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RESEARCH NOTES

PATERNAL PARTICIPATION AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING AFTER MARITAL DISSOLUTION*

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Using a nationally representative sample of children aged 11–16 who had experienced their parents' marital dissolution, we examine the influence of paternal involvement on the child's well-being. For measures of academic difficulty, problem behavior, and psychological distress, there is little evidence that paternal involvement had either harmful or beneficial effects. Paternal economic support reduced somewhat the likelihood of problem behavior. Frequency of visitation and closeness of relationship to father showed no consistent influence on the available measures of child well-being.

The prevalence of divorce over the past decade implies that between a third and a half of all children in the U.S. will experience their parents' marital dissolution (Bane 1979; and Bumpass and Rindfuss 1979; Bumpass 1984; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill 1983). With this increasing incidence, concern has grown over the potentially deleterious consequences of marital dissolution for children. Prior to the 1970s, most researchers viewed divorce as a traumatic event that disrupted normal family functioning and was, therefore, likely to have negative behavioral, cognitive, and emotional consequences (see review by Herzog and Sudia 1973).

Led partly by empirical findings that did not show uniformly poorer outcomes for children experiencing divorce (Longfellow 1979; Thompson 1983), and partly by a growing recognition in developmental studies that most events do not produce a uniform response (Bronfenbrenner 1979), interest has recently shifted to the context and characteristics that condition children's responses (Furstenberg and Seltzer 1986). This paper focuses on one such aspect of marital dissolution, whether children are better off when

noncustodial fathers maintain an active role in their lives.

PATERNAL PARTICIPATION AND CHILD WELL-BEING

Few fathers retain custody of their children and most noncustodial fathers greatly decrease their involvement in childrearing. Many early investigations of the impact of divorce on children attributed developmental disabilities to this so-called syndrome of father absence. Recent research has expanded this theme, tracing the devastating economic and social consequences of divorce for female household heads and their children (Bane 1986; Bane and Ellwood 1983; Garfinkel and McLanahan 1985; Fuchs 1986). We have learned, for example, that mother-headed families are frequently below or near the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1986), due, in part, to the unwillingness of nonresidential fathers to provide child support. Several U.S. surveys have shown that only a third of all single mothers receive regular child support; the contribution in most of these families is quite small (Weitzman 1985). Low levels of child support are typically accompanied by low levels of contact. Recent investigations have revealed that most fathers living apart from their children see them infrequently or not at all (Furstenberg et al. 1983; Furstenberg and Nord 1985).

Many researchers and policy makers believe that paternal absence and infrequent, irregular contact impede children's adaptation to divorce. Children deprived of paternal contact may grow up without a secure male model, may receive less parental support and supervision, and may

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be raised by a single mother who is under great stress. It is plausible, therefore, that children who have little or no contact with their noncustodial fathers will not fare as well as those who maintain an ongoing relationship (Weiss 1975, p. 217). Of course, the remarriage of the mother can greatly complicate this scenario.

The revolution in custody procedures that swept across the U.S. during the past decade was justified in part by the belief that children do better when both parents are actively involved in childrearing. The movement from maternal to joint custody was an attempt to expand the rights and responsibilities of fathers. Nevertheless, few studies have tested the hypothesis that frequent paternal contact aids children's adaptation to divorce.

In their study of approximately 60 families' adaptations to divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980, p. 218) concluded that infrequent, irregular contact with nonresidential fathers usually led to feelings of rejection and lowered self-esteem. Nevertheless, they also discovered that, with age, the paternal relationship had a declining significance for the child's psychological well-being. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978, 1979), in a study of 48 intact and 48 disrupted families, showed that children who maintained contact with their noncustodial fathers appeared to adopt more conventional sex-role patterns. Hess and Camara's (1979) study of 16 divorced and 16 intact families suggested that the child's relation with the resident mother and nonresidential father were equally important.

Although these studies are suggestive, their small and unrepresentative samples cast doubt on their conclusiveness. There are also reasons to suspect that the link between paternal contact and child well-being may be weaker than is generally believed. For example, regular contact between the child and nonresidential father may, in many cases, increase conflict between the ex-spouses, which could adversely affect the child. More generally, if the association between the quantity and *quality* of relations is weak, there may be little association between quantity and children's adjustment. Furthermore the father's participation may be influenced by the response of the child to divorce. For those children who adapt well, ties with their fathers may become closer over time. On the other hand, fathers whose children experience academic, behavioral, or psychological problems may withdraw from them. Finally, some fathers might become involved *because* their children are having adjustment problems. If such a variety of different causal sequences exists, the association between paternal contact and child well-being might in fact be very slight.

This paper examines whether children generally fare better when their noncustodial father

maintains an active presence in their lives. Further, we explore different dimensions of paternal involvement to see which is most critical for children. We also examine other factors that might weaken or strengthen the father's impact on the child.

DATA AND METHODS

The data are drawn from the National Survey of Children (NSC), a panel study of a nationally representative sample of children interviewed in 1976 and 1981. Our analyses focus almost exclusively on the 1981 interviews, when the children were aged 11–16, because the information on paternal involvement is much richer. The interviews elicited a wide range of information from three sources—the children, a parent (almost always the mother), and a teacher—to assess the social and psychological functioning of the child. For further details on sample selection and data collection, see Furstenberg et al. (1983). Although the total sample included 1,423 children, we focus only on the 227 children who had experienced marital dissolution by the time of the 1981 survey, who were living with their mothers, and whose biological fathers were still alive.

Unlike many prior studies that focus on a single outcome or a single realm of psychosocial development, the NSC contains numerous items examining many areas of the child's functioning. This paper builds on two earlier analyses, which distilled a limited set of reliable indices that assess several dimensions of children's well-being (Furstenberg and Allison 1985; Furstenberg and Seltzer 1986). The names of the 10 measures of well-being can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Actually, these measures reflect "ill-being" since higher scores represent less desirable states or behaviors.

Except for the teacher's report in 1981, all reports of "academic difficulty" are based on single items measured on a five-point ordinal scale (treated as interval in the regression analyses). The remaining indicators are all multiple-item scales; the individual items and the estimated reliabilities are given in the Appendix.

Frequency of Paternal Contact

Most fathers in our study did not see their children very often. As reported by the mothers, 23 percent of the fathers had no contact with the children during the previous five years. Another 20 percent did not see their children at all in the preceding year, 21 percent spent 1 to 12 days with their children in that year, 11 percent spent between 13 and 24 days, and the remaining 26 percent spent at least 24 days with their children. The children were also asked how often they saw their fathers; their answers were strongly associated with the mothers' reports, though the mean was somewhat higher. We

used the mother's report in our analysis, but the conclusions are not altered if one substitutes the child's report or a variable that combines the mother's and child's report. Further, results are very similar for other measures of contact with father, such as "How long since you last saw father?" or "How often do you talk to father on the telephone?"

The first column of Table 1 gives standardized coefficients from OLS regressions of each of the measures of well-being on paternal contact, coded as follows: 0 = none in past five year; 1 = none in past year; 2 = 1-12 days; 3 = 13-24 days; 4 = 25 or more days. The regressions also included controls for several background variables described at the foot of the table; coefficients for these variables are not reported.

Since the four categories of contact do not really constitute an interval scale, we also did analyses of covariance in which contact was treated as a set of five categories, again controlling for the same background variables. The *p*-values for the tests of the hypothesis that contact has no effect are given in the second column of Table 1.

It is apparent that these results provide little, if any, support for the hypothesis that paternal contact is beneficial to the child. None of the standardized coefficients is statistically significant at the .05 level. And although the hypothesis of beneficial paternal contact implies that the coefficients should all be negative, half are positive. For the analyses of covariance, paternal contact had a marginally significant effect on the mother's report of delinquency. But an examination of the coefficients (not shown) revealed an implausible pattern: children who had not seen their father in five years did

significantly better than those who spent between 0 and 13 days with their father in the previous year.

In separate analyses not shown here, we attempted to determine whether the effects of contact varied with the child's sex or with the current marital status of the mother. On the basis of previous research, we suspected that boys and girls might react differently to more active participation by the nonresidential father (Lamb 1977, p. 164-68). There were few significant interactions, however—no more than would be expected by chance. And those few that appeared did not occur consistently across similar measures, nor were they consistently in the predicted direction. Such a pattern of interactions could easily result from sampling variability.

The interaction of the mother's marital status with paternal contact also failed to clarify the picture. Some research has suggested that the mother's remarriage might complicate paternal participation, offsetting its beneficial effects for the child (Ganong and Coleman 1984; Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman 1987). We found no evidence to support this hypothesis.

In sum, we find that paternal contact is unrelated to a variety of well-being measures in the 1981 data. Similar analyses for measures of well-being constructed from the 1976 interviews were equally unresponsive of any effects of paternal contact. Apparently, children in maritally disrupted families were not doing better if they saw their fathers more regularly than if they saw them occasionally or not at all.

Closeness to Father

A possible explanation for these negative findings is that the quantity of paternal partici-

Table 1. Effects of Parental Contact and Closeness on Child's Well-Being

	Father's Contact		Father's Closeness		Mother's Closeness
	Interval β	ANCOVA <i>p</i>	Interval β	ANCOVA <i>p</i>	Interval β
<i>Mother's Report</i>					
Delinquency	-.03	.05*	.03	.00**	-.20**
Problem behavior	-.07	.86	.01	.70	-.18**
Distress	.09	.15	.06	.50	-.14*
Academic difficulty	.01	.91	-.02	.36	-.08
<i>Teacher's Report</i>					
Problem behavior	-.12	.54	-.09	.25	.05
Academic difficulty	-.06	.29	.04	.90	.11
<i>Child's Report</i>					
Delinquency	.04	.27	.03	.29	-.20**
Dissatisfaction	.11	.54	.06	.06	-.16**
Distress	.13	.24	.01	.23	-.22**
Academic difficulty	-.02	.98	.02	.60	-.02

Note: In addition to parental contact or closeness, the regressions included variables describing the child's age, race, sex, birth order, and region of residence, as well as the mother's education, religious preference, age at birth of the child, age at birth of first child, current marital status, foreign vs. U.S. birth, and timing marital dissolution.

* *p* ≤ .05.

** *p* ≤ .01.

pation may be only loosely indicative of the quality of relations between fathers and children. Children may closely identify with their fathers even though they see them infrequently or, alternatively, those who have frequent contact may experience greater conflict with their father or be subjected to rivalry between parents.

Those children who had seen their father in the last five years were asked how close they were to him. The distribution of responses was: no contact in five years = 23 percent; not very close = 10 percent; fairly close = 10 percent; quite close = 33 percent; extremely close = 22 percent. Given the generally low levels of contact, these reports are somewhat surprising. In fact, only a moderate correlation exists between the amount of time children spend with their noncustodial fathers and how close they feel to them. This moderate correlation is important in itself because it indicates the possibility that children can preserve identity with a parent whom they see infrequently.

The third column of Table 1 shows standardized coefficients for regression of each of the measures of well-being on paternal closeness, again controlling for the set of background variables. The five categories of closeness are assigned ordinal scores, which are treated as an interval variable. The fourth column gives *p*-values from analyses of covariance in which the categories of closeness are treated as an unordered polytomy. The results are quite similar to those for paternal contact: none of the standardized coefficients is statistically significant and only two of the ten are in the expected direction. Again, the analysis of covariance shows a significant effect of closeness on the mother's report of delinquency, but the pattern of coefficients (not shown) is completely inconsistent with the hypothesis.

In further analyses not presented here, we examined more refined hypotheses that might explain the absence of an association between closeness to the noncustodial father and children's adjustment. Specifically, we examined interactions to determine whether the effects of closeness varied with child's sex, closeness to mother, presence of a stepfather, and recency of separation. We found no evidence for any of these interactions. In short, we have been unable to specify a set of conditions in which the quality of child's relationship to his or her outside father seems to matter.

Perhaps this largely negative set of results merely indicates that our measures of well-being are unreliable or invalid. We are inclined to dismiss this possibility because many of the control variables are related to these outcome measures in predictable ways. For example, delinquency and problem behavior is more

common for boys and for those from low socio-economic statuses. Moreover when the children of divorced and separated parents are compared with those from intact families, the latter show consistently better outcomes on many of these measures (Furstenberg and Allison 1985). Finally, the last column of Table 1, which gives standardized coefficients for the child's report of closeness to *mother*, reveals a clear pattern of strong effects. Maternal relationships apparently *are* important for children's well-being.

Economic Support from Fathers

The weak effects of paternal contact and closeness suggest that the emotional significance of paternal participation may be overstated in much of the current policy deliberations about family relations after divorce. Could it be, as some have suggested (McLanahan 1985), that fathers' main influence is through their economic contributions?

In the NSC survey, mothers were asked for dollar amounts received from fathers during the previous year for both schooling and for all other purposes. Approximately 60 percent received no money whatsoever. Another 9 percent received less than \$1,200, 16 percent received between \$1,200 and \$2,400, and 16 percent received more than \$2,400.

Table 2 shows estimates of the effects of paternal contributions on children's well-being, controlling for other variables. As in Table 1, these were first estimated by assigning ordinal scores to the four levels of support, and then treating these as an interval scale. The standardized coefficients for these regressions are given in the first column. Significant negative effects appear for both the mother's report of problem behavior and the teacher's report of problem behavior. These coefficients remained significant when we introduced controls for mother's household income. The remaining four columns of the table present results from an analysis of covariance in which the income categories were treated as an unordered polytomy. For the two measures of problem behavior, the pattern of the coefficients corroborates the finding from the interval scoring: each increase in support yields an increasingly negative coefficient.

We consider these estimated effects on problem behavior to be the strongest evidence in our data of an influence by the nonresidential father. Still, there is no clear evidence of an effect of child support on other aspects of well-being. Again we searched for conditions that would amplify or reduce the importance of paternal participation. Marital status and income of the mother were obvious examples because child support payments might be most crucial

Table 2. Effects of Father's Support Payments on Child's Well-Being

	Interval β	Coefficients for ANCOVA Model ^a			p
		\$1– \$1,199	\$1,200– \$2,399	\$2,400 +	
<i>Mother's Report</i>					
Delinquency	-.12	.11	-.05	-.20	.22
Problem behavior	-.16*	-.21	-.28	-.38*	.16
Distress	.00	-.26	-.25	.12	.36
Academic difficulty	-.07	.39	-.27	-.11	.14
<i>Teacher's Report</i>					
Problem behavior	-.23**	-.13	-.46*	-.54*	.05*
Academic difficulty	-.07	-.32	-.42	-.04	.26
<i>Child's Report</i>					
Delinquency	-.06	-.01	-.26	-.09	.68
Dissatisfaction	.11	-.22	-.31	.23	.18
Distress	.00	-.24	.11	-.04	.76
Academic difficulty	.05	.32	-.06	.17	.49

Note: In addition to parental contact or closeness, the regressions included variables describing the child's age, race, sex, birth order, and region of residence, as well as the mother's education, religious preference, age at birth of the child, age at birth of first child, current marital status, foreign vs. U.S. birth, and timing marital dissolution.

^a Each contrast is with children whose mother's report no paternal support during the preceding year.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

when a family has only one breadwinner or when the financial situation is precarious. As before, we found no evidence of such interactive effects.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The general absence of effects of paternal participation on children's well-being is surprising in view of the widespread belief that children benefit from maintaining contact with their fathers. In addition, the effects of father's participation did not depend on the sex of the child or the presence of a stepfather. On the other hand, we did find some evidence that the level of child support is related to the incidence of problem behavior.

Do outside fathers really make no difference, except perhaps for the child support they provide? There are several possible explanations for these negative results. First, our relatively crude measures of well-being may not reveal subtle differences that are detectable using clinical or observational techniques. Moreover, none of our measures taps the area of sex-role patterns, which Hetherington et al. (1978, 1979) found to be most strongly influenced by paternal participation. Nevertheless, we found that closeness to the mother is related to our measures, and so are many other variables not examined in this paper.

Second, the level of paternal contact is so low in this national sample that there may be too few cases in the high-contact categories to produce statistically significant results. This may be one way to reconcile our results with available clinical studies. Nonresidential fathers in the Wallerstein and Kelly and Hetherington et al.

studies saw their children much more frequently than did the NSC fathers we studied. Perhaps if we compared children who never saw their father with a sizable sample of children who saw their father several times a week and had a deep and emotionally satisfying relationship with him, then we would see the effects of paternal contact. Although we cannot rule this out, the ANCOVA coefficient estimates not shown in Table 1 are not encouraging. Of the ten contrasts between the two groups with highest and lowest contact, nine are in the wrong direction; i.e., the children with high-contact fathers are doing more poorly than those who hadn't seen their fathers in five years. Still, we say little about the potential impact of truly involved fathers—those men who are deeply involved in raising their children. It remains for future research to explore this possibility.

On the other hand, results reported here are consistent with findings from other work that has traced the long-term consequences of adversity in childhood and adolescence. The subsequent life course of adolescents and young adults is exceedingly complex and there are many paths to recovery for those who experience stressful events such as teen pregnancy or the divorce of parents. These results challenge simple notions that single events, even major ones, set individuals on irreversible and unfavorable life course trajectories. As the life course unfolds, subsequent experience tends to dull the differences between those who experienced such events and those who did not.

The policy implications of findings reported here are unsettling because they clash with prevailing practice that attempts to increase paternal involvement. On the basis of our study,

we see no strong evidence that children will benefit from the judicial or legislative interventions that have been designed to promote paternal participation, apart from providing economic support. Of course these interventions could be justified on other grounds. If paternal contact involves some responsibilities and duties, this participation may ease the mother's childrearing burdens. Thus, mothers may benefit from paternal contact even if children do not (Longfellow 1979, p. 291). Likewise, fathers might benefit emotionally from contact with their children (Lamb and Sagi 1983). In short, our data suggest only that contact with fathers does not produce uniformly positive outcomes for children.

In summary, we do not advocate abandoning present efforts to involve noncustodial fathers. No single analysis or data source can provide an unqualified answer to the questions we raise, and firm conclusions must await further evidence. It would be premature to conclude that paternal contact has no or little influence. Our findings are a piece of evidence—we think an important piece—that should be considered with data from clinical sources in assessing the effect of paternal contact on children of divorced parents.

This topic surely merits more careful attention by researchers and policy makers. It is disconcerting to discover weak evidence for an almost commonplace assumption in popular and professional thinking—that children in disrupted families will do better when they maintain frequent contact with their fathers. In the absence of better and more convincing evidence, policy makers rely on conventional wisdom that is, unfortunately, an unreliable guide for social reform.

APPENDIX

Component Items for Scales of Well-Being

Mother's Report

Delinquency (alpha = .60)

1. Since January 1977, about the time of the first interview, has he/she had any behavior or discipline problems at school resulting in your receiving a note or being asked to come in and talk with the teacher or principal?
2. Has (child) been suspended, excluded, or expelled from school since January 1977?
3. Since January 1977, has (he/she) run away from home?
4. Since January 1977, has (child) stolen anything, regardless of its value?
5. How many times, if any, has (child) been stopped or questioned by the police or juvenile officers?

Problem Behavior (alpha = .69)

Tell me whether each (of the following) statement(s) has been . . . true of (child) during the past three months:

1. Cheats or tells lies.
2. Is disobedient at home.
3. Is disobedient at school.
4. Hangs around with kids who get into trouble.

Distress (alpha = .69)

Tell me whether each (of the following) statement(s) has been . . . true of (child) during the past three months:

1. Has sudden changes in mood or feelings.
2. Feels or complains that no one loves (him/her).
3. Is too fearful or anxious.
4. Feels worthless or inferior.
5. Is unhappy, sad, or distressed.

Teacher's Report

Problem Behavior (alpha = .79)

1. In your class, how often was any disciplinary action required for this student?

For each of the following statements, please indicate . . . how much like that this student was in 1980–81:

2. Fought too much, teased, picked on, or bullied other students.
3. Cheated, told lies, was deceitful.
4. Had a very strong temper, lost it easily.

Academic Difficulty (alpha = .95)

How did this student compare with others in his/her class last year (1980–1981)?

1. Verbal ability?
2. Math ability?
3. Overall performance?

Child's Report

Delinquency (alpha = .52)

1. How many times, if ever, have you been stopped or questioned by the police or juvenile officers about something they thought you did wrong?

In the last year, about how many times have you:

2. Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor?
3. Lied to your parent(s) about something important?
4. Taken something from a store without paying for it?
5. Damaged school property on purpose?

Dissatisfaction (alpha = .71)

Are you satisfied, somewhat satisfied, or not too satisfied with:

1. Your friends?
2. Your family?
3. Yourself?
4. Being a (boy/girl)?
5. Being an American?

Distress (alpha = .46)

1. Do you feel lonely and wish you had more friends?
2. Do you have days when you are nervous, tense, or on edge?
3. Do you have days when you are unhappy, sad, or depressed?
4. All things considered, (how) is your life going?

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