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Guest Editorial

Introduction to Special Issue Contributions of father-child relationship to children's development within the larger family system: A focus on observational measures

Improvements in assessing father-child interactions over the last decades have contributed substantially to the empirical evidence about the role of fathers in children's development. This special issue joins several others of national and international journals that have focused on the father-child relationship in different developmental contexts and from different theoretical perspectives. For example, past special issues have focused on the importance of fathers' play (Cabrera & Roggman, 2017) and father-child attachment relationships (Ahnert & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Cowan & Cowan, 2019) for children's development. Increasing empirical evidence about the role of fathers in children's development is attributed, in large part, to improvements in assessing father-child interactions over the past decade. A recent Society for Research on Child Development (SRCD) monograph (Volling & Cabrera, 2019) presented a set of studies on fathering that demonstrated the importance of fathers for children's development using innovative ways to measure father-child relationships. It also included studies that tested potential mechanisms through which fathering matters for children.

Despite these advances, the parenting literature continues to be dominated by studies that include mostly mothers and often do not control for paternal influences, and the studies that focus on fathers often do not include mothers and often do not control for maternal influences. Studies of mothers and fathers are still scarce (but see Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018; Majdandžić, de Vente, Colonnesi, & Bögels, 2018). Moreover, observational studies focusing on the quality of father-child interactions and relationships are still outnumbered by studies examining the quantity of father involvement (i.e., self-report on how much time fathers spend with their children; Cabrera et al., 2018). Hence, observational studies on father-child interactions are still scarce. This state of our knowledge suggests that studies that observe father-child and mother-child relationships, rather than studies that survey these processes through questionnaires, would theoretically and empirically contribute in significant ways to our understanding of how children develop in the context of the family. This special issue addresses this gap.

The goal of this special issue is to advance theory, measurement, and empirical knowledge of the ways in which fathers matter for child development and to address mechanisms that explain fathers' impact on children. Specifically, the focus of the special issue is on innovative observational studies of father-child relationships in the context of the family system. Accordingly, the studies included in this special issue situate parents and children in the contemporary family, in which a myriad of variations from the Western middle class two-parent family exists along multiple dimensions, including country of residence, ethnicity, parent gender composition, and socioeconomic status. It includes studies on gay, lesbian and heterosexual families (Ellis-Davies et al., 2022), ethnically diverse USA families (Deneault et al., 2022, Kerr et al., 2022), economically disadvantaged families (Brown et al., 2022; Oh, Kim, Park, Mastergeorge, & Roggman, 2022), families with diverse degrees of religiosity (de Vries, van der Pol, Toshkov, Groeneweld, & Mesman, 2022), families from a wide variety of countries, including various high-income countries (USA, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France) and one middle-income country (China; Huang, Sun, Lau, & Zhou, 2022), and families with children of diverse ages - ranging from 4 months to 8 years old.

This special issue is framed within a family systems perspective that children develop in a network of close relationships with key caregivers, which goes beyond studying individual dyadic relationships. Father-child or mother-child interactions are assumed not to exist in a social vacuum but instead are related to child development both individually and inter-dependently of one another (Cabrera et al., 2004). The effects of fathers’ and mothers’ parenting behaviors (as well as other caregivers) on child development should thus be studied independently and jointly to fully capture the dynamic nature of family interactions. The inclusion of both fathers as well as mothers (or another caregiver) calls for innovative analytical designs that reflect a family systems approach of independent and combined caregiver contributions to children's development. Furthermore, the current special issue addresses the ways in which the father-child and mother-child relationships independently and jointly contribute to a wide range of children’s developmental outcomes: social competence, problem behavior, executive functioning, language, math, and self-regulation.

The studies in this special issue contribute to our understanding of father-child interactions at different levels: (1) theoretical, (2) methodological/measurement, and (3) empirical with a focus on mechanisms through which father-child interactions contribute to children's developmental outcomes. At the theoretical level, collectively these studies go beyond the well-documented aspects of parenting — parental sensitivity and parent-child attachment, parent-
child synchrony, scaffolding and coparenting — to include other aspects of parenting such as parenting behaviors that are specifically developed to tap the quality of father-child or triadic father-mother-child interactions. For instance, challenging parenting behavior (Deneault et al., 2022) and parental gender talk (de Vries et al., 2022) are relatively novel ways to capture the unique ways in which fathers might interact with children. Authors of these pieces are careful to note that these “novel” ways are not exclusive to fathers but rather tend to be favored more by fathers than mothers. The sources of these preferences are embedded in complex biological, environmental, and dynamic systems and not easily identified. Regardless, these innovative approaches provide us with valuable new insights into how these parenting behaviors are uniquely and jointly associated with children’s developmental outcomes.

At the measurement level, the papers in the special issue utilize a wide range of measures to observe the quality of father-child and mother-child interactions at home and in laboratory settings and in both dyadic (parent-child) and triadic (parent-parent-child) configurations. An innovative measure is the Laughing Task, which assesses the extent to which a parent excites the child while at the same time being sensitive to the child’s emotional arousal (Bureau, Trepiak, Deneault, & Boulerice, 2021). This assessment procedure was specifically developed for fathers in response to the need for measures that assessed fathers’ theoretical emphasis on children’s exploration behaviors (e.g., Grossmann et al., 2002). Bureau and colleagues showed stability over time for the different interactions as measured with the Laughing Task for fathers but not for mothers. Deneault et al. (2022) found similar levels of challenging parenting behaviors (i.e., encouraging children to explore and act in ways that lie beyond their comfort zone) during a no-toy free play interaction in low-income ethnically diverse families, as found previously in White middle class families. This suggests that this relatively new parenting measure might be a universal dimension of parenting observed across ethnic and diverse families. They found no significant differences between levels of observed parental and maternal challenging behaviors, and neither fathers’ nor mothers’ challenging behaviors significantly contributed to infants’ social competence and behavior problems. The authors propose that the absence of associations can be explained by the young age of the children, or because challenging parenting behavior may be domain specific, not predicting broader aspects of social and emotional development than anxiety, or because these challenging behaviors interact with, or influence, other parenting dimensions.

A third new measure is used by de Vries et al. (2022). In this study with two-parent families, both parents’ gender talk while reading a picture book on gender stereotypes with the child was observed during a triadic interaction. Mother, father and child together read the book with drawings of boys, girls, and gender-neutral children alternately pictured in stereotypically masculine or feminine activities; and fathers’ and mothers’ frequencies of stereotypical gender messages were summed based on video ratings. De Vries and colleagues found that children of more religious parents had more stereotypical gender attitudes (i.e., rated stereotypically masculine occupations more often as ‘only for men’ and stereotypically feminine occupations as ‘only for women’). Moreover, more religious fathers, but not mothers, showed more stereotypical gender messages (i.e., number of stereotypical gender messages about the pictured children while reading the book) to their preschoolers, which was significantly and positively related to children’s gender attitudes, especially for boys. Studies of gender talk triads, in which both caregivers and the child are observed together in a family interaction, are new and relatively rare. Previous studies have examined this issue only in dyadic interactions and mostly with mothers. By examining how children learn concepts such as gender during the mother-father-child triad interactions, we can gain unique insights into the complex and diverse influences on children within the entire nuclear family system.

At the empirical level, the studies in this special issue report on the differences and similarities between mothers’ and fathers’ parenting behaviors, the independent and joint associations of fathers’ and mothers’ parenting behaviors on children’s developmental skills, and some go beyond the dyad to include triadic interactions that illuminate family systems influences on early development. Some studies report no significant differences in the levels or quality of parenting behaviors between parents (Deneault et al., 2022; Ellis-Davies et al., 2022; Kuo & Braungart-Rieker, 2022), or in the association of paternal versus maternal parenting behaviors with child outcomes (Bureau et al., 2021; Deneault et al., 2022; Helmerhorst, Lucassen, van der Storm, & Keizer, 2022; Oh et al., 2022; Quigley & Nixon, 2022). For instance, Ellis-Davies and colleagues (2022) in a study with 57 French couples, 47 Dutch couples and 31 British couples (predominantly white) found that parental sensitivity and intrusiveness (observed during playing, feeding and diaper change using rating scales based on the Emotional Availability Scales; Biringen, Robinson, & Emde, 2000) in gay-, lesbian- and heterosexual-parent families was not related to parent gender or relative parental involvement. There was one exception for parental intrusiveness during infant bathing/diaper change: secondary caregiving fathers displayed more intrusiveness compared to secondary caregiving mothers. In their study of 103 Dutch families (49 families of relatively lower educational background and 54 families of relatively higher educational background), Helmerhorst and colleagues (2022) found that neither fathers’ nor mothers’ sensitivity contributed uniquely to children’s receptive language ability. In contrast, Oh et al. (2022) showed that both maternal and paternal insensitiveness in triad at home in a sample of 453 low-income U.S.A. families were linked to lower vocabulary skills at age 5 years, and higher levels of insensitivity were related to poorer regulatory skills at 5 years, for fathers directly, and for mothers through less adaptive child engagement (i.e., a composite of engagement, persistence, and a lack of frustration during a series of puzzle tasks). In a sample of 73 well-educated families from Ireland, Quigley and Nixon (2022) found that both maternal and paternal child directed speech in toddlerhood was significantly related to children’s language during a dyadic interaction and that neither mothers’ nor fathers’ child directed speech was related to children’s language during a triadic (father-mother-child) interaction. These results suggest that although fathers’ and mothers’ speech is related to child language in a comparable way, the context of the interaction (dyadic or triadic, with both parents or one parent present during the interaction with the child) plays an important role in whether parent’s speech is related to child language. This assumes that it is not only imperative to consider both fathers’ and mothers’ contribution to child development, but also it is important to measure fathers’ and mothers’ parenting during interactions in which both are present with the child (and parents are not apart from one another).

However, study findings also revealed differences in interactive quality between parents (Ellis-Davies et al., 2022; Kuo & Braungart-Rieker, 2022), or differences in how fathers’ and mothers’ parenting behaviors are related to children’s developmental outcomes (Altenburger & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Kerr, Rasmussen, Smiley, Buttitta, & Borelli, 2021). Ellis-Davies et al. (2022) report that secondary caregiving fathers (i.e., fathers who engaged in fewer childcare responsibilities than their partners) in gay or heterosexual families were more intrusive than secondary caregiving mothers (in lesbian or heterosexual families) during infant diaper change and bathing. Kuo and Braungart-Rieker (2022) demonstrated that in a U.S. sample of 117 white families with infants with a secure attachment to only fathers showed lower levels of effortful control and higher defiance in toddler-
hood compared to children who were secure to both parents or only to mothers or insecure to both. Similarly, in their study with 166 white U.S.A. middle-class families, Altenburger and Schoppe-Sullivan (2021) showed that higher levels of mothers’ parenting quality in infancy (i.e., a composite score of sensitivity, detachment (reversed), and positive regard observed during a toy play task) were related to higher levels of children’s attention in toddlerhood, whereas higher levels of father’s parenting quality in infancy were related to higher levels of children’s inhibitory control at 7.5 years of age. Kerr and colleagues (2021) found that in a U.S. sample of 75 socioeconomically and ethnically diverse families father-child, but not mother-child, synchrony (i.e., synchrony refers to interactions with a shared focus of attention, temporal coordination and contingency between parent and child) was related to less distress in toddlers.

In terms of the possible mechanisms – moderation or mediation– that explain why and how father-child relationships matter for children’s development in the context of the family, several studies in this special issue report tests of possible moderation effects. Moderation effects, where the interaction between parents’ and mothers’ parenting in relation to child development is examined, are generally considered appropriate methods to test spillover effects. According to family system theory, spillover effects refer to the assumption that one parent’s influence on child outcomes is strengthened or buffered by the other parent’s influence on the child outcome (moderation effect), for better or for worse. Typically, interaction effects can be of three kinds: (1) buffering or compensatory, where the negative effect of one parent in relation to child development is compensated by the positive effect of the other; (2) strengthening, where the positive effect of one parent in conjunction with the positive effect of the other is associated to a cumulative improvement in child outcomes; and (3) double jeopardy, whereby the negative or low behavior of one parent and the negative and low behavior of the other parent jointly contribute to more negative child outcomes than just the negative behavior of one parent. In a Canadian sample of 76 white middle class families, Bureau et al. (2021) found that the joint combination of low father-child synchrony and low mother-child synchrony was associated with higher levels of child problem behavior (double jeopardy effect). Brown and colleagues (2022) studied triadic interaction quality (i.e., higher positive affect and cohesiveness, and lower detachment and negative affect during a father-mother-child semi-structured play task) between both parents and their 3-year-old child, in a U.S. sample of 67 white middle class families. Interaction quality in the triad was highest in families where the child is securely attached to both parents, compared with families where the child is securely attached to one parent (and insecurely attached to the other parent) or is insecurely attached to both parents (strengthening effect). Moreover, children who were securely attached to one parent and insecurely attached to the other parent were more likely to show a preference for one parent over the other, which in turn was related to less cohesive, less positive and more disengaged triadic interactions. As the authors argue in their discussion, this seems to suggest that the conflicting (one secure and one insecure) attachment relationships with their parents might affect children negatively.

In a Chinese sample of 96 families, Huang et al. (2022) found that mothers’ scaffolding significantly improved the positive link between fathers’ scaffolding and 5-6 years-old children’s initiative (strengthening effect). Similarly, Bureau et al. (2021) report that when both paternal and maternal dyadic coordination (an overall measure of observed responsive and harmonious parenting quality) was low, children exhibited higher levels of problem behavior (double jeopardy effect), and high coordination of one parent buffered low levels of the other in relation to children’s behavioral problems (buffering effect). Altenburger and Schoppe-Sullivan (2021) investigated moderation between father’s quality of parenting and supportive coparenting in relation to child impulsivity. They found that higher levels of paternal parenting quality were related to lower child impulsivity when supportive coparenting was high (strengthening effect). Together, these findings illustrate the importance of taking a family systems perspective on child development, because in addition to individuals’ effects, specific combinations of parental qualities from both caregivers yielded different child outcomes. Furthermore, studying fathers and mothers separately in dyadic interactions with their child generates different findings from studying them in triadic observations in which both caregivers and the child are present. Thus, studying multiple family members in (different) combination(s) provides a more comprehensive picture of what it means for children to grow up in a family than when the effect of a single parent is studied in isolation and, as such, a more accurate representation of each caregiver’s contributions to children’s development emerges.

In summary, the studies in this special issue advance our conceptual, methodological, and empirical understanding of why fathers matter for children’s development and why they need to be included in parenting research. The studies in this special issue use observational data, which are difficult and expensive to collect. With this type of data, it is possible to get closer to capturing the complexity of parent-child relationships and to explore mechanisms of influence, which are still understudied. Collectively, the studies in this special underlie the importance of utilizing measures that go beyond collecting self-report data to actually observing parent-child interactions. These measures more adequately capture the complexity of parenting behaviors. The specificity of behaviors, contexts, and effects is well-illustrated in this special issue. The studies also go beyond these influences by adding a new dimension: some child outcomes may be related to one parent’s behavior but not the other. The dynamic nature of parent-child relationships as they unfold in real-time is hinted at by the findings from studies that tested interactions or joint effects between mothers and fathers. The answer to the question of whether two parents are better than one may be “it depends”. The better question is how, when, under what conditions, and for whom do mothers and fathers matter for each dimension of children’s development.

We end this introduction with some directions for future research. More longitudinal studies of fathers and mothers are needed; studies with larger samples despite the difficulty of observational research in this way; studies that capture the full range of family types today, such as gay, lesbian, blended and step families; and more innovative and rigorous methodological strategies are needed that go beyond the dyad to analyze multiple relationships among members of the family system. Based on the studies in our special issue (predominantly white, middle class samples), we are unable to identify specific trends in terms of outcomes in more socio-economically and ethnically diverse samples versus white, middle-class samples. The findings of the studies in our special issue also show great variability in outcomes and no clear trends regardless of sample type. Some studies revealed no differences in interaction quality between fathers and mothers or no differences in associations between paternal and maternal parenting behaviors in relation to child development. Other studies, however, found differences in quality or level between paternal versus maternal interaction or in the association between fathers’ and mothers’ parenting behavior and children’s developmental outcomes. Findings also showed different examples of moderation between fathers’ and mothers’ parenting behavior in relation to child outcomes. These studies found support for double jeopardy, strengthening, and buffering of paternal and maternal parenting effects.
Future studies are needed using more culturally, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse samples. Some of this diversity is present in the samples studied in this special issue, but it is important to obtain more observational studies on father-child and mother-child interactions from low-income and Non-Western cultures to understand whether and how sample characteristics would influence the findings. As Hiram Fitzgerald (2022) writes in his commentary: “Collectively, the studies provide the reader with a sense that these “experiments” are glimpses of relationship dynamics as they actually occur in everyday life.” Similarly, Marian Bakermans-Kränenburg (2022) reminds us in her commentary that the future of fathering research needs to broaden its scope to include clinical samples, experimental designs, and interventions. We hope this special issue will inspire researchers to pursue these avenues in studying fathering to capture the complexities, dynamics, and miraculous nature of how fathers and their children build loving, positive relationships.

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