Early research on absent fathers: Host of negative outcomes for children
Recent research on \textit{present} fathers: How do they matter? (What happened to mothers?)
What fathers do when they are present...
Theoretical frameworks

- **Attachment theory**
  - Beginning at infancy, the early childhood period is a significant period where caregivers establish close relationships with the baby that form the foundation for child well-being and development

- **Family systems theory**
  - Families are dynamic and change over time as family adjusts to child
    - Family subsystems are interdependent and influence one another

- **Resource theory**
  - Parents with more resources (income, education, social resources) are able to invest more in their children

- **Parenting models**
  - Belsky’s 1984
  - Cabrera et al 2007
Typology of Father Involvement

Engagement

Accessibility

Responsibility
Typology of Father Involvement

Data Sources

1. **Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**
   - N=3800

2. **EHS National Father Research Consortium**
   - N=3000, moms & dads in random-control design

3. **ECLS-B**
   - N=10688; 2001: 9, 24, 48 months

4. **FAMILIA (qualitative & quantitative)**
   - N=40, 46 mothers and fathers: observations, interviews, and direct child assessments
Fathers are involved early and stay...

**Prenatally involved fathers** were still engaged at years 1 and 3 because they became more committed to each other (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2011)

But, there’s variability..

- for White and Latino fathers, residence at birth was a stronger predictor of father leaving
- for African American fathers, no prenatal involvement was a stronger predictor of father leaving (Shannon & Cabrera, 2008)
Fathers who engage in high quality play have children who are more regulated and less aggressive (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Paquette, 2008; Shears & Robin, 2005)

In our own work,

- EHS data shows that mothers and fathers are just as playful, which is related to language (fathers) and self-regulation (Cabrera et al., 2007)

- High quality play (positive control, reciprocity, cooperation) at 24 months predicted children's emotion regulation (LEITER-R) at 48 months.
Fathers discipline their children

Fathers use various strategies to help their children follow directions:

- At 24 months, fathers use more regulatory language than behavioral
- Boys heard more regulatory language than girls
- Children with less vocabulary had fathers using more behavioral compliance

24 months $\rightarrow$ Pre-K

- Fathers’ behavioral strategies $\rightarrow$ child sustained attention
- Fathers’ regulatory language $\rightarrow$ child emotion regulation

Father Relationships and Child Social Adjustment

- Close Relationship to Father
  - Externalizing Behaviors
  - Positive Peer Relationships

- Not Close Relationship to Father
  - Externalizing Behaviors
  - Positive Peer Relationships
FATHERS AND CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
From my own lab’s research…
Father-toddler communication in low-income families: Education and depressive symptoms

Participants
- n=80 racially and ethnically diverse sample of low-income fathers and their 2-year-old children

Measures
- Father and child language
  - Transcribed father-child using CHAT and CHILDEs to analyze transcripts
- Father depression
  - CES-D

(Malin, Karberg, Cabrera, et al. 2013, *Family Science*)
Large variability in quality & quantity of language

Three main findings:

- Fathers’ education predicted children’s language: more utterances & diverse vocabularies (i.e. word types)

- Fathers’ depressive symptoms related to less grammatically complex language (i.e. smaller MLUs)

- Fathers’ depressive symptoms & education and children’s language outcomes were partially mediated by fathers’ quantity and quality of language
Mothers & fathers were equally playful with their toddlers and spent ½ of time in concrete play ($t = -.12, p = .90$)
Fathers’ playfulness is related to children’s vocabulary

Over and above parental responsiveness, playfulness was related to ER and vocabulary

$\beta = .64$
Mothers and fathers working together

Interaction of mother and father playfulness predicting children’s pre-kindergarten receptive vocabulary

The association between maternal playfulness and children’s vocabulary at pre-K was significant only when fathers were highly playful ($\beta = .25$)
Discussion

Low-income fathers are important contributors to children’s school readiness

- Fathers are just as playful as mothers, but their playfulness matters differently
- Fathers’ playfulness is related to language whereas mothers’ playfulness is related to emotion regulation

We find evidence of:

- That moms AND dads working together are better for vocabulary
  - Maternal playfulness matters **only when** high paternal playfulness

- Fathers effects are independent of mom’s – fathers are not substitutes for moms –
- Both parents matter in different ways
THANK YOU!