellbeing during and after pregnancy [8,9], infant mortality and/or preterm birth [10,11], or subsequent paternal involvement with the child [12]. These studies tend to overlook the possibility that, in addition to father involvement postnatally, paternal involvement prenatally and at the time of birth may predict developmental outcomes in children. The current study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining whether father involvement prenatally, postnatally, and at the time of birth predicts the likelihood of receiving one (or more) of several developmental diagnoses during early childhood.

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A long line of research has examined the influence of mothers' parenting practices on various child outcomes [13]. However, an ever-growing number of scholars are beginning to turn their attention to the role of fathers in offspring development [2,3]. This body of research varies in terms of scope and emphasis, with different scholars examining fathers' impact on interrelated, yet distinct child outcomes at separate life stages. To illustrate, a recent study of 123 preschool-aged children and their fathers revealed that father laxness, depression, and frequent demands when children were 3 years of age increased offspring externalizing behavior as well as cognitive and social skills deficits at 6 years of age [2]. A similar study detected a significant relationship between fathers' controlling parenting and impaired executive functioning in offspring at age 3 [1]. Conversely, paternal engagement in cognitively-stimulating activities with their toddler appears to enhance the child's memory, vocabulary, problem-solving, reasoning, and counting abilities [3].

The influence of fathers appears to persist during later stages of development as well. For instance, a recent study indicated that less observed paternal sensitivity corresponds to higher levels of inattentiveness during middle childhood, and that intrusive paternal behavior (i.e., physical or verbal control over child's play) is predictive of hyperactive-impulsive behaviors at school [7]. Recent research has also suggested that risky fathering behaviors (e.g., alcohol use) during late childhood can also diminish child wellbeing by increasing the extent of their problem behaviors and deviant peer associations [4]. Alternatively, research has indicated that father's play sensitivity, which involves motivating, instructing, and cooperating with the child during play, is predictive of a child's internal working model of attachment at age 10 [5].

In addition to the body of research examining the influence of fathers on their offspring during childhood, a number of scholars have examined paternal influence during the adolescent years. A review by Guilamo-Ramos and colleagues [6], for example, found that the paternal-offspring relationship and communication style were significantly associated with adolescent sexual behavior. Research has also indicated that youth whose fathers who provide less affection/care and more overprotection and authoritarian control are significantly more likely to exhibit ADHD symptomatology during adolescence [14]. Other research has revealed that paternal traits and behaviors can influence an adolescent's mental health and behavior [15]. Ultimately, the research linking father involvement (or lack of involvement) to the developmental trajectories of offspring is (a) extensive, (b) supportive across several life stages, and (c) broad in the scope of its outcomes.

While many researchers have examined the role of fathers in numerous aspects of child development, comparatively less have explored *how early* in the life course this paternal influence begins. Because much of the research focuses on fathering during childhood and beyond, the possibility that paternal influence on offspring development may emerge at an earlier life stage is often overlooked. Research recently revealed that remote and disengaged interactions between fathers and their 3-month-old infants predict offspring externalizing behavior at age 1 [16]. Thus, the influence of fathers, at least on the behavioral patterns of their children, appears to emerge even shortly after the child's birth.

A growing number of scholars are beginning to examine father involvement at an even earlier stage of development: the prenatal period [8,12]. Specifically, some researchers have started to emphasize the potential importance of father involvement and support of the mother during the pregnancy [8,11]. The majority of these studies, however, examine paternal prenatal involvement as a predictor of maternal wellbeing [8,9] and future paternal involvement [12]. Additionally, a handful of studies have also considered whether paternal prenatal support predicts infant perinatal outcomes, such as infant mortality and prematurity [10,11]. Research examining paternal involvement and support during labor and delivery, moreover, tends to explore its impact on concurrent maternal mental health/distress [17], maternal satisfaction with

the childbirth experience [18], and partner relationship quality [19]. To the best of our knowledge, research to date has not explicitly tested whether fathers' involvement before and at the time of birth might be implicated in offspring developmental outcomes *during childhood*.

In the current study, we examine whether paternal involvement during prenatal, perinatal, and infant stages of development independently predict developmental diagnoses of the offspring in early childhood. Developmental delays in early childhood related to activity, attention and learning, and speech/language diagnoses have been associated with several adverse outcomes at later life stages, including educational failure, difficulties maintaining employment, and troubled relationships [20]. Prior research has also indicated that risk factors for such delays may be present as early as the prenatal, perinatal, and infant stages of development [21]. This body of literature has primarily emphasized factors related to the health and behaviors of the mother; less attention, however, has been given to the role fathers play in shaping the development of their children during these periods. Instead, scholarship has largely focused on his involvement in terms of its impact on fathering outcomes (e.g., paternal attachment) or the wellbeing of the mother (e.g., promoting maternal health, reduced maternal stress during labor and delivery) [18,22,23].

The current study builds upon this body of work and examines whether paternal involvement during prenatal, perinatal, and infant stages of development independently predict developmental diagnoses of the offspring in early childhood. Although a limited number of studies have suggested that paternal involvement during prenatal development and infancy are associated with child wellbeing [10,11], the extent to which paternal involvement impacts developmental diagnoses remains unclear. Moreover, since the 1970's, there has been a substantial increase in the number of fathers present during the labor and delivery of their children [24]. Even so, research exploring father involvement at birth and offspring developmental outcomes is lacking. Understanding the role of early paternal involvement on developmental diagnoses may be useful in efforts to improve outcomes for children at-risk for developmental delays.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Sample

The present study uses data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B examines a large, nationally-representative sample of approximately 10,600 children born in the United States in 2001. Using a stratified sampling approach, ECLS-B researchers sampled birth certificates registered with the National Center for Health Statistics in the year 2001. Children were deemed ineligible if a) they died before the age of 9 months; b) they were adopted before the age of 9 months; or c) their mothers were younger than 15 at the time of birth. Five waves of data have been collected to date, following subjects from birth through early childhood. Data were collected from multiple sources, including both parents, ECLS-B researchers, day care providers, and school teachers. Additionally, direct assessments of children's cognitive skills as well as birth certificate data were obtained.

Interviews at wave 1 were conducted between the fall of 2001 and the fall of 2002, when the children were, on average, about 9 months of age.¹ The primary caregiver (which was typically the mother) was asked a range of questions regarding their own mental health, accomplishments, and wellbeing, as well as questions regarding family life and the focal child's temperament, development, and behavior. During wave 1, a subsample of over 6000 fathers was also interviewed. Each father was asked several questions about his relationship with the focal child and the child's mother, as well as his employment history, education, and mental health. Importantly, questions regarding the

¹ Children ranged from approximately 6 to 14 months of age.

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