

Fathers' engagement with baby depends on mother

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Fathers' involvement with their newborns depends on mothers' preparation for parenthood, even for fathers who show the most parenting skills, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that fathers who showed high levels of intuitive parenting were more involved than other fathers with their infants at 3

months of age - but only if the [mothers](#) showed lower levels of intuitive parenting.

Intuitive parenting involves subtle, nonconscious behaviors—like cooing and making eye contact with the baby - that have been shown to stimulate and engage infants.

It may seem that fathers who are better at this positive parenting behavior would be more engaged with their infants, but that is not always the case, said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, lead author of the study and professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"A lot of the father's involvement depends on what is going on with the mom, at least in the first few months after birth," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"If the mother is especially well-prepared for parenthood, there may be fewer opportunities for the father to be involved."

The study appears in a recent issue of the *Infant Mental Health Journal*.

The researchers used data from the New Parents Project, a long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time. In all, 182 couples participated in this study.

All the couples were assessed at their homes during the third trimester of pregnancy.

As part of the assessment, researchers observed the couples interacting with a doll. This doll procedure has been used by these researchers and others to see how expectant parents might interact with their own baby after birth.

In the videotaped procedure, an assistant playing the role of a nurse presented the "baby" to each couple. The 5-minute session was separated into four parts: Each parent-to-be played with the doll alone, then they played with it together, then they discussed their experience.

Trained researchers then viewed the videotape to look for how much each parent-to-be showed intuitive parenting behaviors.

Three months after the birth of the baby, the researchers conducted another assessment of the new parents. As part of this, the parents completed a time diary in which they reported each and every thing they did for a 24-hour period. They did this for one workday and one non-workday.

For this study, the researchers focused on the total number of minutes the new fathers spent in positive engagement activities with their infants on the non-workday. These activities included reading, playing, talking and listening and soothing or holding the infant.

Results showed that fathers' positive engagement increased as their intuitive parenting increased, but only when mothers had shown lower levels of intuitive parenting.

Schoppe-Sullivan noted that this study involved highly educated, dual-earner couples and few in which the mother would be staying at home full-time.

"You might have expected that in these couples especially, we wouldn't see these differences between mother and father involvement, but we still did," she said.

Study co-author Lauren Altenburger, a graduate student at Ohio State, said that it is possible that fathers would take a more active role later.

"Mothers may be more involved right after birth, whereas fathers may become more involved later on," Altenburger said.

In general, mothers showed higher levels of intuitive parenting than fathers did, the findings showed. But there was a lot of overlap and there are some families in which the fathers are actually more intuitive than the mothers.

The researchers found that intuitive parenting levels were related in couples. In other words, when mothers were highly intuitive, the [fathers](#) tended to be, too.

"That suggests couples are actually selecting each other on their parenting potential," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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