

## Cooperation, Conflict, or Something In-Between?

### Unmarried Fathers' Co-Parenting Experiences and Early Involvement with Children

**Background and significance.** Information from Fragile Families survey, which includes a representative sample of nonmarital births in large U.S. cities, shows a high level of engagement among fathers around the time of their child's birth (e.g., Carlson and McLanahan 2004). Within three years, however, more than half of these men were living apart from their children and a similar proportion of nonresident fathers were out of contact with them (Waller and Swisher 2006). Given high levels of early attachment, what explains why some fathers are more successful at remaining involved with their young children than others?

Although a number of factors may account for differences in early involvement, research has shown that fathers' relationships with children are often mediated through their relationships with their child's mother (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Previous studies have investigated the ways in which parents either support or undermine each other's parenting during marriage (Belsky, Crnic and Gable 1995; Margolin, Gordis and John 2001) and following divorce (Arendell 1995). Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) distinguished between co-parenting arrangements in which divorced parents cooperated in parenting in low conflict relationships and parallel parenting in which they developed separate relationships with children to minimize conflict. In a study which included more recent divorces, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) also identified a third important co-parenting pattern in which parents remained engaged but had conflicted relationships.

It is likely that co-parenting would affect paternal involvement, since previous research shows that men tend to be more involved with their children when they have higher quality relationships with their child's mother (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Johnson 2001; Pleck 1997). Two studies of this issue have found that cooperative parenting leads to higher paternal involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2007; Sobolewski and King 2005). However, some unanswered questions remain about the meaning of these arrangements and how particular patterns of co-parenting and paternal involvement are linked. Because previous studies have also focused on non-resident fathers, a more complete analysis of co-parenting patterns among unmarried parents --who are often still romantically involved, and even living together, in the years after their child's birth --has yet to be undertaken. Drawing on information from the Fragile Families Survey, and qualitative interviews I conducted with a sub-sample of parents who participated in the study, the paper uses a mixed method analysis to gain a more complete understanding of these co-parenting patterns and how they shape men's early connections to children.

**Research design and methods.** The project will begin by analyzing three waves of survey data collected from mothers and fathers who participated in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Surveys with both parents were initially conducted when their child was born and follow-up interviews take place when their child is 12-18 months and 36 months. Data for this study collected in 20 U.S. cities and provide perhaps the most comprehensive information available for looking at early relationships between unmarried fathers and their children. When weighted, the sample is representative of all births to unmarried parents in cities with populations over 200,000. Nonmarital births were over-sampled at a ratio of three to one. The final sample contains 4,898 births, including 3,712 nonmarital births and 1,186 marital births. Because births

to married parents were selected from the same cities and hospitals as those to unmarried parents, the sample of married parents can be used as a comparison group.

The analysis also includes information from qualitative interviews I conducted with a sub-sample of Fragile Family participants from the Oakland, California site of the study. The qualitative study was designed to be nested within the broader survey to facilitate mixed method analyses (Creswell 2003). Qualitative interviews were conducted between the baseline survey at the birth and one year survey and between the three year survey and five year survey. To select parents for qualitative study, the Oakland survey sample was stratified by the three largest race/ethnic groups (i.e., non-Hispanic, black, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and non-Hispanic white). A random 10% sample of births to 62 mothers and fathers was drawn within race/ethnic groups.

**Measures:** The project will examine two survey indicators of father involvement at 12-18 and 36 months. The first indicator is a continuous measure of how often fathers spent one or more hours a day with their child in the last month (ranging from every day to not at all), an important measure of their accessibility (Pleck 1997). The survey also asks how often men participated in a variety of activities with their child among those fathers who had recent contact. These activities provide information about the quality of involvement (Amato and Gilbreth 1999) and represent a broad range of ways fathers could be engaged with and accessible to children (Lamb et al. 1987), including playing games, singing songs/nursery rhymes, reading stories, telling stories, playing inside, visiting relatives, hugging/showing affection, and putting the child to bed. The 12-18 month survey also has questions which ask about changing the child's diaper and feeding or giving the child a bottle while the 36 month survey includes additional questions about telling the child you love him/her, telling the child you appreciate him/her, letting the child help with chores, going out to eat, and assisting with eating. The analysis considers paternal involvement at both follow-ups, because fathers often engage in different activities with infants than toddlers and also tend to be more involved with them (Pleck 1997; Yeung et al. 2001). These scales take account of both the number of activities fathers participate in with their child as well as the number of days they do so, with scores ranging from 0 to 7. The scale averages the unstandardized values of these items. The 12-18 and 36 month scales both yield a Cronbach's alpha of .91 among unmarried parents.

Cooperative parenting will also be examined through parents' reports at the first two follow-up surveys. Questions about cooperation ask mothers and fathers whether the other parent respects the schedules and rules she/he makes for the child, whether he/she supports her/him in the way she/he wants to raise their child, whether she/he and the father/mother talk about problems that come up with raising their child, whether she/he can trust the father/mother to take good care of the child, and whether she/he can count on the father/mother for help with the child. Scores on these indexes range from 5, for parents who report no cooperative parenting, to 20, for parents who report high levels of cooperation on each measure. Conflict in the relationship will be captured by a continuous variable at 12-18 and 36 months asking parents how often they argue about things that are important to them.

To replicate Maccoby et al.'s (1990) study, measures of cooperative (high cooperation, low conflict), disengaged (low cooperation, low conflict), conflicted (low cooperation, high conflict), and mixed (high cooperation, high conflict) parenting will be created. These are binary measures in which "high" categories indicate a score at or above the median and "low" categories indicate a score below the median.

**Quantitative analysis.** The analysis will begin with a descriptive analysis of co-parenting patterns among unmarried parents in: 1) cohabiting; 2) non-residential romantic; and 3) non-residential non-romantic relationships, using married and previously married parents as a comparison group. In the full sample of unmarried parents, preliminary analyses (based on mothers' reports at year three) suggest that 24% of parents engaged in cooperative parenting, 8% reported disengaged parenting, and 32% reported conflicted parenting. In comparison to Maccoby et al's study of divorced couples, a surprisingly high number of these fragile families (36%) also appear to be engaged in "mixed" parenting relationships that are categorized by both high cooperation and high conflict.

OLS regression models in which fathers' time and daily activities with children at 12-18 and 36 months are dependent variables will next be examined. Explanatory variables will include measures of cooperative, disengaged, conflicted, and mixed parenting. The models will also control for variables such as parents' background characteristics (e.g., education, employment) and demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, multi-partner fertility, child gender) that may be related to the explanatory and dependent variables.

In the full sample of unmarried parents, preliminary analyses (based on mothers' reports at year three in OLS models with controls) show that fathers are more involved in their children's daily activities when parents report cooperative or mixed parenting. Conversely, paternal involvement is negatively associated with disengaged and conflicted parenting. When all of the co-parenting measures are included in the model simultaneously, paternal involvement was significantly higher (at the .001 level) among parents who reported cooperative or mixed parenting in comparison to conflicted parenting. However, paternal involvement was not significantly different among couples with disengaged parenting styles in comparison with those who have conflicted parenting styles. In the next stage of the analysis, models will be run separately for parents who are cohabiting at each wave and those who are living apart in both married and unmarried at birth samples.

The analysis will assess reporting bias by using the paired sample of mothers and fathers to test whether paired differences in reports are significantly different than 0. Sensitivity analyses will also be conducted to compare regression results in which mothers' and fathers' reports of involvement are used as outcomes.

**Qualitative and mixed methods analysis.** The mixed methods analysis will follow Creswell's (2003) description of a sequential, explanatory design in which qualitative results are used to explain and interpret results from a quantitative study. This type of design is particularly useful for explaining why and how the independent and dependent variables are linked. This type of design can also help us understand unexpected associations in the quantitative results.

After examining relationships between co-parenting patterns and father involvement in OLS models, I will turn to the qualitative data to examine how parents talk about the meaning and content of their co-parenting interactions as well as the process by which it influences men's connections to children. The analysis will begin with open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) of transcripts, or reading transcripts line-by-line and labeling segments of text related to co-parenting and father involvement. Codes for this analysis will be developed inductively, on the

basis of observations that emerge from the interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and deductively, on the basis of previous research (Burawoy 1991). The analysis will later proceed to more focused, analytic coding (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The Atlas query tool will be used to sort codes associated with these types of co-parenting by codes for father involvement. I will also display a reduced form of these data in a matrix format and use memos to analyze themes in the sorted responses.

An important goal of this analysis will be to investigate whether four distinct types of parenting (cooperative, disengaged, conflicted and mixed) can be identified in parents' accounts. Since Maccoby et al had trouble explaining the relatively small number of divorced couples who engaged in "mixed" parenting and this pattern appears to be more common in fragile families, the analysis will pay particular attention to the meaning of this pattern of co-parenting.

Insights from the qualitative analysis will also be used to help explain associations identified in quantitative results. For example, this analysis may reveal some of the concrete ways in which cooperation with the mother facilitates unmarried men's involvement and conflict leads to their disengagement. The qualitative analysis may also shed light on some expected and unexpected results in this and previous quantitative studies. For example, it may help us understand why cooperation appears to facilitate paternal involvement but why cooperation between parents does not tend to increase when men become highly involved. Although studies of divorced couples suggest disengaged, or parallel parenting, may be an effective co-parenting strategy, this analysis may also suggest why it does not seem to facilitate unmarried men's early engagement with children. Finally, the qualitative analysis may indicate how and why co-parenting patterns and associations may vary by relationship context.