



Dads and Learning

The research on fathers' impact on their children ...

Fathers have a big influence on their children's education and their learning.

Brain development

Up to 80% of children excluded from school in years 10 and 11 have problems that can be traced back to poor literacy levels in years 3 and 4.

Where do fathers fit in? Numerous studies demonstrate that language exposure in very early life has a significant effect on later verbal skills. It is therefore not surprising to learn that:

- High quality (sensitive/supportive) and substantial father involvement from the month following birth is connected with a range of positive outcomes in babies and toddlers including better language development and higher IQs at 12 months and 3 years
- The 'IQ effect' continues: a significant relationship is found between positive father engagement at age 6, and IQ and educational achievement at age 7
- The social class effect is substantial: Nettle (2008) found highly-involved middle-class fathers having a greater (positive) impact on their children's IQs than highly-involved working-class dads.

Levels/trends in fathers' involvement in schools

Fathers are increasingly involved with schools, though not to the same extent as mothers..

A South Lanarkshire online survey of 177 men in 2007 found 86% of this self-selected sample reading with their children, 60% helping 'often' with schoolwork and 77% 'often' attending parents' night.

Factors associated with two-parent fathers' greater school involvement include mothers' (high) school involvement, fathers' (high) education level and the presence of a step-mother. For non-resident fathers, mothers' education level and whether child support is paid are additional factors (Nord et al, 1998).

The widespread failure of non-resident fathers to engage with their children's schools – 31% of the non-resident fathers who have contact with their children go into their schools, compared with 75% of fathers who live at home – may be contributing to school

failure in this group. However, it would be wrong to assume that non-resident fathers are unwilling. A UK survey in 2008 found 70% of two-parent-family fathers and 81% of non-resident parents (mainly men) wanting to be more involved in their children's education. School processes that fail to include non-resident fathers and staff anxieties may be key.

Fathers v. mothers: involvement in education

While at first sight gender is the primary driver in fathers' lesser involvement with children's education, more subtle research suggests that the picture is more complicated.

The major determining factor may be working hours. A number of studies have found little or no difference between mothers' and fathers' reading with children, helping with homework, helping out in classrooms or feeling involved in schooling, once the parents' working hours are taken into account,

However, because many more UK fathers than mothers work fulltime; and because there are so few men working in childhood services, libraries, schools and nurseries which almost never employ systematic approaches to drawing fathers in; and because adult men's reading choices rarely reflect the kind of reading done in school, far fewer males than females 'model' interest in literacy or interact with children in literacy activities, in the home or out of it.

The care/education 'nexus'

A key predictor of fathers' involvement in children's learning is having been involved in their care very early on.

When parents share care more equitably, fathers engage in more early literacy activities with their young children than in families where childrearing tasks are divided traditionally by gender. Such parents are also more likely to share similar attitudes toward childrearing and to resolve family conflicts calmly and with compromise.

This greater 'co-parenting' (as it is called) may in part explain the positive educational effect of high father involvement in childcare: Yeung (2004) found a one-point increase in fathers' co-parenting behaviour associated with an almost four-point increase in children's academic test scores. In fact, fathers' co-parenting was second only to their education level in predicting good educational outcomes for their children – and both proved more important than the fathers' income.

Fathers' earnings and education

This does not mean that fathers' income is insignificant.

Fathers' earnings are linked to their children's educational, and have been found to predict, among other things, sons' years of schooling. But it's not fathers' earnings but family earnings that count: studies that have compared the impact of fathers' and mothers' earnings have found them to be equally influential on children's education success.

The father's own education level is also important and is of course linked to his income: better educated fathers tend to earn more

There may also be small genetic effects: cleverer fathers/mothers = better educated fathers/mothers = cleverer children = better educated children. However, what is almost certainly most significant is that a father's education (like a mother's) affects his behaviour in ways that are vital to his children's cognitive development, as well as enabling him to provide them with better material and educational resources.

Children's behaviour at school

Fathers' (higher) commitment to their child's education and their involvement with the school are also associated with children's better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion.

Children's school behaviour is strongly linked with their educational attainment; and fathers' influence on that behaviour is not only significant but may at times be more significant than mothers': for instance, fathers' harsh parenting is more strongly linked to children's (especially boys') aggression than is mothers' harsh parenting.

These effects are not limited to fathers in two-parent families. In separated families, a number of studies have found that where non-resident fathers are more than 'McDonalds Dads' and spend sufficient time with them to engage in a wide range of everyday activities with them, the children tend not only to achieve better at school but to be subject to fewer suspensions and lower drop-out rates.

Cowan et al (1994) found aggression/bad behaviour in children directly linked to their parents' fighting; and Sturge-Apple et al (2006) found that fathers who withdrew unhappily from their partners also tended to become emotionally unavailable to their children, which was connected with their aggressive/delinquent behaviour and poor school adjustment.

When parents separate, no, or very low, father-child contact can exacerbate bad behaviour, not least because it contributes to difficulties with peer relationships including bullying and causes children considerable distress, anger and self-doubt which often persist into adulthood.

A study that investigated the impact of father involvement on children born to teenage mothers (and took account of maternal risk factors) found greater father-child contact related not only to fewer child behaviour problems, but also to children's higher reading scores.

Fathers and literacy

Around 1:3 fathers of young children read with them at least several times a week

Fathers' reading habits can have a substantial influence on their sons' reading interest, levels and choices. When asked who taught them to read, children mention fathers third, behind mothers and teachers.

Frequency of fathers' reading to 1-2 year olds is linked with their greater interest in books later.

Time spent by fathers in reading to very young children is the strategy most consistently associated with their emergent literacy outcomes.

Some studies suggest that fathers' verbal interactions with their children may differ from mothers'; and that this may sometimes be to their children's advantage. Fathers have been found to use different and longer words with their children and also more abstract words. Topics may also vary by gender, with mothers referring more frequently to emotions (this has been found to predict children's emotional understanding) and fathers more often using causal explanatory language, which predict their children's theory of mind.

Sources

FI Research Summary: [Fathers' Influence Over Children's Education](#)

FI Research Summary: [Anti-social Behaviour and Fatherhood](#)
[National Literacy Trust research summary on fathers and children's literacy](#)

Compiled January 2012