

Non-resident father involvement with their two-year-old children: Findings from the ECLS-B

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Introduction

Due to societal changes in family structure, researchers and policy makers have been increasingly interested in identifying factors associated with non-residential fathers' contact with their biological children. Father involvement has been associated with children's academic and social outcomes. The current investigation utilizes data collected from non-residential fathers by the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to examine correlates of involvement when children were approximately 2-years old.

Sample

ECLS-B is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 14,000 children. Data were collected from non-residential fathers (NRF) when the children were approximately 9-months, and 2-years. At the 2-year follow-up, mothers of 2,054 children reported that there was no resident father living in the home. The Non-resident Father Questionnaire (NFQ) was administered to children's biological fathers who did not reside in the household with the child, when the mother gave permission and reported he had contact (by phone or in person) with the child in the last month or talked with the mother about the child several times a year. Of an estimated 1,618 fathers who would be eligible as non-residential fathers (an estimated 500 NRF would not meet eligibility), the NFQ at 2-years was completed by biological fathers of 660 children (331 girls, 320 boys; 23% white, non-Hispanic; 17.7% African American; 17.2% Hispanic; 0.6% Asian American, 3.5% Native American or Alaska Native; and 8.8% more than one race, non-Hispanic).

Measures

Non-residential fathers' self-report data were used to compute five indicators of NRF involvement at two years:

- Number of times the NRF reported *seeing the child* in the past 3 months; NRF rating of how often he spent *one or more hours* with the child in the past month; NRF rating of how often he *looked after* the child in the last month; NRF rating of involvement in *instrumental* caregiving activities (e.g., prepare food, wash dishes; 7 items, $\alpha = .93$); NRF rating of involvement in *play / enrichment* activities (e.g., read books, play chase; 11 items, $\alpha = .86$).

Teacher-child assessments using the Bayley Short Form- Research Edition (BSF-R) were used to assess children's *mental ability* and *motor ability* at 2-years.

Classroom teachers provided measures of children's *peer competence* (e.g., accepted by other children, makes friends easily; 6 items, $\alpha = .81$) and pre-academic *kindergarten readiness* skills (e.g., knows colors, alphabet; 8 items, $\alpha = .84$).

Results

Table 1:
T-scores for measures of Nonresident Father Involvement and child sex and NRF self-reported items.

	Seen child	One or more hours	Looked after	Instrumental	Play / enrichment
Child Sex	0.33	0.61	1.13	1.15	1.20
Father wanted child?	1.48	0.04	0.32	0.55	1.59
Ever married to Mother?	1.47	1.12	1.275	1.435	-.013
NRF Self-Reported Major Depression	3.51**	3.93**	3.34**	4.22**	3.13**
NRF Self-Reported Drug Abuse	1.25	.42	2.65*	3.40**	2.60**
NRF Self-Reported Alcohol Abuse	0.24	0.66	1.06	1.63	2.014*

Notes: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Table 3
Associations between non-residential father-child interaction and child outcomes.

	2-year Motor	2-year Mental	Peer Competence	Kindergarten Readiness
BOYS				
2-year Instrumental	-.10	-.09	.02	-.02
2-year Play	-.03	-.03	.01	-.04
GIRLS				
2-year Instrumental	-.04	-.04	-.09	-.06
2-year play	-.03	-.04	-.08	-.07

Table 2
Associations between non-residential father-reported involvement with child and non-residential father reported variables.

	Seen child	One or more hours	Looked after	Instrumental	Play / enrichment
Relationship with mother	.15**	.26**	.16**	.15**	.26**
Efficacy as father	.28**	.35**	.33**	.42**	.43**
Timing of first holding baby	.12**	.10	.01	.02	.01
Closeness to baby at 9-months	.16*	.12*	.09	.05	.20*
Attend religious services	.05	.09*	.13**	.12**	.10**
Household income	.01	.06	.01	.01	.01
Hours worked per week	.01	.05	.04	.04	.11**
Highest grade completed	.05	.07	.03	.02	.04
NRF general health	-.08	-.14**	-.13**	-.16**	-.15**
NRF age when first child born	.12*	.10	.01	.06	.09
NRF's total # of bio. children	-.01	-.04	-.04	-.12**	-.13**
NRF belief importance father play	.16**	.12*	.09	.05	.20**

Notes: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

T-scores between the five NRF involvement measures and dichotomous child variables were computed (see Table 1). No significant difference was obtained between child sex, if NRF had ever married the mother, and NRF's belief that they wanted the child. Significant t-scores were obtained for measures of involvement and NRF reports of their own depression, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse.

Table 2 presents correlations between the five NRF involvement measures and continuous variables. Significant associations were found for NRF reports of quality of the relationship with the mother, efficacy as a father, 9-month closeness to baby, attendance of religious services, and belief that father-child play is important.

No significant associations were obtained for boys or for girls between measures of children's outcomes and NRF 2-year instrumental caregiving or 2-year play/enrichment activities (see Table 3).