

# Enhancing the Role of the Father in Children's Development: A contextually informed approach

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Fathers play an important role in children's development, and the ways in which they can make significant, positive contributions is quite notable (Parke et al., 2005). A variety of research studies have found that fathers' emotional support, relationship with their children, and financial caretaking are all associated with children's well-being, cognitive development, and social competence (e.g., Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). For example, fathers' involvement in caregiving is associated with decreased behavior problems in later childhood (Aldous & Mulligan, 2002), greater positivity towards school in adolescence (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002), and better mental health, occupational success, and educational attainment in adulthood (see Brown et al., 2007, for a review).

Research on fathers' influence on child development has gradually moved beyond simple measures of the quantity of father involvement (e.g., time or amount of monetary support; Pleck, 2010) towards reliable and meaningful measures of the nature, or quality of fathers' relationships with their children. Both the quantity and quality of fathers' involvement are associated with healthy child outcomes. Specifically, greater levels of involvement have been linked with decreased emotional distress/dysregulation (e.g., depressive mood, anxiety), higher academic achievement, and increased competencies with peer relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2013)

Current theories developed to explain father involvement have adopted an ecological focus (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which means they have incorporated a variety of individual, social, cultural, and contextual factors which are thought to impact fathering directly and indirectly (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2007). For example, research has demonstrated that fathers' roles in the family are less circumscribed by the dictates of social convention than are mothers' (e.g., Pleck, 1997; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). This means that, compared to mothers, fathers' involvement in parenting is more heavily influenced by a variety of personal and contextual factors. For example, fathers' participation in childcare is more affected by qualities of the co-parenting and marital relationships than is mothers' participation in childcare (e.g., Cummings et al., 2010; Cabrera et al., 2006).

One potentially important environmental/contextual factor related to fathering that has received little empirical attention is religion. A large majority of Americans describe themselves as religious (Mahoney, 2010), and religion plays an important role in shaping core values and beliefs regarding family life. In what follows, the ways in which religion is associated with family functioning, particularly parenting and fathers' involvement, will be explored.

## Religion and family functioning

In a seminal meta-analysis of studies on religion and families (Mahoney et al., 2001), religion was found to

be related to important marital and parenting outcomes, including higher global marital satisfaction, lower rates of divorce, lower rates of interparental conflict, higher rates of family cohesion with subsequent improvements in children's ability to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors, and more authoritative (i.e., supportive, yet structured and directive) parenting (Mahoney et al., 2001). Parental religiosity was found to be negatively associated with authoritarian (i.e., strict and emotionally unsupportive) parenting, and positively associated with more effective parenting practices in several key domains, including communication, closeness, support, monitoring, conflict, and peer acceptance (Snider, Clements & Vazsonyi, 2004).

### How is religion associated with fathers' parenting?

Fathers who embrace religion as an encompassing life philosophy are likely to manifest their values and beliefs through everyday interactions with others, including family members. Two concepts are particularly relevant regarding how religion affects fathers' parenting. Sanctification of parenting refers to the extent to which parents view God as evident in their relationships with family members, and view their parental roles to be imbued with religious and spiritual meaning. Sanctification is one way in which religion is manifested in everyday interactions within marital, parent-child, and family relationships (Mahoney et al., 1999); it cuts across denominational boundaries and can be used to describe nuances within a range of influences of religion on family life (Mahoney, et al., 1999). For example, spouses who endorse sanctification-related marital beliefs show greater marital satisfaction and less conflict, while parents who endorse sanctification-related beliefs show decreased conflict with children and more constructive discipline practices (Mahoney, et al, 1999; Volling et al., 2009).

Religious coping is a construct that describes the ways that individuals utilize religion to work through life

challenges (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1999). It concerns specific beliefs about God's role in times of distress (e.g., that God may be sought through prayer, and that God is a source of emotional support and guidance in the midst of a variety of life stressors).

Religious coping appears to predict a wide variety of health and well-being outcomes, above and beyond the influences of similar (yet non-religious) strategies used to cope with chronic psychosocial stressors, medical issues, or acute traumatic events (for a review, see Pargament et al., 2011). In addition, religious coping has been found to mediate the relationship between general religious orientation and individuals' outcomes following major life events (Pargament, 1997). In other words, when individuals internalize religious beliefs and are able to cope with stressors using the core adaptive messages promoted by their faith backgrounds (a very different set of behaviors from religious service attendance, *per se*), they are more likely to demonstrate meaningful and positive adjustment over time in the face of stressors. Given these findings, it follows logically that fathers' use of religious coping (in contrast to measures of religious service attendance or global religiosity) may better explain how sensitive and involved fathers are with their children.

One recent study (Lynn & Grych, under review) sought to examine relationships among religion, father involvement, and father-child relational quality after accounting for factors already known to impact fathers' parenting (e.g., marital relationship and personality characteristics). The investigation was conducted with 180 fathers and their 8-11 year-old children, and evaluated several ecological models of fathering (Cabrera et al., 2007; Pleck, 2010). The study was designed to broaden and strengthen the literature on sanctification of parenting and religious coping by going beyond an examination of whether religion is correlated with parenting to investigating how fathers' religious lives are related to other intra- and interpersonal constructs that

are related to parenting.

Results from this study indicate many paths of potential influence on fathering, and serve as a powerful reminder of the complex ecology that shapes parenting (Lynn and Grych, under review). For example, findings demonstrate that fathers' religious orientation, personality, and marital quality uniquely relate to their parenting involvement. Furthermore, it is likely that many fathers' religious involvement often plays an important, yet secondary, role. For example, religion may shape, inform, and/or strengthen fathers' chances of responding in healthy ways to life stressors (e.g., by promoting adaptive personality characteristics such as conscientiousness and openness to new experiences), which can then increase the chances of positive "spillover" to parent-child relationships. These adaptive, positive characteristics can also strengthen fathers' patterns of relating to their spouses. Given that the marital relationship serves as one of the strongest, most consistent predictors of parenting, contextual factors that support (or even strengthen) marital ties are extremely important.

Results from this research study also indicate that it is possible to distinguish global levels of religiosity from more specific measures which indicate how fathers utilize religion in their everyday lives. These more functional measures, which better reflect fathers' intrinsic beliefs and experiences, are more strongly associated with fathers' involvement in parenting (Lynn & Grych, under review). For example, fathers' positive use of religious coping, as well as their belief that parenting is a sanctified activity (that is, one that is imbued with religious significance), were significantly better predictors of father involvement than fathers' global report of how religious they are. These findings are concordant with previous research with mothers that indicates that specific, functional measures of religion are more strongly associated with family outcomes than global measures of religion (Mahoney, 2010).

### Why are religion and fathering linked?

Previous work on religion and fathering (e.g., Dumas et al., 2006) has largely neglected potential "third variables" that may explain why indices of religion and parenting are associated. The study by Lynn and Grych (under review) is notable because it identifies religiosity, along with personality and marital quality, as unique predictors of fathers' involvement in parenting. As expected, these concepts were related in complex ways: Fathers who viewed parenting as a sanctified responsibility, and relied on their religion and faith community for support, showed higher levels of personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability; they also reported more satisfying marriages. However, whereas personality was related to both father involvement and parent-child relationship quality, marital quality was associated only with relational quality, and religion was related only to fathers' involvement.

These results point to the complex interplay between environmental and contextual predictors, such as personality characteristics and the marital relationship, which help explain the nature of fathers' involvement with their children. Fathers who exhibit more positive personality characteristics (e.g., greater emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) may be generally oriented toward developing close relationships and have the intrapersonal qualities to make these relationships successful. Meanwhile, involvement in religious communities promotes and reinforces parenting ideology, and also provides significant social support (e.g., contact with like-minded peers regarding faith and parenting; Wilcox, 2002). Most religions emphasize the importance of the father's role in the family and view fathers as having a responsibility to raise healthy, moral children; these belief systems can be supported through practical, day-to-day experiences with like-minded parents (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

Although contextual factors such as the marital relationship and religious/spiritual involvement combine to encourage fathers to spend time with their children, they do not necessarily translate into sensitive and responsive parenting in the absence of other qualities, such as those captured by “positive personality” characteristics. Likewise, the link between marital and parent-child relationship quality may reflect fathers’ capacity for establishing satisfying relationships, which is distinct from the amount of time they spend with their children.

Taken together, these contextual and intrapersonal factors help to explain both the quantity and quality of fathers’ involvement with their children. When fathers view parenting as a sacred responsibility, are stable and agreeable in temperament, and experience support in their marriage, they are more likely to be engaged in parenting and demonstrate close and secure relationships with their children. However, these findings also illustrate the complexity among these constructs (Lynn & Grych, under review). For example, there may be fathers who view parenting as a sacred responsibility and invest time in their relationship with their children, but tensions in their marriage or aspects of their personality may undermine the quality of that time. Further research is needed to elucidate and strengthen our understanding of these factors’ associations with fathers’ involvement.

### Promoting healthy father-child relationships

Mental health providers have long recognized the need to attend to parents’ psychological health and relationship quality when addressing child adjustment problems. Results of research investigating the links between religion and fathering suggest that fathers may also benefit from increased focus and support at the community level. Research suggests that attention to fathers’ religious lives can foster positive fathering behaviors and attitudes, and could play a pivotal role in interventions designed for children and families.

Moreover, religion must be viewed within a complex web of interrelated constructs, such as the marital relationship and aspects of fathers’ personality, that together influence important fathering outcomes. Understanding fathers’ intrinsic beliefs about the role of religion in supporting parenting (e.g., belief that parenting is imbued with meaning as a spiritual, holy endeavor) can inform individual and community-level work that promotes tangible increases in father involvement. For example, social policies and common practices that promote a range of supportive interventions for parents (including their religious involvement, where applicable), should be encouraged. Likewise, parents’ religious communities may offer programming that fosters healthy marital relations, and these resources may be most effective for fathers with high religious involvement and commitment. The implication is that, for fathers who identify as religious, the social norms which provide support for fathers’ engagement with their religious traditions and communities may promote positive fathering.

Given that religious and faith communities can provide valuable sources of inspiration and support for fathers, it is important that mental health providers not miss opportunities for collaboration. Although it is common for mental health providers to operate in a sphere largely separate from religious themes or influence (Mahoney et al., 2001), mental health providers and makers of social policy would be well-advised to support the diverse array of domains that impact fathers’ parenting. This includes the oftentimes-powerful, yet frequently misunderstood (or unaccounted for), influences of religion.

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Mark Lynn, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Clinical Fellow at The Family Institute at Northwestern University, specializing in child, adolescent and family therapy. He received his PhD in Clinical Psychology from Marquette University and completed his

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