

Predictors of Low-Income Fathers' Caregiving, Play, and Verbal Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

As parenting literature has steadily expanded and evolved in the 21st century, scholars have enhanced their efforts to explore predictors, patterns, and outcomes of fathering behaviors (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Paternal engagement refers to the "direct interaction between a father and child" (Bronte et al., 2008, p. 1213) and extant examinations have explored three key dimensions of paternal engagement: verbal engagement, physical play, and caregiving (Cabrera et al., 2011). Importantly, a growing body of research demonstrates that paternal engagement has positive implications for children, fathers, and families (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020). Specifically, paternal engagement may be particularly important during infancy, as early engagement is linked to infants' present and future development (Cabrera et al., 2017). Moreover, research suggests that paternal engagement may weaken associations between economic disadvantage and negative child outcomes (Lee & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study utilizes Belsky's (1984) Process Model of Parenting. Belsky posits that parenting is not singularly influenced, but instead is a complex, multideterminant process. Applying the framework to early fathering, Belsky's Process Model of Parenting suggests that contributions from the child, the father, and the broader social context may influence low-income fathers' engagement in verbal engagement, physical play, and caregiving behaviors with their infants.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Do child characteristics (infant age, general health, and premature birth), father demographic characteristics (father age, education, and work hours), father psychological characteristics (financial stress and depressive symptoms), and the broader social context (coparenting alliance quality, relationship type, and social support) predict low-income fathers' reports of verbal engagement, physical play, and caregiving behaviors with infants?

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics & Correlations with Engagement Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Verbal	2.87	.69	-		
2. Caregiving	3.37	.61	.56***	-	
3. Physical Play	3.41	.74	.47***	.65***	-
4. Infant Age	86.17	75.14	.22**	.09	.28***
5. Premature Birth	-	-	-.08	-.11	-.22**
6. Infant Health	4.85	.47	.06	.12	.11
7. Father Age	27.21	7.59	-.04	-.11	-.97
8. Education Level	-	-	.15*	.06	.07
9. Work Hours	30.50	22.98	-.06	-.01	.08
10. Depression	1.24	.40	-.01	-.03	.05
11. Financial Stress	1.65	.62	-.10	-.05	-.03
13. Non-Residential	.15	.36	-.14	-.20***	-.23**
14. Cohabiting	.48	.50	-.07	.01	.01
12. Social Support	3.48	.61	.08	.09	.08
15. Coparenting	3.86	.23	.18*	.28***	.24***

SAMPLE

Our sample was drawn from a larger, federally-funded home visiting program. Eligibility screening yielded a final sample of 183 fathers. Participants were predominately white (63%) and were on average 27 years old (range = 16–54; SD = 7.59), married or cohabitating with their infant's mother (84%), employed (70%), and had at least a High School diploma or GED (78%).

Table 2

Simultaneous Regression Analyses for Types of Father Engagement

Variables	Verbal		Play		Caregiving	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Child Characteristics						
General Health	.090	.436	.156	.168	.148	.140
Premature Birth	.018	.891	-.252	.054	-.068	.558
Infant age	.002	.029*	.002	.007**	.000	.876
Father Demographics Characteristics						
Education Level	.101	.087	.039	.492	.032	.528
Father Age	-.005	.545	-.013	.098	-.007	.280
Work Hours	-.006	.029*	.001	.671	-.001	.546
Father Psychological Characteristics						
Depression	.289	.063	.389	.010**	.244	.068
Financial Stress	-.100	.308	-.003	.975	.037	.659
Broader Social Context						
Non-Residential	-.357	.054	-.156	.383	-.236	.137
Cohabiting	-.174	.171	-.038	.757	-.053	.624
Social Support	.079	.468	.055	.603	.020	.835
Coparenting Alliance	.452	.104	1.036	.001***	.824	.001***

METHODS

Participants in the study completed a 45-minute baseline phone survey prior to intervention. We performed hierarchical linear regressions to explore the determinants of father engagement in each of the three engagement forms (i.e., verbal engagement, physical play, and caregiving).

RESULTS

Results demonstrated that fathers were more likely to (a) verbally engage with older infants when they worked less hours, (b) participate in caregiving activities when they perceived the coparenting relationship more positively, and (c) engage in physical play when their infants were older, they perceived the coparenting relationship more positively, and they reported more depressive symptoms.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings support the use and application of Belsky's (1984) Process Model of Parenting for fathers of infants. Further, our findings may suggest that though some demographic variables are linked with engagement (e.g., the bivariate correlation between father education and father verbal engagement), they are not significant in a model that considers the multiple layers of social ecology influencing the father–infant relationship. This may have important implications for future research and theory, as well as policy and practice.

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OBJECTIVES

- (1) Identify contextual determinants of low-income fathers' engagement in caregiving, physical play, and verbal stimulation with infants.
- (2) Explore the relationship among determinants utilizing Belsky's (1984) Process Model of Parenting.
- (3) Inform future theory and research, as well as policy and practice as they relate to supporting and encouraging early father–infant engagement.

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