



## Research article

# The association between characteristics of fathering in infancy and depressive symptoms in adolescence: A UK birth cohort study



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 27 November 2015

Received in revised form 9 May 2016

Accepted 10 June 2016

## Keywords:

Father involvement

Attitudes

Child care

Abuse

Depressive symptoms

Adolescents

## ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that the quality of fathers' parenting has an impact on psychological outcomes during adolescence, but less is known about which aspects of fathering have the strongest effects. This study, using the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), considers which paternal attitudes towards and experiences of child care in infancy are most strongly associated with depressive symptoms in adolescence, and whether father effects are independent of maternal influence and other risk factors. Primary exposures were fathers' attitudes to and experiences of child care at 8 weeks, 8 months and 21 months coded as continuous scores; the primary outcome was self-reported depressive symptoms at 16 years (Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire score  $\geq 11$ ). Multivariable logistic regression models showed reasonably strong evidence that parental reports indicating potential paternal abuse when children were toddlers were associated with a 22% increased odds of depressive symptoms at age 16 (odds ratio [OR] 1.22 [95% CI 1.11, 1.34] per SD). There was some evidence for an interaction with social class ( $p = 0.04$ ): for children living in higher social class households (professional, managerial and technical classes), an increase in the potential abuse scale increased the odds of depressive symptoms by 31% (OR 1.31 [1.13, 1.53] per SD), whereas there was no effect in the lower social class categories. The potential paternal abuse measure needs to be validated and research is needed on what circumstances predict anger and frustration with child care. Effective interventions are needed to help fathers cope better with parenting stress.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of negative interactions with caregivers in early childhood for later outcomes is well established. Although there is debate about the extent to which children can recover from these damaging early influences (Allen, 2011; Wastell &

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White, 2012), there is strong evidence that the first years of a child's life have a profound effect on their later development and particularly on their emotional well-being (Agid, Kohn, & Lerer, 2000).

There is increasing awareness of the potential impact of father involvement specifically on the longer-term psychosocial functioning of children. Longitudinal research indicates independent positive effects of father involvement on child psychological (Culpin, Heron, Araya, Melotti, & Joinson, 2013; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Jorm, Dear, Rodgers, & Christensen, 2003) behavioural (Aldous & Mulligan, 2002) and cognitive outcomes (Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004).

Lamb (2010), in summarising the greatly expanded field of research on father influence, notes that the effects mothers and fathers have on children are more similar than they are different. Fathers' individual characteristics are less important in determining influence on child development than the quality of father-child relationship. The amount of time fathers spend with children appears to be less important than the quality of that contact and how it is perceived by fathers and their children.

Pleck's (2012) overview of father involvement research notes that work in the 1980s focused on three elements: engagement (i.e. direct interaction through hands-on care and play), accessibility (i.e. being available) and responsibility (i.e. ensuring that various parenting activities are carried out). In this early research, based largely on monitoring of time spent on activities via diary-keeping, no association was found between these dimensions of involvement and child outcomes. Pleck (2010) later presented a revised conceptualization of father involvement with three dimensions which drew on the wider knowledge about effective parenting: positive engagement activities, warmth and responsiveness and control.

Paternal attitudes may also be associated with father involvement. Bulanda (2004) found that men whose personal ideologies were more in line with gender equality were more involved with children than men with more traditional views. Some studies have questioned how closely attitudes are associated with practices (Wall & Arnold, 2007). For instance, Poortman and Van Der Lippe (2009) found paternal attitudes to child care to be associated with actual time spent on child care (self-report from time diaries) only when individual items were summed into an overall score. There seems to be a lack of evidence, however, on the relationship between paternal attitudes and quality of relationship with child and on the association between paternal attitudes and longer-term child outcomes.

Although there is evidence from the UK on the effects of father presence, little is known about fathers' attitudes to child care and their relationship with children. Most of this evidence is US-based. Despite their historical connections, there are social and cultural differences between the UK and the US and it cannot be straightforwardly assumed that findings in one country will apply to the other. Most existing evidence is also from cross-sectional rather than longitudinal studies. Another limitation of the existing evidence base is that father involvement studies examine mainstream fathering and do not consider the more extreme negative responses to children, which are considered in a separate body of research on child abuse.

Our study focuses on the long-term effects of early fathering. Specifically, it examines the association between fathers' attitudes towards and experiences of child care when their children are infants and subsequent depression in those children during adolescence.

A range of studies have identified biological, genetic, demographic, familial, psychosocial and cognitive correlates of depression in adolescence (Birmaher et al., 1996). Focusing more specifically on demographic and familial factors, there is evidence of a social class gradient for adolescent depression (Goodman, 1999) and elevated risk of adolescent onset in girls (Cyranski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000) and following stressful life events such as divorce, bereavement and exposure to suicide (Birmaher et al., 1996). Higher levels of maternal depression are associated with adolescent depressive symptoms (Goodman et al., 2011). Paternal depression is also associated with a variety of emotional and behaviour problems in children and adolescents (Ramchandani et al., 2008, 2011).

Several of these risk factors for adolescent depression may also map onto patterns of fathering. There is some evidence that paternal involvement varies according to socio-economic status and is often limited in low-income families (Hango, 2007). Higher levels of maternal depression (Paulson, Dauber, & Liefman, 2006) and paternal depression (Wilson & Durbin, 2010) are associated with lower levels of father involvement.

The attachment bond between caregiver and infant is one plausible reason for the apparent importance of fathers to children's subsequent well-being. There has been limited empirical investigation of father-infant attachment. However, there is some evidence to suggest that it has a comparable effect to that of mothers on the development of depressive symptoms in adolescence (Ainsworth, 1989; Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000). Low levels of paternal involvement during the sensitive developmental stage of early childhood may be associated with disrupted attachment (Belsky et al., 1996), which in turn constitutes a risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms in adolescence (Kenny, Moilanen, Lomax, & Brabeck, 1993). Another possible mechanism is marital conflict, which is associated both with lower levels of parental involvement (Erel & Burman, 1995) and higher risk of adolescent depression (Hanington, Heron, Stein, & Ramchandani, 2012). As Lamb (2012) has argued, regardless of how developmental mechanisms are conceptualised, the association between parental warmth and children's adjustment (at all ages) is one of the best evidenced in child development research.

The term 'fathers' is not restricted to biological fathers in this paper. The study is focused on the relationships between infants and men in a parenting role, regardless of biological status, because of the diversity of contemporary family structure (Mann, 2009) and because most evidence suggests that biological status is less important in predicting children's well-being. Lamb (2012) notes that children's adjustment is best predicted by quality of parenting, parent-child relationships, parental relationships and socio-economic resources, rather than by family structure, including biological relatedness.

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