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How the Pandemic is Strengthening Fathers' Relationships with Their Children

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Far too many fathers have little involvement in children's lives. To be sure, expectations of fathers and mothers have changed substantially over the last 50 years, and more fathers are taking on substantial caregiving roles with children than in the past. But mothers are still likely to devote more time to care for children relative to fathers (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012), despite the fact that women have entered the workforce in droves over the last five decades.

Fathers' time with their children may be severely limited for many reasons, including work demands. Some fathers may also lack the motivation or confidence to engage in certain aspects of child-raising. Further, large numbers of fathers are physically absent from households and have little or no contact with their children. Half of all children in the United States will spend some portion of their pre-adult lives living in single-parent households; most of these

children will live with their mothers, and large numbers of these children's contact with their fathers evaporates over time (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010). For example, eight years after not living together, almost a quarter of children see their fathers no more than once a year (Cheadle et al., 2010).

Then came a pandemic. Our new, preliminary research, based on a national online survey of a diverse cross-section of 1,319 American adults—including 284 fathers—suggests this striking, heartening trend amid the many stresses families are now experiencing: **68% of fathers feel closer or much closer to their children since the pandemic, and only 1.4% feel less close.** Twenty percent of dads feel “much closer” to their children. Fathers report feeling closer to their children across race, class, educational attainment, and political affiliation.

In what ways are fathers feeling closer to their children? In a second survey we conducted over a week ago of 1,297 parents in the United States—including 534 dads—we asked about various dimensions of closeness. Among other findings, it appears that fathers are having more meaningful conversations with their children, getting to know their children better, and sharing more with their children about their own lives. Dads are also appreciating their children more and discovering new, shared interests with their children. The specific findings are as follows:

- 52% of fathers report that their children are talking to them more often about “things that are more important to them” while 40% report no change in the amount of these conversations. 46% percent of fathers report that they are talking with their children more often about “things that are important to them” while 40% report no change.
- 51% percent of fathers report that they are getting to know their children better while 41% report no change. 46% of fathers report that their children are getting to know them better while 46% report no change.
- 57% of fathers report that they are appreciating their children more while 37% report no change. 43% of fathers report that their children are appreciating them more while 49% report no change.
- 43% of fathers report discovering new, shared interests with their children while 45% report no change. 51% of fathers report that they’re doing more things with their children that their children are interested in while 37% report no change.
- 54% of fathers report that they’re paying more attention to their children’s feelings while 42% report no change. 35% of fathers report that their “children are paying more attention to my feelings” while 55% report no change.
- 53% of fathers report that their children are sharing more about their feelings/perspectives while 39% report no change. 50% of fathers report that they’re sharing more of their own feelings/perspectives with their children while 45% report no change.

1. In the bulleted findings, the reason that the percentages do not add up to 100% is that a small percentage of fathers indicated that the statement about their interaction or relationship with their child(ren) was “not true,” implying that their level of each type of interaction had either stayed the same or decreased. The response items were “Yes, this is true,” “No, this is about the same as before the Coronavirus,” and “No, this is not true.”

In the words of several fathers:

- "Staying and working from home has greatly helped in improving my bond with my little girl. It has brought us together closer than before. She freely shares her thoughts with me, what interests her, and what she wants from me. We play games together nearly every other day and I have become her partner in so many other things too. This is a remarkable improvement."
- "I feel closer to all family because we seem to be communicating more often and on a deeper level."
- "We have been spending time discussing social and family issues, discussions about news, work, studies, future, and so on. The conversations have been deep compared with our conversations prior to coronavirus outbreak and stay indoors order."
- "I have become closer to my daughter that lives with her mother. I wrote both of them a note about things I wanted them to know in case I got COVID-19 and died. It was like my final encouragement to them to lead great lives. Now we all appreciate life more."
- "I have found things to do with my kids that I might not have done otherwise if life was still normal."

- "It's certainly given us a lot more time together and it's helped us grow together."
- "I feel that my child is able to spend more time with his parents and do/learn some things he wouldn't be doing or learning in school."

There is, of course, a very real chance that fathers will quickly return to their former roles and to business as usual once the pandemic is over. But it's vital for fathers not to let these new, often very meaningful, interactions with their children evaporate. Fathers and children might set up rituals and routines now—whether taking walks, playing games, or going out for ice cream—that they commit to carrying on long after this pandemic is over.

Research suggests that increased involvement from dads can have many benefits for kids, including strengthening cognitive and emotional development and increasing the chances of academic and career success and life satisfaction (Allen & Daley, 2007). And solid relationships with dads are certainly better for kids than feeling abandoned by or worrying about being unloved by a dad who is unavailable or emotionally remote. These relationships can also clearly be profoundly gratifying for dads and are often at the heart of dads' healthy development.

Methods and limitations:

The online surveys mentioned in the report were conducted via Amazon's Mechanical Turk or Mturk, a fee-for-service survey panel that attracts diverse internet users who are "not all that different from respondents on other survey platforms" (Huff & Tingley, 2015, p. 8).

The first survey (N = 1319, 56% male, 10% Black, 71% White) was published to U.S.-based adults over 18 years of age in late April and early May, and the second survey (N = 1297, 41% male, 11% Black, 74% White) was published to U.S.-based parents in early June. Both surveys included about 50 primary questions (with some open-ended response options) developed by Making Caring Common. They each took participants less than 20 minutes to complete.

Upon completion of survey data collection, we used raking to generate sample weights which matched the samples to the population of U.S. adults on gender, race, age, income, educational attainment, and political party or affiliation. When applying the survey weights, both samples approximately matched the population

of U.S. adults in terms of race, gender, and political affiliation, although they were somewhat disproportionately higher in education and income, as well as more likely to be of working age (between 25 and 55). All results presented in this brief report incorporate the survey weights in order to attain better estimates of the U.S. population.

As is common with most survey research in the social sciences, self-report questions lend themselves to bias and subjectivity; however, many of the questions we asked were personal in nature and thus appropriate for self-reporting. Moreover, some threats to internal (e.g., attention or motivation) and external validity (e.g., generalizability) using Mturk have been reported (see Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012), but even after accounting for these threats, researchers have found that results obtained from Mturk samples are consistent with results obtained from other widely used and accepted sampling pools (see Follmer, Sperling, & Suen, 2017; Huff & Tingley, 2015).

Citations:

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