The Effect of Father Involvement on Mothers' Parenting After the Birth of a Child

Emily T. Gutman

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The Effect of Father Involvement on Mothers’ Parenting After the Birth of a Child

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Comments
The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between father involvement and maternal parenting behaviors. Father involvement was measured using variables from a Demographics questionnaire, the Marital Relationship Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), and the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-Infant/ Toddler Edition (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984); these measures assessed father accessibility, emotional support, and engagement. Maternal parenting behaviors were measured using codes from 10-minute videotaped play interactions between participants and their 2-year old children. It was found that father accessibility was associated with more positive and less negative maternal parenting behaviors. It was also found that engagement was a predictor of better maternal parenting behaviors. Emotional support was not found to be a significant predictor of positive or negative maternal parenting behaviors. Overall, this study supports the notion that fathers who are more involved with their children and with their partners may aid mothers in improving their parenting skills resulting in a better mother-child relationship.

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THE EFFECT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT ON MOTHERS' PARENTING AFTER
THE BIRTH OF A CHILD

By

Emily T. Gutman

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
Honors College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
with Honors in Psychology

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April 2, 2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between father involvement and maternal parenting behaviors. Father involvement was measured using variables from a Demographics questionnaire, the Marital Relationship Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), and the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-Infant/Toddler Edition (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984); these measures assessed father accessibility, emotional support, and engagement. Maternal parenting behaviors were measured using codes from 10-minute videotaped play interactions between participants and their 2-year old children. It was found that father accessibility was associated with more positive and less negative maternal parenting behaviors. It was also found that engagement was a predictor of better maternal parenting behaviors. Emotional support was not found to be a significant predictor of positive or negative maternal parenting behaviors. Overall, this study supports the notion that fathers who are more involved with their children and with their partners may aid mothers in improving their parenting skills resulting in a better mother-child relationship.
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The Effect of Father Involvement on Mothers’ Parenting after the Birth of a Child

Mother-infant attachment is an important area of developmental psychology (Ainsworth, 1967). How a mother behaves in relation to her child in the early years of life can influence both negative and positive child outcomes, including the quality of the infant’s attachment to the mother and the quality of other relationships throughout the child’s life (Bowlby, 1969). Furthermore, the quality of a young child’s attachment is one of the best predictors of social-emotional outcomes throughout childhood and into adulthood (Sroufe et al., 1995).

Mary Ainsworth began trying to understand the nature of mother-infant attachment in Uganda in 1954 where she initially identified two types of attachment as ‘secure' or ‘insecure’ (Ainsworth et al., 1971). Subsequently, Ainsworth, as well as John Bowlby and other researchers in the field, defined four types of mother-child attachment as Secure, Ambivalent-Insecure, Avoidant-Insecure, and Disorganized through observations of child behavior during separations and reunions with the mother in a paradigm called the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988, Main & Solomon, 1990). Secure attachment develops when the caregiver is available and responds appropriately to the needs of an infant on a consistent basis. This is shown by the child being willing to explore when the caregiver is around, becoming distressed when the mother leaves and happy when she returns, and being only mildly or minimally wary of strangers.

Ambivalent-insecure attachment is shown by the infant’s hesitation to explore and interact with strangers, having very distressed reactions to caregivers leaving, and having ambivalent responses when they return. Avoidant-insecure attachment is shown when
infants show no signs of concerns about the comings and goings of their caregivers. This type of seemingly indifferent child will react to strangers and caregivers similarly, have little to no reaction when the caregiver leaves, and avoid or ignore the caregiver upon return. Finally, Disorganized attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990) can be seen in infants who have contradictory and atypical ways of reacting to caregivers. This is believed to stem from a lack of coping strategies when dealing with stress produced by the caregiver. As suggested by Main and Solomon (1990), children who are frightened of their caregivers are more likely to develop this attachment style.

Attachment research suggests that the quality of a child’s attachment system is largely based on his/her attachment figure’s ability to sensitively and consistently respond to child wants and needs in an appropriate manner (Ainsworth, 1967; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964). For example, multiple parenting dimensions are significantly related to quality of infant attachment including sensitivity, warmth, and engagement, which then leads to the attachment figure becoming a “secure base” for the child (Ainsworth, 1963). Once a parental figure has become a “secure base,” the child can explore the environment freely knowing that the attachment figure will be there (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Carr, Dabbs & Carr, 1975; Rheingold, 1969; Sorce & Emde, 1981). Many recent studies have found that parenting sensitivity and secure infant attachment are related to other important mechanisms such as a parent’s reflective functioning, i.e., a parent’s capacity to think about and understand accurately the child’s mental states (e.g., Stacks et al., 2014).

One important factor that is related to the quality of maternal parenting behavior is the mother’s relationship with her partner or the father of her child. Previous studies
have looked at father involvement and maternal stress (Harmon & Perry, 2011), which impact the mother’s parenting of the child, or even how maternal parenting quality affects father involvement (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Some indirect links have been drawn between father involvement and maternal parenting, but very few studies have examined the direct link between the two. However, the topic of paternal involvement and maternal parenting quality has only recently (within the past 40 years or so) become an area of interest to researchers, and it is one that has not been given much attention. Therefore, more studies, such as the current study, need to be done on fathers’ roles in the family and paternal involvement in order to understand this important influence on the development of a child. Throughout this review of the literature, the topic of father involvement will be discussed from a historical perspective, the difficulties and complications in studying fathers will be outlined, and how father involvement is defined and measured will be provided. Subsequently, existing knowledge about how fathers impact the mental health of the mother, as well as developmental outcomes of their children will also be discussed. Finally, literature related to how father involvement impacts the parenting of mothers will be reviewed. This paper will then describe the methods of the current study, results and findings, and end with implications for work in this area for the future.

**Historical Overview of Fatherhood**

Unfortunately, fathers often go overlooked throughout the parenting literature because, historically, mothers have often been thought of as the main caregivers, while fathers have been thought of as the main financial providers (Forste, 2002). However, more recently, the role of fathers in providing emotional support and care to family
members has been raised as an important concern for understanding family functioning, with a large majority coming from the work of Michael Lamb; much of the following information follows Lamb’s work in this area. Throughout history, fathers’ roles within the family have changed significantly. During ancient times, fathers were viewed as the person holding the patriarchal power over the family (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2003). Soon into the Puritan era, through the Colonial era, and through the Republican period, they developed into the person who was responsible for teaching values and morals to their children. When the industrialization period came along, the role of the father shifted from leadership through morals and values to being seen as the “breadwinner” and supporting the family economically. This idea and practical reality resulted in the father being the sole source of income and economic support. Once the Great Depression was under way and economic turmoil hit the majority of families, many men did not have the ability to effectively provide for their families. When World War II began and fathers started being deployed to different countries, social scientists then began to research maternal deprivation, or the effect of children being separated from their mothers (Bowlby, 1951), as well as fatherlessness.

Through this period of research on family functioning, the view of fathers shifted towards becoming male role models to their children. That is, it was their responsibility to teach their sons how to be masculine through example, which became a concern since their fathers were more than likely going to war at that time. Their influence on daughters was not yet clarified. It was not until the 1970’s, following the critique of masculinity and femininity by the feminist movement, when fathering became a larger concern to child development and attachment research. The “new nurturant father”
subsequently became a hot topic of discussion. Through this push for more father involvement studies, researchers found that, while fathers influence their children by being involved or uninvolved in various ways, they also influence maternal parenting behavior (Lamb, 2000; Lewis & Lamb, 2003).

**Challenges and Difficulties of Studying Fathers and Fatherhood**

In addition to the changing theories about the role of fathers within families, researchers have struggled with more practical difficulties in empirically studying fatherhood. Historically, researchers have had to rely on mothers to provide information about fathers when conducting research (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). In addition to this, it is important to understand who exactly should be included in a study about fatherhood. Family structures have developed in such a way that non-traditional father figures (stepfather, grandpa, uncle, brother, etc.) now may reside in the home rather than biological fathers, and these individuals may play more of the father role to the child than some biological fathers (Coley, 2003). According to the US Census Bureau in 2011, 63% of children under 18 were living with two married parents, 5% lived with two unmarried parents, 24% lived with a single female parent, 4% lived with a single male parent, and 5% lived with a guardian. Of the children who lived with a guardian, 55% resided with grandparents.

While researchers have made great strides in collecting data about fathers through mothers, they can face some difficulty when trying to reach the fathers directly. Mothers who participate in studies can offer valuable information on where the father is located, how to reach him, and so on, but they can also cause some difficulty when trying to get in contact with the father. For example, mothers can sometimes act as “gatekeepers” to
fathers when researchers are required to acquire consent from them to contact fathers (Mitchell et al., 2007). Mothers can also opt to have fathers included or turned away from studies for various reasons (e.g., to protect the father's time, protecting herself and her children from violent fathers, or having no relationship at all with the father), but contacting fathers through mothers can be a huge obstacle when trying to study fathers directly (Mitchell et al., 2007). This, in turn, causes a barrier when attempting to identify fathers for studies focused on parenting and fatherhood.

If there is a contact made with the target family's father, recruitment can either be very easy or very difficult depending on the information given by the mother. Up-to-date contact information can be the key to recruiting a father into a study. This is especially important for low-income families, as it has been shown that the fathers in these settings most often do not live in the same residence as the mother and child(ren) (Cabrera et al., 2004). While phone calls may be a cost-effective way to try to make contact with the fathers, it is usually met with complications because the father may move from place to place, or those living with the father may not relay information. There may also be a general mistrust of strangers calling for information about the father among some female participants. Because of these common complications with phone calls, it is typically best to have face-to-face contact with the father through obtaining information on where he may live or where young children go to daycare. With this information, researchers can make a visit to these locations to have contact with the father (Mitchell et al., 2007).

Retaining fathers in longitudinal studies can also be very challenging, especially in low-income families. Complications can arise due to many causes, such as high incarceration rates, lack of contact information that is accurate, and difficulties in
relocating fathers that go missing from studies (Groves & Couper, 1998). Changes in the father-mother relationship can also cause difficulty in retaining fathers. It has been shown that fathers who do not have at least cordial and friendly interactions with the mother are much less likely to be involved with their children, leading to much lower involvement in child development studies (Cabrera et al., 2004). It is also relatively common that there is no father-figure at the beginning of a study, but a father-figure is available at later waves of a study because the mother becomes romantically involved with someone new or a male relative begins living in the home (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006).

**Defining and Measuring Father Involvement**

As mentioned previously, the role of the father has evolved over time from the dominant patriarch of the family to a provider of nurturing care. Because of this shift over time, social scientists have varied considerably in how they measure the influence of fathers on family functioning. For example, some researchers have measured qualitative dimensions of fatherhood, such as dominance and masculinity, whereas others have examined quantifiable dimensions, such as sheer amount of time spent by fathers with their children (Lamb, 2000). Therefore, the construct of ‘father involvement’, the focus of the present study, does not yet have a clear definition. Depending on what exactly is being examined, researchers define father involvement in many different ways.

Recent empirical research has reflected these varying definitions of father influence and father involvement. For example, DeGarmo (2010) conducted a study involving 230 fathers who had been divorced within the past 24 months with children between 4 and 11 years. Father involvement was operationalized as time physically spent
with the child. For this, the researchers used an index, the *Family Activities Checklist*, which measured how many parent-child activities (e.g., going for a walk, seeing a movie, eating together) were done within the last 2-months. More specifically, the researchers measured the number of weekdays or weekend days per month that contacts were made between the father and child, as well as the number of overnight visits. Father-child interactions were also coded with a *Fathers' Positive Involvement (FPI)* scale. Observations were made of the father and child during interaction and teaching tasks, and fathers were then rated on the FPI scale on items such as “was involved,” “treated child with respect,” “good eye contact and interactive posture,” and “treated child with respect.”

Another recent study focused on father involvement by Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2009) measured father involvement in multiple ways from the prenatal period to 14 months postpartum, although all reports were made by the mother in the study. During the prenatal period, involvement was measured by asking the mother various questions about how often the father visited the hospital during the pregnancy, listened to the heartbeat of the child during pregnancy, gave money to support necessary preparations for the baby, spoken about the pregnancy to her, felt the baby move, or attended Lamaze classes with the mother. At 1 and 6 months postpartum, mothers were also asked about who was directly engaged with the infant on a daily basis (grandparents, uncles, aunts, significant others), and researchers coded father engagement based on three activities: taking the baby on an outing (to visit friends or relatives, to the park or zoo), social interaction (playing with the baby, talking to the baby), and caregiving (feeding or changing the baby, giving the baby a bath, putting the baby to sleep) at these times. At
14 months, three indicators of father involvement were measured: 10 different activities together (e.g., playing games with toys, reading together), time spent with the child (e.g., how often the father watched the child when the mother was absent), and eating meals with the child on a daily basis.

While it is important to assess fathers’ involvement with their children through assessment of amount of contact between the father and child, it is also important to assess father involvement in other ways such as financial support or indirect care. Kotila and Kamp Dush (2012) conducted a study using a subsample of women who were unmarried from the Fragile Families and Children Wellbeing Study. Their goal was to predict whether or not the mothers in the study had another child with the same father from the original study or with a new father. Engagement, indirect care, accessibility, and financial support were all measured to encompass father involvement within the study. Engagement was considered to be occurrences of in-person interaction between the father and the child (how often the father fed the child, played with the child, etc.) The researchers considered indirect care to be how often the father did necessary activities that benefited the mother and child such as being available to watch the child for a few hours if the mother was busy or taking the child to a doctor’s appointment. Accessibility was only measured for non-resident fathers by using how often the father had seen the child within the past 30 days as an indicator of accessibility to the mothers. Finally, non-resident fathers’ financial support was measured. The researchers considered any form of payment to the mother to be financial support, whether that was court-ordered or worked out between the mother and father.
Besides mother reports of father variables, father involvement can also be measured through the father himself if he is able to be recruited for the study. For example, a study by Kwok et al. (2012) used a very reliable measure (alpha = .96) entitled the *Inventory of Father Involvement (IFI-26)*, which assesses fathers’ perceptions of their own involvement and parenting over the course of the prior year. They collected data in Hong Kong from 48 nurseries from fathers with children aged 2-6 months. Nine dimensions are measured on this scale, including: Attentiveness, Time and Talking Together, Reading and Homework Support, Discipline and Teaching Responsibility, Developing Talents and Future Concerns, Giving Support to the Mother, Giving Praise and Affection, Providing, and School Encouragement. They found that these scales differentiated fathers from healthy intact relationships and families with fathers from separated, divorced, or unhealthy relationships. These differences were evident especially for levels on the Attentiveness, Providing, and Giving Support to the Mother dimensions.

A study done by Brown et al. (2012) also focused on fathers reporting on their own involvement with their children, measuring it differently over multiple years. Their study centered on father involvement, paternal sensitivity, and father-child attachment security during the first 3 years of life. At the first time point, Brown and his colleagues focused on parental responsibility. Specifically, at the first 13-month laboratory visit, father involvement was measured using the *Parental Responsibility Scale (PRS)* to measure paternal involvement in regards to responsibility. The fathers in the study reported what percentage of time each child-care task was completed by them, the mothers, or by both of the parents together. Fathers were considered to be less
responsible if their percentages were lower. At the second 3-year home visit the
*Interaction/Accessibility Time Diary* interview was used to assess what the fathers did on
a daily basis and to measure the accessibility and interaction quality of father
involvement. The researchers considered interaction to be activities that both the parents
and the child were directly engaged in. Accessibility consisted of activities where parents
were not necessarily directly engaged with the child, but were available to them. Finally,
another form of the *PRS* was given at this time point as well to see if the responsibility
for the child in certain tasks had changed over time.

In the father literature overall, the most well accepted view of father involvement
seems to include engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, &
Levine, 1987). Engagement is the most restrictive definition in that it involves direct,
one-on-one interaction with the child. This can include doing homework, playing, or
eating dinner with the child. It does not include time spent in the same room with the
child without direct interaction. Accessibility simply means how available the parent is
to the child while they are involved in some other activity. An example of this would be
the child playing in another room or outside while the parent is inside doing a chore.
While the parent is not directly engaged with the child, he is there when/if the child
would need something. Responsibility is another form of involvement and, while it is the
most important according to some researchers (Lamb et al., 1987), it is difficult to define.
This form of involvement reflects the degree to which the parental figures take ultimate
responsibility for the care and welfare of the child. As an example, responsibility
includes knowing that the child needs a dental appointment (or a need similar to this),
making the dental appointment, and following through on taking the child to and from the
dental appointment. It also involves making sure that the child has clothes to wear, is having a well-balanced diet (or as well-balanced as can be), making baby-sitting plans, and providing care when the child is sick or feeling ill. It does not just include simply baby-sitting or helping out. Out of the three areas of involvement as defined by Lamb et al. (1987), responsibility is the one most overlooked in studies because many times it involves not being directly involved with the child, but taking part in actions to benefit the child's overall needs, which is difficult to measure.

The Impact of Father Involvement on Developmental Outcomes of the Child

Though the scope of this thesis will be focused on how father involvement impacts the mother's parenting of the child, it is important to present some of the vast amount of research pertaining to how father involvement impacts the developmental outcomes of the child. In their recent review, Wilson and Prior (2011) point out that many positive developmental outcomes for children result from higher levels of father involvement. They indicate that children are influenced both by the quality and the quantity of father involvement across many stages of development. For example, as a result of higher levels of father involvement, children may have better psychosocial adjustment and better mental health as they approach adulthood. There is also a higher likelihood that children will have higher levels of social and cognitive competence. Findings suggest that higher levels of father involvement also increase children's social responsibility, self-control, capacity for empathy, and self-esteem. These authors go on to explain why both quantity and quality of fathering may be important when parenting a child. They state that quantity of time may result in fathers feeling like they have a closer relationship with the child and may lead to greater sensitivity to the child's needs and
characteristics, as well as greater confidence in their own parenting. On the other hand, they note that other researchers (e.g., Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000) have suggested that the amount of time spent with the child does not always correlate with better paternal parenting. For instance, if a parent is spending large amounts of time with the child, but consistently demeans and interacts negatively with the child, problems may develop such as lowered child self-esteem. Therefore, quality of interactions may be more important than large amounts of time spent together. On the other hand, too little time, or no time at all, spent with the child can also have detrimental effects on developmental outcomes (Sawyer, Arney, Baghurst, et al., 2001). In fact, children in families experiencing father absence may show poorer academic performance as well as vulnerability for more problems with adjustment.

In one interesting study, Dumont and Paquette (2013) examined the ways in which father involvement impacted children’s socio-emotional development as assessed by the Strange Situation and Risky Situation paradigms (Paquette & Bigras, 2010). The Strange Situation has typically been validated when assessing mother-child attachment quality, but its validity as a measure for predicting children’s socio-emotional development or the quality of father-child attachment has been questioned (Dubeau & Moss, 1998; Youngblade, Park & Belsky, 1993; Volling & Belsky, 1992); this is because fathers are typically much more involved in playful activities rather than caregiving activities with their children (Lamb, 1977a), which are not well represented by the Strange Situation paradigm.

In contrast, the Risky Situation paradigm was developed (Paquette & Bigras, 2010) to better account for the types of interactions fathers typically have with their
children based on Paquette’s (2004) theory about the origins of father-child attachment. More specifically, this theory, called the *activation relationship theory*, posits that fathers tend to stimulate and discipline their children. As the father engages in these two practices, the child opens up to the world around him/her (stimulation), while also having limits set for their safety (discipline); these types of interactions are believed to ultimately lead to a bond between the father and the child.

During the Risky Situation procedure, children explore a room that is unfamiliar and are encouraged to take a physical and social risk. The physical risk involves a big, colorful set of stairs that is placed in the middle of the room that presents as both inviting and perilous. The social risk involves a stranger who becomes increasingly interactive and intrusive with the child while the father is present. Children are classified as *activated*, *underactivated*, or *overactivated* following the completion of the procedure. Activated children will be friendly towards the stranger, but react with some fear and hesitation as the stranger becomes more intrusive. They will also play on the stairs, but obey the limits set by the father. Underactivated children react much more hesitantly and fearfully towards the stranger. They are also obedient and cautious of the father’s limits, but explore less. Overactivated children are very sociable with the stranger, exhibiting little or no fear or hesitation as the stranger becomes more intrusive. They also have much higher levels of exploration while also disobeying their father’s limitations the majority of the time. In Dumont and Paquette’s (2013) study, they found that only Activation status from the Risky Situation, not attachment quality based on the Strange Situation, was significantly related to the child’s socio-emotional development which was measured using the Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation Scale (SCBE:...)
LaFreniere & Dumas, 1995). They also found that Risky Situation scores predicted the child’s socio-emotional development for internalizing problems only, such that children who were Activated were less depressed, less isolated, less anxious, and less dependent than children in the other groups.

To measure father involvement in this study, a Daily Activities (DA) questionnaire was administered using items from the Montreal Father's Involvement Questionnaire (MFIQ; Paquette et al., 2000). One of the scales, Discipline, was taken directly from the MFIQ while two other scales, Stimulation and Comfort, were developed from utilizing specific questions from the Physical Play, Emotional Support, Opening to the World, and Basic Care scales in the MFIQ. The Stimulation scale seems to reflect the father involvement variable of Engagement, as defined by Lamb et al. (1987), while the Discipline and Comfort scales seem to reflect the father involvement variable of Responsibility, as defined by Lamb et al. (1987). Results related to father involvement in this study revealed that the children’s responses in the Risky Situation were related to their social-emotional development when fathers reported more Discipline and Stimulation, but not when fathers reported more Comfort. Furthermore, they found that lower levels of Stimulation and Discipline were both correlated with higher activation in children and more social competence. As they predicted, involvement in Comfort was not significantly related to child activation or social competence.

The Impact of Father Involvement on Maternal Functioning

Mental Health. Some researchers have speculated that father involvement has a positive effect on children’s development, as briefly described above, because it influences the well-being of the mother. That is, fathers have an indirect effect on the
EFFECT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT ON MOTHERS' PARENTING

child through their effects on maternal well-being and functioning such as through mothers’ mental health and parenting quality (the latter being the focus of the present study). One study (Mezulis et al., 2004), for example, examined the association between father involvement and maternal depression in 570 women and 550 husbands/partners of those women during pregnancy. This study focused on whether or not father involvement during the infancy of the child exacerbated or reduced the adverse effect of maternal depression during the child’s first few years of life. They also hypothesized that the fathers’ parenting styles would be characterized by high warmth and high control when fathers spent greater time on caregiving activities. Their hypotheses were partially supported by their findings; specifically, they found that paternal warmth and quantity of father involvement moderated the effects of maternal depression on the child’s internalizing problems. These results suggest that high warmth and father involvement may buffer children from maternal depression.

Another study looked at the effect of father involvement on maternal depression in families with children with special needs (Laxman et al., 2014). Father involvement was measured in three different ways in this study: routine caregiving, literacy skills, and responsive caregiving. They found that fathers with greater literacy levels and higher responsive caregiving (i.e., responding to the needs of the child) were associated with lower levels of maternal depression. The authors speculated that this was the case because, in families who are dealing with children who are developmentally delayed, fathers who respond more often to the needs of their children may cause mothers to feel less burdened, lowering their levels of depression.
Parenting Stress and Parenting Behavior. Although some studies have reported how fathers influence mothers’ mental health and emotional well-being, a few studies have examined how fathers influence mothers’ parenting stress and parenting behaviors. Because the latter are most relevant to the current study, more details about prior studies will be given here. One study by Harmon and Perry (2011), for example, examined how fathers contributing to the family emotionally (i.e., being a caregiver and support to the mother) and instrumentally (i.e., financially providing for the family) affected the mothers’ overall parenting stress, parenting self-efficacy, and parenting behavior. The data for their study were taken from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCW) which included 1,672 mothers and their 3-year old children. Thirty-eight percent of the mothers were either unmarried or cohabitating with a partner while the remainder was married.

Maternal parenting stress was measured using a scale with items that were borrowed from a study on parenting stress by an Early Head Start study and items that were developed by the Center for Research on Child Well-Being. The scale included 12 items that were measured using a 5-point scale with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. Maternal self-efficacy was also measured by using items from the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) Inventory, as well as items from the Parental Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). This particular scale created by the researchers had 5 items, which were measured on a 4-point scale with 1 being strongly agree and 4 being strongly disagree. Parenting behaviors were measured based on the frequency and number of caregiving, physical, social, and cognitive activities that parents would engage in with their children such as, “How many days per
week do you play inside with the child?” with responses being from 0 days to 7 days per week. The questionnaires measuring parenting behaviors measured both mothers’ and fathers’ parenting behaviors as reported by the mothers. Finally, mothers’ parenting support was measured by using 6 items that tapped levels of parenting support received from the study-child’s father. An example of one of the items is, “The child’s father supports the way you want to raise the child.” Items were scored based on a 4-point scale with 1 being always and 4 being not applicable.

Harmon and Perry (2011) found that, in terms of father involvement, parenting support, and maternal parenting stress, the level of fathers’ parenting support was significantly predictive of parenting stress in the mother. That is, higher reports of fathers’ parenting support were associated with lower levels of maternal parenting stress. According to the researchers, mothers may feel that their levels of stress increase if they have perceived that the efforts they put towards being the primary caregivers are not met with support given from the father of the child. The father’s income was not significantly related to mothers’ parenting stress. It was also found that mothers’ reports of fathers’ parenting behaviors were not significantly related to levels of maternal parenting stress. The authors suggested that, in terms of the father’s involvement and parenting, mothers may view father involvement as less important to the child’s development because fathers are not typically the primary caregivers. Mothers may also view the father’s role as less influential because fathers may choose when they are involved with the child rather than being involved on a more obligatory day-to-day basis. This study suggests that mothers are at risk for negative parenting experiences (both stress levels and parenting behavior) when fathers are less emotionally supportive of the mother’s parenting efforts.
Another study (Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Coley, 2005) sought to test the relationship between mothers’ perceptions of father involvement and young mothers’ psychological adjustment over 2 years. Father involvement was assessed using questions taken from the *Baltimore Multigenerational Families Study* (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). The constructs of father involvement included Engagement, which included caretaking, Accessibility, which included contact between the mother and father, and Responsibility, which they defined as financial support and responsibility for the child’s upbringing. Maternal parenting stress was measured during both time periods using 6 questions that asked about her role as a mother. Examples of the questions were “You have too little time to spend by yourself” and “Your child is making too many demands on you.” Mothers rated their answers on a 1-5 point scale with higher numbers reflecting a greater amount of stress. It was found in this study that mothers’ perceptions of father involvement were predictive of maternal parenting stress. More specifically, decreasing patterns of father involvement over time were associated with increasing maternal stress over time when compared to stable patterns of father involvement.

Overall, prior empirical studies do not provide very much information on how father involvement directly impacts maternal parenting. This may be because other aspects of the mother’s life such as socioeconomic status or only certain aspects of father involvement (such as financial support) take precedence in studies rather than evaluating the multiple dimensions of father involvement. It is also likely that the lack of empirical work in this area is due to the difficulties recruiting fathers into studies and challenges with measuring father variables, as described earlier.
Rationale for the Present Study

As previously mentioned, fathers have often been overlooked in the parenting literature, which is why it is imperative to understand how fathers can affect a mother’s parenting style, especially in more disadvantaged and diverse samples such as the sample being focused on in the proposed study. This, in turn, can dramatically change the way father figures are viewed and understood in relation to parent-child relationships, especially within diverse populations. The present study aims to examine aspects of the relationship between mothers and their partners and the role of fathers as they relate to maternal parenting during infancy and toddlerhood. More specifically, the present study aims to examine how father accessibility and father engagement impacts maternal parenting during infancy and toddlerhood. Father emotional support to the mother will also be examined in relation to maternal parenting during infancy and toddlerhood.

The present study had the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses

1. The longer the father of the child lives with the baby (i.e., the more times the mother reports the father of the child living with the baby at assessment points) over the first two years of life, the more positive and less negative parenting behaviors the mother will display at the 2-year interview.

2. If the mother of the child is in a romantic relationship with the father of the child at the 1-year interview, then it is hypothesized that the mother will exhibit more positive parenting and less negative parenting at the 2-year interview than those that are not in a romantic relationship with the father of the child. Likewise, if the
mother is in a romantic relationship with the father of the child at the 2-year interview, similar results will be seen.

3. Mothers who have a father-figure living in the home at the 1-year interview will exhibit more positive parenting and less negative parenting behaviors than mothers who do not have a father figure in the home. Likewise, mothers who have a father-figure in the home at the 2 year interview will exhibit more positive and less negative parenting than mothers who do not.

4. The greater emotional support the mother receives by the father of the child at the 2 year interview, the more positive and less negative parenting behaviors mothers will display.

5. Mothers will exhibit more positive parenting and less negative parenting at 2-years when the father of the child is involved in the care of the child (defined by certain criteria judged by the researchers) compared to mothers who do not have an involved father of the child.

6. Mothers will exhibit more positive parenting and less negative parenting at 2-years when the father of the child eats at least 1 meal a day with their child most days of the week compared to mothers who do not.

7. The more often fathers are involved with the baby over time (i.e., the more time periods the mother reports the father to be involved), the more positive parenting and less negative parenting the mother will display at the 2-year interview.
Methods

Participants

One hundred and twenty women (N = 120) were originally recruited into a longitudinal study that began in November 2007 at Eastern Michigan University (PI: Alissa Huth-Bocks) called the Parenting Project. Data were collected at four waves. The first wave (T1) was completed during the third trimester of the participant’s pregnancy. The second wave (T2) was completed 3 months postpartum. The third wave (T3) was completed when the child turned 1 year of age. The fourth wave (T4) was completed when the child was 2 years of age. For the purpose of this study, only data from T3 and T4 will be utilized.

Participants were recruited through the posting of flyers in public locations, as well as local community organizations and agencies serving low-income families in Washtenaw and Wayne counties. More specifically, 23% were recruited through community-based health clinics serving low-income and/or uninsured individuals, 18% through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) social service program, 16% through student areas at one community college and one regional-level university, 11% through a “community baby shower” sponsored by local service programs, 11% heard about the study through word of mouth (via a friend, relative, another research study, or church), 7% through Head Start and local daycare programs, 7% through subsidized housing and/or temporary housing facilities, 5% through second-hand donation centers for pregnant women and their children, and 2% through a parenting class.

With a retention rate of 83%, there were 99 participants still in the study by the time the child turned 2 years old. Due to the strategic recruitment strategy, participants
mostly consist of minority and low-income families. At the time of pregnancy, the participants’ average age was 26 years old ($SD = 5.7$). Forty-seven percent of the participants identified as African American, 36% Caucasian, 13% Biracial, and 4% as another minority group, making this sample much more diverse than many other samples in the literature. Education levels of this sample also vary with 20% having a high school diploma/GED or less, 44% having some college or trade school education, and 36% having a college degree. Seventy percent of the participants had an average of 2.7 children (ranging from 1 to 12 years of age), with the rest being first time mothers. Sixty four percent reported being single (never married), 28% married, 4% divorced, and 4% separated.

Economic disadvantage was common overall with the participants at baseline. The median family income was about $1,500 per month (range = $0 - $10,416) at the first wave of data. While 45% were employed at the time, 90% of the sample received Medicaid, Medicare, or MI-Child, 88% received services from WIC, 62% reported receiving food stamps, and 20% received public supplemental income.

**Procedures**

The fliers posted at the approved locations asked for women who may be interested in participating in the EMU Parenting Project, a research study about women’s pregnancies and overall health. Eligible participants included women who were pregnant, 18 years old at the start of the study, and spoke fluent English. Women who agreed to participate in the study did so through verbal consent and either agreed to have research assistants come into their home for the first interview or meet in an office designated for research on Eastern Michigan University’s campus. 78% of the women
had their first interviews done in their homes, while 22% opted to have the first interview done in a research office. The interviews lasted about 2.5 to 3 hours with one research assistant leading the interviews and a second research assistant observing the interview or providing childcare to aid in the completion of the interview. All research assistants involved in the study were trained thoroughly by the principal investigator on proper administration of all questionnaires and measures, study procedures, as well as home visit protocol (appropriate conduct, safety, ethical issues, etc.). Home interviews, including a 12-minute video-taped play interaction between the mother and child, were then conducted at T3 and again at T4. Both of these follow-up interviews lasted between 3 and 3.5 hours each. At every time point, the women received compensation in the form of a gift card or up to $50.00 cash.

The interview at T1 consisted of a demographic questionnaire, as well as an assortment of other self-report measures. Prior to filling out any measures, an informed consent form was read aloud and signed by the participant. A 1-hour semi-structured interview was also given, and audio-recorded, to assess the way the participants thought and felt about their unborn children. The interview at T2 was done over the phone with only 5% completed at the participants' homes due to special circumstances. With a retention rate of 99.2%, 119 women completed the interview at T2. This interview was shorter, lasting 30-45 minutes, and consisted of asking participants basic information about their baby as well as the sleeping, crying, and feeding routines of the child. Information about the health and well-being of the infant and mother was also obtained.

At around the time of the child's first birthday, the third wave of interviews was given (T3). With a retention rate of 95%, 114 women completed the interview at T3.
93% of the participants completed the interviews in their own homes, while 7% were completed at EMU in a research office. These interviews included questionnaires, as well as a 10-minute free-play and 2-minute clean-up interaction between the mother and her child, which was recorded and later coded by trained research assistants. The coding procedure will be described in detail in the Measures section.

Similar to T3, interviews at T4 were held around the child’s second birthday. With a retention rate of 82.5%, 99 women completed the interview at T4. Some of the same questionnaires were given at this time point with 93% occurring in the participants’ homes and 7% occurring over the phone or at EMU. Video-taped mother-toddler play interactions also took place similar to those that took place during T3 and coded in the same manner as T3 by trained research assistants.

**Measures**

Being that the aim of the original Parenting Project study focused on mothers and their children and did not specifically aim to measure “father involvement,” no specific instruments were administered to assess this construct in the proposed study. However, items were available from multiple measures that provided some information about the child’s father and other father-figures (e.g., the mother’s partner if it wasn’t the biological father), as perceived by the mother. For the purpose of the present study, questions from several measures that refer specifically to fathers’ roles and mothers’ perceptions of their relationships with them were used.

**Father accessibility.** The first measure that included information about fatherhood was a Demographics questionnaire administered at the T1, T3, and T4 waves. The Demographics questionnaire assesses for background characteristics such as age,
ethnicity, education & income, marital status, and use of childcare. Four items from the Demographics questionnaire at T3 were used and 4 items from T4 were used. The first item assessed at T3 was, “Does the father live with the child?” If participants answered “Yes” then they were given a score of 1, if they answered “No” then they were given a score of 0. The same question was asked at T4 and was scored in a similar way. The scores for each participant were then added up over both time points. If the mother answered “No” at both time points, she scored a 0, if she answered “Yes” at one time point she scored a 1, and if she answered “Yes” at both time points, she scored a 2. Higher scores, therefore, indicate greater duration of time in which the father lives with the baby.

Participants were also asked about the current relationship with the father of the child at T3 and T4. Possible responses were as followed, “1 = spouse, 2 = ex-spouse, 3 = partner, 4 = ex-partner, 5 = friend, 6 = acquaintance,” and “7 = stranger.” If mothers considered the father of the child a spouse or partner, they were considered to be in a relationship with that person currently. If they answered with any of the other choices, they were considered to not be in a relationship with the father of the child. This variable was retained as a dichotomous variable at each time point.

Finally, another item at T3 on the demographics questionnaire asked the participant to list who lived in the home with her. Women were grouped based on whether any father figure was mentioned (husband, partner, father, brother, etc.) or not. The same question was administered at T4 and scored in the same way. These variables were retained as dichotomous variables at each wave.
Father emotional support. To measure romantic partner relationship quality and the support the mother feels from her partner, the Marital Relationship Scale (MRS; Braiker & Kelley, 1979) was used at T1, T3, and T4. The MRS is a 25-item self-report questionnaire that measures marital satisfaction and functioning. These items were scored on a scale of 1 to 9 ranging from a variation of "Very little/infrequently" to "Very much/frequently." Participants were asked to answer the questions for the "present time" in their relationship and circle the number that described their relationship best. The scale takes about 10 minutes to complete. Four subscales were measured including Love (10 items), Conflict (5 items), Ambivalence (5 items), and Maintenance (5 items). Scores were calculated by averaging items. Higher scores on each subscale represent greater feelings of love, conflict, ambivalence, or maintenance. For the purpose of this study, the Love scale at T4 (age 2) was utilized to address how emotionally supported the mother felt by the father.

Father engagement. The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-Infant/Toddler Edition (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984), which assesses the quality of the home environment, was the final measure that contained information about the father or father-figure of the child. This measure was given at T3 and was made up of both observations made of the home environment by researchers and maternal responses during a semi-structured interview about the quality of the home and family routines. Two items from the HOME were utilized from this measure for the purpose of this study. The first was, "The father provides some care daily." Answers that qualified as "No" were scored with a 0 and answers that qualified as "Yes" were
scored with a 1. The second item was, “The child eats at least one meal a day with the mother and father,” and was scored in a similar way to the previous item.

Father engagement was also assessed using 1 item from the Demographics questionnaire at both T3 and T4. The item used was, “Is the father involved with the baby?” If the participant answered, “Yes” they were scored with a 1; if they answered “No” they were scored with a 0. The same item was also assessed at T4 and was scored in a similar way. Each participant’s answers for these questions were added together to create a 3-point scale. Mothers who answered “No” at both time points scored a 0, mothers who answered “Yes” at one time point scored a 1, and mothers who answered “Yes” at both time points scored a 2. Higher scores reflect greater duration of father involvement over time.

Maternal parenting. Mothers’ overall parenting was assessed through coding maternal behaviors from the 12 minute video-taped play interactions between the mother and child at age 1 (T3) and 2 (T4). Maternal behavioral and affective codes were developed by Gallagher and Huth-Bocks (2010) based on other published coding systems. For the purpose of this study, parenting codes from the T4 wave were used. For the play-interaction task, mother-child dyads were given the same set of toys to play with that were developmentally appropriate for the children. The same instructions were given in the beginning of each videotaped play interaction:

Now we’d like to videotape you and your baby playing together with some of the toys that we brought along. Please feel free to play and interact with your child as you normally would. Go ahead and have a seat behind the toys and facing us. If possible, please try to keep your child around this area and these toys for the next 12 minutes. After about 10 minutes, we’ll let you know that there’s about 2 more minutes left and that you and your baby can clean up the toys by putting them back in the bucket. One of us will make sure the camera is working, and the other will just be sitting aside organizing paperwork. Ready to begin?
At a later time, a team of trained coders made up of five research assistants coded the 10 minute free-plays and 2 minute clean-ups on their own. Each free-play and clean-up were assigned 5 behavioral and 5 affective codes. Behavioral scales included: *Sensitivity*, or the mother's ability to perceive the meaning behind and respond appropriately to her infant's behavioral signals; *Engagement/Disengagement*, or the degree of involvement displayed by engaging in play activities with the child, frequently attempting to communicate with the child about the activities they were involved in, keeping their gaze on the child; *Interference/Overcontrolling/Intrusiveness*, or the degree to which the mother intrudes on the child's play or clean up activities; *Covert Hostility/Discrepant Communication*, or how often the mother reacted to the infant's behaviors in a hostile way without the knowledge of the infant or displayed herself in contradictory ways; and *Frightened/Frightening Behaviors*, or behaviors in which the mother reacts to her child in a frightened or frightening way (e.g., growls or uses a haunted voice). Affective scales included *Warmth*, or the degree to which the mother showed physical or verbal affection towards the child; *Anxiety*, or the degree to which mothers appeared stressed or anxious during the interaction; *Enthusiasm*, or the mother's level of excitement toward the activities; *Flat Affect*, or level of depressed behaviors; and *Overt Hostility/Anger*, or degree of anger in direct response to the child. Each behavioral and affective code was rated on a 5-point scale: 1 (none or very little), 2 (some), 3 (moderate), 4 (much), or 5 (very much, or all the time). Higher scores indicated a higher degree of each behavior or affect. Subsequently, a "Positive" parenting composite was created and included codes from Sensitivity, Engagement, Enthusiasm, Warmth, and the
EFFECT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT ON MOTHERS’ PARENTING

reverse code of Flat. A “Negative” parenting composite was also created and included codes from Frightened/Frightening, Covert Hostility, Interference, and Overt Hostility.

A doctoral student was trained under the direction of the Principal Investigator to become reliable using the coding scheme for maternal behaviors and affect. Under the direction of this doctoral student, two master’s students and myself were trained on the maternal behavioral and affect coding system. Trainings occurred weekly, and each meeting lasted approximately 2 hours for about 12 weeks. During these trainings, a detailed explanation of each code was given and coders watched and discussed mother-infant play-interactions, which exemplified each code. Once the team became familiar with the codes, the meetings started including the coding of tapes and discussions following the tapes as to why codes were chosen and assigned. Near the end of the training period, each of the coders took time on their own to code video tapes and returned to meetings to watch the coded video tapes and discuss each code that they assigned. Once the doctoral student felt comfortable with the progress made, training was completed. At this point, a 10-week reliability period started where coders were asked to be assigned a random subset of mother-infant interaction tapes and code each tape on a weekly basis. Reliability of each coder was calculated using intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC). The reliability coding period lasted about 12 more weeks, and each coder coded 2 free plays and 2 clean ups per week. One hour meetings were held each week to check in on each coder and give feedback to improve any discrepancies that may have been occurring.
Maternal clean up codes were not used for this study, as it was determined that the free play codes served as a better indicator of the parenting of the mother and relationship quality of the mother and child due to the longer period of observation time.

Results

Missing Data

Due to attrition over time, there were some missing data in the present study. Thirty-two participants had missing maternal parenting codes at the 2 year interview because the free-play portion of the interview could not be done. Of those 32 participants, 21 could not be reached during the interview time due to changes in contact information. Six participants could not complete this portion of the interview because they did not have custody of their child during that time. Four participants had the interview done over the phone. One child fell asleep during the interview, so they were not able to engage in the play interaction. For these reasons, 88 participants with complete data are included in the study.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 stated that the longer the father of the child lives with the child across the 1- and 2-year interview period, the more positive parenting and less negative parenting mothers would exhibit at the 2-year interview. A correlation was conducted to test this hypothesis; results supported this hypothesis (see Table 1). Hypothesis 2 stated if the mother of the child was in a romantic relationship with the father of the child at the 1-year interview, then the mothers in the study would exhibit higher levels of positive parenting and lower levels of negative parenting at year 2; the same was expected
regarding the mother being in a romantic relationship with the father of the child at age 2.

A t-test was conducted and results supported the hypothesis (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. Correlations between Father Involvement and Accessibility across Age 1 and Age 2 and Maternal Parenting at Age 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maternal Codes at Age 2</th>
<th>Positive Maternal Parenting</th>
<th>Negative Maternal Parenting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total father involvement across Age 1 and Age 2</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological father living with child across Age 1 and Age 2</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support to mother by the father at Age 2</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

Hypothesis 3 stated that mothers would show significantly more positive and less negative parenting at age 2 when a father figure was living in the home at age 1 compared to when there was no father figure in the home; the same was expected regarding the presence or absence of a father figure at age 2. A t-test was again conducted. Results supported the hypothesis (see Table 2), except for the association between live-in father figure status at age 2 and negative parenting. Hypothesis 4 stated that greater perceived emotional support by the father of the child would be related to more positive and less negative parenting at age 2. A correlation was conducted and did not support this hypothesis (see Table 1); perceived emotional support from the mother’s partner was unrelated to her observed parenting quality. Hypothesis 5 stated that mothers would exhibit more positive and less negative parenting at age 2 when the father of the child was more involved and engaged at age 1 (as defined by having daily interactions) compared to mothers who reported that the father of the child did not have daily interaction. This hypothesis was tested using a t-test in SPSS. As shown in Table 2,
results indicated that mothers exhibited significantly more positive and less negative parenting at age 2 if the father was considered involved by the researchers compared to those without an engaged father.

TABLE 2. Father Involvement at Age 1 and 2 and Maternal Parenting Behaviors at Age 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maternal Codes at Age 2</th>
<th>Positive Maternal Parenting</th>
<th>Negative Maternal Parenting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m (sd)</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father involvement/engagement based on daily interactions at age 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17.92 (2.91)</td>
<td>2.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15.91 (3.20)</td>
<td>6.00 (3.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father eats meals with child at age 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17.82 (3.09)</td>
<td>2.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.44 (3.14)</td>
<td>7.69 (3.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a romantic relationship with biological father at age 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17.63 (2.98)</td>
<td>2.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15.77 (2.98)</td>
<td>8.23 (3.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a romantic relationship with biological father at age 2:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17.94 (2.90)</td>
<td>3.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15.83 (3.07)</td>
<td>7.78 (2.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father figure living in home at age 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17.67 (3.11)</td>
<td>2.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.14 (2.95)</td>
<td>7.75 (3.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father figure living in home at age 2:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18.20 (2.74)</td>
<td>3.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15.84 (3.07)</td>
<td>7.35 (2.40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Hypothesis 6 stated that mothers would show significantly more positive and less negative parenting at age 2 when fathers ate regular meals with their children compared to when fathers did not have regular mealtimes with their children. As shown in Table 2,
t-test results supported this hypothesis, demonstrating that mothers showed significantly more positive and less negative parenting at age 2 when fathers ate meals with their children compared to when fathers did not have regular mealtimes with their children. Hypothesis 7 stated that the more times the father of the child lived with the child across the 1- and 2-year interviews, the more positive parenting and less negative parenting mothers would exhibit at the 2-year interview. A correlation was conducted and did not support this hypothesis (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

Throughout the parenting literature, there has been little focus on the role of fathers and fathering as it relates to the quality of maternal parenting toward young children. However, existing literature suggests that a mother can benefit from a father or father figure is involved on some level (through engagement, emotional support, accessibility, etc.) (Harmon & Perry, 2011; Tamis-LeMonda, 2009; Lamb et al., 1987; Kotila & Kamp Dush, 2012). This study, therefore, sought to better understand how different aspects of father involvement (accessibility, emotional support, and engagement) affect maternal parenting behaviors during infancy and toddlerhood. Mothers' overall parenting was assessed using coded maternal behaviors from free play interactions with their toddlers. Father involvement was assessed using different variables from various questionnaires. Results from this multi-method, longitudinal study are anticipated to further contribute to the fatherhood literature in hopes of stimulating more research on the role of fathers in families.
Findings from Major Research Aims

Overall there were many significant findings that resulted from the analyses conducted in this study. First, results showed that mothers exhibited more positive parenting behaviors when the father of the child lived with the child at both of the time points rather than at one or no time points. This meant that the longer the biological father lived with the child, resulting in higher accessibility over a period of time, the more positive maternal parenting behaviors were seen in the age 2 videos. Results also showed that if the mother was in a romantic relationship with the father of the child, she exhibited more positive parenting behaviors. Finally, results showed that when a father figure was living in the home at age 1 and age 2, the mother exhibited more positive parenting behaviors at age 2 compared to when there was not a father figure living in the home at either time point. In other words, the more accessible the father or father figure was, the more positive maternal parenting behaviors were seen from mothers in the age 2 videotapes. Similar results for negative maternal parenting were found; if the father or father figure was more accessible to the mother, the less negative maternal parenting behaviors were seen in the age 2 videotapes. The only exception to this was if a father figure was living in the home at age 2. There was no significant relationship with parenting in this case.

These results were consistent with findings by Kalil, Ziol-Guest, and Coley (2005). These authors found that when they tested father accessibility as it relates to maternal stress, patterns of decreasing involvement from the father (which included accessibility) were related to increasing patterns of maternal stress. Though they were not testing for maternal parenting behaviors specifically, there is reason to believe that
higher maternal stress can lead to less positive and more negative parenting behaviors. These results were also similar to Brown et al.’s (2012) study, which found that accessibility was a predictor of overall father involvement. The Brown et al. study did not test for any associations between father variables and mother variables, but it seems highly probable that higher accessibility could lead to higher overall father involvement which could then lead to a better relationship with the mother and better parenting by the mother.

When testing the importance of emotional support in the present study, results showed that there was no significant correlation between a mother feeling more close, attached, and loving toward her partner and her levels of positive and negative parenting. This was unexpected. In contrast, Harmon and Perry (2011) found that emotional support by the fathers to the mothers was related to maternal parenting quality. Harmon and Perry (2011), however, assessed amount of support the mother received in parenting specifically. The measure used in the present study, while still tapping emotional support, was focused more on how the mother felt about her relationship with her partner in general rather than how she felt about receiving support with parenting responsibilities. On the other hand, results from this study are somewhat consistent with Kotila and Kamp Dush’s (2012) findings; they found that the mother’s romantic relationship satisfaction with the father was not a significant predictor of having a child with that same person in the future. Thus, it could be inferred that emotional support on a romantic level is not grounds for assuming that the mother will exhibit better parenting or want to continue parenting with that same person.
When testing engagement using the HOME, a researcher-coded instrument based on observations of the home and interviews, results showed that greater father engagement based on frequency of interactions with the child was significantly related to more positive and less negative maternal parenting behaviors in the age 2 videotapes. Results also were significant in the expected direction when the father ate more meals with the child at age 1. These results were consistent with Kotila and Kamp Dush's (2012) study in that if the mother felt that the father of the child was more engaged with the child, she was more likely to have another child with that same person. Though the latter study was not testing specifically for an association between father involvement and maternal parenting behaviors, it seems that there may be a connection between higher levels of engagement, levels of positive and negative parenting behaviors, and future relationships with the same partner.

When engagement was examined again, but using mothers' own reports, results showed that there were no significant associations between mothers' perceptions of father involvement over time and maternal parenting quality. Being that the engagement question from the HOME and the question from the Demographics Questionnaire ("Is the father of the child involved?") seemed to be tapping the same thing, it was puzzling as to why they yielded significantly different results. As a result, each of the measures were closely examined. It is possible that the results from the Demographics Questionnaire occurred due to the way that this questionnaire item was administered to the participants. Typically, this questionnaire was given at the beginning of the interview when rapport had not yet been developed between the participant and the research assistant. This could have caused participants to withhold certain information or feel as though they needed to
have the biological fathers appear to be more involved than they actually were at that time (e.g., social desirability as a response style). Another possibility as to why these results may have occurred is that each mother may have very different understandings of what ‘father involvement’ meant to them. That is, when asked “is the father of the child involved?” mothers may have had very different things in mind such as financial support, interactions with the child, proximity in living situations, etc. Perhaps if a definition such as Lamb et al.’s (1987), which includes strict criteria for father involvement including engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, had been given to the participant, she would have had a better idea of what is considered an involved father. Because this item was also administered in a “yes or no” format, mothers only had two options to choose from according to their own criteria for father involvement. For most, father involvement likely does not fit into such neat ‘all or none’ categories.

The question regarding father involvement on the HOME results from a conversational interview, during which the interviewer asks different questions regarding father involvement, but does not explicitly ask the participant whether or not she thinks that the father is involved. If the mother’s answers meet the criteria for father involvement that the interviewer has (according to the HOME scoring manual), then the father is considered involved based on the judgment of the researcher. Interestingly, the HOME’s criteria for a father being involved, which requires the father to have visited the child a certain amount of times per week, yielded significant results whereas the mother’s own criteria for father involvement yielded no significant results. The differences in these results also point to the advantages of using interview methods with many questions
and probes to establish father involvement as compared to asking a simple “yes or no” question that can be interpreted very differently by participants, as previously stated.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study was that it was longitudinal in design, that is, participants were followed over the course of several years. This design was ideal for seeing how the role of the father over time was or was not related to maternal parenting skills 2 years after giving birth. Another strength of this study was that it included an observational measure of parenting and did not rely on mothers’ own self-report of their parenting, which may or may not be accurate. This meant that trained observers had a first-hand account of any behaviors that occurred during parent-child observations. Relatedly, expert coding of maternal behaviors was also a strength of this study. Research assistants had to be trained for a very long period of time and reach a certain level of inter-rater reliability before independently coding videos. This allowed the head graduate student and Primary Investigator to be confident regarding the quality of assigned codes by research assistants. Although the larger study did not aim specifically to examine fatherhood in the present study, an unexpected strength of this study was that there were, in fact, father variables that tapped different father constructs such as accessibility and engagement. The last strength of this study mentioned here was that it had a very racially diverse sample with a wide variety of family structures. With around half of the participants being African American and around half being unmarried, it was helpful to address the proposed hypotheses in a sample such as this since racially diverse samples are generally not well represented in research.
While there were strengths in this study, there were also some limitations. One of those limitations was that the measures used were not specifically meant to comprehensively measure father involvement in the original study. Therefore, measures of father accessibility, emotional support, and engagement were measured often with just a few items each, drawn from various measures. Other father variables such as responsibility or financial support were not measured at all. Another limitation was that the information that the mothers did give about the fathers was solely based on their own perceptions. Fathers were not able to give their input while answering different questions regarding their own involvement because, again, the original study did not intend to focus on fathers. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, research on fatherhood has been limited by using only mothers’ report, and future research needs to include fathers as a primary source of reporting. One last limitation mentioned here was that the sample size used was not very large. It would have been much more beneficial to have a larger sample size in order to test more complex associations and to have better statistical power to detect significant associations.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In sum, it is clear that more studies must be done in order to understand the impact that father involvement can have on a mother’s parenting. Although the present study’s findings are mostly consistent with past studies, suggesting that greater father involvement is related to more maternal positive parenting behaviors and fewer maternal negative parenting behaviors, more research is needed. Though this study had many strengths, the limitations must also be taken into account for future studies. An important next step for future research would be to include the father’s own report of his
involvement. Though the mother’s perceptions are valuable in representing how she personally thinks and feels about the level of involvement by the father of the child, the father’s accounts of his own involvement are also critically important, as mothers and fathers may view situations very differently and have unique perspectives to share. In this way, researchers may be able to better understand what each of the parents considers to be involvement and whether or not they both view the father as an actively participating parent.

Future research should also include a better representation of diverse families and should expand the definition of a “father,” as there are many types of male figures that can live in a home at one time. Biological fathers may not always be present or show effective involvement or parenting behaviors. Nontraditional fathers may step in at these times and display those parenting behaviors much more consistently, yet they may not be considered father figures because they are an uncle to the child or a good friend of the mother. Another issue that should be looked into for future research is diversifying the types of participants. Oftentimes, this type of research only includes traditional families, such as those who are married or come from middle class backgrounds, who are easier to contact and easier to keep in studies. This means that a critical portion of the population is being missed and often do not have the same experiences that traditional families have. Those that live in poverty, are from a diverse background, or tend to move from house to house, for instance, may be over-looked in research because they may be harder to keep in contact with or recruit for the study in the first place. Researchers must make it a priority to include these individuals so that results represent their experiences and such
findings can influence new ways of thinking about parenting and the parent-child relationship in many different types of families.
References


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