Father Involvement and Toddlers’ Behavior Regulation: Evidence from a High Social Risk Sample

Using a sample of 401 adolescent mothers (16-20 years of age at childbirth) and their firstborn toddlers, we examined relations between father involvement, mother-father relationships, and toddlers’ socioemotional functioning. Mothers reported on father involvement and father-mother relationship quality (support, conflict, intimate partner violence). Children’s behavior problems and social competence were assessed using the Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA). The expected positive influence of high father involvement on toddlers was absent when parents were in conflict, or had high intimate partner violence (IPV). Results are discussed in light of the current emphasis on policies and programs to support father involvement and suggest that enhancing the quality of father-mother relationships may facilitate the potential positive effects of father involvement on children’s functioning.

Keywords: father involvement, mother-father relationship, interparental conflict, intimate partner, violence, child socioemotional development

The establishment of healthy, adaptive patterns of behavior regulation is one of the central tasks of early childhood (Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001). Both developmental theory and empirical data highlight the pivotal role that fathers may play in a child’s emotion and behavior regulation (Leidy, Schofield, & Parke, 2012). Father-child interactions, while different from mother-child interactions, are especially important during the first years of development in shaping children’s adaptive socioemotional development (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). While involvement of fathers is presumed to be positive for children, most of the data supporting this notion are drawn from studies of middle-income married, residential fathers. Research on the relations between nonresidential fathers’ involvement and child well-being, for example, is limited and somewhat inconclusive (Beers & Hollo, 2009). The present study investigates the relations between father involvement and toddlers’ behavior regulation.
and young children’s socioemotional development in a sample of primarily low-income, nonresidential fathers.

Several theoretical orientations are relevant to the study of fathers and their impact on children’s development. According to both family systems theory (Minuchin, 1985) and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) father involvement, and its impact, are embedded within contexts that include both father-mother and mother-child relationships. In many families, mothers serve as “gatekeepers and gateopeners” to father involvement, and this may be particularly the case with unmarried, nonresidential fathers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Parke, 2002; Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008; Waller & Swisher, 2006). Thus, the quality of the father-mother relationship (e.g., closeness, cohesion, conflict) may affect both the father’s access to, and impact of, father involvement (Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002). One goal of the present study was to investigate the relations between father involvement, quality of father-mother relationships, and children’s socioemotional development.

THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN CHILDREN’S EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REGULATION

While mothers and fathers show many similarities in parent-child interactions and relationships, at the same time, young children’s interactions with their fathers and their mothers are different from each other. Researchers note the particular role that fathers play in the development of children’s emotional and behavioral regulation during the first two or three years of life due to opportunities for experiencing (and needing to cope with) high emotional arousal during father-child interactions (Fitzgerald & Bockneck, 2012; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, & Jones, 2004). The “wide range of intensity of affect that fathers display and the unpredictable character of their playful exchanges” (Leidy, Schofield, & Parke, 2012, p. 156) may be important in the development of affect and behavioral regulation that affects social interactions with peers and other nonfamilial partners (Parke, McDowell, Kim, & Leidy, 2006). These links between paternal behavior and children’s socioemotional development are present as early as the second year of life (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). The impact of early father involvement (during infancy) extends beyond the early childhood years. Further, this influence may be moderated by particular characteristics of children, parents, or their context. For example, Boyce and colleagues (2006) found that when father involvement in infancy was low, children who were physiologically reactive to social contexts were more likely to show mental health symptoms in middle childhood. There is need, then, to examine the impact of father involvement in families who are at high social risk, during the early years when family relationships and children’s emotional and behavioral regulatory systems are forming, and to investigate how father-mother relationships may moderate the influence of father involvement.

Father Involvement in Families with Young Parents

The research supporting the benefits of involved father-child relationships arises primarily from studies of moderate and high SES, married, White families. Yet family structures and relationships show great heterogeneity. For example, although the median age at first fatherhood in the U.S. is 25 years (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012), the range includes men in their teens and their 40s and 50s. Although public and media portrayals of young fathers often represent them as uninvolved in the lives of their young children (Stengel, 2005), there is considerable variability among young fathers’ involvement with their children.
(Kalil, Ziol-Guest & Coley, 2005), and many young fathers desire to be highly involved parents. Yet many unwed young fathers do not live with their children, and the relationship status of adolescent mothers and the fathers of their babies may be unstable, complicating the achievement of consistent high father involvement (Hofferth & Goldschieder, 2010). In one study of children born to adolescent mothers (Kalil et al., 2005), although almost two-thirds of the fathers were highly involved with their infants, one year later only one-third of them were highly involved, illustrating a common pattern of decreasing father involvement over time.

Although the majority of research on father-child relationships has been conducted on low-risk samples, there is evidence that father involvement is even more critical in low-income or high-risk contexts, including for children of adolescent mothers (Fitzgerald & Bockneck, 2012; Tamis-LeMonda & McFadden, 2010). Approximately 40% of U.S. births now are to nonresidential and noncohabiting families (Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010) who have been dubbed “fragile” due to tenuous mother-father relationships. Children growing up in these contexts have greater exposure to stressors, including community and interpersonal violence and lack of access to positive resources; in these circumstances a present and involved father may serve as a protective factor that mitigates potential stress (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). And although adolescent mothers and the fathers of their babies are less likely to co-reside when compared to older parents, the impact of father involvement on children is substantially similar among married and unmarried dyads (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Leidy et al., 2012). In a longitudinal study of children born to low-income, adolescent mothers, father involvement was positively related to children’s social, behavioral, and academic functioning (Howard, Burke, Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006) despite the fact that fathers were not living with their children. Others have noted the potential protective role of father involvement when maternal behavior is compromised (Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). Since early childbearing is associated in general with less optimal maternal parenting (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Leadbeater & Way, 2003), positive involvement of these children’s fathers may be especially important to their adaptation. Father influences on children’s development are both direct (e.g., father-child interactions) and indirect (e.g., through positive mother-father relationships that fuel parents to meet the challenges of parenting) (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000).

Mutual Influence of the Father-Mother Relationship and Father Involvement

Father-child relationships exist within a network of other family relationships, and primary among these is the father-mother relationship. Thus, a better understanding of the links between father involvement and children’s development would be enhanced by examining aspects of the father-mother partnership. Close, positive relationships between fathers and mothers, whether or not they are married, are associated with greater father involvement (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Coley, 2005). In our own previous work (Easterbrooks, Barrett, Brady, & Davis, 2007), we found that young fathers were more involved in the lives of their young children when father-mother relationships were more positive and less conflictual. Although this pattern is observed both in middle- and low-income families, and among children of adolescent and adult mothers, there is evidence also of heterogeneity. For example, in a study of low-income families, Cabrera and colleagues (Cabrera, Mitchell, Ryan, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008) found that racial minority fathers showed more stable father involvement over time.
than did white fathers, and the authors surmised that this was due to more stable romantic father-mother relationships.

There also is strong empirical support for the impact of marital conflict on children, even during the first years of life (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004). Family systems theory highlights the “spillover effects” of marital conflict on parenting, thereby influencing children (Katz & Gottman, 1996). In a study of low-income families who were using Early Head Start, Fitzgerald and colleagues (Fitzgerald, McKelvey, Schiffman & Montanez, 2006) found that children with self-regulatory difficulties lived in families characterized by high levels of marital conflict. Effects may be magnified in families where there is intimate partner violence (IPV) rather than nonviolent conflict. Children of adolescent mothers are most likely to be exposed to IPV, and its effects are likely most detrimental to infants and young children (Carpenter & Stacks, 2009), perhaps because of disrupted attachment relationships and the impact of stress, neglect, or trauma on the developing brain during a time of emergent stress and behavioral regulatory systems (Gerwitz & Edleson, 2007; Hostinar & Gunnar, 2012). The literature on IPV and children’s development demonstrates that both violent and nonviolent (i.e., verbal abuse) behaviors are linked to problems in children’s behavioral adaptation (Anderson & Cramer-Benjamin, 1999; Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002), including negative emotionality and behavior problems; these data are drawn primarily from preschool-aged and older children.

The literature reviewed suggests that high father involvement may not always be favorable for children and that direct mechanisms (e.g., modeling of conflict resolution) and indirect mechanisms (e.g., disrupted parenting resulting from interparental conflict) may contribute to the associations between father-mother relationships and children’s emotional and behavioral regulation. The complex exploration of father involvement on children’s development requires analytic models that examine both direct and indirect pathways; for example, testing moderated and mediated paths. A mediation model, for example, is useful in examining whether father involvement affects children’s development by influencing the relationship between the father and mother, which in turn affects the child’s competence and wellbeing. Indeed, studies show that the quality of the father-mother and father-child relationship may mediate the positive effects of father involvement (Amato & Rejac, 1994; Lamb, ed., 1997) on children’s development. Cabrera and colleagues (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000) wrote, “the benefits obtained by children with highly involved fathers may be largely attributable to the harmonious family contexts” (p. 130).

A moderation model, on the other hand, allows examination of whether father involvement affects only some children. For example, the benefits of high father involvement might accrue for some, but not all, children depending on characteristics of children, or fathers, or family environment (e.g., among families of boys but not girls, or families with residential but not nonresidential fathers). Minton & Pasley (1996) found that the relation between paternal identity and father involvement was moderated by father residential status. The impact of father involvement on children’s development also may be moderated by other characteristics of fathers, including mental health and parenting behavior (Ryan, 2012). To date there are few studies examining models of moderation or mediation by which father involvement may affect children’s development, particularly among children in the first to years of life and in families at high social risk.

In summary, the purpose of the current study was to fill a gap in the literature by examining relations between father involvement, father-mother relationships, and young chil-
Children’s socioemotional development in a sample of children born to young mothers. Our research questions were as follows: (1) Is greater father involvement positively associated with children’s behavioral competence and negatively with behavior problems? and (2) Is the effect of father involvement on children’s development moderated by the quality of mother-father relationship? We examined whether positive effects of father involvement might be seen only in families where the father-mother relationship (indicated by support, conflict, intimate partner violence) is positive and not when the relationship is negative. Our third research question addresses the potential of an indirect, mediated relation linking father involvement and children’s behavioral competence. Specifically, (3) Is there a mediated pathway between father involvement and child development through the mother-father relationship?

**METHODS**

**Sample and Procedures**

Data were derived from a longitudinal randomized control trial evaluation of a statewide newborn home visiting program for first-time parents ages 20 and under at childbirth. The program is an adaptation of the Healthy Families America program and is designed to (1) prevent child abuse and neglect by supporting positive, effective parenting; (2) promote optimal child health, growth, and development; (3) encourage parental educational attainment, job, and life skills; (4) prevent repeat teen pregnancies; and (5) promote parental health and well-being.

Eligibility to participate in this research included being female, 16 years of age or older, having received no HFM services in the past, speaking either English or Spanish, and being cognitively able to provide informed consent. Women seeking HFM services (N = 840) were randomly assigned to either the Home Visiting (HV) group or control group (who received referrals to other service programs for young parents and monthly child development information); 704 (84%) took part in this research (61% HV group, 39% control group). Participation included a phone interview and/or allowing us to access administrative data from state public agencies. Participants were invited to participate in an in-person research interview at three time points: enrollment (T1), 12 months following enrollment (T2), and 24 months following enrollment (T3).

**Sample**

The sample consisted of participants who took part in a research interview at T2 (n = 401). Most mothers identified as either Non-Hispanic White (n = 135, 35%) or Hispanic (n = 141, 36%); others identified as Non-Hispanic Black (n = 79, 20%) or Non-Hispanic other ethnicity (n = 33, 9%). Mothers were, on average, 18.73 years old at childbirth (SD = 1.29, range 15.83–21.42). At the T2 interview, mothers were 19.64 years old (SD = 1.35, range 17.00-22.92), fathers were 21.91 years old (SD = 4.16, range 15.92–52.08); children were 10.154 months old (SD = 5.25, range 3–28). Half of the children (203, 52%) were boys.

At T2, half of the mothers (n = 212, 55%) were in a relationship with the baby’s father (of them 8% were married); a third (n = 127, 33%) stated that they were single, and 13% (n = 49) were in a relationship with someone other than the baby’s father (of them 8% married). Most mothers did not co-reside with the father of the baby (n = 263, 68%); 13% (n = 34) reported living alone with the child.

**FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND TODDLERS’ BEHAVIOR REGULATION**
By T2, most mothers (n = 221, 55%) had received a high-school diploma or GED; 27% (n = 108) were still in high school; and 16% (n = 63) experienced an educational interruption. A majority of mothers (n = 306, 76%) were not employed. Most fathers completed high school or GED (n = 174, 43%) or below (n = 113, 36%) by T2; 8% (n = 24) had completed any year of college. Less than half of the fathers were employed (n = 180, 45%). A few fathers were deployed in the military (n = 7, 2%) or incarcerated (n = 19, 5%).

More than half of the mothers (57%, n = 229) were in the HV group, representing the random assignment. There were no differences between HV and control groups on any mother, child or father characteristics, with the exception of ethnicity: proportionally, there were more Hispanic mothers in HV group (HV 41% vs. control 30%) and more White Non-Hispanic mothers in the control group (HV 30% vs. control 42%; χ²(3) = 9.06, p < .05).

Measures

Complete details of the methodology of the larger randomized controlled trial evaluation, including detailed descriptions of the study protocols and psychometric properties of all instruments, have been presented elsewhere (citation to be included post-review). Measures pertinent to this current paper are described below.

Family demographics. With the exception of mother’s race, which was assessed at T1, all demographic characteristics of participants and their children (child’s age and sex, mother’s and father’s age, education and employment) were assessed at T2.

Father involvement with the child (T2). To assess father involvement, we asked mothers to indicate how much time father spent with the child, on a scale ranging from 0 (none) to 5 (daily). This continuous variable was used in regression analyses to predict child outcomes. A categorical variable was derived by recoding the values into 0 = uninvolved fathers, 1 = intermittently involved (less than daily) and 2 = highly involved (daily contact). This variable was used to explore differences in bivariate analyses that were used for descriptive purposes. Although it would be ideal to have fathers report on their involvement with their children, fathers were not available in this study (the majority were not living with the mother or child). Other researchers have found that mothers are reliable reporters of father involvement (e.g., Caspi, Taylor, Smart, Jackson, Tagami, & Moffitt, 2001; Martin, Brazil, & Brooks-Gunn 2012).

Mother’s report on father presence and support (T2). In order to help describe the nature and context for father involvement, we asked mothers questions about their relationship status with the father of the child (married, committed relationship, dating, single); whether she currently co-habitated with the father; and satisfaction with the amount and quality of time fathers spent with them and the children (3- and 4-point scales ranging from not at all satisfied to very satisfied). Mothers also reported about levels of fathers’ support: emotional (as defined by mother), financial (money and material, including dollars provided per month), and help with parenting (as defined by mother).

Quality of Relationship Inventory (QRI; T2). The QRI (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991) was used to assess perception of the quality of the mother-father relationship. The 25-item measure has three subscales: support (7 items, e.g., “To what extent can you turn to this person for advice about problems?”), conflict (12 items, e.g., “How angry does this person
make you feel?"), and depth (6 items, e.g., “How significant is this relationship in your life?”). Participants answered the questions on a 4-point scale, from 0 not at all to 3 very much. A mean score (ranging from 0 to 3) was calculated for each subscale.

The QRI has good reliability, validity (e.g., discriminant, predictive), and test–retest stability (Verhofstadt, Buysse, Rosseel, & Peene, 2006). It has proven useful in both clinical and nonclinical research on close relationships and has been validated in other languages (Reiner, Beutel, Skaletz, Brähler & Stöbel-Richter, 2012).

**Conflict Tactics Scale-2 Short Form** (CTS2S; T2). CTS2S (Straus & Douglas, 2004) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire that measures the extent to which partners engage in psychological or physical attacks on each other. There are five subscales: Negotiation, Physical Assault, Psychological Aggression, Injury, and Sexual Coercion. Items describe specific acts perpetrated by the respondent and by the partner (e.g., “My partner pushed, shoved, or slapped me”). In order to measure total exposure to violence, we asked participants to think about all partners they were within the past year. In this current study, only the partner-perpetrated IPV scores were used.

Participants indicate the number of times the act occurred in the past year (“Once” = 1, “Twice” = 2, “3–5 Times” = 4, “6–10 Times” = 8, “11–20 Times” = 15, and “More than 20 Times” = 25) or that it occurred but not in the past year. Items are rescaled to reflect midpoints for response categories (e.g., “3–5 Times” = 4) and summed to obtain annual chronicity scores (ranging from 0 to 50, representing the estimated number of times behaviors occurred). A total annual chronicity is calculated by summing scores for each subscale (possible range 0–200). Binary scores for each subscale are derived to reflect annual and lifetime prevalence (1 = behavior occurred or 0 = has not occurred). Finally, prevalence scores for subscales are summed to assess the number of types of IPV participants experienced in the past year and in lifetime (both range 0–4).

**Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment** (BITSEA: T3). The BITSEA (Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2006) is a 34-item questionnaire designed to identify children (1–3 years) with social-emotional and behavioral problems or delays. It covers a broad range of social-emotional problems (e.g., “Is restless and can’t sit still”), including internalizing, externalizing, and regulatory domains; and competence (e.g., “Follows rules”). Problem behaviors items inquire about behaviors that are both typical of development (e.g., aggression, sadness, or fear) and those that are not developmentally appropriate (e.g., flapping or self-injurious behaviors). Mothers indicated how true statements were for their child using a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true/rarely, 1 = somewhat true/sometimes, 2 = very true/often). The Problem score is created by summing 31 problem items (range 0–62); higher scores indicate greater levels of socio-emotional or behavioral problems. The Competence score is created by summing 11 competence items (range 0–22); lower scores indicate a possible deficit/delay in competence.

The BITSEA was nationally standardized on 600 children (Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2006). To account for age and sex differences found (competence was higher in girls and increased with age), dichotomous cut scores can be created for age-band-by-sex norm groups from the Problem and Competence scores to indicate whether a child’s behavior is in the range of possible problems (25th percentile) or deficits/delays (15th percentile). We used the continuous sum scores and controlled for child’s age and sex.
RESULTS

Close to half of the mothers \((n = 184, 47\%)\) indicated that fathers were involved with the child daily, while 28\% were intermittently involved (less than daily, but more than none), and 25\% indicated that fathers were not at all involved \((n = 98)\). Table 1 compares 3 groups of participants in which fathers were highly involved, intermittently involved, or uninvolved on various characteristics including mother’s report on father presence, availability, and support of mother and the baby; mother-father relationship and child socio-emotional development; in addition to demographic characteristics. As shown in Table 1, demographic characteristics such as mother ethnicity or age, child sex or age, and father age were not related to how much time fathers spent with their children. Mothers were more likely to indicate that fathers were involved daily with the child if they were in a relationship with the father (as opposed to being single or with a different partner), co-resided with the father, or spent time with the father daily. Mothers who described fathers as highly involved were more likely to be satisfied with both the amount and the quality of time fathers spent with them and the child and more likely to receive financial, emotional and parenting support. These mothers reported the highest support and depth scores in the father-mother relationship and the lowest conflict scores. They reported less intimate partner violence than mothers who described fathers as not at all involved with the child, including less injury, physical assault, and sexual coercion. Children of highly involved fathers had higher competence scores than children of intermittently involved or uninvolved fathers.

Some mothers who described fathers as uninvolved with the child were satisfied with this level of involvement, e.g., a third of them (35\%) wanted father involvement to remain the same and 4\% wanted even less involvement. To account for this variability, we controlled for mother’s satisfaction with this level of father involvement.

**Research Question 1: Is greater father involvement positively associated with children’s socioemotional development?**

The average BITSEA Problem score was 13.01 \((SD = 6.79; \text{range } 1–38)\); close to half of the children \((47\%)\) had scores in the “of-concern” range. BITSEA Competence scores ranged from 4 to 22 \((M = 17.98, SD = 2.90)\); only 7\% of the children were classified as “of-concern” based on their Competence scores. Consistent with the findings reported by Briggs-Gowan and Carter (2006), competence total scores were higher among girls \((M = 18.61, SD = 2.48 \text{ vs. } M = 17.40, SD = 3.13; t(368) = -4.11, p < .001)\) and fewer girls \((6\%)\) than boys \((16\%)\) were in the “of-concern” range of competence \((\chi^2(1) = 6.72, p < .01)\).

Higher father involvement was related to lower problem scores \((r = -.13, p < .05)\), and higher competence scores \((r = .15, p < .01)\) on the BITSEA. Linear regression analyses showed that father involvement was significantly related to total problem scores (Table 2, Model 1a) and total competence scores (Table 3, Model 1b), even after the effect of child’s age and sex were accounted for. Partial correlations between child behavior and father involvement were -.14 for problem scores and .18 competence, after the variance due to child’s age and sex had been removed (i.e., “partialled out”).

**Research Question 2: Is the positive impact of father involvement absent when the mother-father relationship is negative (lacking in support; presence of conflict)?**

Model 2a in Table 2 shows a significant interaction between the father involvement and QRI conflict in predicting child’s problems, controlling for the effect of child age, sex, and...
Table 1

*Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for Study Variables (n = 389)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father Involvement with the Child</th>
<th>n (%) / M (SD)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total n = 389</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily n = 185</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Less than daily n = 129</td>
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<td>None n = 75</td>
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**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

*Father ethnicity*  
**χ²(6) = 11.11, ns**

- White (non-Hispanic): 135 (35%) 70 (38%) 34 (26%) 31 (41%)
- Black (Non-Hispanic): 79 (20%) 30 (16%) 37 (29%) 12 (16%)
- Hispanic: 141 (36%) 67 (36%) 47 (36%) 27 (36%)
- Other (Non-Hispanic): 33 (9%) 17 (9%) 11 (9%) 5 (7%)

*Mother age*  
**F(2, 386) = 0.230, ns**

- 19.65 (1.34) 19.67 (1.30) 19.59 (1.35) 19.70 (1.45)

*Father age*  
**F(2, 365) = .440, ns**

- 21.92 (4.15) 21.87 (4.61) 21.76 (3.47) 22.34 (4.04)

*Child age (months)*  
**F(2, 386) = 2.323, ns**

- 10.50 (5.26) 9.97 (5.06) 10.68 (5.06) 11.48 (5.94)

*Child sex: Boy*  
**χ²(2) = .573, ns**

- 203 (52.2%) 98 (53.0%) 64 (49.6%) 41 (54.7%)

**FATHER PRESENCE AND AVAILABILITY**

*Mother Relationship Status*  
**χ²(4) = 199.11, p < .001**

- Single: 127 (32.7%) 13 (7.1%) 70 (54.3%) 44 (58.7%)
- With Father: 212 (54.6%) 168 (91.3%) 36 (27.9%) 8 (10.7%)
- With Another Partner: 49 (12.6%) 3 (1.6%) 23 (17.8%) 23 (30.7%)
- Father lives with mother: 125 (32.2%) 117 (63.2%) 8 (6.2%) 0 (0.0%)

*How much time father spends with mother*  
**χ²(4) = 473.64, p < .001**

- None: 98 (25.2%) 2 (1.1%) 28 (21.7%) 68 (90.7%)
- Less than daily: 107 (27.5%) 9 (4.9%) 93 (72.1%) 5 (6.7%)
- Daily: 184 (47.3%) 174 (94.1%) 8 (6.2%) 2 (2.7%)

*Mother satisfied with the amount of time father spends with her*  
**χ²(6) = 75.42, p < .001**

- Not at all: 55 (14.2%) 2 (1.1%) 31 (24.0%) 22 (29.7%)
- Somewhat: 48 (12.4%) 15 (8.1%) 25 (19.4%) 8 (10.8%)
- Pretty much: 86 (22.2%) 43 (23.2%) 33 (25.6%) 10 (13.5%)
- Very: 199 (51.3%) 125 (67.6%) 40 (31.0%) 34 (45.9%)

*Mother satisfied with the quality of the time father spends with her*  
**χ²(8) = 484.11, p < .001**

- Not at all: 32 (8.3%) 6 (3.2%) 9 (7.0%) 4 (5.4%)
- Somewhat: 244 (62.9%) 124 (67.0%) 70 (54.3%) 50 (67.6%)
- Pretty much: 62 (16.1%) 31 (16.8%) 31 (24.0%) 3 (4.2%)
- Very: 168 (43.8%) 136 (73.5%) 32 (25.2%) 0 (0.0%)

*Mother would like father to be involved with her*  
**χ²(4) = 7.19, ns**

- Less: 19 (4.9%) 6 (3.2%) 9 (7.0%) 4 (5.4%)
- Same: 244 (62.9%) 124 (67.0%) 70 (54.3%) 50 (67.6%)
- More: 125 (32.2%) 55 (29.7%) 50 (38.8%) 20 (27.0%)

*Mother satisfied with the amount of time father spends with child*  
**χ²(6) = 172.08, p < .001**

- Not at all: 81 (21.0%) 1 (0.5%) 37 (28.7%) 43 (60.6%)
- Somewhat: 50 (13.0%) 14 (7.6%) 30 (23.3%) 6 (8.5%)
- Pretty much: 62 (16.1%) 28 (15.1%) 31 (24.0%) 3 (4.2%)
- Very: 192 (49.9%) 142 (76.8%) 31 (24.0%) 19 (26.8%)

*Mother satisfied with the quality of the time father spends with child*  
**χ²(8) = 484.11, p < .001**

- Not at all: 32 (8.3%) 2 (1.1%) 30 (23.6%) 0 (0.0%)
- Somewhat: 49 (12.8%) 16 (8.6%) 33 (26.0%) 0 (0.0%)
- Pretty much: 62 (16.1%) 31 (16.8%) 31 (24.0%) 0 (0.0%)
- Very: 168 (43.8%) 136 (73.5%) 32 (25.2%) 0 (0.0%)

*Table 1 continued on page 80*
Table 1, continued from page 79

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<th>Father would like father to be involved with the child</th>
<th>$\chi^2(4)=51.09, p&lt;.001$</th>
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<td>194 (50.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>186 (48.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father Support of Mother and Baby</th>
<th>$\chi^2(2)=122.95, p&lt;.001$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If father provides money, monthly amount (in $)</td>
<td>F(2, 128)=7.51, p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of Mother-Father Relationship</th>
<th>$F(2,372)=155.05, p&lt;.001$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support mean score</td>
<td>1.74 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict mean score</td>
<td>1.24 (0.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth mean score</td>
<td>1.77 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Tactics Scale (2-SF); Partner perpetrated acts</th>
<th>Past year prevalence</th>
<th>$F(2,372)=4.23, p&lt;.05$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Aggression</td>
<td>300 (80%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>59 (16%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Assault</td>
<td>75 (20%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Coercion</td>
<td>59 (16%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Socio-Emotional Development</th>
<th>$F(2,357)=3.02, p&lt;.05$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA Problem Sum Score</td>
<td>13.00 (6.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA Competence Score</td>
<td>18.01 (2.91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Subscripts refer to significant paired comparisons (Tukey’s post-hoc test): a = daily, b = less than daily, and c = none.
mother’s satisfaction with the level of father involvement (all continuous variables were centered). The interaction term was positive, indicating that the relationship between father involvement and child problems was positive at higher levels of QRI-conflict. Figure 1 shows that the results of probing the interaction effect across three scores of the moderator (lowest, average, and highest level of QRI-conflict). In couples who experienced low parental conflict, children’s problems were higher when fathers were not involved; however, if couples experienced a high degree of conflict, children appeared to have more problems when fathers were involved daily as opposed to not involved.

We used the Johnson–Neyman technique (Hayes & Matthes 2009; Preacher et al., 2006) to identify regions in the range of the moderator where the effect of the predictor on the outcome is statistically significant. Results showed that father involvement impacted children’s problems significantly only at values of QRI-conflict below -0.24 ($b = -0.46$, $p < .05$). The value of -0.24 corresponds to a score of 1 in the raw (non-centered) QRI-conflict, which ranges from 0 to 3. The negative coefficient suggested that higher father involvement was related to fewer child problems.

Model 2b in Table 3 shows a significant interaction between father involvement and the sum of types of IPV mothers experienced in the past year in predicting child’s competence, controlling for child’s age, sex, and mother’s satisfaction with the level of father involvement. Results of probing the interaction effect across three scores of the moderator (lowest, average, and highest number of IPV types) are shown in Figure 2. The region of significance on the moderator, IPV, ranged from -0.89 to 0.34, and the simple slopes were statistically significant only inside this range. The coefficients were positive at both the lower and the upper bound ($b = 0.49$ and $b = 0.26$, respectively, $p < .05$), indicating that, within this range of the moderator, the effect of the father involvement on children’s competence was positive. Given that the values of -0.89 and 0.34 corresponded to the values of 0.41 and 1.64 in the raw (non-centered) IVP, which ranged from 0 to 4, these results indicate that, when the sum of IVP types exceeds 1, there is no longer a statistically significant effect of father involvement on child competence.

Research Question: Is the pathway between father involvement and child development explained by the nature of mother-father relationship?

To test the hypothesis that greater father involvement impacts child development by promoting a strong positive relationship between father and mother, we tested a set of mediation models in multiple regression, following procedures described by Baron and Kenny (1986).

As shown in Model 1a in Table 2, the total effect of father involvement on child’s socio-emotional problems was statistically significant, after controlling for child’s age and sex. Indirect (mediated) and direct effects are presented in Table 4 (Model 3a). Results indicate that, after including the mediator, QRI-Support, the direct effect of father involvement on child’s problems is no longer significant, while the indirect effect ($a \times b$) is. This signifies complete mediation by Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria. Together, father involvement, the mediator, and the control variables explained 9% of the variance in child problems. Results

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1 We used Kristopher Preacher’s online tool (http://www.quantpsy.org/interact/mlr2.htm) to calculate regions of significance.

2 Significance of $a \times b$ was evaluated with Sobel’s (1982) test, using Kristopher Preacher’s online tool http://www.quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm
Figure 1. Prototypical plot illustrating the moderating effect of mother-father relationship quality on the relation between father involvement and child socio-emotional problems.

Figure 2. Prototypical plot illustrating the moderating effect of intimate partner violence on the relation between father involvement and child socio-emotional competence.
of additional analyses (available upon request) with other indicators of relationship quality (QRI-Conflict, IPV lifetime prevalence, IPV annual chronicity) also confirmed this mediation hypothesis. For the sake of simplicity, we present the data table only for QRI-support.

Next, we explored whether mother-father relationship quality also mediated the association between father involvement and child competence. As shown in Model 1b in Table 3, the total effect of father involvement on child’s socio-emotional competence was statistically significant, after controlling for child’s age and sex. Table 5 presents the results of the mediation analysis, which shows that the lifetime sum of types of IPV partially experienced by the mother partially explained the path between father involvement and child’s competence. Although the indirect effect was significant, it was more modest (β = .03) than the direct effect of father involvement (β = .15), which remained statistically significant. Together, father involvement, the mediator, and the control variables explained 10% of the variance in child competence.

**DISCUSSION**

Supporting father involvement in low-income families is a current policy and program priority in the U.S. The Healthy Marriage Initiative of 2003, reauthorized in 2010, provides
$150 million in funding for Healthy Marriage grants and Responsible Fatherhood under the Claims Resolution Act of 2010. This funding was authorized by U.S. Health and Human Services based on research demonstrating that children are most likely to thrive when they have parents whose relationship is one of support rather than conflict. Eleven federal agencies are joined in the Federal Interagency Working Group on Responsible Fatherhood (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, www.fatherhood.gov) in response to the call for a national conversation about responsible fatherhood issued by President Obama in 2009. The programs and policies emerging from these initiatives typically address families who have low economic resources, may be young and unmarried, and may have unstable father-mother relationships. As important and ambitious as these initiatives are, there is a limited research base concerning some of the families that they are meant to serve, including adolescent mothers, the fathers of their children, and the children themselves. The goals of this study were to describe father involvement and the quality of father-mother relationships in a high social risk sample of young mothers and the fathers of their babies and to examine the nature and pathways of impact of father involvement on toddlers’ social and emotional competence and problems.
The data on the children’s socioemotional competence and problems indicate that there are some developmental concerns (47% had BITSEA problem scores in the “of concern” range) but also considerable strengths (93% had competence scores in the “no concern” range) in this high risk sample. Although we might expect that father involvement would be limited in a sample of primarily unmarried, nonresidential young fathers, according to the mothers of the children, these fathers did spend time with their young children; on average, once per week or more. Almost half (47%) of fathers spent time with their children daily. This is a substantial commitment considering that only about one-third (32%) of fathers were residing with the child and mother. On the other hand, one-quarter (25%) of fathers were not at all involved in the lives of their young children, though we do not know the circumstances surrounding this lack of involvement (e.g., whether due to paternal or maternal choice, paternal unavailability due to residential distance or incarceration, etc.). Father involvement generally is more limited among unmarried fathers, perhaps reflecting residential distance (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Jaffee, Caspi & Moffitt, 2001) but the fact that most fathers were not co-residing, yet still were involved in the lives of their young children, confirms that “absent does not equal uninvolved” (Danzinger & Radin, 1990, p. 636). In addition to spending time with their children, mothers reported that the majority of fathers provided support to them through financial, emotional, and parenting help.

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Table 4
Regression Results for the Mediation of the Effect of Father Involvement on Child Socio-Emotional Problems by Mother-Father Support (n = 349)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>CI (lower)</th>
<th>CI (upper)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 3a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.48 (1.12)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Sex</td>
<td>-0.42 (0.72)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-1.83</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Involvement → QRI-Support (a)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.02)***</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QRI-Support → BITSEA Problems (b)</td>
<td>-1.11 (0.45)*</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-1.99</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Involvement → BITSEA Problems (c')</td>
<td>-0.07 (0.26)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect (a X b)</td>
<td>-0.44 (0.18)**</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2_{M,X}$</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2_{Y, MX}$</td>
<td>.04***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a, b, and c’ are path coefficients. Path a describes the association between the independent variable X and the mediator M; path b describes the association between the mediator M and the dependent variable Y, when the independent variable X is also in the model; path c’ denotes the direct effect of X on Y.

B = Unstandardized regression coefficient, $\beta$ = Standardized regression coefficient, SE = Standard Error, CI = Confidence interval.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

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The data on the children’s socioemotional competence and problems indicate that there are some developmental concerns (47% had BITSEA problem scores in the “of concern” range) but also considerable strengths (93% had competence scores in the “no concern” range) in this high risk sample. Although we might expect that father involvement would be limited in a sample of primarily unmarried, nonresidential young fathers, according to the mothers of the children, these fathers did spend time with their young children; on average, once per week or more. Almost half (47%) of fathers spent time with their children daily. This is a substantial commitment considering that only about one-third (32%) of fathers were residing with the child and mother. On the other hand, one-quarter (25%) of fathers were not at all involved in the lives of their young children, though we do not know the circumstances surrounding this lack of involvement (e.g., whether due to paternal or maternal choice, paternal unavailability due to residential distance or incarceration, etc.). Father involvement generally is more limited among unmarried fathers, perhaps reflecting residential distance (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Jaffee, Caspi & Moffitt, 2001) but the fact that most fathers were not co-residing, yet still were involved in the lives of their young children, confirms that “absent does not equal uninvolved” (Danzinger & Radin, 1990, p. 636). In addition to spending time with their children, mothers reported that the majority of fathers provided support to them through financial, emotional, and parenting help.
Table 5
Regression Results for the Mediation of the Effect of Father Involvement on Child Socio-Emotional Competence by IPV Lifetime Sum of Types (n =349)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>CI (lower)</th>
<th>CI (upper)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-1.87 (0.46)***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-2.78</td>
<td>-0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>0.08 (0.03)**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Sex</td>
<td>1.25 (0.30)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Involvement → IPV (a)</td>
<td>-0.10 (0.03)***</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPV → BITSEA Competence (b)</td>
<td>-0.40 (0.14)**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Involvement → BITSEA Competence (c‘)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.08)**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect (a X b)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.02)**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²M,X</td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²Y, MX</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a, b, and c’ are path coefficients. Path a describes the association between the independent variable X and the mediator M; path b describes the association between the mediator M and the dependent variable Y, when the independent variable X is also in the model, and path c’ denotes the direct effect of X on Y.

B = Unstandardized regression coefficient, β = Standardized regression coefficient, SE = Standard Error, CI = Confidence interval.

**p < .01; ***p < .001.

Correlates of Father Involvement

Father involvement was not related to demographic characteristics such as maternal ethnicity or age, father age, child sex or child age, but, consistent with an ecological model, father involvement was associated with characteristics of the family context, such as the status of the father-mother relationship and whether the father lived with mother and child. Not surprisingly, fathers were more involved with their children when they were in a romantic relationship with the mother and when they lived with the mother and baby. Since mothers often serve as “gatekeepers” and “gateopeners” to father involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Roy et al., 2008), their attitudes about the fathers hold particular sway when attempting to understand patterns of father involvement. Mothers were most satisfied with the amount and quality of father involvement when fathers spent more time with them, and with their child, and fathers who spent more time with their children also were more likely to provide other kinds of support (emotional, financial parenting). Although these are not causal data, they do endorse the notion that maternal satisfaction with paternal support may “open the gate” to greater access for fathers to spend time with their children (Parke, 2002). This mutual influence of “relationships on relationships” (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988) was evident in the links between father involvement and the father-mother relationship; when mothers reported that fathers were highly involved they also noted more positive qualities (support, depth) and less negative aspects (conflict, IPV) of the father-mother relationship.
Father Involvement and Children’s Development: Moderation and Mediation

Guided by theoretical frameworks of systems theory and ecological models of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Minuchin, 1985), we tested a moderation hypothesis that greater father involvement would be associated with children’s socioemotional competence and problems when the father-mother relationship was positive in character. The general finding that daily father involvement was associated with better child functioning (greater competence, less problem behavior) was refined by the moderation analysis. Indeed, level of conflict in the mother-father relationship moderated the impact of father involvement on children’s problems and competence. The positive impact of father involvement on children’s development that is represented in the literature and encouraged in father involvement programs (Leidy et al., 2012; Roggman et al., 2004) was not evident for children whose parents were in conflict. When conflict in the interparental relationship was low, children had fewer problems when fathers were more involved; however, when mother-father conflict was high, father involvement did not buffer against behavior problems. This pattern of moderation was replicated when we used intimate partner violence as a measure of the father-mother relationship. Higher father involvement was associated with children’s positive socioemotional competence when there was low intimate partner violence, but not in families with higher IPV.

Using mediation analyses, we found that both positive and negative characteristics of the co-parent relationship explained father involvement effects on children’s functioning. Both father-mother conflict and support, as well as IPV, mediated the effect of father involvement on child behavior problems assessed on the BITSEA, though only IPV mediated the effect on child competence. This highlights the indirect influence that father involvement may have on child development by enhancing the quality of the mother-father relationship. There is substantial agreement that poor marital relationships and compromised parenting attitudes and behavior covary and affect children both directly and indirectly. Leidy and colleagues (2012) noted that “poor parenting and poor marriages often go together, and some father effects are best understood by recognizing this link between parenting and marriage” (p. 160).

While on balance, mothers reported greater support than conflict in their relationships with the fathers of their babies, there was a sizeable number of mothers who reported that their relationship with the father was lacking in support. And mothers also reported considerable intimate partner violence during the past year. The IPV was primarily psychological aggression (reported by 90% of mothers) (e.g., threatening harm, insulting, shouting). Although greater father involvement was associated with lower prevalence of psychological aggression, this type of IPV was quite pervasive, even among mothers in the “daily father involvement” group. Many mothers (32%) experienced physical assault during the past year; prevalence and chronicity of physical assault, and chronicity of injury, were lower when fathers spent time with their children daily. In families where the father was not involved with the child, the average number of physical assaults (e.g., kicking, choking, use of knife or gun) was greater than four times in the past year. These are sobering data that underscore the complicated family relationships among these young parents. Some maternal “gatekeeping” of father involvement may be to limit exposure (of children and their mothers) to intimate partner violence. One caveat is that the IPV measure did not identify the perpetrator, so while some of these acts may have been perpetrated by the father of the child, others may have been perpetrated by another partner. Regardless of the perpetrator, IPV was less prevalent if fathers were more involved with their children. It may be that...
when biological fathers are present in their children’s lives, mothers are more protected from experiencing IPV from another partner.

Policy and Practice Implications

The first two years of a child’s life are critical to establishing longer-term father involvement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007), and father involvement during the first years of life is particularly important to a child’s socioemotional development (Cabrera et al., 2007). Father involvement typically decreases over time, from birth to preschool years and beyond, among fathers of children of adolescent mothers (Howard, Burke, Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). The current emphasis on policies and programs to support father involvement puts into context the applied implications of the results of our study. Our data highlight that young, nonresident fathers are more likely to be involved in their children’s lives than might be expected considering lower rates of marital relationships and co-residence. Perhaps these data reflect that the calls in the public forum for increased father involvement are taking hold in this population. Yet, the expected positive effects of increased father involvement may not be quite so clear-cut. Our study shows that the anticipated positive “effects” of father involvement on their children’s socioemotional development are present only when the interparental relationship was not conflictual, suggesting the need to work, perhaps simultaneously, on patterns of positive communication and behavior between fathers and mothers in an effort to support their children’s optimal development. This focus on the interparental relationship might take various forms, including co-parenting or partner communication education and support programs even when mothers and fathers are no longer in a romantic relationship with each other. These programs might focus on educating parents on the impact of IPV on children and on ways to prevent IPV by recognizing triggers of violence. Further, programs that provide mechanisms and assistance for women to seek safety for themselves and their children may play a role when IPV is acute.

Understanding father involvement and father-child relationships may be particularly important in samples at high social risk, where multiple stressors on mothers and children (e.g., “toxic stress” from community violence; lack of mental health services to serve mothers with depression; very low birth weight infants with medical needs) make it difficult to establish healthy mother-child relationships. In these conditions, positive, strong and stable relationships between children and their fathers may buffer or compensate for such difficulties, fostering positive developmental trajectories for children and mothers (Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Our data suggest that even in circumstances that are considered to be at increased risk for challenges to positive development, such as unmarried teen mothers, fathers can remain involved with their children despite difficulties such as living apart from their children, and children can thrive with high father involvement when the relationships between fathers and mothers are healthy rather than conflictual.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our study sample had the advantage of large size (n = 401) compared to many investigations of father involvement, several limitations of this study may limit generalizability to other families. It is possible that father involvement may have different associations in families where mothers are older and parents are more likely to be married and co-residing, and there may be geographic and regional differences among samples. Sec-
ond, there are limitations in the assessment of father involvement. Our measure of father involvement was based on amount of time that fathers spent with their children. But the actual activities and contributions of fathers may take many forms, both within and outside of, the quantity of time spent with the child. Understanding what specifically occurs when fathers spend time with their children will shed additional light on the links between father involvement and child development. For example, fathers may stimulate their children’s socioemotional development by spending time playing with them, providing the child with opportunities to regulate emotional challenges. Spending time with their children may also provide opportunities for fathers to spend time with the child’s mother and may help to facilitate positive father-mother relationships. It also may be the case that mothers get “time off” from child care when fathers are more involved, and this provides opportunities (e.g., for self-care or for employment) that positively enhance family well-being. Taking a multidimensional view of father involvement and examining time spent with the child but also other avenues of support (e.g., financial, responsibility for transportation and appointments, etc.) would help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances and impact of father involvement in young families. Not unexpectedly, significant effect sizes in our study were small, confirming the notion that other factors and circumstances, for example, the quality of father-child and mother-child interaction, parental mental health, and the neurobiological functioning of the child, also have considerable impact on children’s socioemotional development.

As is the case for many, if not most, studies of father involvement, our study has the limitation that we relied on maternal reports of father involvement rather than on fathers’ reports of their involvement or direct observations. Mothers’ reports may be a conservative estimate of father involvement compared to fathers’ reports (Rhein et al., 1997), although the literature supports that both mother and father reports can be reliable indicators of father involvement in diverse samples varying in residential status and race/ethnicity (Caspi, Taylor, Smart, Jackson, Tagami, & Moffitt, 2001; Hernandez & Coley, 2007; Martin et al., 2012). There is evidence that mothers’ and fathers’ reports of father involvement are substantially similar (Coley & Morris, 2002); although some studies report greater discrepancy when parents do not live together (Coley & Morris, 2002), other studies find greater similarity among nonresiding couples (Mikelson, 2008) such as those who constitute the majority of our sample. Mikelson (2008) argued that quantitative assessments of father involvement (e.g., days per week), as we used in our study, are relatively more accurate measures (compared to types of activities) since mothers are likely to know when a father is spending time with his child but may not know what activities are being engaged in. She also suggested that mothers may be particularly accurate in estimating time spent between nonresident fathers and their children. In one study of a large sample of low-income, primarily minority families (Hernandez & Coley, 2007), the authors concluded that “father and mother reports of father involvement show similar predictive validity to child functioning” (p. 87) in preschool-aged children, as well as invariance across ethnic groups and residential status.

Since mothers often serve as the “gatekeepers” and “gateopeners” in providing access and engagement between fathers and their children, mothers’ perceptions of and satisfaction with father involvement may actually be key factors in understanding patterns of father involvement and children’s development and may be important components to consider in any father engagement and involvement policy and program initiative. As such, our study poses theoretical and empirical questions about when and how father involvement has a positive impact on children’s development. This study provides an initial step that should
be followed by investigations using methods that allow researchers to interpret causal relations even in the face of multicollinearity among predictors and to explicitly model the variance that can be explained by the shared method of assessment.

REFERENCES


