

The Effects of Involved Nonresidential Fathers' Distress, Parenting Behaviors, Inter-Parental Conflict, and the Quality of Father-Child Relationships on Children's Well-Being

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Abstract:

Based on data from the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the present study examined a sample of 129 nonresident fathers who had regular contact with their young children to determine how father involvement and father distress are related to children's well-being. Results revealed a negative relationship between father distress and child well being, with, based on father reports, daughters being more affected than sons. A negative relationship was also found between inter-parent conflict and child well being. Further, there was a positive relationship between paternal warmth and child well-being and higher levels of father-child relationship quality were related to higher levels of child well-being. In terms of racial subgroup analyses, limit setting was a positive predictor of child wellbeing only among African-American children.

Keywords: nonresidential fathers | father involvement | paternal behaviors | father-child relationship quality | fathers' distress.

Abstract:

Due to high rates of divorce and unwed pregnancies, many children are being raised in households without a biological father. Based on their review of the literature on nonresident father involvement, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) suggested that the majority of past research has examined involvement in terms of frequency of contact and financial support. In recent years, an emerging literature has focused on issues of quality, such as the context of parent-child contact, the parenting behaviors of the father, and the nature of the relationship between father and child. In this study, we examined relations among inter-parent conflict, paternal distress, paternal behaviors (warmth, limit setting), father-child relationship quality, and child well-being in a sample of nonresident fathers with regular contact with their children.

Theoretical Perspective

According to identity theory, the meaning and importance that a nonresident father ascribes to certain roles will aid in the formation of his identity. A key premise of identity theory is that the nature of the man's identity regarding his role as a father will partly determine how he behaves toward his children, including the extent to which he exhibits warmth to his children and engages in limit-setting behaviors. Furthermore, the manner in which the father negotiates the change in his identity away from being a husband or partner to the child's mother to being a co-parent with her is likely to affect not only how he parents his children, but also the amount of

conflict that he has with the child's mother. Accordingly, in the model tested in this study, we posited that a man's paternal identity, fathering behaviors, and parenting experiences will influence his own psychological health (i.e., level of psychological distress), the level of conflict that he has with the child's mother, and the quality of his relationship with his children. Finally, our model suggests that all of these factors—fathering behaviors, psychological distress, inter-parent conflict, and father-child relationship quality—affect the child's overall well-being. Thus, by directing us to focus on the father's parenting behaviors and how these are related to his level of distress, the extent of conflict with the child's mother, the quality of his relationship with his child, and ultimately the child's overall well-being, identity theory formed the foundation upon which the models tested in this study were based.

With specific reference to nonresidential fathers, societal and institutional norms can either help clarify or confuse the role that they construct for themselves. With the majority of societal norms and guidelines focused on residential parenting, the role of nonresident father can be quite ambiguous. For a father who is separated or divorced, the transition from being a residential to nonresidential parent can have an especially dramatic effect on his identity (Ihinger-Talman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993). Baum (2004) suggested that the identity of divorced fathers is often tied to the relationship that they had with the mother and children *prior* to the marital breakup. Many of these men remain connected with certain aspects of their past role, but may have difficulty in redefining or building new identities. As a result, Baum indicated that these fathers often experience problems in such areas as continued conflict with the ex-spouse, psychological distress, and eventual disengagement from children.

Role ambiguity is also apparent among never married fathers. While divorced fathers have shared the same household with the child at some point, many never married fathers have not. Never married fathers have few legal rights regarding how the child is raised, and matters of visitation and child support are often arranged through informal agreements. Few norms or guidelines are present for these fathers. Certain social networks may encourage these men to not take responsibility for their child (Andersen, 1993). Thus, the meanings that never married fathers attach to fatherhood may be different from those of previously married fathers. Consequently, in this study, we considered whether or not the nonresident father was never married or divorced.

It is important to note that residency status may not be equally important for all fathers. Especially for cohabiting and lower income men, residency may be quite fluid, suggesting that their identity as a father and their level of involvement may be determined by factors other than only their current place of residence. Nevertheless, because being a nonresident father is at least a rough indicator of having fewer opportunities for maintaining active involvement with one's children, we restricted the sample to this group of men.

Inter-Parent Conflict

The lack of established norms for inter-parent relationships for never married or dissolved unions can create confusion and disillusionment in terms of how nonresident fathers identify with their parenting role. Madden-Derdich and Leonard (2002) found that divorcing parents are often caught in the difficult situation of redefining their roles as father and mother as they simultaneously begin to give up their roles as husband and wife. Fathers who are unable to separate their identities as a husband and father may displace ex-spousal conflict into the parenting realm. Never married fathers are also placed in a precarious situation of being the 'outsider,' thus leaving them with few guidelines. The ambiguity or disillusionment can often result in increased tension and conflict between the former partners.

Cowan, Cowan, and Schulz (1996) and Hetherington (1999) have suggested that inter-parent conflict often creates an environment of strained relationships between parents and children. Recent studies, however, have challenged the inference that there is a direct relation between inter-parent conflict and father-child relationship quality. Based on a subsample of school-age children with nonresident fathers, Dunn, O'Connor, and Bridges (2004) found that the amount of the mother's conflict with the nonresidential father was positively associated with higher levels of conflict between the nonresidential father and child. However, more inter-parent conflict was not related to low levels of positivity in the nonresidential father-child relationship. In a sample of nonresidential fathers, Sobolewski and King (2005) found that cooperative coparenting was positively associated with both responsive fathering and father-child relationship quality. However, conflict over childrearing was not related to either paternal responsiveness or relationship quality. The discrepant findings from these studies may be the result of different aspects of the co-parenting relationship being examined and possibly to differences in the ages of the children in the samples. While inter-parent conflict and cooperative

coparenting are certainly conceptually and empirically related, they are separate aspects of the relationship and might have different relations to fathers' parenting behaviors, the quality of father-child relationships, and children's well-being. To bring some clarity to these mixed results, in the present study, we examined the question of whether inter-parent conflict affects father-child relationship quality above and beyond the influence of father distress and paternal behaviors in a sample of young preadolescent children (i.e., ages 3-12).

Continued conflict between nonresident fathers and resident mothers has consistently been related to numerous cognitive and social adjustment difficulties among children of all ages (See Amato & Keith, 1991, Davies & Cummings, 1994, Hetherington, 1999, for reviews). Children often establish role identification and derive meaning from those whom they are most closely connected, commonly a mother and father. During times of persistent conflict, a child may become confused or disillusioned. Often, even a young child may become triangulated into the parental dispute (Bowen, 1976), and even develop problematic symptoms in an effort to restore balance to the parental system (Jackson, 1968). Many of the child difficulties observed post-divorce were likely to have also occurred before the divorce took place. A context of continued or even higher levels of inter-parent conflict after the divorce, however, has been consistently related to even more problematic child outcomes (Hetherington, 1999; Shaw, Winslow, & Flanagan, 1999). At times, the post-divorce environment is less conflictual than it was before the divorce, and this can have positive benefits for children as time passes (Hetherington, 1999). Accordingly, we hypothesized that higher levels of interparent conflict will be related to lower levels of child well being.

Studies that have focused on potential sex differences in responses to divorce and inter-parent conflict have revealed mixed results. Some studies of preadolescents have revealed that boys are more adversely affected than girls; however, other findings have suggested that girls are more likely to blame themselves for the problems of the parents (Hetherington, 1999). Therefore, we also tested the moderating effect of child sex on the relation between inter-parent conflict and child well-being.

Nonresidential Father Distress

Much of a father's identity is tied to his role as a husband and father. If either or both of these identities are well established and then lost, he may struggle with how to establish modified and distinct identities, while having to maintain contact with the ex-spouse and his children. In addition, men often lack other significant support systems to help them cope with the stress and frustrations that often exist in these situations. Because of this, divorced men with children living elsewhere typically exhibit greater psychological distress (e.g., lower levels of life satisfaction, poorer psychological health) than do married men or divorced men without children (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Hughes, 1989; Umberson & Williams, 1993). These men may then attempt to fill this void or temporarily alleviate their distress by engaging in health compromising behaviors, such as alcohol or drug use (Umberson et al., 1993). In the long run, these activities only serve to create even more distress, thus creating the potential for a downward spiraling effect.

Research has previously linked father distress to various aspects of the father-child relationship. Studies of nonresident fathers have typically focused on adolescent children, and have revealed a limited connection between the father's distress and the relationship quality he has with his children (Eggebeen et al., 2001; Rettig & Leichtentritt, 2001). This could potentially differ, however, for nonresident fathers of younger children. In a community sample of school age children and young adolescents, Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2005) found that the psychological distress of resident fathers was negatively related to several aspects of the fathers' parenting behaviors, including paternal acceptance. Taken together, these findings suggest that high levels of father distress would hinder the formation of a close relationship between nonresident fathers and their young children. Therefore, we hypothesized that high levels of nonresident father distress will be related to lower quality father-child relationships.

Based on a review of studies of the psychological well-being of fathers, Phares (1997) found only 17 studies that addressed the potential negative impact of father distress on child adjustment. In 12 of those studies, a significant inverse association was found. More recently, West and Newman (2003) found that even mild levels of parental distress were positively related to both parental and observer reports of difficult child behaviors in a preschool sample. In addition, Papp et al. (2005) also found a relation between paternal distress and adjustment problems among school age and early adolescent children. Therefore, we hypothesized that high levels of nonresidential father distress will be associated with lower levels of child well being for the sample as a whole.

The sex of the child may be an important influence on the relation between paternal distress and child outcomes. Girls are often reinforced for maintaining a close connection with family, whereas boys receive support for being autonomous and establishing their own identities. Remaining emotionally connected to a father could make girls more vulnerable to the harmful effects of paternal distress (Gore, Aseltine & Colten, 1993). With a sample of mother-father-adolescent triads, Bosco, Renk, Dinger, Epstein, and Phares (2003) found that paternal depression and anxiety were positively correlated with more internalizing behavior problems in daughters. There was no relation between fathers' depression or anxiety and sons' adjustment. It is possible, however, that younger girls may not internalize the father's distress to as great a degree as would older girls. Thus, child sex may not moderate the relationship between father distress and child well-being among younger children. In a recent study of children in kindergarten, Cummings, Keller, and Davies (2005) found no differences between boys and girls in the effects of residential father distress on internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, or peer exclusion. In terms of prosocial behavior, the negative effects of paternal distress were in fact greater for boys than for girls. It is important to note that none of these studies focused primarily on nonresidential fathers. Because little is known specifically about nonresidential fathers and because our sample contained young children (3-12 year olds), we tested whether child sex moderated the relation between nonresident father distress and child well being.

Nonresident Father Involvement and Behavior

Nonresident fathers are often described as having role strain (Seltzer, 1991; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Identity theory suggests that this parental role strain comes from a lack of role preparation, low role clarity, and even a lack of control over decisions made on behalf of the child. Nonresident fathers typically take on the role of recreational companion (e.g., "Disneyland dads;" Stewart, 1999) and are permissive with their children rather than authoritative. Nonresident fathers often fulfill this role because they are confused about how to act during brief visits and do not want conflict with the child (Weiss, 1976). Even though these recreational activities may not be geared toward specific learning experiences, they may nevertheless help the father and child form a close relationship (Sobolewski & King, 2005). Studies of infants have also found that certain father behaviors, such as sensitivity and affection, are positively related to secure infant-father attachments (Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992; Van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). Given the relatively short periods of time that nonresidential fathers are able to spend with their child, it seems likely that behaviors marked by high levels of paternal warmth and support would do more to build a strong father-child bond than would behaviors that focused on monitoring or setting limits for children. In understanding this finding, it is important to distinguish between the constructs of paternal warmth and father-child relationship quality. While measures of these two constructs are often empirically correlated, paternal warmth is an individual-level construct consisting of the extent to which the father engages in nurturing parenting behaviors, whereas father-child relationship quality is a dyadic construct involving the overall functioning of the father-child relationship.

The impact of nonresidential fathers' parenting behaviors on child development has received increased attention in recent years and the findings have been somewhat mixed. In their analysis of 14 studies, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that authoritative nonresidential parenting practices were related to few problematic behaviors among youth. Their classification of authoritative parenting consisted of such practices as listening to children's problems, giving advice, helping with homework, and engaging in projects with the children. There is also evidence that displays of warmth and support from nonresidential fathers are associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, delinquency, and drug use among adolescents (Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Other findings, however, show little or no support for the direct effects of paternal warmth and control on the frequency of problem behaviors among young children (Coley, 1998) and adolescents (Simons, Whitbeck, Bea-man, & Conger, 1994). In some cases, father monitoring and limit setting have been related to higher levels of externalized and internalized behavioral difficulties among adolescents (Stewart, 2003). Some would argue that the controlling behaviors of the father cause the youth to rebel and engage in problematic behaviors. Younger children, however, would not be as likely to exhibit the same level of rebellious response to paternal control as would adolescents who are commonly attempting to assert a certain level of independence. Based on these findings, we hypothesized that high levels of warmth and limit setting by nonresident fathers will be related to increased levels of child well-being over and above the effects of father distress and inter-parent conflict.

Variations by race/ethnicity. The role identity that nonresident fathers develop is heavily influenced by the cultural norms or values embedded within society as a whole or in a particular subculture. Townsend (2003) reported that definitions of "good fathering" and expectations for a father's involvement with his children differ among cultures. These cultural expectations or norms are significant in determining how a father will act out his role. Some studies support the claim that nonresidential African-American fathers have more contact with their children than do other racial/ethnic groups (King, 1994; Mott, 1990; Seltzer, 1991), while other findings indicate no differences in involvement based on race/ethnicity (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Recent studies of residential fathers may provide insight into possible racial differences in nonresidential fathering behaviors. Findings based on fathers' self-reports indicated that African-American men exhibited less warmth and greater control toward their children than White fathers, even after controlling for income level and neighborhood quality (Hofferth, 2003). Coley (1998) found that greater paternal control predicted fewer problematic behavior problems among young African-American children. This relationship was not found for White children. Perhaps African American children interpret the controlling actions of their fathers as being normal and non-punitive; thus, the meaning they attach to the father behaviors may be quite different than for White children. Father warmth, however, would likely be interpreted in a positive way for both African American and White children. Therefore, we hypothesized that the positive influence of nonresidential father limit setting on child well-being will be greater for African American children than for non-African American children, whereas no difference between African-American and non-African-American children is expected on the extent to which paternal warmth is related to child well-being.

Relationship Quality between Nonresident Fathers and Their Children

Existing evidence demonstrates a negative relation between father-child relationship quality and children's adjustment problems (Papp et al., 2005) and depression levels (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). In their meta-analysis, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) confirmed the relation between nonresidential father-child closeness and child adjustment. Because these studies have been primarily based on older youth, less is known of the impact of these close relationships on young children. In a recent qualitative study of children (7 years of age) from single-parent and stepfamily homes in Finland, Taanila, Laitinen, Moilanen, and Jarvelin (2002) found that, when nonresidential fathers had physically close (frequent contact) but psychologically distant father-child relationships, children were more likely to exhibit behavior problems at school than were children with both physically and psychologically close relationships with their nonresident fathers. Thus, we hypothesized that higher levels of perceived relationship quality between the father and child will be related to higher levels of child well-being over and above the influence of inter-parent conflict, paternal distress, and paternal behavior.

If, as hypothesized, we find that there are direct effects between fathers' parenting behaviors (i.e., warmth and limit-setting) and children's well-being, it would be informative to identify the mechanisms that account for this relation because parenting behaviors may have different effects on children depending on the relationship context in which they occur. For example, as noted earlier, it has been argued that parental control may have differing effects on African American and European American children because African American parents exhibit controlling parenting behaviors in the context of a more nurturant and supportive parent-child relationship (Coley, 1998; Ispa et al., 2004). Thus, we posit that parenting behaviors, and the context in which they occur, will, over time, influence the quality of the father's relationship with his child and, further, that the quality of the father-child relationship will positively affect children's well-being. Thus, we hypothesized that any direct effects of paternal behavior on child well-being will be mediated by the quality of the relationship between the father and child.

Control Variables

We included several variables in our analysis that are commonly associated with nonresidential father involvement and child well being. We included marital status because never married fathers have few norms or guidelines concerning their role as a father. Thus, the meaning never married fathers attach to fatherhood may be different from that of previously married fathers. In addition to marital status, we included other father characteristics that may be related to nonresidential father involvement and child well-being. Increased levels of father education are often related to increased involvement and child outcomes (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003).

The frequency of contact between father and child is positively related to both paternal responsiveness and father-child relationship quality (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Certain child characteristics (e.g., child sex, ethnicity, and age) have also been noted in prior literature to influence paternal involvement and child outcomes (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Seltzer, 1991).

Contributions of this Study

The present study contributes to the literature on nonresident father involvement in several ways. First, whereas most studies of nonresidential father involvement have used mother or child report data, this study obtained the insights of fathers. Although the mother may provide accurate assessments of contact frequency or financial support, problems exist with using her as the primary or the only reporter of that involvement.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by examining how particular activities and behaviors of nonresidential fathers can promote positive child development in early and middle childhood. Much of the literature has focused on the impact of fathers' parenting behaviors on adolescents. Many of the behaviors and activities that fathers engage in with younger children are likely to be different than those engaged in with adolescents. Also, younger children may respond differently to certain nonresidential parenting behaviors than would adolescents.

Third, this study focused on nonresident fathers who have regular contact with their children. Past studies have often pooled involved fathers with those men who rarely see their child. Fathers who frequently spend time with their children have greater opportunity to interact with them in a variety of ways, and the behaviors they choose to employ during these interactions can have important influences on the child. As a result, only nonresidential fathers with regular contact were included in this study.

Fourth, this study examined the relations among nonresidential fathers' parenting behaviors, father-child relationship quality, and child well-being. Although research has demonstrated an association between relationship quality and child outcomes, only one known study has considered whether father-child relationship quality mediates the relation between fathers' behavior and child well-being (Stewart, 2003). Although Stewart's study did not provide much support for such a relationship, it was based solely on the reports of adolescents. This study extended the work of Stewart by examining this potential link for younger children and by utilizing information gathered from both the mother and the nonresidential father.

Fifth, whereas most studies have focused on behavioral problems or adjustment difficulties, this study chose to consider a broader focus on the child's *overall* development. There are a variety of possible ways in which fathers can have an impact on children that go well beyond problematic behaviors. Thus, we decided to use a global measure of child well-being that included such areas as physical health, friendships, self esteem, and outlook for the future.

A final contribution comes from the multi-method approach of assessing father-child relationship quality and child outcomes. Whereas many studies of nonresidential fathers and younger children have used outcome measures based on reports from a single source, this study assessed the perceptions of both the mother and the father.

Method

Participants

Analyses were based on the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Hofferth, Davis-Kean, Davis, & Finkelstein, 1998). A sample of 2396 households for the Child Development Supplement (CDS) was drawn from the ongoing PSID longitudinal survey consisting of 6792 families. Between January and November 1997, the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan conducted a comprehensive study of 3563 children ages 12 and under. Information on up to two randomly selected children (12 and under) per household was collected from a primary caregiver. From these interviews, 1431 children were identified as having a nonresident father.

Each caregiver was then asked to provide contact information for the father. The caregiver refused to provide information in 439 cases, while in 416 the father could not be located. No attempt was made to contact the father in 137 cases because of imprisonment, death, or living in a foreign country. Of the remaining 444 cases in which the father was contacted, a total of 285 agreed to participate in the study (a response rate of 64%). In each case of

father participation, the primary caregiver was also a participant. This allowed for paired sample analyses.

For the purposes of this research, restrictions in the sample were necessary. First, because child well-being was not reported for children younger than 3, they were removed from the sample. After this restriction, the sample included 237 fathers. Second, when data were originally collected for the sample as a whole, parents were asked to report on up to two children in the household. We made the decision to include only one child per household, thus providing independence of observations. When more than one child was reported on, the youngest child was removed. After this restriction, the sample included 189 fathers. Third, the sample was further restricted to fathers who maintained regular contact with their children. Various scholars have pointed out that, while quantity of contact is not a sufficient characteristic of a meaningful and close relationship, it is a necessary one (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bersheid & Peplau, 1983). Regular contact was defined as fathers reporting that they saw their child 12 or more days in the previous year, as well as seeing their child in the past month. After this restriction, the sample contained 139 fathers with children between the ages of 3-12 who were reported to be maintaining regular contact with their father. The sample was then restricted to children whose primary caregiver was listed as the mother as opposed to a grandparent or some other family member. After this restriction, the sample included 129 nonresident fathers.

In terms of the demographic characteristics of the sample, approximately 73 percent of the fathers reported having contact with their children several times a week. Thirty-two percent were remarried or with another partner. Approximately 72 percent of the fathers earned more than \$20,000 per year, and 82 percent reported completing at least 12 years of school. Among the children, 73 percent lived in single mother homes, and almost half were African-American. Approximately 36 percent of the children came from homes in which the family income was less than \$20,000 the preceding year (see Table 1).

To determine the extent to which the final sample of 129 fathers was representative of the original sample of 285 fathers, these 129 fathers were compared with the 156 fathers excluded from the final sample because they were either uninvolved, had children younger than 3 years old, or had children whose primary caregiver was someone other than the child's mother. One-way ANOVAs on the demographic characteristics of father's age, father's income, and father's education, children's age, family income, and child sex revealed no significant differences between groups, suggesting that the final sample was representative of the original sample.

Procedures

Mothers were first contacted by phone. During this phone contact, the interviewer explained the study, asked about children presently living in the household, and set up a time for an in-home interview. During the home interview, mothers were questioned on a variety of issues concerning the household and the child. Certain questions during

HARPER AND FINE Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Father age	20-29	20%
	30-39	43%
	Over 39	37%
Father income	Under 20,000	28%
	20,000 or more	72%
Marital status	Remarried/another partner	32%
	Separated/divorced	42%
	Never married	26%
	N/A	2%
Education	Less than 12 years	17%

Contact frequency	12 years	45%
	More than 12 years	38%
	Several times per week	73%
	Once a week	13%
	1-3 times a month	12%
Child Age	Several times a year	2%
	3-5 yrs	28%
	6-9 yrs	32%
Sex	10-12 yrs	40%
	Male	49%
Ethnicity	Female	51%
	European-American	43%
	African-American	49%
Family income	Other	8%
	Under \$20,000	36%
Household type	\$20,000 or more	64%
	Single parent	78%
	Remarried/another partner	22%

the interview addressed the current family structure in the household. In instances when no biological father was living in the household, the mothers were asked to provide contact information for this individual.

The interviewer sent an introductory letter to fathers living outside the home explaining the project. Fathers were then contacted by phone and asked to consent to participate in a phone interview. During the interviews, fathers were asked to provide information on a variety of topics, including engagement in activities with the child, parenting behaviors, child outcomes, and level of psychological distress. More details about procedures can be found in the Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Hofferth et al., 1998).

Measures

Child well-being reflects the overall quality of a child's life. Coding for the 5 items on this scale ranged from 1 (*Excellent*) to 4 (*Poor*). Items included "His/Her health," "His/Her friendships," "His/Her prospects for the future," "His/Her feelings about himself," and "His/Her relationship with the mother." Items were reverse coded so that higher scores reflected more positive well-being for the child. The items were then averaged to create a composite child well-being score. Both the father and mother were asked to respond to these items during the in-home interviews. The reliability coefficient was .76 for the fathers' report and .73 for the mothers' report.

Nonresidential father warmth was measured by the frequency of certain warm and supportive behaviors the nonresident father said he exhibited toward the child in the past month. Nonresident fathers were asked to complete a self-report measure developed by Child Trends (Zaslow, Dion, & Morrison, 1997). The 6 items used for this measure were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not in the past month*) to 5 (*Everyday*). Scores were averaged to obtain a composite paternal warmth score. Example items include "Hugged or shown physical affection toward your child" and "Told child you appreciated something he/she did." The reliability coefficient for this scale was .92.

Paternal limit setting comes from the Limits scale that was developed for use in the Detroit Area Study (Alwin, 1997). Each father was asked to report how often he engaged in monitoring and limit setting behaviors when the child was with him. The 8 items used for this measure were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Very often*) to 5 (*Never*). Scores were reverse coded so that higher scores would reflect more frequent limit setting behaviors. Scores for the 8 items were averaged to obtain a composite paternal monitoring score. Example items include "Set limits on how much time your children can watch TV during the day," "Set limits on how late your child can stay up at night," and "Set a time when your child does his/her homework." The reliability coefficient for the scale was .67.

Father-child relationship quality was measured from the perspectives of both the father and mother. Each father was asked one question pertaining to his overall feelings of the child's relationship with him, with responses ranging from 1 (*Excellent*) to 4 (*Poor*). The perception of the father-child relationship, as reported by the mother, was assessed by one question: "[child's] closeness to the biological father." Responses ranged from 1 (*Extremely close*) to 4 (*Not close*). Both of these items were reverse coded so that higher scores reflected a closer relationship between the father and child.

Inter-parent conflict reflects the degree of conflict or agreement between the resident and nonresident parent over issues concerning the child. The 10 items on this scale were selected primarily from the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Response options ranged from 1 (*Often*) to 4 (*Never*). Example items include "Where the child lives," "How he/she is raised," "The amount of time (father) spends with child," and "(Father's) contribution to child support." Items were reverse coded so that higher scores reflected more inter-parent conflict. The items were then averaged to create an inter-parent conflict score. Both the father and mother were asked to respond to these items. The reliability coefficients were .82 and .85 for the fathers' and mothers' reports, respectively.

Paternal distress assesses the psychological well-being of the nonresident father. The 10-item Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002) was designed to yield a global self-report measure of distress. Example items include "Feel tired for no good reason," "Feel restless or fidgety," and "Feel worthless." Responses ranged from 1 (*All the time*) to 5 (*None of the time*). Items were reverse scored so that higher scores represented greater distress. The 10 items were then averaged to create a psychological distress composite score. The reliability coefficient for the scale was .82.

Results

Prediction of Child Well-Being

As shown in Table 2, 4 models were tested to consider various contributions to child well being. To be consistent, several control variables were included in all regression models predicting child well being and father-child relationship quality. These control variables were selected from prior bivariate correlations that examined the relations among various demographic characteristics (see Table 1) with child well being and father-child relationship quality. Two of the variables were dummy coded prior to analysis. For the purposes of our study, child race/ethnicity was coded as non-African-American (coded as 0) and African-American (coded as 1). Father marital status was coded as previously married (0) and never married (1). Prior to all regression analyses, the independent variables of inter-parent conflict, father distress, father warmth, father limit setting, father-child relationship quality, child sex, and child ethnicity were centered.

In model 1, we entered the demographic variables that were selected from prior correlation analyses. Child age was a significant negative predictor of child well being as reported by the mother, suggesting lower levels of child well being as children grew older. Results also indicated that mothers were more likely to report that their children had high levels of well being if the fathers had greater education. There were no significant father-report predictors of child well being.

In model 2, we entered father distress, inter-parent conflict, father warmth, and father limit setting, thus testing for their unique contribution to child well-being over and above the contribution of the control variables. As expected, inter-parent conflict was a negative predictor of child well-being as reported by both the father and mother, suggesting that lower levels of conflict were related to higher levels of child well-being.

Consistent with our predictions, father warmth was positively related to father reports of child well-being. The association approached significance for mother based reports. These results suggest that displays of warmth from the father were related to higher levels of child well-being. The hypothesized relation between father limit setting and child well-being was not supported for the sample as a whole.

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Child Well-Being

Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
FR (β)	MR (β)	FR (β)	MR (β)
FR (β)	MR (β)	FR (β)	MR (β)

Child age -.07 -.23* -.04 -.27** -.02 -.27** .05 -.26**
 Father education .01 .28* -.05 .25** -.05 .24** .07 .26**
 Child sex .08 .11 .09 .08 .12 .09 .08 .10
 Child ethnicity .15 -.03 .08 -.02 .10 .02 .04 -.04
 Father marital status .06 -.07 .08 -.03 .04 -.03 -.06 .00
 Contact frequency .10 -.05 .15+ .02 .19* .03 .16* .03

Father distress -.22* -.12 -.18* -.16 -.16* -.13
 Inter-parent conflict -.29** -.20* -.30* -.11 -.11 -.18*
 Father warmth .21* .16+ .23* .19 .04 .10
 Father limit setting .11 -.11 -.19 -.16+ -.01 -.10

Father distress x sex -.19* .02
 Conflict x sex .10 -.04
 Warmth x ethnicity -.04 -.01
 Limit setting x ethnicity .23* .13

Father-child
 relationship quality .65** .19*
 R^2 .04 .12* .23** .21** .30** .23** .53** .24**

Note. MR = Mother Report; FR = Father Report. For maternal reports of child well-being, mothers' reports of inter-parent conflict and father-child relationship quality were used. For paternal reports of child well-being, fathers' reports of inter-parent conflict and father-child relationship quality were used. Child sex (0= male; 1= female); Child ethnicity (0= non-African American; 1= African American); Father marital status (0= previously married; 1= never married).
 + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Model 3 tested the hypothesized moderating effects of child sex and child race/ethnicity. The first set of product terms was entered to test the potential moderating effect of child sex on the relation between father distress and child well being as well as the relation between inter-parent conflict and child well-being. Results revealed that the product term of father distress and child sex accounted for a significant portion of variance in father reports of child well-being. To examine the meaning of this interaction, separate regression analyses were conducted for males and females, controlling for all previously regressed variables. There was a significant negative relation between distress and child well-being for girls ($\beta = -.46, p < .001$), whereas no significant relation was found for boys. Consequently, child sex moderated the relation between father distress and father reports of child well-being. No significant moderating effects of child sex were found for the relation between distress and maternal reports of child wellbeing. In addition, child sex did not significantly moderate the relation between inter-parent conflict and child well being

In addition, we tested the potential moderating effect of child race/ethnicity by entering the father warmth by race/ethnicity product term and father limit setting by race/ethnicity product term. The product term of father limit setting and child race/ethnicity was significant for father reports of child well-being. Separate regression analyses were conducted for non-African-American children and African American children, controlling for all previously regressed variables. There was a significant positive relation between father limit setting and father reports of child well-being for African-American children ($\beta = .30, p < .05$), whereas no significant relation was found for non-African-American children. The product terms of child race/ethnicity and father behavior (race/ethnicity \times father warmth, race/ethnicity \times father limit setting) did not provide any unique contribution to

the variance in mothers' reports of child well-being. Consequently, support was found for our hypothesis with respect to father reports, but not for mother reports.

Finally, in model 4, we entered nonresident father-child relationship quality to determine its unique contribution to child well-being over and above the effects of father distress, inter-parent conflict, father warmth, and father limit setting. Based on father and mother reports, the relationship quality between the father and the child was positively related to child well-being, thus supporting our hypothesis.

Prediction of Nonresident Father-Child Relationship Quality

As seen in Table 3, we then tested the effects of inter-parent conflict, father distress, and father behavior on father-child relationship quality. Two models were constructed using hierarchical multiple regression. In each model, we tested the effects on both mother reports of father-child relationship quality and father reports of father-child relationship quality. In model 1, we entered the demographic variables that were selected from prior correlation analyses. For father reports, there was a marginal negative relation between fathers' marital status and father-child relationship quality, suggesting a trend that never married fathers perceived that their relationships with their children had lower quality than did previously married fathers. Based on mother reports, a significant negative relation was found between child age and father-child relationship quality, suggesting that mothers perceived the relationship quality between father and child to be poorer as the children grew older. The relationship between contact frequency and father-child relationship quality also approached significance. Marginal positive effects were also found for child race/ethnicity and father marital status.

Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Father-Child Relationship Quality

	Model 1FR (β) MR (β)	Model 2FR (β) MR (β)
Child age	-.19*	-.14-
Father education	.11	.02
Child sex	.16+	.06
Child ethnicity	.19+	.21*
Father marital status	-.07	.00
Contact frequency	-.03-	-.01-
Father distress	-.01-	.02
Inter-parent conflict	-.05	.12
Father warmth	-.18+	-.17+
Father limit setting	-.17+	-.06-
		.09
		.33**
		-.06
<i>R</i> ²	.10+	.12*
		.28**
		.21**

Note. MR = Mother Report; FR = Father Report. For maternal reports of father-child relationship quality, mothers' reports of inter-parent conflict were used. For paternal reports of child wellbeing, fathers' reports of inter-parent conflict were used. Child sex (0 = male, 1 = female); Child ethnicity (0 = non-African American, 1 = African American); Father marital status (0 = previously married, 1 = never married). +*p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01

In model 2, father distress, inter-parent conflict, father warmth, and father limit setting were entered to determine their unique contribution to father-child relationship quality over and above the contributions of the control variables. Both mother and father reports revealed that father warmth was positively related to nonresidential father-child relationship quality, suggesting that higher levels of warmth exhibited by the father contributed to higher levels of relationship quality between father and child. A significant positive relationship also existed between father limit setting and father reports of father-child relationship quality, suggesting that fathers perceived that engaging in more limit setting behaviors contributed to higher levels of father-child relationship quality. Based on father reports, a significant negative relation was found between inter-parent

conflict and father-child relationship quality, indicating that higher levels of inter-parent conflict contributed to lower levels of father-child relationship quality. Thus, support was found for the hypothesized relation between father warmth and father-child relationship quality. Partial support was found for the hypothesized relation between inter-parent conflict and father-child relationship quality, as well as between father limit setting and father child relationship quality.

Does Relationship Quality Mediate the Relation Between Father Behavior and Child Well-Being?

Finally, we tested whether relationship quality mediated the relationship between father behavior and child well-being. For a mediation effect to exist, several criteria must be met. First, a significant direct relation must be found between father behavior and child well-being. Table 2, model 2, revealed a significant positive relation between father warmth and child well-being as reported by the father. The relation between warmth and maternal reports of child well being approached significance. The next step was to test the relation between father warmth and father-child relationship quality. As seen in Table 3, model 2, there were significant positive relationships between warmth and father-child relationship quality as reported by both the mother and father. Next, the relationship between father-child relationship quality and child well-being was tested. As seen in Table 3, model 4, a significant positive relation was found between father-child relationship quality and both mothers' and fathers' reports of child well. The final step was to test the potential influence of father-child relationship quality on the relation between paternal warmth and child well-being. Table 2, model 4, shows that, after controlling for relationship quality, the relations between warmth and both mothers' and fathers' reports of their children's well-being were no longer significant, suggesting that the effect of father warmth on child well being was explained by the relationship quality between father and child. Consistent with our hypothesis, nonresidential father-child relationship quality accounted for the significant effect of father warmth on child well-being. Because no direct effects were found between father limit setting and child well-being, mediation regarding paternal limit setting could not be tested for the overall model.

We also conducted the Sobel test ($z\text{-value} = a*b/\text{SQRT}(b^2*s_a^2 + a^2*s_b^2)$) in order to determine if father-child relationship quality carried the influence of paternal behavior to child well-being (MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995; Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001; Sobel, 1982). We tested the potential mediation of relationship quality on the relation between paternal warmth and child well being. For father reports, the mediation model was supported ($z = 2.69, p < .01$); for mother reports, the mediation model approached significance ($z = 1.81, p < .10$).

Due to the significant moderating effect of race/ethnicity on limit setting, we decided to test whether father reports of father child relationship quality would mediate the relation between limit setting behaviors and child well being for African American children. To test this, we needed to establish that limit setting was significantly related to father reports of African American father-child relationship quality. After controlling for all previously regressed variables, a significant positive relationship was found ($\beta = .33, p < .05$). Next, after controlling for relationship quality, the relation between father limit setting and child well-being no longer approached significance. A significant relation remained between father-child relationship quality and child well-being ($\beta = .68, p < .001$). In addition, we conducted the Sobel test in order to test whether father-child relationship quality mediated the relation between paternal limit setting and child well being. The mediation model was supported ($z = 2.38, p < .05$), suggesting that, as hypothesized, the effect of father limit setting on African American children's wellbeing was explained by the relationship quality between father and child.

Discussion

Extending past research on nonresidential fathers, a model informed by notions from identity theory guided us to empirically test the relations among inter-parent conflict, father distress, father behavior, father-child relationship quality, and child wellbeing. For the sample as a whole, significant relations were found between several nonresidential father variables (inter-parent conflict, father distress, father warmth, and father-child relationship quality) and child well-being. Further, we found that the effect of father warmth on child well-being was mediated by the quality of the father's relationship with his child. Thus, partial support was found for the overall model, suggesting that involved nonresident fathers who can sustain a positive fathering identity can play an important role in the lives of their young children. Several individual hypotheses were also supported, as

discussed below.

Relations between Inter-Parent Conflict and Child Well-Being

As expected, for both mother and father reports, inter-parent conflict was negatively related to child well-being. Not only do these findings provide additional support for the negative impact of conflictual parental relationships on child outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cowan et al., 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Hetherington, 1999), but they also extend the literature by demonstrating that this effect occurs in early and middle childhood and even when *both* parents report on the extent of conflict and on their children's well being. *Relations between Nonresident Father Distress and Child Well-Being*

As predicted, we found that, for the sample as a whole, father distress was related to fathers' reports of child well-being. These findings are consistent with previous research (Papp, 2005; Phares, 1997) and suggest that the mere involvement of nonresidential fathers is not sufficient if they are to have a positive influence on their children's well-being; it is also important that these men themselves maintain healthy levels of psychological and emotional well-being. Children appear to be able to sense the distress of their father, and are thereby negatively affected. Further, based on father reports, the relation between father distress and child well-being was significant for daughters, but not for sons, which was also found by Bosco et al. (2003). Girls, even at a young age, may have a greater ability than sons to sense the fathers' distress. When they take on the role of parentified child, daughters may exhibit symptoms of depression or other behavior problems (Hetherington, 1999). We do not know why the sex moderating effect was found only for father reports of child well-being, and not for mothers' reports. It is possible that shared method variance (i.e., the father completed all of the measures in the analysis that yielded a significant sex moderating effect) accounted for this finding. The relatively small sample size may also help explain why the sex moderating effect was not significant for mother reports.

Relations between Nonresidential Father Behavior and Child Well-Being

Consistent with previous literature (Amato et al., 1999), we found a positive relationship between nonresidential fathers' reports of warmth and child well-being. The effect of paternal warmth on maternal reports of child well-being approached significance. Contrary to our expectation, fathers' limit setting, for the full sample, was not related to child well-being as reported by either the mother or father. One possible explanation of this unexpected null finding is that there is a bidirectional effect that washes out the hypothesized unidirectional effect. At times, fathers are likely to be proactively engaged in monitoring and limit setting behaviors in order to guide and teach their children in positive ways. These types of parental behaviors would certainly seem to benefit their children. However, at other times, fathers may be reactive to cues from their children. Stewart (2003) suggests that many fathers often set limits and monitor their children more closely only *after* they find out about problems that currently exist. The lack of significant findings may also be due to the relatively small sample size in this study.

We also predicted that race/ethnicity would have a moderating effect on the relation between father limit setting and child well-being. Based on father reports, African-American children were more likely than non-African-American children to benefit from the limit setting and monitoring behaviors of their fathers. Other cross-cultural research supports the idea that controlling behaviors may have different meanings for children depending on their perceptions and the affective context of the behaviors (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Ispa et al., 2004; Taylor, 1996). Perhaps the limit setting behaviors of African-American fathers are used within a natural normative context. For White fathers, the limit setting behaviors may not be as natural and may be more likely to be performed in anger, which may result in these behaviors having more detrimental effects for White children (Ispa et al., 2004). Our confidence in this moderating effect was compromised because this relation was only found for father reports of child well-being, again suggesting that shared method variance may have contributed to this effect. It is also possible that African-American fathers have overly favorable perceptions regarding the positive effects arising from their limit setting behaviors, or alternatively, that White fathers have overly negative perceptions regarding the well-being of their children.

Relations between Father-Child Relationship Quality and Child Well-Being

Past research has revealed the positive effects of a close relationship between nonresident fathers and their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; White & Gilbreth, 2001). As hypothesized, both mothers' and fathers' reports of relationship quality between involved nonresident fathers and their children positively predicted child well-being after controlling for the effects of child age, child sex, child race/ethnicity, father education, father marital status, father contact frequency, inter-parent conflict, father distress, father warmth, and father limit setting. These results support the idea that a strong bond between a father and child can be of great importance during early and middle childhood, even if the father and child no longer live in the same household.

Effects of Inter-parent conflict, Father Distress, and Father Behavior on Father-Child Relationship Quality

Consistent with expectations, paternal displays of warmth and support were positively related to father-child relationship quality. These findings are consistent with past studies that have linked paternal warmth and infant-father attachment (Cox et al., 1992; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1997). Also, in keeping with our hypothesis, father limit setting was positively related to paternal reports of father-child relationship quality. It is possible that these behaviors may help forge and strengthen the bond between father and child even though they no longer live in the same home. A significant negative relation was also found between father reports of inter-parent conflict and child wellbeing.

Because of our desire to identify the mechanisms underlying the links between fathers' behavior and child well-being, we tested whether father-child relationship quality mediated any of the observed relations. Support was found for the mediating hypothesis on the relationship between paternal warmth and child well-being, although the mediational effect for maternal reports of child well-being only approached significance. The expected mediating effect of father-child relationship quality on the relation between father limit setting and child well being could not be tested for the overall sample due to the lack of a direct effect between limit setting and child well being. However, due to the significant interaction effect of race/ethnicity, we were able to test whether father-child relationship quality mediated the relation between limit setting and child well-being for African American children. Consistent with our hypothesis, father-child relationship quality explained the positive relation between increased limit setting and African American children's well being.

Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations exist in the present research that can provide direction for future studies. First, one of the purposes of this study was to focus on nonresident fathers with regular contact with their children. Given this focus on a specific sub-sample of fathers, the ability to generalize these findings is limited. Future studies should examine the impact that less-involved nonresidential fathers have on their children.

Second, contact information for the nonresidential fathers was obtained from the mothers of the children. In many cases, the mothers refused or were unable to provide contact information for the father. Because of this, many fathers who had poor or conflictual relationships with the mother may not have been included in the sample. In the context of a high conflict parental relationship, nonresidential fathers may not have as positive an impact as do fathers in a low conflict co-parent relationship (Amato & Rezac, 1994). Thus, the effects of father distress, father behavior, and father-child relationship quality on child well-being cannot be generalized to situations in which the mother and father have a more acrimonious relationship. Future research should study families with a broader range of both acrimonious and nonacrimonious ex-spouse relationships.

Third, most of the fathers in this study reported little distress. It is unknown how the results would have been affected if more fathers had been suffering from high levels of distress. Perhaps future studies could examine clinical samples of nonresidential fathers who suffer from high levels of distress or depression. By observing or obtaining the insights of these individuals, we could gain greater insight into the effects of distress on the involvement and behaviors of nonresidential fathers, as well as their children's well-being.

Fourth, a quantitative approach was taken to examine a relatively small sample of nonresident fathers. Replicating the findings with a larger sample would help alleviate concerns related to statistical power. In addition, to compliment the quantitative data, it might be useful to gather deeper and more meaningful insights into the lives of nonresident fathers and their children through the use of qualitative approaches. Past studies have taken an in-depth look into the lives of African-American fathers from poverty stricken environments, many of whom do not live with their children (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2000). These types of studies provide a rich

contextual perspective on fathers as they deal with the daily pressures of work and family.

Fifth, whereas this study considered the influence of African-American nonresident fathers, there was no attention given to nonresident fathers from other ethnic backgrounds. Future researchers would do well to study nonresidential fathers who are Latino, Asian-American, and other ethnicities.

Sixth, many of the measures were based on the self-reports of nonresidential fathers. By examining the perspectives of these men, we moved beyond the traditional focus on the perspective of mothers. However, a potential bias exists when using self-report measures. Due to social desirability responding, fathers may misrepresent or exaggerate their description of how they behave towards their child. Past research on infant-father attachment has incorporated an observational-based approach in both naturalistic (Easterbrooks & Goldberg, 1984; Volling & Belsky, 1992) and laboratory settings (Goossens & van IJzendoorn, 1990; Schneider & Rothbaum, 1993). Incorporating these same types of approaches for nonresident fathers and their pre-school and school age children could prove very beneficial in measuring the behaviors and relationship quality of fathers and their children, and would compliment the self-report measures. Further, some of the measures were based on only a single item, which makes it impossible to estimate the psychometric properties of these items. However, similar or identical items have frequently been used in large-scale national studies.

Seventh, it must be noted that other unmeasured variables could be responsible for the findings in this study. Among these various factors could be paternal economic support (Amato et al., 1999), pre-existing child personality and temperament (Belsky, 1984), maternal parenting behaviors (Papp et al., 2005), and/or maternal psychological health (Cummings et al., 2005). Continued efforts are needed to uncover the multiple mechanisms through which parents and children influence each other in various family structures.

Finally, this study primarily sought to examine how nonresidential fathers influence the well-being of their children. Instead of focusing solely on how fathers influence their children, research should also explore how children influence nonresidential fathers.

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