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Social Fathering in Low-Income, African American Families with Preschool Children

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In Press. Journal of Marriage and the Family

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Support for this research was provided in part by a W.T. Grant Faculty Scholars Award to the first author, and a NICHD Individual National Research Service Award (1 F32 HD08145-01) to the second author. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 Meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development. We thank Meejung Chin for data management and research assistance and Jay Belsky, Rebekah Levine Coley and Nan Crouter for helpful comments on prior drafts. Any opinions expressed are those of the authors.

Abstract

Although research increasingly focuses on nonresident biological fathers, little attention has been given to the role of other men in children's lives. We examine the factors associated with social father presence and their influence on preschoolers' development. Findings indicate that the majority of children have a social father, and that mother, child, and nonresident biological father characteristics are all related to social father presence. These associations differ depending on whether the social father is the mother's romantic partner or a male relative. The social father's influence on children's development also depends on his relationship to the child. Male relative social fathers are associated with higher levels of children's school readiness, whereas mothers' romantic partner social fathers are associated with lower levels of emotional maturity.

KEYWORDS: social fathers; fatherhood; preschoolers' development; single mother families; African American children; low-income families

Introduction

Changing patterns of marital structure and parental involvement have altered both societal and individual views of the father role (Coley, 1998). As the percentage of American children living with their fathers continues to decline, research and policy interests increasingly focus on nonresident biological fathers and their influence on children's development (Furstenberg, 1995; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Given high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing, focusing on nonresident biological fathers' involvement is clearly warranted. However, the increasingly complex and fluid marital and living arrangements that children experience necessitates a broader examination of the adults who influence their lives. Especially in single mother families, children may have relationships with important men who are not their biological father but who act like a father to them.

To better understand the context of children's family relationships and to further examine the "father" concept in single mother families, we examine the presence and impact of social fathers on preschoolers' development. By a social father, we mean a male relative or family associate who demonstrates parental behaviors and is "like a father" to the child (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Our focus on social fathers does not negate the importance of nonresident biological fathers. Rather, we suggest that in addition to biological father involvement, the presence of social fathers may also be significant. By examining social fathers' contribution to children's development, we can more effectively address the complex ecologies of family structure experienced by young children (Hawkins & Eggebeen, 1991).

The presence and effects of social fathers are particularly relevant for African American families, where rates of single parenthood are especially high. Only about 25% of African American children live with both biological parents, a lower rate than ones for White and

Hispanic children (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). At the same time, cultural traditions that encourage fluid and nontraditional roles for adult members may increase the significance of social fathers for African American children (Billingsley, 1992). Thus, African American children in single mother families may be especially likely to have relationships with men who play a parental role but are not the child's biological father.

Relatively little attention has been paid to social fathers and their potential influence on children's development (although research on fatherhood and nonresidential father involvement has flourished in recent years (see Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000)). Existing studies that include social fathers have been either small-scale or qualitative in nature, or have included a general fathering concept which has not differentiated social fathers from biological fathers (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Coley, 1998; Sullivan, 1993). Although providing some initial insights into the role that social fathers play and their potential importance, these studies have yet to answer two key research questions: (a) what factors are associated with having a social father? and (b) is having a social father associated with children's development?

Background

Many hypothesize that children growing up in single mother homes do less well, on average, than children in two parent families because of the lack of a male role model (Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Others argue that family structure alone is not a good indicator of children's access to, and involvement with, adult males. Some nonresident biological fathers do stay involved with their children. In other situations, grandfathers, uncles and other male relatives may step in and fulfill the socialization and male role modeling tasks performed by a biological father in two parent families. Additionally, even though rates of marriage and remarriage are low among poor, African American single mothers, many have a

boyfriend or cohabiting male partner who may act as a role model for children. Biological father absence is not necessarily equivalent to social father absence. Particularly for African American children living in urban communities, where rates of single parenthood are high and where economic and demographic factors challenge the involvement of nonresident biological fathers (Wilson, 1996), social fathers have a greater role to fill (Furstenberg, 1995).

Social fathers may be particularly relevant for preschool age children's development. By the preschool age, stranger anxiety has been resolved and children have a basic understanding of family relationships, such as fathering (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Woodworth, Belsky, & Crnic 1996). In single mother families, nonresident biological fathers are more involved with their preschool aged children than with infants (Woodworth et al., 1996), and this pattern of increased interaction with preschoolers may hold for social fathers as well. Other research shows that young children tend to accept a stepfather more than do adolescents (Parke, 1996); this may also be true in the case of social fathers.

Our focus on social fathers does not overlook children's nonresident biological fathers. We hypothesize that nonresident biological father characteristics are key factors correlated with social father presence and the association of this presence with children's adjustment. We hypothesize that social father presence will be greater in families where the nonresident biological father is less involved, although the causal direction of this relationship is unclear. Mothers, for example, may seek out a social father for children when biological fathers are disconnected with the family. Alternatively, nonresident biological fathers may limit their involvement in response to the presence of a social father. Furthermore, we expect that the correlates of social father presence and involvement will depend on the social father's relationship with the child. For example, low levels of nonresident biological father involvement

may be more strongly related to romantic partner social father presence than to male relative social father presence. Perhaps romantic partners are less likely to take on a social father role when nonresident biological fathers are highly involved, or nonresident biological fathers may withdraw their involvement if a romantic partner social father is present. On the other hand, nonresident biological fathers may feel less threatened by a male relative social father.

How might the presence of a social father relate to children's adjustment? As with nonresident biological fathers, it is possible that social fathers contribute directly and indirectly to children's development (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Tamis-Lemonda & Cabrera, 1999). Social fathers might fill an important male role modeling function for children in female-headed families. In this case, one would expect that children who had a social father would fare better than those who did not, all else being equal. Social fathers could also augment the positive socialization the child receives by providing important material goods, such as books and toys, or by taking the child on outings. These improvements could, in turn, be associated with positive child outcomes. Alternatively, social fathers, like other kinds of partners and support figures, could influence maternal behavior by providing support and assistance, thereby allowing mothers to invest more time and energy in the child's home environment (Parke, 1996). Our analyses will test the hypothesis that social father presence is associated with children's development directly and also indirectly through the quality of the child's home environment.

The influence of social father presence on a child's development might differ depending on his relationship to the child. Whereas a male relative social father might be beneficial (Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1998), having a romantic partner social father may prove detrimental. The mother's romantic partner is likely to have different interactions with the child than is a biological relative. Male relative social fathers probably have a longer relationship

history with the family and child, whereas a boyfriend may be a recent addition to the child's extended network. Additionally, boyfriends may come and go, and some children, having seen men enter and exit the family, could be hesitant about forming attachments with them. A boyfriend may also be a source of competition for mothers' attention, and a child might resent the intrusion of an unrelated male into the family.

In summary, despite their potential importance, little information is available on social fathers in low-income, African American, single mother families. We seek to fill this research gap by answering the following questions: (a) What proportion of children in these families have a social father? (b) What characteristics of the mother, child and nonresident biological father are associated with the social father presence? (c) What factors distinguish having a male relative social father from having a romantic partner social father? (d) Does having a social father make a difference for children's school readiness and social maturity, over and above the contributions of nonresident biological fathers? (e) Does the association of social father presence with children's development depend on his relationship to the mother and child? (f) If social father presence is associated with children's development, are the effects direct, or are they mediated through the quality of children's home environments?

Data and Measures

We use data from the Fulton County Descriptive Study, a component of the Child Outcomes Study in the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies. The Child Outcomes Study was designed to investigate the life circumstances and development of children at the time their mothers entered the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, a mandatory welfare-to-work program that operated under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the welfare program in effect until 1996 (Moore, 1996; Moore, Zaslow et al., 1995). Nonexempt

individuals (exemptions were primarily granted for caretakers of children under age 3) were required to participate in JOBS as a condition of welfare eligibility. The Child Outcomes Study sample consists of welfare applicants and recipients who were subject to the JOBS mandate. Detailed descriptive information on a sample of mothers and their children was collected from one Child Outcomes Study site, Fulton County, Georgia. The Fulton County Descriptive Study data include assessments of social father presence.

Data were collected in the respondent's home between March 1992 and June 1993, soon after the mothers had enrolled in the JOBS program. All sample mothers had a child who was between three and five years old (a few children had turned 6 by the time of the interview, but because their birth date fell after the cut-off date they were not enrolled in school), and this child was the designated focal child. Because mothers with children under three were exempt from JOBS participation, the focal child was almost always the mother's youngest child. If a mother had two children between three and five years old, one was randomly selected as the focal child.

All interviewers were African American women living in the Fulton County area. They received in-depth training in conducting child assessments and in rating children's home environments (Moore et al., 1995). Information comes from interviews with the mothers, interviewer-assessments of the home environment and mother-child relationships, and cognitive achievement assessments administered by the interviewer to the focal child. The response rate is 87%. Total sample size is 790, the majority (96%) are African American and most are either divorced, separated or never married (married and widowed mothers comprised less than 1% of the sample). We therefore exclude the small number of White respondents and married and widowed mothers, resulting in a final sample size of 749 mothers and their children.

Fulton County includes most of the city of Atlanta and is the most populous county in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Compared to other metropolitan areas in the U.S., Fulton County has higher rates of overall poverty, child poverty, and single mother families (Hamilton & Brock, 1994). These characteristics make this sample ideally suited for examining children's development in a low-income, urban, African American population.

Measures. Social father presence was determined by asking the mother the following question: Other than his or her birth father, is there a man in the child's life who spends a lot of time with the child or who is very close to him or her--someone who might be considered a father figure? Mothers who answered yes to this question were asked to identify their relationship with the social father. Using these two questions, we constructed a variable indicating that: (a) the child does not have a social father, or (b) the child has a social father who is the mother's current romantic partner, or (c) the child has a social father who is someone other than the mother's current partner. For simplicity, we refer to men in the latter group as male relative social fathers, as this is the most common relationship (grandfathers and uncles were the most frequently mentioned relationships, followed by an other relative category).

Child Development. We examine child development in cognitive and emotional domains. In the cognitive domain, we use the Caldwell Preschool Inventory (Caldwell, 1970), an interviewer-administered assessment consisting of 32 items designed to measure the child's mastery of skills and concepts important for entering school (the ability to follow directions, and knowledge of colors, shapes, and numbers). Summary scores represent the total number of items answered correctly. Children's socioemotional development is measured using the Personal Maturity Scale, a 14 item maternal report adapted from the 1976 National Survey of Children (Zill, Moore, Smith, & Steif, 1991). The Personal Maturity Scale assesses a child's behavioral

and emotional adjustment by asking the mother whether the child fights, is creative, is loving, or is affectionate. Answers are rated from a scale of 0 (my child is not at all like that) to 10 (my child is exactly like that). Higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional adjustment (α = .76).

Controls. When examining the association of social father presence and child outcomes, it is important to control for maternal resources and child characteristics, especially those that are known correlates of nonresident biological father involvement and that may be associated with social father presence and child development (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Belsky, 1998). Maternal characteristics controlled in our analyses include age, marital status, education, the number of children she has living with her, her self-reported health status, earnings, and the number of residential moves in the previous two years. Including income as a control variable is important when examining child outcomes. Unfortunately, we have no income measure in the data, and therefore include earnings from employment as a proxy for economic resources. Given that all sample members receive public assistance, we believe that income from employment distinguishes material resources. Also included is the mother's score on the 20 item depression scale (Radloff, 1977), a commonly used self-report index measuring somatic and psychological distress symptoms (" = .85). Psychological distress is over represented among low-income mothers (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000) and has been shown to predict behavioral difficulties in children (McLoyd, 1998). It may also be related to social father presence.

Child characteristics include the child's sex and age. We expect that boys will be more likely to have a social father (e.g., mothers might be more inclined to seek one for their son) given the cultural emphasis on male role models for young boys. In our analysis predicting social father presence, we code child's age as a dichotomy contrasting younger (age 3) and older

(age 4 to 6) children to test the hypothesis that the child's age will predict the presence of a social father differently in younger versus older children. In our second set of analyses (examining the effects of social father presence on child development), child age is included as a control variable and is used in its linear form.

As described above, we are interested in whether biological father characteristics are associated with the presence of social fathers and the extent to which social father presence influences child development over and above the contributions of nonresident biological fathers. We include several dimensions of nonresident biological father involvement to more fully capture his relationship to his child and the association this has with social father presence and child development.

Demographic characteristics of biological fathers include whether he currently lives in the same state as the mother and child, whether he has other children with a different woman, and whether he provides cash financial support, either through the formal child support system or directly to the mother. We also include a 7 item index of nonresident biological father in-kind support and emotional involvement. The items include (a) whether the father bought the child clothes, toys or presents in the past few months, (b) whether he bought groceries, (c) whether he babysat for the child, (d) whether he cared for the child overnight, (e) how often he saw his child in the past year, (f) how satisfied the mother is with the amount of love and care the father has shown towards the child, and (g) how satisfied the mother is with the amount of money and help he has provided in raising the child. This index includes measures of father involvement that are separate from his financial contributions, providing a broader measure of involvement. Because the constituent items were measured with different scales, items were standardized prior to scale creation. This index ranges from -0.6 to 2.6, with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 0.8 ("

= .88). We tested several different specifications of nonresident biological father involvement, including entering each item singly. Because all specifications had the same relationship to social father presence and child development, we present this index as the most parsimonious specification.

Finally, in order to test the hypothesis that social father presence is associated with child outcomes indirectly through the quality of the home environment, we use a measure based on the short form of the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (the HOME-SF; Baker & Mott, 1989). This 24 item summary index relies on interviewer observations and maternal responses to assess 10 items regarding emotional support (e.g., emotional tone of mother-child interactions, mothers' use of physical punishment) and 14 items regarding cognitive stimulation to the child (e.g., books available, stimulating outings outside of the home, safety and organization of the home). Additional items that appear in the original measure focus on the child's contact with their father. We exclude these items and instead include them as part of our nonresident biological father involvement scale. The total score for a family indicates the number of items out of 24 that were scored favorably (" = .55). Previous analyses of these data have discussed the relatively low internal consistency of this measure when used in low-income samples (Sugland et al., 1995). The low reliability likely reflects the lack of a clear underlying construct due to the wide range of issues tapped by the emotional support subscale in particular, and also the potentially inappropriate focus on material possessions in the cognitive stimulation subscale. Nevertheless, the short form total score shows good concurrent and predictive validity (Mariner & Zaslow, 1998) and is therefore included in these analyses.

Results and Discussion

As illustrated in Table 1, the majority (74%) of mothers in our sample had never been married, a significant minority (35%) had not graduated from high school, and 79% had no earnings during the prior year. The average score on the depression scale was also quite high (a score of 16 is commonly taken as indicative of depression (Weissman, Sholomskas, et al., 1977)). These statistics illustrate the high level of personal and economic stress experienced by sample members. The children are, on average, about four and one-half years old and there are equal numbers of boys and girls. Fifty-one percent of children have a social father. This person is most often the mother's current partner or boyfriend (31.6% of children have this type of social father whereas 19.6% have male relative social fathers). In general, children had frequent contact with their social father; 50% saw him almost daily and only 9% saw him less often than once a week.

Given the poor economic conditions of this sample, it is not surprising that we find low levels of nonresident biological father involvement (Wilson, 1996). For example, 73% of nonresident biological fathers have never lived with their child and 43% have an additional child with a woman who is not the focal child's mother. Although the majority (73%) of fathers reside in the same state, only a quarter have at least weekly contact with their child and 34% have not seen their child at all in the previous year. Only 18% make formal child support payments.

Correlates of Social Father Presence. A multinomial logit model is used to examine the association between mother, child, and nonresident biological father characteristics and social father presence. The dependent variable includes three outcomes: not having a social father, having a romantic partner social father, and having a male relative social father. The multinomial logit can be thought of as simultaneously estimating binary logits for all possible comparisons among the outcome categories. We present a minimal set of contrasts (because

presenting all would be redundant), and in these analyses the reference category is not having a social father. Table 2 presents the parameters, standard errors and significance levels for this model. Because meaningful interpretations are difficult to make by examining the parameters alone, we rely on predicted probabilities to illustrate the substantive findings.

Table 3 presents the predicted probabilities for the statistically significant findings in the multinomial logit, except for biological father involvement, which is displayed in Figure 1. First, the probability of having a male relative social father declines with the number of children the mother has (refer to column 3). In contrast, the number of children has little effect on the probability of having a mother's romantic partner social father (refer to column 2). With several children in the household, a male relative's time may be distributed such that they are less likely to be nominated as a social father to a specific child. Second, frequent residential moves are associated with an increased probability of having a mother's romantic partner social father and a decreased probability of having a male relative social father. Residential moves may be indicative of weak family ties or limited family contact or influence. Thus, if mothers attempt to provide a social father for the child, it may be more likely that this person is her romantic partner. This hypothesis is tempered by our not knowing the distance of the residential move, it could have been across state, across town or within the same neighborhood. The third significant predictor was child age. Compared to young children, those who are between 4 and 6 years old have a higher probability of having a mother's romantic partner social father. Perhaps romantic partners are better able to play a father role when children are older and can be taken on outings and the like. Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find that child's sex was associated with social father presence.

All four of the nonresident biological father characteristics examined were significantly correlated with social father presence. The predicted probabilities for the three dichotomous characteristics are presented at the bottom of Table 3; the probabilities for the continuous measure (the index of father involvement) is presented in Figure 1. We note that the cross-sectional data limit our ability to discern the direction of these effects. One possibility is that biological father characteristics influence social father presence. For example, social fathers may step in to fill the void left by uninvolved biological fathers. Another possibility is that social father presence affects nonresident biological father involvement. An involved social father may push the biological father out of the picture or the biological father may withdraw when he sees an active social father. The results should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The probability of having a male relative social father is higher when the biological father lives in another state. In addition, the probability of having both types of social fathers is higher if the biological father has other children (not with the child's mother). It is possible, but unlikely, that the presence of a social father affects biological fathers' fertility or residential decisions. Therefore, we speculate that when the biological father has other children his father role is divided and mothers may perceive him as being less available to her own child. She may look to a partner or to male relatives to fill this father role. Furthermore, these men may perceive biological fathers as being less involved, and take it upon themselves to fill the role. Similarly, male relatives may volunteer or be called upon to fill a father role when the child's father lives out of state and is known to be unavailable.

Finally, romantic partner social fathers are more likely to be present if biological fathers' make financial contributions. Romantic partners may be more inclined to play a social father role if the biological father plays the traditional economic provider role. In other words, partners

may be more willing to assume the social father role if they do not have to contribute financially. A more negative interpretation is that these types of social fathers are attracted to the money available from the biological father's contributions. Unmeasured variables might also explain this relationship. For example, in the present sample, only 18% of biological fathers gave any money, either informally or through the formal child support system, to the child's mother. The few mothers who receive money likely differ from the mothers who do not receive such assistance. These unmeasured factors may include personal characteristics of the mother that make her more attractive to potential partners and make her more likely to have partners who are more actively involved with her child.

Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities for the association between nonresident biological father involvement (based on the 7 item summary index) and the probability of having a social father (based on the multinomial logit presented in Table 2). The association between nonresident biological father involvement and the presence of a romantic partner social father is significant and strongly negative. In contrast, the presence of male relative social fathers is not correlated with nonresident biological father involvement. If one hypothesized that highly involved nonresident biological fathers lessen the need for social fathers in general, we would expect the presence of both types of social fathers to decline when nonresident biological fathers are highly involved. Our results suggest that biological fathers limit their involvement only when mothers have partners who act as social fathers, or that high levels of biological father involvement lessens the need for romantic partner social fathers in particular. Whatever the direction of effects, this suggests substitutability or competition between the roles of nonresident biological fathers and current male partners. In contrast, biological fathers may not view male

relatives as a threat or competition, and male relatives may not view their role as a substitute for nonresident biological father involvement.

Social Father Presence and Child Outcomes. Finally, we examine the association of social father presence with children's school readiness and personal maturity. The results from ordinary least squares regression analyses are presented in Table 4. As noted previously, the analyses control for a number of maternal characteristics that prior research has shown to influence child outcomes among low-income families. We also include child's sex and age as controls, as well as nonresident biological fathers' financial assistance and the index of his involvement.

The difference between Model 1 and Model 2 is that Model 2 adds the home environment score, allowing us to examine whether any links between social father presence and children's development can be explained by this measure. The results from Model 1 suggest that the presence of a male relative social father is associated with significantly higher levels of children's school readiness. Moreover, as Model 2 indicates, the measure of the home environment is positively and significantly associated with school readiness, and once the home environment measure is included in the model, male relative social father presence is no longer significantly related to school readiness.

This finding could reflect a supportive function whereby male relative social fathers model appropriate parenting behavior or support the mother's ability to engage with children in warm and cognitively stimulating ways. For example, male relative social fathers may engage in activities which allow poor, single mothers more time with their children, or make that time more enjoyable. Male relatives may also provide the child with books and cognitively stimulating materials. As a sensitivity test, we examined whether the presence of a male relative

social father was a proxy for social support available to the mother by including a measure of maternal perceptions of instrumental, emotional and parental support (analyses not shown). Including this variable did not change the positive association between male relative social father presence and children's school readiness, indicating that our measure of male relative social fathers is not merely a proxy for social support. As an additional sensitivity test, we also examined a model that included a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the social father resided in the same household as the child (analyses not shown). Social father coresidence had no significant effect on children's school readiness and did not alter the relationship between social father presence and the dependent variable.

Next, we examined the association of social father presence with children's personal maturity scores. Results indicate that children who have a romantic partner social father have significantly lower levels of personal maturity (Model 1). This association remained significant even after the home environment is controlled (Model 2). Similar to our strategy with school readiness, we examined whether the residential status of the social father was associated with emotional adjustment. Again, no effects were found. Perhaps mothers who have less well-adjusted children are more likely to introduce a male role model in the hope of stabilizing or improving children's behavior. On the other hand, when mothers have male partners who act like fathers or when mothers wishfully nominate their romantic partners as social fathers, children may display less mature behavior. Perhaps male partners compete with children for the mother's time and attention. It would be useful to know how long the partner has been present, or how many of the mothers' partners the child has been exposed to. Some mothers have had multiple partners, and it is perhaps relationship transitions that are associated with negative outcomes for children.

Another hypothesis that we tested was that the association between social father presence and child development would differ depending on the child's sex. Some suggest that boys in single mother homes may, in particular, benefit from the presence of a male role model. On the other hand, the step-parent literature suggests that the introduction of a social father or step-parent may be detrimental to girls' adjustment (Hetherington, Bridgess, & Insabella, 1998). The results in our sample were similar for boys and girls.

These findings point to several directions for future research. Key among these is determining not only the nature of social fathers' affective ties with children, but also with other family members. Even though one might expect that single mothers have encouraged and approved the presence of someone whom they nominate as their child's social father, his involvement could nevertheless produce disagreements over parenting issues or his appropriate role in the family. This might be especially true in the case of the mother's romantic partner. Perhaps integrating a male relative social father into the child's life is easier from this perspective since he is already a family member. Similarly, because consistency in parental behavior is an important determinant of children's well-being (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999), children's emotional adjustment problems could also develop if social fathers' socialization behaviors are incongruous with those of the mothers' or other caretakers. Again, expected or acceptable parent socialization behaviors may be clearer within families than between mothers and their romantic partners.

Conclusion

Whereas most children had limited contact with their nonresident biological father, the majority of children in this sample had a social father and most had frequent contact with him. Moreover, although we illustrate the importance of social fathers, our findings also demonstrate

that their role should be examined in the context of nonresident biological father involvement. Finally, with respect to children's development, it appears to matter who the social father is. The correlates of social father presence, as well as the influence of social fathers on children's school readiness and personal maturity, differed depending on whether he was a male relative or the mother's romantic partner. Together, these findings highlight the need to consider children's wider social networks and also the importance of adopting a more nuanced view of the adults who influence children's lives. For example, the proportion of single mothers living alone with their children appears to have declined in the latter part of the 1990s, particularly among low-income families. Although marriage rates did not increase, more and more poor families are cohabiting (Acs & Nelson, 2001). This may portend an increase in the presence of romantic partner social fathers, highlighting the need for further examining their roles and influence.

Our examination of social fathers was based on a simple measure assessing his presence or absence. Clearly, future research should obtain more detailed information on the nature and quality of social fathers' interactions with children. Research on nonresident biological fathers that examine only his presence or absence, or the frequency of his contact, have consistently found no significant effects (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Nonresident biological fathers have been found to be significantly associated with child development only when more detailed measures on the quality and nature of his interactions are included (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Thus, our simple measure of social father presence makes our significant findings on the child development outcomes particularly striking.

The available data preclude our testing all relevant hypotheses. For example, although we identify social father presence, we lack information on the quality of relationships between him and the mother's family, the quantity and quality of his time and financial contributions, and

the activities he engages in with the child. Our findings suggest the possibility of distinct pathways from type of social father presence to specific child outcomes. Future work on social fathering urgently needs to develop a theoretical framework of what social fathers do, perhaps following the biological father involvement literature (see Lamb, 1996).

Second, future research should examine subgroup differences in social father presence and impact. Although we focus on low-income, African American single mother families, it would be useful to examine similar issues among other racial/ethnic groups and families from various economic backgrounds. We should also examine social father's presence and influence among older children, who may be less accepting of a new male into the family (in the case of romantic partner social fathers). It is important to note that our findings may not generalize to a national sample of low-income, African American single mother families. Some studies in the African American kinship literature suggests that Southern community environments sustain more extended conceptions of family, resulting in higher levels of assistance and exchange (Chatters, Jackson, & Taylor, 1985). If this is the case, then our study likely over estimates the prevalence of male relative social fathers and their influence.

Our measure of social father presence is based on mothers' reports. Although many children in this study were too young to provide information on social fathers, future studies with older children should attempt to elicit their views. In some cases, mothers' claims of social father presence, especially when she nominates her romantic partner, may result from wishful thinking. That is, she may want to think of her boyfriend as having a stronger relationship with her child than he actually does. The findings concerning romantic partner social fathers may be more related to the presence of a boyfriend than the presence of a social father. Additionally, some mothers may have a romantic partner (or a male relative) who has significant contact and

interaction with the child, but who is not nominated as a social father. Therefore, mothers' nominations of social fathers may differ from their children's perceptions.

The past few years have seen substantial program and policy efforts geared at increasing nonresident biological father involvement. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (welfare reform) contained several key provisions related to nonresident fathers. Believing that responsible fatherhood is a key factor in child development, these policy measures are aimed not only at increasing the financial responsibility of nonresident fathers, but also at strengthening their parenting role and involvement with children. Our findings suggest that financial contributions from nonresident biological fathers are associated with the presence of a mother's romantic partner social father. This has important implications for the second goal. Increased visitation and interaction by the biological father may be difficult when boyfriend social fathers are present. One consequence of this policy goal may be increased conflict over role definitions. This is not to suggest that these policy goals are not laudable, but to highlight the need for policy to understand the broader context of family systems.

The current policy emphasis on nonresident biological fathers also overlooks the important contributions made by other men. Grandfathers, uncles and other male friends and relatives can make important contributions to children's development, and their involvement should not be discounted. In a climate emphasizing biological fathers, it would be a shame for other men to feel as if they do not have an important role to play. All types of men in families can be important to children, and our efforts should focus more broadly to better understand their involvement. Research and policy must recognize the complexity of family arrangements and include social fathers as an additional important contributor to children's development.

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Table 1

Sample Description

	Percent	Mean	s.d.
Sample size = 749			
Marital status			
Never married	73.8		
Divorced/ separated	26.2		
Education			
High school graduate or GED	65.3		
Less than high school	34.7		
Mother's age		29.79	5.26
Earnings			
None	79.1		
Some earnings	20.9		
Mother's health status			
Excellent or very good	52.3		
Other	47.7		
Mother's depression score		14.89	9.48
Number of moves in the past 2 years			
None	44.6		
One	35.0		
Two or more	20.4		

	Percent	Mean	s.d.
Number of children			
One	26.0		
Two	37.5		
Three or more	36.4		
Child's age in years		4.64	.70
Child's sex			
Girls	51.8		
Boys	48.2		
Social fathers			
Romantic partner social father	31.6		
Male relative social father	19.6		
No father figure	48.7		
School readiness		17.71	6.22
Personal maturity		103.50	21.28
Home environment		17.59	2.64

Table 2

Multinomial Logit Results: Correlates of Having a Social Father

	Romantic partner social father		Male relative social father	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Constant	-1.02	.432	-.608	.479
Characteristics of the Mother				
Never married (div/sep=0)	.150	.219	-.059	.243
High school graduate (no=0)	-.097	.195	.315	.232
Number of children	-.151	.120	-.287*	.136
Number of moves	.314**	.119	-.163	.141
Excellent/very good health (no=0)	.132	.085	.060	.098
Had some earnings (no=0)	-.112	.229	.037	.253
CES-D depression scale	.004	.009	-.004	.254
Characteristics of the Child				
Girls (boys=0)	-.311	.183	-.199	.209
Age 3 (4 to 6=0)	-.612*	.270	.032	.271
Biological Father Characteristics				
Lives in same state (no=0)	-.146	.220	-.485*	.242
Has other child(ren) (no=0)	.898**	.190	.767**	.216
Gives money (no=0)	.662**	.246	.382	.294
Absent father involvement	-.495**	.137	-.274	.160

Note. Not having a social father is the comparison group.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3

Predicted Probabilities for Multinomial Logit

	Does not have a social father	Romantic partner social father	Male relative social father
Number of children			
1 child	0.47	0.32	0.21
2 children	0.52	0.30	0.17
3 or more children	0.57	0.29	0.14
Number of residential moves			
No moves	0.50	0.26	0.24
1 move	0.47	0.34	0.19
2 or more moves	0.43	0.42	0.15
Age of child			
Child is 3	0.55	0.22	0.24
Child is 4 to 6	0.46	0.34	0.20
Biological dad characteristics			
Lives in other state	0.43	0.31	0.26
Lives in same state	0.49	0.32	0.19
No other children	0.57	0.25	0.17
Has other children	0.36	0.40	0.24
Does not give money	0.50	0.30	0.20
Gives money	0.37	0.42	0.21

Table 4

Regression Results: The Impact of Social Fathers on School Readiness and Personal Maturity

	School Readiness				Personal Maturity			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	B	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Constant	-1.23	1.83	-10.11	2.47	95.17	6.93	86.34	9.64
Mother's characteristics								
Age	-0.04	0.04	-0.04	0.04	-0.04	0.15	0.02	0.16
Never married (div/sep=0)	-1.03*	0.47	-0.59	0.48	-4.85**	1.80	-4.59**	1.94
Excellent/very good health (no=0)	-0.46*	0.18	-0.35*	0.16	-0.36	0.70	-0.20	0.75
High school graduate (no=0)	1.09**	0.42	0.86*	0.43	3.82*	1.60	2.79	1.70
Number of children	-0.74**	0.26	-0.68**	0.26	-1.15	0.99	-0.62	1.05
Number of moves	0.44	0.25	0.58*	0.26	1.39	0.97	1.83*	0.80
Had some earnings (no=0)	-0.02	0.48	-0.08	0.49	-0.04	1.83	-1.67	1.96
CES-D depression scale	-0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	-0.85***	0.08	-0.71***	0.86
Child characteristics								
Girl (boy=0)	1.30***	0.39	0.82*	0.39	3.63*	1.48	2.09	1.57

	School Readiness				Personal Maturity			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	B	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Age in years	4.99***	0.26	4.96***	0.26	0.88	0.99	0.53	1.05
Social fathers								
Romantic partner social father	-0.36	0.45	-0.33	0.45	-3.48*	1.72	-4.28*	1.80
Male relative social father	1.07*	0.51	0.66	0.52	-1.45	1.96	-2.64	2.10
Biological father characteristics								
Gives some money (no=0)	0.05	0.53	0.24	0.55	0.29	2.03	0.66	2.19
Absent father involvement	0.32	0.27	-0.02	0.28	1.17	1.03	0.17	1.11
Home characteristics								
Home environment			0.46***	0.08			1.57***	0.32
	R^2 = .39 for Model 1 and .43 for Model 2.				R^2 = .20 for Model 1 and .22 for Model 2.			
	*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.				*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.			

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of having a social father by nonresident biological father involvement.

