



Study Summary

New ECHO Research Highlights Gaps in Literature Studying Role of Fathers in Child Development

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Who sponsored this study?

The Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health supported this research.

Why was this study needed?

While few studies on parental health and child development include fathers in any substantial way, a growing body of literature emphasizes their vital role—even in the period before birth. This study reviewed existing literature on what is known about the father’s role in child development. It highlights how a father’s history and personal characteristics before the baby is born, during pregnancy, and after birth can influence their child directly via their parenting behaviors and indirectly by influencing the child’s mother. The study also discusses how the ECHO Program can address key gaps in the literature by designing studies that address unanswered questions.

What were the study results?

The researchers reviewed the existing literature to find out which characteristics or behaviors of fathers have been connected to children’s development, especially their physical and mental health. While many studies give some information about the role of fathers, often fathers do not provide this information themselves, or existing data do not allow researchers to compare the role of fathers to that of mothers. Compared to the pregnancy and pre-pregnancy stages, this study allows researchers to better understand a father’s role once a baby is born. The study team created a model to guide future inquiry and suggest methods researchers can use to help fill in some knowledge gaps in the future. One unique aspect of this work is describing how fathers can impact the child by first influencing the mother, for example, by helping her follow healthy behaviors, such as cooking or helping to cook healthy meals and eating healthy food himself.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should always consult with a qualified healthcare provider for diagnosis and for answers to your personal questions.

What was the study’s impact?

This review of other publications reveals gaps in the research community’s understanding of the father’s role in child development. First, very little is known about the father’s role in child development before

birth. The study authors noted that more studies are needed to research mothers and fathers before they have children, focusing on including fathers in a substantial way. Some of the father data collected in the existing literature was reported by the mother. This highlights a gap in the literature and the need to incorporate maternal and paternal reported data on father characteristics. Second, this review demonstrates how studying the effect of fathers on child development has revealed additional insights into children's health outcomes, including reasons for declines in physical or mental health.

This study also introduces a model designed to guide other researchers in focusing on pieces of the puzzle that are currently less understood. The model may help explain how each parent interacts with their child and which influence has a stronger impact or is more prevalent for which parent.

Who was involved?

This literature review involved an in-depth look into existing research on the role of fathers in child development and evaluated its quality. The study focuses on three specific child outcome areas of the ECHO program: obesity, neurodevelopment, and positive health.

What happened during the study?

This literature review begins by describing data collected by the ECHO Cohort and identifying critical gaps in the research related to the role of fathers in ECHO's five key health outcome areas. After understanding the program's data collection methods, the research team analyzed multiple research papers categorized into three broad stages of child development—preconception, prenatal, and postnatal. The review concludes with the presentation of a new proposed conceptual model to guide future studies considering paternal influences in ECHO and beyond.

What happens next?

With more data becoming available from the ECHO Program, information on fathers' characteristics can be connected to the rich data on family characteristics, mothers' influences, and child development. Additional data will be gathered to provide further insights and answer remaining questions.

Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article, titled "The Role of Fathers in Child Development from Preconception to Postnatal Influences: Opportunities for the National Institutes of Health Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program" in [Developmental Psychobiology](#).

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