

Impact of Early Father Involvement on Middle Childhood Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes

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Abstract : Father involvement across the development of a child has been linked to children's psychological adjustment, fewer behavioral problems, and higher educational attainment. Conversely, there is much less research that highlights father involvement in relation to childhood development during early childhood period prior to preschool age (ages 1-3 years). Most research on fathers and child outcomes have been limited by its focus on the stages of adolescence, middle childhood, and infancy. This study examined the influence of father involvement, during the toddler stage, on 5th grade cognitive development, rule-breaking, and behavior outcomes measured by Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) scores. Using data from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation (EHSRE) Study, 1996-2010: United States, a total of 3,001 children and families were identified in 17 sites (cities), representing a diverse demographic sample. An independent samples t-test was run to compare cognitive development, aggressive, and rule-breaking behavior mean scores among children who had early continuous father involvement for the first 14 - 36 months to children who did not have early continuous father involvement for the first 14 - 36 months. Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine if continuous, or non-continuous father involvement (14 month-36 months), can be used to predict outcome scores on the Child Behavior Checklist in aggressive behavior, rule-breaking behavior, and cognitive development, at 5th grade. A statistically significant mean difference in cognitive development scores were found for children who had continuous father involvement ($M=1.92$, $SD=2.41$, $t(1009) = 2.81$, $p = .005$, $95\% CI = .146$ to $.828$) compared to those who did not ($M=2.60$, $SD=3.06$, $t(1009) = -2.38$, $p = .017$, $95\% CI = -1.08$ to $-.105$). There was also a statistically significant mean difference in rule-breaking behavior scores between children who had early continuous father involvement ($M=1.95$, $SD=2.33$, $t(1009) = 3.69$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .287$ to $.940$), compared to those that did not ($M=2.87$, $SD=2.93$, $t(1009) = -3.49$, $p = .001$, $95\% CI = -1.30$ to $-.364$). No statistically significant difference was found in aggressive behavior scores. Multiple linear regression was performed using continuous father involvement to determine which has the largest relationship to rule-breaking behavior and cognitive development based on CBCL scores. Rule-breaking behavior was found to be significant ($F(2, 1008) = 8.353$, $p < .001$), with an R^2 of $.016$. Cognitive development was also significant ($F(2, 1008) = 4.44$, $p = .012$), with an R^2 of $.009$. Early continuous father involvement was a significant predictor of rule-breaking behavior and cognitive development at middle childhood. Findings suggest early continuous father involvement during the first 14 - 36 months of their children's life, may lead to lower levels of rule-breaking behaviors and thought problems at 5th grade.

Keywords : cognitive development, early continuous father involvement, middle childhood, rule-breaking behavior

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