Which fathers are involved in looking after their children?

Identifying the conditions associated with paternal involvement.

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**Project partner:** Working Families (http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/).

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One of the gender inequalities in the home is that fathers are less involved than mothers in looking after their young children’s day-to-day lives. Sen’s (1992) ‘capability framework’ elaborates how state and organisational policies, social norms, and household economic and demographic circumstances shape men and women’s options, decisions and behaviours, creating pressures on the arrangement of the domestic division of labour in households. Yet the relative importance of these factors in shaping men’s involvement in childcare remains under-researched and largely based on small-scale qualitative studies or cross-sectional survey data (see Norman 2010 for a review).

Our previous research (Norman 2010; Norman et al 2014; Norman and Elliot 2015; Fagan and Norman 2016) used the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to develop measures of paternal involvement in childcare when the child was aged nine months and three years old. We found the mothers’ employment hours had the strongest association with paternal involvement: if the mother worked full-time both nine months and three years after the child’s birth then the father was more likely to be an involved parent when the child was aged three. Fathers were also more likely to be involved when the child was aged three if (i) they worked shorter hours in employment and (ii) if they were involved in childcare.
nine months after the child’s birth; but the effect of both these variables was significantly weaker than that of the mothers’ employment hours.

This research project will build on this analysis, using the MCS, to establish which employment and socio-demographic characteristics shape paternal involvement as children age from nine months to eleven years old. Part of the analysis will focus on intact households to remove the confounding impact of relationship breakdown. We will also examine the longitudinal relationship between paternal involvement and the probability of households remaining intact following recent research that found a correlation between paternal involvement and the quality of a couple relationship; e.g. Poole et al. (2014).

The research questions to be addressed are:

1. How can we develop measures of paternal involvement over time as the child develops?
2. What are the key employment, socio-demographic, and attitudinal characteristics of fathers in the UK who report involved parenting behaviour when their child is aged 9 months, 3, 5, 7 and 11 years old?
3. Do trajectories of paternal involvement over the child’s lifecourse vary between fathers and if so, what are the predictors?
4. Does paternal involvement when the child is aged nine months predict whether a household is still intact when the child reaches age eleven?

In examining these questions, the project aims to contribute to scholarly and policy debates about what encourages or impedes fathers’ involvement in providing care for their children. It will make an original contribution to the literature on parental involvement by using a representative sample of fathers to develop measures of paternal involvement, identify differences among fathers and explore how their involvement develops as the child grows older. This is particularly relevant in light of the growing attention to fathers within policy debates about work-family issues across Europe (e.g. European Commission 2012; Eurofound 2015), including UK policy, where the introduction of shared parental leave is the most recent reform designed to provide better support for fathers and their involvement in childcare (BIS 2014; also see Working Families 2015).

References


Working Families (2015): Shared Parental Leave: The quiet revolution, how mothers and fathers share work and care: