

Nonresident Fathers Can Make a Difference in Children's School Performance

Because of the high rates of non-marital childbearing, separation, and divorce in the United States, as many as half of U.S. children will spend part of their childhood living apart from at least one of their parents, usually their fathers (Zill, 1996; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991). Research on the salience of nonresident fathers to children's lives consistently finds that their payment of child support is important to children's well-being. Such research, however, is more mixed about the benefits of their continued contact and involvement for children (Kelly, 1993; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991).

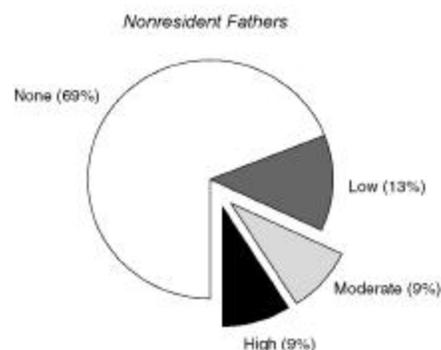
This issue brief looks at the involvement of nonresident fathers in one important area of children's lives—their schools. Using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES:96), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), it examines the extent to which nonresident fathers are involved in their kindergartners' through 12th graders' schools and whether their involvement is linked to children's school performance.

The NHES:96 asked about four types of school activities that parents could participate in during the school year: attending a general school meeting, attending a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attending a school or class event, and serving as a volunteer at the school. Resident parents reported on whether nonresident parents who had had contact with their children in the past year had participated in these activities. Nonresident fathers are said to have no involvement in their children's schools if they have participated in none of the activities during the current school year. They are said to have low involvement if they have participated in only one of the four activities. They are categorized as having moderate involvement if they have done two of the activities. Those who have participated in three or four of the activities are said to be highly involved in their children's schools.¹

Most nonresident fathers are not very involved in their children's schools.

Sixty-nine percent of children in kindergarten through 12th grade who have seen their nonresident fathers in the past year have fathers who participated in none of the four school activities (figure 1). An additional 13 percent of children have nonresident fathers who participated in only one activity. However, eighteen percent of children have nonresident fathers who participated in at least two of the school activities and 9 percent have nonresident fathers who participated in three or four of the activities.

Figure 1. Level of involvement¹ in school of nonresident fathers who have seen their children within the last year²: Students in grades K-12, 1996



¹ Low involvement is participation in one activity; moderate involvement is participation in two activities; and high involvement is participation in three or four activities.

² Questions on nonresident parents' involvement were only asked if children had seen their nonresident fathers in the last year. According to the reports of custodial parents, 75 percent of nonresident fathers had had contact with their children in the last year.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey.

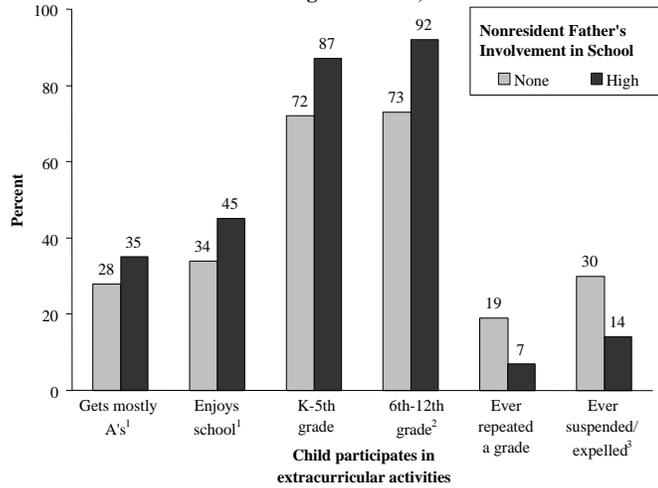
Children are less likely to have ever repeated a grade or been suspended or expelled if their nonresident fathers are involved in their schools.

Children in kindergarten through 12th grade are about one-third as likely to have ever repeated a grade if their nonresident fathers are highly involved in their schools (7 percent) than if their nonresident fathers are not involved in their schools (19 percent) (figure 2). Similarly, 6th through 12th graders are half as likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their nonresident fathers are highly involved in their schools (14 percent) than if their nonresident fathers are not involved (30 percent). Even after controlling for such

¹ Not all schools offer parents the opportunity to be involved in each of these activities. Low involvement can result because parents do not take advantage of available opportunities for involvement or because schools do not offer them opportunities for involvement.

factors as the child's race-ethnicity and sex, the resident mother/guardian's education, household income, family type (stepparent, mother only, or neither parent in household), and whether the nonresident father paid any child support, children are less likely to have ever repeated a grade or been suspended or expelled if their nonresident fathers are involved in their schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Figure 2.—Student outcomes, by nonresident fathers' involvement in school: students in grades K-12, 1996



¹Children in 1st through 12th grade.

²Youth report.

³Children in 6th through 12th grade.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey.

Children are more likely to get A's in school, to enjoy school, and to participate in extracurricular activities if their nonresident fathers are involved in their schools.

Roughly a third of students get mostly A's if their fathers are highly involved in their schools (35 percent) compared to just over one-quarter if their nonresident fathers are not involved (28 percent) (figure 2). Children also enjoy school more and are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities if their nonresident fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to if they are not involved.

Forty-five percent of children whose nonresident fathers are highly involved in their schools are said to enjoy school compared to 34 percent whose nonresident fathers are involved. Similarly, 87 percent of kindergarten through 5th graders and 92 percent of 6th through 12th graders whose nonresident fathers are involved in their schools participate in extracurricular activities compared to 72 percent of kindergarten through 5th graders and 73 percent of 6th through 12th graders whose nonresident fathers are not involved in their schools. Even after controlling for the child's race-ethnicity and sex, the resident mother/guardian's education, household income, family type, and whether the nonresident father paid any child support, children are more likely to get mostly A's, to enjoy school, and to participate in extracurricular activities if their nonresident fathers are involved in their schools than if they are not (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Discussion

Nonresident fathers' participation in school activities makes a difference in their children's school performance. Inconsistencies about the benefits of nonresident fathers' continued involvement with their children in extant studies may be due in large part to the fact that contact is often used to measure involvement. These results show that it is not contact, per se, that is associated with improved student outcomes, but rather active participation in children's lives through involvement in their schools that makes a difference. The majority of nonresident fathers, however, are not involved in their children's schools.

References and Related Publications

Furstenberg, F.F. and Cherlin, A. (1991). *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Furstenberg, F.F., Nord, C.W., Peterson, J.L., and Zill, N. (1983). The Life Course of Children of Divorce. *American Sociological Review*, 48(5): 656-668.

Kelly, J.B. (1993). Current Research on Children's Postdivorce Adjustment: No Simple Answers. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review* 31(1): 29-49.

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Zill, N. (1996). Family Change and Student Achievement: What We Have Learned, What It Means for Schools. In A. Booth and J.F. Dunn, eds. *Family-School Links: How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 139-174.

Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences discussed are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For additional details on NHES:96 data collection methods and definitions, see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1997.) *National Household Education Survey of 1996: Data File User's Manual*, Vol. 1, NCES 97-425, by Mary A. Collins et al. Washington, DC.

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Christine Winqvist Nord of Westat. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the National Household Education Survey, contact Jerry West (202) 219-1574. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616. NCES publications are available on the Internet at <http://nces.ed.gov>.