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Until recently, fathers were the hidden parent in research on children's well-being. Their importance to children's financial well-being was widely accepted, but their contribution to other aspects of children's development was often assumed to be secondary to that of mothers and was not usually examined. Reflecting this bias in research on child development, many federal agencies, and programs dealing with family issues, focused almost exclusively on mothers and their children. In 1995, President Clinton issued a memorandum requesting that all executive departments and agencies make a concerted effort to include fathers in their programs, policies, and research programs where appropriate and feasible (Clinton, 1995). Research stimulated by the new interest in fathers suggests that fathers' involvement in their children's schools does make a difference in their children's education (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997).

This Digest looks at the extent to which fathers are involved in their children's schools and the link between fathers' involvement and kindergartners' through 12th-graders' school performance, using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES:96).

1996 NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD EDUCATION SURVEY

The NHES:96 was sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The involvement of fathers in two-parent and in father-only families is presented and contrasted with that of mothers in two-parent and in mother-only families. Information related to the link between father involvement and student achievement is presented for children living in two-parent and in father-only households. (The analyses are restricted to children living with biological, step, or adoptive fathers. Children living with foster fathers are excluded.)

The NHES:96 asked about four types of school activities that parents could participate in during the school year: attending a general school meeting, attending a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attending a school or class event, and serving as a volunteer at the school. Parents are said to have low involvement in their children's schools if they have participated in none or only one of the four activities during the current school year. They are categorized as having moderate involvement if they have participated in at least two of the available activities. Those who have participated in three or four of the activities are said to be highly involved in their children's schools. (Not all schools offer parents the opportunity to be involved in each of these activities. Low involvement may be due to failure to take advantage of available opportunities for involvement or because schools do not offer parents opportunities for involvement.)

THE EXTENT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

TWO-PARENT FAMILIES The proportion of children living in two-parent families with highly involved fathers is about half of the proportion with highly involved mothers--27% and 56%, respectively. In other words, in two-parent families, children are twice as likely

to have mothers who are highly involved than to have fathers who are highly involved in their children's schools. Nearly half of children in two-parent families have fathers who participated in none or only one of the four activities since the beginning of the school year. In contrast, only 21% of children living in two-parent families have mothers with such low participation in their schools.

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

Children living with single fathers or with single mothers are about equally likely to have parents who are highly involved in their schools--46% and 49%, respectively. Both fathers and mothers who head single-parent families have levels of involvement in their children's schools that are quite similar to mothers in two-parent families and are much higher than fathers in two-parent families.

TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT

In two-parent families, there are two activities for which fathers' involvement approaches that of mothers: attendance at school or class events (such as a play, science fair, or sports event) and attendance at general school meetings. Fathers may find it easier to attend these types of activities because they are more likely than the other two to occur during nonschool and nonwork hours. Fathers in father-only families are more likely than fathers in two-parent families to participate in these and other activities, so work constraints are not the sole explanation for low involvement among fathers in two-parent families.

FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Policymakers and educators agree that family involvement in children's education is closely linked to children's school success (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Many policymakers, school officials, and families, however, often assume that family involvement means that mothers' involvement in schools is important. This assumption has some basis in fact in that mothers are more likely than fathers to be highly involved in their children's schools, and the extent of their involvement is strongly related to children's school performance and adjustment (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). However, an important question is, does fathers' involvement matter, as well?

FATHER PARTICIPATION IN TWO-PARENT FAMILIES

Half of students get mostly A's and enjoy school, according to their parents, when their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to about one-third of students when their fathers have low levels of involvement. Students are also half as likely to

have ever repeated a grade (7% vs. 15%) and are significantly less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled (10% vs. 18%) if their fathers have high as opposed to low involvement in their schools. After taking into account such factors as mothers' involvement, fathers' and mothers' education, household income, and children's race/ethnicity, it was found that children are still more likely to get A's, participate in extracurricular activities, enjoy school, and are less likely to have ever repeated a grade if their fathers are involved in their schools compared to if they are not (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997).

After taking into account these other factors, it was found that mothers' involvement, but not fathers' involvement, is associated with a reduced likelihood of 6th- through 12th-graders having ever been suspended or expelled.

FATHER-ONLY HOUSEHOLDS

Children living in single-parent households are, on average, less successful in school and experience more behavior problems than children living in two-parent households (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Most research on single- parenthood focuses on children living with single mothers. However, children living in father-only households also do less well in school than children living in two-parent households.

Results also reveal that children in father-only households do better in school, are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, enjoy school more, and are less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to if they have only low levels of involvement. Nearly one-third of students get mostly A's when their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to 17% when their fathers have low levels of involvement in their schools. Even more striking, only 11% of 6th- through 12th-graders have ever been suspended or expelled when their fathers have high levels of involvement in their schools compared to 34% when their fathers have low levels of involvement in their schools. Although a similar pattern is observed for grade repetition, the difference between children whose fathers have high and low levels of involvement is not statistically significant.

Even after controlling for such factors as fathers' education, family income, and children's race/ethnicity, it was found that children do better in school and are less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers have high as opposed to low levels of involvement in their schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The observed patterns of fathers' involvement in their children's schools, linked to family structure, are consistent with existing research (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996) and with the notion that there is a division of labor in two-parent families, with mothers taking more responsibility for child-related tasks, whereas in single-parent families the lone parent assumes the responsibility. Fathers and mothers in two-parent families may be operating under the mistaken assumption that fathers do not matter as much as

mothers when it comes to involvement in their children's school. The results also support research showing that single fathers and mothers are more similar in their parenting behavior than are mothers and fathers in two-parent families (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992).

The low participation of fathers in two-parent families offers schools an opportunity to increase overall parental involvement. By targeting fathers, schools may be able to make greater gains in parental involvement than by targeting mothers or parents, in general. This is not to say that schools should not continue to welcome mothers' involvement, but because mothers already exhibit relatively high levels of participation in their children's schools, there is less room to increase their involvement.

The involvement of fathers in their children's schools is also important for children's achievement and behavior. In two-parent households, fathers' involvement in their children's schools has a distinct and independent influence on children's achievement over and above that of mothers. These findings show that fathers can be a positive force in their children's education, and that when they do get involved, their children are likely to do better in school. Unfortunately, many fathers are relatively uninvolved in their children's schools (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). These results should encourage fathers to become more involved in their children's schools and encourage schools to welcome fathers' involvement.

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