

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

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Introduction

The last three decades have seen a growing trend examining the outcomes of active paternal engagement (APE) on a child (for synthesis; Furman and Buhrmester, 1992; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003 and 2004), the parents and how schools can maximise active paternal engagement, which will be shown throughout this paper. Data suggesting paternal engagement with children increases the number of positive outcomes for children's cognitive development and wellbeing (Harris, et al., 1998; White and Gilbreth, 2001; Jeong, et al., 2016). It can also reduce adverse outcomes such as emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. Fathers who actively engage in childcare and household labour have also been associated with positive outcomes for children and parental relationships. There is limited data on how schools can maximise APE, as schools tend to focus on maximising parents engagement which in turn results in the mother engaging more than the father. We have focused on three main actors in a child's life; the child, its parents and school.

Firstly, what is active paternal engagement (APE), and why should we be interested in its outcomes on family, children and schools? Fathers were usually considered to be on the fringe of a child's life and assumed little direct influence on their development. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, the realisation that 'paternal involvement' is a significant factor in a child's development has become a broad psychological research topic (Flouri, 2005). This study on APE stems from my being a new father and a drive to support my children's growth and development. It is written as information for fathers to learn; what APE is and its outcomes on certain actors, why APE is essential and how APE can be academically explored further in the future. It is not written as a guide on how to become a good father. It is also not written from a child's engagement perspective to external systems. However, it must be recognised that Bronfenbrenner (1974) puts the child as the main actor and demonstrates a child's development is a complicated system of relationships influenced by various levels of the micro and macro environment, from immediate family members and schools to governments, cultural ideals, regulations and traditions.

What is active paternal engagement (APE)?

It is important to realise that active paternal engagement is different from paternal involvement. APE is more participative than paternal involvement. Even so, these two terms are used synonymously throughout the literature explored. Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) suggest that engagement is a fundamental part of a process incorporating care and commitment into a child's life. Pushor and Ruitenberg further indicate engagement affords parents more confidence to work with educators for their children. The term engagement shares the power and authority more equally between parents and schools, which is mutually beneficial for all parties.

Harris and Goodall (2007) state that many education institutions concentrate solely on parental involvement and do not go further and explore parental engagement. Another vital distinction offered by Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg (2010) defines parental engagement as engaging in a shared responsibility. This sharing moves from a position of blame (when a parent blames the school or vice versa) to a position of resolve and resolution. Ferlazzo (2013) has contended that parental engagement encompasses more than parental involvement. In contrast, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) say that parental involvement and parental engagement represent each other's continuation. In light of the evidence, engagement delivers a more holistic outcome for a parent/father and will be used throughout. The acronym APE therefore, was created naturally from this study and is used throughout. We will now consider the differing roles parents play.

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

Defining parental roles

Historically, a mother's role is seen as the primary caregiver, and a father's role is seen as the provider. Mothers tend to do everyday tasks like cooking, nappy changing, washing and getting children dressed. In contrast, fathers are inclined to play with their children and engage in hobbies that need a significant dedication of time and interaction (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson, 2004).

Adamsons and Buehler (2007) argue a lack of research on the long-term effects this parenting style brings. However, this parenting style is undergoing a fundamental change, specifically for the father. Pleck, (2004) states that although a mother does the bulk of parenting, Dufur, et al., (2010) demonstrate that a father's role is evolving, and fathers are starting to contribute more with everyday tasks. Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson, (2004) also support this view, adding that fathers now invest far more time in childcare. This evolving parenting style results in more significant pressure on fathers to engage with their children and be the primary breadwinner. Splitting the day-to-day tasks is fair, and now the gender pay gap is narrowing; mothers can be equal or the primary breadwinner (Graf, Brown, and Patten, 2019; Kochhar, 2020). This will reduce the father's pressure to spend more time with children and not only be the primary breadwinner (Miller, et al., 2021). But why should a father spend more time with their children?

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

Outcomes of APE on a child

Cognitive development

Academics have researched the importance of APE and its influence on a child's cognitive development for many years now (for synthesis; Blanchard and Biller, 1971; Brazelton and Cramer, 1990; Furman and Buhrmester, 1992; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003 and 2004). A father's impact on a child's cognitive development reaches the family home, the classroom, and the wider community. It also affects cognitive behaviour, wellbeing and emotional growth (Levine, Murphy, and Wilson, 1998). When fathers are unengaged, children have less developed cognitive skills than children whose fathers are highly engaged. It also appears that fathers who have low engagement levels create significant negative correlations to a child's wellbeing and development (Jeong, et al., 2016).

There are many reasons that APE advances cognitive development in a child (Cano, Perales and Baxter, 2019). Levine and Pitt (1995) suggest that involving fathers with their preschool children will increase that child's cognitive and motor skills. These children become more independent, manage stress better, make friends more comfortably and achieve higher grades. Huerta, et al., (2014) showed a relationship between APE in the first twelve months of a child's life and more significant cognitive development in later years. Having an actively engaged father and mother creates more variation and heterogeneity in a child, thus helping cognitive development from exposure to different conditions, habits, education levels, parenting styles and an assortment of educational activities/interests. Fathers will engage in playtime and educational activities more if a mother is also actively engaged (Craig and Mullan, 2011), resulting in a more significant degree of time fathers spend with their children. Moreover, when these fathers engage in playtime and activities with their children, it results in more positive emotions to schooling and high academic achievement at school (Allen and Daly, 2007). Cano, et al., (2019) examined how fathers alone time with a child links to an increase in the child's cognitive development. It concluded that the time fathers spent with only their children correlated to a positive cognitive development in that child. Interestingly, it also found little effect on cognitive development between father-son-time, mother-son-time and fathers and mothers-son-time in playtime activity. However, when a father engaged in educational activities, their cognitive development's impact was comprehensive.

Increased wellbeing

APE influences the quality and quantity of influence on the wellbeing of children. It reduces delinquency, drug use, alcohol use, truancy and stealing (Harris, et al., 1998). Noncustodial fathers and stepfathers who maintain healthy bonds with their children will further increase positive results in wellbeing (White and Gilbreth, 2001). Children with engaged fathers suffer less from bullying or victimisation at school (Flouri, 2005), and engaged fathers improve children's behaviour (Aldous and Mulligan, 2002). Haggerty, et al., (2002) showed that engaged fathers dissuade daughters from antisocial behaviour. Peters and Ehrenberg (2008) listed an increased capacity for empathy, heightened self-control, higher self-esteem, increased social maturity, more life skills and a better father-child relationship lasting into adulthood. It can be seen from the research undertaken; APE is vital to maximising a child's wellbeing at home, school and the community. We can see APE positively influences a child at home, but does it have a similar effect on parents?

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

Outcomes of APE on parents and how this affects a child

The following section focuses on the outcomes of fathers who perform APE and its impact on a parent's relationship. It examines the effects on a mother, a father and the quality of their relationship and wellbeing. It looks at why these outcomes are essential and then concludes; how and why this is vital for a child's overall development.

Outcomes of performing APE for mothers

Higher stress levels from being a parent affect mothers, and specifically working mothers, more than fathers. This increased stress is because women still undertake more household chores and provide more routine care (see the introduction for a definition of care) to a child (Hochschild, 1989). Therefore, a father who performs APE, housework and more routine childcare will lower a mother's stress levels and lead to a more stable marriage (Kalmijn, 1999). Kalmijn (1999, p. 420) concludes with his 'Suppressor Hypothesis';

'Highly involved fathers do have stabler marriages, but this effect appears to be due to the fact that their wives are more satisfied with their marriages when they don't need to carry the entire burden of child-rearing themselves.'

Moreover, there are several advantages of parents who engage with one another; for example, better social integration into the wider community (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003). Conversely, some disadvantages can impact a parent's wellbeing with parents who do not engage with one another. A significant negative outcome on parents and specifically mothers is the protracted time demand they encounter due to a child needing a considerable portion of energy, attention and time (Pollmann-Schult, 2014). A child also increases household chores (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003), adding to these time demands and increasing stress and pressure, respectively (Ruppanner, Perales and Baxter, 2019). As discussed earlier, due to the majority of housework and childcare falling on mothers, and even more acutely, working mothers (Taylor and Scott, 2018), it is they who are more likely to suffer adverse outcomes if a father fails to perform APE and household labour. (Scarr and Deater-Deckard, 1996; Pollmann-Schult, 2014). Chandola, et al., (2019) highlight this outcome and show that mothers commonly endure 40% more stress and a decline in wellbeing than women without children. This study used biomarkers rather than a personal judgment of stress which resulted in more objective findings.

Additional studies (Milkie, et al., 2002) describe how mothers display increased stress levels when there is a lack of APE with the child, and an ideal division of care is not met, ending in an adverse effect on a mother's wellbeing and stress. Milkie, et al., (2002) measured 234 heterosexual couples and asked them what their ideal division of care would be compared with the actual care division and how this difference impacted wellbeing and stress levels. When Milkie, et al., (2002) studied the household's actual division of care, fathers appeared less engaged than mothers wanted, particularly in playtime and authoritative parenting. This resulted in mothers' stress levels increasing. When fathers actively engaged more than the agreed ideal division of care, it lowered both parents' stress levels. As before, Milkie, et al., (2002) showed that an unbalanced division of care could adversely affect stress and wellbeing levels, particularly when parents want it more balanced. It must be realised that this data was collected in 1999; as Brenan (2020) suggests, these ideal divisions of care may have changed over the years. A repeat of the study would be beneficial to see what these ideals are now. In light of the evidence, a more egalitarian sharing of housework and routine childcare, coupled with governmental initiatives encouraging these, could lower mothers' adverse wellbeing and stress outcomes. Moreover, considering these results, a father who actively engages in APE, housework and childcare raises everyone's happiness levels.

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

Outcomes of APE on fathers

The outcomes for fathers performing APE are associated with many beneficial cognitive results; social and psychological characteristics of shared parenting and care are associated with parental competence, family closeness and marital happiness. (Wilson and Prior, 2011). Evidence from the UK shows a growing number of fathers desiring to increase APE (Working Families, 2017; Chung, et al., 2020). This change of fathers mentality has thus shifted a father's identity (Brandth and Kvande, 1998) to a more engaged caregiving role. Despite this shift, the type of care a father gives compared to a mother might lead to certain care types increasing their wellbeing more than others. Craig and Mullen (2011) showed that fathers are more inclined to participate in non-routine/enrichment activities than routine care. Fathers value this type of care as more 'masculine' (Brandth and Kvande, 1998). By extension, engaging in non-routine/enrichment activities may increase a fathers wellbeing more than a father engaging in routine care. However, as the previous section suggests, it is important to consider that mothers find sharing of all types of care vital, so sharing non-routine/enrichment and routine care may still lead to positive outcomes for all.

Additionally, outcomes for fathers performing APE increase self-confidence, parenting becomes more gratifying and generates a sense of greater significance to a child. (DeLuccie, 1996). Outcomes for fathers performing APE are more likely to develop cognitive maturity (Pleck and Pleck, 1997), cause less psychological distress, participate in community events and hold leadership roles in community programs (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Townsend, 2002).

It is evident from the research that a father who performs APE, shares housework, provides more routine care, provides financial support, and offers an appreciation and support of active maternal engagement, is vital for a healthy relationship with the mother, and in turn, benefits a child's development and wellbeing. Considering this, how can the final actor, the school, develop APE and why should it?

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

Schools maximising APE

The following paragraphs analyse how and why school programs should encourage APE to benefit children and schools. Schools benefit from parental engagement with school programs in several ways, including; stronger parent-teacher relations, better teacher morale, improved school climate, improved school attendance, better grades and improved child-teacher relations (Fan and Chen 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007). However, several studies highlight that mothers engage more in school programs than fathers (Duursma, 2014; Kim and Hill, 2015; Baker, 2018). Therefore, it is fair to review how and why school programs should encourage APE in addition to solely parental engagement programs. This section will look at the home setting, at school, and finally, specific programs aimed at encouraging APE.

Schools maximising APE at School

It is common for schools to offer programs any parent can attend, but mothers tend to be taking up these opportunities, as mentioned earlier (Tadi, 2018). It is evident to consider ways that appeal to more fathers and get them engaged too. Goldman (2005) states that fathers' initial engagement in a school setting is based on a child's needs rather than the adult's needs. She offers three general reasons for how this happens:

1. Children encourage their fathers to get involved.
2. Fathers want to build better relationships with their children through shared activities.
3. Fathers want to support their children's learning and school achievement.

Schools need to consider how fathers are invited to participate in school. Invitations sent from children could encourage participation, or 'shared activities' may need to be the focus. Indeed, careful planning is required to ensure that fathers get the opportunity to work with their children at school and not just observe them (Fletcher and Silberberg, 2006).

Teachers have a difficult task in maximising APE at school. One of the barriers to APE in school activities is identified as schools being female orientated and dominated environments (Frieman and Berkeley, 2002; Goldman, 2005). Tadi, (2018) suggests it would be beneficial to see an increase in male teachers offering ways of engagement as fathers may relate better to another male. Rohrmann, (2019) agrees and adds that many hurdles for fathers to participate in school programs exist. The main barrier is a lack of time due to work commitments. Apart from hiring more male staff, which may not be practical, effort and commitment from existing school staff in making policy, practice and procedures for engagement that actively supports fathers would be valuable. Encouragement and an appreciation of what fathers can offer would help to promote engagement further. Frieman and Berkeley (2002) suggest that current practitioners must understand the importance a father has on a child to maximise APE. If practitioners understand this, they will find it easier to engage with fathers as 'allies in the educational process' (Frieman and Berkeley 2002, p.213). Fletcher (2008) adds that a teacher's self-reflection of beliefs and attitudes is another key method to increase APE at school. Unhelpful beliefs, such as fathers being afraid of feelings, can be addressed through self-reflection. From examining these points, adopting both an understanding of a fathers importance and self-reflection on attitudes and beliefs would ensure that APE has increased at school and more male teachers.

Fathers who engage with their children at home, school and community for substantial amounts of time will advance their children's opportunities (Harris and Goodall, 2008). The research has

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

shown that to help get fathers engaged, specific programs need to be designed by schools to build a father's self-confidence and willingness to engage with a child. Further work still needs to be done to establish whether children respond to certain activities better than others when undertaken with the father.

Additionally, schools need to learn that APE with school programs will help their child's development (Lechowicz, et al., 2019). Goldman (2005) suggests almost pandering to a father's stereotype and offering programs that are perceived they will enjoy. Schools must address the barriers that fathers face in participation; the most common hurdle is work commitments, as discussed earlier (Rohrman, 2019). If schools can design programs that fit around these work commitments, it may increase participation. Schools need to train existing teachers about the importance and benefits APE has on children. Teachers must also recognise the barriers that fathers face with APE (Frieman and Berkeley, 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that APE and its outcomes on a child and its closest actors in Bronfenbrenner's (1974) microsystem, as mentioned in the introduction, have a prodigious influence on many outcomes of a child's life. It shows how APE impacts parent relationships and shows how schools could maximise APE for the child, the family and the school.

We have highlighted how vital APE is for a child's positive cognitive development, increased wellbeing, better academic achievement and stronger social skills. Nevertheless, most studies examined focussed on lower socioeconomic stereotypes. However, we are limited by the absence of APE research into higher socioeconomic groups. Ergo, future studies should target these groups better to understand APE's effects on children from such groups.

When a father performs APE and engages in housework and childcare, which are reasonably divided between parents, it will also significantly improve parental relationships, and therefore positive development of a child. Chung, et al., (2020) demonstrated, mothers and fathers have started to seek a more even division of housework and childcare. Taking this even division into consideration, the COVID-19 pandemic is potentially seeing a reverse of seeking equal division due to the negative impact on women's potential to keep a job (Czymara, Langenkamp and Cano, 2021; Kniffin, et al., 2021). Further studies need to be carried out to validate this suspicion and hopefully avoid regression of gender equality after years of development preceding COVID-19. Considering this evaluation, schools must also encourage APE more as opposed to only parental engagement as mothers tend to be the only parent engaging. While there is research conducted, such as Lechowicz, et al., (2019) and Harris and Goodall (2008), explaining the benefits of schools maximising APE in different settings, there is a paucity of research related to the number of time schools spend encouraging APE, specifically (Hebrard, 2017). The majority of research into schools maximising parental engagement does not consider which parent is involved. Schools tend to assume that mothers and fathers have a similar relationship to one another in school, home and community settings (Kim and Hill, 2015). Therefore, it is important for schools to offer father only school programs, mixed with the normal school programs usually offered.

Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

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Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

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Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

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Outcomes of Active Paternal/Father Engagement (APE) on a child, parents and why schools should maximise APE within school programs.

Jacob Street - Anglia Ruskin University

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