

# Including Measures of Commitment to Fatherhood in Evaluations of Fatherhood Programs

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## Introduction

Responsible fatherhood (RF) programs aim to increase fathers' positive involvement with their children, improve father-child relationships, and augment child well-being (National Fatherhood Clearinghouse, n.d.). To achieve these goals, programs provide various classroom and individual services, such as support for coparenting, parent education, employment training, encouragement to be responsible parents, and case management.

Evaluations of RF programs usually include measures that line up with these goals, including coparenting (e.g., support, coparenting alliance, gatekeeping), father involvement with children, sense of parenting efficacy and satisfaction, job readiness and acquisition, and child support payments. The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN) has recently developed and validated new measures of coparenting and father involvement to be used by fatherhood programs (see Dyer, Fagan, Kaufman, Pearson, & Cabrera, in press; Dyer, Kauffman, Fagan, Pearson, & Cabrera, 2018; Fagan, Dyer,

Kaufman, & Pearson, 2017). Studies have shown that fathers' participation in RF programs is associated with improvement in these aspects of fathering (e.g., Kim & Jang, 2018).

This brief focuses on another aspect of fathering that has not been included in RF program evaluations: fathers' commitment to the fathering role (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015). Researchers should consider including commitment measures because (1) fathers may become more committed to the father role as a result of their participation in the RF program, and (2) commitment to the father role may influence the extent to which the RF program is able to bring about positive change in other aspects of parenting such as engagement with children, payment of child support (formal and informal), and coparenting relationships with mothers. Briefly put, fathers attending the RF program may be more motivated to work on making positive changes in these areas if they already have a strong commitment to fathering.

**THIS BRIEF:**

- 1** Reviews the various ways in which fathers' commitment to the parenting role is conceptualized by researchers, and;
- 2** Examines the statistical associations (i.e., correlations) between low-income, nonresident fathers' commitment to parenting and two aspects of fathering (engagement with children and self-perceived closeness with children) using data collected by FRPN.

## Commitment to fathering

Identity theory has been used to explain fathers' commitment to the father role. This theory posits that fathers have an internalized standard of performance (e.g., expectations) associated with being a father. Fathers with a high standard of performance are more committed to fathering and tend to find fatherhood more meaningful, and those with a low standard are less committed and find the role less meaningful.

There are several ways to view fathers' commitment to the father role. One way focuses on "salience" of the father role, that is, the probability that fathers will view their parenting role as more salient than other roles such as friend, partner, or worker (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Researchers have also suggested that commitment to the father role can be conceptualized as "centrality" (Adamsons, 2013). Whereas salience suggests the probability that one will enact behaviors associated with the father identity, identity centrality reflects the importance an individual attaches to an identity (Henley & Pasley, 2005). Fathers who view their father role as high in centrality are likely to value the importance of being a father, think about their child during the day, seek out opportunities to spend time with their child, express pride in their child, provide financial support to their child, and talk with others about their child. Importance of the father role (i.e., centrality) is the term used in this brief to describe this approach to conceptualizing identity.

Another conceptual approach suggests that fathering identity and commitment are embedded in social relationships with others who support and encourage the father's role as a parent. This view posits that fathers feel validated in their identity as a parent when they receive feedback from significant others suggesting that they are meeting the standards of being a good parent (Burke, 1991). According to this perspective, father's commitment is conceptualized as the number of social relationships associated with a father's role identity (Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002). Interactional commitment is the term used in this brief to describe this approach to conceptualizing identity.

In this brief, I hypothesize that fathers who report higher levels of role importance (i.e., see the father role as central to their identity), and receive validation from others for being a good parent, which is called interactional commitment, will also report closer relationships with children and higher levels of engagement in child-related



activities. I also hypothesize that fathers will report closer relationships with their children and higher levels of engagement in child-related activities if the father perceives a better quality coparenting relationship and if the father is employed in the labor market. Finally, I hypothesize that the associations between father involvement, coparenting alliance, gatekeeping, and unemployment will be greater when fathers view the parenting role as more important to them and experience higher levels of interactional commitment compared with fathers who are less committed to fatherhood.

## Method

This study is based on a convenience sample of 300 low-income fathers who had at least one child with whom they did not reside all or most of the time that was collected between January 2015 and June 2015. Fathers were recruited from one southern and six northeastern U.S. cities and took place across 14 different fatherhood programs and various other sites in high-poverty neighborhoods. Fathers recruited from the community were approached in various neighborhood locations including grocery stores, barber shops, and churches. The fatherhood programs were mostly voluntary, but some programs served fathers who were mandated as a condition of their parole. While several of these fatherhood program were public sector programs, the majority were unaffiliated social services agencies. All programs provided parenting and coparenting education and employment support.

## Participants

About 19 percent of fathers reported that their highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or GED; 51 percent had obtained a high school diploma or GED with no further education. A majority of the fathers (74%) were African American, 18 percent were Hispanic, and 12 percent were White. The fathers had a mean of 2.3 biological children, their mean annual income was \$10,000 to \$15,000, and 42 percent of fathers were unemployed at the time of their interview. Roughly 4 in 10 of the sample was enrolled in a fatherhood program. Children ranged in age from one month to 18 years.



## Measures

Fathers in the study completed a questionnaire that included a variety of measures of fathering. Two measures of father involvement were used: self-reported closeness and father engagement in child-related activities. The Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS, short form, Pianta, 1992) was used to measure closeness [15 items rated on a 5-point scale from *definitely does not apply* (1) to *definitely applies* (5)]. The CPRS measure was validated with the sample of nonresident fathers in the current study (Dyer, Kaufman, & Fagan, 2017). Items were summed ( $\alpha = .89$ ), with high scores indicating higher levels of father-child closeness.

Father engagement in child-related activities was measured with four items from the Father Engagement

Scale (FES; Dyer, Kauffman, Fagan, Pearson, & Cabrera, 2018), including visiting family, eating meals, hugging the child, and going for walks. These items were selected because they were used in each developmentally appropriate version of the FES. Item responses were recoded so that 1 = *never* and 3 = *more than one time per week*. Items were summed to construct an index of father engagement ( $\alpha = .94$ ), with high scores indicating higher levels of engagement.

The Interactional Commitment scale (Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002) assessed "the extensiveness or number of social relationships" (p. 133) associated with the fathering role identity. Respondents indicated how encouraging or discouraging parents, grandparents, and friends are in relation to their involvement with their children (five-point Likert scale, from 1 = *very discouraging* to 5 = *very encouraging*) (see [Table 1](#) for description of items). Fathers' responses to the three items were added together to form an index, with higher scores indicating higher levels of interactional commitment.

Fatherhood role importance was measured with 11 items assessing the degree to which fathers believe the father role is important to them (1 = *not very true*, 2 = *somewhat true*, 3 = *very true*). After reverse coding one item ("I prefer the company of adults to spending time with [child's name]"), items were added together into an index; higher scores indicated higher levels of commitment to the father role ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

Fathers' perception of coparenting was measured using a scale developed and validated using data of the current study (Dyer, Fagan, Kaufman, Pearson, & Cabrera, in press). The measure consists of three subscales: coparenting alliance, gatekeeping, and undermining. Only coparenting alliance and gatekeeping were used in the current study. Participants indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with eight items applied to their coparenting (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A high score on the coparenting alliance measure suggests that fathers perceive having a stronger alliance with mothers ( $\alpha = .94$ ), and a high score on the gatekeeping measure indicates that father experience higher levels of maternal gatekeeping ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

The analysis also included a measure of father's unemployment, highest level of education attained, race/ethnicity, target child's age and gender, and father's enrollment in a responsible fatherhood program.



## Results

[Table 1](#) shows the items for the role importance questionnaire. Most fathers in the study indicated a high level of commitment to the father role, as seen in the distribution of responses to items (i.e., most fathers rated items to be *very true of me*). The average for all items added together was 32.69 ( $SD = 2.95$ ), which is equivalent to an average item score of 2.97, suggesting a high level of role commitment.

[Table 2](#) shows the items for the interactional commitment questionnaire. The average for all items added together was 12.85 ( $SD = 2.36$ ), which is equivalent to an average item score of 4.28, suggesting that parents, grandparents, and friends are very encouraging of fathers' involvement with children.

[Table 3](#) shows the results of self-reported father-child closeness regressed on role importance, interactional commitment, coparenting (alliance and gatekeeping), and unemployment. All variables included in moderation analyses were centered. Control variables are also included in the analysis but not shown in the table. Model 1 shows these multivariate results without interaction effects. Father-child closeness is positively predicted by both types of commitment to fathering and coparenting alliance, and negatively predicted by gatekeeping. Model 2 in this table shows a significant interaction effect for role importance and coparenting alliance. Graphing the interaction effect reveals that coparenting alliance has a stronger positive effect on father-child closeness among fathers with low role importance compared with fathers with high role commitment (see [Figure 1](#)).

[Table 4](#) shows the results of self-reported father engagement in child-related activities regressed on the same variables. Only interactional commitment and coparenting alliance were significantly and positively associated with father engagement. There were no significant interaction effects for the commitment variables.

## Discussion

The findings of the current study showed that both low-income, nonresidential fathers' role importance and interactional commitment explain a significant portion of the variance in self-reported father-child closeness, but only interactional commitment is a significant predictor of self-reported engagement with children. The findings also revealed a significant but medium-sized correlation between role importance and interactional commitment ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ). These findings suggest that role importance and interactional commitment address unique but overlapping aspects of fathers' commitment to the parenting role, and both are important in predicting fathers' involvement with children.

The findings also revealed that role importance, but not interactional commitment, influenced (moderated) the relationship between coparenting alliance and father-child closeness. Contrary to expectation, the association between coparenting alliance and father-child closeness was stronger when nonresident fathers were less committed to the parenting role compared with fathers who were more committed. That is, coparenting alliance appears to have a greater positive effect on father-child closeness among less committed fathers. This suggests that fathers who are able to maintain good-quality coparenting alliances with mothers may have better relationships with their children even when fathers view the paternal role as having low importance to them. These findings are consistent with research showing that quality of the coparenting relationship is especially important for the highest risk fathers, such as adolescent fathers (Fagan & Lee, 2011).

Maternal gatekeeping was negatively associated with self-reported closeness but not with self-reported father engagement. This finding suggests that gatekeeping may have a greater influence on the emotional aspects of fathering than on the extent of his engagement with the child. It is possible that mothers restrict fathers' access to



the child because they sense the father and child do not have a close relationship. The lack of a close relationship may manifest in children not wanting to spend time with the father, and mothers may exert greater control over fathers' involvement knowing that the child's attachment to the father is weak (or lacking in security). Of course it is also possible that maternal gatekeeping leads to relationships that lack a sense of closeness. Future research should attempt to examine the mechanisms and process by which gatekeeping and father-child closeness influence each other.

The results of this brief should be viewed in light of a number of study limitations. Cause-effect relationships between commitment to the father role and father involvement cannot be assumed in correlational studies. The role importance and interactional commitment measures have not been validated and thus may not be valid measures of fathers' commitment to parenting. The convenience sample also precludes any generalization to all low-income, nonresidential fathers.

In spite of these limitations, the findings of this brief may have several implications for fatherhood programs. First, programs should consider assessing role importance and interactional commitment in the evaluation of their services. Programs should also consider reaching out to fathers' relatives and friends who can provide encouragement for fathers to be involved in positive ways with their children. Increased encouragement provided by these individuals could strengthen fathers' relationships to their children. Although it cannot be concluded from these findings that fathers will demonstrate more commitment to fathering by attending a fatherhood program, there is a good chance that role importance will influence (moderate) the association between coparenting alliance and father outcomes. In addition, I encourage continued research on low-income, nonresidential fathers' commitment to the parenting role as it relates to outcomes for fathers and families.

**Table 1. Role importance items and responses**

Role commitment items	Not Very True of Me	Somewhat true of me	Very true of me
I talk with friends or family about [child's name].	4.4	19.5	75.7
I find myself thinking about [child's name] during the day.	.5	8.8	90.3
I like being known as a father.	.7	5.3	93.4
I share pictures of [child's name] with friends or family.	5.3	14.2	79.7
I enjoy going places [child's name] will enjoy.	4.9	5.3	93.4
I think it's more fun to get [child's name] something new than it is to get myself something new.	2.6	11.9	85.0
I think spending time with [child's name] is fun.	1.5	4.4	93.2
I share news and updates about [child's name] with family or friends.	4.6	16.1	78.3
I talk about [child's name] with others on social media websites like Facebook.	41.1	14.4	42.7
I prefer the company of adults to spending time with [child's name] (reverse code).	73.7	14.4	11.1
Being a father to [child's name] has changed me a lot.	4.2	7.3	87.8

Note: Percentages are reported.



**Table 2. Interactional commitment items and responses**

Interactional commitment items	Very Discouraging	Somewhat Discouraging	Neutral	Somewhat Encouraging	Very Encouraging
<i>How encouraging, or discouraging, are the these people of your involvement with [target child's name]</i>					
Your Parents	3.7	3.0	11.7	14.2	67.5
Your grandparents or other relatives	2.3	1.9	17.6	34.8	43.3
Your friends	2.3	1.9	17.6	34.8	43.3

Note: Percentages are reported.

**Table 3. Father-child closeness regressed on coparenting and commitment to parenting and unemployment (N=252)**

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Unemployed	-1.02	.64	-.09	-1.00	.64	-.09
Interactional commitment	.39	.14	.16**	.36	.14	.15**
Role importance	.68	.12	.34***	.61	.13	.30***
Coparenting alliance	.16	.06	.19**	.15	.06	.18**
Gatekeeping	-.26	.11	-.17**	-.29	.11	-.19**
RI x Coparenting alliance				-.03	.01	.12*
F	9.24***			8.97***		
R <sup>2</sup>	.33			.35		

Note: RI x Coparenting alliance = role importance multiplied by Coparenting alliance. Non-Hispanic Black is the reference group. Controls include father's age, father's education, Hispanic, White, other, responsible fatherhood program, child's age, and child's gender.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4. Father engagement in child-related activities regressed on coparenting, commitment to parenting, and unemployment (N = 300)**

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$
Unemployed	.19	.32	.03
Interactional commitment	.15	.07	.11*
Role importance	-.02	.06	-.02
Coparenting alliance	.09	.03	.19**
Gatekeeping	-.07	.05	-.08
F	10.93***		
R <sup>2</sup>	.33		

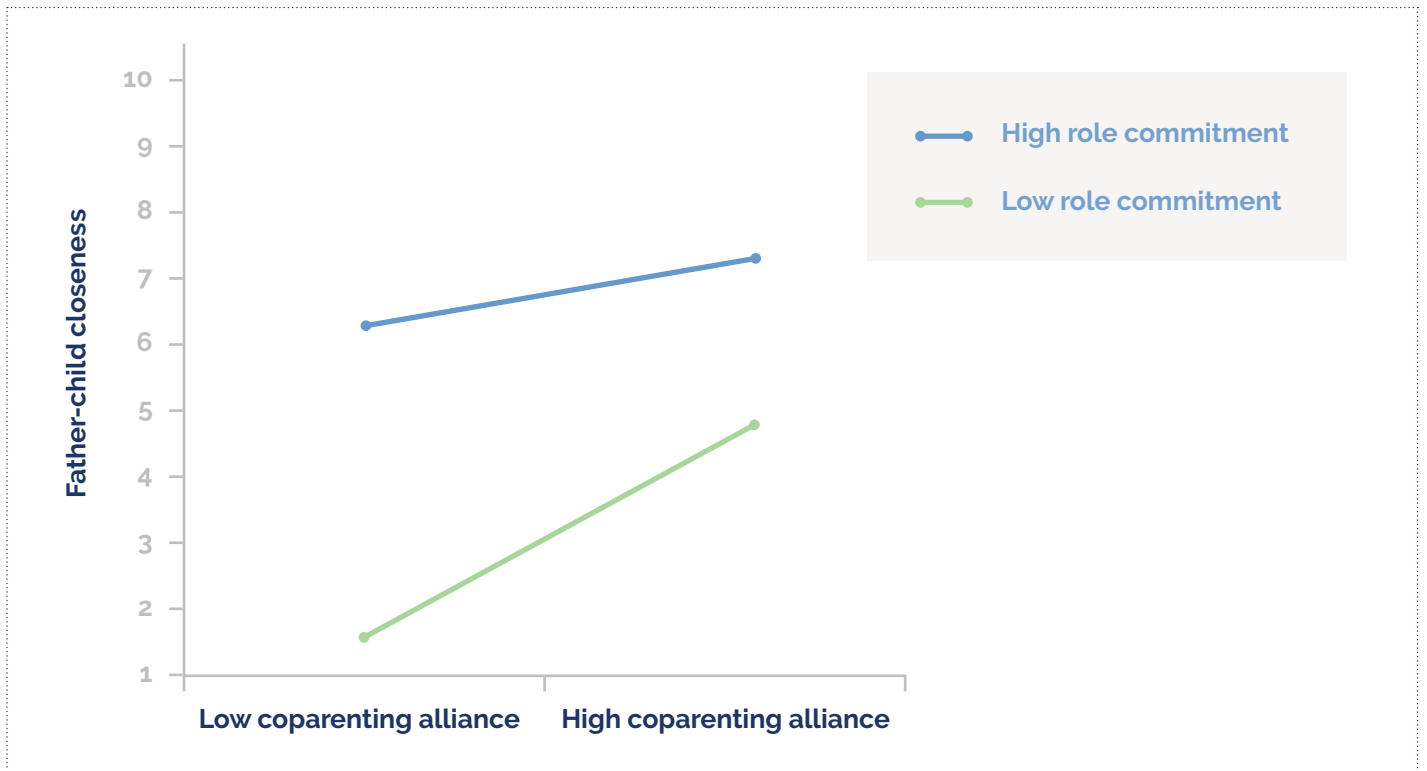
Note: Controls include father's age, father's education, Hispanic, White, other, responsible fatherhood program, child's age, and child's gender.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1. Association between coparenting alliance and father-child closeness for fathers with low and high role importance.**





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