

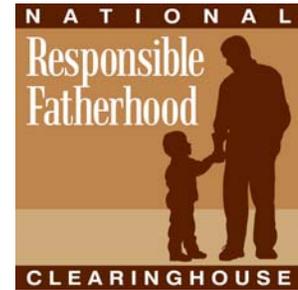


U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

February 2010



## Father Involvement and Family of Origin

The characteristics of men's families of origin—such as the quality of their parents' relationship and whether their father was present in their lives—have important implications for their own marital relationships and their involvement with their own children.

### Definitions

*Father involvement* refers to the type and level of a father's involvement with his children. The concept encompasses three main dimensions: *engagement* (a father's involvement in activities with his child), *accessibility* (a father's availability to his child), and *responsibility* (the extent to which a father provides his child with resources, including financial support).<sup>23, 24</sup>

### Importance and Implications of Fathers' Families of Origin for Father Involvement

Researchers and theorists emphasize that individuals' relationships in their current families are influenced by the experiences and relationships they had in their own families of origin.<sup>38</sup> Both the current state of men's marriages and the nature of their involvement in their children's lives may be shaped to a significant degree by the relationship and parenting models fathers experienced in their families of origin.<sup>3, 11</sup>

#### *Implications for Fathers, Their Partners, and the Coparental Relationship*

- Characteristics of the family of origin have been shown to influence the timing of men's transitions into fatherhood.
  - Several characteristics of men's families of origin have been found to be related to an increased likelihood of experiencing an early transition into fatherhood, including: being raised in large families; coming from families considered having low socioeconomic status; being raised in single-parent households; being born to an adolescent mother; having parents with low levels of education or low educational aspirations for their children; having a poor-quality relationship with one's parents; having a mother who used harsh, inconsistent discipline styles; or having parents who engaged in antisocial behaviors.<sup>10, 13, 19, 25, 34, 35</sup>
- Research has found that current marital quality is positively related to the quality of one's parents' marital relationship in the family of origin.<sup>5, 14</sup>
  - The ways in which spouses behave toward one another and the level of aggression that they show in their interactions with each other have been shown to reflect the behavior and aggression styles exhibited by their own parents in their families of origin.<sup>21, 37</sup>
  - Recollections of having positive relationships with one's own parents have been linked to better marital quality in one's own marriage following the birth of a child.<sup>4, 16, 22</sup>
- Studies suggest that fathers' current coparenting behaviors are related to the quality of coparenting in the family of origin.
  - One study showed that fathers exhibit more positive coparenting behaviors when they perceive that their own parents had a more positive coparental relationship, whereas mothers' coparenting experiences were found to be unrelated to their families of origin.<sup>36</sup>

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- Other research found that mothers whose parents had more supportive coparenting relationships exhibited more supportive coparenting with their own spouses, compared with mothers whose own parents had less positive coparental relationships. However, the supportiveness of the coparenting relationship in fathers' families of origin was not found to be related to current coparenting supportiveness.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Implications for Father Involvement*

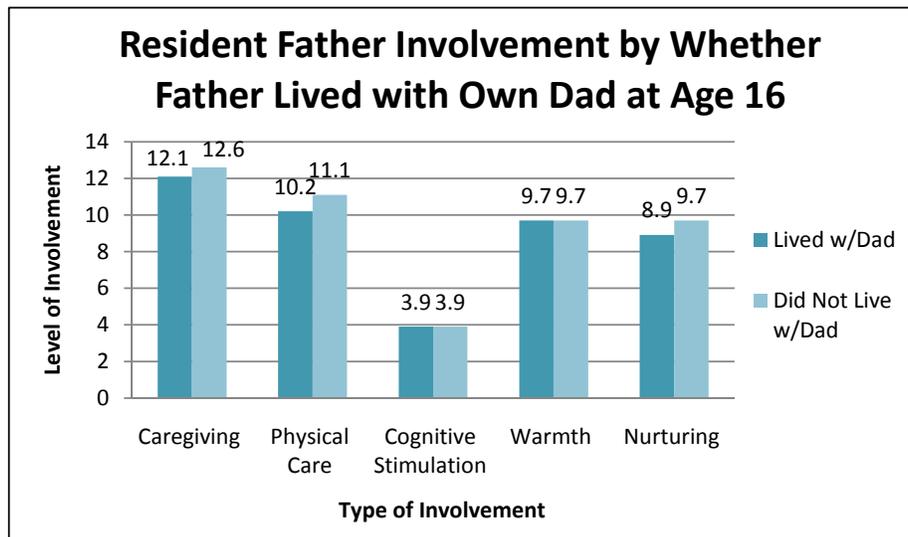
- Fathers' parenting behaviors and involvement with their children are often associated with one's family of origin.<sup>11, 27</sup> Researchers have proposed two possible explanations for how the family of origin may influence father involvement:
  - The *modeling hypothesis* suggests that fathers model the parenting that they experienced with their own fathers (whether positive or negative).<sup>27</sup>
  - The *compensation hypothesis* suggests that fathers who experienced poor parenting as children attempt to compensate for that poor parenting by being better parents to their children.<sup>27</sup>
- Both of these explanations are supported by studies that have examined fathers' families of origin and current involvement with children, acknowledging that fathers may either model their own parents' behaviors or may compensate for a lack of positive parental experiences with their own children.<sup>15, 27, 29</sup>
  - Adolescents who report that they experienced good parenting are more likely to exhibit more positive parenting (e.g., better monitoring, communication, discipline, involvement, and affection) with their own children 20 years later.<sup>6</sup>
  - Men are more likely to spend more time living with their own children if they report having positive relationships with their parents during childhood, if they experienced low levels of conflict in their family of origin, if their parents were not engaged in antisocial behaviors, and if they did not experience changes in caretakers as children. In contrast, men who report less positive family of origin characteristics are likely to spend less time living with their children.<sup>19</sup>
  - Adolescent fathers may be more likely to take responsibility for and help care for their children if they have positive feelings toward their own families of origin and if they perceive that their families of origin support them in their father roles.<sup>7, 18</sup>
  - Fathers may participate in child care more if they remember their own relationships in their families of origin as cohesive, expressive, and low in conflict.<sup>8</sup>
  - Fathers who report that they had a better relationship with their own father (versus with their own mother) also report increased levels of involvement with children over time.<sup>31, 32</sup>
  - Fathers who report experiencing positive interactions with their own fathers also report being more comfortable taking on an active parenting role with their own children.<sup>20</sup>
  - Fathers who report that their own fathers exhibited low levels of involvement may be more likely to take on the role of primary caregiver for their own children.<sup>28</sup>
  - Many men report that they do not view their own fathers as positive models but that they want to be better fathers to their own children.<sup>9, 12</sup>
  - Some studies suggest that fathers who had *either* a very close *or* a very distant relationship with their own parents during childhood have more positive attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about father involvement prior to the birth of their first child and at six and 12 months after that birth.<sup>1, 2</sup>
- However, not all studies have found a relationship between fathers' families of origin and their current levels of involvement with children.
  - Some studies have found that the level of involvement that a father has with his children is unrelated to the amount of involvement that his own father had with him.<sup>17, 30</sup>
  - One study found that although mothers' relationships with their own parents were related to their levels of warmth and investment with their own infants, fathers' relationships with their own parents did not predict their levels of warmth or investment with their own children.<sup>26</sup>

### Family of Origin and Father Involvement in Early Childhood

The following estimates are for fathers of infants (nine-month-old children).

**Figure 1** and **Table 1** show that there were statistically significant differences in fathers' levels of involvement with infants based on whether fathers lived with their own dads at age 16. Men whose fathers did not live with them when they were 16 engaged in higher levels of caregiving, physical care, and nurturing activities than did men whose fathers lived with them at age 16.

**Figure 1: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Whether Father Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 1: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Whether Father Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

Type of Involvement	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
Caregiving	12.1	12.6 <sup>a</sup>	0-15
Physical Care	10.2	11.1 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
Cognitive Stimulation	3.9	3.9	0-9
Warmth	9.7	9.7	0-10
Nurturing	8.9	9.7 <sup>a</sup>	0-16

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

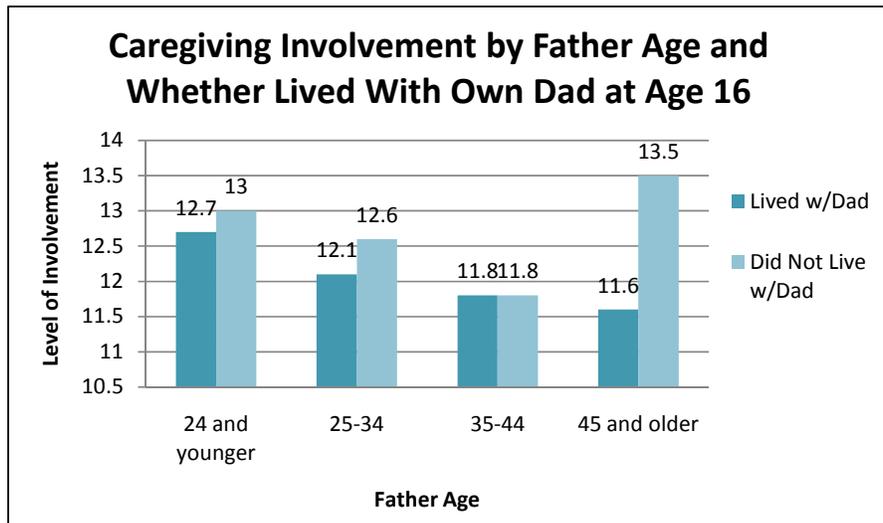
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Differences in Father Involvement With Sons and Daughters by Subgroup**

*Differences in Father Involvement by Father Age and Family of Origin*

**Figure 2** and **Table 2** show that for resident fathers aged 25 to 34 and 45 and older, caregiving involvement was higher among men whose fathers did not live with them at age 16, compared with men of the same ages who did live with their fathers at age 16.

**Figure 2. Father Caregiving Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 2. Father Caregiving Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

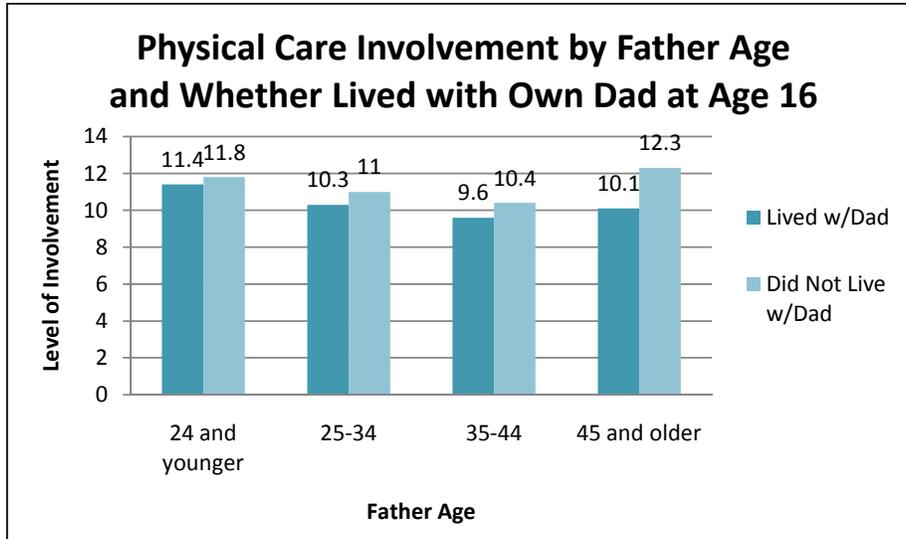
Father Age	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
<b>24 and younger</b>	12.7	13.0	0-15
<b>25-34</b>	12.1	12.6 <sup>a</sup>	0-15
<b>35-44</b>	11.8	11.8	0-15
<b>45 and older</b>	11.6	13.5 <sup>a</sup>	0-15

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Figure 3** and **Table 3** show that for all fathers under age 45, physical care involvement was higher among men who did not live with their own fathers at age 16, compared with men who did live with their fathers at 16. There were no significant differences in fathers' physical care among fathers aged 45 and older.

**Figure 3. Father Physical Care Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 3. Father Physical Care Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

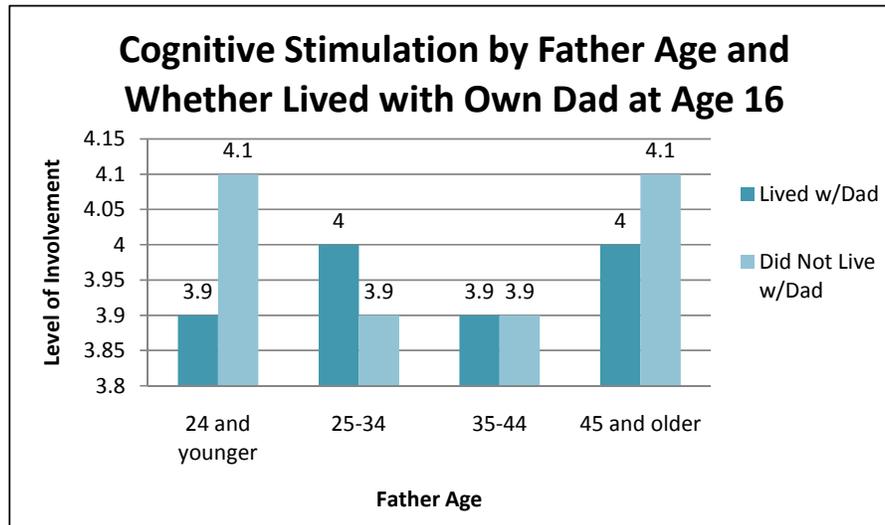
Father Age	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
24 and younger	11.4	11.8	0-20
25-34	10.3	11.0 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
35-44	9.6	10.4 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
45 and older	10.1	12.3 <sup>a</sup>	0-20

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Figure 4** and **Table 4** show that there were no significant differences in fathers' levels of cognitive stimulation by family of origin for fathers of any age group.

**Figure 4. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 4. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

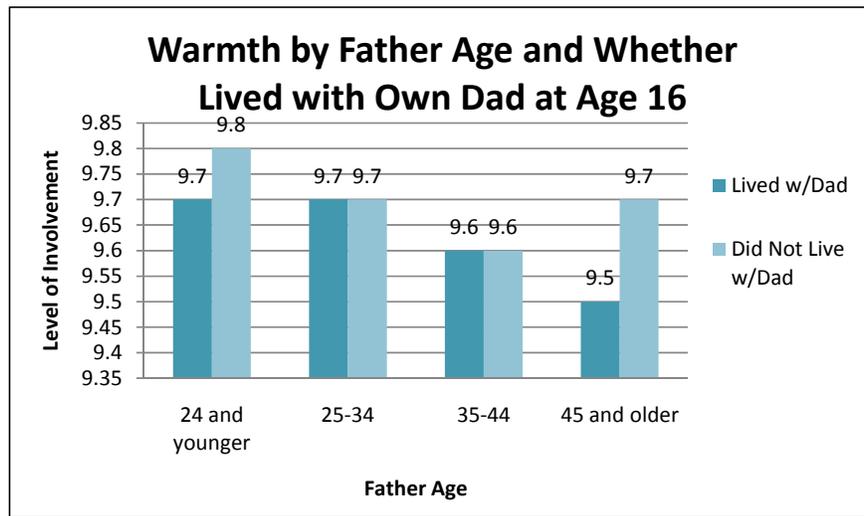
Father Age	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
24 and younger	3.9	4.1	0-9
25-34	4.0	3.9	0-9
35-44	3.9	3.9	0-9
45 and older	4.0	4.1	0-9

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 5 and Table 5 show that fathers' levels of warmth did not differ significantly by family of origin for resident fathers of any age group.

**Figure 5. Father Warmth Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 5. Father Warmth Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

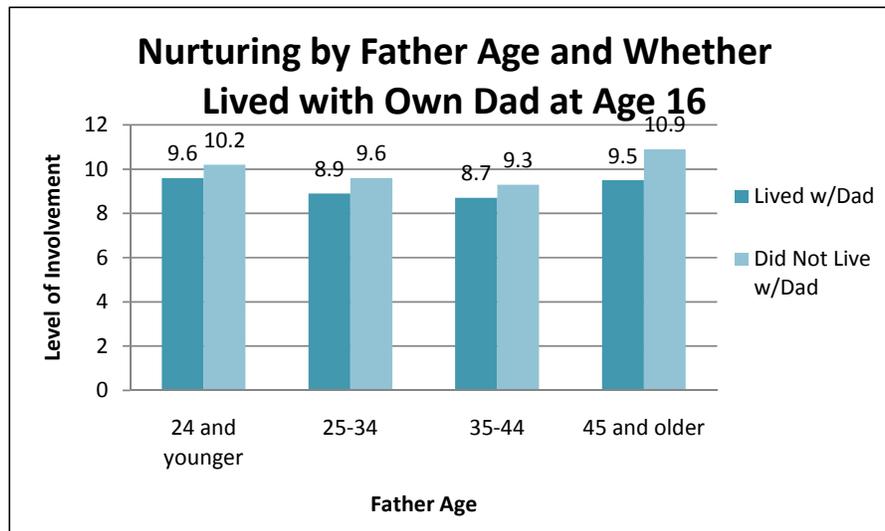
Father Age	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
24 and younger	9.7	9.8	0-10
25-34	9.7	9.7	0-10
35-44	9.6	9.6	0-10
45 and older	9.5	9.7	0-10

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Figure 6** and **Table 6** show that for fathers of all ages, levels of nurturing infants were higher among fathers who did not live with their own fathers at age 16, compared with fathers who did.

**Figure 6. Father Nurturing Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 6. Father Nurturing Involvement by Father Age and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

Father Age	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
24 and younger	9.6	10.2 <sup>a</sup>	0-16
25-34	8.9	9.6 <sup>a</sup>	0-16
35-44	8.7	9.3 <sup>a</sup>	0-16
45 and older	9.5	10.9 <sup>a</sup>	0-16

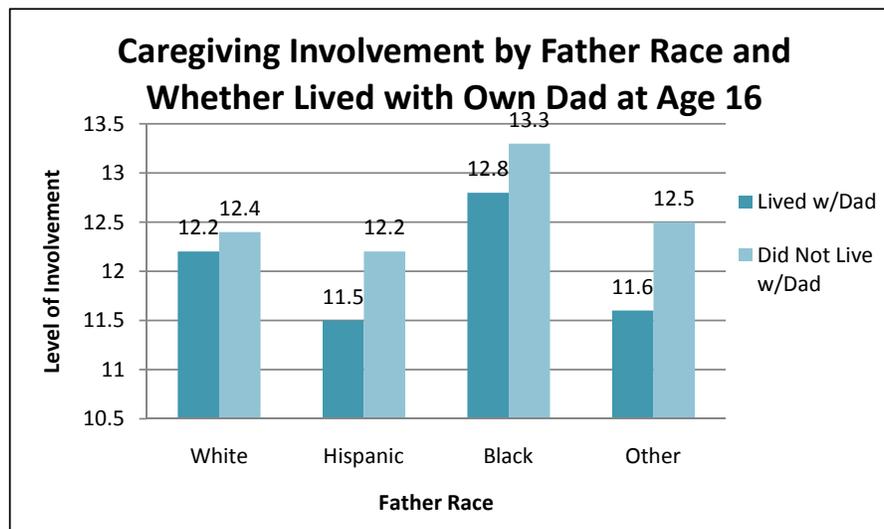
a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

*Differences in Father Involvement by Father Race/Ethnicity and Family of Origin*

**Figure 7** and **Table 7** show that fathers' levels of caregiving were higher among Hispanic, black, and "other" race fathers who did not live with their own fathers at age 16. There were no significant differences in levels of caregiving by family of origin for white fathers.

**Figure 7. Father Caregiving Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 7. Father Caregiving Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

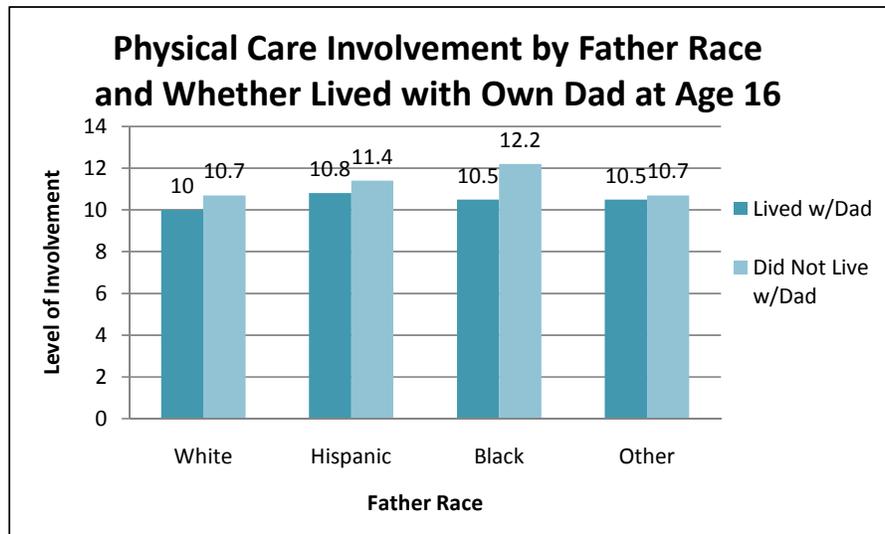
Father Race	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
White	12.2	12.4	0-15
Hispanic	11.5	12.2 <sup>a</sup>	0-15
Black	12.8	13.3 <sup>a</sup>	0-15
Other	11.6	12.5 <sup>a</sup>	0-15

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 8 and Table 8 show that fathers' levels of physical care were higher among white, Hispanic, and black fathers who did not live with their own fathers at age 16. There were no significant differences in levels of physical care by family of origin for fathers of "other" races.

**Figure 8. Father Physical Care Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 8. Father Physical Care Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

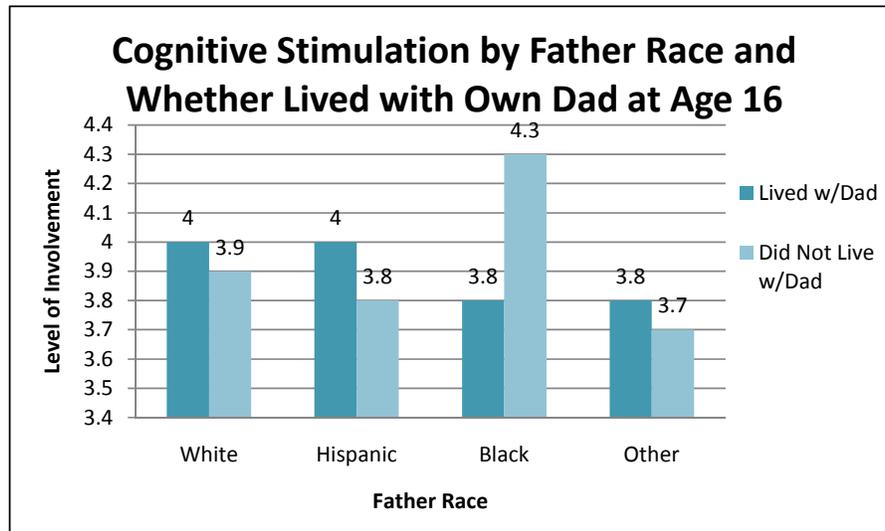
Father Race	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
White	10.0	10.7 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
Hispanic	10.8	11.4 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
Black	10.5	12.2 <sup>a</sup>	0-20
Other	10.5	10.7	0-20

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Figure 9 and Table 9 show that among black fathers, levels of cognitive stimulation with infants were higher among men who did not live with their own fathers at age 16. There were no significant differences in levels of cognitive stimulation by family of origin for fathers of any other racial group.

**Figure 9. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 9. Father Cognitive Stimulation Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

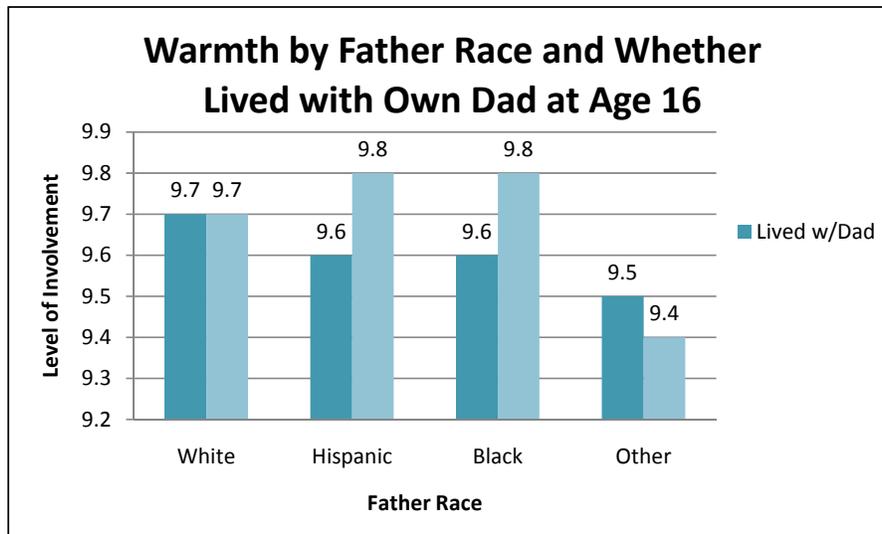
Father Race	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
White	4.0	3.9	0-9
Hispanic	4.0	3.8	0-9
Black	3.8	4.3 <sup>a</sup>	0-9
Other	3.8	3.7	0-9

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Figure 10** and **Table 10** show among Hispanic fathers, levels of warmth toward infants were higher among men who did not live with their own fathers at age 16. There were no significant differences in levels of warmth by family of origin for fathers of any other racial group.

**Figure 10. Father Warmth Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 10. Father Warmth Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

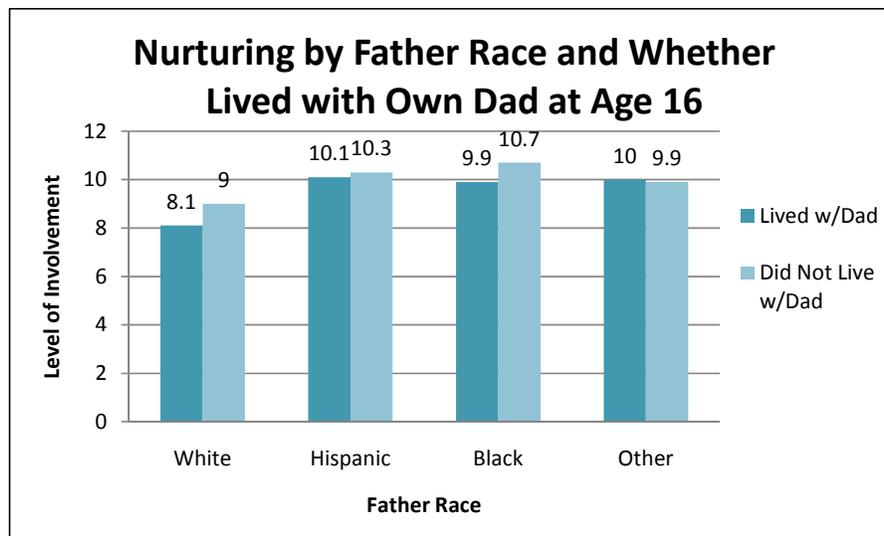
Father Race	Lived w/Dad	Did not live w/Dad	Significance
White	9.7	9.7	0-10
Hispanic	9.6	9.8 <sup>a</sup>	0-10
Black	9.6	9.8	0-10
Other	9.5	9.4	0-10

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Figure 11** and **Table 11** show that among white and black fathers, levels of nurturing with infants were higher among men who did not live with their own fathers at age 16. There were no significant differences in levels of nurturing by family of origin for Hispanic fathers or fathers of “other” races.

**Figure 11. Father Nurturing Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**



Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 11. Father Nurturing Involvement by Father Race and Whether Lived With Own Dad at Age 16**

Father Race	Lived w/Dad	Did Not Live w/Dad	Significance
White	8.1	9.0 <sup>a</sup>	0-16
Hispanic	10.1	10.3	0-16
Black	9.9	10.7 <sup>a</sup>	0-16
Other	10.0	9.9	0-16

a = significantly different from fathers who lived w/dad

Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

### Definitions and Measurement

Father involvement was measured by adding together scores from a series of questions about the frequency with which fathers take part in various activities with their children. These activities included reading books, singing songs, telling stories, going on errands, playing chasing games, preparing meals, changing diapers, giving the child a ride on shoulders, playing indoors, putting the child to sleep, bathing the child, playing outside, helping the child get dressed, going out to eat, helping the child eat, helping the child brush teeth, taking the child to religious services, soothing an upset child, staying home with an ill child, or taking the child to day care.

### Data Sources

The tables and charts in this brief documenting relationship happiness and father involvement among resident fathers are based on Child Trends’ analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) 9-month surveys. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of American children born in 2001. The ECLS-B includes 10,688 children and their caregivers, and it

follows these children from infancy until the time they enter first grade. Data were collected through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers. The National Center for Education Statistics collected the data.

## Data Limitations

The data presented here were drawn from a sample consisting only of resident fathers and therefore may not be representative of the involvement of fathers who do not live with their children.

## Resources

- The **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services** funds programs and research about fatherhood development and the importance of fathers for children: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>
- The **National Center on Fathers and Families** provides research-based information about father involvement and child well-being aimed at improving children's lives through the positive participation of their fathers: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>
- The **National Center for Fathering** conducts research and provides resources to increase involvement of fathers in the lives of children: <http://www.fathers.com>

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