

**Social Fathers' Characteristics, Parenting Quality, and Family Stability\***

Lawrence M. Berger  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sharon H. Bzostek  
Rutgers University

Marcia J. Carlson  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

September 2014

---

\*Lawrence Berger ([lmberger@wisc.edu](mailto:lmberger@wisc.edu)) is Professor of Social Work, and Research Affiliate at the Institute for Research on Poverty and the Center for Demography and Ecology, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Sharon Bzostek ([sbzostek@sociology.rutgers.edu](mailto:sbzostek@sociology.rutgers.edu)) is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Affiliate at the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research at Rutgers University; and Marcia Carlson ([Carlson@ssc.wisc.edu](mailto:Carlson@ssc.wisc.edu)) is Professor of Sociology, and Affiliate at the Center for Demography and Ecology and the Institute for Research on Poverty, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We appreciate support for this research from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) through grants K01HD054421 (to Berger) and R01HD57894 (to Carlson) and through a core grant to the Center for Demography and Ecology at UW-Madison (R24HD047873). NICHD (through grants R01HD36916, R01HD39135, and R01HD40421) and a consortium of private foundations provided support for the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

High rates of nonmarital childbearing combined with considerable union instability portend that a large proportion of children can expect to spend time with a ‘social father’ (i.e., a man who is married to or cohabiting with their mother but to whom they are not biologically related). Research from the 1980s and 1990s, primarily about living with a married stepfather after parental divorce, suggests that children growing up in social-father families have similar developmental outcomes to children in single-mother families, and that both groups exhibit considerably worse developmental outcomes than children in two-biological-parent families (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Ihinger-Tallman 1988; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). These differences are likely due in part to differences in resources and parenting practices across family types (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994; Thomson and McLanahan 2012); social-father families also tend to be less stable (face a greater likelihood of parental union dissolution) than two-biological-parent families (Amato 2010).

In contrast to this early research, more recent evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, focused on unmarried parents and their children, reveals relatively high-quality parental investments among social-father families that are formed after couples break up and mothers repartner. Specifically, after a nonmarital birth, mothers tend to repartner with men who have *higher* levels of economic capabilities than their children’s biological fathers (Bzostek, McLanahan, and Carlson 2012), these men tend to be highly involved with the mothers’ children and at similar levels to those of resident biological fathers (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, and Osborne 2008; Carlson and Berger 2013), and such involvement is positively associated with children’s well-being, in some cases even more strongly than for children in biological-father families (Berger and McLanahan 2013; Bzostek 2008). Maternal repartnering is also associated with (at least modest) declines in maternal depression and material hardship (Osborne, Berger,

and Magnuson 2012). Thus, at least in the short term, families where mothers repartner after union dissolution tend to be relatively advantaged compared to those who do not repartner. Yet, it is unclear whether the relatively high-quality parenting behaviors and family relationships contribute to family stability over time, as well as whether better parenting behaviors persist among social-father families that stay together.

In this paper, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study from birth through age 9, focusing on union stability and fathering behaviors over the age-5 and age-9 interviews to address two primary research questions. First, we examine whether high-quality social father parenting behaviors are related to union stability over time; in other words, do the positive behaviors of social fathers observed after repartnering contribute to union stability? Second, we evaluate among the families that stay together, whether social father parenting behaviors tend to persist or fade over time, overall and as compared to intact biological-father families. These analyses shed new light on the relative risks and benefits of maternal repartnering for children by exploring the extent to which maternal repartnering results in a stable family environment for children where social fathers play a long-term positive parenting role. Given that a sizeable proportion of children will spend time with a social father during childhood (particularly children born outside of marriage), this study may have important implications for children's well-being as well as policy efforts to support disadvantaged families.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### *Social Fathers' Parenting Behaviors and Family Stability*

Most of the literature focused on factors that affect union stability (generally and among parents) has focused on two biological parents (either implicitly or explicitly). Children are

viewed as relationship-specific ‘capital’ that fosters union stability (England and Farkas 1986), and greater investment in parenting is expected to strengthen family cohesion and reduce union dissolution (where both parents equally share the biological tie to children). Especially for men, parenting is viewed as part of the “package deal,” where men’s parental and partner roles go together (especially within marriage) and are mutually-reinforcing (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2002)

There has been less attention to the role of parental investments among non-biological parent-figures as linked to union (in)stability. Evolutionary theory suggests that adults who are not biologically related to children have less incentive to invest in them (Daly and Wilson 2000). Therefore, we might expect that investments by social fathers in children actually matters more for union stability (so-called ‘mating effort’) than similar investments that by biological parents, which are more ‘expected.’ In other words, social fathers get more ‘credit’ with mothers for the same level of paternal investment, and hence greater levels of social fathering may do more to promote union stability, all else equal.

On the other hand, social father investments in children do not come without complications. The lack of clear norms, authority, legal relationships and habits in stepfamilies with children compared to first families led to the characterization of remarriage as an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin 1978). Members of a remarried household often have competing or conflicting interests (Bernard 1956), and the biological parent has much greater incentive for and interest in investing in his or her biological child(ren) than the non-biological parent in his partner’s children. Also, especially early on in the new union, it can be difficult for step-parents to take an active parenting role with their non-biological children, since their perceived legitimacy as a parent is often uncertain (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Therefore,

greater involvement by social fathers could also create tension within the family and increase union instability.

To our knowledge, the existing literature on this topic has largely focused on how fathers' involvement in parenting is linked to union stability among couples of the same biological child(ren), and there is little empirical research that has explored how social father roles in parenting are linked to couples' union instability. For example, research using earlier waves of the Fragile Families dataset suggests that greater father involvement and positive coparenting are associated with a lower likelihood of children's cohabiting biological parents breaking up by the time they are five years old (McClain 2011), and that couples with stronger beliefs about the importance of father involvement are also less likely to break up (Hohmann-Marriott 2009). Research using a recent birth cohort of British children also finds that higher levels of father involvement in childcare are associated with greater maternal reports of relationship satisfaction, and lower levels of union dissolution (Schober 2012). These studies, however, did not include biological mothers cohabiting with social fathers. Greater involvement by fathers within marriage is associated with greater marital stability, largely because wives are happier when men are more involved with children (Kalmijn 1999).

#### *Persistence of Social Fathers' Parenting Behavior over Time*

In terms of whether the relatively high levels of social fathers' parenting behavior persist over time, we consider three potential processes. First, we might expect social fathers' 'good' parenting behaviors to decline over time, as the initial 'glow' of the new relationship and family circumstance wears off. New partners may demonstrate high levels of involvement early on in order to try to impress mothers that they will be a good father-figure to the mother's children. As they settle into the challenges of parenting (or the relationship), such involvement may decline

(and/or mothers may develop a more realistic picture of the partner about whom they were initially overly optimistic). If this were the case, we would expect a narrowing of the gap between social fathers' and biological fathers' behaviors over time as compared to the 'better' behaviors observed among social fathers in prior studies (e.g., Berger et al. 2008).

Second, since social fathers are the same individuals in the same family context over time, we might expect their levels of fathering behaviors to remain the same over time. Men who are willing to partner with women who already have children typically have a more positive view than other men of entering relationships with partners who have children, and they are more likely to themselves have minor children living at home (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006; Goldscheider, Kaufman and Sassler 2009). It could be, then, that social fathers are simply prone to be consistently good fathers toward children, including their partner's children. Third, it could be that social fathers' involvement actually increases over time, as children become more accepting of mothers' partners taking an active parenting role in their lives, and fathers begin to see themselves more as father-figures to the children with whom they co-reside.

In terms of prior research, there are a number of studies that consider step/social fathers' involvement with children amidst the challenges of being a stepfamily, and some studies that compare the involvement of step/social fathers to biological fathers. The general research on stepfamilies emerged in the 1970s and has identified the stepfather's role with children as a key challenge in the positive functioning of such families (Cherlin 1978; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Stewart 2006). In terms of the research comparing stepfather involvement to biological father involvement, studies of stepfathers in nationally-representative data sets typically find that stepfathers are much less involved than are biological fathers (Hofferth 2006; Hofferth and Anderson 2003). However, as noted above, more recent studies using an urban birth cohort finds

that social fathers display relatively high levels of paternal involvement as compared to biological fathers (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, and Osborne 2008). The difference likely results from the fact that the latter studies include a larger share of unmarried fathers, and biological status may do less to differentiate parental roles among those having births in large cities. To our knowledge, there has been little empirical attention to the patterns of social/stepfather involvement over time in general, and especially as compared to biological father involvement over time.

In this paper, we provide new evidence about social-father families—which are becoming an increasingly common family form, particularly for those at the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum and/or outside of marriage; indeed, one recent study finds that more than one-third of children born outside of marriage will experience a stepfather by age 15 (Gibson-Davis 2013). We evaluate whether better parenting behaviors promote union stability among mothers with a young child who have repartnered, and then among stable families, we explore the persistence of social fathers' parenting behaviors, overall and as compared to biological fathers. This research sheds new light on family functioning and investments in children that occur amidst the growing complexity in U.S. family life.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey designed to track the conditions and capabilities of unmarried parents—and a comparison group of married parents—and their children over time (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001). The study follows a cohort of 4,898 children and their parents in 20 large U.S. cities from birth (1998-2000) until the child is about nine years old. The survey over-

samples unmarried parents and includes 3,712 nonmarital births and 1,186 marital births. When weighted, the data are representative of births to parents in cities of populations 200,000 or more. (As Reichman et al. [2001] note, the data may not be as representative of marital births, since hospitals with the most *nonmarital* births within cities were chosen for sampling purposes.) Mothers were interviewed in person at the hospital within 48 hours of the birth, and fathers were interviewed in person either in the hospital or were located as soon as possible thereafter. Follow-up interviews occurred by phone when the child was about one, three, five, and nine years old.

In this paper, we used data from the baseline through nine-year surveys. Response rates for the baseline survey were 87% for unmarried mothers and 82% for married mothers; among cases with a completed mother interview, 88% of married fathers and 75% of unmarried fathers were interviewed. Response rates for eligible mothers (i.e., had a completed baseline interview) remained high at each follow-up wave: 91%, 88%, 87%, and 76% at the one-, three-, five- and nine-year surveys, respectively (follow-up rates were similar for mothers with marital and nonmarital births). Our analyses focused on mothers' reports about the characteristics and parenting behaviors of social fathers and biological fathers at the five- and nine-year surveys, but we also used information from prior waves as covariates. Although the Fragile Families Study interviewed both biological mothers and biological fathers at each wave, social fathers were not interviewed. Thus, the data include only mother-reported data pertaining to social fathers' characteristics and behaviors. For consistency of measurement across biological and social fathers, we also used only mother-reported data about the focal children's biological fathers.

From the full sample, we identified 2,479 families that participated in the age-five interview and in which the focal child lived with his or her mother and either the biological



father or a social father at that time. We then excluded 531 families that were not interviewed at age nine, 50 families for whom one or more parenting behaviors was missing at age five, and 28 families for whom one or more parenting behaviors was missing at age nine. This left us with a final analysis sample of 1,870 families. Of these, 1,317 remained in the same family structure between ages five and nine, whereas the mother and biological father or social father dissolved their union in 553 families. We used the full analysis sample of 1,870 to predict parental union stability between the age-five and age-nine interviews, and the subsample of 1,317 stable families to predict fathering behaviors at the age-nine interview.

For all other variables with missing data, we replaced missing values with either the sample mean (for continuous variables) or zero (for dichotomous and categorical variables) and then included in our regression models dummy variables indicating that the initial value had been missing. In future analyses, we will use regression-based multiple imputation methods for dealing with missing data. The proportion of missing cases was less than five percent for each of the control variables with the exception of whether the mother and biological/social father had (other) children together (six percent missing), the biological/social father's age (six percent) and education (18 percent), the total number of residential moves since the focal child's birth (eight percent), and the duration of the mother and biological/social father's relationship (seven percent).

### *Measures*

*Parental union stability.* We measured parental union stability with an indicator (1=yes) that the mother was cohabiting with or married to either the same biological father or same social father at both the age-five and age-nine interviews, regardless of whether their marital status changed between interview waves.

*Fathering behaviors.* We focused on four measures of fathering and family behaviors that were each assessed at ages five and nine. Shared responsibility in parenting consisted of the mean score on two items indicating the frequency with which the biological or social father shared responsibility with the mother for 1) looking after the focal child, and 2) taking the child to appointments such as daycare or the doctor. Each item was measured on a four-point scale, ranging from *never* to *often*. Participation in household chores was measured by the mean score on two items indicating the frequency with which the biological or social father 1) ran errands for the mother and 2) fixed things around the home or helped make the home look nicer in other ways. These items were measured on a four-point scale, ranging from *never* to *often*. Co-parenting was comprised of the mean score on six items (each measured on a three-point scale, from *rarely true* to *always true*) assessing the mother's report of the extent to which the biological or social father 1) acted like the kind of parent she would want for her child, 2) could be trusted to take good care of the child, 3) respected her schedules and rules for the child, 4) supported her in the way she wanted to raise the child, 5) talked with her about problems related to raising the child, and 6) could be counted on to look after the child for a few hours. Finally, supportiveness in the couple relationship consisted of the mean score on six items assessing mother reports of the frequency with which the biological or social father 1) was fair and willing to compromise when they had a disagreement, 2) expressed affection or love toward her, 3) insulted or criticized her or her ideas (coding reversed), 4) encouraged or helped her to do things that were important to her, 5) listened to her when she needed someone to talk to, and 6) really understood her hurts and joys. Each of these items was measured on a three-point scale from *never true* to *often true*.

*Father type.* We measured father type (biological or social, married or unmarried) at the age-five interview with four indicators (1=yes): married biological-father families were families in which the focal child's biological father lived in the household and was married to the child's mother; cohabiting biological-father families were those in which the child's biological father was cohabiting with (but not married to) the mother; married social-father families were those in which a social father lived in the household and was married to the mother, and cohabiting social-father families were those in which a social father was cohabiting with (but not married to) the mother.

*Control variables.* Our regression analyses made use of two sets of control variables. Mother, child, and household characteristics included the mother's age at the focal child's birth, the number of children and adults in the household, the logarithm of "permanent" (i.e., mean) income from the focal child's birth through the age-five interview, the logarithm of maternal work hours per week, the number of residential moves the child experienced between birth and age five, and indicators for child gender, whether the child was low birth weight, the mother's race/ethnicity, whether the mother was U.S. born, the mother's education, whether the mother received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in the year before the focal child's birth, whether a grandparent was living in the household, whether either of the child's parents considered having an abortion when they learned that the mother was pregnant with the focal child, and whether the mother had children with anyone besides the biological father by the age-one interview. Father characteristics (reported by mothers) included the biological or social father's current age, the number of months he had lived with the mother, an indicator that he had less educational attainment than the mother, and indicators that he had children (other than the focal child) with the mother, had children with someone other than the mother, was currently

working, had a drug or alcohol problem, had seriously injured the mother in a fight, had a work-limiting condition, and had ever been incarcerated.

### *Analytic Strategy*

We first examined bivariate mean differences in characteristics and fathering behaviors between those biological- and social-father families that remained intact versus those in which the mother and biological or social father dissolved their union between the age-five and age-nine interviews. We also examined mean differences in fathering behaviors by family type at both the age-five and age-nine interviews.

Next, we estimated a series of ordinary least squares regressions (linear probability models) predicting whether the mother and biological or social father remained in a stable relationship between the age-five and age-nine interviews. For this set of analyses, we estimated two models using the full analysis sample. The first included the father-type indicators and the full set of covariates, but not the fathering behaviors. We added the fathering behaviors in the second model. Finally, we estimated a separate model for each of the four family types in order to assess whether the coefficients on the covariates and fathering behaviors differentially predicted union stability across families.

In our final set of analyses, we examined associations between family type and each of the fathering variables, again using OLS regressions. We estimated four models for each outcome. First, we regressed the age-five fathering behaviors on the family type indicators and the full set of covariates. Second, we regressed the age-nine fathering behaviors on the family type indicators and the full set of covariates. Third, we added a lagged dependent variable (the age-five fathering behavior) to these models. In the fourth and final model, we also included a set of interactions between the lagged dependent variable and each family type indicator. This

allowed us to examine whether the associations of age-five fathering behaviors with age-nine fathering behaviors varied by family type.

In addition, for each of the regression models that included the family type indicators, we employed a difference-in-difference test to explicitly investigate whether associations between marital status and each outcome (either union stability or fathers' parenting practices) differed for biological and social fathers. Here, we examined whether there was a bigger (or smaller) gap in the outcome by marital status for families with biological versus social fathers. Specifically, we tested whether differences in union stability or practices between cohabiting and married biological fathers were equal to differences in union stability or parenting practices between cohabiting and married social fathers, adjusted for all correlates. A rejection of the null hypothesis (i.e., that there is zero difference in the differences) indicates that the association between marriage and the outcome significantly differed for biological- and social-father families.

## RESULTS

### *Social Fathers' Parenting Behaviors and Union Stability*

Our first research objective was to examine factors that predict union stability over time, with a particular focus on parenting behaviors. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for biological- and social-father families that had stable unions between the age-five and age-nine interviews as compared to those whose unions dissolved between interviews. Married and more socioeconomically-advantaged biological- and social-father families were generally more likely to remain intact than their cohabiting and less-advantaged counterparts, although the magnitude of these differences sometimes differed by family type. For example, a greater proportion of

stable biological-father families had been married at age-five than was the case for stable social-father families. Likewise, the proportion of stable biological-father families in which the mother had more than a high school degree was considerably larger than that of social-father families. The results for fathering behaviors revealed two patterns. First, mothers reported *better* fathering behaviors by social fathers than by biological fathers on all measures, for both stable and unstable families. Second, in families where the mother and her partner broke up between the five- and nine-year interviews, mothers reported relatively high-quality fathering behaviors at the age-five interview for social, but not biological, fathers.

We next turned to OLS regression models that estimate the associations between family type and whether the parental union remained stable between the age-five and age-nine interviews, holding constant a number of confounding factors. Estimates in the first column are from a model controlling for the full set of covariates listed in Table 1, but not for age-five fathering behaviors. We find that both married and cohabiting social-father families were significantly less likely to have retained a stable parental union than were both married and cohabiting biological father families; cohabiting social-father families were also less likely to have remained intact than married social-father families. The second model adjusted for age-five fathering behaviors, which we expected would play a stabilizing role for social-father families (meaning that we expected the families in which mothers gave social fathers higher fathering scores to be more stable). Surprisingly, however, the results were basically unchanged. Thus, we find no evidence in our models that fathering behaviors are associated with the probability of parental union dissolution by family type. Furthermore, only one fathering behavior—supportiveness—was significantly associated with the likelihood of union stability. Finally, results from the difference-in-difference test suggest that the marriage premium with regard to

union stability was larger for social-father families than biological-father families. That is, the relative likelihood of union stability for married compared to cohabiting couples is greater among social-father families than biological-father families, although the absolute likelihood of breaking up is greater for social-father families with either status.

The final four models in Table 2 were estimated separately for each family type. This approach allowed us to investigate whether fathering behaviors played a differential role vis-à-vis union stability (and estimates are easier to interpret than models with all interactions included simultaneously). We find some evidence that this may be the case: participation in household chores was more strongly associated with union stability for cohabiting social-father families than any other family types; supportiveness was more strongly associated with union stability for married social-father families than for cohabiting biological-father families, and also more strongly associated with union stability for cohabiting social-father families than both married and cohabiting biological-father families. Nonetheless, as the findings from the first two models demonstrated, these differences did not reduce the greater probability of parental union dissolution among social-father families. It is also noteworthy that although the coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) for the models predicting union stability in two biological-parent families were quite high (.85 for both married and cohabiting couples), they were considerably lower for the models predicting union stability in mother and social-father families (.41 for married and .18 for cohabiting social-father families). In other words, our models do a much better job of identifying the characteristics that predict stability among biological-parent families than among social-father families, which have by definition already experienced some prior union instability (i.e., mothers breaking up from the focal child's biological father).

*Persistence of Social Fathers' Parenting Behaviors over Time*

Our second research question focuses on the subset of couples that stay together over years five through nine and examines the extent to which the high levels of social fathers' parenting behaviors persist over time (and as compared to biological fathers). Figure 1 depicts bivariate mean differences by family type at each interview among the subset of families with a stable union between the five- and nine-year interviews. The raw data reveal that social fathers were reported to have higher parenting behaviors scores than biological fathers on all fathering behaviors measures at each time point, although these differences were not always statistically significant. Most notably, whereas married social fathers scored significantly higher on shared responsibility in parenting at age five, the difference at age nine was non-significant. For each of the other parenting behaviors, married social fathers scored significantly higher than both married and cohabiting biological fathers at both time points. Cohabiting social fathers also scored significantly higher than married biological father on all measures and at both time points, with the exception of co-parenting at age five. Married and cohabiting biological fathers never significantly differed from one another, and this was almost always true for married and cohabiting social father families as well. Finally, it is worth noting that although married (and, to a lesser extent, cohabiting) social-father families scored highest in absolute terms at each time point for each measure, their scores also tended to decline the most over time.

Next, we turn to multivariate models in order to adjust for confounding factors. We run a series of OLS regression models predicting each of the four fathering behaviors (shown in Table 3). Panel A presents the results when age-five fathering behaviors were regressed on the full set of covariates. These estimates reveal that social fathers (both married and cohabiting) had higher scores than cohabiting biological fathers on all of the measures of fathering behaviors we considered. Social fathers also had higher scores than married biological fathers for several



measures: co-parenting, participation in household chores, and supportiveness (the difference between social fathers and married biological fathers for co-parenting was only significant for married social fathers). Married and cohabiting biological fathers differed on only one measure, co-parenting (marginally significant at  $p < .10$ ), with married biological fathers having higher scores than cohabiting biological fathers. There were no statistically significant differences on any of the measures between married and cohabiting social fathers.

Panel B of Table 3 presents results when the age-nine fathering behaviors were regressed on the family type indicators and the full set of covariates. The overall pattern of results is largely similar to that for the age-five measures. Once we accounted for initial (age-five) differences in fathering behaviors (Panel C), however, the magnitudes of these estimates were drastically reduced, and most no longer attained statistical significance. Indeed, the only remaining significant differences were that cohabiting (but not married) social fathers had marginally higher co-parenting scores than married biological fathers, as well as greater participation in household chores than both married and cohabiting biological fathers. As expected, the lagged dependent variables were highly positively associated with the age-nine fathering behaviors measures, indicating a high level of concordance between (mothers' reports of) the men's parental involvement at the five- and nine-year interviews.

Figure 2 displays adjusted mean differences using the age-five estimates from Panel A and the age-nine estimates from Panel C. For most of the fathering behaviors, we see a very clear pattern. After adjusting for the covariates and initial parenting behaviors at age five, the gaps between family types are largely reduced and are rarely statistically significant at age nine. The gaps between biological and social fathers' scores decrease over time primarily because the social fathers' scores decline, whereas the biological fathers' scores generally remain flat or

slightly increase. In summary, after accounting for fairly large initial (age-five) differences in fathering behaviors, which favored social fathers, we find very few differences between family types in fathering behaviors. That is, the initial gaps in fathering behaviors do not seem to have expanded over time, and indeed, the gaps have mostly closed, as social fathers' behaviors decline.

Our final set of estimates (Panel D) included interactions between the lagged fathering behaviors measures and family type. With a few exceptions, we find relatively little evidence that the association between age-five fathering behaviors and age-nine fathering behaviors varied by family type. That is, we find that fathering behaviors at age five are usually highly (and equally) predictive of fathering behaviors at age nine for all of the family types we considered. There are, however, a few exceptions to this general pattern. Levels of supportiveness at age five are (at least marginally) more predictive of supportiveness at age nine for married social fathers than for any of the other three groups. Co-parenting at age five, in contrast, is a weaker predictor of co-parenting at age nine for cohabiting social fathers than for both married (marginally) and cohabiting biological fathers. Finally, supportiveness at age five is a (marginally) stronger predictor of supportiveness at age nine for cohabiting social fathers than for married biological fathers.

The results of the difference-in-difference tests for the models predicting fathering scores at age nine suggest that the marriage-cohabitation gap in parenting behaviors was equivalent for biological- and social-father families on all measures except participation in household chores (marginally significant), for which the cohabitation-marriage gap (favoring cohabiters) was larger among social-father families than biological-father families.

## DISCUSSION

This paper provides new information about social-father families formed among (mostly) disadvantaged, unmarried (at birth) mothers to explore one aspect of how repartnering plays out for mothers and their children over time. In particular, we were interested in the extent to which the initial advantages we've observed in parenting behaviors among social fathers predict union stability, and among the stable couples, whether the positive parenting behaviors seem to persist or decline over time; across these analyses, we compare co-resident social fathers to co-resident biological fathers in order to evaluate whether parenting is similarly related to union stability for social- and biological-father families, and then how levels and changes in parenting behaviors proceed for these two groups of fathers.

In terms of our main findings, we observe much higher union stability among biological than social father families – whereas 80 percent of biological-father unions at the age-5 interview are still together at the age-9 interview, only 43 percent of social-father unions remain intact over this time period. These higher dissolution rates are consistent with prior research showing that remarried unions are less stable than first unions (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

We found that perhaps surprisingly, parenting behaviors do not seem to be a notable predictor of union stability over time. The one exception is supportiveness in the couple relationship, where greater supportiveness is positively related to union stability. This finding is consistent with prior work about the importance of relationship quality for unmarried parents' relationship stability (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005), and one might question our conceptualization of supportiveness of the mother as a 'parenting behavior'. Overall, we find little evidence that shared responsibility in parenting, participating in household chores, and co-parenting were strongly predictive of

couple's union stability. We also found little difference in how across marriage/biology family type in how parenting behaviors were linked to union stability, with a few exceptions – participation in household chores increases stability among cohabiting social-father families (but not the other types), whereas supportiveness matters more for married and cohabiting social father union stability than it does for biological cohabiting fathers.

In terms of the difference in parenting behaviors, consistent with the prior work using Fragile Families data, we find fairly large gaps in parenting behaviors, favoring social fathers, at five years. Regardless of whether or not we adjust for a host of social, economic and demographic characteristics, mothers report that married social fathers demonstrate significantly better parenting behaviors than married and cohabiting biological fathers—in terms of shared responsibility, co-parenting, participating in household chores, and supportiveness. Mothers report cohabiting social fathers as being higher than married biological fathers on participation in household chores and supportiveness—and higher than cohabiting biological fathers on all four measures.

In terms of the persistence of fathering behaviors over time, we find that biological father behaviors remain quite consistent over time. However, social fathers' parenting behaviors (especially for married social fathers) appear to decline somewhat over time, thus reducing the age-9 gap between biological and social fathers in parenting behaviors. To the extent that the initial, very positive, reports reflected mothers' 'glow' about a new man with whom she had recently entered a relationship—or social fathers' actual better behaviors in that new relationship, we might expect social fathers' behaviors to decline toward the levels of biological fathers' behavior over time. We control for duration of co-residence to address this, but a simple

control for number of months co-residing may not fully account for other factors that differentiate families that have been together for a long time versus newly-formed families.

There are several limitations that are important to note. First, all of our outcome variables are reported by mothers. This is of concern to the extent that mothers' own attributes and experiences may color her views about fathers' behaviors, independent of the behaviors themselves. This may be particularly important regarding social fathers' behavior. As noted above, mothers may have a more optimistic perspective about a 'new guy'. Also, independent of relationship timing, it is possible that, since biological father involvement is simply expected (as a function of biological parentage), mothers may report the same *actual* level of involvement by social fathers as higher, since they perceive it to be a greater investment. Having more objective reports about fathering would allow us to arbitrate whether the differences we observe are due to the perceptions of mothers or to the behaviors of fathers (or some of each).

Second, we are focused on fathers' parenting behaviors, but we have only limited measures of parenting, and in fact, several of our measures reflect more about mother-father interaction than they do about father-child interaction. Unfortunately, the measure of father-child engagement that we would like to use (and that has been used in prior work) does not have the same response codes at year 9 as at year 5, so we cannot conduct comparable analyses over these two time points. The measures we use do not necessarily define a "high quality" parent, and these are only a few of many important ways that parents can be involved with their children.

Third, we use listwise deletion here, which is not the ideal way of dealing with missing data (though fortunately, we do not have a large proportion of cases missing on any given variable). We will use more sophisticated methods for dealing with missing data in future drafts.

Finally, we recognize that we are not necessarily observing causal relationships here. While we find that social fathers have much less stable relationships—and display generally better parenting behaviors, there could be something unobserved that is related to both social father status and stability and parenting.

Our findings suggest fruitful areas for additional research. First, we find that differences in (mothers' perceptions of) fathers' parenting are not what drive higher rates of union dissolution among social father families. Investigating what factors *do* seem to account for higher rates of union dissolution in social-father families will be an important avenue for future research in this area. Additionally, in contrast with research suggesting “better” outcomes in married, two-biological-parent families for a number of measures, our research suggests that when there are differences in fathering across groups, it is not always (or even usually) those families that stand out as having the best outcomes. It would be interesting for future research to delve more deeply into this question to address why this series of outcomes stands out in this way.

Our results also have implications for public policy. The recent emphasis of policy efforts toward unmarried families has been to encourage relationship stability (and ideally “healthy marriage”) among unmarried parents who have a child together. Relationship education programs such as the Building Strong Families interventions, however, have shown little impact on key outcomes of interest such as relationship quality, relationship stability, and getting married (Wood et al. 2012). Given that many couples who have children together will break up, it is important for policy efforts to also focus on new families formed *after* instability. Many children will experience some ‘parenting’ by non-biological father figures, and our research suggests that this parenting can, in fact, be quite positive (at least as perceived by mothers).

Beyond focusing solely on biological parents, policy might be well-served to recognize the broader array of parental figures involved in children's lives and to encourage stability (and the positive family relationships that occur within stable families), even if such families do not meet the definition of a "traditional," stable, nuclear family.

## References

- Amato, Paul R. 2010. "Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72:650-666.
- Berger, Lawrence M., Marcia J. Carlson, Sharon H. Bzostek, and Cynthia Osborne. 2008. "Parenting Practices of Resident Fathers: The Role of Marital and Biological Ties." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70:625-639.
- Bernard, Jessie. 1956. *Remarriage: A Study of Marriage*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Bzostek, Sharon H., Sara S. McLanahan, and Marcia J. Carlson. 2012. "Mothers' Repartnering after a Nonmarital Birth." *Social Forces* 90:817-841.
- Carlson, Marcia J. and Lawrence M. Berger. 2013. "What Kids Get from Parents: Packages of Parental Involvement across Complex Family Forms." *Social Service Review* 87:213-249.
- Carlson, Marcia, Sara McLanahan, and Paula England. 2004. "Union Formation in Fragile Families." *Demography* 41:237-262.
- Cherlin, Andrew. 1978. "Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution." *American Journal of Sociology* 84:634-650.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. 1994. "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Reconsideration." *Annual Review of Sociology* 20:359-381.
- Daly, Martin and Margo I. Wilson. 2000. "The Evolutionary Psychology of Marriage and Divorce." Pp. 91-110 in *The Ties that Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, edited by L. J. Waite. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- England, Paula and George Farkas. 1986. *Households, Employment and Gender: A Social, Economic, and Demographic View*. New York: Aldine.
- Furstenberg, Frank F. and Andrew Cherlin. 1991. *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gibson-Davis, Christina, Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan. 2005. "High Hopes but Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage among Low-Income Couples." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:1301-1312.
- Gibson-Davis, Christina M. 2013. "Biological and Stepfather Marriages For Children Born Non-Maritally." Unpublished paper.
- Hofferth, Sandra L. 2006. "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being: Investment versus Selection." *Demography* 43:53-77.
- Hofferth, Sandra L. and Kermyt G. Anderson. 2003. "Are All Dads Equal? Biology Versus Marriage as a Basis for Paternal Investment." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65:213-232.
- Ihinger-Tallman, Marilyn. 1988. "Research on Stepfamilies." *Annual Review of Sociology* 14:25-48.
- Kalmijn, Matthijs. 1999. "Father Involvement in Childrearing and the Perceived Stability of Marriage." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:409-421.
- McLanahan, Sara S. and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reichman, Nancy, Julien Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, and Sara McLanahan. 2001. "Fragile Families: Sample and Design." *Children and Youth Services Review* 23:303-326.
- Stewart, Susan D. 2006. *Brave New Stepfamilies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



- Thomson, Elizabeth, Thomas L. Hanson, and Sara S. McLanahan. 1994. "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Economic Resources vs. Parental Behaviors." *Social Forces* 73:221-242.
- Thomson, Elizabeth and Sara S. McLanahan. 2012. "Reflections on "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Economic Resources vs. Parental Socialization"." *Social Forces* 91:45-53.
- Townsend, Nicholas W. 2002. *The Package Deal: Marriage, Work and Fatherhood in Men's Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Biological-Father Family at Age 5			Social-Father Family at Age-5		
	Stable Union	Dissolved Union	p-value	Stable Union	Dissolved Union	p-value
<i>Mother, child, and household characteristics:</i>						
Married	0.762	0.539	***	0.344	0.190	***
Mother's age at child's birth	27.60 (6.190)	24.15 (5.421)	***	22.38 (3.945)	22.86 (4.999)	
# kids in HH	2.515 (1.220)	2.668 (1.315)	+	2.555 (1.340)	2.834 (1.528)	*
# adults in HH	2.215 (0.674)	2.204 (0.702)		2.215 (0.691)	2.145 (0.700)	
LN mean income birth-to-age 5	10.66 (0.800)	10.26 (0.732)	***	10.18 (0.689)	9.818 (0.750)	***
LN mother's work hours	2.037 (1.764)	2.354 (1.737)	**	2.158 (1.792)	2.047 (1.816)	
# residential moves since birth	1.496 (1.574)	1.813 (1.792)	**	2.634 (1.785)	2.584 (2.075)	
Child is female	0.474	0.518		0.483	0.429	
Child low birth weight	0.060	0.0857		0.081	0.139	*
Mother is white	0.344	0.221	***	0.254	0.103	***
Mother is black	0.279	0.511	***	0.455	0.678	***
Mother is Hispanic	0.319	0.221	**	0.244	0.190	
Mother is another race/ethnicity	0.051	0.036		0.038	0.018	
Mother US born	0.755	0.893	***	0.938	0.927	
Mother: less than HS degree	0.236	0.336	***	0.330	0.410	+
Mother: HS degree	0.253	0.321	*	0.335	0.385	
Mother: more than HS degree	0.510	0.343	***	0.335	0.205	**
TANF in year before birth	0.201	0.407	***	0.378	0.476	*
Grandparent in HH	0.068	0.079		0.067	0.070	
Either parent considered abortion	0.159	0.336	***	0.368	0.396	
Mother MPF (age-1 interview)	0.232	0.321	**	0.359	0.440	+
<i>Biological or social father characteristics:</i>						
Father's age	34.97 (6.768)	31.90 (6.066)	***	29.76 (6.818)	29.59 (6.760)	
Duration of co-residence (months)	110.0 (48.15)	90.49 (35.94)	***	28.60 (24.58)	28.44 (23.93)	
Less education than mother	0.521	0.664	***	0.344	0.220	**
(Other) children with mother	0.773	0.679	**	0.373	0.326	
Children with other woman	0.237	0.346	***	0.483	0.520	
Currently working	0.872	0.811	**	0.842	0.824	
Limiting condition	0.044	0.079	*	0.086	0.081	
Substance problem/ injured mother	0.015	0.029		0.005	0.022	
Ever incarcerated	0.167	0.432	***	0.124	0.220	**
<i>Fathering behaviors:</i>						
Shared responsibility for parenting	-0.0182 (0.962)	-0.036 (1.064)		0.148 (0.967)	-0.003 (1.098)	
Participation in household chores	-0.0629 (1.009)	-0.278 (1.160)	**	0.424 (0.618)	0.216 (0.879)	**
Co-parenting	0.0144 (0.972)	-0.307 (1.233)	***	0.251 (0.723)	0.065 (0.957)	*
Supportiveness	-0.0516 (1.006)	-0.437 (1.118)	***	0.520 (0.610)	0.260 (0.839)	***
Observations	1108	280		209	273	

Note: 1,870 observations. Proportions or means (and standard deviations) presented. + p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

Table 2. Stable relationship between age-5 and age-9 interviews

	All Families, No Age-5 Fathering Behaviors	All Families, Age-5 Fathering Behaviors	Biological Father, Married	Biological Father, Cohabiting	Social Father, Married	Social Father, Cohabiting
<i>Family Type (ref=bio father married)</i>						
Biological father, cohabiting	0.014 (0.020)	0.015 (0.020)				
Social father, married	-0.343*** <sup>b</sup> (0.033)	-0.356*** <sup>a</sup> (0.033)				
Social father, cohabiting	-0.503*** <sup>bc</sup> (0.027)	-0.513*** <sup>bc</sup> (0.027)				
<i>Parenting Behaviors</i>						
Shared responsibility for parenting		-0.004 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.006)	0.015 (0.013)	0.047 (0.069)	-0.004 (0.029)
Participation in household chores		0.005 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.013 (0.011)	-0.031 (0.089)	0.069+ <sup>abc</sup> (0.037)
Co-parenting		0.007 (0.009)	0.003 (0.006)	0.019 (0.014)	0.048 (0.093)	-0.024 (0.036)
Supportiveness		0.018* (0.009)	0.011+ (0.006)	-0.007 (0.013)	0.082 <sup>b</sup> (0.080)	0.077+ <sup>ab</sup> (0.041)
Constant	0.682*** (0.136)	0.695*** (0.136)	1.018*** (0.098)	0.638** (0.200)	-0.495 (1.039)	-0.396 (0.493)
<i>F-statistics for joint significance (p-values):</i>						
Father type	0.000	0.000				
Family characteristics	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.015	0.583	0.021
Father characteristics	0.054	0.061	0.165	0.035	0.244	0.755
Fathering behaviors		0.026	0.159	0.364	0.514	0.050
<i>Difference-in-difference estimates of associations between marital status and stability by father biological status:</i>						
Cohabitation (vs. marriage) for biological fathers	0.014	0.015				
Cohabitation (vs. marriage) for biological fathers	-0.160	-0.157				
Difference-in-difference	0.174	0.172				
F-statistic	23.91	23.17				
p-value	0.000	0.000				
Total Observations	1,870	1,870	995	393	124	358
R2	0.609	0.611	0.848	0.849	0.412	0.184

Note: 1,870 observations. Coefficients (and standard errors) from OLS regressions presented. Each model controls for all of the covariates listed in Table 1. + p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001.

<sup>a</sup>Differs from biological father, married at p<.10.

<sup>b</sup>Differs from biological father, cohabiting at p<.10.

<sup>c</sup>Differs from social father, married at p<.10.

Table 3. Fathering behaviors among stable two-parent families

	Shared Responsibility for Parenting	Co-parenting	Participation in Household Chores	Supportiveness
<i>Panel A: Age-5 fathering behaviors</i>				
Biological father, cohabiting	-0.120 (0.075)	-0.126+ (0.074)	-0.117 (0.077)	-0.085 (0.075)
Social father, married	0.214 <sup>a</sup> (0.133)	0.334** <sup>a</sup> (0.131)	0.398*** <sup>a</sup> (0.135)	0.541*** <sup>a</sup> (0.133)
Social father, cohabiting	-0.115 <sup>a</sup> (0.113)	0.112 <sup>a</sup> (0.111)	0.371** <sup>a</sup> (0.115)	0.464*** <sup>a</sup> (0.113)
<i>Panel B: Age-9 fathering behaviors</i>				
Biological father, cohabiting	0.009 (0.075)	0.002 (0.079)	-0.040 (0.078)	-0.048 (0.077)
Social father, married	0.176 (0.133)	0.347** <sup>a</sup> (0.139)	0.201 <sup>a</sup> (0.139)	0.458*** <sup>a</sup> (0.137)
Social father, cohabiting	0.061 (0.112)	0.250** <sup>a</sup> (0.118)	0.407*** <sup>a</sup> (0.118)	0.345*** <sup>a</sup> (0.116)
<i>Panel C: Age-9 fathering behaviors with lagged dependent variable</i>				
Biological father, cohabiting	0.048 (0.071)	0.063 (0.070)	0.008 (0.072)	-0.004 (0.067)
Social father, married	0.106 (0.125)	0.185 (0.124)	0.038 (0.127)	0.179 (0.119)
Social father, cohabiting	0.099 (0.048)	0.196+ (0.105)	0.255** <sup>a</sup> (0.108)	0.106 (0.101)
Lagged dependent variable	0.326*** (0.026)	0.486*** (0.027)	0.411*** (0.026)	0.516*** (0.025)
<i>Panel D: Age-9 fathering behaviors with lagged dependent variable and interactions by father type</i>				
Biological father, cohabiting	0.049 (0.071)	0.064 (0.070)	0.012 (0.072)	-0.000 (0.067)
Social father, married	-0.004 (0.137)	0.103 (0.152)	-0.044 (0.154)	0.205 (0.169)
Social father, cohabiting	0.104 (0.049)	0.223* (0.106)	0.296** <sup>ab</sup> (0.122)	0.017 (0.113)
Lagged dependent variable	0.345*** (0.033)	0.489*** (0.032)	0.396*** (0.032)	0.493*** (0.030)
Lagged dependent variable* cohabiting biological father	-0.084 (0.065)	0.033 (0.062)	0.057 (0.060)	0.051 (0.057)
Lagged dependent variable* married social father	0.292+ <sup>a</sup> (0.163)	0.197 (0.220)	0.189 (0.190)	-0.016 (0.200)
Lagged dependent variable* cohabiting social father	-0.066 <sup>b</sup> (0.078)	-0.185+ <sup>a</sup> (0.099)	-0.086 (0.131)	0.214+ (0.115)
<i>F-statistics for joint significance (p-values):</i>				
Father type	0.732	0.210	0.070	0.680
Family characteristics	0.023	0.310	0.036	0.048
Father characteristics	0.471	0.069	0.620	0.001
<i>Difference-in-difference estimates of associations between marital status and stability by father biological status:</i>				
Cohabitation (vs. marriage) for biological fathers	0.049	.064	0.012	-0.000
Cohabitation (vs. marriage)	0.108	0.120	0.340	-0.188

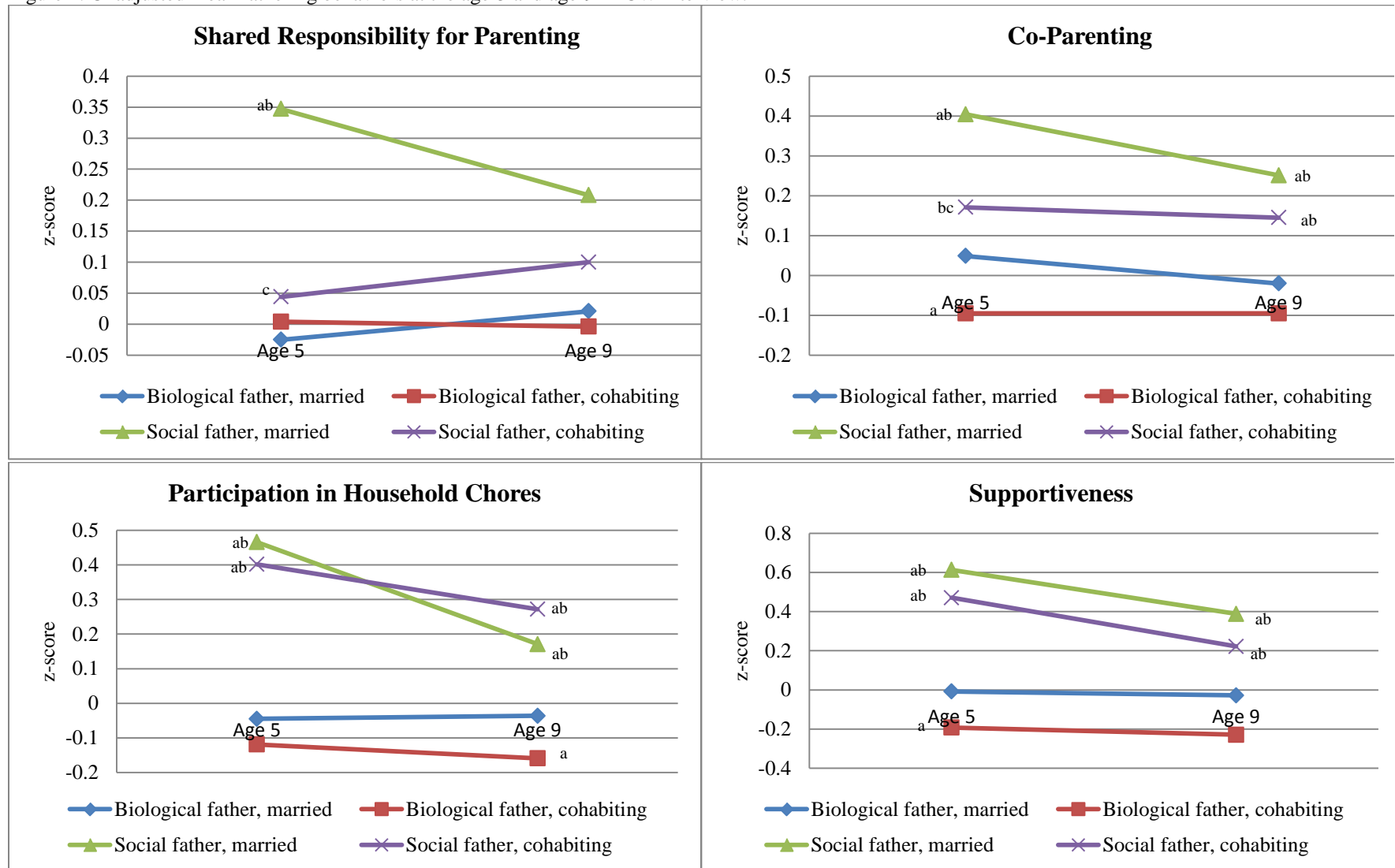
for biological fathers				
Difference-in-difference	-0.059	-0.056	-0.328	-0.188
F-statistic	0.14	0.11	3.31	0.97
p-value	0.708	0.745	0.069	0.324
Total Observations	1,317	1,317	1,317	1,317
R2	0.165	0.265	0.221	0.328

Note: 1,317 observations of families with the same biological or social father present at the age-5 and age-9 FFCW interviews. Coefficients (and standard errors) from OLS regressions presented. + p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001.

<sup>a</sup>Differs from biological father, cohabiting at p<.10.

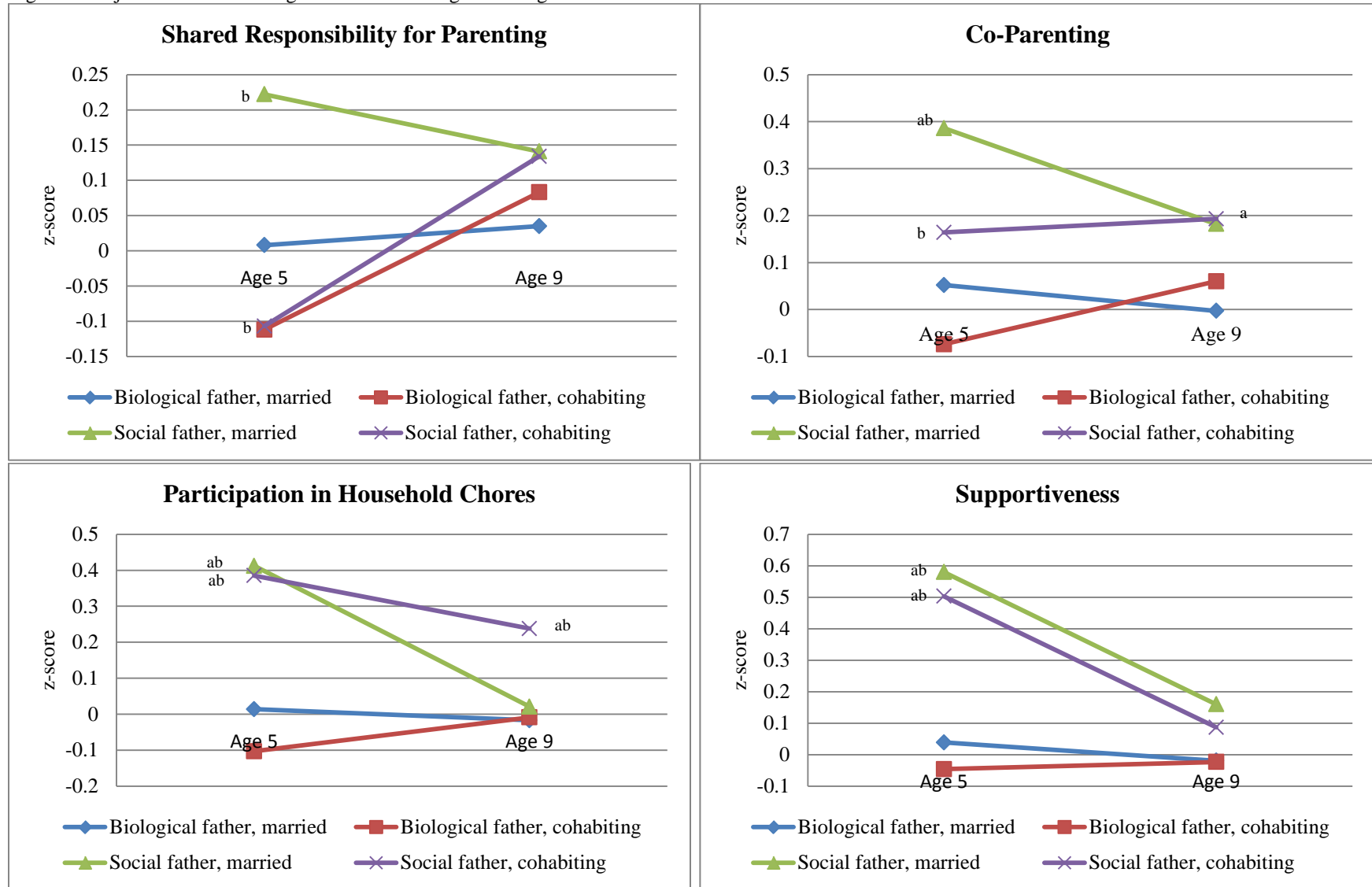
<sup>b</sup>Differs from social father, married at p<.10.

Figure 1. Unadjusted mean fathering behaviors at the age-5 and age-9 FFCW interview.



<sup>a</sup>Differs from biological father, married at  $p < .10$ . <sup>b</sup>Differs from biological father, cohabiting at  $p < .10$ . <sup>c</sup>Differs from social father, married at  $p < .10$ .

Figure 2. Adjusted mean fathering behaviors at the age-5 and age-9 FFCW interview.



Note: The age-5 estimates were drawn from the results in Panel A of Table 3. The age-9 estimates were drawn from those in Panel C of Table 3.  
<sup>a</sup>Differs from biological father, married at  $p < .10$ . <sup>b</sup>Differs from biological father, cohabiting at  $p < .10$ . <sup>c</sup>Differs from social father, married at  $p < .10$ .