

## NCFR *Report*: What Have Meta-Analyses Taught Us About Fatherhood and the Quality of Child–Father Relationships?

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# What Have Meta-Analyses Taught Us About Fatherhood and the Quality of Child–Father Relationships?

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## In Brief

- **Meta-analyses provide a bird's-eye view of a discipline and help derive robust conclusions from multiple studies and thus a larger number of people.**
- **Recent meta-analyses have shown that fathers are sensitive parents and that children can form positive relationships with fathers, just like they can with mothers.**
- **These studies have also shown that child–father relationships foster positive child development in similar ways as child–mother relationships.**

In the past 15 years, the proliferation of research on fatherhood and the quality of fathers' relationships with their children has allowed for the integration of many small sample studies to provide a birds-eye view of research findings on child–father relationships and their influence on positive child development outcomes. Synthesizing the results of multiple studies to quantify the overall effect of interest is conducted via meta-analysis. By and large, research on parenting and its influence on children's well-being has focused on mothers. As a result, the importance of mothering in child care and children's developmental outcomes was used to advocate for policy changes to support mothers' involvement in the family (e.g., increased maternity leave, flexible work arrangements). Fathers, however, continue to be underrepresented in research (see Cowan & Cowan, 2019) and considered less by practitioners and policymakers. Recent years have seen an increasing number of meta-analyses on fathers and father–child

relationships, thereby helping highlight fathers' important role in child development and identify important gaps and avenues for future research.

It is important to remember that most of this evidence is based on White educated fathers from a middle-upper socioeconomic background and, thus, may not generalize to all fathers.

### Parenting and Relationship Quality

The first important question addressed by recent meta-analyses is whether mothering and fathering are similar constructs (Cabrera et al., 2014; Fagan et al., 2014). A study led by our team sought to clarify whether fathers and mothers present similar levels of parental sensitivity (i.e., a rapid and appropriate response to their child's signals). Some theories argue that mothers are more sensitive caregivers than fathers because of their primary roles as caregivers and nurturers (e.g., Paquette, 2004) and the socialization of women to care for others (Knudsen & Wærness, 2008). Others argue that the roles taken on by mothers and fathers in the family have become increasingly similar (Cabrera et al., 2000) and there are no big differences in the roles different parents play in child rearing.

In our meta-analysis (Deneault et al., 2022), we synthesized data from over 10,000 families and found that mothers were more sensitive than fathers, but the difference was small. However, fathers and mothers presented similar levels of sensitivity in studies conducted since the 2010s, which



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may be driven by the increase in fathers' involvement in child care (Sayer, 2018). This may suggest that as fathers become more involved in their children's lives, fathers become more attuned to their children's signals and can respond to them just as sensitively as mothers (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019). Additionally, we found that European mothers and fathers presented similar levels of sensitivity, unlike those in North America and the Middle East—the only regions represented in the studies. Even with variations between countries, we believe that this difference may be detectable because European countries have some of the most generous parental leave programs for both parents (e.g., a year-long parental leave shared between parents). By spending more time with their young children, fathers get exposed to their children's signals and can learn to respond to them sensitively, just like mothers (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019). Relatedly, in another meta-analysis, we showed that children are as likely to form a secure attachment relationship (i.e., trusting, positive, reciprocal) to their fathers as to their mothers (Madigan et al., 2023), which in turn predicts an array of positive developmental outcomes.

## Child Outcomes

Across multiple recent meta-analyses, findings suggest that positive paternal and maternal behaviors independently foster positive child adaptation. In a meta-analysis including more than 28,000 children, we found that caregiver sensitivity is associated with fewer behavioral problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, aggression) in children regardless of parent gender (Cooke et al., 2022). Similarly, children who have sensitive caregivers, regardless of gender, present better language abilities (Madigan et al., 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2021).

In another series of meta-analyses, our team has shown that child–father and child–mother secure attachment relationships—which are strongly influenced by the quality of caregiving sensitivity—foster positive adaptation in children. Across 1,300 children, we found that children with a secure attachment relationship to their father present fewer behavioral problems (Deneault et al., 2021). Additionally, children with a secure attachment to their father act more prosocially (e.g., helping, comforting, cooperating) toward others (Deneault et al., 2023). Using an advanced individual participant data meta-analytical approach, we also showed that children benefit from being securely attached to both of their parents simultaneously (rather than to only one or neither parent). Children with two secure attachments have the lowest

rates of internalizing behavioral problems (e.g., depression and anxiety symptoms; Dagan et al., 2022) and the highest rates of language competence (Dagan et al., 2024). In addition, the Dagan studies indicated that insecure attachment to mother only and insecure attachment to father only equally interfered with obtaining optimal emotional and cognitive outcomes. Taken together, the studies reviewed here highlight that the quality of parenting and of parent–child relationships fosters positive adaptation, regardless of parental gender.

## Implications

It is critical for clinicians, professionals, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and families to consider that mothers and fathers, as well as other coparental caregivers who play a significant role in children's lives, matter when thinking about children's well-being. The meta-analytical evidence described is clear in showing that fathers matter for child development—and in ways that are similar to mothers (Cabrera et al., 2018). The meta-analyses also show that there are additive effects of a high-quality relationship with multiple parents. Yet many parenting programs or public policies designed to support parents and families are designed for mothers specifically. There is an important need to design programs and policies for mothers and fathers, as both play similar roles in fostering children's positive development and fathers also benefit from such interventions (e.g., de Waal et al., 2022). Increasing evidence also points to the importance of taking a family systems approach by supporting mothers, fathers, and the coparenting and romantic relationships at the same time (e.g., Pruett et al., 2017; for guidance for stakeholders interested in adopting a family systems approach, see Cowan & Cowan, 2020). Similarly, it is important to include fathers in research more routinely to better understand the full picture of the environmental influences on children's development. Equally important is to move beyond assessing mothers and fathers (and other caregivers) separately and to consider them simultaneously, given the potential influence of the interaction between child–mother and child–father relationships on

children's optimal development (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018).

Last, the way that fathers are discussed in everyday life also needs to be reconsidered. For example, it is common in some circles to hear that fathers are “babysitting” their kids while their partner is away, or that schools and doctors systematically call mothers first, even if fathers are the contact person for the child. Family Scientists should consider whether we are letting bias about mothers being the “default” parent influence how we navigate interactions with families.

## Conclusion

Meta-analyses have allowed us to derive robust conclusions based on a wide body of literature to understand whether child–father relationships matter for child development and to compare their influence to the findings of studies with child–mother dyads. These large-scale studies have helped highlight that fathers can be as sensitive as mothers, that children are as likely to form secure attachments to fathers and mothers, and that high-quality relationships with fathers promote positive child development, just like relationships with mothers. Importantly, these meta-analyses also helped identify future directions for work on fathers. The meta-analyses described here relied on studies that were almost exclusively conducted with White, highly educated, high-income fathers who were in a biparental relationship with a mother. Across research, practice, and public policy, it is critical that we approach fathering from an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991), whereby various identities (e.g., culture, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, residential status) can shape fatherhood, and consequently children's well-being. Indeed, families from different backgrounds may face a host of unique conditions that influence individual and family-wide processes (Cabrera & Volling, 2019). For instance, two-father families may face homophobic microaggressions, which have a detrimental influence on their well-being and the quality of their parenting (Carone et al., 2021). As we look ahead to the next 15 years, it is

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Additionally, allocating resources and funding to support the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions (Swanson et al., 2013).

### Conclusion

Enhancing incarcerated fathers' parenting is crucial for the well-being of fathers and their children. The challenges faced by incarcerated fathers highlight the need for comprehensive prison policies that prioritize child- and parent-focused approaches. Strategies such as promoting interaction, implementing family-focused policies, and providing structured interventions like the For Our Children's Sake program and literacy projects can significantly support incarcerated fathers in maintaining strong emotional bonds with their children.

Additionally, developing skills and tools, such as goal articulation, self-reflection, and ongoing learning, are vital for incarcerated fathers' successful parenting. Reflective practices supported by institutions can help incarcerated fathers



overcome personal barriers and develop healthier relationships with their children. However, it is essential to recognize the interdependency of family relationships and the significance of external support in supporting incarcerated fathers.

By promoting meaningful interactions, providing necessary tools and skills, and considering the interdependence of family relationships, Family Scientists can

create a more supportive environment for incarcerated fathers and their families. This comprehensive approach holds the potential to enhance the parenting abilities of incarcerated fathers, contribute to positive child development outcomes, and ultimately foster stronger family relationships during and after incarceration. ✨

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imperative that we be collectively mindful of including fathers in research, practice, and policy, and that we remember that fathers are a heterogeneous group with varied and diverse experiences. ✨

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