

## The Role of Parental Relationships in Children's Well-Being: A Modest Set of Proposals for Improving the Lives of Children

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What has been missing in child and family research and interventions? Until recently, fathers have been missing from parenting research and interventions (Cabre-ra, Volling, & Barr, 2018). Intriguingly, when fathers *are* included in interventions, benefits for the parenting couple, their parenting strategies, and their children begin to emerge more convincingly (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2018; Dadds, Schwartz, & Sanders, 1987). The recent inclusion of both parents in some studies of children's development had a second desirable consequence – the discovery that high, unresolved conflict in the relationship between parents, whether married, cohabiting, separated, or divorced, is associated directly with the quality of the parent-child relationships and, both directly and indirectly, with the ability of children and adolescents to manage their worlds – socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Davies, Coe, Martin, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2015; Harold & Sellers, 2018). The findings about the effects of unresolved interparental conflict do not apply only to distressed families. More than 50 studies (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003) have shown that there is a normative decline in marital satisfaction after having a child, which continues for at least 15 years. Thus, over time, many children in what appear to be low-risk populations are also at increased risk of developing problematic behaviors associated with the expectable increase in tensions between their parents.

Based on an ecological, family system model, we and our colleagues have created and evaluated a couples' group intervention for parents of young children, in which clinically trained male-female facilitators help couples to find more effective and satisfying relationships as partners and parents. We use a curriculum that focuses on five aspects of family life that constitute buffers or risks for development: the parents' well-being or distress as individuals, as a couple, as parents, in their three-generational patterns, and, in their larger environments, coping with family stressors and enlisting supports to buffer them. The couple groups, which include structured and open time, are offered weekly over 4 months. Currently the group intervention has been validated by seven longitudinal studies, four of them random control trials (RCTs) in California, Alberta, Canada, and London in the UK. In the *Becoming a Family* study (Cowan & Cowan, 2000), after 24 weekly meetings before and after their transition to

first-time parenthood, expectant and new parents maintained their satisfaction with their relationships as couples over a 5-year period, whereas marital satisfaction declined for comparable couples with no treatment (Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006). Next, children making the transition to elementary school whose parents were randomly assigned to participate in the Schoolchildren and Their Families study – a 16-week group intervention – were rated by their teachers in 1st, 4th, and 9th grades as having fewer behavior problems, and their parents maintained their level of marital quality over 10 years compared to a no-treatment control group (Cowan, Cowan, & Barry, 2011). Then, in the first of three trials of the Supporting Father Involvement intervention, in which more than 800 low-income families in five California counties participated in an RCT, father-only groups improved fathers' involvement in the care of their children – as did couple groups – but the groups for both parents also affected the parents' satisfaction as couples, their parenting effectiveness, and the children's behavior problems over 18 months (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). A second replication trial with a pre-post design showed similar positive changes over time (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Gillette, 2014). In a third, more recent RCT of the Supporting Father Involvement intervention (Kline Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Gillette, & Pruett, 2019), half the couples were referred by the Child Welfare System because of concerns about past child abuse, neglect, or domestic violence; notably those couples showed the same positive results as comparable couples recruited from the same communities. Similarly, pre-post studies of the Supporting Father Involvement intervention in Canada (Kline Pruett, Gillette, & Pruett, 2016), and England (Casey et al., 2017) showed statistically significant positive changes in couples' reports of marital quality, and reductions in parenting stress, harsh parenting, and children's behavior problems.

From the point of view of theory, the results of our intervention studies support the idea that the relationship between the parents plays a causal role in both parent-child relationship quality and children's social development and academic achievement. From the point of view of practice, the results support the conclusion that fathers play an important role in their children's development, and that focusing on the relationship between the parents has a stronger effect on parents' and children's developmental outcomes than a singular focus on mother-child or father-child relationships.

We have recently outlined the policy implications of moving from a mother-centric to a family system view of parenting (Cowan & Cowan, 2018). Our central conclusion is that the siloed approach to research (mothers only, fathers only, child only, or couple only) is too often replicated in the siloed offerings of family service delivery systems (separately for mothers, fathers, or children) and in government agencies that support “family-strengthening programs” (e.g., Departments of Maternal and Child Health, Office of Family Assistance, programs for “marital relationships” or “responsible fatherhood”).

This state of affairs leads us to several “modest proposals” for remedying the one-by-one approach to research, service, and policy pertaining to fostering optimal development in parents and children.

- 1 It is necessary to broaden the definition of fathers and co-parenting couples. While a majority of children live in families with two heterosexual biological parents, large numbers are living with same-sex parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, intimate partners of the custodial parent, mother- or father-grandpar-

- ent caretakers, and other combinations of adults (Golombok, 2015; Parke, 2013). Although research has not yet provided extensive information about all of these family structures, we expect to find that the tenor of the coparent relationship, however it is defined, has enduring effects on the child.
- 2 It is imperative to include fathers in research and treatment wherever possible. It may not be advisable to include fathers when there is active concern about violence, but it is important to reach out to fathers and other co-parenting figures to get a more complete picture of children's environmental resources and obstacles. While many researchers and service providers claim that "fathers won't come," we have found that active outreach, male staff, flexible scheduling, and welcoming environments will overcome this objection. When we leave fathers out of studies that aim to understand variations in children's behavior and adaptation, two things are true: we are left with a limited view of the reality of contemporary families, and we risk conveying to the general public that fathers are not key players in children's development.
  - 3 Parenting research and intervention designs would be strengthened by adding a focus on the relationship between the parenting partners. Findings from our intervention studies and the preponderance of evidence from correlational studies indicate that the quality of relationship between the parents plays a role in parenting quality – and in their child's social, emotional, and academic development.
  - 4 We propose that policy makers and service providers consider the routine offering of couple relationship workshops for new parents as a preventive strategy, in the same way that many contemporary couples routinely attend classes on prenatal care, childbirth, and infant care.

We agree wholeheartedly with a statement frequently attributed to Bronfenbrenner that we were unable to locate in his writings: "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." To this we would add: Every child deserves to live in an environment in which the primary caretakers find ways to resolve their disagreements about childrearing in ways that support effective co-parenting and prevent them from undermining each other's handling of the child. It is time for researchers, family service providers, and policy makers to take note of what we know – to step up to dismantle the silos that limit our understanding of children's optimal and troubled development and to formulate programs that show promise of helping fathers, mothers, and children to thrive.

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