Published in final edited form as:

Pers Relatsh. 2012 December ; 19(4): 759–774. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01391.x.

Non-resident Fathers' Social Networks: The Relationship between Social Support and Father Involvement

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Abstract

Literature and research examining non-resident fathers' involvement with their children has focused primarily on the fathers' relationship with their child's mother. Receiving limited attention in the literature has been the inclusion of examining non-resident fathers' social support networks, the function of these social networks—perceived and received social support, and how these social support networks affect non-resident fathers' involvement with their children. Using data from Wave One of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, this study examined the social support networks non-resident fathers ($n = 895$) utilized in their involvement with their children. Results of the regression analyses indicate that non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother and perceived social support from their social networks contributed positively to their involvement with their children. Policy and practice implications are discussed.

Keywords

father involvement; social networks; perceived and received social support

In the United States (U.S.), a significant and increasing number of fathers are marginal or transient members of their children's lives. Of the 67 million fathers in the U.S., estimates suggest that between 11 and 28 million do not live with any of their biological children (Emens & Dye, 2007; Kreider & Elliot, 2009). Compared to resident fathers, non-resident fathers have lower levels of involvement with their children (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). The barriers to involvement are even greater for non-resident fathers who are poor, because poverty poses multiple threats to fathers' economic, emotional, and physical well-being and is negatively related to fathers' ability to support their children financially and emotionally (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Lerman & Sorensen, 2000). Because father involvement is positively associated with better cognitive and socio-emotional developmental outcomes for children (Lamb, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002), federal and state policy and program initiatives in recent decades have focused on increasing rates of involvement for non-resident fathers (Bronte-Tinkew, Bowie, & Moore, 2007). Those programs have shown mixed results, often suffering from low participation rates (Burwick & Bellotti, 2005) and limited impact on fathers' parenting behavior (Spaulding, Grossmann, & Wallace, 2009).

While programs intended to increase non-resident father involvement frequently target fathers' employment status—focusing on fathers' financial support of their child—research with low-income mothers suggests that fathers' relationships can have a positive impact on parenting behavior. The quality of non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother is one of the primary factors influencing the amount of contact he has with a child with whom he does not live (Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Ryan et al., 2008). Furthermore, social networks, made up of relationships with family and friends, are positively related to individual's coping abilities and parenting skills (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Family and friends can help parents fulfill their parenting role by providing emotional support, financial aid, and tangible assistance such as childcare or transportation to work. Such support is associated with reduced stress (Degarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Melson, Windecker-Nelson, & Schwarz, 1998), better psychological, emotional, and economic well-being (Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005) better quality of parenting (Hashima & Amato, 1994), and better outcomes for children (Kana'iaupuni, Donato, Thompson-Colon, & Stainback, 2005).

While the influence of social networks has been included in the study of families, research has primarily focused on low-income, single mothers (Kotch, Browne, Dufort, Windsor, & Catellier, 1999). Less work has considered the relationship between non-resident fathers' social networks and parenting behavior, which may be important because of differences in both the size and function of fathers', as compared to mothers', social support (Leinonen, Solantus, & Punamaki, 2003; Summers, Boller, & Raikes, 2004). There are few interventions that target social support as a means of increasing non-resident father involvement (Fagan & Lee, 2011) and limited research that explores the relationship between social support and father involvement (Degarmo et al., 2008; Wheat, 2003). Given the mixed success of existing fatherhood programs at increasing non-resident father involvement, augmenting fathers' social support may be a strategy for enhancing their well-being and development, which may impact their involvement with their children.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological systems theory is interested in the interaction between individuals and a layered system of environmental features, ranging from personal relationships to socioeconomic status and cultural norms, within which the person lives and functions (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Ecological systems perspectives are useful for explaining the relationship between social support and non-resident, low-income father involvement because such theories account for the influence of contextual factors on human behavior (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). While parent and child factors exert significant influence on the development and maintenance of parent-child relationships, those relationships are also influenced by contextual sources of stress—such as poverty, which threaten a parent's ability to provide adequate food, shelter, educational opportunities, and health care to their child—and support, which can mitigate the impact of other stressors on parent and child well-being (Eamon, 2001). Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting identifies three sources of support that can protect the quality of parenting in the face of stress: the marital relationship, social networks, and parents' work environment. Because non-resident fathers, by definition, do not have a marital relationship with their child's mother, and many are not employed, their parenting behavior may be largely influenced by relationships with family and friends. The main ecological variables in this study are fathers' relationships—both their relationship to their child's mother and social support from family and friends—and how they relate to involvement with a non-resident child within a context of poverty.

Non-resident Fathers

Changes in family structure and household living arrangements, or the dissolution of a romantic relationship when a child is involved, can have significant deleterious effects on parents, resulting in parental conflict, social isolation, debilitating emotional and physical health, and engagement in risky behaviors. All of these factors negatively impact non-resident fathers' well-being and development as parents (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2005; Belsky, 1984; Doherty et al., 1998). Compared to resident fathers, non-resident fathers tend to be younger and have less education and income (Nelson, 2004). They are less likely to be employed and more likely to suffer from depression (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Matthews, & Carrano, 2007), and have a history of drug abuse or incarceration (Nelson, 2004). Given this profile, which includes significant barriers to fathers' economic and psychological well-being, non-resident fathers often face considerable challenges to being involved parents (Cheadle et al., 2010) and have less contact with their children than married or cohabiting fathers (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008).

Father Involvement

As the result of changing cultural expectations concerning family structure and the role of fathers, the conceptualization of father involvement continues to evolve (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). While initially focusing on simple measures such as fathers' absence or presence in a child's household, father involvement has become a multidimensional construct that includes affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Research on non-resident fathers, however, has lagged behind research on resident fathers, often conceptualizing involvement simply as fulfillment of financial obligations (Doherty et al., 1998). For this study of non-resident fathers, we draw on Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine's (1985) model of involvement, and focus on fathers' direct engagement with their young child, defined as hands-on activities such as playing games, singing, or eating.

Within an ecological framework, father involvement is conceptualized as the product of individual, relational, and contextual factors that serve as both barriers and supports for involved parenting. Pleck (1997) and Parke (1996) identify intra-dependent characteristics—internal motivation, skills, and self-confidence—and interdependent characteristics—familial, social, and institutional factors—that influence fathers' parenting behavior. Research suggests that father-child interactions are especially sensitive to contextual factors (Doherty et al., 1998) and poverty affects father involvement across systems. There are negative associations between poverty and fathers' physical and emotional health (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007), motivation to parent (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010), quality of relationship with their child's mother (Ryan et al., 2008), and social support (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Eamon, 2001), all of which are associated with lower levels of father involvement (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, 2009; Johnson, 2001; Pleck, 1997; Wilson & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). The quality of non-resident fathers' relationship to their child's mother is one of the most significant factors influencing their involvement with their child (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Ryan et al., 2008); while this relationship has been well-documented (Doherty et al., 1998), we are also interested in how fathers' other relationships are related to involvement.

Social Support

Social network theory maintains that interpersonal relationships are resources through which individuals gain emotional and material support and access to opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Granovetter, 1973) that can help them meet their daily responsibilities, overcome challenging conditions, and cope with stress (Lin & Ensel, 1989). The support individuals received from social networks is associated with better physical and mental health (Cohen &

Wills, 1985) and material well-being (Henly et al., 2005) and is especially meaningful for low-income individuals, who may have fewer resources to respond to acute or chronic stressors (Hashima & Amato, 1994). Research demonstrates that the availability of social support differs according to sociodemographic characteristics; women (Haxton & Harknett, 2009), younger individuals (Mazelis & Mykyta, 2011) and higher-income individuals (Gjesfjeld, Greeno, Kim, & Anderson, 2010) report higher levels of social support. Some research suggests there are also racial and ethnic differences in the availability of social support (Haxton & Harknett, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Social support is often differentiated between emotional support, which consists of intangible assistance, such as affection and companionship, that conveys nurturance and acceptance; and instrumental support, which consists of tangible assistance such as financial aid, a place to live, and childcare (Belsky, 1984), which helps individuals solve problems. Social support is also differentiated in terms of whether it is perceived (person believes that such help is available) or received (person actually receives some type of emotional or instrumental assistance). The perception that social support is available is consistently associated with better health and mental health outcomes (Maisel & Gable, 2009; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010). Received support, in contrast, is sometimes associated with negative or neutral outcomes on measures of physical and emotional well-being (Meadows, 2009; Uchino, 2009), because it can undermine an individual's sense of self-efficacy and independence and increase feelings of indebtedness (Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006).

Both informal (provided by family and friends) and formal (provided by public and private sector organizations) support (Wills, 1991) serve a protective function for the quality of parenting in the face of stressors such as poverty (Belsky, 1984; McLoyd, 1990), although there are differences in the availability and impact of support provided by formal as compared to informal networks. Instrumental support provided by family and friends is not available as consistently as that provided by community and religious organizations (Kalil & Ryan, 2010), in part because the social networks of poor individuals may themselves be poor and therefore unable to provide assistance (Henly et al., 2005). Men are less likely to access support from community organizations than from family and friends (Summers et al., 2004), and report that they perceive asking for help from public organizations as a sign of weakness (Roggmann, Boyce, Cook, & Cook, 2002).

Social Support and Non-resident Father Involvement

Economic strain threatens parents' ability to provide materially and emotionally for their child (Eamon, 2001) and social support can mitigate the effects of poverty on parental stress and well-being. When compared to parents with low levels of social support, parents with higher levels of support have lower levels of depression and anxiety (Meadows, 2009; Taylor & Roberts, 1995), are more likely to have full-time employment (Bassuk, Mikelson, Bissell, & Perloff, 2002), perceive less daily hassles related to parenting (Melson et al., 1998) and have less punitive parenting behaviors (Hashima & Amato, 1994; Leinonen et al., 2003) and less parental conflict (Degarmo et al., 2008).

Despite research showing that social support buffers the negative effects of poverty on parent and child outcomes, limited attention has been given to fathers' social support (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Miller, 1997). In general, fathers' support networks are smaller, as compared to mothers (Melson et al., 1998), and provide less support (Haxton & Harknett, 2009). Fathers often rely on their romantic partner as a primary source of social support (Wheat, 2003); conflict in the wake of a break-up with their child's mother may partially explain lower rates of perceived social support for non-resident fathers as compared to

resident fathers (Ravanara, 2007). Fathers who report that they get along well with their child's mother tend to have more accurate parenting information and spend more time with their child (Easterbrooks, Barrett, Brady, & Davis, 2007). In the absence of a marital or romantic relationship, however, research suggests that fathers turn to relatives and extended family for support (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992; Degarmo et al., 2008).

Emotional and instrumental support is positively related to father's levels of involvement with their non-resident child (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992; Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007; Fagan & Lee, 2011; Miller, 1994, 1997; Wheat, 2003). Because the data set we are using does not include measures of emotional support, this study will focus on instrumental support provided by family and friends, which may be particularly important for non-resident fathers. Research shows that single and divorced fathers with higher levels of instrumental support have better quality parenting (Degarmo et al., 2008) while other studies have found that emotional support is not related to fathers' parenting behavior (Leinonen et al., 2003). Instrumental support provided by non-resident fathers' family and friends, in particular, is associated with higher levels of engagement in caregiving and nurturing activities (Castillo & Fenzl-Crossmann, 2010; Fagan & Lee, 2011; Wheat, 2003). In contrast, some research shows that support provided by their child's maternal grandparents has no relationship, or is negatively related, to father involvement (Fagan et al., 2007; Perry, 2009).

Despite evidence showing a positive relationship between instrumental support and father involvement, Miller (1994) found no correlation between instrumental support, characterized as the provision of financial resources and assistance with childcare, provided by the father's mother, and young fathers' involvement with their child. Melson et al. (1998) found that higher levels of instrumental support from both formal and informal sources were predictive of fathers' perception that they had a greater number of daily hassles and negative life events. These results confirm research showing that low-income mothers with greater levels of available instrumental support from family and friends have greater parenting stress, because such support increases the potential for family conflict (Jackson, 1998).

Researchers hypothesize several pathways through which financial, material, and childcare assistance facilitates father involvement. Assistance completing parenting tasks, such as taking the child to the doctor, and other activities of daily life, such as preparing meals, may reduce paternal stress related to caregiving activities (Degarmo et al., 2008). Non-resident fathers who are poor experience significant barriers to involved parenting, including the inability to fulfill financial obligations to their child; failure to provide such support is negatively related to fathers' involvement and positively related to conflict with their child's mother (Johnson, 2001). Instrumental support provided to fathers, in the form of money or transportation to and from work, can help fathers fulfill a "breadwinning role," which may increase both their motivation and self-confidence for being an involved parent (Tach et al., 2010). Support for this interpretation can be found in the fact that non-resident fathers' financial support of their child is positively related to engagement in caregiving activities (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Landale & Oropesa, 2001).

Because conflict with their child's mother is one of the biggest threats to non-resident father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2008; Coley & Hernandez, 2006), financial support provided to non-resident fathers, or material support that helps fathers maintain employment, may enhance involvement by reducing parental conflict; such assistance helps mothers take care of household necessities such as buying food, and paying rent and other bills (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Mothers may actually discourage fathers from contact with their child if the father does not contribute financially to the child's well-being or if she is concerned about his skills in caring for an infant (Doherty et al., 1998). Childcare support provided to adolescent,

non-resident fathers by their own mothers is positively related to their engagement in caregiving activities because it provides an opportunity for fathers to gain parenting skills, which they may otherwise lack (Wheat, 2003).

Given the role that family and friends can play in supporting non-resident fathers' involvement with their child, and discrepancies in research findings regarding instrumental support and father involvement, this study explores the relationship between fathers' social support and engagement with their young child. Uchino (2009) argues that perceived and received social support should be measured separately because they are separate constructs that have different effects on human behavior. We found no studies that compare the differential relationship of perceived and received instrumental support to father involvement and most studies that differentiate between perceived and received support use measures of emotional support, with less attention to instrumental support (Reinhardt et al., 2006). In order to fill such gaps in the literature, this study will explore the relationship between non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother, perceived and received instrumental support, and involvement with their young child. This study examines three hypotheses associated with non-resident fathers' social networks and involvement: 1) non-resident fathers who report a positive relationship with their child's mother will have higher levels of involvement with their child; 2) non-resident fathers who report higher levels of perceived instrumental support will have higher levels of involvement with their child; and 3) non-resident fathers who report higher levels of received instrumental support will have higher levels of involvement with their child, though the relationship will be smaller than that found between perceived instrumental support and involvement.

Methods

Data

The data used in this study were taken from Wave One of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (Fragile Families Study hereafter), which is a national, longitudinal study examining the consequences of non-marital childbearing in low-income families. There are 20 cities in the full Fragile Families Study sample, of which 16 were selected, via stratified random sample, to comprise the national sample. For each wave of data and unit of analysis the data is weighted up to two different populations—the national or city level. Applying the national weights makes the data from the 16 randomly selected cities representative of births occurring in the 77 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000 and applying the city-level weights makes the data from all 20 cities in the sample representative of births in their particular city (Carlson, 2006; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Tienda, & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Reichman, Tietler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The data for Wave One was collected one year after the child's birth and the final sample for this study consists of 895 fathers who reported they did not live with their child and whose child was between 0 and 12 months old.

Measures

Dependent variable

Non-resident fathers' involvement: A father involvement scale was created to examine engagement between non-resident fathers and their child. Fathers were asked to identify the number of days in a given week they participated with their child in each of the following eight activities: played peek-a-boo, sang songs or nursery rhymes, read stories, told stories, played indoors, visited relatives, showed physical affection, and supervised bedtime routines. These values were summed together and resulted in a scale score ranging from 0 (did not participate in any of the activities any days of the week) to 56 (participated in every

activity each day of the week). Lower scores represent less father involvement and higher scores represent more father involvement.

Independent variables

Non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother: To examine non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother, one item with five response categories was used. The item asked, "In general, would you say that your relationship with your child's mother is...?" The original response categories were 1 = Excellent, 2 = Very Good, 3 = Good, 4 = Fair, or 5 = Poor. These response categories were recoded and higher numbers were assigned to the more positive relationship categories, 0 = Poor, 1 = Fair, 2 = Good, 3 = Very Good, and 4 = Excellent.

Non-resident fathers' perceived social support: A scale was created to examine non-resident fathers' perception of social support from family and/or friends. The scale consisted of six items measuring non-resident fathers' perception of social support from family and/or friends. The six items asked non-resident fathers if they could: count on someone to loan them \$200 in the next year; count on someone to loan them \$1,000 in the next year; count on someone to provide them with a place to live in the next year; count on someone to help w/ emergency childcare in the next year; count on someone to co-sign a \$1,000 bank loan with them in the next year; and count on someone to co-sign a \$5,000 bank loan with them in the next year. The original response categories to these items were coded 1 = Yes and 2 = No and later recoded to 0 = No and 1 = Yes. A score of zero indicated non-resident fathers did not perceive they could count on support from family and/or friends. A score of one indicated non-resident fathers did perceive they could count on support from family and/or friends. The values from the six items were summed to create a scale ($\alpha = .970$) ranging from 0, indicating a low level of perceived social support from family and/or friends, to 6, indicating a high level of perceived social support from family and/or friends.

Non-resident fathers' received social support: A scale was created to examine non-resident fathers' receipt of social support from family and/or friends. The scale consisted of five items measuring non-resident fathers' receipt of social support from family and/or friends. The first three items asked non-resident fathers whether they received financial help or money from their parents, relatives, or friends with the response categories of 1 = Yes and 2 = No. The fourth item asked non-resident fathers whether they lived in a house or condominium owned by a family member with the response categories of 1 = Yes and 2 = No. The final item asked non-resident fathers whether they lived with family and/or friends and paid no rent with the response categories of 1 = Yes and 2 = No. The original response categories were recoded to 0 = No and 1 = Yes. A score of zero indicated fathers did not receive support from family and/or friends. A score of one indicated fathers did receive support from family and/or friends. The values from the five items were summed to create a scale ($\alpha = .870$) ranging from 0, indicating a low level of received social support from family and/or friends, to 5, indicating a high level of received social support from family and/or friends.

Control variables

Non-resident fathers' social characteristics: Previous research suggests that father involvement is related to a variety of paternal and contextual variables, including age, income, race and ethnicity, and educational status (Cheadle et al., 2010). We controlled for the impact of non-resident fathers' age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, and income on father involvement. Non-resident fathers' age was a categorical variable and the response categories were converted into a series of dummy variables: 15–22, 23–26, 27–33, and > 34 years of age. Non-resident fathers' race and

ethnicity was a categorical variable and the response categories were converted into a series of dummy variables: Black, White, and Hispanic. Non-resident fathers' educational attainment was a categorical variable and the response categories were converted into a series of dummy variables: less than high school education, high school diploma, some college education, and college degree. Non-resident fathers' employment status was a dichotomous variable with the response categories, 0 = unemployed and 1 = employed. Non-resident fathers' annual income was a categorical variable and the response categories were converted into a series of dummy variables: less than \$14,999; \$15,000–\$24,999; \$25–\$49,999; and greater than \$50,000. Research examining young, low-income, single mothers suggests that living with family can be a source of support and have a positive impact on parenting behavior (Kalil & Danziger, 2000). Living with family and friends is a unique circumstance, in that such arrangements have the potential to provide both social support and conflict (Gordon, 1999); for this reason, we included fathers' living arrangements as a control variable. Non-resident fathers' living arrangement was a dichotomous variable with the response categories, 0 = did not live with family and/or friends and 1 = lived with family and/or friends.

Analysis plan—To examine the relationship between non-residents fathers' relationship with their child's mother, perception and receipt of social support and their involvement with their child, we ran statistics using Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) 18. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the distribution of responses to each item and bivariate and univariate analysis-of-variance statistics were used to evaluate the difference between the means of the groups. Several multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother and perceived and received social support as the independent variables and non-resident fathers' involvement with their child as the dependent variable.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Participants included in this study consisted of fathers who reported that they were not married and did not live with their children. The age of non-resident fathers ranged from 16–65 years, with a mean of 26 years. Over two-thirds of the non-resident fathers identified as Black/African American and Hispanic. Close to three-quarters of the non-resident fathers reported having an education level equivalent to or less than a high school diploma. Three-quarters of non-resident fathers reported being employed. Thirty-one percent of the non-resident fathers reported having an annual household income equivalent to or less than \$14,999. On a scale of 0–1, non-resident fathers' reported a mean score of 0.74 and standard deviation of 0.44 on the living arrangement measure. On a scale of 0–4, non-resident fathers' reported a mean score of 1.98 and a standard deviation of 1.30 on the father-mother relationship measure. On a scale of 0–6, non-resident fathers reported a mean score of 4.43 and standard deviation of 1.79 on the perceived social support from family and/or friends measure. On a scale of 0–5, non-resident fathers reported a mean score of 0.51 and standard deviation of 0.79 on the received social support from family and/or friends measure. On a scale of 0–56, non-resident fathers reported a mean score of 23.24 and standard deviation of 14.31 on the father involvement scale. The sample size of each model varied because of different response rates to items used to construct the social characteristic, independent, and dependent variables (See Table 1).

Bivariate and Univariate Analysis-of-Variance Statistics

Numerous bivariate and univariate analysis-of-variance tests were conducted to examine the differences between the means of the covariate and independent variables, non-resident

fathers' social characteristics and perceived and received social support, on the dependent variable, non-resident fathers' involvement with their child. The ANOVA examining the relationship between non-resident fathers' age and father involvement was significant, $F(3, 633) = 3.04, p < .05$. Follow-up tests revealed that non-resident fathers 15–22 years of age scored significantly higher in their involvement with their child ($m = 25.09, sd = 14.47$) than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older ($m = 20.54, sd = 14.29$). An independent-samples t-test evaluating the mean difference in involvement between non-resident fathers who lived and did not live with family and/or friends was significant, $t(473), -2.31, p = .02$ and revealed that non-resident fathers who lived with family and/or friends ($m = 23.94, sd = 13.82$) had higher levels of involvement than non-resident fathers who did not live with family and/or friends ($m = 20.46, sd = 13.82$). The ANOVA examining the relationship between non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother and father involvement was significant, $F(4, 633) = 4.95, p < .001$. Follow-up tests revealed that non-resident fathers with good, very good, and excellent relationships with their child's mother scored significantly higher in their involvement with their child ($m = 25.24, sd = 13.54; m = 26.76, sd = 13.91; m = 26.77, sd = 14.70$, respectively) than non-resident fathers with poor relationships with their child's mother ($m = 19.42, sd = 14.66$). The ANOVA examining the relationship between non-resident fathers' perceived social support and father involvement was significant, $F(6, 700) = 4.53, p < .001$. Follow-up tests revealed that non-resident fathers with higher levels of perceived social support from family and/or friends scored significantly higher in their involvement with their child ($m = 25.65, sd = 14.93; m = 25.48, sd = 14.56$, respectively) than non-resident fathers with lower levels of perceived social support from family and/or friends ($m = 17.12, sd = 13.29$). There were no significant differences between non-resident fathers' race and ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, income status, received social support and their involvement with their child.

Linear Regression Analyses

To examine whether non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother and perceived and received social support from family and/or friends was related to non-resident fathers' involvement with their child, several linear regression analyses were conducted using an assortment of variables in five different models. The analyses were conducted separately to ensure that multicollinearity between the independent variables did not distort the analyses. The results revealed that non-resident fathers' age, relationship with their child's mother, and perceived social support from family and/or friends were significantly related to non-resident fathers' involvement with their child.

As shown in model one of Table 2, non-resident fathers between 15–22 years of age ($\beta = 4.94, p < .01$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older. As shown in model two of Table 2, non-resident fathers' age and relationship to their child's mother was significantly related to their involvement with their child, $F(14, 433) = 2.31, p < .01$. Non-resident fathers between 15–22 years of age ($\beta = 5.74, p < .01$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older. Non-resident fathers who reported having a better relationship with their child's mother ($\beta = 2.43, p < .001$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers who reported having a poor relationship with their child's mother.

As shown in model three of Table 2, non-resident fathers' age and perceived social support was significantly related to their involvement with their child $F(14, 481) = 1.57, p < .10$. Non-resident fathers 15–22 years of age ($\beta = 4.67, p < .05$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older. Non-resident fathers with higher levels of perceived social support ($\beta = .97, p < .01$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers with lower perceived social support.

As shown in model four of Table 2, non-resident fathers between 15–22 years of age ($\beta = 4.44, p < .05$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older. As shown in model five of Table 2, non-resident fathers' age, relationship with their child's mother and perceived social support was significantly related to their involvement with their child $F(16, 426) = 2.14, p < .01$. Non-resident fathers between 15–22 years of age ($\beta = 4.88, p < .05$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers 34 years of age and older. Non-resident fathers who reported better relationships with their child's mother ($\beta = 2.29, p < .001$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than fathers who reported poor relationships with their child's mother. Non-resident fathers with higher perceived social support ($\beta = .77, p < .05$) had higher levels of involvement with their child than non-resident fathers with lower perceived social support.

Discussion

In this study, we were interested in the relationship between low-income, non-resident fathers' social support and their involvement with their young child. Our results, in which two of three hypotheses were confirmed, offer support for the quality of non-resident fathers' relationship with their child's mother, fathers' perceived instrumental social support, and involvement with their young child. Consistent with previous research, non-resident fathers who report that they get along with their former spouse or partner also spend more time in caregiving and nurturing activities with their child (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Ryan et al., 2008). Non-resident fathers are often dependent on their child's mother for access to their child and conflict in the parental relationship may result in a mother restricting such access (Doherty et al., 2008). Conflict may arise when fathers do not fulfill child support obligations, are involved in criminal activity, or do not have parenting skills to help mothers care for the child (Ryan et al., 2008; Waller & Swisher, 2006). This conflict itself can be a source of parenting stress and result in less paternal involvement (Easterbrooks et al., 2007). While family initiatives often focus on promoting strong marital relationships, our results underscore the importance of offering programming that helps parents maintain positive relationships in the wake of a break up (Carlson et al., 2008) and confirm research showing that non-resident fathers' family and friends may play a role in reducing stress that results from parental conflict (Walker, 2010; Waller & Swisher, 2006).

Our finding that higher levels of perceived, but not received, instrumental social support were related to higher levels of father involvement confirm existing research and offer new insight into the pathways through which instrumental social support is related to father involvement. Given the stressful factors impacting low-income parents, we assumed that instrumental support provided to non-resident fathers would facilitate fathers' ability to contribute resources to their child's well-being, which in turn would enhance involvement by reducing fathers' stress, increasing motivation to parent, and reducing conflict with their child's mother. This interpretation assumes, however, that instrumental support is beneficial to fathers because it helps them solve specific problems, such as not being able to pay bills or find a ride to work. The fact that perceived instrumental support is positively related to father involvement while received support is negatively related to involvement, though not statistically so, suggests that the relationship between instrumental support and father involvement has more to do with the symbolic rather than the functional aspects of support.

Fathers in this sample were more involved when they felt that someone would help them rather than because someone actually did. Such support may be important because of its relationship to individuals' psychological well-being and coping skills; in effect, the belief that support is available may have emotional meaning, even if the support is instrumental,

and therefore functions as a type of emotional support (Semmer et al., 2008). Hashima and Amato (1994) found that perceived social support was more important for low-income parents than for those with higher incomes, because poorer families have fewer resources to draw on in times of crisis and the perception that help was available decreased feelings of vulnerability that were negatively related to parenting behavior. The belief that help is available is an indicator of emotional closeness (Procidano & Heller, 1983), suggesting that our results may actually support Miller's (1994) finding that emotional support is positively related to father involvement.

Our results may also offer support for social science research suggesting that received instrumental support comes with psychological costs: increasing individuals' sense of obligation, undermining their sense of self-efficacy, and leading to increased conflict (Reinhardt et al., 2006). Received instrumental support that does not fit the need it is intended to address creates distress (Maisel & Gabel, 2009; Reinhardt et al., 2006). Our findings may reflect discrepancies between fathers' needs and the support they were given, which can undermine individual's motivation for parenting. For instance, Gordon (1999) found that grandmothers' assumption of caregiving duties for their adolescent daughter's child had the unintended effect of undermining the young mother's motivation and competence for parenting herself. Resident fathers who spend more time caring for their child alone have more motivation to be involved and an increased sense of their own parenting competency (Wilson & Prior, 2010). Our results suggest that received instrumental support, such as childcare assistance, is not beneficial for fathers' parenting behavior when it is not responsive to fathers' needs; that is, if childcare assistance replaces rather than enhances involvement, it may actually undermine fathers' motivation for parenting.

Our results contradict studies that found a positive relationship between received instrumental support and father involvement (Castillo & Fenzl-Crossman, 2010; Degarmo et al., 2008; Wheat, 2003). The differences in our findings compared to those studies may reflect low levels of received instrumental support reported by fathers in the sample. Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that the fathers in Degarmo's (2008) sample were affluent divorced fathers whose social networks, presumably, had the means to give money or other material aid. The social networks of low-income individuals are often poorly equipped to provide financial assistance (Henly et al., 2005). Simply put, the family and friends of non-resident fathers in our sample may be too poor to help: they do not have money or own houses or live in houses large enough to offer fathers a free place to stay. Our findings may reflect the poverty of non-resident fathers' family and friends rather than their willingness to provide assistance.

This study included a number of control variables that were expected to relate to non-resident fathers' involvement with their child. In several models, non-resident fathers' age was related to their involvement with their child, notably between younger and older non-resident fathers. This finding contradicts the expectation that older fathers are in a better position than younger fathers to meet their child's economic, cognitive, and social needs (Lamb, 2004; Parke, 2002). However, these results confirm several studies suggesting strong motivation in young fathers to spare their child the absent or inconsistent fathering that they themselves experienced (Young & Holcombe, 2007). Danziger and Radin (1990) also found that younger fathers had higher levels of involvement than older fathers because older fathers were more likely than younger fathers to have more than one child and therefore had competing claims on time available to spend with their non-resident child. Our finding may reflect differences in the relationships and family structure of younger fathers as compared to older fathers; such differences may pose structural and emotional barriers to their involvement with their non-resident child (Ryan et al., 2008; Tach et al., 2010).

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study. The findings can only be generalized to those cities included in the national sample. Given the tendency of survey respondents to reply in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others, fathers may over-report their involvement with their child (Hofferth, Pleck, Steuve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). The present study did not include reports from mothers, but using both parents' reports of fathers' involvement might serve as a more accurate measure. Because of available measures within the Fragile Families Study, we constructed the "instrumental support" variable using measures of both instrumental and financial support; research suggests, however, that these constructs should be studied separately because individuals who are too poor to provide money to friends or family may still be able or willing to provide other types of tangible assistance, such as transportation or childcare (Henly et al., 2005). Our results are correlational and do not establish causality; the direction of hypothesized relationships may actually be reversed. Mazelis and Mykyta (2011) found that fathers who were less involved with their child had less social support because family members disapproved of fathers' parenting behavior. Future research should also consider the influence of involvement on social support. The effect sizes were relatively low and the results accounted for only a small part of father involvement. It is possible that other factors, such as non-resident fathers' psychological, relational, and physical well-being, may be better indicators of fathers' involvement with their child.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While numerous fatherhood initiatives have been implemented over the past 20 years to increase involvement among non-resident fathers, these efforts have focused on improving fathers' employment and income status, both of which are intricately connected to fathers' ability to fulfill their economic responsibilities to their children. Despite some success, these initiatives have often failed to address several factors impacting fathers' social and emotional well-being, notably social networks, which may help non-resident fathers fulfill their caregiving and parenting responsibilities. Our results suggest that parenting initiatives may be particularly impactful when directed at young fathers, who reported higher levels of involvement. Such involvement sets the stage for more contact between fathers and children; young (i.e. adolescent), non-resident fathers who have high levels of involvement at the time of their child's birth are likely to maintain that involvement over time, even in the face of stressors such as poverty and unemployment (Fagan et al., 2007). Attention to individuals' perception of social support is especially relevant for adolescents; Uchino (2009) argues that primary interventions targeting perceived support help younger individuals maintain "healthier trajectories" throughout their lives (p. 59). Fagan and Lee (2011) found that social support interventions had more influence on younger fathers' involvement as compared to older fathers. Due to small effect sizes, our results do not offer support for the use of interventions targeting social support as a main focus of fatherhood programming. Given the potential for involvement while the father is young to positively influence parenting behaviors over time, however, our results may justify the inclusion of primary preventions that target fathers' perceived social support in order to establish and maintain fathers' contact with a non-resident child.

Social service organizations may be more effective if they cultivate a model of care that pays specific attention to the types of social support available in non-resident fathers' social networks. Given fathers' reluctance to access formal support services (Summers et al., 2004), interventions may be more relevant if they increase fathers' commitment to maintaining meaningful, cooperative, and respectful relationships with their child's mother and family and/or friends, which may reinforce fathers' knowledge, skills, and capacity to be involved with their child. Our results suggest that strengthening fathers' relationships,

and perception that he has people he can count on, may be more useful than providing tangible assistance; the belief that people would help was a better predictor of involvement than fathers' report that people actually did help. The inclusion of non-resident fathers' social networks as part of the social and family service process may help non-resident fathers identify resources that will alleviate the negative impact of contextual stressors on non-resident fathers' involvement with their child.

Acknowledgments

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was supported by Grant Number R01HD36916 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Non-resident Father Sample^a

Variable	n	% ^b	m	sd	Range
Age	790		25.93	7.33	16–65
Race/Ethnicity					
Hispanic/Latino	136	15			
White/Caucasian	83	9			
Black/African American	521	58			
Educational Attainment					
Less than high school	303	38			
High school diploma	284	36			
Some college	174	22			
College graduate	28	4			
Employment					
Unemployed	219	28			
Employed	569	72			
Income					
< \$14,999	167	31			
\$15,000–\$24,999	115	21			
\$25,000–\$49,999	150	28			
>\$50,000	112	20			
Living Arrangement ^c	567		0.74	0.44	0–1
Father-Mother Relationship	895		1.98	1.30	0–4
Perceived Social Support ^d	895		4.43	1.79	0–6
Received Social Support ^e	831		0.51	0.79	0–5
Father Involvement	895		23.24	14.31	0–56

Note.

^aTotal number of participants does not add up to 895 due to missing data.^bPercentage is based on number of participants responding to item.^cLiving arrangement—father did not live or did live with family and/or friends.

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^d Perceived Social Support— father perceived he would receive financial support, a place to live, and/or emergency childcare from family and/or friends.

^e Received Social Support—father received financial support and/or a place to live from family and/or friends.

Table 2

Father Involvement Linear Regression Coefficients of Five Models

	Father Involvement				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Age^a</i>					
15–22	4.935 (2.229) **	5.740 (2.261) **	4.668 (2.216) +	4.435 (2.322) *	4.883 (2.363) *
23–26	3.392 (2.337)	3.703 (2.378)	3.422 (2.322)	2.705 (2.403)	2.961 (2.450)
27–33	1.555 (2.428)	2.218 (2.463)	2.016 (2.418)	1.072 (2.493)	2.115 (2.543)
<i>Race/Ethnicity^a</i>					
White	–1.337 (2.288)	.689 (2.378)	–1.380 (2.273)	–1.054 (2.326)	.982 (2.410)
Hispanic	–1.477 (1.706)	–.192 (1.709)	–1.774 (1.698)	–1.653 (1.729)	–.763 (1.737)
<i>Educational Attainment^a</i>					
< High school	2.037 (3.981)	–.522 (4.059)	2.665 (3.961)	2.298 (3.996)	.606 (4.086)
High school diploma	2.977 (3.832)	1.033 (3.905)	3.361 (3.809)	2.925 (3.847)	1.659 (3.921)
Some college	1.166 (3.951)	–.331 (4.035)	1.506 (3.927)	1.640 (3.978)	.826 (4.066)
<i>Employment</i>	1.538 (1.545)	.037 (1.573)	1.302 (1.537)	1.580 (1.557)	–.106 (1.587)
<i>Income^a</i>					
<\$14,999	2.188 (1.815)	1.300 (1.789)	2.564 (1.810)	2.042 (1.832)	1.459 (1.806)
\$15,000–\$24,999	1.328 (1.857)	.869 (1.836)	1.817 (1.854)	1.300 (1.884)	1.138 (1.864)
\$25,000–\$49,999	2.238 (1.728)	1.996 (1.758)	2.480 (1.719)	2.071 (1.744)	1.921 (1.771)
<i>Living Arrangement</i>	1.712 (1.505)	1.514 (1.506)	1.595 (1.495)	2.087 (1.539)	1.778 (1.534)
<i>Father-Mother Relationship</i>		2.425 (.521) ***			2.287 (.527) ***
<i>Perceived Social Support</i>			.969 (.356) **		.771 (.373) *
<i>Received Social Support</i>				–.231 (.724)	–.191 (.742)
N	481	433	481	474	426
R	.173	.268	.212	.165	.278
R ²	.030	.072 **	.045 +	.027	.077 **

Note.

^a reference group: age (>34 years of age); race and ethnicity (Black); education (College Degree); income (>\$50,000)

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Unstandardized regression coefficients/(Standard errors in parenthesis)

$\neq$
p < .10
*
p < .05
**
p < .01

p > .001