Early Bonds, Strong Ties: Foundations of Married and Cohabiting Father Involvement

Abstract

Early father involvement is critical to establishing sustained involvement, and this may be particularly important for cohabiting fathers who are at high risk for relationship dissolution. Although a large literature has been devoted to identifying individual, relationship, and socioeconomic determinants of fathers' sustained involvement with children, no studies to date have tested reciprocal associations between multiple father involvement domains over time. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study examined reciprocal associations between married and cohabiting fathers' early involvement in three domains (positive engagement, warmth, and control) when children were 1 and 3 years old. For all fathers, early involvement was associated with increases in later involvement within the same domains. However, only early positive engagement was associated with increases in later warmth, and only for married fathers. Findings suggest that: (1) resident status may be most integral to promoting father involvement in any one domain, (2) positive engagement is a central involvement domain that may be leveraged to promote high quality father involvement and strong father-child bonds, particularly in married families, and (3) cohabiting fathers may face family structure-related barriers to their sustained involvement. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: father involvement, marriage, cohabitation, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, fathering determinants

Early Bonds, Strong Ties: Foundations of Married and Cohabiting Father Involvement

Fathers' early interactions with children are crucial to establishing involvement patterns that are sustained over time (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006). When fathers are involved, children fare better on a variety of socioemotional outcomes, such as reduced externalizing problems (Jia, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012) and better cognitive development (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). A primary impetus for sustained father involvement is the relationship status of the father, such that fathers in less committed and more tenuous relationships are more likely to see their involvement with children decline, particularly after relationships end (Townsend, 2002). In 2013, over 40% of children were born to unmarried parents (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Matthews, 2015), the majority (60%) of whom were living together, or cohabiting (Payne, Manning, & Brown, 2012). With fewer institutionalized norms (Nock, 1995), cohabitation is less stable than marriage; nearly 35% of cohabitations will end within the first year after children are born (McClain, 2011). When relationships end, father involvement declines (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010), and this decline is complicated by the tendency for both parents to repartner and have additional children (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). Low father involvement leaves children at risk for a host of unfavorable outcomes, including lower emotional wellbeing (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003) and increased behavioral problems (Carlson, 2006) in adolescence.

Becoming a parent represents a turning point in fathers' lives (Elder, 1998; Rossi, 1968). Many new fathers disengage from risky behaviors (Palkovitz, 2002) and become more socially connected (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001), increase time spent in paid employment (Lundberg & Rose, 2002; but see Percheski & Wildeman, 2008), and devote time to child-related care (e.g., Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013). Indeed, today's new fathers are expected to be

highly involved caretakers who are competent in a variety of child-related tasks (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Pleck (2010) described three primary domains of fathers' involvement that have been consistently linked with children's well-being: (1) positive engagement - the time fathers spend in direct, developmentally appropriate interactions with children, (2) warmth and responsiveness - the degree of affection or responsivity to children, and (3) control – management-type activities that do not entail direct interaction with children. Although a large literature has been devoted to identifying individual, relationship, and socioeconomic determinants of fathers' sustained involvement with children, no studies to date have tested reciprocal associations between multiple father involvement domains over time.

The primary purpose of this study is to test reciprocal associations between the three primary domains of father involvement (positive engagement, warmth, and control) across children's early years (ages 1-3). In doing so, this study identifies the three most integral domains that promote frequent and sustained father involvement over time. This study also engages the current national debate on marriage and its diminishing role among young adults in the U.S. (e.g., Cherlin, 2004) by comparing reciprocal associations across two prominent fathering contexts, marriage and cohabitation. Births to cohabiting parents have increased nearly 300% since the 1980s (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2014), underscoring the importance of understanding how parents' relationship status sets the stage for children's well-being, both in the short and long term. These efforts are in an attempt to identify strengths and vulnerabilities for married and cohabiting fathers' involvement and to provide practitioners and educators with targeted, translatable evidence to help fathers build strong, sustainable relationships with their children regardless of family context.

Fathering Contexts

Fatherhood has undergone significant changes in recent decades. Marriage, historically the primary context for fathering, has become increasingly optional in the U.S. (Cherlin, 2004). An increase in the social acceptability of non-marital sexual relationships and cohabitation has changed the fathering landscape from a dichotomy of married or nonresident fathers to a more variable setting of married, cohabiting, nonresident, and hybrid (Manning & Brown, 2012) fathers. Cohabiting fathers are a unique comparison group to married fathers. Overall, the majority of unmarried fathers (91%; McLanahan & Beck, 2010) intend on marrying their partner sometime in the future, and many of these new fathers choose to cohabit with their partner because of their strong desire to fulfill an active fathering role (Edin, Nelson, & Reed, 2011). Despite their best intentions, cohabitors' relationships are often precarious and end quickly in a breakup (Kamp Dush, 2011; McClain, 2011), resulting in reduced father involvement (Tach et al., 2010) and increased risks for cohabiting children (Lamb, 2010).

Scholars have suggested that the demographic composition of cohabiting couples is a major contributor to the frailty of cohabiting relationships. Compared to married fathers, cohabiting fathers are often younger, more socioeconomically disadvantaged, and a greater proportion are racial minorities (Manning & Brown, 2006), key characteristics that are linked with lower and more fragile father involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002). Cohabiting couples cite limited economic resources as a primary barrier to marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005), and few relationships last longer than five years (Kamp Dush, 2011). Despite risk factors for lower involvement, few differences between married and cohabiting fathers' early involvement have been found (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2012).

Despite similarities in involvement with young children, comparing married and cohabiting fathers' involvement connections over time is a useful pursuit. The couple relationship provides a foundation for father involvement (Townsend, 2002), and cohabitation has been described as an incomplete institution, lacking the institutionalized norms and values that guide marriage and parenting behaviors (Nock, 1995). In general, cohabiting couples have lower relationship quality than married couples (Brown & Booth, 1996), and these differences persist even among new cohabiting parents whose relationships remain intact a full two years after their child's birth (Klausli & Owen, 2009). For the most part, the context of cohabitation has been viewed as a deficit to father involvement, suggesting that links between father involvement domains that are present in married but absent in cohabiting families may represent vulnerabilities in cohabiting fathers' involvement that are inherent in family structural features, including couples' lower relationship quality. Yet, fewer institutionalized fathering norms in cohabiting families may signify more egalitarian parenting arrangements; cohabiting couples tend to be more flexible in their gender roles (see Smock, 2000), which may serve to diversify the ways in which cohabiting fathers are involved (e.g., Manning & Brown, 2012). Thus, links between involvement domains that are present in cohabiting families but absent in married families may represent inherent strengths in cohabiting families, potentially resulting from greater flexibility in cohabiting fathers' parenting roles. In this way, cohabiting fathers' diverse involvement may function as a source of support for sustained father involvement, especially if the couple relationship ends. Indeed, Hohmann-Marriott (2011) noted that, compared to parents who married in response to a pregnancy, those who remained unmarried were more child-centric (as opposed to couple-centric) in their relationships, as evidenced by higher father involvement and more cooperative coparenting.

Father Involvement: Conceptualization and Linkages

In 2010 Pleck developed a revised model of father involvement that conceives of father involvement as multidimensional, consisting of distinct, yet interrelated domains. This model reflects a general trend toward emphasizing the father's role in the healthy socioemotional development of children. The revised conceptualization consists of three main domains: positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness, and control. Positive engagement refers to direct interaction with children in activities that scaffold children's healthy development. Developmentally appropriate activities such as reading and playing with the child are included in this domain. Warmth and responsiveness represents the qualitative aspect of a father's involvement, such as expressions of love and affection and sensitivity. This study examined only the warmth aspect of this domain. Finally, control refers to management-type activities undertaken for children, such as making childcare arrangements, managing schedules, and looking after children.

Direct Associations

Becoming a parent represents a turning point in men’s lives (Rossi, 1968). A family systems perspective, one often used to study father involvement, suggests that early fathering experiences lay the groundwork for future involvement, as interaction patterns are generally stable over time (Minuchin, 1985). Indeed, Hwang and Lamb (1997) documented moderate stability in father involvement, measured as a global construct consisting of engagement, responsibility, and accessibility (available for interaction), from children’s early years until elementary school.

When new fathers establish early patterns of frequent positive engagement, fathers tend to remain engaged over time (Hwang & Lamb, 1997), even increasing time spent in positive

engagement as children grow and develop (Lang et al., 2014). Similarly, fathers' early displays of warmth may foster closer, more affective relationships during toddlerhood. Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, and Osgood (2007) found that parental warmth was relatively stable during children's early years, suggesting that those fathers who display warmth early on tend to maintain warm interactions with children as they grow. Limited longitudinal research is available specifically on fathers' control involvement, but it is reasonable to assume that a similar pattern persists, as fathers become more competent and the management of children becomes more important as children age and are increasingly connected with social institutions.

Reciprocal Associations

The multidimensionality of the father involvement construct implies that the involvement domains are interrelated yet distinct (Pleck, 2010). On the one hand, fathers' involvement in one domain of a child's care may not translate into changes in another domain of involvement. Rather, domains of father involvement may remain relatively disconnected, although stable, over time. On the other hand, fathers' early involvement in one domain may foster growth in another involvement domain. This is consistent with the life course perspective that parenthood marks a significant turning point in the lives of men (Rossi, 1968), and Erikson's (1980) concept of generativity. Generative fathers invest in the care and development of the next generation, typically through involvement with their own children. In this case, fathers who are involved may become increasingly invested in the paternal role and seek out additional opportunities for involvement, resulting in changes in other involvement domains.

Positive Engagement

Frequent positive engagement may foster the growth of warm, responsive, and rewarding father-child relationships, as fathers become more familiar with their children's personality and

needs through direct interaction. Indeed, Eggebeen and Knoester (2001) found that resident fathers who were engaged with their children were more satisfied in their lives and more connected to their families. Children tend to enjoy interactions with fathers (Roggman, 2004), and this enjoyment may spillover to the father, thereby increasing his warmth. Similarly, a father's involvement in developmentally stimulating engagement may arouse his interest in taking an active role in other child-related decisions and management activities, aspects of control. For instance, engaged fathers feel more competent in their ability to parent (Fagan & Barnett, 2003), and this may encourage fathers to feel comfortable providing input in and negotiating childrearing with mothers, or even making decisions on their own.

Warmth and Responsiveness

A father's warmth and responsiveness is necessarily linked with his positive engagement. Indeed, paternal responsiveness reduces child negative affect during the toddler years (Davidov & Grusec, 2006), potentially yielding greater paternal engagement by encouraging more manageable child behavior. Thus, warm fathers build strong relationships with their children and promote functional behaviors that may encourage greater engagement over time. Moreover, a father's lack of warmth may make interactions with children less enjoyable. Infants may become less responsive and elicit interaction less often, making parenting challenging and resulting in less warmth and positive engagement over time. Though they did not directly measure warmth, Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, and Carrano (2010) found that greater aggravation and stress in parenting was associated with less frequent positive engagement with one-year old children. Given that parenting stress is linked to many negative parenting practices, including low levels of warmth (Rodgers, 1993), the degree of paternal warmth in father-child interactions may be vital to facilitating more frequent and enjoyable interactions.

Although research regarding paternal control is still in its infancy (Pleck, 2010), one can imagine that a father's warm, responsive parenting during infancy evokes feelings of responsibility for the dependent child, akin to the process of generativity (Erikson, 1980). In a culture that encourages involved fathering and increasingly understands paternal responsibility to extend far beyond the provision of financial support (Coltrane, 1996; Milkie & Denny, 2014), sensitive fathers who desire to fulfill the new "involved father" role may be encouraged to become more involved in managing their child's care.

Control

Empirical support regarding this revised component of father involvement is limited (Pleck, 2010), but it is likely that fathers who take on more indirect roles in their child's life come to recognize their child's dependency and intrinsic need for love and affection and respond by increasing their warmth. Further, fathers who are more involved in the day-to-day management of their child's care may recognize the child's need for developmentally appropriate stimulation and provide it, resulting in greater positive engagement over time.

Positive Engagement: An Integral Component

Play is an historically integral aspect of the father role (Pleck & Pleck, 1997) and today's fathers are encouraged to be highly involved in child-centric, positive engagement activities (Quirke, 2006) that are likely to elicit positive social feedback from others as well as contribute to the psychological maturation of the father (Erikson, 1982). Furthermore, the fathers' participation in these activities with children during their own course of marked physical and psychological development may ignite in fathers the growth of warmth and responsiveness and a desire to share control over his child's wellbeing. Thus, the domain of positive engagement may

be the most integral to promoting father's diverse involvement, thereby laying foundations for sustained father involvement during early childhood.

The Present Study

This project significantly advances current scholarship on fatherhood by delineating links between three domains of a fathers' involvement over time. Further, this project engages the current sociological debate on the deinstitutionalization of marriage by testing whether associations between fathering domains differ for married and cohabiting fathers. These efforts are in the hopes to expose vulnerabilities and strengths that inherent in structural features of families and to inform educational and intervention practices that are aimed at strengthening fathers' bonds with children by increasing early involvement. Data from The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001) were used to investigate reciprocal links between fathers' positive engagement, warmth, and control in married and cohabiting families when children were 1 and 3 years old. First, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to construct latent indicators of father involvement using primarily fathers' reports. Second, links between each domain of father involvement over time were explored for all fathers. Finally, comparisons across family context (i.e. marriage and cohabitation) were made to expose strengths and vulnerabilities for married and cohabiting fathers' sustained involvement.

Method

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Reichman et al., 2001) is a nationally representative, panel study of births to unmarried (N = 3712) and married (N = 1186) couples in large U.S. cities in the early 2000s. Parents were interviewed separately in the hospital shortly after their child's birth and re-interviewed when their child was 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 (data collection

currently underway). This study is among the first to collect large-scale survey data directly from unmarried fathers, obtaining a response rate of nearly 75% for unmarried fathers at the baseline interview. Data from the baseline through Year 3 are used in the current study because consistent measures of fathers' warmth and control were not available at later Years. Fathers were included in the sample if the mother reported they were either continuously married or continuously cohabiting from the baseline interview through Year 3 (i.e., did not report a relationship transition). This selection criteria resulted in a full sample of 1330 fathers (880 married/450 cohabiting).

Overall, few fathers in the selected sample were missing at each Year; 85 fathers (24 cohabiting, 61 married) were not interviewed at Year 1, 110 fathers (38 cohabiting, 72 married) were not interviewed at Year 2, and 112 fathers (35 cohabiting, 77 married) were not interviewed at year 3. Only 19 fathers were not interviewed at all during the observation period. Small cell sizes precluded logistic regression analyses to determine the demographic characteristics associated with fathers' absence from the survey during the entire observation period. However, logistic regressions showed that older men were more likely to be missing at Year 2, and older men, and those with less than a high school education, were more likely to be missing at Year 3.

The sample selection criteria required that couples be either continuously married or cohabiting from their child's birth until the Year 3 interview. Because many cohabiting relationships dissolve relatively quickly (Kamp Dush, 2011; McClain, 2011), the sample of cohabiting fathers may be select. Sensitivity analyses (available from author) were conducted to determine how the sample selection criteria biased the sample. Compared to all married fathers at the baseline interview, a greater proportion of the selected sample of married fathers were white, a smaller proportion were black, and a greater proportion were college educated.

Compared to all fathers who were cohabiting at the baseline interview, a smaller proportion of the selected sample of cohabiting fathers were black, a smaller proportion were college educated, and a greater proportion were employed at Years 2 and 3. These differences are in line with the notion that employment is a key facilitator of marriage among cohabiting parents (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Smock et al., 2005).

Measures

Positive engagement. At each Year, fathers reported the number of days per week (*0-7*) they were involved in the following developmentally appropriate engagement activities: 1) playing games, 2) singing, 3) reading, 4) telling stories, and 5) playing inside. Similar versions of this measure have been used in previous work investigating fathers' engagement (see Carlson, Pilkauskas, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011; Kotila & Kamp Dush, 2012; 2013).

Warmth. At Year 1, only 1 item was available to measure fathers' warmth. At Year 3, two additional items were added. Because reciprocal models require variables to be measured consistently over time, only the repeated item was used. At Years 1 and 3, fathers reported the number of days per week (*0*-7) they hugged or showed physical affection to their child.

Control. Fathers were not asked questions about control, thus mothers' reports were used. At each Year, mothers rated how often *(1=Rarely - 4 =Always)* fathers 1) took the child places like the doctor or daycare, 2) were available to watch the child for a few hours (rated *2=Sometimes - 4=Always* at Year 1), and 3) looked after the child when mothers were busy. This scale has been used in prior work investigating fathers' control (also labeled responsibility and indirect care) (Kotila & Kamp Dush, 2012; 2013).

Time-invariant controls. Father age, race (*White, Black, Hispanic, Other),* and education (*Less than High School, High School, Some College, College Grad*) were included as time-invariant controls, measured from fathers' reports at birth.

Time-variant controls. Father's employment was measured at each Year from fathers' responses (*Employed or In school/Unemployed).*

Analysis

Latent variables for each father involvement domain were constructed using SEM prior to use in the reciprocal model. Model fit was evaluated using χ^2, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), and comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990). For acceptable model fit, the χ^2 fit statistic should be nonsignificant, RMSEA values should be below .08 (Browne, Cudeck, & Bollen, 1993), and CFI values should be close to 1 (Byrne, 1994). The χ^2 statistic is sensitive to sample size, thus a low RMSEA value was favored over a significant χ^2 when evaluating model fit. Missing data was estimated using Full Information Likelihood Estimation (FIML), a best practice in estimating missing data that does not exceed 50% of the sample (Johnson & Young, 2011). In addition to adequate fit indices, latent variable construction required that standardized coefficients for each item-level indicator be above 0.30 (Kline, 2014).

Reciprocal models require the use of consistent measures over time. Tests of configural (structural) and metric (weak) measurement invariance (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) using these specific father involvement measures (positive engagement and control) have already been conducted (author cite). The positive engagement measure was found to exhibit full structural and partial metric invariance, which is not unexpected due to the increasing developmental capabilities of children between ages 1 and 3 and co-occurring increase in father engagement

(Lang et al., 2014). Reading to children seemed to be an activity that was ubiquitous and consistent over time; this is consistent with recent descriptions of young children's daily lives (Laughlin, 2014). Full structural and partial metric invariance was also exhibited for the control domain, although only one item displayed changed over time, suggesting greater stability in fathers' control involvement over time.

SEM was used to construct a reciprocal model of associations between involvement domains over time. The conceptual model is located in Figure 1. A multiple groups approach tested whether associations between each involvement domain differed across fathering context (i.e., married/cohabiting). A baseline model was fit simultaneously for each group to establish a comparative model from which to test for group differences. Following this, paths between each father involvement domain over time were independently constrained and model fit was reevaluated using the χ^2 difference test. For example, paths between Year 1 positive engagement and Year 3 positive engagement were constrained to be equivalent across groups. Constraints were determined to be invalid and were removed prior to applying additional constraints if the χ^2 value increased significantly, and valid (constraints retained) if the increase in the χ^2 value was nonsignificant. Invalid constraints indicate that associations vary across fathering context.

Results

Sample Characteristics. There were significant differences between married and cohabiting fathers on each demographic indicator. On average, cohabiting fathers were younger and less educated than married fathers, and a greater share were racial minorities (Table 1). A greater proportion of married fathers were employed at each Year. Consistent with recent work (Manning & Brown, 2012), there were few item-level differences in married and cohabiting fathers' involvement. Married fathers read to children more frequently than cohabiting fathers at

each Year, a result that is likely a function of married fathers' higher education. Mothers reported that cohabiting fathers were more involved in taking children to the doctor or daycare. There were no differences in fathers' warmth by family context.

Measurement models. Latent indicators of fathers' positive engagement and control were constructed for all fathers at each Year using SEM. The *positive engagement* indicator was constructed using the five positive engagement items. At Year 1, the baseline model fit the data poorly; χ^2 (5) 125.66; p = 0.00; RMSEA = 0.14; CFI = 0.89. Modification indices suggested correlating the errors between reading and telling stories and playing games and Legos. The modified model fit the data well; χ^2 (3) 1.99; p = 0.57; RMSEA = 0.00; CFI = 1.00 and all factor loadings were significant and above the 0.30 standardized cutoff. At Year 3, the baseline *positive engagement* model fit the data poorly (χ^2 (5) 68.11; p = 0.00; RMSEA = 0.10; CFI = 0.96) and modifications were suggested. Errors were correlated between reading and telling stories and playing games and Legos. Final model fit was excellent and all standardized loadings were above the standardized threshold; χ^2 (3) 4.39; p = 0.39; RMSEA = 0.02; CFI = 0.99.

The *control* indicator was constructed at each Year using the three mother-reported items. At each Year models were exactly identified (χ^2 (0)0.00; RMSEA = 0.00; CFI = 1.00) and standardized loadings for each item were above the 0.30 cutoff. No modifications were made to the control models.

Structural model. Next, a reciprocal baseline model with no controls was constructed (see Figure 1). Item-level errors for each latent variable were correlated based on modification indices suggested in the measurement models described above (e.g., errors correlated between playing reading and telling stories). Errors between each involvement domain were also intercorrelated at each Year. This model fit the data well (χ^2 (152)560.39, p = 0.00, RMSEA =

0.04; CFI = 0.92) and initial findings are reported in Table 2. Next, time-invariant and variant controls were added to the model and fit was reevaluated (χ^2 (305)991.84, p = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.87.

Findings for the full sample of fathers (Table 2) suggested that each father involvement domain was significantly associated with itself over time. A one day increase in fathers' positive engagement at Year 1 resulted in a 0.62 day increase in his positive engagement at Year 3. Similarly, a one day increase in fathers' early warmth was associated with a 0.10 day increase in his later warmth. A one point increase in mothers' reports of fathers' control at Year 1 was associated with a 0.62 point increase in mother's perceptions of fathers' control at Year 3. Only one cross-lagged association was present; a one day increase in fathers' positive engagement at Year 1 was associated with a 0.05 day increase in his warmth at Year 3.

Between groups model. First, a baseline model including controls was tested to ensure the model fit adequately for both groups of fathers and to establish an initial χ^2 value to test further modifications. This model fit the data well; χ^2 (534)1221.37, p = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.86. To test whether associations between the involvement domains differed by fathering context, loadings between each involvement domain over time were independently constrained and model fit was retested. For the sake of space, only the final model fit is presented (Table 2). All applied constraints were valid, with the exception of the constraint between fathers' positive engagement at Year 1 to his warmth at Year 3; a one day increase in positive engagement at Year 1 was associated with a 0.08 day increase in warmth at Year 3, but only for married fathers. The association was not significant for cohabiting fathers.

As before, significant associations were present between each fathering domain and itself over time. A one day increase in positive engagement at Year 1 was associated with a 0.62 day

increase in positive engagement at Year 3. A one day increase in warmth at Year 1 was associated with a 0.10 day increase in warmth at Year 3. Finally, a one point increase in mothers' reports of control at Year 1 was associated with a 0.63 point increase in her perceptions of fathers' control at Year 3.

Discussion

Early fathering foundations are critical to building the strong bonds that promote and sustain high quality father involvement (Doherty et al., 2006). However, contemporary fathering contexts have changed, such that unmarried fatherhood and cohabitation are increasingly common (Martin et al., 2015) and place children at risk for experiencing parental break ups (Kamp Dush, 2011; McClain, 2011), often resulting in low father involvement (Tach et al., 2010) and weaker father-child relationships as children age (e.g., Ahrons, 2007). The primary focus of this study was to describe the development of early father involvement in married and cohabiting fathering contexts across children's early years in an effort to highlight strengths and vulnerabilities in cohabiting and married fathers' early involvement. Links that are present in cohabiting families, but absent in married, may represent strengths that are inherent in cohabiting families, such as greater flexibility in cohabiting fathers' roles (Manning & Brown, 2012). In contrast, links that are present in married families and absent in cohabiting families may represent vulnerabilities for cohabiting fathers as they establish early involvement patterns.

Direct Associations

It was expected that each domain of early father involvement would be important for establishing sustained involvement in that domain. This hypothesis was supported and was not found to vary across fathering context. This is not surprising given prior research that points to relatively high stability (Doherty et al., 2006; Hwang & Lamb, 1997) and even increases in

fathers' early engagement (e.g., Lang et al., 2014). Fathers who establish involvement patterns with children early on likely gain from these experiences, either in the form of emotional (Kotila & Kamp Dush, 2013) or social (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001) benefits. Moreover, participating in the care of one's own children fosters a man's own generative development (Erikson, 1980), and fathers likely incorporate these activities into their fathering identity.

Stable residential relationships provide married and cohabiting fathers with optimal contexts in which to establish frequent involvement patterns when children are young. In the case of linking early involvement to later involvement in the same domain, marital status may be of little importance. Instead, a father's early involvement may be more proximally linked to his fatherhood identity, such that fathers will simply become and remain involved in the activities that they deem to be most integral to their notions of what it means to be a "good father". Residential status, rather than marital status, may be a primary mechanism that allows fathers to establish early bonds that are in line with his fathering identities. Indeed, qualitative work on cohabiting fathers suggests that the father-child relationship is a driving force behind men's choices to cohabit (Edin et al., 2011), and few differences between married and cohabiting fathers' early involvement have been noted (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Manning & Brown, 2012).

Reciprocal Associations

Reciprocal links between each involvement domain (i.e., early positive engagement increases later warmth) were expected, but few links were found. Only positive engagement appeared important for later warmth in the full sample. Few links across fathering domains supports the notion that father involvement domains are interrelated yet distinct (Pleck, 2010). However, the lack of reciprocal associations poses difficulties for individuals who seek to

increase the ways in which fathers are involved. These findings suggest that the most effective way to establish sustained involvement in any one domain is to simply become involved in that area. Given that resident fathers' early involvement may be more proximally linked to fathering identities rather than marital status, this may entail encouraging fathers to shift identities toward those that encourage more diverse fathering activities.

Further analyses revealed that the link between early positive engagement and later warmth was only present for married fathers. The absence of a link between early positive engagement and later warmth for cohabiting fathers is particularly striking. Fathers' early engagement with children is typically enjoyable, consisting of boisterous play (e.g., Paquette, 2004) and opportunities for watching children acquire new skills through developmentally stimulating activities such as reading. Thus, it is surprising that these interactions did not foster the growth of cohabiting fathers' warmth.

There may be several explanations for this. First, in the absence of a solidified commitment, such as marriage, cohabiting fathers may temper their relationships with children in order to minimize both their own and their child's discomfort in the event that the relationship ends. It is likely that these fathers have been witness to, or even experienced, the emotional distress associated with parental relationship dissolution (Carlson, VanOrman, & Pilkauskas, 2013; Kamp Dush, 2011) and want to protect their own children from this pain. Thus, fathers may remain engaged but keep an emotional distance that precludes the growth of warmth over time.

Second, features inherent to cohabitation, such as poorer relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Klausli & Owen, 2009), may function as vulnerabilities for cohabiting fathers' sustained involvement. In the current sample, both married and cohabiting mothers and fathers

reported similar average relationship quality at Year 2 and increases in relationship quality from Years 2 to 3. However, differences emerged at Year 3, with married parents reporting both greater gains and higher quality relationships than their cohabiting counterparts. Though small, these differences may signal relationship difficulties or conflict that deteriorates the quality of fathers' parenting (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1996), thus impeding the growth of warmth and the sensitive, responsive parenting that is vital for young children's healthy socioemotional development. At minimum, fathers who are preoccupied with maintaining fragile relationships or who feel pressured to meet their partner's often high standards for marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005) may "go through the motions of parenting" in a detached manner, as their emotional resources have been depleted and they have little left to give.

Positive Engagement: An Integral Component

A secondary goal of this study was to identify an integral component of father involvement that could be leveraged to promote fathers' early and sustained involvement regardless of fathering context. On the surface, it appears that promoting fathers' positive engagement with children is an excellent start. Fathers who take the time to read, sing, and play games with their children likely enjoy this time. Curious toddlers are eager to learn, abundant in energy, and often enjoy the rough and tumble play fathers frequently engage in with them (Paquette, 2004). Fathers' experiences of their children's laughter, joy, and simple innocence undoubtedly evokes fathers' emotions and draws out expressions of warmth. Further, play is an integral component because it uniquely feeds into the father identity that has been shaped by cultural messages and historical patterns that place fathers as children's playmates (e.g., Marsiglio, 1993; Paquette, 2004).

Unfortunately, the picture is not so clear for cohabiting fathers; play only promoted the growth of warmth for married fathers. This "missing link" is striking in that it encompasses primary activities that promote children's healthy socioemotional development (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2005; Lang et al., 2014), and may represent a vulnerability in cohabiting families that may help to explain why children of cohabiting parents tend to display greater behavioral and emotional problems than children in married homes (Brown, 2004). More importantly, this finding highlights the importance of considering marital status when implementing interventions to promote fathers' diverse involvement with children. For married fathers, engagement activities may be key to facilitating warmth, whereas cohabiting fathers may need additional supports, such as services that enhance relationship quality or encourage healthy stress management behaviors that may reduce fathers' stress and help him focus on building warm, sensitive, and responsive parenting.

Limitations

There are several limitations that are important to note. First, the sample of cohabiting fathers is select, and findings are only generalizable to those fathers who remain in cohabiting relationships up to three years after the birth of their child. Though select, stable cohabitors are perhaps the most analogous comparison group to stable married fathers, as their residence provides them both the opportunities to become involved and sources of support from their partners. However, the two year lag time between interviews may have been insufficient to observe relatively short breakups that ended in reconciliation.

Second, these models are stringent and represent only cross-lagged associations that go above and beyond the already significant growth in each domain over time. Although reciprocal associations were expected for each involvement domain, such stringent tests underscore the

significance of fathers' early positive engagement for later involvement. At the same time, the "missing link" for cohabiting fathers fosters further questions about the conditions (i.e., lower commitment, low relationship quality, pressure to live up to idealized expectations) that may serve as barriers to links between cohabiting fathers' early engagement and later warmth, as well as the conditions in marriage that may promote them.

It is worthwhile to note that this study only considered the extent to which involvement was stable or precipitated changes in another domain; some fathers may not have been involved in any or all of the domains at either Year. As the findings show, a father's identity may be more important than his previous involvement for diversifying the ways in which dads are involved. Recently, scholars have called for increased attention to identity in the study of father involvement (Pasley, Petren, & Fish, 2014), and these findings underscore the importance of this focus, as shifting fathers' identities may be necessary to promote diverse, high quality involvement that is sustained.

Though this study was the first to address reciprocal associations between multiple dimensions of father involvement according to updated theory (Pleck, 2010), some measures, particularly of warmth and control, were limited. The measure of warmth consisted of one item and did not assess sensitivity and responsiveness, which are also key to promoting healthy child development and fostering strong father-child relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2004). Similarly, the measure of control did not include aspects of authoritative parenting that were an important impetus to the reconceptualization of father involvement theory (Pleck, 2010) and key facilitators of healthy socioemotional development (Darling, 1999). Further, available involvement measures were inconsistent across survey Years, making it impossible to construct reciprocal models extending through the child's 5th or 9th year. Children experience rapid

development across the first 9 years, and the Fragile Families Study did well to incorporate developmentally appropriate measures of father involvement into each assessment. However, future researchers should consider how to incorporate developmentally appropriate changes while also maintaining measures that are valid for longitudinal designs.

Conclusion

Fathers are central contributors to children's development (Lamb, 2010), and understanding what promotes strong, sustained father involvement is important given the current U.S. family context that consists of an increasing number of unmarried and cohabiting parents (Martin et al., 2015) whose relationships are at high risk for dissolution (Kamp Dush, 2011; McClain, 2011). First, these findings highlight the centrality of positive engagement for building strong foundations for sustained father-child relationships. At least for married fathers, encouraging early and frequent positive engagement may be the most effective way to promote strong father-child bonds and healthy child development. Second, it seems that resident status, rather than marital status, may be more important for simply getting fathers involved. For couples who are on board, providing institutional supports that encourage residential relationships among unmarried parents may be a first step toward building strong father-child ties. Finally, these findings expose vulnerabilities in cohabiting families that may serve to reduce the quality of father-child relationships in the short term, and create difficulties for sustained involvement in the long term, particularly if cohabiting relationships end. Future research should explore the specific mechanisms that serve as barriers or supports between early positive engagement and later warmth for married and cohabiting fathers in an effort to provide all fathers and children with the necessary foundations to build strong, lasting relationships.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Father Involvement Indicators and Sample Characteristics

	Married *(n = 880)*		**Cohabiting** *(n = 450)*	
	Year 1	Year 3	Year 1	Year 3
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Positive Engagement				
Singing	4.90 (2.48)	3.65 (2.35)	4.71 (2.66)	3.81 (2.25)
Playing Games	6.23 (1.54)	4.53 (2.34)*	6.17 (1.64)	4.83 (2.31)*
Reading	3.65 (2.78)*	4.09 (2.35)*	3.24 (2.70)*	3.61 (2.34)*
Stories	3.59 (2.75)	3.72 (2.48)	3.50 (2.73)	3.64 (2.48)
Playing Inside	5.84 (1.89)	4.93 (2.21)	6.00 (1.80)	5.17 (2.19)
Warmth and Responsiveness				
Hug	6.82(0.89)	6.84 (0.80)	6.87 (0.80)	6.86 (0.65)
Control				
Looks After Child	3.82 (0.43)	3.81 (0.45)	3.85 (0.44)	3.82 (0.49)
Available to Watch	3.76 (0.53)	3.73 (0.53)	3.76 (0.55)	3.70 (0.61)
Take to Doctor/Daycare	3.10 (1.03)*	3.10 (0.98)	3.26 (0.99)*	3.09 (1.07)
Control Variables				
Age *(17-53)*	31.95* (6.21)		27.48* (6.89)	
Race				
White	0.47*		0.16*	
Black	0.23*		0.40*	
Hispanic	0.23*		0.41*	
Other	0.07*		0.03*	
Education				
Less than HS	0.15*		0.38*	
HS	0.20*		0.38*	
Some College	0.29*		0.22*	
College	0.35*		0.02*	
Employment				
Employed	0.95*	0.94*	0.85*	0.85*

Note. *Indicates significant differences between married and cohabiting fathers at $p < 0.05$. HS = High School.

Table 2

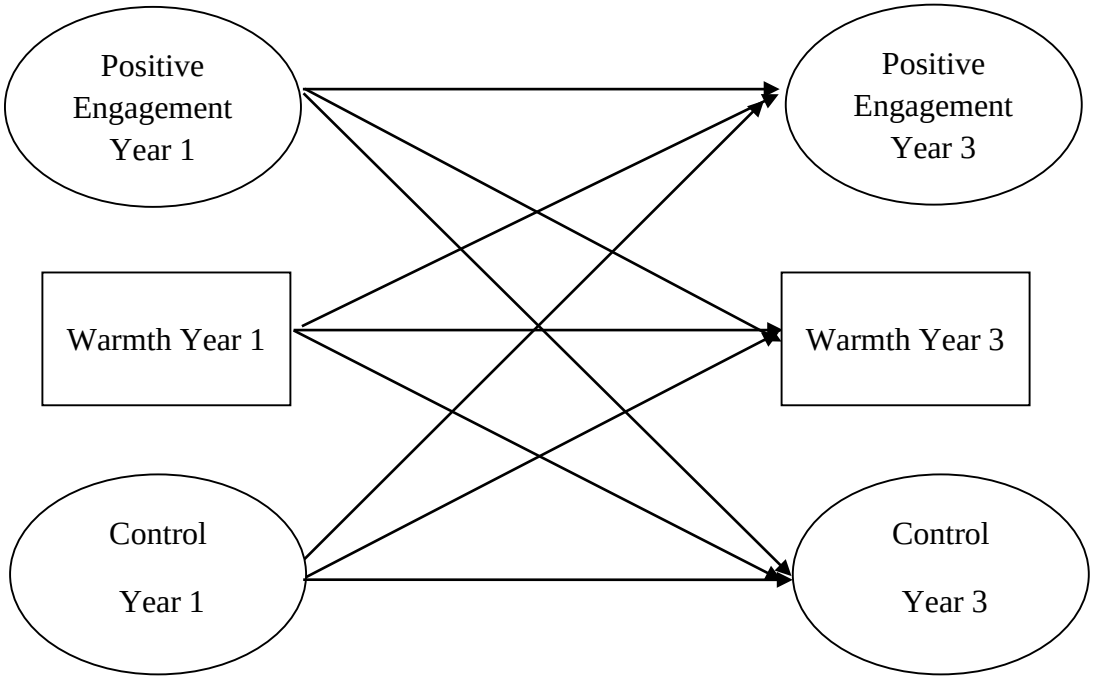
SEM Reciprocal Model and Between-Groups Analysis for Associations between Father Involvement Domains over Time

	No Controls[1]		With Controls[2]		Between Groups[3]	
	b(se)	*p*	*b(se)*	*p*	*b(se)*	*p*
Positive Engagement Year 3						
Positive Engagement Year 1	0.62(0.05)	0.000	0.63(0.05)	0.000	0.63(0.05)	0.000
Warmth Year 1	0.04(0.07)	0.530	0.05(0.07)	0.475	0.06(0.07)	0.404
Control Year 1	0.04(0.15)	0.774	0.03(0.15)	0.814	0.07(0.15)	0.642
Warmth Year 3						
Warmth Year 1	0.10(0.03)	0.002	0.09(0.03)	0.002	0.10(0.03)	0.001
Positive Engagement Year 1	0.05(0.02)	0.004	0.05(0.02)	0.003	0.08(0.02)[a] -0.01(0.02)[b]	0.000[a] 0.704[b]
Control Year 1	0.02(0.07)	0.254	0.09(0.07)	0.222	0.08(0.07)	0.256
Control Year 3						
Control Year 1	0.62(0.05)	0.000	0.64(0.05)	0.000	0.63(0.05)	0.000
Positive Engagement Year 1	0.01(0.01)	0.411	0.01(0.01)	0.392	0.01(0.01)	0.289
Warmth Year 1	-0.02(0.02)	0.161	-0.02(0.02)	0.150	-0.02(0.02)	0.209
n	1330		1330		1330	

Note. **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; *p* < 0.001. HS = High School. [1] Model Fit: $\chi^2(df) = 560.39(152)$ *p* < 0.001, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.92. [2] Model Fit: $\chi^2(df) = 991.84(305)$ *p* < 0.001, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.87. [3] Model Fit: $\chi^2(df) = 1224.82(542)$ *p* < 0.001, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.87. [a] Associations for Married fathers. [b] Associations for Cohabiting fathers.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Associations between Father Involvement Domains over Time



Note. Positive associations were expected between each father involvement domain over time. Squares indicate observed variables, circles indicate latent variables. Father involvement variables were correlated with each other at each Year. Paths between independent time-invariant and variant control variables (*Age, Race, Education, Employment*) and father involvement at Year 1 (Year 3 for time-varying) were present in models with controls but are not pictured here.