The Role of the Father in Child Development

The Effects of Increased Paternal Involvement

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For a variety of sociopolitical, economic, scientific, and clinical reasons, considerable interest in the study of father–child relationships has emerged in the last decade. In the last few years, the focus has narrowed to concern about the effects of increased paternal involvement. Interest in, and concern about, the latter seems to be especially prominent among social service providers and clinicians. For this reason, and also because the voluminous literature on paternal influences has been scrutinized quite extensively, we will focus in this chapter on evidence concerning the effects of increased involvement. Much less will be said, mostly in summary fashion, about paternal influences more generally, although readers will be referred to recent reviews for further discussions of the literature.

Contrary to those who have argued for or against increased paternal involvement on the grounds that it will have generally positive or negative effects on children, mothers, and/or fathers, we believe there is little evidence and no coherent reason to expect that increased paternal involvement in itself has any clear-cut or direct effects. Our argument is that increased paternal involvement must be viewed and can only be understood in the context of the family, circumstances, values, and reasons for the increased involvement. To be sure, paternal involvement and the attitudes and values associated with it can have positive conse-
quences when it is in accord with the desires of both parents. However, consequences are likely to be mixed when either or both parents view the changed paternal role as an unfortunate temporary circumstance that flies in the face of their values and better judgment. Because of this, we think it is misguided to see increased paternal involvement as a universally desirable goal. Rather, we believe that attempts should be made to increase the options available to fathers so that those who want to be can become more involved in their children’s lives. Families tend to do best when they are able to organize their lives and responsibilities in accordance with their own values and preferences, rather than in accord with a rigid, socially determined pattern. As a result, we disagree with those who extoll the advantages and benefits of increased paternal involvement. Although there is evidence that fathers do have significant effects, both positive and negative, on their children’s development, none of the evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that increased paternal involvement necessarily has beneficial consequences for children, fathers, or mothers. Instead, it seems that paternal involvement can have such consequences when it is the arrangement of choice for the family concerned. The goal of this chapter is to review the evidence supporting this conclusion.

There are, we believe, three sorts of arguments that can be used to argue for the introduction of increased options for mothers and fathers. The first and most common is to focus on the effects of increased paternal involvement on at least some mothers, fathers, and children. The review of such arguments and studies occupies most of this chapter. Second, there are considerations of equity, which essentially hold that it is unfair for mothers to be expected to fill the roles of parent, homemaker, and breadwinner, while fathers, focused nearly exclusively on breadwinning, have a markedly less onerous total workload. Third, there are arguments that stress the beneficial effects of choice—the notion that families that are free to make their own decisions about paternal involvement are as a result characterized by more harmonious relationships between contented parents who thus have positive effects on their children’s development.

Unfortunately, there was little written about the effects of increased paternal participation on children until recently, and thus much of the chapter is concerned with the effects that traditionally uninvolved fathers have on their children. Most of these studies, like most studies concerned with increased paternal involvement, have considered effects on sex-stereotyped attitudes and interests, intellectual development and school performance, moral development, and general psychosocial adjustment. In addition, although these topics have received much less attention from researchers and theorists, we deal with equally important issues concerning the effects of increased paternal participation on the