

# **Fatherhood after union breakup in Uruguay: Transitory or life-long commitment?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rising union dissolution in Latin America –and in much of the world– has increased public concern over the involvement of nonresidential fathers in the lives of their children. At the same time, social norms about post-separation fatherhood have changed, increasingly favoring not only economic support, but also participation in childrearing. In this study, we a) examine several dimensions of nonresidential fathers' involvement with their children, b) test whether there is a link between pre-separation and post-separation fathering practices and c) explore which dimension of pre-separation fathering practices –engagement, accessibility and responsibility– is more influential on post-separation paternal behavior. The study is based on two waves of a longitudinal national survey carried out in Uruguay. Empirical findings suggest that fathers' pre-separation involvement in childrearing affects their post-separation parenting behavior, although results are not conclusive in all aspects of post-separation involvement, and father's educational attainment tends to have a more influential role.

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

### **1. Introduction**

Ever since divorce rates started to increase, family scholars have studied the weakening effect of parental separation on father-child relationships. High parental separation rates and the extent to which nonresident fathers lose contact with their child(ren) have sparked concern about the negative effects of father absence on children's well-being and life chances (McLanahan & Percheski 2008, Härkönen, Bernardi & Boertien 2017). In fact, the steady decline of father-child co-residence among men lends support to claims about 'shrinking fatherhood' and 'fathers pulling out of family life' (Henz 2014).

Topics such as the prevalence of father-absent families and the mechanisms that underlie the 'parental separation penalty' have been widely researched in more developed countries since the 1980s. Initially, research focused on showing that, after parental union breakup, a significant proportion of children and adolescents lost contact with their fathers and, when they did not, the frequency of visits was highly variable (Seltzer & Bianchi 1988, Amato & Gilbreth 1999, Manning & Smock 1999), suggesting some men's limited attachment to the

paternal role after separation (Furstenberg & Cherlin 1991, Seltzer 1991). In recent years, the focus has largely shifted from the frequency of father-child contacts and child support payments to a more comprehensive analysis of the quality and content of nonresident fathers' involvement with their children –including shared activities, communication, emotional closeness, and investments of time and money– after the reconfiguration of residential arrangements caused by the breakup (Choi, Palmer & Pyun 2014). In advanced societies, the nature and meaning of the distant father –traditionally associated with the patriarchal model– has gradually weakened, leading to a new concept of paternity which entails a more active and emotionally involved fatherhood. Men have gone from being mere economic providers and protectors to adopting a larger and more significant role as caregivers of their offspring. This *new* fatherhood involves a growing emphasis on nurturing, practical care and co-parenting over the traditional role of the breadwinner (Machin 2015).

In this study, we focus on union dissolution and fathers' involvement in raising children. We want to understand whether this *new*, more involved fatherhood also holds after union breakup, and the extent to which post-separation paternal involvement reflects pre-separation fathering practices.

## **2. Research questions**

Drawing on arguments about the effect of parental loss and stress associated to the turmoil and instability of the first few years after separation, prior research has shown that negative impacts on children's well-being tend to lessen when post-separation parenting arrangements mirror pre-separation ones (Poortman 2018). We contribute to this research area by providing a novel analysis of the relationship between pre-separation fathering practices and post-separation child-father involvement in Uruguay. Specifically, we examine whether nonresident father-child interactions differ according to the degree of father's involvement in childrearing prior to separation. Recent empirical evidence has found a positive association between fathers' prenatal involvement and later levels of care engagement (Cabrera, Fagan & Farrie 2008, Habib 2012). We believe that, from a life course perspective, being involved in early childhood helps men develop a closer relationship with the child, which may strengthen their commitment and engagement over time, even in the event of conjugal separation.

A man for whom fatherhood plays an important part of his male identity will probably show greater motivation for the changes and adaptations needed to care for the child after union dissolution. For this type of men, the father identity is not embedded in the *package deal* formula, since they do not view fatherhood as closely dependent on the conjugal relationship. Despite the eventual breakup of the couple, these men do not detach themselves from the father role and feel obliged to actively participate in their child(ren)'s life (Habib 2012). Fathers' commitment and ties with their child(ren) during conjugal union increase their preferences for greater paternal involvement and therefore can have long reaching effects. It is therefore expected that fathers with stronger bonds with their offspring will most likely desire to stay involved throughout the child(ren)'s life course. Indeed, it has been shown that differences in the subjective centrality that the nurturing role acquires for fathers may explain

variations with regard to actual involvement (Rane & McBride 2000, González et al. 2018). Consequently, our initial hypothesis is that, although union breakup usually leads to a decline in father-child interaction, *more engaged fathers before separation (in terms of total time investments in childrearing) are expected to be also more involved in raising their children after union breakup (H1)*.

A common view in the literature is the traditionalization of gender roles occurring worldwide during family formation (Grunow & Evertsson 2016). It is a well-stylized fact that while women usually devote more time to routine household chores than men, the gap widens considerably when small children are present. Moreover, the largest gender inequalities are found in childcare. Fathers spend less time than mothers with children, and perform more leisure activities (Craig 2006, Miller & Nash 2017). Even though paternal involvement in childcare can be measured in multiple ways, it is the amount of time shared –be it in absolute or relative levels of involvement in childrearing– which is most often used, yet we consider it is not enough, in itself, to fully analyze the involvement of men in care activities.

Lamb et al. (1987) theorize three main components of what has been labeled as ‘positive paternal involvement’ which allow us to explore more diverse and complex aspects of fathers’ involvement in childcare, namely: (i) *engagement*, which refers to the time dedicated to care, play or leisure; (ii) *accessibility*, understood as the time availability or flexibility to be with the child and respond to his/her needs; and (iii) *responsibility*, which involves making daily decisions and monitoring care tasks (e.g. deciding meals, taking care of the backpack, arranging and attending medical appointments, determining when the child needs new clothes, etc.). This latter ability to take initiative and organize is particularly distinctive of an active fatherhood, as many fathers are mere executors of instructions and explicit directions without being as attentive as mothers to what needs to be done (Craig 2006).

As a result, paternal involvement may not only differ in terms of total time investment but also with regard to the dimensions of care in which men engage. In fact, prior empirical evidence suggests that it is not so much the amount of time *per se* what matters for the father-child relationship, but rather the extent to which men are transforming their identities and practices as fathers (González et al. 2018). Thereby, we would like to explore whether the adoption of fathering practices covering these three dimensions before separation encourages post-separation paternal involvement.

We expect differences in the development of an engaged, accessible and responsible type of fatherhood during the union will explain variations in subsequent paternal involvement after union dissolution. More specifically, *we expect men who embraced a responsible father involvement before separation to be also more involved in their children’s lives after separation (H2)*. In other words, in couples with a more traditional gendered division of care practices where fathers only interact with the child in the form of play or leisure and/or were barely accessible to respond to the child’s needs, assuming a secondary role compared to the mothers’ regarding responsibility, the post-separation paternal involvement will be lower.

This hypothesis is clearly innovative and entails a new insight into the driving forces of post-separation fathers’ involvement (Haux, Platt & Rosenberg 2015) since, to the best of our knowledge, no study has been undertaken to quantitatively investigate the extent to which

fathers' active involvement in childrearing is relevant to explain post-separation father-child contact and economic support in the Latin American region. This seems to be a particularly pertinent issue to explore, as earlier research has noted the importance of this type of paternal involvement for both children's cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and gender equity across Western societies (Pleck 2010, Cano, Perales & Baxter 2018) and Latin America (Barker & Verani 2008).

### 3. Analytical sample and methodology

High costs make longitudinal databases rare in Latin America, but this study benefits from an ongoing longitudinal survey on early childhood, the *Encuesta de Nutrición, Desarrollo Infantil y Salud [ENDIS]* –National Survey on Early Childhood Health, Nutrition, and Development–. This survey is being carried out by academic and government institutions and headed by the National Statistics Institute of Uruguay. So far, the survey comprises two waves. The first one was collected in 2013 and consisted of a sample of 3,077 children aged 0 to 3. In 2016, the second wave collected data from 2,455 children aged 3 to 6 (sample attrition was 20.2%).

This data source meets two crucial requirements. Firstly, 76.7% of the sampled children were living with both parents in Wave 1. Three years later, in the second wave, 177 of them (7.5%) had ceased to live with their fathers due to union breakup between waves, generating the focal subsample for this study.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the ENDIS database allows us to measure fathers' involvement both pre- and post-separation. Data in Wave 1 describe fathers' and mothers' involvement in several home tasks in detail (cooking, buying groceries, housekeeping, paying the bills, changing diapers, feeding the children, scolding children when they misbehave, taking them to the doctor, playing with them, etcetera) and measures the amount of time fathers spend on childcare. Wave 2 focuses intensely on nonresident father-child involvement: at least 15 survey questions refer to frequency and intensity of contact between father and child, parental attitudes, and economic and noneconomic support. The information collected allows the assessment of three dimensions of father-child involvement after separation: visiting patterns –*frequency of in-person contact*–, financial contributions to child maintenance –*regular child support payments*–, and participation in *childrearing decisions* in several areas (education, health, habits and discipline).

The main focus of the analysis is on two key dimensions of father involvement before separation: fathers' absolute time devoted to childrearing and the extent to which fathers develop an engaged, accessible and responsible type of fatherhood in Wave 1. The first dimension, *fathers' absolute time devoted to childrearing*, is a covariate which indicates the total number of hours per week spent by the father in childcare activities. We distinguish between fathers who dedicated no time at all to child care when they were partnered –*no involvement*–, fathers who spent up to 39 hours –*low involvement*– and fathers who dedicated 40 or more hours –*high involvement*–. This measure of pre-separation involvement ranks

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<sup>1</sup> We excluded 495 not co-residing fathers (71,7%), because they were already not co-residing in Wave 1, therefore providing us with no information on father's pre-separation involvement in childcare. We also excluded from the analysis eight cases of children living primarily with their father after divorce.

fathers into thirds according to the number of hours devoted to childcare: fathers with no involvement (31.1%), low involvement (33.5%) and high involvement (35.3%), respectively.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the second dimension of fathers' involvement, mothers indicated whether co-resident fathers participated in the following childrearing tasks: "playing and/or outings with child", "scolding children when they misbehave", "transport to various places", "changing diapers", "washing child, bathing", "putting child to bed", "cooking/feeding the child" and "taking children to the doctor".<sup>3</sup> We take some of these tasks as proxies for the three dimensions of care in which men engage to test whether an active fatherhood before separation is conducive to a greater post-separation paternal involvement. We distinguish *father engagement* in care only in the form of play or leisure –playing with the child–, *father accessibility* to respond to the child's needs –cooking/feeding the child– and *father responsibility* to make and monitor care tasks –attending medical appointments with the child.

We also include a small number of control variables which have been shown to influence father's involvement after separation (Westphal, Poortman & van der Lippe 2014). *Father's educational attainment* indicates whether the father was enrolled in school for at least 9 years<sup>4</sup> and we take it as a proxy for socio-economic status. Higher educated fathers may be inclined to remain involved after separation due to more modern and egalitarian parenting styles. A control variable for *child's gender* is also included in the analysis. Previous studies on the effects of parental separation on paternal involvement by child gender and age have shown a higher involvement of separated fathers in their sons' lives than in their daughters' (Kalmijn 2015) as well as with younger children (Skevik 2006). We did not include a control for child's age due to low variability: because of design characteristics, children's ages were less than four at Wave 1 and four to six at Wave 2.

We first perform a descriptive analysis to depict fathers' degree of involvement with their children after separation, looking at three key dimensions: frequency of contact, financial support and participation in childrearing decisions (about education, health, habits and discipline). We also examine the association between pre-separation and post-separation fathers' involvement. Next, we conduct a logistic regression analysis to examine this association in a multivariate framework. We have kept the number of covariates in the models to a minimum because of the relatively small size of the analytical sample.

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<sup>2</sup> The number of hours reportedly devoted to childcare by fathers is noticeably greater than those recorded in the 2013 Uruguayan Time Use Survey (Batthyány 2015). However, since they are largely based on mothers' reports (in Wave 1, respondents could be either the mother or the father of the focus child, but 96.6% of questionnaires were responded by the mother), it is difficult to argue that they are subject to substantial over-reporting. It is possible that, since enrollment in early childhood education is low in Uruguay (Santiago et al. 2016) and many children under three are cared for at home, mothers' reports include fathers' time devoted to "secondary" or "passive" child care. Nonetheless, by ranking fathers into three broad groups of similar size according to the total time devoted to childcare, we expect to minimize potential biases.

<sup>3</sup> The survey question is stated as: "Now I would like to talk about how you and your partner organize your domestic life. How do you distribute tasks with your partner in the following areas?" The questionnaire lists several dimensions, as stated above. When the answers are "mostly my partner" or "my partner and me (50/50)" we assume fathers are participating.

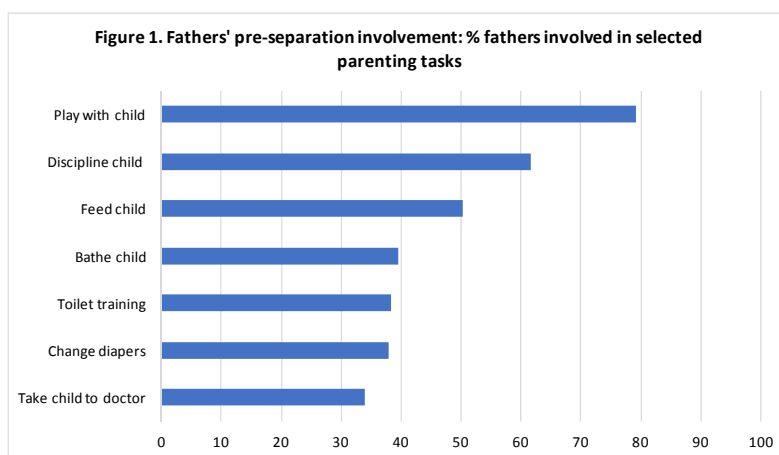
<sup>4</sup> Compulsory education in Uruguay encompasses 9 school years (primary and lower secondary education).

## 4.1. Descriptive results

**Table 1. Selected indicators of parental involvement**

|   | Nonresident<br>fathers<br>% | Resident<br>fathers<br>% |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Face-to face contact                    |                             |                          |
| Every day                               | 16.2                        |                          |
| 5 - 6 days per week                     | 7.4                         |                          |
| 3 - 4 days per week                     | 20.0                        |                          |
| 1 - 2 days per week                     | 28.7                        |                          |
| Once per 15 days                        | 8.5                         |                          |
| Once a month                            | 2.6                         |                          |
| Some times per year                     | 3.2                         |                          |
| No contact                              | 13.3                        |                          |
| Economic support                        |                             |                          |
| Yes, regularly                          | 53.6                        |                          |
| Yes, occasionally                       | 9.9                         |                          |
| No                                      | 36.6                        |                          |
| Participation in childrearing decisions |                             |                          |
| Education                               | 14.6                        | 61.5                     |
| Health                                  | 8.9                         | 51.3                     |
| Habits                                  | 13.3                        | 58.4                     |
| Discipline                              | 13.1                        | 60.9                     |
| <i>N</i>                                | 177                         | 2378                     |

Source: ENDIS 2016 (Wave 2).



Source: ENDIS 2013 (Wave 1).

**Table 2. Association between pre-separation and post-separation father's involvement with child**

| Pre-separation involvement | Post-separation involvement |               |                            |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
|                            | Frequency of contact        | Child support | Participation in decisions |
|                            | 3+ times a week             | Regular       | Education                  |
| None                       | 34.3                        | 41.9          | 16.7                       |
| Low                        | 37.5                        | 58.2          | 7.9                        |
| High                       | 66.2                        | 54.0          | 19.0                       |
| Total                      | 47.0                        | 52.3          | 14.3                       |
| N                          | 167                         | 167           | 167                        |

Source: ENDIS 2013 (Wave 1) and 2016 (Wave 2)

## 4.2. Multivariate analysis

**Table 3. Logistic regression models of the effect of father's pre-separation involvement with child on three dimensions of post-separation involvement. Odds ratios.**

|   | Has contact with child 3+ times a week | Pays child support regularly | Participates in decisions about education |
|---|--|------------------------------|---|
| Pre-separation involvement (total hours of childcare) |  |                              |   |
| None  | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| Low   | 1.16                                   | 1.30                         | 0.23 **                                   |
| High  | 3.99 ***                               | 1.26                         | 0.88                                      |
| Father's <i>engagement</i> (plays with the child)     |  |                              |   |
| No  | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| Yes   | 0.64                                   | 0.70                         | 0.62                                      |
| Father's <i>accessibility</i> (cooked for the child)  |  |                              |   |
| No  | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| Yes   | 0.80                                   | 1.53                         | 1.51                                      |
| Father's <i>responsibility</i> (took child to doctor) |  |                              |   |
| No  | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| Yes   | 1.04                                   | 2.50 **                      | 2.11                                      |
| Father's educational attainment                       |  |                              |   |
| 9 years or less                                       | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| >9 years  | 1.34                                   | 3.04 ***                     | 3.14 **                                   |
| Child gender  |  |                              |   |
| Female  | 1                                      | 1                            | 1   |
| Male  | 1.16                                   | 0.81                         | 0.29 **                                   |
| N   | 177                                    | 172                          | 177                                       |
| Log pseudolikelihood                                  | -8137.72                               | -7650.900                    | -4637.25                                  |
| Pseudo R2   | 0.092                                  | 0.111                        | 0.143                                     |

\*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Source: ENDIS 2013 (Wavw 1) and ENDIS 2016 (Wave 2).