

Religiosity and Child Involvement among Non-Resident Fathers

George M. Hayward
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Please direct all correspondence to George M. Hayward at georgemhayward@unc.edu

Abstract

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being study (FFCW), this paper will examine the association between religiosity and child involvement among non-resident fathers. While there is a sizeable literature on both religious fatherhood and non-resident fatherhood, the intersection between them has yet to be fully explored. The present paper will use surveys from the third and fourth wave of the FFCW study to ascertain the differences in child involvement, if any, between religious and non-religious fathers. To determine this relationship, various measures of religiosity, including denomination and worship attendance, will be explored individually and as part of a religiosity index. Additionally, this paper will test whether fathers' religiosity three years after a child's birth predicts child involvement two years later. These findings will contribute to our understanding of fragile families and the motivations of non-resident fathers to be involved in the lives of their children.

Description of Topic and Significance

Amato (2005) argues that family structure is an important factor in child outcomes, impacting cognitive, emotional, and social well being. Specifically, he finds that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely to experience problems in these domains. With more children born to cohabitating unions than in the past (Bumpass and Lu 2000), the general instability of these unions over time (Brown 2003), and the institution of marriage changing (Cherlin 2004), deeper understanding of how family structure affects children is of key importance for researchers and policy-makers alike.

One increasingly common focus of research is non-resident fatherhood. Surely, there is a great variety in the extent and manner that non-resident fathers are involved with their children (Wilson 2006). For example, fathers may provide for their children financially but not emotionally, and vice versa. Fathers may also vary in the extent to which they intend to be involved, and they may face obstacles to involvement such as low income, poor health, residency arrangements, and distance from the child (Wilson 2006). However, Cheadle, Amato, and King (2010) find certain factors to be associated with higher involvement among non-resident fathers, such as having been married at the child's birth, longer residency before separation, and higher education of the mother. Other research finds that non-resident father involvement is contingent upon the father's relationship with the mother (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010) and positively

related to effective co-parenting (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008). These studies represent a small fraction of growing literature, but they point to the complexities and variation of non-resident fatherhood. In light of significant family changes over the last few decades, continued research into the motivations and consequences of father involvement is of prime importance to family research. One such motivation, in particular, is that of religion. King (2003) finds that religious fathers are more involved with their children than their counterparts, and Petts (2007) finds that religious fathers are more likely to be involved with their children following a birth. Both of these studies address non-resident fatherhood (with consistent findings), yet it is not a central component of their analyses. A greater investigation of this relationship is the aim of the current paper.

Theoretical Framework

Religious, non-resident fatherhood has been the focus of few studies. However, two bodies of literature frame competing arguments regarding child involvement. First, non-resident fathers are less involved with their children than resident fathers (Furstenberg et al. 1983). Non-resident fathers generally decrease their involvement over time, as well, although certain patterns of stable involvement and non-involvement emerge (Cheadle et al. 2010). The second, competing body of literature shows that religious individuals are less likely to divorce (Call and Heaton 1997; Larson and Goltz 1989) and more likely to be involved in the lives of their children (King 2003; Wilcox 2002). There is little research on the child involvement of *religious, non-resident* fathers, however, which is difficult to predict from the current state of research.

This paper will test these competing arguments to uncover the relative influence of both religiosity and non-residency. Perhaps they will offset each other, but perhaps one will exhibit greater relative strength than the other. Two closely related studies provide a suggestion for the outcome: Petts (2007) finds that residency status has a larger influence on paternal involvement than does marriage, and he also finds that higher religious participation is related to more involvement, regardless of residency status. King (2003) finds that religiosity is associated with higher involvement, even among divorced fathers. Although compelling arguments exist on both sides, this paper presents two hypotheses based on the outcomes of these recent studies.

Hypothesis (1): Higher levels of religiosity are associated with higher levels of child involvement among non-resident fathers.

Hypothesis (2): Higher levels of religiosity during the child's third year of life will be associated with higher levels of child involvement during the child's fifth year of life.

Data and Methods

Data:

Data are from The Fragile Families and Child Well-being study, a longitudinal study of approximately 5,000 children born in U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. Telephone surveys were conducted with both mothers and fathers at one, three, five, and nine years after the birth of their child. In addition, in-home assessments were conducted during the third and fifth years of data collection, providing supplemental material on the child's development and health outcomes. There is an oversample of non-married parents in the study, making it particularly suitable for the study of non-resident fathers.

Of the 3,299 fathers who completed the three-year follow-up survey, 1,012 did not live with the child all or most of the time. Of these 1,012 respondents, 725 reported seeing their child in the last 30 days. Due to the design of the study, questions regarding child involvement were only asked to these 725 fathers. Therefore, for this study, non-resident fathers are defined as fathers who do not live with the child all or most of the time but who have seen their child in the past 30 days. Of the 725 non-resident fathers who completed the three-year follow-up survey, 253 met these same criteria at the five-year follow-up.

Primary Measures:

Religiosity: Four questions are used for analyses. The first is, "Which best describes your religion?" Responses are coded into five categories: Protestant, Catholic, Other Christian, Other, and No Preference. The following three measures are ordinal variables and will be looked at individually and as part of an index. They are responses to the following: 1) "How often do you attend religious services?" 2) "My religious faith is an important guide for the way I treat my family in daily life" and 3) "How important is religious faith to your happiness?" A standardized index is created using factor analysis and a separate index is created by totaling each score (Range = 0-11, Mean = 6.41).

Child involvement (Three-year follow-up survey): Thirteen questions were asked to the respondents regarding their child involvement. A factor analysis of these variables reveals that ten have a strong relationship with each other, and these were thus chosen to create several

variations of the same index. The questions included are as follows: “How many days a week do you...1) Sing songs or nursery rhymes with the child, 2) Hug or show physical affection to him/her, 3) Tell the child that you love him/her, 4) Let the child help you with simple household chores, 5) Play imaginary games with him/her, 6) Read stories to the child, 7) Tell stories to him/her, 8) Play inside with toys such as blocks or legos with the child, 9) Tell the child that you appreciated something he/she did, [and] 10) Put the child to bed?” Each question is coded from 0 (0 days per week) to 7 (7 days per week).

Child involvement (Five-year follow-up survey): Respondents were asked five of the same questions and three new ones. The identical questions are as follows: “How many days a week do you...1) Sing songs or nursery rhymes with the child, 2) Read stories to the child, 3) Tell stories to him/her, 4) Play inside with toys such as blocks or legos with the child, [and] 5) Tell the child that you appreciated something he/she did?” The new questions are: “How many days a week do you...1) Play outside in the yard, park, or playground with the child, 2) Take the child on an outing, such as shopping, or to a restaurant, church, museum, or special activity or event, [and] 3) Watch TV or a video together?” Each question is coded from 0 (0 days per week) to 7 (7 days per week).

Analytic Strategy:

These analyses will be conducted using a combination of ordinary least squares regression and logistic regression. The former will be used to model associations for the continuous measures of child involvement while the latter will be used to assess whether change over time is predicted by religiosity.

Preliminary Descriptive Statistics and Results

Table 1 shows that approximately 80% of non-resident fathers affiliate with a religion, and Table 2 shows that a similar percentage are neither romantic nor married to the child’s mother. These variables have not been used in greater analyses, yet, but they show that a sizeable portion of the sample share a few important characteristics. Table 3 contains all of the current independent and dependent variables. Of particular interest is the notable decrease in child involvement between years three and five. Whether this decrease varies by religiosity is initially explored in Tables 4-6. Until further testing is completed, the results are inconclusive. However, several comparisons of the tables suggest that religiosity will have an effect on child involvement

– but it may be particularly nuanced. For example, in Tables 5, 5a, and 6a, the fathers with the highest involvement are not necessarily those with the most religious response. This is not the case in the other three tables. Further, comparisons of changes between Tables 4 and 4a and 5 and 5a show that the least religious fathers are more likely to score in the lowest two categories of child involvement at the year five follow-up survey. Due to the small sample size, however, these preliminary findings will be supplemented with more rigorous statistical tests to determine significance. Conducting these analyses is the next step in the development of this paper.

Table 1: Religion of Non-resident Fathers

	N	%
Protestant	266	37
Catholic	142	20
Other Christian	86	12
Other	51	7
No preference	166	23
Total	711	100

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 3

Table 2: Relationship to Mother Among Non-resident Fathers

	N	%
Married	19	3
Romantic	130	18
Separated	111	15
Friends	348	48
No relationship	117	16
Total	725	100.0

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 3

Table 3: Summary Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Coding	Min	Max	Mean	Median	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness
Religiosity (Standardized)	Factor	-2.71	1.44	-0.06	0.22	0.97	2.96	-0.77
Child involvement (Standardized)	Factor	-1.98	2.14	0.00	-0.05	1.00	2.26	0.16
Religiosity (Year Three, N=725)	Index 0-11	0	11	6.19	6.50	2.56	2.58	-0.48
Religious attendance	0 = Lowest	0	6	2.42	2.00	1.56	2.12	0.05
Religion as a guide	0 = Lowest	0	3	2.34	3.00	0.88	3.88	-1.29
Religion as source of happiness	0 = Lowest	0	2	1.49	2.00	0.64	2.67	-0.86
Child involvement (Year Three, N=725)	Index 0-70	0	70	33.29	32.00	17.05	2.26	0.17
Sing songs or nursery rhymes	# Days/week	0	7	2.29	2.00	2.07	3.17	0.96
Hug or show physical affection	# Days/week	0	7	4.40	4.00	2.32	1.65	-0.18
Tell child you love him/her	# Days/week	0	7	5.30	7.00	2.19	2.29	-0.85
Let child help with chores	# Days/week	0	7	2.66	2.00	2.38	2.28	0.64
Play imaginary games	# Days/week	0	7	3.10	3.00	2.31	2.09	0.41
Read stories	# Days/week	0	7	2.60	2.00	2.13	2.65	0.70
Tell stories	# Days/week	0	7	2.59	2.00	2.15	2.58	0.68
Play inside with toys	# Days/week	0	7	3.49	3.00	2.29	1.95	0.26
Show appreciation	# Days/week	0	7	4.08	4.00	2.37	1.66	-0.03
Put the child to bed	# Days/week	0	7	2.94	3.00	2.31	2.23	0.50
Child involvement (Year Five, N=253)	Index 0-56	0	56	19.03	16.00	11.89	3.88	1.03
Sing songs or nursery rhymes	# Days/week	0	7	1.65	1.00	1.69	5.08	1.43
Read stories	# Days/week	0	7	1.87	2.00	1.69	4.57	1.26
Tell stories	# Days/week	0	7	2.14	2.00	2.01	3.70	1.22
Play inside with toys	# Days/week	0	7	2.49	2.00	2.04	3.28	1.04
Show appreciation	# Days/week	0	7	3.85	3.00	2.28	1.70	0.18
Play outside	# Days/week	0	7	2.41	2.00	1.81	3.79	1.07
Take the child out	# Days/week	0	7	1.97	2.00	1.68	5.39	1.53
Watch TV together	# Days/week	0	7	2.68	2.00	2.00	3.23	0.99

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Waves 3 and 5

Table 4: Child Involvement at Year Three by the Importance of Religion to Happiness Among Non-resident Fathers (N=718)

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total
0-10	10%	6%	11%	9%
11-20	12%	18%	15%	16%
21-30	24%	22%	22%	22%
31-40	21%	19%	22%	21%
41-50	14%	17%	10%	13%
51-60	12%	11%	13%	12%
61-70	7%	6%	8%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 3

Table 4a: Child Involvement at Year Five by the Importance of Religion to Happiness Among Non-resident Fathers (N=253)

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total
0-10	41%	17%	25%	23%
11-20	23%	49%	38%	41%
21-30	18%	22%	23%	22%
31-40	14%	4%	6%	6%
41-56	5%	7%	9%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 5

Table 5: Child Involvement at Year Three by the Importance of Religion in Guiding Family Treatment Among Non-resident Fathers (N=705)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
0-10	4%	7%	9%	10%	9%
11-20	16%	12%	17%	17%	16%
21-30	22%	23%	24%	21%	22%
31-40	22%	19%	20%	21%	21%
41-50	16%	25%	12%	11%	13%
51-60	13%	7%	10%	14%	12%
61-70	7%	7%	8%	6%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 3

Table 5a: Child Involvement at Year Five by the Importance of Religion in Guiding Family Treatment Among Non-resident Fathers (N=249)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
0-10	21%	14%	31%	21%	24%
11-20	50%	29%	43%	41%	41%
21-30	7%	38%	16%	24%	22%
31-40	14%	5%	6%	4%	6%
41-56	7%	14%	4%	10%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 5

Table 6: Child Involvement at Year Three by Church Attendance Among Non-resident Fathers (N=713)

	Never	Few Times/Year	Few Times/Month	Weekly or More	Total
0-10	9%	8%	9%	9%	9%
11-20	19%	15%	19%	14%	16%
21-30	23%	23%	21%	21%	22%
31-40	20%	20%	22%	23%	21%
41-50	13%	18%	7%	10%	13%
51-60	13%	10%	14%	14%	12%
61-70	4%	6%	7%	9%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 3

Table 6a: Child Involvement at Year Five by Church Attendance Among Non-resident Fathers (N=252)

	Never	Few Times/Year	Few Times/Month	Weekly or More	Total
0-10	24%	19%	35%	21%	23%
11-20	40%	44%	33%	40%	40%
21-30	19%	21%	23%	26%	22%
31-40	7%	8%	2%	5%	6%
41-56	10%	8%	6%	8%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being, Wave 5

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