

FIFTH EDITION

# THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT



*Edited by*

MICHAEL E. LAMB

# The Role of the Father in Child Development

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Fifth Edition

Edited by

Michael E. Lamb

University of Cambridge

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## Preface

**T**HIS FIFTH EDITION of *The Role of the Father in Child Development* appears nearly 35 years after the first edition was published in 1976. The intervening decades have been marked by extensive research, thoughtful scholarly reconceptualization of fatherhood and father-child relationships, and widespread public debate about the meaning and importance of fatherhood in drastically changing social landscapes. As a result, this edition bears little resemblance to the four earlier volumes with the same name. Instead, it contains a series of integrative summaries and reviews that represent the vibrant and productive scholarship that has done so much to illuminate our understanding of fatherhood and the many ways in which fathers can influence their children's development.

One feature of the contemporary scholarly landscape, in comparison with that which existed in 1976, is close attention to the broader social context. Whereas contributors to the first edition focused narrowly on biological fathers and father-child dyads, the contributors to later editions have increasingly placed fathers in the context of family systems and subsystems, in which the relationships with and attitudes of mothers and siblings also play crucial roles. By the third edition, there was also widespread recognition of the variety of roles that fathers played in their families, with the relative salience of these roles varying across time and (sub)cultural context. Meanwhile, changing patterns of partnering and child-bearing have created a new landscape of relationships and paternal roles, with scholars and researchers broadening their focus from biological fathers in 'intact' two-parent families to include step-fathers (married and unmarried), resident and non-resident bio-fathers, adoptive fathers, and gay fathers. Other features of this latest edition are concerns with cultural variability alongside recognition that the middle-class North American fathers who initially attracted the attention of social scientists and commentators are a small minority, and increased attention to social policy issues in a variety of countries. Strikingly, the authors hail from five continents, with only South America unrepresented. Also noteworthy are the disciplinary backgrounds of the contributors: Whereas the first volume was written entirely by psychologists, this edition includes contributions written by psychologists, sociologists, educationalists, social policy specialists, anthropologists, social workers, and legal scholars.

All of the chapters in this anthology were written especially for the volume, whose size and scope attest to the amount social scientists have learned about father-child relationships, especially in the last few decades. Each of the contributors has made seminal contributions to our collective understanding of the specific topic about which she or he has written, and together they have painted a rich and highly nuanced account of fatherhood and paternal influences, beginning with two chapters that provide a broad overview and examine the seldom-examined links between the concepts of masculinity and fatherhood. Several later chapters focus on the normative processes whereby paternal behavior and family dynamics shape children's development, while others examine the effect of variations in paternal involvement in both intact and divorced families or focus on the special social and psychological circumstances that shape relationships, family climate, and child development. The unique challenges, opportunities, and circumstances faced by step-fathers, divorced and divorcing fathers, non-resident fathers, gay fathers, and fathers whose children have special psychological or psycho-educational needs are also examined. A further group of contributors examine cultural variations in perceptions of fatherhood and the ways in which fathers perform their roles, as well as the policies increasingly adopted by developed countries to foster and facilitate the constructive engagement of men in their children's lives, when they live with them and when they do not. The resulting collection of chapters constitutes a truly comprehensive and up-to-date summary of contemporary scholarship concerning fathers, fatherhood, father-child relationships, and paternal influences around the world.

The collection will be of special interest to clinical, developmental, and social psychologists and their students, as well as policy makers, psychiatrists, social workers, family lawyers, and other mental health professionals. In the face of an exploding scholarly literature, this unprecedented collection provides a timely, unique, and definitive integration of recent scholarship and research. It will surely shape conceptions of and research on fatherhood for years to come.

Michael E. Lamb  
Cambridge  
January 2010

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## CHAPTER 1

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# How *Do* Fathers Influence Children's Development? Let Me Count the Ways

MICHAEL E. LAMB

IT IS OFTEN claimed that psychology became a science in the second half of the 19th century, led in part by continental (mostly German) research on perception, psychophysics, and memory, Galton's attempts to measure intelligence and establish the importance of heredity, and William James's efforts to create a coherent theoretical edifice, which might guide the derivation of empirical answers to age-old philosophical questions. For those who study the development of personality and social behavior, however, the key figure was Freud, who pioneered the close study of pathology as a medium through which to elucidate psychological functioning and spawned a plethora of admirers and critics who constructed much of the popular and scientific psychology we encounter in books such as this. For example, we owe Freud credit for the proposition, now widely viewed as an article of faith, that childhood experiences shape subsequent personality and behavior, although Freud himself only shifted the focus from late childhood and early adolescence to infancy very late in his life. Similarly, it was Freud who placed special emphasis on the formative importance of parent-child relationships, although the specific mechanisms he considered have since been widely discredited. Furthermore, although Freud (and the cohort of psychoanalysts and psychodynamic theorists he inspired) published prodigiously from just before the turn of the nineteenth century to the time of the Second World War, the scientific study of social, personality, and developmental psychology really took off in the postwar period, initially dominated by social learning theorists who rejected Freud's theoretical architecture even as they embraced many of the related beliefs and concepts, including those regarding the importance of parent-child relationships, although neo-analysts played a central role in the construction of attachment theory, which dominates parts of developmental psychology to this day.

Developmental psychology changed from a discipline dominated by theoretical analysis to one dominated by empirical research, much of it initially conducted in North America, in the years following World War II. This is often viewed as a politically conservative era, dominated by policies designed to put into the past the rigors and horrors of both the Depression and the two world wars by creating a new age of affluence and opportunity. In practice, this involved championing the "traditional" nuclear family, dominated by a breadwinning father and a home-making, child-rearing mother, often housed some distance from either parent's biological or metaphorical roots. Not surprisingly, psychologists embraced these values of the society in which they were reared and lived, so their initial empirical forays into research on children's early development were dominated by mothers—as informants, as the cofocus of observations, and as the "socializing" figures about whom they theorized. Where fathers did enter the picture, their roles were often represented through the eyes and voices of their partners, or they were judged against the models of family function developed by family theorists who shared similar societal assumptions. In such a context, it was easy (if exaggeratedly provocative) to entitle my first essay on the subject: "Fathers: Forgotten Contributions to Child Development" (Lamb, 1975).

Three and a half decades later, the scholarly landscape has changed dramatically. Thousands of professional articles have explored the ways in which fathers affect their children's development, and the contributors to this anthology provide a thorough and readable summary of our contemporary understanding. My goal in this introductory chapter is to sketch some of the overarching themes that dominate the book.

## FATHERS AND THEIR ROLES

### WHAT DO FATHERS DO?

It seems logical to begin this anthology by examining definitions and descriptions of fathering. What roles do fathers play in family life today? What taxonomies might effectively characterize fathers' activities with and commitments to their children? *What* do fathers do when they are available to their children, and *why* they do what they do? In this regard, a fuller conceptualization of fathers' roles and the origins of their "prescribed" responsibilities is warranted. As several contributors illustrate in this volume, historical, cultural, and familial ideologies inform the roles fathers play and undoubtedly shape the absolute amounts of time fathers spend with their children, the activities they share with them, and perhaps even the quality of the relationships between fathers and children.

In earlier times, fathers were viewed as all-powerful patriarchs who wielded enormous power over their families (Knibiehler, 1995) and vestiges of these notions continued until quite recently. According to Pleck and Pleck (1997), for example, Euro-American fathers were viewed primarily as moral teachers during the colonial phase of American history. By popular consensus, fathers were primarily responsible for ensuring that their children grew

up with an appropriate sense of values, acquired primarily from a study of the Bible and other scriptural texts. Around the time of industrialization, however, the primary focus shifted from moral leadership to breadwinning and economic support of the family. Then, perhaps as a result of the Great Depression, which revealed many hapless men as poor providers, social scientists came to portray fathers as sex role models, with commentators expressing concern about the failures of many men to model masculine behavior for their sons. Throughout the 20th century, fathers were urged to be involved (Griswold, 1993), and following feminist and scholarly critiques of masculinity and femininity, there emerged in the late 1970s a concern with the "new nurturant father," who played an active role in his children's lives. As Elizabeth Pleck (2004) explained, however, popular and scholarly discussions of fatherhood have long dwelled on the importance of involvement—often defined by successful breadwinning—and the fear of inadequate fathering. In contrast to earlier conceptualizations of fathers' roles, often focused quite narrowly on breadwinning, and later discussions focused narrowly on "involvement," researchers, theorists, and practitioners no longer cling to the simplistic belief that fathers ideally fill a unidimensional and universal role in their families and in their children's eyes. Instead, they recognize that fathers play a number of significant roles—companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers, and breadwinners—whose relative importance varies across historical epochs and subcultural groups. Only by considering fathers' performance of these various roles, and by taking into account their relative importance in the socio-ecological contexts concerned, can fathers' impact on child development be evaluated. Unfortunately, theorists and social commentators have tended in the past to emphasize only one paternal role at a time, with different functions attracting most attention during different historical epochs.

Focusing on fathers' behavior when with their children, much of the observational and survey data collected by developmental and social psychologists in the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Lamb, 1977) suggested that mothers and fathers engage in rather different types of interaction with their children, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries like the United States (see Chapter 4). These studies have consistently shown that fathers tend to "specialize" in play, whereas mothers specialize in caretaking and nurturance, especially (but not only) in relation to infants.

Although such findings seem quite reliable, the results have often been misrepresented, and have led to overly stereotypical and unidimensional portrayals of fathers as play partners. Compared with mothers, fathers indeed spend a greater proportion of their time with children engaged in play, but they still spend most of their time with children engaged in other activities. In absolute terms, most studies suggest that mothers play with their children more than fathers do, but because play (particularly boisterous, stimulating, emotionally arousing play) is more prominent in father-child interaction, paternal playfulness and relative novelty may help make fathers especially salient to their children (Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1983). This enhanced salience may increase fathers' influence more than would be expected based on the amount of time they spend with their children.

However, comparative studies, in which fathers' interactions are contrasted with those of mothers, typically focus on mean level differences in parenting activities, and often obscure other common patterns of parent-child interaction. By highlighting the predominant qualities of fathers and mothers, they may promote narrow views of fathers' and mothers' roles, thereby failing to capture similarities in the meaning or degree of influence parents exert on their children. In fact, both fathers and mothers encourage exploration during play with their infants (Power, 1985), alter their speech patterns to infants by speaking slowly and using shorter phrases (Dalton-Hummel, 1982; Golinkoff & Ames, 1979; Rondal, 1980), respond to their infants' cries and smiles (Berman, 1980), even when otherwise engaged (Notaro & Volling, 1999), and adjust their behaviors to accommodate developmental changes in their infants' competencies (Belsky, Gilstrap, & Rovine, 1984; Crawley & Sherrod, 1984). Sensitive fathering—responding to, talking to, scaffolding, teaching and encouraging their children to learn—predicts children's socio-emotional, cognitive, and linguistic achievements just as sensitive mothering does (e.g., Conner, Knight, & Cross, 1997; Easterbrooks & Goldberg, 1984; Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002; Van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). Such findings suggest that fathers can and do engage with their children in many different ways, not only as playmates, and that they are more than role models for their children.

The broader, more inclusive conceptualization of fathers' roles recognizes the appreciable variation that exists both within and between fathers. Most individual fathers assume numerous roles in their families (including breadwinner, playmate, guide, caregiver), although fathers differ with respect to the relative importance of these diverse roles.

#### FATHERS' INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN

A second line of research on fatherhood examines fathers' effects on children and the pathways through which those effects are exerted. Which aspects of child development are influenced most, at what ages, under which circumstances, and why? Three types of studies have been designed to explore this topic: correlational studies, studies of father absence and divorce, and studies of involved fathers. Here, we review these research methods and then examine direct and indirect effects of fathering on child development.

*Correlational Studies* Many of the earliest studies of paternal influences were designed to identify correlations between paternal and filial characteristics. The vast majority of these studies were conducted between 1940 and 1970, when the father's role as a sex role model was considered most important; as a result, most studies were focused on sex role development, especially in sons (for reviews, see Biller, 1971; Lamb, 1981). The design of these early studies was quite simple: Researchers assessed masculinity in fathers and in sons, and then determined how strongly the two sets of scores were correlated. To the great surprise of most researchers, however, there was no consistent correlation between the two constructs, a puzzling finding because it seemed to violate a guiding assumption about the crucial

function served by fathers. If fathers did not make their boys into men, what role did they really serve?

It took a while for psychologists to realize that they had failed to ask: Why should boys want to be like their fathers? Presumably, they should only want to resemble fathers whom they liked and respected, and with whom their relationships were warm and positive. In fact, the quality of father-son relationships proved to be a crucial mediating variable: When the relationships between masculine fathers and their sons were good, the boys were indeed more masculine. Subsequent research even suggested that the quality of the father-child relationships was more important than the masculinity of the father (Mussen & Rutherford, 1963; Payne & Mussen, 1956; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957). Boys seemed to conform to the sex role standards of their communities when their relationships with their fathers were warm, regardless of how "masculine" the fathers were, even though warmth and intimacy have traditionally been seen as feminine characteristics. A similar conclusion was suggested by research on other aspects of psychosocial adjustment and on achievement: Paternal warmth or closeness appeared beneficial, whereas paternal masculinity appeared to be irrelevant (Biller, 1971; Lamb, 1981; Radin, 1981). By the 1980s, it had thus become clear that fathers and mothers influence children in similar ways by virtue of nurturant personal and social characteristics (see Chapter 4). Research summarized in this volume by Golombok and Tasker (Chapter 11) goes even further, indicating that the sexual orientation of homosexual fathers does not increase the likelihood that their children will be homosexual, effeminate, or maladjusted.

As far as influences on children are concerned, in sum, very little about the gender of the parent seems to be distinctly important. The characteristics of the father as a parent rather than the characteristics of the father as a male adult appear to be most significant, although some scholars and social commentators continued to underscore the crucial importance of distinctive maternal and paternal roles into the late 1990s (Biller, 1994; Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996).

*Studies of Father Absence and Divorce* While the whole body of research that is here termed *correlational* was burgeoning in the 1950s, another body of literature comprising studies in which researchers tried to understand the father's role by examining families without fathers was developing in parallel. The assumption was that, by comparing the behavior and personalities of children raised with and without fathers, one could—essentially by a process of subtraction—estimate what sort of influences fathers typically had on their children's development. The early father-absence and correlational studies were conducted in roughly the same era; not surprisingly, therefore, the outcomes studied were very similar and the implications were similar and consistent with popular assumptions as well (see Adams, Milner, & Schrepf, 1984; Biller, 1974, 1993; Blankenhorn, 1995; Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Whitehead, 1993, for reviews): Children—especially boys—growing up without fathers seemed to have "problems" in the areas of sex role and gender-identity development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and perhaps in the control of aggression.

Two related issues arising from the father-absence research must be addressed when evaluating these conclusions. First, one must critically examine the concept of father absence when applied to children whose parents have separated or divorced: Fathers cannot be assumed to be psychologically and emotionally absent just because the parents are separated/divorced and the men no longer live with their partners. Second, even when researchers accept the conclusion that there are differences between children raised in families with the father "present" and those raised in families with the father "absent," they must ask *why* those differences exist and how they should be interpreted. Second, it is important to remember that the existence of differences between groups of children growing up with and without fathers does not mean that every child growing up without a coresident father has problems in the aspect of development concerned, or that all children whose fathers live with them develop appropriately. One cannot reach conclusions about the status of individuals from data concerning groups simply because there is great within-group heterogeneity. This again forces us to ask why such heterogeneity exists among children in father-absent families: Why do some children appear to suffer deleterious consequences as a result of father absence, while others do not? More broadly, the question is: What accounts for group differences between children in father-absent and father-present contexts, and what accounts for the impressive within-group variance?

Researchers and theorists first sought to explain the effects of father absence on boys by noting the absence of male sex role models in single-parent families. In the absence of a resident male parental model, it was assumed that boys could not acquire strong masculine identities or sex roles and would not have models of achievement with which to identify (Billler, 1974, 1993). The validity of this interpretation is weakened by the fact that many boys without coresident fathers seem to develop quite normally so far as sex role development and achievement are concerned. Clearly, some factors other than the absence of a male sex role model may be at least as important as (if not more important than) the availability of a sex role model in mediating the effects of father absence on child development. What might these factors be?

In a conceptual and empirical extension of research on the effects of father absence, many researchers initiated studies in the early 1980s designed to explore more carefully the ways in which divorce might influence children's development. The results of these studies have underscored the many ways in which the absence of coresident fathers influences children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). First, there are the cancerous effects of predivorce and postdivorce marital conflict (Kelly, 2000; see also Chapter 5). Because most single-parent families are produced by divorce, and since divorce is often preceded and accompanied by periods of overt and covert spousal hostility, parental conflict may play a major role in explaining the problems of "fatherless" children. Second, there is the absence of a coparent—someone to help out with child care, perhaps participate in tough decisions, and to take over when one parent needs a break from the incessant demands of child care. Following divorce, children consistently do better when they

are able to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents unless the levels of interparental conflict remain unusually high (see Chapter 7; Kelly, 2000; Lamb & Kelly, 2009). Children of divorce are often affected by the perceived, and often actual, abandonment by one of their parents and the reduced availability of the other (see chapter 7; Lamb, 1999; Lamb & Kelly, 2009; Thompson & Laible, 1999). Third, there is the economic stress that frequently accompanies single motherhood (Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). The median and mean incomes of single women who head households are significantly lower than in any other group of families, and the disparity is even larger when one considers per-capita income rather than household income (Glick & Norton, 1979; Horn, 1995; O'Hare, 1995). Fourth, the tremendous economic stress experienced by single mothers is accompanied by emotional stress occasioned by a degree of social isolation and continuing (though diminished) social disapproval of single or divorced mothers and children (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Amato and Dorius (Chapter 6) provide a succinct and exceedingly clear summary of the most recent survey research on the effects of divorce on children, Carlson and McLanahan (Chapter 8) examine the characteristics and dynamics of fragile families, and Marsiglio and Hinojosa (Chapter 9) explore the little studied role of stepfathers.

In sum, the evidence suggests that paternal nonresidence (previously known as "father absence") may be harmful not because a sex role model is absent, but because many paternal roles—economic, social, emotional—are inadequately filled in these families. Once again, the evidence suggests that recognition of the father's multiple roles as breadwinner, parent, and emotional partner is essential for understanding how fathers influence children's development. Similarly, the evidence suggests that the absence of a male sex role model is not important when explaining the effects of fatherhood or father absence (see Chapter 2).

*Research on Involved Fathers.* In the 1980s, several researchers sought to identify the effects of increased paternal involvement on children. In most of these studies, researchers compared the status of children in "traditional" families with that of children whose fathers either shared or took primary responsibility for child care (Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1985; Radin, 1994; Russell, 1983, 1986); other researchers examined the correlates of varying levels of paternal engagement (Koestner, Franz, & Weinberger, 1990; Mosely & Thomson, 1995). The results were remarkably consistent. Children with highly involved fathers were characterized by increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, fewer sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control (Pleck, 1997; Pruett, 1983, 1985; Radin, 1982, 1994). Again, the question that has to be asked is "Why do these sorts of differences occur?"

Three factors are probably important in this regard (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985). First, when parents assume less sex-stereotyped roles, their children have less sex-stereotyped attitudes themselves about male and female roles. Second, particularly in the area of cognitive competence, these children may benefit from having two highly involved parents rather than just one. This assures them the diversity of stimulation that comes from



interacting with people who have different behavioral styles. A third important issue has to do with the family context in which these children are raised. In each of the studies cited above, a high degree of paternal involvement made it possible for both parents to do what was rewarding and fulfilling for them. It allowed fathers to satisfy their desires for closeness to their children while permitting mothers to have adequately close relationships with their children and to pursue career goals. In other words, increased paternal involvement may have made both parents feel much more fulfilled. As a result, the relationships were probably much warmer and richer than might otherwise have been the case. One can speculate that the benefits obtained by children with highly involved fathers is largely attributable to the fact that high levels of paternal involvement created family contexts in which the parents felt good about their marriages and the child care arrangements they had been able to work out.

In all of these studies, fathers were highly involved in child care because both they and their partners desired this. The effects on children appeared quite different when fathers were forced to become involved, perhaps by being laid off from work while their partners were able to obtain or maintain their employment (Johnson & Abramovitch, 1985). In such circumstances, wives may have resented the fact that their husbands could not support their families while the husbands resented having to do "women's work" instead of providing for their families financially (Johnson & Abramovitch, 1988; Russell, 1983). Not surprisingly, this constellation of factors appeared to have adverse effects on children, just as the same degree of involvement had positive effects when the circumstances were more benign. Evidently, the extent of paternal involvement may have been much less significant (so far as the effects on children are concerned) than the reasons for high involvement and the parents' evaluations thereof.

*Direct and Indirect Effects.* Research on paternal influences has also moved beyond correlational studies and studies of "absence"/divorce or enhanced involvement to explore the pathways through which fathers ultimately affect their children. Fathers affect their children directly and indirectly, and both pathways are key to a comprehensive understanding of fatherhood, as Lamb and Lewis elaborate in Chapter 4.

Fathers influence their children directly through their behavior and the attitudes and messages they convey. The direct effects of fathering are especially salient when fathers' and mothers' interactions differ. Because fathers typically spend less time with their children, for example, many are less familiar with their children's language competencies and thus more likely to speak in ways that "challenge" children's linguistic and pragmatic abilities. Specifically, when talking to their young children, fathers use more directives, requests for clarification, *wh-* questions, references to past events, imperatives and contentless utterances than mothers do (e.g., Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998; Tomasello, Conti-Ramsden, & Ewert, 1990). Because these more complex forms of speech place greater linguistic demands on children, fathers are thought to serve as a "bridge to the outside world" (Ely, Berko-Gleason, Narasimhan, & McCabe, 1995; Mannle & Tomasello, 1987). Thus, fathers'