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Research Report

Increasing father involvement in child care: What do we know about effects on child development?

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Increasing Father Involvement
in Child Care:
What Do We Know about
Effects on Child Development?

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Increasing Father Involvement in Child Care: What Do We Know about Effects on Child Development?

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The time fathers spend and the activities they perform with children have risen continuously in most Western countries. Increasing father involvement in child care has also been an explicit policy objective with many European countries implementing individual parental leave entitlements for fathers. Whereas these policies mainly aimed at facilitating reconciliation of market work and family care and promoting maternal employment, consequences for child development have received less attention in the policy debate.

This DIW Roundup describes potential mechanisms how increased father involvement in child care may impact children's development in different domains and provides an overview of the existing empirical evidence. Overall, previous studies generally point to some moderate positive effects of fathers involvement, in particular when father-child-activities and -relationships are stimulating and of high quality and distinct from mother-child activities or maternal parenting styles.

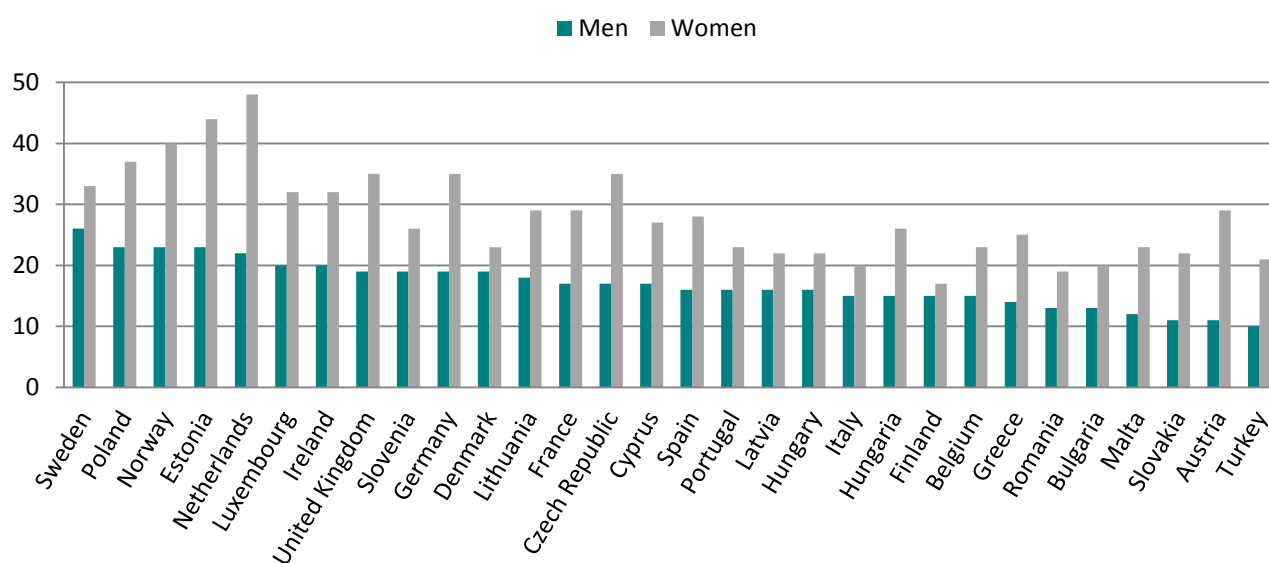
Father care and corresponding policies on the rise

Over the past decades in most Western countries, fathers' participation in unpaid household work in general and also specifically in care activities has increased in absolute terms and relative to mothers ([Hook, 2006](#); [Kan et al., 2011](#)). In 2007 men reported spending the highest number of child care hours in Sweden (26 hours per week) and the lowest at about 10 hours in Slovakia, Austria, and Turkey (see Figure 1). Despite general increases in maternal labour market participation since the 1970s, women's care time fluctuated or remained relatively stable in many countries (Kan et al., 2011). As a result of men increasing their care time and women not decreasing theirs in some countries, parents nowadays spend more time with children than in the past.

In several countries, increasing father involvement in child care has also been an explicit policy objective usually aiming at greater gender equality or at improving the reconciliation of work and care for parents. To-date, the majority of European countries has implemented parental leave legislations with some individual leave entitlements for fathers. In particular in combination with relatively generous compensation rates, such individual leave entitlements have been found to

significantly increase paternal uptake of leave at least for the designated period of the leave quota (e.g. [Wrohlich et al. 2012](#), [O'Brien 2009](#), [Patnaik 2014](#), [Trappe 2013](#)). Despite some mixed results, previous studies from Norway, Canada and Germany indicate some longer-term effects of fathers taking more than a couple of weeks of leave on a more equal gender division of domestic work ([Bünning 2015](#), [Schober 2014a](#), [Patnaik 2014](#), [Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011](#), for a review see [Schober 2014b](#)).

Figure 1: Weekly hours men and women aged 18 and over spent educating and caring for children in 30 countries



Source: [OECD Family Database, 2014](#), based on Second European Quality of Life Survey, 2007.

Conceptualising father involvement and consequences for child development

Given ongoing change in father care policies and practices, potential effects of father leave quotas and greater involvement of fathers in child care on children's development and wellbeing are of great interest. To identify mechanisms and dimensions where father involvement may be particularly likely to impact child development, a conceptualization of father involvement is essential. A widely applied conceptualization by Lamb (1986) has distinguished three dimensions of father involvement: 1) interactions through shared activities with children, which are often distinct from mother-child activities, 2) availability by being present or accessible, and 3) responsibility by ensuring that the child is taken care of. The first dimension has received increasing attention with several recent studies focusing on the frequency of fathers' involvement in specific activities with children (e.g., [Flouri & Buchanan 2004](#); [Huerta et al. 2013](#)). Given that previous studies suggest that the time fathers spend on child care is qualitatively different to that of mothers, with mothers doing more of the physical care, and fathers spending a higher proportion of their child care time on play or fun activities ([Craig 2006](#); [Lamb 1997](#); [Pleck 1997](#)), this may provide opportunities for distinct

influences on children's development. Relating to the second dimension, several empirical studies have operationalized father involvement as the amount of time fathers spend with children (e.g., [Mehall et al. 2009](#); [Sayer, Gauthier & Furstenberg 2004](#)). The third dimension of responsibility has received less attention.

Analyses of fathering in terms of time and frequency of activities have been criticized because this approach may not fully capture the quality of father-child interactions, which may matter more for children's outcomes ([Baxter & Smart 2010](#); Pleck 1997). Certain styles of parenting are likely to be more beneficial to children; for example, more supportive parenting styles should facilitate positive development in children. Mothers and fathers on average vary slightly in their styles of parenting (Lamb 1997). Even in absence of any general gender differences in parenting, close involvement from two parents with somewhat different types of interaction and parenting styles may be beneficial for children's development (Lamb 1997). Finally, some studies stress that the quality of the co-parenting relationship between mother and father may be another important indirect influence on children's wellbeing, in particular in terms of socio-emotional development ([Fegert et al., 2011](#); [Baxter and Smart, 2010](#); Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Methodological issues

Previous research has overwhelmingly found systematic differences between fathers who show a high degree of involvement and those who do not, for instance in terms of ethnicity, education, and attitudes but also in terms of family context (for reviews, see Lamb, 1997; [Marsiglio et al. 2000](#); [Baxter and Smart, 2010](#)). Fathers' own and their partners' gender role attitudes and perceived levels of parenting skills have been found to correlate with father involvement. Higher levels of education have been consistently associated with greater parental involvement in activities aimed at increasing the human capital of children, like reading and homework. It is unclear to what extent these correlations also reflect unobserved genetic foundations of father involvement and their children's outcomes. In addition, small differences according to children's own characteristics, such as age, gender and temperament, have also been noted in a range of studies ([Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2006](#); [Verhoeven et al. 2007](#)), which point to the risk of reverse causality.

As a result, research designs should aim to control for many of these selection factors and possible unobservable confounders. Furthermore, one requires measures which can capture the potential influences of mothers and fathers, as several studies have found that the levels and quality of involvement of fathers and mothers in the same family tend to correlate. Given the risk of bias due to reverse causality with child temperament or development impacting father involvement, a longitudinal design with some possibility to consider previous levels of involvement, child development or temperament is advantageous. In practice, however, many items to measure father involvement and child outcome tests are specific to the child's age and are therefore not perfectly comparable over time which hampers the possibility of measuring change over time and controlling for time-invariant unobserved influences. As a result, an effective approach to account also for unobserved selection factors is to draw on

exogenous variation in father involvement, e.g. due to policy reforms or randomized treatments.

Empirical evidence: How father involvement relates to child outcomes

Several reviews of previous studies which investigate correlations with father involvement in two-parent families have pointed to positive associations with some positive social, behavioral, psychological, or cognitive outcomes of children at least for some subgroups of the population and only few negative associations (for reviews see e.g., [Allen & Daly, 2007](#); [Fegert et al., 2011](#); [Sarkadi et al., 2008](#); [Lewis and Lamb, 2003](#); [Marsiglio et al., 2000](#)). Results are mixed as to variations between boys and girls. In several studies, not just the quantity of paternal involvement but the quality appeared to be important, i.e. sensitivity and responsiveness to children's needs, temperament, and abilities ([Baxter & Smart 2010](#); [Fegert et al., 2011](#)). The association of a close father-child-bond and distinct activities with child development were found to be stronger in families where some problems existed in the mother-child-bond or in terms of support from mothers ([Fegert et al., 2011](#)). In a study based on a large number of Australian families with young children and a rich set of controls, Baxter and Smart (2010) found that mothers' and fathers' total time with children were mostly not significantly associated with children's socio-emotional and academic development, whereas warm parenting styles were consistently linked to favorable outcomes.

Three longitudinal studies based on relatively rich data sets with large samples showed more mixed results. A British study ([Washbrook, 2007](#)) presented evidence that children of different pre-school ages who also regularly spent time alone with their father showed fewer behavioural problems than those only cared for by their mothers. However, they also found negative associations of long hours of early paternal care with boys' later academic achievements. A US study ([Cabrera et al., 2007](#)) similarly provided support for the importance of sensitive and stimulating parenting styles of both parents for cognitive and behavioural outcomes of children during pre-school years. Yet they also reported intrusive overcontrolling parenting to be negatively associated with cognitive and socio-emotional development. In a cross-nationally comparable study of birth cohorts in Australia, the US, the UK, and Denmark, Huerta et al. (2013) found that more frequent involvement of fathers in child care activities was associated with better cognitive outcomes of children. However, the strength of these associations varied across surveys depending on whether father involvement measures included interactive activities such as reading and playing with children, which showed stronger correlations with cognitive outcomes. Associations with behavioural outcomes of children were generally weak and sometimes even negative. This may point to mechanisms of reverse causality with fathers becoming more involved when children showed conduct problems.

To circumvent these problems, two recent studies have evaluated a randomized treatment and a policy reform, respectively, which impacted father involvement. An evaluation of a randomized father-engagement program in the US for low-income fathers with young children showed moderate positive effects on

children's social and emotional development (Cowan et al. 2009). A recent Norwegian study (Cools et al., 2015) used a quasi-experiment of the introduction of a 4-week paternal leave quota in 1993 to identify causal effect of greater father involvement on children's cognitive outcomes. They found that children's school performance at the age of 16 improved in families where fathers were more highly educated than mothers (effect size of about one quarter of a standard deviation). This may be interpreted as in line with the argument that father involvement has positive effects when it offers children distinct activities or interaction quality which is different from mothers'.

Future research should continue to exploit exogenous variations to identify causal effects of father involvement in different cultural context. From a policy point of view, as children's motivations and attainments related to specific skill sets, e.g. science subjects or social skills, are frequently being debated, it would be relevant to better understand which activities or aspects of the father-child-relationship benefit children's development in different domains. Further analyses of different subgroups of the population based on large scale longitudinal data set may be used to advance our understanding of theoretical mechanisms.

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