

How Socioeconomic Status Influences Fathers' Involvement with their Children and the Cycle it Produces

Emily Fofonoff

Abstract

The intent of this paper is to examine the current evidence that fathers of lower socioeconomic status are less involved with their children in areas such as childrearing, homework help, and supporting the family emotionally and financially. Other areas covered in this paper include the possible reasons and theories as to why low socioeconomic status tends to lead to low father involvement. The effects of low father involvement on the children is also discussed, and this concept is furthered in order to explain the *cycle of socioeconomic status* that these effects create. Possible solutions are derived using the current theories, the intent of which are to help solve this problematic cycle. This paper also includes extensions beyond the scope of low and middle socioeconomic status fathers to include high socioeconomic status fathers.

Emily Fofonoff is a student at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta studying Sociology with a specialization in Family and Youth. Emily's choice career is working with children, assisting with their cognitive development. She hopes to combine the theory learned in the Bachelor of Sociology degree with the knowledge learned in the Early Youth and Childcare diploma.

Introduction

Father's involvement with their children is a fairly new development in academic studies. This is due to a cultural shift in the ideal of fathers and their responsibilities. This shift has heightened and expanded the role of the father in the family (Carlson, 2006, p. 139). Carlson (2006) also notes that this has devalued the breadwinning role previously expected to be filled by men, and instead highlights child nurturing, caregiving, playing, and providing support (to mother and child), and providing guidance and discipline (p. 139). To fully understand the concepts being argued in this paper, it is important to have a working definition of them. Combining the examples that Carlson (2006) gives above, she provides a useful (although not exhaustive) collection of activities considered to be *involvement*. Seward, Cready, Igoe, Richardson, & Roberts (2006) effectively simplify many activities or actions that could be considered *involvement* into "three distinct components, including engagement, accessibility and responsibility" (p. 2). Meaning that the father needs to be engaged with their child – this could be playing, helping with homework, or just having a conversation. Accessible to their child – referring to the father being readily available to the child, and responsible (taking personal or financial responsibility for ensuring the child's success), in order to be labelled as involved with their child. Another term that needs to be defined before continuing is *socioeconomic status*. "[Socioeconomic status] SES is usually conceptualized to include multiple dimensions (knowledge, employment, and economic status) and is often indexed by education and occupation attainment and income" (Rogers, Saint Onge, 2007, p. 1).

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Many characteristics of low socioeconomic status are directly correlated with being less involved with the child. For example, a low-income job that usually is entailed with low socioeconomic status leads to stress, lack of free time, poor relationships, and even low-self esteem. Which, as we will discuss, all lead to a decrease in a father's parental involvement. In this paper, I will analyse the cycle that begins with low socioeconomic status in order to explain why socioeconomic status and level of father involvement are positively correlated.

Literature Review

Despite level of father involvement in activities other than breadwinning being a relatively new topic, majority of research shows that it is important to the child's development and success in many areas. We see evidence showing that the level of father involvement is a key determinant in the child's educational performance (Altschul, 2012), behavioural outcomes (Carlson, 2006), individual development (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010), as well as various other sectors. Much of the research done names the major difference between middle and low socioeconomic families as level of income. The lack of money creates a host of other problems for the low socioeconomic status family and it therefore leads to more issues within the family structure, and to more issues outside the family, all of which they cannot control. Eventually leading to less time and or energy dedicated to the child(ren).

Recent research has looked at the emotional support a child needs to succeed, and also the material resources required to put a child on the track to success. The results unsurprisingly claim that the middle socioeconomic status fathers possess or can obtain these material resources (e.g. money), while the lower socioeconomic status fathers are unable to gain them. This is identified in the *investment model* that both Altschul (2012) and Conger, Conger, & Martin (2010) observe in their respective works, which will be discussed later on.

Because academic achievement is affected by the child's (family's) socioeconomic status and socioeconomic status later in life is determined by academic achievement, schools function to perpetuate and reproduce these social stratification issues. As Altschul (2012) identifies, in order to break this pattern, we need to "invest in human and social capital of... parents" (p. 27). By this, she means we need to implement programs to help low socioeconomic parents increase their human and social capital, which they will then pass on to their children. This then allows the children to succeed and in a sense, *bridge the gap* between different social classes.

Differences Between Low and Middle Socioeconomic Fathers

Differences in things like parenting techniques, discipline styles, jobs/careers, personalities, family dynamics, and personal issues are apparent when looking at low socioeconomic fathers compared to middle socioeconomic fathers. As Kwon and Roy (2007) found in their study of father involvement:

Middle-class and working-class [(low socioeconomic status) fathers] did deal with some issues that were specific to their socioeconomic status... more working-class men struggled with [balancing the tradition of drinking with parenting] ... middle-class fathers... invested time in additional education to help them move up the ladder in their workplace (p. 298).

This study shows some of the difference in lifestyles between low and middle socioeconomic status fathers. Low socioeconomic status fathers fought to fit the tradition of hegemonic, masculine drinking in with the changing roles of fatherhood. While middle socioeconomic status fathers adapted and took on more involvement in the *responsibility* component. Even if it was fulfilling a more conservative "breadwinner" role. It is important to look at the possible reasons why this difference may occur. The middle-class men work hard because they are employed in jobs where there is a possibility of receiving a raise or promotion. Whereas working-class or lower socioeconomic status men are more likely to work at *dead end* jobs, with no advancement

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opportunities and therefore putting extra effort into work would not have any effect on their pay or position.

A difference noticed by Kaiser is based on the work of Annette Laureau – a sociologist with a family studies background. It is a difference set in the technique category. Kaiser (2017) notes that according to Laureau, there are “two class-based parenting strategies that lead to the reproduction of social inequalities” (p. 78). It is identified that the higher socioeconomic status families’ strategies are “child-centered” and lead to “competent children”, whereas low socioeconomic families’ strategies are the opposite – less child focused and produce less competence in children (Kaiser, 2017, p. 78). This may be due to the time and energy the parent has available to put into childcare, and also possibly due to the higher education of middle socioeconomic status fathers about what kinds of childcare are most effective.

An interesting difference observed between low and middle socioeconomic status fathers is the duration of their lifetime spent parenting. As Ravanera and Rajulton (2000) state, “men of lower class start earlier and end parenting later” (p. 73). Meaning that low socioeconomic status fathers have their first child earlier in life and last child later in life (or a child stays at home longer) than higher socioeconomic status fathers. This trend indicates lower socioeconomic status fathers have more children. Ravanera and Rajulton name determining factors of length of time spent parenting as, “earlier school completion [or non-completion], starting work earlier, getting married earlier (all due to lack of parental resources, and parent expectations)” (p. 74). Not attending school (high school or post-secondary) and starting work earlier can be seen of the effects of parents not having the resources to support the (now) father through high school and into college or university. Marriage at an earlier age appears to be a *fall-back* option. The main choices in a new graduate’s life seem to be *family* or *post-secondary*. If post-secondary is

inaccessible, family is the only choice. Due to low socioeconomic status fathers having more kids and less resources we could extrapolate and derive a thesis stating: because of the dispersion of attention and resources required for multiple children, low socioeconomic status fathers are proven less to be involved with per child. Another reason to estimate that low socioeconomic fathers would be less involved with their children in this case is because all three components of involvement (engagement, accessibility, and responsibility) would be compromised. The sections of engagement and accessibility are threatened due to the division of time required by each child. Responsibility (in the financial sense) is susceptible because there is less money available per child.

Explanations for the Different Levels of Involvement

The first explanation for the increase in father involvement compared to an increase in socioeconomic status is a self-reported description provided by fathers in a study done by Seward, Stevens, Cready, Igoe, Richardson, & Roberts. They have found that “barriers in the workplace have been repeatedly reported by fathers as among the most important reasons for low levels of paternal involvement”. The barriers mentioned include “working more hours, little control over work time, unsympathetic supervisors and coworkers and a ‘company culture’ that fails to support father involvement” (Seward, Stevens, Cready, Igoe, Richardson, & Roberts, 2006, p. 13). All of the barriers listed in these findings are more likely to belong to low socioeconomic status fathers who are in working-class jobs rather than middle socioeconomic status fathers. Higher quality jobs are more likely to work closely with their employees and, as this study goes on to explain, more jobs are even encouraging fathers to take paternal leave. Nonetheless, you are more likely to see these incentives in higher paying, higher socioeconomic status jobs, leaving these barriers to be dealt with by the lower socioeconomic status fathers. The

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lack of barriers is a reason as to why middle socioeconomic fathers are more involved with their children than are low socioeconomic fathers.

More theoretical-style approaches to the explanations as to why middle socioeconomic status fathers are more involved with their children are the stress model, the investment model, and the four-factor model. The stress model, as explained by Altschul (2012) claims that “economic hardship [caused by working in a low-income job related to low socioeconomic status] leads to parental stress, which leads to family conflict and parental depression; in turn, parental conflict and depression reduces positive-parenting behaviours that promote child well-being” (p. 15). Another way of explaining the stress model comes from Conger, Conger, and Martin (2010), where they describe it as the “parents’ economically influenced maladjustments predict[ing]... problems in parenting such as harsh, uninvolved, and inconsistent childrearing practices” (p. 692). The stress model is useful because it identifies that lack of father involvement stems from low-income caused stress, which is strongly related to low socioeconomic status fathers and not higher socioeconomic status fathers. Basically, stress from belonging to a low socioeconomic status and earning a low income causes the side effect of less parental (father) involvement.

The stress model is applicable to the different parenting strategies of low and middle socioeconomic families that we mentioned above. Less stress for the middle socioeconomic fathers leads to healthy, child-centred parenting practices, whereas the opposite is true for low socioeconomic fathers. Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman, Einhorn, & Etter (2011) fortify this theory by providing their findings that “one stressor known to take a toll on fathering... is financial hardship” (p. 191), they also state that “fathers [with]draw from children... [because]

they are particularly sensitive to financial problems... which are then associated with poorer parenting” (p. 192).

Along side the stress model, Conger, Conger, & Martin, as well as Altschul speak to another explanation for varying levels of involvement between low and middle socioeconomic status fathers: the investment model. Conger, Conger, & Martin (2010) define the investment model as a theory which “proposes that families with greater economic resources are able to make significant investments in the development of their children, whereas more disadvantaged families must invest in more immediate family needs” (p. 694). Altschul’s (2012) description of the model follows suit with the previous, suggesting that “as a household’s socioeconomic resources increase, so does the parents’ ability to invest resources, as well as human and social capital” (p. 15). Both of these definitions suggest that as socioeconomic status rises, so does the ability of the parent to offer resources. Financially due to higher income, but also in terms of human capital (e.g. skills, knowledge, experience). This transfer or investment of capital may be due to the average higher *quality* time spent with childrearing activities (Carlson, 2006, p. 139), but it also may be just a matter of higher socioeconomic status fathers simply possessing certain human capital that lower fathers do not.

The investment model would be effective for explaining why men of lower socioeconomic status start having children earlier and parent for longer than higher socioeconomic status fathers do. The father’s parents passed on their capital – skills, knowledge, and experience. Which, due to a lack of finances, include starting work and having a family young while skipping education. This reproduces the pattern, and due to reasons discussed previously, works to keep levels of involvement for low socioeconomic fathers at a low average.

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It is significant to note that the stress model and the investment model are not mutually exclusive (nor are the different parenting practices used by the fathers). This means that they are likely to be affecting a family simultaneously (Altschul, 2012, p. 16). This also applies to the different practices we see between parents with different socioeconomic statuses. It is likely that the lower socioeconomic status fathers use less child centered practices, parent longer, and also perform other practices that separate them further from the middle socioeconomic status fathers. This also means that these theories and practices intersect. When looking at the level of involvement, we might see a certain practice that restrains a father from meeting two out of three of the involvement components. This then may lead us to assume that since this specific practice is not completely restraining him, he is able to meet the third component. When in fact, another practice or model could also be present, restricting the father from meeting the third requirement of involvement as well.

The final model that is useful to shed light on the reasons as to why lower socioeconomic fathers show lower levels of involvement with their children is the *four-factor model*. Seward, Stevens, Cready, Igoe, Richardson, & Roberts (2006) identify the four factors as including: motivation, skills/self-confidence, social support, and institutional. They analyse these factors under macro and micro scenarios to explain the parents' personal identities and interactions. As well as to predict the fathers' behaviour (p. 9). This concept is interesting when you apply it to the barriers of the workplace that fathers identified. These four factors in a person's life are all affected by working at a low income, low socioeconomic status job. Motivation and skills drop while working a dead-end job as there is no reason to push yourself to get educated or gain skills in order to be better at your job and move up the ladder. As we have seen, low socioeconomic status men go to drink after work, while middle socioeconomic status men put in extra hours

educating themselves (Kwon and Roy, 2007, p.298). This action by the middle-class men indicates their motivation to work for a promotion, and increasing their skills by gaining education.

The other two factors are situational. Each person has a different level of social support dependent on their family connections. Although, with the cycle idea, we can assume that a low socioeconomic status father's father is *also* low socioeconomic status and therefore engages in the same low level of involvement that his son is most likely displaying. Therefore, the current generation father will not see much support or involvement from his own parents. Institutional factors include help offered by the government. Once again this is situational. If the family is on a social welfare system, their identities and behaviours may be different than if they were not receiving this help.

Effects on Children

A variety of effects on children caused by lack of father involvement have briefly been touched on throughout this paper; this section will examine them further. The most prominent effect of low father involvement appears to be on the child's academic outcome. Altschul (2012) has done in-depth study on the link between parental involvement with the child's education – “defined by parents' investment of resources in their children's education, and also... in terms of parents' behaviours, their personal support for education, and their provision of cognitively stimulating materials and activities” (p.25), and academic outcomes. She found evidence suggesting that family processes linked to socioeconomic status are an important source of supports and barriers for adolescents' academic achievement (p. 25). Once again, we see socioeconomic status not directly causing the affect, but causing a chain of events:

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socioeconomic status leads to specific family processes, which lead to academic achievement (or lack of). This then restarts the *cycle* which will be further discussed later on.

Another well documented effect of low levels of father involvement on children is that it leads to the child having behavioural problems. Carlson (2006) notes that “father involvement has a direct effect on adolescent behaviour” (p. 150). To be more specific, Carlson’s research found that “father involvement is significantly associated with fewer behaviour problems” (p. 150). While aspects like discipline, love, and family processes (which are all considered a version of involvement) are extremely likely to affect the child’s behaviour patterns, Carlson notes that the most important benefit children gain from involved fathers is the father’s social capital. In other words, since children are so impressionable, simply being around the father is enough for the father to (consciously or not) teach their children about the different types of relationships throughout society (e.g. friend to friend, teacher to student) and how they are expected to behave in each of these relationships. It also teaches them how to navigate these different relationships in a socially acceptable way in order to get further in life. For example, the student is expected to respect their teachers in order to avoid trouble and succeed in class. This knowledge will stay with them, and transfer into their adult lives. To explain, it could help them relate to their supervisors at work and succeed there as well.

Other effects worth mentioning are discussed by Allen and Daly (2007). They measure father involvement by “the amount of interaction, including higher levels of play and caregiving activities” (p. 1). The first effect of higher levels of father involvement on children that they note is higher cognitive development. Due to the fathers engaging in the involvement activities mentioned above, children were found to have higher cognitive development than did children whose fathers did no engage in these activities (p. 1).

Another effect found was that children whose fathers were more involved were more likely to be securely attached to their fathers, be better able to handle strange situations, be more resilient in the face of stressful situations, be more curious and eager to explore the environment, relate more maturely to strangers, react more competently to novel stimuli, and be more trusting. All of these characteristics can be summarized into the category of emotional development and well-being (Allen and Daly, 2007, p. 2). Being well situated into their surroundings is an important aspect for a child in order to feel like they have a safe space to grow and learn.

Social development is also mentioned by Allen and Daly. This relates well to the behavioural outcomes discussed previously. The father provides social capital (Carlson, 2006), which allows the child to develop socially. Including “overall social competence, social initiative, social maturity, [and] capacity for relatedness with others” (Allen and Daly, 2007, p. 4). As well as the poor behaviour that results from not understanding these components of social life. If the child does not understand how to relate to others (e.g. sharing, or respecting authority), they might be seen as ‘acting out’ and get themselves into trouble at school. As discussed previously, understanding social cues is an important aspect of behaviour that the child will carry for life.

The final effect is the impact on the child’s physical health. This occurs indirectly before the child is even born. The father’s involvement with pre-childcare – for example, being involved with doctor’s appointments, helping prepare the house for the baby, baby shopping, and simply supporting the mother allows her and encourages her to stay healthy. Therefore, benefiting the child’s health as well. (Allen & Daly, 2007, p. 5). The importance of these effects can be seen in the long term. Being a father with low socioeconomic status leads to low

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involvement with children due to work, stress, lack of resources to invest, availability, and a decrease in the first two of the four major factors (motivation and skills).

Exceptions and Extensions

Of course, there are exceptions to these explanatory models. There are various personal anecdotes where men *pull themselves up by their bootstraps* and exit the cycle of poverty (as well as the cycle of low father involvement). It is important to keep these cases in mind while considering this topic in order to avoid negative consequences such as stereotyping fathers of all socioeconomic statuses.

A question raised while reading Kwon and Roy's study is: does this trend level out? By this, I mean: after a certain point, does the level of father involvement taper off and possibly even drop once socioeconomic status reaches a certain point? Kwon and Roy found that due to the extra pressure from work,

[Lower socioeconomic] fathers [had] 42% of the men spending less than an hour every weekday caring for their children, and 58% spending between one to five hours in caregiving activities daily. [Higher socioeconomic] fathers were much less involved by comparison. Only 15% of these fathers spent more than an hour of every weekday with their children. A full 85% counted minutes, and not hours, with their children, and four of these fathers admitted that they did not see their children at all (p. 296).

We know that low socioeconomic status equal low levels of involvement and middle socioeconomic status equals higher levels of involvement. But at a certain socioeconomic status level, does this stop being true? Do the demands of a high-level "CEO career" combined with the luxuries and help that a person with extremely high socioeconomic status can afford (such as nannies, tutors, and private boarding schools) cause the level of father involvement to drop back down to low levels? Of course, it depends on the definition of involvement being used.

According to the investment model, this father would be seen as investing a large amount of resources into their child and therefore be tremendously involved in their child's life.

Although, as we know, the models are not mutually exclusive. This means that the stress model could also be at play in this situation. The stress of a very prestigious job must be just as stressful as having a low income. Although, instead of worrying about the thousand dollars for rent that the low socioeconomic status father is worried about, the high socioeconomic status father is worried about the one-hundred and fifty million dollars needed for the new international factory. Although the types of stress are different, they are likely to lead to the same conflicts within the family, and, due to the same reasons that were discussed earlier, lead to less father involvement with the child.

To look at this scenario from another point of view, the three components definition is useful. This extremely high socioeconomic father would most likely be less engaged and accessible to their child due to strong work commitments. They would most likely be less responsible (responsibility here meaning ensuring child's success, not financial) for their child due to the hired help (e.g. nannies, tutors). Therefore, they would be overall less involved with their child. Further research would need to be done to fully answer this question.

In order to fully understand socioeconomic status and what causes father involvement, it is essential to look at the other aspects of life that socioeconomic status affects, as well as the other possible determinants of father involvement. It is shown that the socioeconomic status of a person is commonly linked to health and mortality. Due to the institutional aspects of socioeconomic status, it has been shown that people with lower socioeconomic status have less access to health information, healthy foods, and are unable to follow through with doctor recommendations (e.g. paying for prescriptions) (Rogers & Saint Onge, 2007, p. 1). It is equally

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important to ensure that socioeconomic status is not seen as the only predictor of father involvement. There are many alternative suggestions, including: the quality of marital relations, the personal characteristics of the father and child, the father's level of self esteem, the father's level of sensitivity, and the father's ability to manage work and family (Volling & Belsky, 1991, p. 471). Although many of these other suggestions *may* have originated from low socioeconomic status, there is also a chance they emerged naturally, or from other cause. Following this analysis then, it is apparent that there are other causes of low or high father involvement, and socioeconomic status is not always the cause of low father involvement.

Low Socioeconomic Status Cycle and Possible Solutions

After analysing, it is apparent that the effects on children ensure that a low socioeconomic status cycle is created. This cycle is extremely difficult to break out of due mostly to the institutional barriers that work in our society to keep people in their designated "class". The cycle is as follows: low socioeconomic status father is less involved with his child, less father involvement has negative effects on the child (e.g. low academic outcomes), effects on child ensure child does not get higher education, lack of education leads child to have a low socioeconomic status, child become low socioeconomic status father. While this cycle could take other forms, with many options filling in for "low academic outcomes", this is the base and it can be modified to represent many different possibilities that all lead to the same outcome: low socioeconomic status.

The workplaces need to be at the start of the movement if we want this reproduction of low socioeconomic status fathers to end, since most men labelled their place of work as the largest barrier to their levels of father involvement. Workplaces need to offer more family friendly policies and encourage supervisors to be more understanding towards family issues.

The second way to fix this cycle is through the education system. Schools are an important tool if we are to change the way people are educated and socialized towards many topics. Education level of the individual is one of the components that is used to determine a person's socioeconomic status. Modifications to the education system could help unify the population instead of "streaming" certain children into "academic classes" and others into "applied classes". Extra programs could be offered as well to ensure that students that are disadvantaged at school by their home life are staying caught up with school work. This would prevent the underprivileged students from falling behind, and in turn make it more likely that low socioeconomic students would continue with education, possibly to post-secondary, and be less likely to start work and a family earlier.

The final object society could alter in order to shift the way socioeconomic status affects father involvement levels is the current *image* of fatherhood. By changing the way people are socialized to think about men's roles or women's roles, father's roles or mother's roles, we could see a big shift in the attitude of fathers. Currently, images are shifting, but institutional aspects are still the same. In most places, it is accepted if a father is heavily involved with childcare but not encouraged. In Sweden, fathers are required to take three months of *mandatory* parental leave. If our views of fathering more closely resembled Sweden's progressive views, we would see many more fathers of all socioeconomic levels participating in many more types of involvement with their children.

Conclusion

After analysing the respective levels of involvement of low and middle-class fathers, the theories behind these differences, and the effects on children, it is clear that there is a link between the level of father involvement and their socioeconomic status due to the side-effects of

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belonging to a low socioeconomic status. Findings overwhelmingly showed that low socioeconomic status fathers were less involved with their children – regardless of the *type of involvement* analysed. This is due to factors beyond their control such as, work restrictions, stress, number of children had, or lack of resources available for investment in the child's development.

Using research completed on fathers' reasons for lack of involvement, and combining this with research on effects of low socioeconomic status, we are able to see that there is in fact a link between the two – and conclude that socioeconomic status has effects that actually cause the lack of father involvement. In other words, the impacts of being low socioeconomic status lead to less involved fathers. We also found that socioeconomic status and level of father involvement combined with structural components such as workplace policies, education processes, and socialization reproduce a cycle that ensures low socioeconomic status families stay low socioeconomic status (and therefore less involved with their children) for generations to follow.

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