

*Non-resident father involvement with their two-year-old children:*

*Findings from the ECLS-B*

Darrell Meece

May 6, 2013

School of Education

Department 4154

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

615 McCallie Avenue

Chattanooga, TN 37403

This research reports results from data examined under contract with the U.S. Department of Education. Dissemination of these findings has been approved by the Institute of Education Sciences. Correspondance should be submitted via e-mail to [Darrell-Meece@utc.edu](mailto:Darrell-Meece@utc.edu)

*Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to examine correlates of non-residential father-child involvement with their children at age 2. This study utilized secondary analysis of data collected through the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Birth Cohort. Participants included 650 biological fathers who did not reside with their child at age 2. Significant associations were found between levels of non-residential father involvement and the non-residential father's reports of the 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. Non-residential fathers who reported higher levels of depression and drug or alcohol abuse were less likely to be involved with their child at age 2. These findings may prove useful in better understanding non-residential fathers' involvement with their children, and particularly for the development of policies and programs to encourage increased father-child involvement.

*Non-resident father involvement with their two-year-old children:*

*Findings from the ECLS-B*

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.

Based upon the literature that has focused on residential fathers, we know that residential fathers spend a higher proportion of their time interacting with young children engaged in play (Lamb, 2010) than do mothers. Moreover, the quality of play between fathers and young children differs from that between mothers and young children (Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997). Parent-child interaction may play an important role in children's subsequent interaction with peers (Mize, Pettit, & Meece, 2000), and father-child interaction may be particularly important for children's development of peer-based social behaviors (Meece & Mize, 2011). However, there have been few studies of father-child interaction among non-resident fathers and their children.

Method

The 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 2,050 of the children reported that there was no resident father living in the home. The Nonresident 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 1,600 fathers who would be eligible (an estimated 500 NRF would not meet eligibility) as non-residential fathers, the NFQ at 2-years was completed by biological fathers of 650 children (350 girls, 300 boys; 23% white, non-Hispanic; 46.7% 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). Sample sizes are rounded to the nearest 50 as per data use guidelines.

### Measures

NFQ data were used to compute five indicators of NRF involvement: the 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; a scale of involvement in *instrumental* caregiving activities (e.g., prepare food, wash child; 7 items,  $\alpha = .93$ ); and a scale of involvement in play / enrichment activities (e.g., read books, play

chase; 11 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ). Measures of child characteristics and NRF characteristics were taken from the 2-year NFQ and one composite measure of NRF closeness to the child at 9-months (e.g., carries picture of child, talks about child; 5 items  $\alpha = .52$ ) was computed from the 9-month NFQ.

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,  $\alpha = .81$ ) and pre-academic *kindergarten readiness* skills (e.g., knows colors, alphabet; 8 items,  $\alpha = .8$ ).

## Results

Table 1 presents t-scores between the five NRF involvement measures and dichotomous child and father variables. No significant difference was obtained between child sex, if NRF had ever married the mother, and NRF's report that they wanted the child. Significant t-scores were obtained for measures of NRF 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 the 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. Table 3 presents associations between both measures of NRF 2-year instrumental caregiving and 2-year play/enrichment activities and measures of children's outcomes. No significant associations were obtained for boys or for girls.

Table 1:

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

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

*Note:* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ .



|                                      | Seen child | One or more<br>hours | Looked<br>after | Instrumenta<br>l | Play /<br>enrichment |
|--------------------------------------|------------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Relationship with<br>mother          | .15**      | .26**                | .16**           | .15**            | .26**                |
| Efficacy as<br>father                | .28**      | .35**                | .33**           | .42**            | .43**                |
| Timing of first<br>holding baby      | .12**      | .10                  | .01             | .02              | .01                  |
| Closeness to<br>baby at 9-<br>months | .16*       | .12*                 | .09             | .05              | .20**                |
| Attend religious<br>services         | .05        | .09*                 | .13**           | .12**            | .10*                 |
| Household<br>income                  | .01        | .06                  | .01             | .01              | .01                  |
| Hours worked<br>per week             | .01        | .05                  | .04             | .04              | .11*                 |
| Highest grade<br>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**  |

---

*Note:* \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ .

Table 3

*Associations between non-residential father care-giving measures and child outcome variables at age 2 and four-year-old peer competence and kindergarten readiness.*

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

### Discussion

Non-residential biological fathers who reported higher levels of depression and drug or alcohol abuse were less likely to be involved with their child at age 2. Other factors significantly associated with non-residential father involvement included the fathers' perceptions of the quality of the relationship with the mother, efficacy as a father, 9-month closeness to baby, attendance of religious services, and the belief that father-child play is important.

This study is limited by reliance on an existing data set, and so only measures that were originally included in the ECLS-B investigation could be utilized.

Thus, as with all studies involving secondary analysis of data, the validity of the measures is jeopardized. However, this study benefits from the large, representative sample made available by the ECLS-B, which benefits the generalizability of findings. Further research is necessary to determine if any linkages exist between residential father involvement and children's peer-based behavior.

#### References

- Lamb, M. E. (2010). "How do fathers influence children's development? Let me count the ways," in *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed.*, M. E. Lamb, Ed., John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ, USA.
- Lindsey, E. W., Mize, J. & Pettit, G. S. (1997). Differential play patterns of mothers and fathers of sons and daughters: Implications for children's gender role development, *Sex Roles*, Vol. 37, Nos 9/10, pp. 643-661.
- Meece, D., & Mize, J. (2011). Preschoolers' Cognitive Representations of Peer Relationships: Family Origins and Behavioral Correlates. *Early Child Development and Care*, 181, 63-72.
- Mize, J., Pettit, G. S., & Meece, D. (2000). Explaining the link between parenting behavior and children's peer competence: A critical examination of the "mediating-process" hypothesis. In K. Kerns, J. Contreras, & E. M. Neal-Barnett (Eds.), *Family and Peers: Linking Two Social Worlds*. (pp. 195-226). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.