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A Key to College Success: Involved Dads

College students whose fathers were around during their high-school years are far more likely to graduate than those whose dads weren't around.

Proud parents try to snap photos of their kids at Harvard Business School's graduation ceremony. Gives new meaning to the term paparazzi.

Reuters

W. BRADFORD WILCOX | APR 22, 2014 | BUSINESS

This month, millions of high school seniors across America are making important decisions about which college they will attend for the next four years of their life. Based on my professional experience talking to high school students considering attending the University of Virginia, where I teach sociology, many of these seniors seem unaware of how much their chances of collegiate success depend not on their hard work or capabilities, but on whether their parents made certain sacrifices to support them over the years.

This brief essay focuses on one particular dimension of these parental investments: paternal involvement during adolescence. I find that young adults who as teens had involved fathers are significantly more likely to graduate from college, and that young adults from more privileged backgrounds are especially likely to have had an involved father in their lives as teens.

Family scholars, from sociologist Sara McLanahan to psychologist Ross Parke, have long observed that fathers typically play an important role in advancing the welfare of their children. Focusing on the impact of family structure, McLanahan has found that, compared to children from single-parent homes, children who live with their fathers in an intact family have significantly lower rates of incarceration and teenage pregnancy and higher rates of high school and college graduation. Examining the extent and style of paternal involvement, Parke notes, for instance, that engaged fathers play an important role in "helping sons and daughters achieve independent and distinct identities" and that this independence often translates into educational and occupational success.

Likewise, a U.S. Department of Education study found that among children

living with both biological parents, those with highly involved fathers were 42 percent more likely to earn A grades and 33 percent less likely to be held back a year in school than children whose dads had low levels of involvement. But little research has examined the association between paternal involvement per se and college graduation.

I investigated that association using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades 7 to 12 in the 1994-'95 school year. The Add Health data indicate that young adults who had involved fathers when they were in high school are significantly more likely to graduate from college.

Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between the group and those who had no relationship with their fathers, controlling for respondent's age, race/ethnicity, level of mother's education, and household income. (W. Bradford Wilcox)

Specifically, 18 percent of teens reported that their father was not involved in

their lives. Among the rest, I relied on a scale of adolescent-reported paternal involvement—measuring such activities as playing a sport, receiving homework help, or talking about a personal problem with their biological, adoptive, or step-father—to divide the remaining portion of teens into roughly equal groups of adolescents with somewhat involved, involved, or highly involved fathers. Compared to teens who reported that their fathers were not involved, teens with involved fathers were 98 percent more likely to graduate from college, and teens with very involved fathers were 105 percent more likely to graduate from college, controlling for respondent's age, race, ethnicity, level of mother's education, and household income as a teen. Clearly, young women and men with more engaged fathers are more likely to acquire a college diploma than their peers without such a father.

How does this story vary by young adults' socioeconomic background? Using maternal education as a proxy for socioeconomic status, the figure below indicates that, unsurprisingly, young adults from less-educated homes are markedly less likely to acquire a college degree. Nevertheless, this figure—which does not adjust for background factors—also shows that young adults whose mothers were at least high-school-educated appear to benefit more consistently from having an involved father in their life than young adults whose mothers were high school dropouts. In particular, the figure suggests that when it comes to college graduation, though father involvement matters for most young adults, it seems particularly important for young adults from moderately and highly educated homes.

Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between the group and teens who indicated no relationship with their fathers, controlling for age, race/ethnicity, and household income. (W. Bradford Wilcox)

If paternal involvement is important for higher education completion in America, what kind of family structure seems most likely to facilitate such involvement? The next figure—which does not adjust for background factors—indicates that adolescents are much more likely to report that they have a father who is involved or highly involved if their biological parents are married. That association between paternal involvement and family structure holds true for families of all education levels. In other words, an engaged approach to fatherhood is more common for adolescents living in an intact, married family, whatever the parents' educational attainment. But note that the most involved fathers are generally found in homes where the mother is college educated.

Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference between the group and teens from intact families, controlling for respondent's age, race/ethnicity, and household income. (W. Bradford Wilcox)

What is it that links paternal involvement and college graduation? Four mechanisms seem particularly likely. First, involved fathers may provide children with homework help, counsel, or knowledge that helps them excel in school. Second, involved fathers may help children steer clear of risky behaviors—from delinquency to teenage pregnancy—that might prevent them from completing college. Third, involved fathers may help foster an authoritative family environment (characterized by an appropriate mix of engagement, affection, and supervision) that is generally conducive to learning. Finally, involved fathers may be more likely to provide financial support to children seeking a college education. However, some other unmeasured factor such as a high-quality marriage or a child's personality traits may account for the association documented here between high levels of paternal involvement and the odds that a young adult graduates from college.

In today's global economy, a college diploma has emerged as an increasingly important ticket to achieving economic success. Among today's millennials between ages 25 and 32, college graduates earn on average about $17,500 more per year than their peers with only a high school diploma. A recent Brookings Institution study found that, over a lifetime, a college degree provides an income premium of about $570,000—a "tremendous return" on an investment.

As I discussed above, young men and women with involved fathers are

significantly more likely to earn a college diploma. Specifically, compared to their peers whose fathers are not involved, young adults with involved fathers were at least 98 percent more likely to graduate from college. Moreover, paternal involvement is especially high among young adults from college-educated homes, who are also more likely to live in an intact family. This means that such young adults are triply advantaged: They tend to come from more affluent families, are also more likely to have an intact family, and an involved father.

The good news about paternal involvement is that fathers have almost doubled the average amount of time they spend with their children each week, from 4.2 hours in 1995 to 7.3 hours in 2011. The bad news is that partly because fewer adolescents are living in an intact, married family, a large minority of the nation's teens—especially ones from poor and working-class homes—are not experiencing today's ethic of engaged fatherhood. If we wish to increase the odds that all young adults have a shot at the higher education of their choice, one thing we need to do is figure out how to bridge the fatherhood divide between children from college-educated and less-educated families.

Note: This essay is adapted from a research brief from the American Enterprise Institute.

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