Involved fathers of preschool children as seen by themselves and their wives: Accounts of attachment, socialization, and companionship

Inge Bretherton a, J. David Lambert b, Barbara Golby c

a University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
b Edgewood College, Wisconsin, USA
c Elmhurst Hospital, New York, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2005
To cite this Article: Bretherton, Inge, Lambert, J. David and Golby, Barbara (2005) 'Involved fathers of preschool children as seen by themselves and their wives: Accounts of attachment, socialization, and companionship', Attachment & Human Development, 7:3, 229 - 251

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/14616730500138341
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616730500138341

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Involved fathers of preschool children as seen by themselves and their wives: Accounts of attachment, socialization, and companionship

INGE BRETHERTON1, J. DAVID LAMBERT2, & BARBARA GOLBY3

1University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, 2Edgewood College, Wisconsin, USA, and 3Elmhurst Hospital, New York, USA

Abstract
Studies of infant–father attachment and other aspects of father–child relationships burgeoned during the 1980s and 90s, in step with new expectations for greater father participation in childrearing, but less is known about how involved fathers experience themselves as attachment figures, socialization agents, and playmates/companions of their young children. In an attempt to investigate these topics from a relationship perspective, we administered the Parent Attachment Interview (PAI) to 49 married fathers from dual career families who, based on current literature, were expected to be active participants in caring for and interacting with their preschool children. The 22 open-ended PAI questions were designed to probe fathers’ thoughts and feelings about parent–child attachment, but also elicited extensive descriptions of other aspects of fathering, including socialization and companionship. In addition, fathers reflected on similarities and differences between the father– and mother–child relationships, and these accounts were compared with corresponding discussions by their wives. Among new issues raised by the study were the role of affection in attachment relationships, evidence for the attachment hierarchy construct, issues of parental self-control in relation to discipline, conceptual overlaps between attachment and other aspects of parenting, and the diverse meanings of father–mother differences and disagreements in the three domains of parenting addressed in this study.

Keywords: fathers as attachment figures, fathers as socializers, fathers as companions, father–mother comparison, parenting narratives

Introduction

In the first volume of his trilogy on attachment theory, Bowlby (1969/1982; see also Fox, 1967) advanced the somewhat provocative suggestion that the most basic human social unit may be a woman and her children, with societies differing in the degree to which fathers become attached to these units. Where fathers take a major role in childrearing, Bowlby surmised, children would direct attachment behavior to them as well as to mothers.

Bowlby’s proposals inspired several attachment researchers to extend their studies to fathers. At the same time, a dramatic shift in societal attitudes regarding the father’s role in the family led to an upsurge of interest in other aspects of father involvement. “New fathers”
were expected to attend their child’s birth, to be active in infant care, and show equal
interest in their daughters’ and sons’ development (Pleck, 1987). Although practice did not
necessarily keep pace with expectations (Backett, 1982; LaRossa, 1988; Parke, 1996),
fathers in professional dual-career families did become substantially more engaged in
parenting (e.g., Darling-Fisher & Tiedje, 1990). But how do highly involved new fathers
experience their expanded role? How do they perceive themselves in comparison to mothers,
and how do mothers perceive new fathers?

A number of qualitative studies published in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Daly, 1993;
Palkovitz, 1997, 2002a; Snarey, 1993) have provided valuable insights on how involved
fatherhood affects men’s personal growth and identity, based on Erikson’s (1950)
construct of generativity. Others have investigated fathers’ changing self-perceptions
during the transition to parenthood (e.g., Lewis, 1986), first-time father’s accounts of
involvement during early infancy (Lupton & Barclay, 1997), difficulties involved fathers
face in balancing active caregiving with the traditional provider role (Gerson, 1993), and
negotiations of tag-team parenting in families with active fathers (Dienhart, 2001).
However, none of these studies have used the lens of attachment theory to gain insights
into fathers’ experiences, and none include a systematic comparison of the father–
and mother–child relationship as perceived by each parent. To explore these topics, we
undertook a qualitative study based on the wider view of attachment proposed by
Grossmann, Grossmann, and Zimmermann (1999). These authors stress that sensitive
parents not only provide reassurance, comforting, and protection, but also serve as a
secure base for their child’s exploration by encouraging curiosity through playful
interaction. Broadening this view still further, we examined socialization issues from an
attachment perspective as discussed by Bretherton, Golby, and Cho (1997). To provide a
context for our study, we briefly discuss theoretical issues relevant to fatherhood raised in
developmental research on attachment, play, and socialization.

Fathers as attachment figures

One of Bowlby’s most controversial proposals about infant attachment was his frequently
misunderstood, perhaps because misleadingly named, “monotropy principle” (1958, 1959/
1982). To some this meant that infants form an all-exclusive attachment to a single
individual, the biological mother, but this is not what Bowlby had in mind. Following
pioneering studies by Ainsworth (1967) in Uganda and by Schaffer and Emerson (1964) in
Scotland, Bowlby concluded that infants typically focus on the mother as principal
attachment figure, with father and sometimes other family members serving as subsidiary
figures to whom infants turn when the mother is not available. Note, however, that Schaffer
and Emerson as well as Ainsworth described a few families in which fathers rather than
mothers became the adult from whom infants preferentially sought reassurance when
stressed or afraid. It appeared that responsiveness, not gender or absolute time spent with an
infant, determined which parent became an infant’s principal attachment figure.

That Bowlby considered fathers to be important attachment figures beyond infancy is
evident:

A young child’s experience of an encouraging, supportive, and cooperative mother, and a
little later father, gives him a sense of worth, a belief in the helpfulness of others, and a
favorable model on which to build future relationships . . . By enabling him to explore his
environment with confidence, and to deal with it effectively, such experience also
In the late 1970s, Bowlby’s notions about attachment hierarchies (the term we prefer to monotropy) inspired a series of systematic studies of infant–father attachment. A major contributor to this literature was Michael Lamb, whose comparisons of mother– and father–infant interactions at home and in the laboratory lent qualified support to the attachment hierarchy notion. In a stressful laboratory situation with both parents present, a majority of infants chose to seek reassurance from their mothers, but when seen separately with each parent, infants’ approach and contact-maintaining behavior did not differ (Lamb, 1976, 1978). Because Lamb provided only group data, however, we cannot conclude that the principal attachment figure in these families was invariably the mother, nor can we tell whether some infants showed no preference. Subsequent intrafamilial comparisons of father– and mother–attachment (e.g., Main & Weston, 1981) revealed that an infant’s attachment could be secure with one parent and insecure with the other, but the question whether the “secure” parent was also the infant’s principal attachment figure, though plausible, was not addressed. Since then, a number of studies have shown that infant–mother attachment is a stronger predictor of developmental outcomes than infant–father attachment (e.g., Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Suess, Grossmann & Sroufe, 1992; for a meta-analysis see van IJzendoorn & DeWolff, 1997). In summary, extant studies show under what circumstances infants direct attachment behavior to fathers, but none provide information about fathers’ experiences as attachment figures or about attachment hierarchies during the preschool period.

**Fathers as playmates**

Bowlby (1969/1982) considered the roles of attachment figure and playmate to be distinct, but not incompatible. Does this mean that fathers who serve as subsidiary attachment figures might have a primary role as playmates? Lamb (1977), during home observations of 1- to 2-year-old infants in nonstressful contexts, found that fathers engaged in proportionately more play than caregiving routines whereas the opposite held for mothers. Fathers’ play with infants also tended to be more physically stimulating than mothers’. Yogman (1981) reported similar findings for much younger infants, Power and Parke (1982) for older toddlers and Roopnarine and Mounts (1985) for preschoolers. The developmental importance of fathers as playmates was underscored by findings from Grossmann and Grossmann’s longitudinal study in Germany (Grossmann, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Kindler, Scheurer-Englisch, & Zimmermann, 2002). Rather than the quality of toddler–father attachment as displayed in the Strange Situation, it was fathers’ sensitivity while engaging in challenging play with their two-year-olds that predicted children’s self-confidence and trust in others during adolescence. The meaning of these experiences for fathers themselves has not been systematically studied.

**Fathers as socialization agents**

Bowlby did not extensively address the role of parents as socialization agents. However, while discussing the family experiences of children likely to grow into trusting and self-reliant adults (Bowlby, 1973), he cited findings from Baumrind’s (1967) classic study showing that children who are socially competent, cooperative, and self-reliant in the preschool setting tended to have parents who were consistent in handling their child and also loving and conscientious in their care. They respected the child’s wishes but could also stick to their own decisions. They gave their reasons for going against a child’s wishes and encouraged plenty of verbal give-and-take. In the laboratory they showed firm control and
expected a good deal of the child but were also supportive. They made their wishes clearly known. (Bowlby, 1973, pp. 350–354).

Adding to Bowlby’s views, Richters and Waters (1992) contended that arbitrary control and threats of love withdrawal are likely to undermine secure attachment (see also, Bretherton et al., 1997). In line with these claims, Cho (1994) obtained negative correlations between children’s secure attachment representations and mothers’ self-reported authoritarian (coercive) socialization practices. In one of the few observational studies on this topic, Kochanska (1995) showed that secure infant–mother attachment predicted the “committed” (i.e., willing) compliance of two-year-olds with their mothers’ demands, but only for temperamentally outgoing children.

Unlike attachment and play research, socialization studies have not explored differences in paternal and maternal guidance strategies. The current assumption appears to be that authoritative (democratic) parenting is associated with better child outcomes irrespective of which parent is studied (see extensive reviews by Parke, 1996, and Lamb, 1997). Kuczynski and Hildebrandt (1997), who discovered that parental discipline practices tend to be more context-dependent and flexible than implied by the earlier literature on parental styles (e.g., Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), also did not examine differences in fathers’ and mothers’ socialization practices. There is, however, limited evidence that parental disagreements (especially when related to childrearing issues) have a detrimental effect on children’s social development (e.g., Jouriles, Murphy, Farris, Smith, Richters, & Waters, 1991; see also Grych & Fincham, 1991).

The study

To shed light on how fathers experience themselves as attachment figures, socialization agents, and playmate/companions in relation to a specific preschool child we relied on a structured interview composed of 22 open-ended questions, the Parent Attachment Interview (PAI; Bretherton, Biringen, & Ridgeway, 1989a). Although we interviewed both fathers and mothers, our study draws primarily on fathers’ accounts. We made use of both parental interviews, however, to examine similarities and differences in how each parent perceived the father– and mother–child relationships. Because the literature had indicated that highly educated fathers in dual career families were particularly likely to practice involved fatherhood (e.g., Darling-Fisher & Tiedje, 1990) we recruited parents from such families, and focused on the preschool period during which fathers’ engagement in childrearing is likely to be higher than at other periods (Pleck, 1983).

Our analysis procedures are based on a modified version of the “grounded theory” approach to qualitative data analysis proposed by sociologists Strauss and Corbin (1990). This approach combines the dual goals of theory verification and theory generation, a procedure that Kuczynski and Daly (2003, p. 383) called “interpretive induction”.

Method

Sample

Participants were 49 European American, upper middle-class professional couples (two mothers were temporarily not employed, and one mother with professional training had not been employed since the child’s birth). Fathers’ education averaged 17.8 years and mothers’ 17.1 years. Fathers’ mean age was 38 years and mothers’ 37 years. Scores on the Hollingshead (1978) 9-point occupational scale for fathers and mothers ranged from ‘9’ for
higher executives and major professionals such as doctors, business executives, lawyers, and professors to ‘6’ for technicians, small business owners, and semi-professionals, with a mean of 8 for fathers and 7.5 for mothers. The interviews focused on the relationship with a specific preschool-aged child (27 boys, 22 girls). The children were between 3 years 1 month and 5 years 11 months old, spread evenly across the whole age range (M = 4 years 4 months). Fifty-one percent of the children were first-born, 47% were second-born, and one child was third in birth-order. Seventy-eight percent of the fathers thus had experience with more than one child. Two families had adopted their child in infancy, and one remarried father had adopted his wife’s child as a toddler.

The families were identified through four local preschools serving a primarily middle-class professional population. An initial letter of invitation was followed by a telephone call to the parents’ homes. Depending on the particular preschool attended by the child, between 50 and 70% of the families agreed to participate. Families received a gift certificate for a children’s book or a toy as a token of appreciation.

Procedure

Parents were interviewed in their own homes, either in the evening after the children had been put to bed or during the weekend while the children were cared for by someone else. The 45 – 90 minute maternal and paternal interviews were conducted concurrently but in separate rooms. A male researcher interviewed the father, and a female researcher interviewed the mother.

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim, including pauses and other audible responses such as chuckles or sighs. As previously noted, the analyses of the father–child relationship are based on the father interviews only, but the mother interviews were included in our examination of similarities and differences of the father– and mother–child relationship from each parent’s perspective. After completing the PAI, each parent filled out several questionnaires that are not included in this report.

The Parent Attachment Interview

The aim of the 22 PAI questions (Bretherton et al., 1989a) was to capture parental thoughts and feelings about the attachment-relationship with a focal child, but the interviews also yielded extensive information about other salient aspects of the parent–relationship, including discipline and companionship (Bretherton, Biringen, Ridgeway, Maslin, & Sherman, 1989b). The three introductory “warm-up” questions (responses not included here) focus on a parent’s thoughts and feelings before and at the child’s birth, and perceptions of the child as a person during the early months.

The major portion of the PAI dwells on the current parent–child relationship, beginning with a request for five adjectives or phrases that characterize the child. In follow-up questions, the parent is asked to recall specific episodes supporting these general descriptors. Next, the parent is queried about enjoyable and close times with the child. Because open emotion communication has been linked to secure attachment in previous studies (e.g., Main et al., 1985; for a review see Bretherton, 1990), the parent is asked to reflect on situations during which the child felt happy, angry, afraid, sad, affectionate, and proud, and situations during which they themselves felt sad and angry. The next question deals with aspects of the parent–child relationship that the parent has found disappointing, frustrating, or worrisome. To tap into aspects of the goal-corrected partnership (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Marvin & Greenberg, 1982), parents discussed situations in which they and their child had
different goals. Additional questions focused on bedtime and longer- as well as short-term parent–child separations and reunions. In their answers, parents were encouraged to recall specific episodes rather than limit themselves to generalities such as “he gets angry when he doesn’t get his own way”. In a third section, parents discussed similarities and differences in how they and their spouse related to the child and then considered intergenerational similarities and differences in parenting (the intergenerational findings appear in Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby, in press).

Open-ended instruments such as the PAI are useful when the aim is to discover, as it was here, what interviewees themselves regard as particularly salient. A drawback is that, under these circumstances, not every interviewee will provide exhaustive information about the full range of possible issues that could have been mentioned in response to the questions. If a parent did not bring up a particular topic, we cannot therefore conclude that he or she regarded it as irrelevant or had no view about it. To guard against social desirability bias, a problem that plagues any self-report instrument, we worded the questions in a nonjudgmental and nonthreatening way, and asked parents to provide specific memories.

Interview analysis procedures

Although the literature on attachment, socialization, and play was helpful in the initial identification of themes, we were particularly interested in identifying new issues related to fathers’ experiences rather than in confirming accepted views. Themes were derived from the interview text as a whole, not from answers to specific questions. For example, if a father mentioned his wife’s relationship to the child while talking about frustrations in the father–child relationship, we analysed these comments in conjunction with others pertinent to the mother–father comparison.

After carefully reading each transcript, we began to extract and print out verbatim statements that captured emergent themes such as affection. Next, we examined these excerpts to identify sub-categories of responses (e.g., the various contexts of affection) and entered these into charts documenting each child’s responses. These charts retained sufficient contextual information to allow a coder to judge whether or not a parent’s statement properly fit the category and sub-category to which it had initially been assigned. Sometimes reexamination of the charts led to the creation of a new category, at other times sub-categories that greatly overlapped were collapsed. When in doubt, the coder referred back to the original interview text. This procedure was performed iteratively until all relevant excerpts had been categorized. A second coder then re-examined the theme-charts for consistency, and discussed disagreements with the first coder. In some instances we relied on our word-processor’s search procedures to detect the use of specific words (e.g., “patience”).

To document how commonly or rarely particular themes and sub-themes emerged in the interviews, we indicate the percentage of parents (or number of parents for infrequent themes) who discussed a particular experience or behavior. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we did not, however, consider statistical tests appropriate. As customary in qualitative analyses, the main focus was on letting fathers (and for the parent comparison, mothers) convey their experiences in their own voices.

Results and discussion

The findings are presented in three parts that cover three major topics: (a) affection, closeness, and attachment, (b) discipline and parental self-regulation, and (c) play and
companionship. Within each part, the first section is devoted to the father–child relationship and the second to an analysis of the father–mother comparison from both parents’ perspectives.

**Affection, closeness, and attachment: Fathers’ reflections**

Fathers mentioned closeness, affection, and attachment not only in response to direct questions, but also while describing their children’s emotions, bedtime routines, separations and reunions, quiet companionship, and even discipline situations.

**Affection/closeness in attachment contexts.** Even though Bowlby (1969/1982) talked of proximity and affectionate mother–infant interchanges as manifestations of attachment, affection is not a frequently mentioned term in attachment research. Likewise, Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974) described sensitive mothers as engaging in “careful, tender” holding and defined attachment as an “affectional bond”, suggesting that not only affect but affection are involved. In our study, a substantial number of fathers brought up instances of affection when discussing “classical” attachment contexts such as separations and reunions, or a child’s fear, pain, or other emotional stress.

Parting in the morning as an important context for affection was mentioned by a quarter of the fathers. Two fathers provided vivid descriptions of their children’s reactions when they left for work without this ritual:

I can’t leave the house without hugging and kissing her ... I mean, she’ll cry ... I’ll have to talk to her on my car phone if she’s awake, and I left without hugging and kissing her.

They want to give you a hug ... If I forget, they'll almost chase after me to do it.

Similarly, many fathers (37%) received an affectionate welcome when they returned home or picked the child up at the preschool. Two fathers commented:

Without fail, the minute I come home from work, she’s all over me.

When I’m picking him up at preschool or if I’m home from work and he gets home ... he always runs up and has a story to tell me and usually a hug and a kiss.

In addition, just over half of the fathers (53%) talked of closeness and affection when saying goodnight (a mild form of separation), and 31% made similar comments about “reunions” in the morning:

I feel close when I’m putting him to bed at night, when he’s touching your face, and saying “I love you, Dad.”

In the morning ... when I’m laying in bed, she’ll always come and she likes to kiss me. She climbs in bed with us in the morning, and she’ll pat me; she likes to rub my arm and likes the way my hair feels.

A majority of fathers (67%) mentioned physical and psychological closeness during stressful situations when the child was in pain, sick, afraid of people or monsters, experienced hurt feelings, or felt sad. One father described feeling close to his child while comforting her:
Last night she realized that our neighbors are moving away because the moving trucks were right outside the door . . . They have a girl who’s one of her best friends, and she was very upset . . . So I sat with her for a while and held her.

Fathers felt especially close when their reassurances or mere presence was effective in alleviating the child’s stress and distress, an aspect of parental attachment that has been neglected. Here is how two fathers described their responses to feeling needed:

When he is frightened, he can get real affectionate, he can run and he can grab on to you . . . make you feel that he really feels security from you.

I feel close to her when she comes to me when she’s upset about, when she’s upset about something that’s really bothering her is when I feel really close to her. When she can talk to me about it and I can help her . . . It’s mostly [when] her feelings have been hurt about something. I, if I can help her feel better about that situation that’s when I feel close, that’s when she makes me feel the closest, because she needs me then.

On the negative side, three fathers mentioned feelings of frustration when attempts at providing reassurance to a child who needed it were unsuccessful. Seven fathers worried about their child’s emotionality (“falls apart real fast”), or clinginess (“sticks to you like Velcro”, “clings to you like a second skin”), and one father who interpreted distress as a type of misbehavior that the child should learn to control wondered whether “you should be the heavy or ignore this behavior”.

**Affection/closeness during companionship.** Almost three-quarters of the fathers (73%) mentioned physical and psychological closeness during quiet companionship. This included closeness while talking with each other at bedtime or in the car, and physical affection while reading at bedtime and watching cartoons together that offered occasions for snuggling, sitting on daddy’s lap, wrapping the arms around him, and hugging or kissing him. Here is how one father described mutual physical and psychological closeness at bedtime:

When we are physically close, we are laying in her bed . . . and reading a story . . . and just talking about what we will do the next day just gives me a very warm feeling.

Whereas fathers also mentioned feelings of closeness during more energetic joint activities, the percentage doing so was much lower (41%).

**Spontaneous affection.** Fathers (41%) seemed particularly pleased by their child’s spontaneous affection “out of the blue”, “for no particular reason”, as illustrated by the following three examples:

He likes to hug . . . just right out of the wild blue, he’ll just come up and give you a hug.

He will just come up and give you a big smackeroo on the cheek.

She’ll take a penny and wrap it up in paper and just come up and say “Here’s another birthday present for you” and give me a hug . . . it’s just real sweet.
Attachment researchers or other developmental psychologists have not, to our knowledge, studied the meaning of this commonly reported behavior for parents. Fathers experienced this behavior as one of the emotional rewards (in contrast to stresses) of parenthood.

**Affectionate empathy toward family members.** When listing five adjectives or phrases characteristic of their preschooler, 46% of the fathers offered “loving/affectionate” and/or “considerate/ thoughtful,” doing so in equal proportions for boys and girls. While elaborating on these adjectives, fathers not only described their child’s affection toward themselves, but also toward brothers and sisters, preschool peers, teachers, parents’ friends, and pets. They valued their children’s empathic and affectionate behavior irrespective of whether they were talking about a son or a daughter. Here is what one father said about his son’s loving behavior to a baby sibling:

> It’s just his nature. He expresses his love in so many ways, whether it be physical with a hug or a kiss, or doing little things for you, and just how he is with the new baby, he’s concerned, and just real open about his feelings.

One father especially appreciated his daughter’s affectionate empathy when he lay in bed with a high fever:

> And she just bops in and comes in with an ice cube. Somehow she had gotten into the refrigerator and gotten an ice cube and she said: “Dad, whenever I’m hot, putting an ice cube on my head always makes me feel better”. Made a bond that it was something she was doing for me, rather than the other way around.

There was one father, however, who felt his son might be overdoing affection:

> I sometimes I get a little uncomfortable with too much kissing on his part. I mean, he likes to just do it over and over again. I don’t mind a kiss on the cheek from time to time. But uh, when he wants to, every time he sees me, climb up on my lap and kiss me for about 5 minutes then, so uh, so I said, “What are you? A kissy fish.” He [child] just thought that was the funniest thing.

**Affection in socialization contexts.** Two fathers commented on affection as a child’s way to “make up” and reestablish closeness after having been disciplined for misbehavior. The excerpt below concerns a child who had been reprimanded about hitting other children at the preschool:

> Actually I feel closest when the poor little guy’s finally contrite and he comes to, finally after a day, or two or three of a strong tussle, like at school, and he’ll come and put his arms around you and tell you he’s sorry and he’s not going to be such a dipstick anymore … when he comes and sits on your lap in spite of all of the tussle we have about other things, he just still likes to be around and hug and kiss and sit and watch a movie.

Although only two fathers described young children’s attempts to use affection in the service of relationship repair, this is an important issue, both for attachment and socialization research.
Separations and reunions

Fathers’ accounts of daytime and longer separations offered additional insights into their thoughts and feelings as attachment figures. Not surprisingly, they had more to say about longer separations. Many fathers (31%), confessed to initial feelings of relief and respite when away from their child overnight or longer, but 80% mentioned that they missed their child, if not always as immediately or intensely as the two fathers cited below:

I miss her immediately . . . getting ready for the trip, I admit I’m thinking it will be nice not to have the responsibilities and the pressures . . . but I’m in the air a couple of hours and I miss them already . . . Night-times are the worst . . . that’s when I miss them the most.

I think about them all the time, it’s just the way I am. I can’t help myself from talking about them, it’s just they’re so much part of me.

Some fathers (22%) reported protective thoughts in conjunction with both short and longer separations, an aspect of fathering almost completely unexplored in attachment research. Fathers expressed these concerns about a variety of situations:

If there is terrible weather out I’ll think about that and worry a little bit.

Say, if he was sick or something, I kind of wonder if he’s doing ok.

There’s always a little bit of fear there, what if something happens to her, like if she’s out at the cottage . . . or what if she fell in the lake or something.

From an attachment perspective, a father’s concerns for the child’s safety are as understandable as the child’s attachment behavior (Bretherton et al., 1989b). Other than maternal separation anxiety studied by Hock and Schirtzinger (1992), we are not aware of research on fathers’ normal worries when separated from a child. A child’s distress can be especially upsetting when it conflicts with other obligations, as illustrated by one father’s quandary at leaving his crying child at the daycare center on the way to work:

It’s kind of wrenching, I feel my chest tightening up, my stomach tighten up . . . lump in my throat . . . I don’t want to dispose of her, so to speak, but I want to be firm and not give in, but be sensitive.

Only one father seemed quite uncomfortable with the question about separations, answering somewhat dismissively: “I’m a pretty rational guy, so I don’t get emotional about that.”

Comparison of affection and attachment in the father– and mother–child relationships

Almost all fathers and mothers mentioned attachment, closeness, and affection while comparing the two parent–child relationships, either in response to the direct question on this topic or at other points in the interview. Many fathers and mothers discussed attachment hierarchies in this context (for percentages, see Table I).

Attachment hierarchies. In 23 families (49% of the sample), both parents described the mother as the preferred attachment figure. In many others, one parent detected a preference
while the other saw the relationships as similar or did not mention this topic. Three couples (6%) agreed that the child’s primary attachment figure was the father, but in six additional families only one parent believed this to be the case.

Many parents prefaced remarks about preferences by describing the child as “real affectionate with both of us”, “the same kind of physical comfort”, or said “we both like to hold him”. One mother stated this position especially clearly, adding that the child preferred the father for active play:

I think that [child] knows that she can count on both [husband] and myself to provide her with anything she needs, whether it’s [that] she needs to have her rear end wiped or needs another glass of milk or has hurt herself, I think she is totally comfortable with the kind of care that she can get from either one of us, um... her dad knows how to do all the things that I know how to do... and I think that makes for one of the reasons that she is so secure and sure in herself and I’m very pleased with that. I think that she is more affectionate with me than she is with him and she also seems to want me more, she wants Momma to do it, so I think she is more dependent on me emotionally, I think that maybe she sees that with her dad there is a possibility for more kind of action type of things.

Explanations why a child might have special feelings for the mother varied. Some fathers regarded it as natural (“a deeper bond”, “a more physical bond”, “moms are special”) while others attributed it to the mothers’ more sensitive behavior, her ability to talk about feelings with the child, or more time spent with the child.

Mothers themselves did not attribute the child’s closeness to maternal instinct or nature. They either saw themselves as more attentive, affectionate, and understanding of the child’s feelings than the father, or they focused on the child’s initiative. Sixty percent of mothers mentioning preferences used expressions such as: “if they’re hurting they’ll ask for me”, “when they’re scared, they’ll come to me”, “he comes to me when something bothers him”, “I’m the one he calls for”. In the few cases in which a child favored the father as attachment figure, mothers explained it in terms of the relationship or the child’s feelings: “they read each other better”, “she likes him better”, or she is “a daddy’s girl”.

Table I. Percentages and frequencies of fathers and mothers describing differences and similarities in the father– and mother–child relationship (absolute number in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics addressed</th>
<th>Fathers*</th>
<th>Mothers*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closeness, affection, attachment</td>
<td>88 (43)</td>
<td>92 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child closer to mother</td>
<td>57 (25)</td>
<td>63 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child closer to father</td>
<td>10 (4)</td>
<td>14 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar closeness to both</td>
<td>33 (14)</td>
<td>23 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization, discipline</td>
<td>90 (44)</td>
<td>84 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father stricter/less patient</td>
<td>53 (23)</td>
<td>52 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother stricter/less patient</td>
<td>29 (13)</td>
<td>26 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar discipline by both</td>
<td>18 (8)</td>
<td>22 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship, play</td>
<td>71 (35)</td>
<td>90 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father more active</td>
<td>53 (19)</td>
<td>56 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father more playful, more play</td>
<td>6 (2)</td>
<td>20 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father more indoor play</td>
<td>12 (4)</td>
<td>16 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar activities with both</td>
<td>29 (10)</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages refer to parents who addressed the topic in their comparison; for major topics percentages are based on the total sample (n = 49), for subtopics, percentages are based on the subsample of parents who addressed the major topic.
One mother felt that fathers could learn to provide security as effectively as mothers. Her husband, she explained, had not experienced this with their first child, but after some learning on his part with the second child, he had come to “realize that he could have the same things that I had out of the relationship”.

Feeling left out? Not all parents viewed the child’s greater closeness to the other parent with equanimity. In response to a question about frustrating aspects of the father–child relationship, four fathers mentioned the child’s preference of the mother. One father vividly described his emotions in response to being excluded:

The fact that everything is “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy”, … and I’ve taken care of her since she was just little and, like I say, I had her all day when my wife was at school … and it’s been 50/50 right down the middle, but it’s always “Mommy” … and when Mommy’s gone she’ll be real nice towards me … and as soon as my wife comes home she is a totally different person, and I can’t get close to her, I can’t do anything with her, it’s all “Mommy, Mommy”. I find that irritating and frustrating.

When her mother was available this girl did not let the father touch her. Another father who said he would “like it to be more even” offered no reasons for the child’s preference, but his wife explained that he found the child’s crying or whining unacceptable (i.e., treated it as a discipline rather than an attachment issue). One mother, concerned that the child’s mother-preference might adversely affect the father–child relationship, said:

She’s very mommy-oriented right now, and I think it’s hard … It’s probably hard on Dad, and we try not to feed into that favoritism. I think there is a little part of him that gets detached a little bit from each other in that strong sense, because I think it’s kind of hard to always hear “Mommy, Mommy” … she really likes being with him, but if there’s a choice, right now it’s going to be me.

Another father who felt concerned about being shut out of the father–son relationship blamed his son’s jealous possessiveness of the mother for undermining the marriage.

In the few families in which the child claimed the father as principal attachment figure some mothers felt left out. One of these mothers commented: “he’s really closer to his father and in a way I miss that”. Another remarked somewhat cryptically: “she loves us both, but you would never know it”. This mother could not initially think of times when she felt close to the child, and said the child “pushed her away”.

Finally, in a small number of families, one or both parents described situations suggesting that the child’s expression of preferences had become manipulative, such as telling one parent “I’m your friend”, and the other “I’m not your friend”. Another mother had noticed that her son treated her as his temporary “knight in shining armor” only after “battles” with his father. To our knowledge, there are no systematic studies about how families with highly involved fathers handle attachment hierarchies in the long run, and how very exclusive preferences for one figure might adversely affect both parent–child and marital relations.
Socialization and discipline issues

Fathers’ reflections

Gaining their child’s cooperation in response to dos or don’ts was the issue that most fathers cited as a negative aspect of the father–child relationship. Attempting to be less strict than their sometimes authoritarian fathers (Bretherton et al., in press), many of the men in this study seemed to subscribe to authoritative or democratic forms of guidance (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) that combined firmness with sensitivity. They seemed to find it hard to remain calm, however, when these practices did not promptly yield a child who “listened”. We had the impression that, having intellectually accepted the idea of noncoercive parenting practices, fathers expected these to yield results more easily, promptly, and without children arguing, “talking back”, or simply ignoring them.

“Stubborn”, “pigheaded”, “pushy”, “strong-willed”, and similar adjectives were listed by 39% of the fathers as one of the five requested descriptors of the child. These and other negative terms (e.g., irritating, spiteful, surly), and even seemingly positive adjectives such as “independent” were explained in terms of resistance to parental demands. Asked about frustrating aspects of the father–child relationship, 82% of the fathers mentioned negative feelings about themselves and/or about the child’s refusal to cooperate (get dressed on time in the morning, go to bed willingly).

A quarter of these fathers commented on difficulties in retaining self control when their children “egged them on” or “pushed their buttons”, but also confessed they did not “feel so good” when that happened. One father assigned more blame to himself than the child:

I guess the only thing that bothers me, not necessarily about him but myself, is that I feel that I may overreact, maybe, to him sometimes, to him if he does something wrong or, he’s good at egging me on, because he can do that. And I can just explode too (laugh). He’s got the same temperament I do and there’s a certain point we can reach, ah, and I feel that I should control that.

An additional 47% felt frustrated when their attempts to gain the child’s prompt cooperation were ineffective, and 20% resented that they had to work so hard at getting their child to “listen”, even if they were successful in the end. Several fathers, while irritated about stubborn behavior, conceded that this might be the price they had to pay for bringing up a self-confident, assertive child. One father used an intriguing metaphor to convey his uncertainties about how to proceed:

It’s a constant question in your mind, you know, it’s just like this Persian Gulf thing, “What is the appropriate level of response?” And you go through child-rearing all the time, and you always have this fear that you’re either being too lenient or too harsh (chuckle), and never doing it right.

Comparison of the father–child and mother–child relationship

Almost all parents broached discipline issues when comparing themselves to their spouses (see Table I).

Both fathers and mothers talked of difficulties in retaining emotional self-control (patience, tolerance, remaining calm) or of losing self-control (short fuse, quick temper) in discipline contexts. Interestingly, the term “patience”, or “tolerance”, frequently used in connection with discipline by both parents, had positive connotations when it referred to
relaxed parental responses ("letting things roll a bit", "being more laid-back") or to greater understanding of the child’s self-regulatory limitations. In contrast, when referring to parental laxness or helplessness ("letting the child get away with too much" or "not carrying through") the word "patience" had negative connotations.

Fifteen of the 49 mothers and fathers (30%) concurred that the father was the stricter or less patient parent, and five couples agreed that this characterized the mother. In 21 families, one parent noted differences while the other either perceived both parents to be similar or did not mention discipline. Six couples held opposite views, with each parent believing the other to be stricter or less patient. More important than differences per se, however, was how the parents interpreted them.

The meaning of similarities and differences

Most fathers and many mothers initially emphasized that they and their spouses tried "very hard to have the same approach" or to "keep pretty much of a party line", although one father felt both spouses lacked patience, saying: "there’s maybe too many similarities". In addition, 22 fathers, but only nine mothers, softened their description of differences by using expressions like "a little more lenient", "probably an easier touch", "a little more harsh" to indicate that parental differences were small. Only one father and five mothers used expressions such as "we’re not the same at all", "vast differences", "much less patient".

Disapproval of the spouse. Of the 13 fathers who were critical of their wives' practices, 10 disapproved of her overly permissive behavior, claiming "she babies [child] more", "she gives her more latitude, lets it drag on more", "she gives in to his whines more readily", "doesn’t stick to her guns", "believes a child understands reason [sarcastic]", "can’t use physical force", or "would never follow through". These fathers claimed that they "drew the line earlier", "held firm", and "believed that a child should respect parents’ authority". In contrast, the three fathers who disapproved of the mother for being overly strict or demanding regarded their own lenient behavior as empathic and child-centered.

In contrast, most of the mothers who disapproved of the father’s discipline (11/14), felt he had too little patience, was too quick to anger and lock horns, or they faulted his harsh discipline and unempathic response to the child’s crying. Only one mother criticized the father for spoiling the child, and another complained that the father had "largely bowed out of childrearing (in the context of discipline)".

Self-criticism. Although many parents viewed their own discipline practices as superior to the spouse’s, nine of the fathers expressed admiration for their wives’ more effective and sensitive parenting, "being eminently more patient", or "better at patiently explaining" while criticizing themselves for their "short fuse". However, one father who felt he let himself be "worked on" (manipulated) too much by his daughter, chided himself for his "patience" and complimented his wife for her greater consistency. Several of the self-critical fathers said they talked discipline issues over with their wives, adding that "we’re getting more similar" or "a lot of my ideas are based on working with her". In contrast, the five self-critical mothers did not explicitly praise their husband’s practices.

Parents who discussed differences more neutrally (16 fathers, 15 mothers) described minor disagreements, such as how promptly they or the spouse intervened when the child "did not listen". Thus, instead of assuming that parental disagreement about discipline practices are necessarily detrimental to the parent–child and marital relationships, it seems
important to take into account whether and the extent to which parents admire or disapprove of each others’ discipline.

Companionship and joint activities

Father’s reflections

All but one of the 49 fathers described enjoyable indoor or outdoor activities in which they engaged with their child. Many of these fathers focused on the mutual engagement, attentive communication, and affective sharing that they enjoyed during one-on-one play and companionship with their children. In addition, they took vicarious pleasure in the excitement and curiosity their child brought to new experiences and the mastery of new skills.

Emotional connection. A sizable minority (37%) of fathers particularly appreciated joint activities because they offered an opportunity to connect with the child through positive “one-on-one” interchanges (while reading picture books, making up stories, and, for the 5-year-olds, counting and spelling). Even talking and singing in the car or engaging in outdoor chores could become an opportunity for positive one-on-one time, as shown in the two accounts below:

She and I, we do anything and enjoy anything where we’re just alone together, a specific example would be on a Saturday afternoon or Saturday morning where I have to go run some errands . . . she always seems to want to go with me. And when we’re out alone together she just she’s just really enjoyable . . . just spending one-on-one time together.

Just our raking leaves, or you know, shoveling snow the other day . . . and it was just [child] and I out there working away. It was just, you know, we were sort of just talking and not really a lot, but you know it was just being together was just real pleasant.

Two fathers who invested much time in joint activities said they did so because they foresaw a time when their child might no longer want this kind of interaction. In conjunction with fathers’ descriptions of closeness during quiet, and to a lesser extent active companionship, these descriptions highlight the relational significance of fathers’ positive time with children, over and above the exuberance that can go with play.

Exploration. Some fathers specifically talked about their enjoyment of the child’s attentiveness, exhilaration, curiosity, or excitement during joint activities, especially outings. One of these fathers felt he gained a fresh view of his surroundings through his child:

Like going for bike rides with him, and I think part of it is you see so many things, and he’s so tuned in that he’ll point out different things, and he gets excited about all these things, and a block later he gets excited about something else, and I think that’s part of what makes it, what makes it enjoyable, you actually get to know the neighborhood through a child’s eyes, he picks up on things that you take for granted and look past.

Exploration and trying out new skills (e.g., climbing on rocks, jumping off high structures, using sharp tools), even in the company of parents, is not always free of risk,
however. When their child wanted to explore potentially dangerous activities fathers combined their role as protective attachment figures with letting or encouraging the child to engage in mastery attempts. Whereas most fathers (not surprisingly) said they would explain why the activity was dangerous and forbid it, 45% of the fathers qualified their answers (fathers of 15 boys and seven girls). If only a bump, a bruise, or nonserious fall was at issue, about one-third of these 22 fathers said they let the child try the activity; another third compromised by suggesting a similar activity that was a little less risky (e.g., ask the child to jump from the sixth step of a staircase rather than the eighth, wear a helmet during tricks on the bicycle, or give instructions while standing ready to intervene). A small number of fathers had learned to trust in their child’s judgment (“she’s in touch with her ability”) and therefore let themselves be talked into overcoming their initial reservations. In short, without permitting what they considered to be unreasonable risks, many fathers strove to be as accommodating as possible when their child wanted to master a new challenge.

Almost one-fifth of the 49 fathers (18%) described their children as “bold”, “will try just about anything”, “more than willing to fall”. These children (six girls and three boys) were harder to protect. Conversely, some fathers (14%) who considered their child insufficiently daring, actively encouraged, even pushed, new skills. These descriptions show that fathers as supervisors of exploration and teachers of new skills were more active than the term “secure base” for exploration (see Grossmann et al., 1999) would seem to imply. They adjusted their protective and encouraging behavior to the child’s level of daring and timidity. A few fathers felt they might be pushing too hard.

Roughhousing. Although fathers mentioned roughhousing with children of both sexes, they did so proportionately more with sons (48% versus 18%). With boys, such interactions typically consisted of play-fighting; with girls they tended to take other forms, as illustrated below:

Well, the one fun thing which she loves and I love is roughhousing. She likes physical contact quite a bit and just loves to roll around on the living room floor, have me play an animal or she’ll be an animal or we’ll both be animals. She likes to be my cub, I am the parent animal and she is the child and I will walk around on my hands and legs and she’ll kind of get underneath, and she just can’t get enough of that, she just loves it. Those are very enjoyable times we have.

For outdoor play and games, on the other hand, the percentages of fathers who enjoyed these activities with sons and daughters were equivalent (62% and 59%, respectively). A number of particularly playful fathers combined outdoor and dramatic play, such as chases through a jungle gym “house” or using a park as scenery for enacting a story the pair had read together (e.g., “I was Shark Tooth and she was Little Foot”).

Time. Whereas most fathers focused on enjoyable times spent with the child, two time-related issues caused frustration. Three fathers felt unappreciated when a child “goofed off” or “walked away” after they had made time to respond to insistent demands for play. More commonly, fathers (20%) felt that by devoting as much time to engaging in activities with their children as they did, too little time was left for their own relaxation, hobbies, or interaction with their wives. Demands on their time irritated some fathers especially when they felt tired, and their child did not seem to understand.
Comparison of play and companionship in the father– and mother–child relationship

The percentage of fathers who compared themselves to the mother in terms of joint play and other activities with the child was considerably lower than the percentage of mothers (see Table I).

Not surprisingly, given the relevant literature, well over half of the fathers who compared mother– and father–child play or joint activities themselves as a more active playmate than the mother, including both roughhousing (horsing around, wrestling, rambunctious, and boisterous physical play) and sports as well as other forms of outdoor play. Some contrasted their own playful interaction with the mother’s more quiet or educative activities (playing board-games, puzzles, or reading), others distinguished their role as playmate from the mother’s as attachment figure. Only a very small percentage of fathers said they spent more time than the mother in pursuit of certain indoor activities with the child, such as watching cartoons, singing songs, cooking, or teaching the child about nature.

Mothers, too, tended to describe fathers as engaging the child in more vigorous, physical play and/or outdoor activities and games (see Table I). Alternatively, they said their husbands played more or were the more “playful” or “fun” parent. One mother who “hated” to engage in pretend play, was pleased that her husband had found a way to combine help with household chores with father–daughter sociodramatic play:

On the weekends, he’s taken over doing the laundry . . . and she [child] goes down there with him, and they actually play these kind of pretend games . . . They’ll come up the stairs and he’s saying: “Come on, doggy, come on now.” . . . so it’s usually that she is the baby puppy, and that he adopted her or got her from the pound, and she’s only 3 months old, and so he’s talking to her: “Come on, baby puppy, let’s do this or that.”

Gender. One father attributed his wife’s dislike of outdoor or rambunctious play to gender differences, and a few other fathers characterized roughhousing as masculine, though not necessarily unsuitable for girls. One father described roughhousing with his daughter as: “She [daughter] likes to do boy-type things with me” and another commented on his son’s enjoyment of roughhousing as: “I don’t know if it’s man-to-man or what”. Three fathers, perhaps countering gender bias, mentioned that they were somewhat less protective and more challenging of their daughters during outdoor activities than the mother, letting the daughter be “more bold and push her skills”. Finally, one father connected play, self-control, and male socialization:

I guess maybe that’s the male bonding situation, and that’s something that [wife doesn’t do] but it’s more fun for us, they can jump on me and it doesn’t hurt, and they can gang up on me, and they have a lot of fun doing that, and it’s a learning process that goes on there as far as setting limits as to what you can and can’t do, what will hurt people . . . and it also helps to dissipate frustrations.

Mothers, too, mentioned roughhousing as gendered. Wishing they could be playful like their husbands, some mothers described themselves as “boring” or “not as good at playtimes”. Several mothers were happy to leave roughhousing to their husbands because they disliked “being jumped upon” and “being ridden like a horse”.

In short, both fathers and mothers spoke of play, particularly roughhousing and outdoor play as a special aspect of the father–child relationship. However, while some mothers stressed that this made fathers more fun, fathers themselves emphasized joint activities as a
vehicle for emotional connection as well as vicarious enjoyment of the child’s curiosity. The few instances in which parents were critical of each concerned protection, with fathers willing to let their children be bolder and mothers wishing them to be more cautious, although one father described such differences positively in terms of complementary teamwork.

**Concluding remarks**

Our open-ended interview questions had the advantage of leaving parents free to discuss issues they, rather than researchers, regarded as particularly salient. However, unlike ratings of questionnaire items, answers to open-ended questions do not systematically address a defined set of topics. Hence, we cannot assume that parents who did not raise a particular issue had no opinion about it or did not regard it as important. Another potential problem relates to social desirability effects, an issue we attempted to circumvent by refraining from judgmental questions such as “do you think you are an involved father” and encouraging parents to describe specific episodes rather than give very general answers. It is nevertheless possible that some painful topics (such as feeling excluded by a child) were not disclosed. Future studies should therefore more deeply probe both common and rare topics raised by parents in this study.

Although we cannot make quantitative claims about father involvement, such as hours per week spent in caring for the child, as other studies have done (e.g., Darling-Fisher & Tiedje, 1990) fathers’ accounts of relating to their preschool child show them to be highly engaged and committed parents. Most provided vivid and tender descriptions of affection, protection, companionship, caring, and relational commitment, all listed by Palkovitz (2002b) as beneficial characteristics of positively involved fatherhood. Aside from the frustration related to issues of discipline, the fathers found much about their parenting role to be rewarding.

As attachment figures, fathers felt valued when they were able to effectively reassure and comfort a distressed child. They enjoyed their children’s affectionate greetings in leave-taking and reunion situations, and missed them during longer absences. Affection and close physical contact were an important aspect not only of attachment situations but also of quiet times together, and fathers particularly appreciated a child’s affection offered “out of the blue”. As playmates and companions, fathers enjoyed one-on-one interaction and encouraged their children’s curiosity while also serving as protectors. Lupton and Barclay (1997) suggested that a father’s involvement in joint activities is central to a sense of “being there”. Their view was shared by the fathers in our study. However, for many fathers “being there” also included feeling needed and being effective in providing comfort and security to their child as attachment figure.

Some researchers (particularly, MacDonald, 1992) have denied that affection plays a role in attachment. Perhaps because the quality of attachment relationships is generally assessed in the stressful Strange Situation, MacDonald linked attachment exclusively to fear and distress and, in contrast to Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth and colleagues (1974), interpreted affection as part of a separate “warmth” system. Admittedly, anxious attempts by a young child to restrain a parent from leaving or to cling tightly to a parent upon reunion are not usually characterized as affection (though a few fathers did view clinging as a form of affection). However, while not fitting the traditional definition of attachment behaviors, we suggest that affectionate leave-takings and greetings, as well as “snuggling” during quiet activities, may fulfil an attachment-maintaining or attachment-confirming function (Bretherton, 1980). These aspects of attachment deserve further study.
On the negative side, a few fathers expressed frustration about times when their children were hard to soothe or were anxiously clingy. In addition, while valuing time with their children, some felt that this left less time than they needed for their own pursuits. By far the most stressful aspect of the father–child relationship, however, turned out to be obtaining the child’s prompt and willing cooperation without using authoritarian discipline, and the effort involved in setting effective limits without losing self-control. Oddly, these topics are rarely mentioned in other qualitative accounts of involved fathering.

**Similarities and differences in father– and mother–child relationships**

Although many parents acknowledged differences in how they and their spouse related to the child in one or more domains, a majority prefaced descriptions of differences with statements about similarities. For example, most fathers in this study used the phrase “we both” at least once while comparing themselves to their spouses and many parents used qualifiers (e.g., “a little more”) when mentioning differences. Thus, when parents commented on differences they talked about them mostly in terms of degree rather than kind (“I do more of X, and she does more of Y” rather than “I do X and she does Y”).

Whereas many parents confirmed previous findings portraying the mother as primary attachment figure and the father as primary playmate/companion (see Introduction), these roles were reversed in a small number of families. More important than differences per se, we suggest, are the variety of positive and negative meanings parents assigned to these differences in the three relationship domains studied here. Concerning attachment hierarchies, some fathers felt frustrated and hurt when their children rejected comforting from them and insisted on the mother for reassurance. Others, who took this difference for granted (as natural) or attributed it to the mothers’ more understanding and affectionate behavior, accepted a role as subsidiary attachment figure without mentioning negative feelings. Criticism relevant to attachment emerged only in the area of protection, with some mothers worrying that fathers’ thresholds for letting children take physical risks were too low (in a very few instances fathers were more anxious). The family literature (e.g., Dienhart, 2001; LaRossa, 1988) tends to attribute young children’s greater closeness to mothers to maternal gatekeeping and to fathers’ feelings of incompetence or fear of maternal criticism. Mothers in our study, in contrast, stressed children’s agency in shaping attachment relationships. How these factors interact in the maintenance of attachment hierarchies needs further study.

Perceived disagreements in disciplinary practices often went hand in hand with (mostly mild) criticism of the spouse, with some fathers disapproving of the mother for being too lenient and some mothers disapproving of the father for being too impatient or too permissive. In addition, a few mothers faulted the father for treating a child’s distress as a situation requiring discipline rather than reassurance. However, a substantial number of parents chided themselves, not the spouse, for having a “short fuse”, and some fathers explicitly admired the mother’s greater patience with the child and tried to model themselves after her (similar findings were briefly reported by Daly, 1993). We propose that parent–child and marital relationships are likely to be impacted very differently when parental disagreements are accompanied by disapproval versus emulation of the spouse’s approach to discipline. Research to confirm this hypothesis is needed.

In the realm of play/companionship, both parents saw differences primarily in terms of complementarities. This was especially true of roughhousing, a type of play that a number of mothers disliked and were happy to leave to fathers. In this realm, differences tended to be seen as enriching family life rather than as a source of conflict. Finally, although gendered
parenting was most often mentioned in regard to this domain, it was not necessarily in support of stereotypical behavior. Although many fathers engaged in more rambunctious play with boys, some deliberately encouraged their girls to be bold and “spread their wings”.

Given the variety of meanings fathers and mothers attributed to interparental differences, we suggest that far more fine-grained studies are required to examine the effect of constructive negotiations versus hostile parental disagreements in families where fathers are highly involved. Disagreement per se as evaluated in most questionnaires, we suggest, may not be especially informative.

*Marital relations and father involvement*

Lamb (2002) speculated that positive father involvement creates a family context in which both parents feel good about their marriage. The obverse, that higher marital satisfaction may foster greater father involvement, has also been suggested (Cowan, Cowan, & Kenig, 1993; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). We suggest that the influence is likely to be bidirectional, creating a beneficent cycle in which good marital relations foster positive father involvement, and helpful father involvement, in turn, fosters good marital relations. What constitutes positively involved fatherhood, however, is likely to vary with the ecology of the family and parental attitudes. Positive fathering, from a feminist approach (e.g., Backett, 1982; Thompson & Walker, 1989), emphasizes equality of child care and household work. From this perspective, good fathering is measured by comparing the amount of fathers’ and mothers’ involvement in the home. Whereas the extent to which fathers are progressing toward shared parenting has been debated (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987; LaRossa, 1988), most of the couples in this study seemed to take shared parenting for granted. The mens’ interviews did not suggest that their involvement was primarily due to spousal pressure, nor did they mention their breadwinner role while comparing the mother– and father–child relationships. Wilkie, Ferree, and Ratcliff (1998) suggest that more equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities and of breadwinning offers more benefits in marital satisfaction.

In our study, mothers (not only fathers) aspired to new roles, valuing both family and career (Burkholder, 2003). Mothers in our study spent less time at home with their children than their mothers had done and devoted less time to housework. They shared parenting not only with their husbands but with child care providers (see Uttal, 2002, for a discussion). Recent research on dual-earner couples suggests that marital satisfaction is highest if neither spouse works very few hours or very long hours. This allows for a more equal contribution to both household finances and housework (Moen & Yu, 1999). Additionally, as highly educated dual-career parents, both fathers and mothers had greater freedom and resources than others to experiment with a new family ecology. They were financially stable and held fairly flexible positions that did not require them to punch time-cards. The flexibility to create work schedules which meet their own, their partner’s, and their children’s needs is associated with less perceived work–family conflict, even more so than reduction in hours worked (Gareis & Barnett, 2002).

The special circumstances that made involved fathering and experimentation with new motherhood possible in our study are, of course, not shared across all strata of society. This limits the degree to which our findings apply to families who do not share the same educational and occupational resources. We hope, however, that, with modifications and improvements, our approach to studying fathers’ experiences as attachment figures, socializers, and companions can be extended to families with children from different socioeconomic levels, cultures, racial groups, ages, and family structures.
Finally, our analysis underscores that, in everyday family life, the roles of attachment figure, socialization agent, and companion are not as neatly compartmentalized as they have tended to be portrayed in the literature. Rather, each role can be exercised in all of these contexts, even if fathers and mothers exercise them somewhat differently. Supportive and empathic parental behavior, usually studied by attachment researchers, can be viewed as a form of socialization (see Bretherton, Golby, & Cho, 1997; Dix, 1992; Richters & Waters, 1992), although it was not described in this way by parents in our study. Parents often have to cope with attachment and discipline issues simultaneously. During joint activities and companionship, fathers were called upon to fulfill their attachment-related role of protector when a child wanted to master a potentially risky skill, and fathers may see physical play as an arena for socialization. Systematic exploration of how facets of attachment are woven into other areas of parent–child relations would not only enrich and further widen attachment theory, but would also illuminate important relationship implications of play/companionship and parental authority.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Research Network on Early Childhood Transitions, the Research Committee of the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Waisman Center. We express our heartfelt thanks to the participating fathers and mothers, to Damien Doyle who interviewed the fathers, and to Mary Copus, Janet Gehrke, Julia North, and Margaret Peterson who transcribed the interviews.

References


Hollingshead, A. B. (1978). The four-factor index of social status. Unpublished manuscript, Yale University, CT.


