

Pre-teens whose dads embrace parenthood may be less prone to behavioral issues

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Kids whose dads adjust well to parenthood and feel confident about their new role may be less likely to have behavioural problems in the run-up to their teens, indicates research published in the online journal *BMJ Open*.

It's how fathers see themselves as parents in the child's early years, rather than the amount of direct childcare they give, that seems to be important, the findings suggest.

The nature of parenting in a child's early years is thought to influence their short and long term wellbeing and [mental health](#), which are in turn linked to development and educational attainment.

But it's not entirely clear what impact the father's role might have, as much of the research to date has tended to characterise paternal involvement in a child's upbringing as one dimensional.

The researchers therefore drew on data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) study, which has been tracking the health of nearly 15,000 children since birth, to assess several aspects of paternal involvement.

The parents of 10,440 children who were living with both their mum and dad at the age of 8 months were asked to complete a comprehensive questionnaire about their and their child's mental health; their attitudes to parenting; time spent on childcare; their child's behaviour and

development; as well as details of household income/education.

When the children were aged 9 and 11, their behaviour was assessed using the strength and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ). This covers emotional symptoms, behaviour (conduct) problems, hyperactivity, peer relationship issues, and helpfulness (pro-social behaviour).

Fathers' parental involvement was measured by asking them to rate their level of agreement with 58 statements, reflecting the amount of direct childcare they engaged in, including household chores; their attitudes to parenting; the relationship with their child; and how they felt about the birth 8 weeks and 8 months afterwards.

The final analysis was based on almost 7000 9 year olds and nearly 6500 of the same children at the age of 11.

Three key factors emerged in relation to the children's SDQ scores: (1) fathers' [emotional response](#) to the baby and their parenting role; (2) how much time the dads spent on direct childcare; and (3) how well they adjusted to their new role, including how confident they felt in their abilities as a parent and partner.

But emotional response and confidence in their new role were most strongly associated with lower odds of [behavioural problems](#) when their children reached 9 and 11 years of age.

A high paternal factor 1 score was associated with 21% and 19% lower odds of a higher SDQ score at the ages of 9 and 11, respectively. Similarly, a high paternal factor 3 score was associated with 28% lower odds of a higher SDQ score at both time points.

After taking account of potentially influential factors, such as age at fatherhood, [educational attainment](#) and household income, hours

worked, and sex of the child, every unit increase in factor 1 scores was associated with 15% lower odds of behavioural problems at the age of 9 and 12% lower odds at the age of 11, compared with kids of the same age, sex, and family background.

Similarly, every unit increase in factor 3 scores was associated with 12% lower odds at the age of 9, and 10% lower odds at the age of 11.

This is an observational study so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect, and as the researchers note, the study dates back 25 years, since when parenting styles may have changed, so the findings may therefore not be widely generalisable.

But they write: "The findings of this research study suggest that it is psychological and emotional aspects of paternal involvement in a child's infancy that are most powerful in influencing later child behaviour, and not the amount of time that fathers are engaged in childcare or domestic tasks in the household."

More information: Father involvement in early childrearing and behavioural outcomes in their pre-adolescent children: evidence from the ALSPAC UK birth cohort, *BMJ Open*, DOI: [10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012034](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012034)

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