

Mom's behavior key to dad's involvement in child care

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Mothers play an important role in determining how much fathers get involved in taking care of their infants, according to new research. A study of 97 couples found that fathers were more involved in the day-to-day care of their infants when they received active encouragement from their wife or partner.

In fact, this encouragement was important even after taking into account fathers' and mothers' views about how involved dads should be, the overall quality of the couple's parenting relationship, and how much mothers worked outside the home.

In addition, fathers' beliefs about how involved they should be in child care did not matter when mothers were highly critical of fathers' parenting. In other words, fathers didn't put their beliefs into practice when faced with a particularly judgmental mother.

"Mothers are in the driver's seat," said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Mothers can be very encouraging to fathers, and open the gate to their involvement in child care, or be very critical, and close the gate.

"This is the first real evidence that mothers, through their behavior, act as gatekeepers by either fostering or curtailing how much fathers take part in caring for their baby."

Schoppe-Sullivan conducted the study with Elizabeth Cannon, a graduate student at Ohio State, along with Geoffrey Brown and Sarah Mangelsdorf of the University of Illinois, and Margaret Szewczyk Sokolowski. Their results appear in the June 2008 issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

The study included 97 couples in the Midwest who were married or cohabiting, and who were expecting a child when the study began. Before the birth, the couples completed a survey that probed their beliefs about the roles of fathers in taking care of children. About 3.5 months after the child was born, the researchers conducted an in-home assessment. The couples completed questionnaires in which each partner reported the mothers' gatekeeping behaviors. They were asked how often the mother responded to the father's parenting behaviors with encouragement (for example, telling the father how happy he makes the child) or criticism (for instance, by looking exasperated or rolling her eyes).

Couples also completed questionnaires that examined how much the fathers were involved in child care, and how well the couple got along when dealing with the baby.

Finally, the researchers videotaped the couple interacting together with the baby to see how involved fathers were in taking care of the baby and how competent they were in caring for the infant. The couples were asked to change their infant's clothes together and the researchers watched to see who did the most work and how fathers interacted with the baby.

The findings about the importance of mothers' behavior for fathers' involvement in child care are important for several reasons, Schoppe-Sullivan said.

For one, this is the first study to examine things moms actually do on a day-to-day basis that have the potential to affect dads' behavior. While some scholars have suggested that such "gatekeeping" occurs, the research hadn't been done to confirm it.

"Most other studies haven't looked at actual behaviors of mothers," she said. "In many cases, researchers have used questionnaires asking parents how much fathers should be involved in parenting, and then related the answers to parents' reports about mother and father involvement in child care."

In addition, most theories about maternal gatekeeping have focused on how negative reactions by mothers can keep fathers from getting involved in child care. But this study showed that encouragement by mothers may be just as important, if not more important, in shaping the role of fathers.

"Encouragement is very important, and really makes a difference in how much fathers participate," she said.

Schoppe-Sullivan cautioned that the format of this study means that the researchers can't prove what actions were the cause and which were the effect. In other words, they can't prove that encouragement by mothers always causes more father involvement, or if, on the other hand, fathers' involvement also affects how much mothers encourage.

It's likely that causation goes both ways, she said.

"For example, if dads are reluctant to get up in the middle of the night with their babies, mothers may just stop asking after a while."

However, it makes sense to believe that mothers may have a larger effect on fathers than the other way around.

“Mothers are still considered the primary caregivers for children in our society, so they likely have a larger effect,” she said.

However, Schoppe-Sullivan has begun new research that will expand on these findings. She recently received a \$400,000 National Science Foundation CAREER award which will allow her to conduct a long-term study of 170 couples expecting their first child to investigate the causes and effects of maternal gatekeeping. Those results may shed more light on how much mothers affect fathers’ behavior and vice versa, she said.

Source: Ohio State University

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