

“Coparenting and Nonresident Fathers’ Monetary Contributions to their Children”

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, the percentage of children who live apart from their biological father has increased substantially in the United States. In 1970, approximately 11% of children under 18 years old lived with only their mother while their father lived elsewhere. By 2011, this percentage had more than doubled to 24% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This is of concern, since children have been shown to fare better on a host of outcomes when they live with both of their biological parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Yet, even when living apart, fathers have the potential to greatly enrich their child’s life.

One key way in which fathers contribute to children is via monetary provision. Federal and state governments strive to ensure that nonresident fathers provide for their child financially via the formal child support system, which collects money from noncustodial parents and reallocates it to custodial parents for the purpose of supporting their common child. Some nonresident fathers also choose to contribute to their child informally by providing money directly to the child’s mother. Unfortunately, despite government mandates and social norms, many nonresident fathers do not provide for their child at all (Grall, 2011). The prevalence of nonpayment is troubling given that nonresident fathers’ financial provisions have been shown to decrease child poverty (Bartfeld, 2000) and improve children’s physical, social, and academic development (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). In light of this evidence, there is a growing need to identify and promote the factors associated with fathers’ monetary contributions to their children. In the present paper, I examine how parents’ level of agreement and cooperation in raising their common child—a feature of the parental relationship known as coparenting (McHale, 1995)—is related to fathers’ formal and informal child support payments.

Background

There are a number of reasons why coparenting may be related to fathers’ financial contributions. First, scholars have argued that fatherhood can be thought of as a “package deal,” in which men’s identity as a father and involvement with their child depends upon their relationship with their child’s mother (Townsend, 2002). Although the package deal concept has mostly been used to explain men’s diminished involvement with their child following the dissolution of their romantic relationship with the child’s mother, it may also account for variation in involvement among nonresident fathers. Being able to interact positively with their child’s mother after their romantic relationship has ended may be important for helping men continue to recognize themselves as a father and maintain a relationship with their child (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). A second reason why coparenting may influence nonresident fathers’ financial contributions stems from research suggesting that nonresident fathers’ access to their child depends upon mothers’ approval, a concept known as “maternal gatekeeping” (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). If fathers who have a conflicted relationship with the mother of their child are less likely to see their child, this might also make them less likely to contribute to their child financially.

It is also possible that the association between coparenting and fathers’ monetary contributions differs depending on the type of payments under consideration. Formal child support payments are typically deducted directly from fathers’ wages. These automated payments require little action from fathers and practically no communication between parents. Informal payments, on the other hand, require fathers to be willing and motivated to support their child and to have at least

some contact with their child's mother. Consequently, it is reasonable to suspect that coparenting is a stronger predictor of fathers' informal payments than formal payments, given the greater role of fathers' willingness to pay and contact with the child's mother in the former than the latter (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010). Nevertheless, given the degree of variability that exists in fathers' payments even within the formal child support system, the strength of their coparental relationship with their child's mother may play a key role in motivating men to comply with their child support orders.

Although the discussion thus far has presumed that the quality of the coparental relationship influences men's decisions to contribute to their child, it could also be the case that the amount of money nonresident fathers provide influences the quality of their relationship with their child's mother. In other words, the direction of this association could flow the other way, or both of these processes could affect each other in a sort of feedback loop. Understanding the direction of this association is important for developing social programs and policies aimed at increasing the likelihood that fathers provide for their children.

A large body of empirical research has examined the association between the quality of parents' coparental relationship and nonresident fathers' contact or engagement with their child. This literature has uncovered abundant evidence that a better relationship is associated with increased father involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Furthermore, much of this work has been methodologically rigorous, using statistical models to address the causal nature of this association and direction of the effects. In general, the results from these studies support the hypothesis that coparenting affects fathers' involvement, rather than vice versa (Carlson et al., 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). In contrast, only a handful of studies have looked at the association between coparenting and nonresident fathers' monetary contributions to their child, relying on data from qualitative interviews with low-income parents (Edin, 1995), or data on aggregate-level trends in unmarried parents' frequency of contact and child support outcomes (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2007). While findings from these studies suggest that coparenting is positively related to nonresident fathers' financial contributions, much more work on this topic is needed. In the present study, I use longitudinal data from a large sample of parents to control for other observed and unobserved factors that might be driving the association between coparenting and fathers' payments, as well as to examine the direction of this association.

Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations presented above, I test the following three hypotheses:

- 1) The quality of parents' coparental relationship is positively associated with fathers' formal and informal child support payments (both the likelihood of any payments and the amount of these payments).
- 2) The strength of this association is greater for informal than formal child support.
- 3) The direction of this association flows primarily from coparenting to fathers' payments rather than from fathers' payments to coparenting.

Data and Methods

I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of 4,897 births (1,187 married and 3,710 unmarried) that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities. The weighted sample is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of the focal

child's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted when the child was one, three, five, and nine years old. Response rates for mothers were 89% at one year, 86% at three years, 85% at five years, and 72% at nine years. Response rates for fathers were 78% at baseline, 69% at one year, 67% at three years, 64% at five years, and 54% at nine years. My analytic sample consists of approximately 1,500 families in which the father lived apart from the mother and child at two or more follow-up waves.

The dependent variables I examine are fathers' formal child support payments and their informal cash contributions. For both of these variables, I consider whether fathers provided any support and the amount of their payments. These measures are based on mothers' reports because nonresident fathers were unfortunately not asked about their financial contributions to their child at the three-year or five-year surveys. Although not having fathers' reports at these waves is a limitation, previous research suggests that mothers may be more accurate reporters of fathers' child support payments than fathers themselves (Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Klawitter, 1989).

My independent variable of interest is the quality of parents' coparental relationship. Starting at one year, mothers and fathers were asked to respond to 6 items about their ability to cooperate in raising their child, (e.g., "you can trust [partner] to take good care of [child]", or "[partner] supports the way you want to raise [child]"). The results discussed below are based on the mean of mothers' responses to these items. In future iterations of this paper, I intend to re-run my analyses using fathers' responses in order to see how this decision influences my findings.

My analytic strategy proceeds in three steps. First, I run standard regression models using pooled data from all four follow-up waves to determine whether an association exists between fathers' monetary contributions and the quality of parents' coparental relationship. To reduce bias in these estimates, I control for a number of time-constant and time-varying factors that could be driving this association. Second, I estimate fixed-effects models in order to better assess whether the association between fathers' financial contributions and coparenting might be causal. Unlike standard regression models, fixed-effects models control for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of individuals and families, and therefore provide a more conservative estimate of this association. Finally, I run cross-lagged structural equation models to examine the direction of the association between these factors. This type of model simultaneously estimates the magnitude of the association between coparenting at an earlier wave and child support at a later wave, and between child support at an earlier wave and coparenting at a later wave, to provide information about the causal ordering of these effects.

Results

The results from both standard regression and fixed effects models indicate that there is a positive association between the quality of parents' coparental relationship and fathers' formal and informal child support payments. In the fixed effects models, a one standard deviation increase in coparenting is associated with around a \$47.00 per month increase in fathers' provision of formal support and a \$65.00 per month increase in fathers' provision of informal support. The fact that this association is stronger for the outcome of informal support than formal support is not surprising given the greater degree of discretion fathers have in deciding whether to make payments outside the formal system. Finally, preliminary results from cross-lagged structural equation models suggest that coparenting may be a stronger predictor of fathers' payments than vice versa.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The present study offers evidence that parents' ability to interact with each other in a positive and cooperative manner following the dissolution of their romantic relationship is related to the likelihood and amount of fathers' monetary contributions to their children. This finding

suggests that a possible strategy for encouraging nonresident fathers to be economic providers is to improve their relationship with the child's mother. By teaching couples how to resolve conflicts and work together to achieve what is best for their child, it may be possible to prevent fathers from disengaging from their child after their relationship with the mother comes to an end.

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