

Fathers Matter:
**The Importance of
Father Involvement on
Child Development in
Early Childhood**

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Background

- Approximately 17% of children in the United States live in families with low income
- Children born to low-income parents tend to have **poorer developmental outcomes**, due to a constellation of risks
- Family protective factors, such as **positive father involvement**, can enhance resilient and healthy development in low-income children



Father Involvement

- Research suggests a well-established link between greater positive father involvement and healthy child development
- Fathering is a multi-dimensional construct



Research Gaps

- **Various patterns of father involvement** and their unique impacts on child development across the social, behavioral, and cognitive domains remain unclear
- Important aspects of father involvement, such as **the quantity of involvement and use of harsh discipline**, have been ignored in prior work
- Less attention to fathers in **low-income, racially/ethnically diverse families**



Research Questions:

(1) Are there different patterns of father involvement among low-income families?

(2) How do different patterns of father involvement relate to social competence, behavior problems, and verbal ability of children?

SAMPLE

- Data were drawn from the [Supporting Healthy Marriages \(SHM\)](#) program
- Analytic sample inclusion criteria
 - at the 12-month follow-up, fathers had contact with child in past month
 - at the 30-month follow-up, focal child was < 5 years old
 - families did not have missing data
- N=2,650 families



Method

Sample Characteristics

		%	Mean	SD
Father				
Age			29.35	5.84
Race and ethnicity	White	45.60		
	African American	19.23		
	Asian	2.40		
	Native American	4.16		
	Pacific Islander	1.47		
	Others	27.14		
	Hispanic	40.48		
Education	At least a high school diploma	80.10		
Residential status	15 months follow-up	Lived with children at least	97.25	
	30 months follow-up	half of the time	91.97	
Mother				
Age			27.40	5.26
Race and ethnicity	White	48.81		
	African American	14.70		
	Asian	3.20		
	Native American	4.17		
	Pacific Islander	1.58		
	Others	27.54		
	Hispanic	40.65		
Education	At least a high school diploma	81.50		
Household				
Income	Below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)		38.12	
	Between 100% and 200% of FPL		41.99	
	Above 200% FPL		19.89	
Focal Child				
Gender	Boy		51.79	
	Girl		48.21	



- **Father Involvement at 12-month follow-up**
- **Child Outcomes at 30-month follow-up**
 - **Child social competence**
 - 9-item social competence scale
 - **Child internalizing and externalizing behavior problems**
 - 25-item behavior problems scale
 - **Verbal ability/ Cognitive performance**
 - The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)

Measures

Measures

- **Father involvement items**

Time spent	Spend one or more hours a day with the child
Paternal warmth	Told (focal child) that you love (him/her)?
	Praised (focal child) or told him/her that you appreciated something that he/she did?
	Laughed with (focal child)?
Harsh discipline	Yelled, shouted, screamed at, or threatened (focal child) because you were mad at him/her?
	Hit, spanked, grabbed or used physical punishment with (focal child)?
Father's engagement	Played inside with games or toys
	Taken the child for a walk or to play outside
	Sung songs or nursery rhymes with the child
	Read books or told stories to the child
	Dealt with the children when he/she did something wrong

Data Analysis

- Latent class analysis
(3-step LCA with distal outcomes)



Results

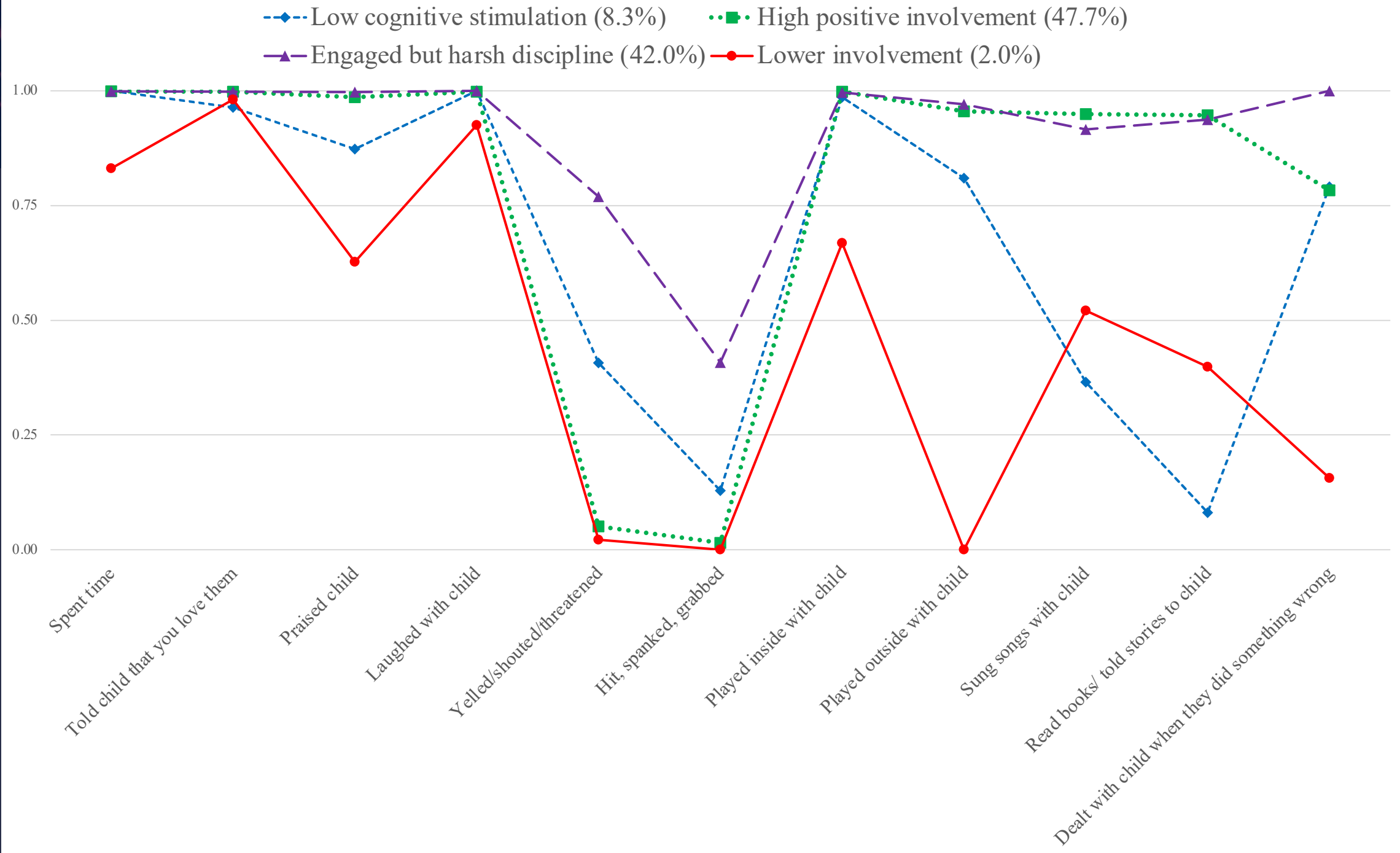
Descriptive Statistics for the Indicators, Covariates, and Distal Outcomes (N = 2,650).

		%
Father involvement		
Time spent	Spend one or more hours a day with the child	99.58
Paternal warmth	Told (focal child) that you love (him/her)?	99.47
	Praised (focal child) or told him/her that you appreciated something that he/she did?	97.43
	Laughed with (focal child)?	99.77
Harsh discipline	Yelled, shouted, screamed at, or threatened (focal child) because you were mad at him/her?	38.12
	Hit, spanked, grabbed, or used physical punishment with (focal child)?	18.91
Father's engagement	Played inside with games or toys	98.98
	Taken the child for a walk or to play outside	93.00
	Sung songs or nursery rhymes with the child	87.78
	Read books or told stories to the child	86.01
	Dealt with the children when he/she did something wrong	86.26
Covariates		% or Mean (SD)
Child age		3.66 (1.32)
Child sex (girl)		48.2
Couple education (both graduated from high school)		56.6
Poverty		
	100% of federal poverty level or under	38.1
	Between 100% and 200% of federal poverty level	42.0
	200% of federal poverty level or above	19.9
Distal outcomes		Mean (SD)
Social emotional functioning assessed by father		2.57 (0.37)
Social emotional functioning assessed by mother		2.56 (0.37)
Internal behavior problem assessed by father		1.21 (0.25)
Internal behavior problem assessed by mother		1.19 (0.25)
External behavior problem assessed by father		1.34 (0.30)
External behavior problem assessed by mother		1.36 (0.32)
Cognitive functioning (verbal ability) assessed by interviewer		97.29 (15.969)

Results

Fit Indices for Unconditional Latent Class Models.

	2-class	3-class	4-class	5-class	6-class
Log-Likelihood	-7128.50	-6860.18	-6792.45	-6757.93	-6739.75
# of parameters	23	35	47	59	71
AIC	14303.00	13790.36	13678.90	13633.85	13621.51
BIC	14438.30	13996.24	13955.37	13980.91	14039.15
Entropy	0.54	0.68	0.75	0.75	0.78
% of class 1	49.97%	46.47%	8.27%	45.31%	5.34%
% of class 2	50.03%	44.13%	47.48%	7.23%	4.48%
% of class 3		9.41%	42.01%	40.79%	41.26%
% of class 4			2.04%	0.81%	45.79%
% of class 5				5.86%	2.68%
% of class 6					0.45%



Results

Distal Mean Differences between Four Latent Classes

Child distal outcome	Class	Distal mean	Low cognitive stimulation	High positive involvement	Engaged but harsh discipline
Socio-emotional functioning _father ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	2.16			
	High positive involvement	2.45	-0.29***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	2.41	-0.25***	0.04	
	Lower involvement	2.31	-0.15	0.14	0.10
Socio-emotional functioning _mother ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	2.11			
	High positive involvement	2.37	-0.26***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	2.42	-0.31***	-0.05	
	Lower involvement	2.29	-0.18	0.08	0.13
Internalizing problems _father ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	1.53			
	High positive involvement	1.11	0.42***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	1.23	0.30***	-0.12***	
	Lower involvement	1.13	0.40***	-0.02	0.10***
Internalizing problems _mother ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	1.49			
	High positive involvement	1.14	0.35***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	1.11	0.38***	0.03	
	Lower involvement	1.15	0.34***	-0.01	-0.04
Externalizing problems _father ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	1.82			
	High positive involvement	1.33	0.49***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	1.47	0.35***	-0.14**	
	Lower involvement	1.39	0.43***	-0.06	0.08
Externalizing problems _mother ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	1.79			
	High positive involvement	1.39	0.40***		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	1.38	0.41***	0.01	
	Lower involvement	1.44	0.35	-0.05	-0.06
Child cognitive functioning _interviewer ratings	Low cognitive stimulation	79.08			
	High positive involvement	85.03	-5.95**		
	Engaged but harsh discipline	84.33	-5.25**	0.70	
	Lower involvement	78.37	0.71	6.66	5.96

Key Findings

- Identified **four** qualitatively distinct **patterns of father involvement**
 - *high positive involvement* (47.7%)
 - *engaged but harsh discipline* (42.0%)
 - *low cognitive stimulation* (8.3%)
 - *lower involvement* (2.0%)
- Children in the **low paternal cognitive stimulation** class showed significantly lower social competence, greater internalizing and externalizing problems, and lower verbal ability
- Children in the fathers **engaged but harsh discipline** class displayed greater internalizing and externalizing behavior problems

Contributions to literature

- Identified **four** qualitatively distinct **patterns of father involvement**
 - *high positive involvement* (nearly half)
 - *engaged but harsh discipline* (also large)
 - *low cognitive stimulation* (novel)
 - *lower involvement* (very small)
- Revealed important role of **paternal cognitive stimulation** across multiple domains of child development in low-income families.
- Affirmed that paternal warmth and engagement cannot compensate for **negative effects of harsh discipline** on child behavior

Discussion



- Findings **may not be generalizable** to a broader population
- Relied **solely** on father report to assess father involvement
- Size of the *lower involvement* class was very **small** (2% of the sample)



Limitations

Implications



Policy

Increased **funding** and **resources** to support programs and initiatives that encourage and facilitate positive father involvement among low-income families

Practice

Actively **engage fathers in** parenting interventions, services, and programs
Focus on cognitive stimulation

Questions & Comments



Thank you

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