

# The Influence of Marital Satisfaction on Father Involvement and Child Development

by Mallory Rose, MSMFT

Much research has been devoted to discovering the components of a satisfying marital relationship. Typically, researchers measure marital quality by asking spouses to rate their global marital satisfaction, which is defined as “an attitude of greater or lesser favorability toward one’s own marital relationship” (Roach, Frazier & Bowden, 1981, p. 537).

Marital satisfaction is associated with many benefits for children’s development. Among these benefits are more father involvement and an increase in the secure attachment of infants to their parents (Bonney, 1999). In contrast, one of the consequences of an unsatisfying marital relationship is a lack of closeness and connectedness between infants and their parents, which can lead to disruptive behaviors in preschool children (DeVito, 2001).

Marital dissatisfaction and permissive parenting practices also predict disorderly conduct among preschool children (Devito, 2001). Because of this, it is important to study the implications of marital dissatisfaction and how it directly affects parents’ relationships with their children.

## Father Involvement

A wealth of evidence links fathers’ involvement with marital satisfaction. Because of the amount of time and direct care required by infants, a father’s involvement

during infancy is crucial. Moreover, the more involved fathers are in the beginning, the more they are involved with child care tasks in the future (Pleck, 2004). Father involvement can be defined by a wide range of activities. These include cognitive stimulation activities such as reading and playing games with the child; physical care, including changing diapers and preparing meals; paternal warmth, which can be tickling or holding the child; nurturing activities such as comforting the child who wakes at night or taking the child to the doctor; and care giving, which involves things like bathing and dressing the child (Tinkew, 2007).

Researchers have also studied belief systems that affect men’s perceptions of father involvement and care giving. The father social role theory postulates there are shared norms and expectations about how fathers internalize their concept of involvement which are influenced by cultural norms and expectations. “Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the way in which fathers define their roles influences the quality and quantity of their behavior with their children” (McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaughn, & Korth, 2005, p. 360). However, these norms are changing, in part because women are now moving into the work force and are being viewed as equal in their careers to their male counterparts (Bonney, 1999).

Because cultural norms are changing to emphasize the more nontraditional division of labor, father involvement with parenting tasks has increased substantially. However, women still perform the majority of the child care labor. In traditional families where the man is the primary financial provider and the woman works inside the home, men perform 22 percent of the child care tasks, whereas in non-traditional families (both spouses work full time),

men perform about 45 percent (Bonney, 1999). Even though fathers average less child care than mothers, their involvement is associated with greater marital satisfaction (Bonney, 1999).

### Children's Attachment to Parents

Bowlby (1982) described infant attachment as “the relationship developed between an infant and a parent or primary caregiver during the early years of life, and its quality is dependent on how a parent responds to a child’s needs for care, comfort, and security” (Bowlby, 1982, p. 13). Ainsworth (1978) advanced the theory on attachment patterns by studying infants’ reactions to the “strange situation” — a research laboratory paradigm involving a primary parent, usually the mother, a child, and a stranger to the child. During the laboratory procedure, the mother engages in a series of separations and reunions while the child’s behavior is observed. By analyzing children’s reactions to their mother leaving and returning, Ainsworth formulated three distinct attachment patterns. The first, secure attachment, involves the attachment figure (the mother or father) responding consistently and appropriately to the psychological and physical needs of the child. Parents assist the child in managing stress, and, in return, the child views the parent as a safe and secure support system. The securely attached child in the strange situation objects to the parent’s departure, expresses joy upon his or her return, and seeks comfort from the parent before returning to exploration.

With *insecure-avoidant* attachment, the caregiver may be emotionally and/or physically unavailable, and may reject the infant. Avoidant infants in the strange situation express minimal distress when the parent leaves the room. When the parent returns, the child does not greet the parent with excitement, or seek comfort from him or her. With *insecure-ambivalent* attachment (also called anxious-resistant), parents respond to the needs of the child in an inconsistent manner. These infants exhibit extreme distress when the parent leaves the room. When the parent returns, the

infant is still difficult to comfort, clingy, and hesitant to explore independently of the parent. Although most attachment research has focused on mothers and infants, several studies also indicate that infants form similar attachments to their fathers (Belsky, 1981; Cox, Owen, Henderson & Margand, 1992; Volling & Belsky, 1992).

### Marital Relationship Quality Fosters Secure Infant Attachment

Two theoretical models have been advanced to explain the association between the marital relationship and the parent-child relationship. These include the compensatory hypothesis and the spillover hypothesis (Belsky, 1981; Engfer, 1988). The *compensatory hypothesis* postulates that a poor marital relationship might actually foster a more positive attachment between children and their parents, because parents who are dissatisfied with their spousal relationship might view their children as substitutes for emotional fulfillment and engage in more positive interaction with them. In contrast, the *spillover hypothesis* states the conflict and stress of a poor marital relationship will spill over into the relationship between parents and children. For example, high conflict between spouses can undermine the authority parents have over their children.

Shek (1998) examined both hypotheses in his study of 1,500 Chinese married adults with adolescent children. Both mothers and fathers completed measures that assessed their satisfaction with their spouse, marriage, and marital relationship, as well as parent-child relationships. He found stronger support for the spillover effect, and this was true independent of parent gender; that is, the spillover effect was equally strong for mothers and fathers. There was a positive association between marital satisfaction and the parent-child relationship, such that more marital satisfaction was related to more secure parent-adolescent attachment. Additionally, positive parenting was associated with closer parent-child relationships.

Isabella and Belsky (1989) confirmed and extended

these results. They found that mothers who had securely attached infants at one year reported more positive appraisals of their marriage before their children were born. In contrast, mothers of infants with an insecure attachment at one year reported more ambivalence in their feelings towards their spouse and marital conflict prenatally.

### Elements of Marital Satisfaction

There are many factors that foster marital satisfaction; yet as the following studies demonstrate, not all of these elements are needed for a fulfilling relationship. One of the factors that promotes marital satisfaction is not whether a relationship is independent of conflict, but rather how conflict is handled (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). Values over how to raise children can often clash, and it is the ability to listen, understand, and compromise that is associated with marital satisfaction and father involvement. If fathers feel their opinions and values are heard, they will be more inclined to participate in child care tasks.

Cox, Own, Henderson, and Margand (1988) found the quality of the marital relationship was essential to the incorporation of the infant into the family. Couples who were able to develop a more competent marital relationship prenatally were better able to integrate the child into the family post-birth, fostering a secure parent-infant attachment to both mothers and fathers. They also found that fathers had more positive attitudes towards their child when they were involved in satisfying marital relationships.

In conclusion, research suggests emotional security within the family is crucial to child development. If emotional security is reduced through marital conflict, infants can have adjustment problems (Davies & Cummings, 1994), especially when marital conflict interrupts the secure infant-parent child relationship. If marital conflict spills over into the relationship with children, parents have diminished resources available to support and foster children's secure attachment.

At The Family Institute at Northwestern University, therapists are trained to evaluate how couples' relationships affect their family and children, and vice versa. Understanding the connections between marital relationship quality, secure infant attachment, and mother and father involvement is a key component of effective intervention with families.

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## Author Biography



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