

## Dad's early connection with child 'writes script' for later school involvement

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When a dad changes diapers and makes pediatrician's appointments, he's more likely to stay interested and involved when his child makes the transition to school, said a new University of Illinois study that explores the role of parent involvement on student achievement.

"If we want [fathers](#) to be involved in school, we need to focus on men building close, loving relationships with their children in the preschool years. When fathers do this, they're writing a script that says they're involved in their child's life, and their expectation is that they'll go on being involved in that child's life," said Brent McBride, a U of I professor of human development.

McBride likes to use affection as an example of early parent involvement. "That can be as simple as a father winking at his three-year-old child," he said.

"If you, as a dad, develop an affectionate way of interacting with your preschooler, later when your child comes home and tells you what he's done in school that day, the warm, close relationship you've built will allow him to approach you with trust, and it will allow you to respond to your child's enthusiasm or [frustration](#) in a positive way," he said.

"If fathers wait to seek a closer relationship with their child until later in the child's life, the moment has passed," he said.

The study involved 390 children and their families from the [Child](#)

[Development](#) Supplement data set of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

When the children were two to five years old, five early parenting behaviors—parent-child household-centered activities, parent-child child-centered activities (for example, reading to kids), parental limit setting, responsibility (such as making doctor's appointments), and demonstrating affection—were measured for both parents. Later the mothers' and fathers' involvement in school and the children's student achievement were assessed.

The study is unique in that it looks at [mothers](#) and fathers simultaneously, said the researcher. "No one person in a family system does anything without being influenced by every other person in that system. Having both parents in these analyses is a big advantage and a step above the previous research."

The study showed that the paths are different for mothers and fathers, and the researcher believes that parents and teachers should acknowledge that and build on these differences.

For example, although mother involvement in school-related activities was positively associated with student achievement, father involvement in such activities had a negative correlation with academic success.

"But this occurs because fathers who have established a pattern of being involved early in a child's life are more likely to step in at school (for example, in formal conferences and interaction with teachers) when their child is struggling in the school setting," he said.

McBride explained that parental roles aren't scripted for men as they are for women, and expectations aren't as clear-cut. "As long as a father is providing for his children, he's usually considered a good father," he

said.

"And, although we're trying to encourage fathers to become more engaged in parenting than they have been, I don't believe the institutional mechanisms are in place to help that engagement along. Child-care providers and teachers aren't trained to approach fathers to help them become more involved as parents," he said.

He believes the best way to make these changes is to work with child-care providers and educators so they broaden their definition of parent to mean more than mothers.

"For example, if you're a day-care provider and a child is experiencing stress because of toileting issues, you would probably automatically reach out to the mother about these problems. Why shouldn't the father get that call?

"We need to train teachers so they're comfortable communicating with men as [parents](#)," he said.

More information: The study, which appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, was co-authored by W. Justin Dyer, Ying Liu, and Sungjin Hong of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Geoffrey L. Brown of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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