Fathers’ Expectations and Aspirations for Their Children

Margaret Jean Intons-Peterson
Indiana University

Do contemporary fathers have the same kinds of goals, beliefs, aspirations, and expectations about their children that fathers had 30 years ago? To answer this question, we interviewed 102 White fathers of 133 daughters and 126 sons about the topics probed by Aberle and Naegele (1952). We also asked about how the fathers expressed approval and disapproval of their children’s behaviors, about their techniques for encouraging their children to develop the traits the fathers considered desirable, and about the sources of sex education for children. In general, our contemporary fathers mimicked some of the expectations of the earlier group and differed in others. Like the earlier group, some expectations were gender stereotypic. These expectations presumably function to restrict or limit the socialization of their children. More striking were the differences in the two sets of responses. In contrast to the statements from Aberle and Naegele’s fathers, our fathers expressed many similar expectations for their daughters and sons. The educational and occupational levels of the fathers and the family composition qualified only a few of the above results.

In 1952 Aberle and Naegele reported that 20 middle-class, largely professional fathers had pronounced gender-stereotypic expectations, aspirations, worries, etc. for their children. Many societal changes have occurred since this oft-quoted study was published, and it now is...
appropriate to ask if contemporary fathers hold similar views. The central purpose of the current research is to ascertain whether, 30 years later, fathers still describe their daughters as nice, sweet, pretty, and affectionate and their sons as emotionally stable, responsible, athletic, or having initiative. Do contemporary fathers still expect their sons to have successful careers and their daughters to marry? Aberle and Naegele’s fathers were concerned about passivity, childishness, excessive tearfulness, and inadequate athletic ability in their sons; they expressed less concern about these behaviors in their daughters. Would our fathers have similar concerns?

This question is important because we assume these attitudes are likely to influence parent-child interactions (e.g., Lynn, 1975). Other, more recent research has supported some of Aberle and Naegele’s findings (see Lamb’s review, 1976; Baumrind, 1982; Spence, 1982). For example, in response to a question about future aspirations for their children, Hoffman (1977) reported that 21% of the fathers mentioned career or occupational success for sons, while 14% responded this way for daughters. As a group, however, these surveys considered a more limited range of questions than the Aberle-Naegele research, and typically did not use interviews to probe vague answers to questions. We might expect substantial changes in contemporary paternal attitudes, for the 30-year intervals has witnessed a widespread trend toward equality of the sexes. Such a general societal trend is not necessarily reflected in the very personal spheres of parental attitudes toward their children. One purpose of the current work, then, is to contrast contemporary paternal attitudes with those expressed by the 1952 sample.

Our second purpose is to extend the previous study in four ways. First, Aberle and Naegele did not report statistics, so it is difficult to assess the statistical significance of the differences they found. Second, they apparently included descriptions of children less than 1 year of age in their data. Such descriptions and the associated paternal aspirations are based on minimal information about the child’s abilities and probably contribute excessive variability to the data. Third, the Aberle and Naegele work, and that of most other research, has focused on middle-class, often professional fathers. We sampled a broader range of educational and occupational backgrounds.

This latter extension is important, for working-class fathers have been reported to be quite punitive toward their daughters (Dropleman & Schaefer, 1963), while middle-class fathers are more supportive and overtly affectionate with daughters than with sons (Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Freeberg & Payne, 1967; Lamb, 1976). It is possible, therefore, that fathers from different socioeconomic groups may have different perceptions and expectations for their children. Moreover, in part because documentation