



WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Science to Care

Pregnancy Through Childhood: Do Fathers Matter? **July 15, 2014**

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Overview: The purpose of this presentation is to describe the unique contributions of fathers from pregnancy through childhood, explain the longitudinal impact of fathers on infant and child outcomes, and recognize the pivotal next steps for research, clinical practice, and policy.

History: Fatherhood is a product of the current economical and environmental process. The role of the father has changed throughout history to reflect the environment of the times. In the Colonial Era, the father was expected to guide children through their education, socialization, and religion. During the Industrial Revolution, as fathers began working outside the home, they became less involved in the child's life and motherhood began to develop more strongly.

The modern era has brought about the nuclear family and fathers and mothers serve as equal guides in the development of the child. However, many federal services still exclude fathers. There is less effort to include the father's name on birth records and a lower percentage of parental leave is provided to fathers through the Family Medical Leave Act. Furthermore, a gender bias still exists in custody battles. These all devalue the worth and contribution of fathers.

Fatherhood During the Prenatal Stage

- Fatherhood starts at conception
- Research indicates a father's intention of having a child the father's involvement with the mother during pregnancy help improve the mother's prenatal care
 - Father involvement linked to reduced maternal smoking and alcohol use
 - Absent fathers are linked to poor birth outcomes across race/ethnicity:
 - Low birth weight
 - Preterm to very preterm births
 - Small for gestational age

- Infant mortality
- A father's support during pregnancy predicts less maternal postpartum anxiety and depression, as well as future infant distress

Fatherhood During Birth

- The support of a father or companion during birth reduced the rate of:
 - Cesarean section deliveries
 - Epidural anesthesia
 - Duration of labor
- Much research has been conducted on the importance of skin to skin contact between child and mother immediately after childbirth, but there has not been much research to examine this importance for fathers

A Father's Transition to Postpartum

Fathers undergo some major life-adjustments after the birth of their child, including:

- Work/family/personal life balance
- Paternity leave
- Financial responsibilities
- Interparental relationship
- Sex life
- Coping with often being the secondary parent
- Mental health

Due to these significant transitions, which occur after childbirth, fathers are at a higher risk of developing depression. Risk of depression increases in both men and women with children. Research suggests that fathers manifest depression differently than mothers. Fathers tend to underreport their symptoms and men are less likely to seek psychiatric treatment. Fathers tend to report, experience, and respond to depression differently than women. Fathers experience more externalizing symptoms, rather than the emotional, internalizing symptoms women face.

Postpartum depression can affect a family's long-term health. Father and mother postpartum depression is associated with toddler mental health. Traits such as anxiety, sadness, perfectionism, and aggression are more common in children whose parents suffer from postpartum depression.

A Father's Role in Parenting

It is important for fathers to have a role in parenting during infancy. Fathers must be involved with vocalizations, gaze, facial expressions, physical contact, and sensitivity. As children transition into childhood and adolescence, fathers play a significant role in boundaries, exploration, teaching, engagement, and age-appropriate play. Of particular importance is rough and tumble play—as this benefits both sons and daughters. Rough and tumble play is important for a child's brain development. It helps them manage their ideas and feelings and allows them to orient themselves, their behaviors, and their moods.

Research indicates that interactions between parents affect how children develop. Interparental Functioning manifests itself in many ways:

- Emotional Security Theory—the attempt by the person to establish, maintain, change, or terminate the relation between the person and the environment on matters of significance to the person
- Modeling—the child learns how to treat people and act based on parents' actions

- Cognitive-Contextual Model
- Triangulation Model—one or both parents will pull the child into the problem between their spouse
- Spillover Hypothesis—a conflict at home spills over to the relationship with the child
- Interparental Conflict-Parental Depression Model

There may be biological changes that occur in fathers during the perinatal period, but research has yet to examine this in depth. There is research that shows that testosterone levels drop when parents engage with their child, and as lower levels of testosterone are related to depression, this may be key in understanding depression in fathers.

In conclusion, researches must examine the largely under-researched area of fatherhood and the role of the father in order to better protect the health of the father and child. The Fathers' Mental Health Center at NU (<http://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/sites/asher-center/index.html>) is working towards the inclusion of fathers in perinatal studies in order to better understand perinatal depression, perinatal hormone changes, shared experiences between mothers and fathers, and unique experiences.