

Does paternal involvement in childcare and housework affect relationship stability for married and cohabiting couples?

Dr Helen Norman, Professor Mark Elliot and Professor Colette Fagan

Project overview

Motivation: The Office for National Statistics (2015) estimate that 42% of all marriages now end in divorce.

Understanding the conditions that lead to parental divorce or separation is important in light of the associated social and economic costs for families and their children.

Background: Previous studies (e.g. Schober 2012) show that paternal involvement in childcare has a positive influence on relationship stability for married and cohabiting couples.

However, most other studies, including Schober's, treat paternal involvement in childcare as a composite measure, which presupposes homogeneity in how involvement in particular childcare and other household tasks influences the parental relationship.

Aim: Our paper provides a critique of these previous studies by exploring how paternal involvement in individual childcare and housework tasks (i.e. solo-childcare, changing nappies, feeding, getting up at night, cleaning, cooking and doing the laundry) influence relationship stability between the parents over time, controlling for other salient variables such as the number of other children at home, household income, the father's education, attitudes towards divorce, age, sex of the baby, employment and marital status.



Methods

Logistic regression on the first four sweeps of the UK's *Millennium Cohort Study* (2000-08).

We use 7 variables (see Table 1 below) measuring paternal involvement in childcare and housework during the first year of a child's life to predict relationship breakdown up to when the child is 7 years old.

Results

Table 1: Is paternal involvement associated with relationship breakdown between 9 months & 7 years post-birth?

Involvement variables	Odds ratios
Solo-childcare¹	
1-2 times a week at most	.7*
Few times a week	.7*
Once or more a day	.8
Gets up at night¹	
1-2 times a week at most	.8*
Few times a week	.9
Once or more a day	.8*
Feeds baby¹	
1-2 times a week at most	.9
Few times a week	.9
Once or more a day	.9
Changes nappies¹	
1-2 times a week at most	1.5*
Few times a week	1.9**
Once or more a day	1.9***
Cooks main meal²	
Dad does most	1.2
Shares equally	1
Cleans²	
Dad does most	1.6*
Shares equally	1
Laundry²	
Dad does most	1.2
Shares equally	1.2

¹ Reference category: 'Never'

² Reference category: 'Dad does least'

N=9,539

Note: Several controls are included - some of which are listed in the 'project overview' box.

Conclusions and next steps



Conclusions: Table 1 shows that paternal involvement in childcare and housework affects the probability of relationship breakdown in different ways depending on the particular task that the father is involved in.

For example, parental relationships are less likely to break down if the father looks after the child on his own at least a few times a week, or gets up in the night to attend to the baby during the first year of parenthood. However, paternal involvement in other tasks appears to have a positive influence on relationship breakdown such as regular nappy-changing and cleaning.

There will be other variables that interact with these associations so no clear conclusions can yet be drawn but it does suggest that treating paternal involvement as a composite measure is misleading as different tasks affect the parental relationship in different ways.

Next steps: To explore mediating effects on these associations at different time points of the child's life using structural equation models.

Contact details

Dr Helen Norman - Principal Investigator

School of Social Sciences,
University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
Manchester. M13 9PL

Email: Helen.norman@manchester.ac.uk

Project website:

<http://projects.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/involved-fathers/>