



Paternal Involvement & its Effects on Children's Education

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Aims and objectives

This study will conduct the first longitudinal analysis in England that explores the relationship between fathers' childcare involvement and their children's attainment at primary school. Using household data from the Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS) linked with official educational records of children from the National Pupil Database in England, we will explore whether, how and at what stage fathers' childcare involvement affects children's attainment at primary school.

Why is this important?

Fathers spend more time on childcare than ever before but the implications of this on children are unclear. Fathers' childcare involvement should have a positive effect on children's cognitive and educational outcomes yet there is little direct evidence to support this. Primary education is a pivotal stage of child development because it is the point at which children first make the transition from the home environment to school. Achievements at this early stage can shape educational pathways and therefore future employment prospects and opportunities.

Previous research with mothers or 'parents' (e.g. Hsin and Felfe 2014) suggests that early parental involvement is critical for child development but we do not know whether fathers impact their children's education differently to mothers, or whether paternal care is particularly important for boys, girls or at certain stages in the child's life regardless of gender.

There is an urgent need to explore the potential effect of paternal childcare involvement given the Department for Education (2018) report that over a quarter of children in England are not primary 'school-ready'. We propose that paternal pre- or school-age care involvement could help to support progression in particular academic subjects, close gender gaps in attainment and even moderate the detrimental effects of poverty.

How will this be investigated?

The MCS collects data at four relevant life stages: pre-school (9 months and 3 years), school entry (age 5), in the middle (age 7) and at the end (age 11) of school. Through longitudinal data analysis, we will track longer, more comprehensive primary school educational trajectories than has been possible in previous studies (e.g. Cano et al. 2019). This approach will enable us to focus on how pre-school and school-age paternal childcare involvement affects children's attainment in core (e.g. Maths, English, Science) and non-core (e.g. Art, ICT) subjects at the three key stages of primary school (ages 5, 7 and 11).

Our Research Questions are:

1. Does paternal involvement increase primary school attainment for children? And specifically:
 - (a) How important is fathers' pre-school involvement?
 - (b) Does the sex of the child moderate the effect of paternal involvement on educational attainment?
 - (c) Does father involvement moderate the known negative effects of poverty?
2. Which kinds of paternal-childcare activities have the strongest effect on a child's primary school attainment, and at what stage of the child's life is this most important?

What is the contribution?

The project will contribute to scholarly and policy debates by being the first UK-based study identifying the ways in which fathers may narrow gaps in children's academic attainment. The findings will benefit government bodies and policymakers by informing policy debates that focus on addressing inequalities in education in light of persistent attainment deficits for boys (e.g. Adock et al. 2016), girls in maths and science (e.g. World Economic Forum 2019), and children from poorer families (e.g. Department for Education 2018). New knowledge will be generated for teachers and practitioners to develop and implement more father-inclusive ways of supporting children's learning, with evidence-based tips and strategies to help families to maximise paternal involvement and impact.

The project builds on a 2016-17 ESRC funded project that explored what influences fathers' childcare involvement (ES/N011759/1) (Norman et al. 2016-17).

References

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