Resident father-child involvement: Associations with young children's social development and kindergarten readiness in the ECLS-B study.

The quantity and quality of interaction between fathers and young children differs from that between mothers and young children, and father-child interaction may play a unique role in children's development. The current investigation examined correlates of father-child interaction in instrumental child care activities, as well as enrichment and play activities, using data collected from residential fathers in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

The ECLS-B is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 14,000 children. Data were collected when the children were approximately 9-months, 2-years, and 4-years. The current study uses data only from cases that included a residential father at 9-months, resulting in 8,453 children (4112 girls, 4341 boys) representing diverse backgrounds (49.1% white, non-Hispanic; 8.2% African American, non-Hispanic; 19.6% Hispanic; 12.1% Asian, non-Hispanic; 3% Native American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 7.9% more than one race). Biological fathers comprised the vast majority (8,304 or 98.2%) of the residential fathers at 9-months (others included 16 adopted fathers, 26 stepfathers, 6 foster fathers, 75 mothers' partners; and 26 father figures); the fathers ranged in age from 15 to 75 years (*mean* = 32.1). At the 2-year follow-up, data were collected from the residential fathers of 7,781 children (3783 girls; 48.8% white, non-Hispanic). At the 4-year follow-up, data were collected from residential fathers of 7,070 children (3,456 girls; 48.3% white, non-Hispanic). Of this group, 4,571 of the children (2,191 girls; 51.3% white, non-Hispanic) had sufficient data for preschool caregiver measures.

Fathers' reports were used to compute father involvement in *instrumental* activities (e.g., feeding, diapering) at 9-months (11 items, α = .86), 2-years (10 items, α = .83), and preschool (5 items, α = .83) and *enrichment / play* activities (e.g., read books, play peekaboo, play chase) at 9-months (8 items, α = .62), 2-years (12 items, α = .78) and preschool (5 items, α = .67). Direct child assessments using the Bayley Short Form-Research Edition (BSF-R) were used to assess children's *mental ability* and *motor ability* at 9-months and 2-years. Preschool teachers provided measures of children's *peer competence* (e.g, accepted by other children, makes friends easily; 6 items, α = .81) and pre-academic *kindergarten readiness* skills (e.g., knows colors, alphabet; 8 items, α = .84).

Results indicate considerable stability in father involvement in both instrumental and enrichment/play activities with both boys and girls from 9-months to 2-years to 4-years (see Table 1). For boys, father enrichment/play at 9-months was significantly associated with both mental and motor skills at 9-months and 2-years. Boys' kindergarten readiness was associated with fathers' participation in instrumental activities at 9-months, 2-years, and 4-years. Preschool teacher ratings of boys' peer competence were significantly associated with father play/enrichment at 9-months, 2-years, and 4-years. For girls, 9-month father play/enrichment was associated with 9-month motor and mental skills, and 2-year father play/enrichment was associated with 2-year motor and mental skills. Discussion will center on results from follow-up regression analysis suggesting that levels of concurrent father-child involvement are more important predictors than cumulative.

Table 1:

Continuity in residential father-reported involvement with child in play / enrichment activities and instrumental caregiving activities from 9-months to 4-years for boys and girls.

	9-month Play	9-month Instrumental	2-year Play	2-year Instrumental	4-year Play	4-year Instrumental
BOYS						
9-month Play	1.0					
9-month Instrumental	.50**	1.0				
2-year Play	.51**	.33**	1.0			
2-year Instrumental	.33**	.55**	.56**	1.0		
4-year Play	.38**	.28**	.47**	.30**	1.0	
4-year Instrumental	.27**	.43**	.31**	.44**	.52**	1.0
GIRLS						
9-month Play	1.0					
9-month Instrumental	.47**	1.0				
2-year Play	.50**	.38**	1.0			
2-year Instrumental	.31**	.58**	.59**	1.0		
4-year Play	.36**	.25**	.31**	.47**	1.0	
4-year Instrumental	.22**	.38**	.47**	.33**	.52**	1.0

Note: ** = $\underline{p} < .01$.

Table 2: Associations between residential father-reported involvement with child and measures of children's outcomes.

	9-month Play[1]	9-month Instrument[1]	2-year Play[2]	2-year Instrument[2]	4-year Play[3]	4-year Instrument[3]
BOYS						
9-month Motor	.05**	.04*				
9-month Mental	.05**	.03				
2-year Motor	.04*	.00	.06**	.04*		
2-year Mental	.04*	.01	.05**	.05*		
Peer Competence	.09**	.05*	.09**	.04	.08**	.03
Kindergarten Readiness	-.01	.07**	.04	.07**	.02	.06*
GIRLS						
9-month Motor	.07**	-.01				
9-month Mental	.08**	.01				
2-year Motor	.03	-.03	.05*	.01		
2-year Mental	.03	-.04*	.04*	.01		
Peer Competence	.04	.02	.04	.01	.04	.01
Kindergarten Readiness	-.01	-.02	.03	.01	-.01	-.03

Notes: [1] includes all cases in which a residential father reported at 9-months; [2] includes cases in which the same residential father reported at 9-months and 2-years; [3] includes cases in which the same residential father reported at 9-months, 2-years, and 4-years; * = $\underline{p} < .05$, ** = $\underline{p} < .01$.