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## **Fathers, Physical Child Abuse, and Neglect: Advancing the Knowledge Base**

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# Fathers, Physical Child Abuse, and Neglect

## Advancing the Knowledge Base

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Fathers are overrepresented as perpetrators of physical child maltreatment, particularly in its most severe forms. Despite this, the research literature continues to lack specificity regarding the role fathers play in risk for physical child abuse or neglect (PCAN). Furthermore, although fathers have received more attention with respect to child sexual abuse and its treatment, their influence has been largely disregarded in many intervention efforts to reduce PCAN. Inadequate attention to the role of fathers, both in research and practice, has numerous problematic implications for the prevention of child maltreatment. The goal of this special issue is to disseminate new research that examines fathers' roles by focusing on multiple fathering factors that may directly and indirectly shape both maternal and paternal risk of engaging in PCAN. In the introduction to the special issue, we highlight key questions in the research literature and present our perspective on how the articles included in this special issue address some of these gaps.

**Keywords:** *fathers; physical abuse; child welfare services/child protection; intervention research*

Inadequate attention to the role of fathers, both in research and in practice, has numerous problematic implications for the prevention of child maltreatment (Dubowitz, 2006; Guterman & Lee, 2005; Strega et al., 2008). First, without an empirically grounded understanding of fathers and fathering, it is difficult to determine the protective or risk heightening factors contributed by fathers and how these factors interact with other family characteristics to shape maltreatment risk. American families are diverse and can be defined by a variety of biological, household, and legal relationships that change over time. This diversity among families in the roles fathers play requires a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the many manifestations of "father involvement" in families. For this reason, we use the term "father" to denote biological fathers as well as men who play a significant parenting role in the family. Second, very little is known about how to successfully engage fathers in existing services such as case management, parent training, and other interventions addressing physical child maltreatment. The lack of empirical evidence on which to base the design and testing of intervention strategies that target fathers hampers effective prevention and intervention with PCAN.

The goal of this special issue is to disseminate new research that examines fathers' roles by focusing on multiple fathering factors that may directly and indirectly shape both maternal and paternal risk of engaging in PCAN. Although prior research has often indirectly considered fathers or relied on mothers and other caretakers to report data about fathers, studies in this special issue represent significant advances to the knowledge base in that they use (a) father self-reported data (Lam, Fals-Stewart, & Kelley, 2009, this issue; Salisbury Henning, & Holdford, 2009, this issue); large-scale data sets that better account for family diversity in (b) the context of child welfare services (Bellamy, 2009, this issue); and (c) urban settings (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009, this issue; Guterman, Lee, Lee, Waldfogel, & Rathouz, 2009, this issue). Because fathers have also been substantially disregarded in the empirical base on prevention and intervention for PCAN, we also present one study that examines fathers' participation and

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outcomes in intervention as a primary focus, rather than secondary to the maternal role (Lam et al., 2009, this issue).

Below we highlight some key questions in the research literature, and present our perspective on how the articles included in this special issue address some of these gaps.

### Father Involvement

Father absence from the home and single motherhood has been widely identified as factors that increase risk of PCAN (Berger, 2004; Guterman & Lee, 2005). However, the presumed risk attendant to father absence is more complex than indicated, particularly when factors such as the quality of parenting or nonresidential father involvement in parenting are not quantified. Recent studies indicate considerable father involvement, even in single mother homes. For example, in a national study of new births, 76% of unmarried, biological fathers saw their 1-year-old child at least once in the past 30 days; nearly 80% paid some child support, and 75% had at least one overnight visit since the child's birth (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). This information is important to consider precisely because, as noted earlier, fathers are overrepresented as perpetrators of physical child abuse. Additionally, despite the high prevalence of single-mother headed households involved in the child welfare system, 72–88% of children at risk of maltreatment or reported to child welfare services have an adult male who plays a fathering role in their lives (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000; Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). Using nationally representative data, Bellamy (2009, this issue) finds that the majority of child welfare-involved families have male relative involvement, providing more empirical evidence that challenges the notion that fathers are absent in these families.

Comprehensively capturing the nature of father involvement is difficult, particularly in families where multiple, one, or no men may take on a fathering role; the articles included in this special issue tackle this challenge from a variety of angles. In contrast to prevailing views, Guterman and colleagues (2009, this issue) find in a multivariate study of biological fathers that marriage per se does not appear to serve as a protective factor. Rather, fathers' educational attainment and positive involvement with the child were most notably associated with lower risk for maternal physical child abuse. Berger and colleagues (2009, this issue) use the same data set to examine how a wider array of relationship

configurations relates to child protective services (CPS) involvement. They find that mothers living with a non-biologically related male and mothers who were not romantically involved were significantly more likely to self-report being contacted by CPS than families in which the mother was living with the biological father of all resident children. By using different subsamples to focus on a range of relationship arrangements, these two studies highlight the complexity of father involvement in diverse, urban families.

These studies suggest that progress in this area of research requires more careful conceptualization and measurement of factors such as the quality of paternal involvement, the relationship status of the father and mother, and the biological relatedness of the father and child, beyond simply noting the fathers' absence from the home. In addition, it cannot be assumed that men who are willing to take on a fathering role are completely absent in single-parent households. With this information, we can begin to build better theoretical models that pinpoint the pathways that directly link fathers' parenting behaviors to PCAN, and examine indirect factors based on his interactions with mothers, caregivers, or other important family members. Through this, we can begin to assess whether certain pathways to maltreatment may be modified by biological relatedness to the child and parental marital status.

### Fathering Maltreatment Pathways

*Demographic characteristics.* Prior theorizing and research tends to emphasize several key demographic characteristics of fathers that are linked to PCAN, including early entry into parenthood, household economic hardship, poverty, and unemployment. Young parental age often has been linked to increased risk of PCAN (Guterman et al., 2009, this issue; Guterman & Lee, 2005; Huang & Lee, 2008; Lee, Guterman, & Lee, 2008). The evidence with regard to the influence of household economic hardship and unemployment is less consistent. Relatively few studies to date have isolated the direct influence of paternal economic contributions and employment status. Recent studies using a large-scale community sample of biological, residential fathers do not appear to indicate a significant direct influence of paternal income or employment on risk of PCAN (Guterman et al., 2009, this issue; Lee et al., 2008; Lee, Kim, & Taylor, 2009). However, other studies find that indicators of economic hardship and poverty are related to risk of child neglect, in an economically disadvantaged sample (Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, &

Bolger, 2004), or physical abuse, but only in single-parent families (Berger, 2005). One study links unemployment to CPS recidivism among families in which the father is the perpetrator of physical abuse (Coohey, 2006). One potential explanation may be that economic conditions play a larger role when examining indicated or at-risk samples in comparison to diverse, community samples.

*Fathers and substance abuse.* Another consistent finding is the relationship between risk of PCAN and parental substance abuse, as reviewed in Guterman and Lee (2005) and discussed elsewhere (Dube et al., 2001). Yet, very few studies to date seek to intervene directly with fathers' parenting behaviors and alcohol use. Lam et al. (2009, this issue) present early evidence that treatment of fathers with alcohol use disorders, particularly treatment that includes a parent skills training component, may decrease likelihood of parental involvement in CPS. The importance of this study is underscored by the empirical evidence documenting the association between substance use/abuse and PCAN, as well as evidence from substance use treatment programs indicating a high rate of unmet family-related services needs (Perron, Ilgen, Hasche, & Howard, 2008) and the need for greater inclusion of fathers in parenting services.

*Mother and father interactions.* Fathers may also indirectly influence risk of child maltreatment via their influence on mothers and vice versa. Guterman and colleagues (2009, this issue) find that paternal involvement in daily child-caregiving activities is one fathering protective mechanism that may influence maternal risk of physical child abuse. Another potential influence on child maltreatment risk is the incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV and PCAN co-occur at high rates, with a median estimate of approximately 40% (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999). Less supportive relationships with a high frequency of conflict and little perceived parental support may be one factor that increases the risk of PCAN. Salisbury and colleagues (2009, this issue) present a research that indicates that IPV perpetrators involved with the criminal justice system seem to be unaware of the effects of IPV on children. The study of Salisbury et al. suggests that men with greater commitment to the partnering and parenting role may be more amenable to change.

## Prevention and Intervention Services for Fathers

Much of the literature describing child and family services and fathers generally, as well as child maltreatment

prevention and intervention efforts, describes the exclusion of fathers and the challenges of engaging them in child and family interventions (Scott & Crooks, 2006). Fathers have been so often excluded from services as to be characterized by some authors as "invisible," "ghosts," or an "afterthought" in child welfare services (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2008; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). Studies of fathers and child welfare have generally revealed that fathers are not often included in even the most basic services, such as in investigations and case planning, particularly when fathers do not share the same household as the primary caregiver (e.g., Billing, Malm, & Sonenstein, 2002; O'Donnell, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 2005; O'Hagan, 1997; Strega et al., 2008). For example, O'Donnell and colleagues (2005) found that child welfare caseworkers recognized that fathers were marginalized in the child welfare system but there was little agreement as to the reasons for this neglect, whether it was a problem that should be addressed or if so what to do about it. Strega and colleagues (2008) similarly found that in the majority of cases fathers were largely considered irrelevant to the CPS investigation and were not often contacted directly by the child welfare caseworker. This work and the implications drawn from Bellamy's article in this issue suggest that studies aimed at improving the strategies used by child welfare caseworkers to identify, assess, and engage fathers are needed.

This neglect of fathers in prevention and intervention efforts is by no means unique to child welfare services (e.g., Duggan et al., 1999). Other authors have long described fathers' exclusion from a variety of child and family prevention services, such as head start or early home visitation services and have hypothesized a variety of reasons for this pattern that range from cultural expectations around fathering and the fathers' role in the family to workers' fear or uncertainty about how to engage men in services (O'Donnell et al., 2005; O'Hagan, 1997). Lam et al. (2009, this issue) make an important contribution to the area by examining the impact of an intervention specifically designed to target fathers. A recent meta-analysis suggests that the inclusion of fathers in parent training results in more positive changes in parenting practices as well as in children's behavior (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). However, because fathers' participation in parent training was observed rather than manipulated, an alternative possibility is that participation in parenting programs may be a proxy for generally high positive father engagement and positive father engagement rather than participation in the

parenting training per se is responsible for better parenting practices and children's behavior.

### Future Directions for Advancing the Knowledge Base on Fathers and Child Maltreatment

The articles included in this special issue begin to address some important questions that are essential to lay a foundation for research to better understand and address fathers' role in PCAN. We believe that this issue represents advances in the conceptualization of father involvement, including measures that move beyond simple categorization of father presence and absence as well as the inclusion of nonresidential and nonbiological fathers. However, more work is needed to advance the methodology in this area, including the quantification of the variety of fathers' formal (e.g., child support payment) and informal (caregiving, interactions with and concrete supports directly to mothers) contributions to families (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Likewise, a number of other important issues that have not been directly examined in this issue remain to be addressed and provide possible avenues of exploration for future research in this area:

First, this body of studies does not speak to how fathers' culture, race, and ethnicity may relate to PCAN. Prior research has identified important differences in the fathering behaviors of diverse racial and ethnic groups and has linked these differences to economic, neighborhood, and cultural differences (e.g., Hofferth, 2003). However, more research is needed to clarify and specify the relationships between fathering behaviors, race and ethnicity, and the risk and protective factors specific to PCAN.

Second, most existing research on fathers and PCAN, including the articles in this special issue, emphasizes risk rather than protective factors. Although it is important to examine the risks that fathers may contribute to families, fathers can also serve in a protective and positive role. A failure to identify resources and supports that might be provided to families by fathers is a missed opportunity to build on family strengths, just as the failure to assess and address risks posed by fathers is a missed opportunity to intervene and prevent negative outcomes.

Third, none of the studies in this special issue focus specifically on child neglect. Although neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, research that specifically examines fathers and child neglect are rare. The "neglect of neglect" is not limited to father research but

has been raised as a more general concern in child welfare research for many years (Dubowitz et al., 2000; Dubowitz et al., 2005; McSherry, 2007). The strong relationships between neglect and poverty, and poverty and single mother headed households, underscore the importance of including nonresidential fathers in studies of child neglect.

Finally, more prevention and intervention studies are needed that specifically target fathers. This special issue includes only one intervention study aimed at fathers, and there are few examples of evidence-based programs, services, and strategies specifically designed for fathers to reduce PCAN. For example, more attention on adolescent boys is needed to inform the prevention of adolescent childbearing.

Noting the above-mentioned areas where additional research is needed, this special issue seeks to enhance our understanding of fathers' roles in PCAN. The studies presented here use new data sets and sophisticated methodological approaches to trace fathers' roles in a more full and precise fashion clearly represent advances in the field. However, a great deal of work is needed to more clearly and fully articulate the relationships between fathers, families, and PCAN. It is our hope that the work presented signals an increasing effort to attend to fathers and PCAN and that new methodological and conceptual advances will continue to shape and guide this important body of work.

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