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## "DAD, DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME?" THE IMPACT OF FATHERS WHO MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

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“DAD, DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME?”  
THE IMPACT OF FATHERS WHO MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in Family Sciences in  
the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Michael S. Sitton

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Ronald J. Werner-Wilson, Ph.D., Professor of Family Sciences

Lexington, Kentucky

2018

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### “DAD, DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME?” THE IMPACT OF FATHERS WHO MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

With an increase in the pace of life in the United States, there comes a recognition of the importance of prioritizing time, especially for fathers. Of the two-thirds of children who live with their father, only a percentage of them have fathers who report regular play time with their children. However, literature in the field does not explain specifically whether or not this play between father and child influences the child's later risk taking behaviors in high school. Using data from the 2003 Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), waves 3, 4, and 6, this quantitative study sought to understand the connection between a father's play with his young children and the number of risk taking behaviors exhibited by those children in high school. The results from this study indicate that high school students who had fathers that played with them when they were young, as well as high school students who had fathers that did not play with them when they were young both exhibited similar rates of risk taking behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Fathers, Play, Children, Influence, Risk, School

Michael Scott Sitton

April 9, 2018

“DAD, DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME?”  
THE IMPACT OF FATHERS WHO MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

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*Dedicated to my children, Clara and Will*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As the pace of life increases for many around the world (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007), the need to preserve some time for relationships has also increased (Gröpel & Kuhl, 2009). With this increase has come heightened awareness surrounding the importance of effectively prioritizing time (Fouché & Martindale, 2011). For example, an increase in the overall number of hours spent working (Virtanen & Kivimäki, 2012) and volunteering (Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998) have imposed on the amount of time people spend with family members, which has negatively impacted the quality of those relationships (Glorieux, Minnen, & Tienoven, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), 49% of adults in the U.S. are men, and 45% of these men are fathers. Only 35% of fathers are married to the mother of their children, and 8% are single fathers.

As Benson (1968) eloquently observed, “an individual father may be expendable, but the institution of fatherhood is indispensable.” As such, men with children face the unique challenge of balancing paid employment (Cooklin et al., 2016) and hobbies (Melman, 2007) with the needs of their spouse (Fong & Bainbridge, 2016) and children (Vieira, Matias, Ferreira, Lopez, & Matos, 2016). This study relates to other studies by anticipating a gap in the literature surrounding the impact of a father’s varied roles on his children. This paper will fill seek to fill this gap by looking at children’s success as a function of time spent with their father, specifically as it relates to the influence of a father’s play. The literature on a father’s balance of work and family has some valuable insights.

## **Literature Review**

Much of the existing literature is about the impact of various roles on a father; however, less is known about how the multiple roles fathers fill specifically impact their children. Symbolic interactionism provides a lens to observe how the impact of juggling fatherhood with other important roles affects a child (Blumer, 1969). The Family Life Cycle illustrates how this impact varies over time (Garcia-Preto, 2011), and looking at fatherhood from a historical perspective sheds light on why contemporary fathers are often viewed as evolving (Griswold, 1993). Observing how shifting expectations for fathers affects their children is another important part in understanding the complete process (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). A father's family of origin in particular plays a major role in how many deal with their varied duties (Herland, Hauge, & Helgeland, 2015). Specifically, how a father is able to balance his work and family life (Cooklin, et al., 2016) leads to the impact he has on the future success of his children (Suh et al., 2016). The following sections will examine each of these ideas in further detail, starting with Symbolic Interactionism.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley were the founders of Symbolic Interactionism. One of Mead's students, Herbert Blumer (1969), observed that "people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation". It is this meaning that provides a sense of self (Mogobe, 2005). This theory is integral for understanding the impact of a father's influence in the lives of his children as it relates to the future success of the child. Because a father's success includes both providing for

their children and the quality of his relationship with his children (Tamis-LeMonda, 2004), the meaning he attaches to each of these values may differ than that of his peers. Take the example of a father who believes that his meaning is to solely provide financially for his children. He would vary from a father who believes it is more valuable to spend quality time with his children (Paquette et al., 2000).

Meaning goes beyond the way people see themselves; it is often coupled with the meaning attached to how these roles are filled. For example, fathers who are poor may find that providing financially for their children makes them feel they are effectively fulfilling their role (Cooklin et al., 2016). Conversely, wealthy fathers might value time spent with their children as an accurate measure of their devotion (Carlson, VanOrman, & Turner, 2017). Symbolic Interactionism looks at the meaning a father places on his values, particularly as these values relate to their children and time spent with them. A father's impact in the lives of his children from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism is made even clearer when viewed through the lens of the Family Life Cycle.

### **Fatherhood and the Family Life Cycle**

The typical family follows the pattern outlined in the seven stages of the Family Life Cycle (Garcia-Preto, 2011): (1) leaving home: emerging young adults; (2) joining of families through marriage/union; (3) families with young children; (4) families with adolescents; (5) launching children and moving on at midlife; (6) families in late middle age; and (7) families nearing the end of life. Fathers with young children often feel low work-life balance due to the adjustment period that accompanies the addition of a child to the family unit (Wynter, Rowe, Tran, & Fisher, 2016). Likewise, fathers with adolescents

as well as fathers with launching children are faced with the increased autonomy of these older children, increasing the level of work-family conflict (Vieira et al., 2016). These situations contribute to diminished quality of the father-child relationship (Reddick, Rochlen, Grasso, Reilly & Spikes, 2012).

Many fathers trying to balance work and family may feel that their dual roles of father and employee are not cohesive (Gasser, 2017). However, recognition of this gap has helped fathers close it as they view their role as caretaker shifting to one of equality with the mother of their children (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). The Family Life Cycle shows that it is typical for fathers at nearly every stage to have to juggle the important roles in their life—family, work, and community. This model also demonstrates that with flexibility and creativity, meeting the needs of varied roles is possible (Bijawat, 2013). Conversely, history views fatherhood with some noticeable differences, particularly when considering the needs of their children.

### **Fatherhood Historically**

Breadwinning was seen as the defining characteristic of fatherhood in the nineteenth century (Griswold, 1993). The Great Depression as well as World War II took many of these breadwinning fathers away from their families. Family roles began to change significantly in the 1960s, with the emergence of the working mother. Fathers generally resisted their proposed increase in housework and childcare, even though many of their wives had full-time jobs (Griswold, 1993). As the decades progressed, an increase in divorce became another factor that took fathers away from their children. This led to one of the major problems faced by fathers in the United States today: how to be included in the caregiving of their children, especially when many do not live with their

children (Griswold, 1993). This resulted in fathers not being in the lives of their children as much as their ex-wives, thus they had a more difficult time connecting with their children (Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent & Hill, 1993).

Additionally, many families pressured their sons to adopt an aggressive and unemotional masculine role (Sussman, 2012). This stifled what may have been a naturally occurring desire in many boys to nurture and care for future children (Benson, 1968). For example, instead of encouraging reading and quiet indoor games, it became more common to point young boys towards roughhouse play outside. These mixed messages held up a masculine identity that was at odds with what society was starting to expect of their men, particularly fathers (Sussman, 2012). The historical understanding of the traditional view of fatherhood may shed light on why many fathers today find it difficult to connect with their children. While fatherhood historically placed rigid boundaries around gender roles, expectations shifted in the twentieth century from the role of sole breadwinner to co-caregiver (Griswold, 1993).

### **Shifting Expectations**

Unlike the stereotypical men of history, most fathers today desire a strong, close relationship with their children (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). Fathers are increasingly willing to be an integral part of the day-to-day lives of their children (Caracciolo di Torella, 2015). However, for some, a noticeable tension arises between their traditionally accepted commitment to their children (breadwinning), and the new societal expectations now beginning to be placed upon them (the addition of childcare) (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). For example, fathers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds find that their comparatively young age, limited financial resources, and lack of education puts

them at a disadvantage when seeking to strengthen relationships with their children (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). Additionally, with the increase of divorce, the majority of the time non-resident fathers get to be with their children is only on the weekends (Hook & Wolfe, 2012).

When fathers are with their children less frequently, they have less opportunity to make a positive impact. One way that this has been addressed in the last few decades is by corporate paternity programs which encourage fathers to create stronger relationships with their children (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). This allows fathers to be more available to co-parent and WANT TO learn the necessary skills to be a more effective father. This type of cultural change would allow the nurturing father to become a more accepted role, as well as effectively influencing policies that relate to families in the context of joint custody, family law, and paternity leave (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). The way in which a society supports the nurturing father through these types of policies will significantly influence the health of that community (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). Thus, by embracing these shifting societal expectations and making time for their children, fathers will be able to successfully model masculinity for their sons as well as what to expect in a future husband for their daughters (Kelly, 2017). Along with society's shifting expectations for father-involvement, a father's family of origin plays a big role in how they view the importance of father-child time.

### **Family of Origin**

The challenges faced by men when they are growing up are often reflected in how they parent their own children (Herland, Hauge, & Helgeland, 2015). Herland and colleagues (2015) identified several roles that a father's family of origin plays in this

regard. First, while some fathers exhibited personal characteristics that allowed them to break the cycle of repeated parenting, more often there was a pattern of turbulent relationships and living away from their children. They also found that most men—whether resident or non-resident fathers—had a “fragile point of balance”, meaning that when these men experienced either a break in the relationship with their child’s mother or a relapse into addiction, these fathers simultaneously had to deal with a decrease in relationship quality with their children.

Another important part of the impact of a father’s family of origin was the sources of outside support available to the fathers (Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000). When someone outside the father-child relationship recognized the importance of a father’s role in the lives of his children, a support system was formed that allowed these fathers to use the resources available (Dumont & Paquette, 2013). Help from the children’s mother, as well as child welfare services, was instrumental in assisting these fathers in becoming and remaining an involved part of their child’s life (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). A father’s family of origin appears to be directly connected to how he views spending time with his children. Like the patterns fathers perpetuate from their families of origin, obtaining balance in work and family pursuits is intertwined with the quality of father-child relationships.

### **Work-family Balance**

Work-life balance is defined as “the extent to which a person experiences feeling fulfilled and having his or her work-life needs met in both the work and non-work facets of life” (Rife & Hall, 2015). This idea of balance is instrumental in understanding the impact fathers have in the lives of their children. Fathers want to meet their personal



needs, but are also increasingly passionate about fulfilling their obligation to care for their children both financially and emotionally (Caracciolo di Torella, 2015).

There are many characteristics that affect how fathers experience balance in their dual role as provider and caregiver. One study found that fathers who were the sole breadwinner as well as fathers who worked more than forty hours per week reported higher work-family conflict (Cooklin, et al., 2016). Others have noted that the more time fathers spend at work, the less time they have to build relationships with their children (Fong & Bainbridge, 2016). Also, a father's satisfaction with his partner is associated with how he chose to spend his time (Fong & Bainbridge, 2016). For example, a father who is constantly fighting with the mother of his children is less likely to feel he has sufficient time to build a relationship with his children, which directly impacts the child's functioning (Easterbrooks, Raskin, & McBrian, 2014). Other factors that play into the reported work-life balance of fathers is the quality of their sleep and their perceived quality of personal time. This is closely correlated with reported happiness, stress, and fatigue (Musick, Meier, & Flood, 2016). Additionally, a child's behavior and reported relationship quality with their father was related to how successful their father felt at achieving work-family balance (Vieira et al., 2016).

A father's workplace also plays a role in work-family balance. Bahadur (2015) found that work-family balance was dependent on how highly the workplace culture viewed family time as well as the ability of these fathers to flexibly adjust their schedule to accommodate family needs. In a similar light, family and socioeconomic status play pivotal roles. Namely, while family support was found to assist in achieving work-family balance, economic disparity was found to hinder the same (Baxter, 2007). A father's

ability to spend time with his children is affected by his experience with work-life balance. The ability to cope with the strain of numerous roles is key to avoiding becoming overwhelmed.

There are many ways to combat the overexertion that often accompanies the role of breadwinner and father. Reddick et al. (2012) have identified several. For example, some men with children cope by compartmentalizing their responsibilities. Others do so by placing a high priority on communication with a spouse or peers. Still others take advantage of workplace policies that lighten their load, thus lessening the conflict. Wada and colleagues (2015) observed consistencies among fathers who reported comparatively higher levels of work-family balance. Namely, the triad of (1) ensuring their family's financial security, (2) being actively involved in family life, and (3) enjoying periodic alone time (Wada, Backman & Forwell, 2015). All were instrumental in allowing these fathers to feel the peace that came from the harmony of work and family life.

Additionally, when both biological caregivers were living with their children they were able to share caregiving responsibilities, reducing work-family conflict (Kalil, Ryan, & Chor, 2014). This finding is supported by Cohen-Israeli and Remennick (2015), who found that divorced fathers experienced a greater degree of work-family conflict than they did when they were married. Ranson (2012) even argued that divorced fathers could be compared to single working mothers, who traditionally are the center of the debate regarding work-family conflict. The ability to effectively cope with the demands of more than one role is clearly the cornerstone of a father's ability to spend increased time with his family. The impact of this invested time between a father and child is significant in a child's life.

## **Impact of Involved Fathers**

The impact of a father who is involved in the lives of his children is noticeable. Whether the father is resident or nonresident, the quality of his relationship with the child's mother is the first indicator as to whether the father is likely to have a strong relationship with his child (Suh et al., 2016). How they viewed the role of a father is also telling. For example, couples who valued the father's role as separate and distinct from that of the mother reported greater father-child involvement (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016). Also, a father's feelings about his life and that of his partner were significant contributing factors. When fathers felt positively towards their child's mother as well as about their own life, they were more likely to engage in play, caregiving, and reading with their children (Baker, 2014).

Throughout the early life of his child, a father's sense of competence influences the outcome of his child's emotions and behavior (Rominov, Giallo, & Whelan, 2016). For example, fathers who were involved in routine postnatal care were also found to have had higher father-to-infant attachment (Wynter et al., 2016). As a child grows, the relationship quality between fathers and their children can be predicted by the level of the father's verbal temperament (Neuendorf, Rudd, Palisin, & Pask, 2015). This same pattern held as their children grew into young adulthood. For example, teenagers who had quality relationships with their fathers experienced a smoother transition to adulthood than young adults who did not have such a relationship (Lindell, Campione-Barr, & Killoren, 2017). Thus, fathers who were involved early on in their child's life were more likely to stay involved throughout their life.

There are three significant factors to consider when comparing resident and non-resident fathers as it relates to influence (Shannon & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002): (1) child support payments, (2) the mother's education level, and (3) the socioeconomic status of the family. When any of these three factors were abated or absent, nonresident fathers exhibited less time and lower quality relationships with their children (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). However, these were not significant indicators with resident fathers (Abramovitch, 1997). Additionally, resident fathers also saw their children exhibit greater mental dexterity and empathy, a more developed sense of egalitarian gender roles, and a higher propensity for self-control (Salisch, 2001). Religious involvement was also correlated with greater fatherhood involvement in the lives of their children. One study found that the more frequently a father attended worship services with his children, the more likely he was to have a strong relationship with them (Lynn, Grych, & Fosco, 2016).

A father who lives with his children simply has more time to be with them, giving him an advantage when it came to building relationships. Resident fathers are also correlated with decreased risk taking behaviors in older children (Sandseter, 2010). At its foundation, children are affected by the levels of trust and communication they share with their father (Yoder, Brisson, & Lopez, 2016). For example, children who had a low-quality relationship with their father tended to exhibit more antisocial behavior than their peers (Kim, Kochanska, Boldt, Nordling, & O'Bleness, 2014). They also engaged in frequent, earlier sexual intercourse (Nogueira Avelar e Silva, van de Bongardt, van de Looij-Jansen, Wijtzes, & Raat, 2016), while children who had fathers that regularly played with them when they were young tended to be more securely attached and

exhibited fewer emotional disturbances (Bureau et al., 2017). They also showed increased emotional and behavioral functioning and self-regulation (St George, Fletcher, & Palazzi, 2017). Clearly, children who had fathers who were involved in their lives were more likely to exhibit risk taking behaviors less often than children who had uninvolved fathers.

Similarly, how involved a father is in the life of his child impacts their scholastic achievement (Gordon, 2017). A father's involvement in the life of his child during their early years has been shown to contribute to their later language and literacy proficiency (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), as well as comparatively higher academic across all grade levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, 2007). This effect is also shown in a reduction of discipline problems at school (Amato & Riviera, 1999). Preschoolers who have strong verbal skills also tend to have fathers who are an active part of their lives (Radin, 1982). Additionally, girls who have a strong relationship with their father tend to do better in mathematics (Radin & Russell, 1983), and boys are more likely to do better on achievement tests (Biller, 1993). This upward spiral of scholastic success can be attributed to fatherhood involvement, including the promotion of their child's curiosity and problem solving skills. Additionally, a child's desire to explore and their self-confidence in their ability to solve problems was more prevalent (Pruett, 2000). This review of the literature provides a foundation for the purpose of this study.

## **Purpose**

The literature suggests that despite a father's busy schedule, time spent involved in the lives of his children will impact their success at home, in school, and throughout their lives. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to determine whether or not fathers

who made time specifically for play had a measurable, positive impact on their child's life in high school. To do so, this study will analyze the impact of fathers who make time for play relative to their children's ability to avoid risk taking behaviors in high school.

### **Hypothesis**

The more days per week a father makes time to play with his young child, the fewer risk taking behaviors the child will report in high school.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### **Sample**

Data for this study was taken from Waves 3, 4 and 6 of the 2003 Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), conducted by McLanahan and colleagues. 4,898 children were studied by Princeton and Columbia Universities. Funding came from 4 government programs and over 20 foundations within the U.S. (McLanahan et al., 2003).

Wave 3 took place from 2001 to 2003, when the children were 3 years old, and a subset of 2,281 fathers participated via in-person interviews. Of the 2,281 fathers who took the survey, 2,113 reported engaging in imaginative play with their 3-year-old child at least once a week, and 2,188 reported playing with toys with their 3-year-old child at least once a week (McLanahan et al., 2003).

Wave 4 took place from 2003 to 2006, when the children were 5 years old. A subset of 2,180 fathers participated via in-person interviews. Of the 2,180 fathers who took the survey, 2,076 reported playing with toys with their 5-year-old child at least once a week, and 2,119 reported playing outside with their 5-year-old child at least once a week (McLanahan et al., 2003).

Wave 6 took place from 2014 to 2017, at the time the children were 15 years old. A subset of 3,423 children participated by taking a 1-hour phone survey. Of the 3,423 teens who took the survey, 1,653 reported failing at least one class in high school; 908 reported being expelled from school at least once; 455 reported having engaged in sexual intercourse at least once in high school; and 743 reported having tried marijuana at least once in high school (McLanahan et al., 2003).

### **Measures**

To determine the frequency with which fathers engaged in play-based activities with their 3 and 5-year-old children, the following questions were used for analysis: “How many days a week do you play imaginary games with him/her?” (Imagine\_3). “How many days per week do you play inside with toys such as blocks or Legos with him/her?” (Inside\_3). “How many days per week do you play inside with toys such as blocks or Legos with him/her?” (Inside\_5). “How many days per week do you play outside in the yard, park, or a playground with him/her?” (Outside\_5). Participants had the option to answer “0–7 days per week,” or “don’t know.” Respondents who refused or did not know were omitted from the analysis. See Table 2.1

To determine the child’s success score in their high-school years, the following questions were used for analysis: “Have you ever failed a class in school?” (Failed). “Have you been suspended or expelled from school in the past two years?” (Suspended). “Have you ever had sexual intercourse with anyone, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?” (Sex). “Have you ever tried marijuana?” (Marijuana). Participants were instructed to answer “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know.” Respondents who refused or did not know were omitted from the analysis. See Table 2.2

For each child, a success score was calculated by giving one point for each type of risk taking behaviors the child avoided. For example, if the child had never tried marijuana, they received 1 point; if they had tried it at least once, they received 0 points. This was done for all four types of risk taking behaviors. Possible scores, therefore, ranged from 0–4. On average, children tended to avoid roughly 3 out of the 4 risk taking behaviors. See Table 2.3.

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics for Waves 3 and 4 of the FFCWS

Type of Play	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Imagination_3	4.64	2.39	2271
Inside_3	5.31	2.18	2285
Inside_5	4.43	2.28	2179
Outside_5	3.62	2.01	2176

Table 2.2 Descriptive Statistics for Wave 6 of the FFCWS

Type of Delinquency	Yes	No
Failed	1653 (48.3%)	1770 (51.7%)
Suspended	908 (26.5%)	2,515 (73.5%)
Sex	455 (13.3%)	2,968 (86.7%)
Marijuana	743 (21.7%)	2,680 (78.3%)

Table 2.3 Descriptive Statistics for Combined Success Score

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Combined Success	2.80	1.19	3375

## Chapter 3: Results

### Hypothesis

*Hypothesis: The more days per week a father makes time to play with his young child, the fewer risk taking behaviors the child will report in high school.*



A correlation matrix was calculated for the different types of play and the combined success score. There was no significant correlation between the combined success score and any individual type of play. See Table 3.1.

The father's engagement in imaginary play on a weekly basis with the child at the age of three (Imagine\_3) was not correlated with the child's combined success score at the age of 15,  $r(1720) = .037, p = 0.129$ . The father's engagement in inside play on a weekly basis with the child at the age of three (Inside\_3) was not correlated with the child's combined success score at the age of 15,  $r(1727) = -0.016, p = 0.516$ . The father's engagement in inside play on a weekly basis with the child at the age of 5 (Inside\_5) was not correlated with the child's combined success score at the age of 15,  $r(1676) = -0.016, p = 0.517$ . The father's engagement in outside play on a weekly basis with the child at the age of five (Outside\_5) was not correlated with the child's combined success score at the age of 15,  $r(1674) = -0.028, p = 0.250$ .

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to determine if the play variables in combination had any predictive power for the combined success score. The multiple linear regression had an  $r^2$  value of .005, with a standard error of 1.09. Thus, the play variables studied explain virtually none of the variation in the combined success score. The only variable that was statistically significant in this regression was Imagine\_3. However, it was not practically significant. The average predicted difference in combined success score between a child whose father played imaginary games 0 days per week compared with 7 days per week was approximately 0.2. Therefore, imaginary play in practicality has very little impact on a child's combined success score as seen in Table 3.2. Based on these results, the hypothesis is not supported by the data.

The impact of 17 other factors were tested for their ability to predict the combined success score. A stepwise regression was run to determine the optimal set of significant variables to include in the model. There were 6 variables selected, including how many days per week a father did the following with his children: shared TV time, assisted with feeding, put them to bed, took them out to eat, took them to visit relatives, or read to them. All combined, the  $r^2$  value of this multiple linear regression model was 0.06, with a standard error of 1.07. While this explains very little of the variation in combined success scores, it was higher than our model that only included play variables.

Table 3.1 Correlation of Types of Play and Combined Success Score

	Imagine_3	Inside_3	Inside_5	Outside_5	Combined Success
Imagine_3	1				
Inside_3	.378**	1			
Inside_5	.236**	.404**	1		
Outside_5	.189**	.250**	.347**	1	
Combined Success	.037	-.016	-.016	-.028	1

Table 3.2 Linear Regression Coefficients

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient	Significance
Constant	3.073	.000
Imagine_3	.028	.043
Inside_3	-.013	.413
Inside_5	-.015	.318
Outside_5	-.014	.369

#### Chapter 4: Discussion

Much of the literature on a father's influence focuses on the various ways in which his presence generally influences the children's lives (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Kokkinaki & Vasdekis, 2014). However, less has been written specifically on whether play with young children has an impact on their later years (St George et al.,

2017). As outlined earlier, there are numerous perspectives that provide context when considering the influence of a father. Symbolic Interactionism shows that a father's many roles do impact the perception of his children and how they view him and their own world (Blumer, 1969). The Family Life Cycle illustrates how the impact of a father can change over time (Garcia-Preto, 2011). From a historical lens, the societal ideals of fatherhood have significantly evolved (Griswold, 1993), and these shifting expectations will affect the children in many ways (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). The family of origin of today's father also plays a role in how he raises his children (Herland, Hauge, & Helgeland, 2015). Finally, how a father balances his work and family is the foundation of the level of involvement he is able to have in the lives of their children (Cooklin, et al., 2016). These ever shifting ideas will always cause fathers to favor certain types of activities over others when seeking to strengthen relationships with their children. Thus, the specific types of interactions used, including play, are likely to generate different outcomes (Suh et al., 2016).

There were four types of play surveyed in this study: imaginary play at age 3; inside play at age 3; inside play at age 5; and outside play at age 5. The goal was to see if any or all of these types of play between a father and his young child would significantly influence the children when they were in high school. Four aspects of risk taking behaviors were chosen to determine the possible connection between play and whether or not the student had ever: failed a class; been suspended from school; had sexual intercourse; or, tried marijuana.

The hypothesis for this study was the more days per week a father makes time to play with his young child, the fewer risk taking behaviors the child will report in high

school. The data suggests that early childhood play among fragile families was not a good predictor of success in high school. Given the connection between quality of parenting and environmental components (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009), perhaps the poverty of many of the participants negatively skewed the otherwise influential impact of early childhood play. The results of this study did not support the hypothesis. Neither children whose fathers played with them while young, nor children whose fathers did not play with them while young, exhibited any significant differences in levels of risk taking behaviors.

### **Clinical Implications**

Most of the fathers in the Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study were not married to the mother of their children (McLanahan et al., 2003). However, research suggests that a father's influence is most profoundly felt when he is living with his children (Dumont & Paquette, 2013). As many fathers do not live with their children, clinicians who work with children and their fathers may find it advantageous to demonstrate how to connect with a child through play, particularly imaginative play. Showing a father how to play with their child may relieve the anxiety many fathers have about connecting with their children. This would make it easier for fathers to create a new meaning behind the experience of playing with their children, further strengthening the relationship.

### **Limitations**

This thesis used data that was collected by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, so it is necessary to acknowledge areas that limit the findings. As the data used was previously collected, identifying research questions that were well suited to

interview questions proved to hamper the depth of analysis. Initially, this study was going to look at numerous areas of accomplishment in the lives of high school age children. However, upon examining the specific types of participants in this study (i.e. unmarried parents, families living below the poverty line, individuals with limited educational attainment, etc.), it became clear that there were other, often overarching characteristics that may have curtailed the hypothesis (i.e. poverty).

Additionally, the correlations between a father's early childhood play and high school risk taking behaviors were single item correlations, thus diluting the strength of the connection. The types of play addressed were also limited, making it difficult to know if there were other types of fatherhood play that might have been significant. Furthermore, the outputs examined were decidedly focused on risk taking behaviors. Perhaps looking at the positive things children accomplished in high school would have shown a more significant correlation. The ratio of risk taking behaviors students who did not have regular play time with their father as young children was supported. While not significant, this is a finding which a larger sample size that included non-fragile families might address.

### **Future Directions**

A pattern from the data is the early influence of a father on his children's later years. Future studies may consider poverty and divorce separately when focusing on the impact of a father's early childhood play. As these variables have such pervasive influence, they likely would negate an otherwise positive, measurable impact. Additionally, research could compare a father's play from fragile families to non-fragile families to examine the similarities and differences. Yet another study could observe the

effects of a father's play in the lives of their children throughout each stage of the Family Life Cycle. During each stage, questions about connection and attachment may be more thoroughly understood. This life-course perspective may provide greater understanding of the long-term benefits of a father's play with his children.

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