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## **Some Relationships among Father Involvement and the Literacy Interests of Young Children with Disabilities**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Courtney Michele Barnes entitled "Some Relationships among Father Involvement and the Literacy Interests of Young Children with Disabilities." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Child and Family Studies.

Vey M. Nordquist, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Sandra Twardosz, John Orme

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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SOME RELATIONSHIPS AMONG FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND THE LITERACY  
INTERESTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Courtney Michele Barnes

August 2009

## Dedication

This thesis project is dedicated to my mother, Ms. Paula Barnes, my aunt, Mrs. Ila Barnes-Frazier, and my grandmother, Ms. Thelma Barnes. These are three great women who are at the forefront of my life and who have helped mold me and support me in all of my endeavors. They have encouraged me to pursue my dreams and goals. My mother has instilled steadfast dedication, confidence, and always putting my best into everything I do. My aunt brought out the charisma in me and showed me how to deal with the pressures of life and the big world among us all. Lastly, my grandmother has inspired me to reach for the stars and it is through Christ that anything is possible. Her great wisdom and prayers have taken me many places and I look forward to seeing what else life has in store for me. I love you all and appreciate everything you have done for me to help me make these incredible milestones in my life.

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## Abstract

Father involvement in child care and household routines has been associated with a number of positive maternal, child, and family outcomes, but largely for families of typically developing children. This contrasts sharply with the father involvement literature that pertains to families of young children with disabilities. Up until the mid 1990s, the extant research with families of typical children relied almost exclusively on maternal reports to assess the effects of father involvement on family members. It has only been in the last 15 years or so that fathers have been given opportunities to assess their involvement in child care and household routines. Studies of father involvement in this research area have focused almost exclusively on the involvement of fathers in early intervention and public school programs. The present study attempted to address each of these limitations by examining father involvement in child care and household routines in families of young children with special needs from the perspective of both mothers and fathers. A sample of 134 couples that currently or recently received services from Tennessee's Early Intervention System participated in the Study. Mothers completed a rating scale comprised of different ways fathers provided assistance and support in the home. Fathers completed a different rating scale comprised of child care and household routines as well as child play activities. Each parent also indicated (yes/no) whether their child with special needs showed interest in adults using a number of different literacy materials as well as showing a direct interest in these same materials at least one time per week. The findings showed that the mother and father measures of father involvement were highly correlated and that mothers and fathers generally agreed on the occurrence of both literacy behaviors. Both father involvement measures significantly predicted the two literacy outcomes. Maternal education level did not affect the strength of the relationships between father reports of their involvement and the literacy outcomes but the level of family income did. Implications of the findings for future research and limitations of the study are discussed.

## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Literature Review</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>Fathers of Typically Developing Children</i>	<b>4</b>
<i>Fathers of Children with Disabilities</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>Father Involvement in the Literacy Activities of Young</i>	<b>12</b>
<i>Typically Developing Children and Children with Disabilities</i>	<b>12</b>
<i>Methods</i>	<b>17</b>
Sample and Data Collection	<b>17</b>
Participants	<b>18</b>
Measures	<b>20</b>
Child Literacy Interests	20
Father Involvement	20
<i>Results</i>	<b>21</b>
Parents' Perceptions of Father Involvement	<b>21</b>
Correspondence between Parental Reports of Their Children's Literacy Interests and Reports of Father Involvement	<b>23</b>
<i>Discussion</i>	<b>25</b>
<i>Directions for Future Research</i>	<b>28</b>
<i>Limitations of the Study</i>	<b>29</b>
<i>References</i>	<b>31</b>
<i>Appendix</i>	<b>38</b>
Table 1 Child Literacy Interest Materials	<b>39</b>
Table 2 Father Involvement Items (father report)	<b>40</b>
Table 3 Spousal Support Items (mother report)	<b>41</b>
Table 4 Chronbach Alpha Coefficients	<b>42</b>
Table 5 Effects of Father Involvement on Child Literacy Outcomes	<b>43</b>
Table 6 Impact of Father Involvement on Child Literacy Outcomes Moderated by Financial Strain	<b>44</b>
<i>Vita</i>	<b>45</b>



## Introduction

Research on father involvement, - the frequency, extent, and type of engagement in a variety of activities with their children - for the most part has been limited to fathers of typically developing children. This contrasts sharply with the lack of attention that researchers have paid to the involvement of fathers with young children who have developmental delays or identifiable disabilities. Father involvement with typically developing children has largely been accounted for by a number of cultural/ contextual, family structural, relationship, and personal variables such as education, income level, maternal employment, and race and ethnicity (cultural/contextual variables); the age and gender of the child, single/dual parent status, and father-child co-residence status (family structural variables); the relationship quality with the child's mother and shared child care responsibilities (relationship variables); and father role salience, role satisfaction, and perceived expectations of others (personal variables). Outcomes for mothers, fathers, and children have been largely positive, although father involvement can have negative effects as well. Moreover, most of what is known currently about the effects of father involvement on family outcomes has been based on maternal reports; it is only in the past 10 years or so that researchers began to seek input from fathers, with varying degrees of success in recruitment (Fox, personal communication; Furst, 2008; Lamb, 1997; 2004).

By contrast, very little has been written about the value of father involvement with children who have special needs or about effective ways to support and maintain father participation in home routines (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Hornby, 1992; Lamb & Billings, 1997; Quinn, 1999). This is due in part to the lack of a commonly agreed upon definition of father involvement (Radin, 1994; Pleck, 1997), and in part to barriers to involvement that are grounded

in the socialization experiences of men and the lack of social support for involvement (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; McBride, 1990; McBride & Darragh, 1995). The research that is available has been limited primarily to the documentation and promotion of father involvement in early intervention and public school programs (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Moon-Ho Ho, 2005); there are far fewer studies in which investigators have examined the effects of father involvement in home settings.

The present study represents an effort to remedy this situation by making a small but hopefully important contribution to the father involvement literature that pertains to families of young children with disabilities. Given the various challenges that families face in rearing a child with special needs and a father involvement literature that is based largely on maternal reports in families of typically developing children, outcomes for fathers of children with special needs may not be the same or occur in home settings in the same ways as they do in families of typically developing children, particularly if family outcomes are based only on maternal accounts of father involvement. A more comprehensive approach to the assessment of father involvement ideally would include both maternal and paternal reports. Such an approach was utilized in the present research.

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between father involvement and children's interest in literacy materials as perceived by *both* fathers and mothers. The focus on literacy materials is important for at least two reasons. First, there are no studies in the early childhood regular or special education literatures in which the relationship between father involvement in child care and household routines and children's literacy experiences has been empirically examined. Indeed, there are only a handful of studies in which the relationship between fathers' *direct* participation in literacy activities (e.g., storybook reading) and child

outcomes has been explored. Second, there is a growing body of literature which demonstrates that direct exposure to literacy experiences during the early childhood years is likely to have a variety of positive outcomes for young, typically developing children (Roskos & Twardosz, 2004). Recently, a much smaller number of studies included reports of similar positive findings for children with special needs (Dolzal-Sams, Nordquist, & Twardosz, in press). Unfortunately, the findings in both literatures are based largely on maternal accounts. Thus, there is a great need to know whether fathers who are regularly involved in family household routines such as child care and household routines also are likely to be involved with their special needs children in ways that contribute to beneficial child outcomes. If it can be shown, for example, that there is close correspondence between mother and father reports of father involvement and both reports are related to children's interest in literacy materials, such a finding would make a significant contribution to the father involvement literature.

### Literature Review

The review begins with a very brief overview of the father involvement literature that pertains to families of typically developing children. Then a more in-depth examination of the father involvement literature that relates to families of young children with disabilities is presented. Particular attention will be paid in this section to the potential benefits of as well as barriers to father involvement. Subsequently, an illustrative but not comprehensive review of studies is presented that focuses on fathers' *direct* participation in young, typically developing children's literacy experiences. This is followed by a very short but thorough review of studies in which the focus has been on father's *direct* participation in literacy activities with their young

children who are developmentally disabled. The review concludes with a list of research questions that were addressed in the study.

### Fathers of Typically Developing Children

The father involvement literature is comprised of conflicting studies and confusing outcomes. Moreover, there is no clear conceptual definition of father involvement. For both of these reasons it is difficult to compare and integrate father involvement findings (Peck, 1997). In addition, this literature is burdened with a number of methodological problems, particularly with respect to sampling and provision of sufficient details concerning procedures used and range of families represented (Lamb, 1997). As is common in most social sciences, research samples have largely been limited to white, middle- and upper-middle class families although a number of researchers have examined the effects of father involvement while controlling for demographic and family variables such as income, education, and employment status and sources and types of family social support. Without controlling for the potential effects of these variables, only tentative and very limited conclusions can be drawn about the generalizability of the findings to other socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups (Lamb, 1997). Some researchers also have questioned the validity of self-report measures in general and certain father involvement measures in particular. The problems with self-report data are well known by social scientists, but concerns about father involvement measures have not appeared nearly as often in the father involvement literature. For example, it is very difficult to assess whether a father's time was spent with one child or all children in the family. Moreover, some fathers contend that certain contributions they make to family life should constitute involvement, for example, the provision of financial support, while some researchers may not consider financial support a

useful or valid measure of involvement (Quinn, 1999). Concerns such as these and others are still matters of contention. Nevertheless, there are some findings in the father involvement literature that warrant close attention, primarily because they have emerged repeatedly from a body of studies despite a plethora of conceptual and methodological limitations.

*Associational Outcomes of Father Involvement.* Much of the father involvement literature has focused on positive outcomes, even though it is easy to think of examples of involvement that are likely to have adverse effects on the child and family. One reliable finding is that father involvement has slowly increased over the past several decades in a variety of ways and is still increasing (albeit very slowly), but is still not comparable to the level of mother involvement (Pleck, 1997; Lamb, 2004). Another reliable finding is that increases in father involvement are usually beneficial to all members of the family. Mothers in particular benefit when fathers regularly assume some of the household and child care responsibilities because they experience less stress and have more time to engage in preferred activities (Hawkins & Belsky, 1990; Russell & Hwang, 2004). They also appear to enjoy their children more and are more satisfied with their marital relationships (Peck, 1997).

Children also benefit from greater father involvement. For example, academic learning and social-emotional development (e.g., increased empathy) may be enhanced (Hawkins & Belsky, 1990; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). In addition, children are not as likely to display sex-stereotyped beliefs or rely as much on external sources of locus control when fathers are more involved with their families (Lamb, 1997; 2004; Russell & Hwang, 2004). Outcomes for fathers also are generally positive and sometimes unexpected. For example, Coltrane (1996) found that fathers who participated in play and recreational activities with their children began to feel more emotionally connected to them. Coltrane (2004) also found that fathers' greater sensitivity and

awareness of their children's needs and moods was positively associated with increased interest in and greater awareness of their wives' emotional conditions.

Some correlates of father involvement also are well documented and even though these findings are not as consistent as those for child and mother outcomes, it is still possible to draw some general conclusions from them. For example, the relationship among child characteristics such as gender, age, family size, and birth order are fairly well established. Fathers of older, first-born boys who have fewer siblings are more likely to be involved with their children compared to fathers of children who do not have one or more of these characteristics (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). The findings for socio-economic features such as a father's income, education, and occupation (as well as composite measures of socio-economic features) vary somewhat, too, but in general are positively associated with increases in father involvement (Lamb, 2004). Better educated fathers who have good incomes and higher-status occupations tend to engage their children more than fathers who do not compare as well in one or more of these areas. The findings for the association between father involvement and race also is not consistent with one important exception: African-American fathers appear to engage their children more often than Caucasian fathers. However, the strength of this association depends largely on the accessibility of African-American fathers, which is far lower than it is among Caucasian fathers (National Longitudinal Study, xxxx).

*Barriers to Father Involvement.* Most of the barriers to father involvement are rooted in the socialization experiences of men (Lamb, 1997; Lloyd, O'Brien, & Lewis, 2003; Pleck, 1997; Quinn, 1999). One of the most frequent explanations for low rates of father involvement is that very few men indicate they have been exposed to male models from whom they learned how to be good parents (Daly, 1993; McBride, 1990). For the large majority of men, household and

childcare responsibilities were not a part of their child or adolescent upbringing. It is much more likely that any responsibilities they might have had prior to adulthood were focused on tasks outside of the home such as taking out the garbage, helping to keep up property by mowing lawns or working in gardens, or working at a job that provided income to support their social activities. Many children and adolescents in today's society have no household or child care responsibilities at all. Thus, men who are reared in so called "traditional homes" often do not acquire the knowledge and skills to become a competent parent because they are not exposed to parents or extended family members who have values and attitudes or model and teach in ways that prepare them to be involved fathers. Even in the decade of the 1990s and through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the early socialization process for men in the United States placed the responsibility for household and child care responsibilities squarely on the shoulders of women (Lamb, 2004). This is true even for women who are married with children and have full- or part-time jobs. Thus, in U.S. society the role of an "involved" parent is mandated for mothers; it largely remains just an option for fathers.

Even as adults, men who are married and have their own children often fail to find the kinds of social/emotional support they often need to become effective fathers. One important exception is fathers who receive support from other family members, particularly their wives (Parke, 1996). The father's personal values, beliefs, and motivation as well as the quality of his relationship with his family of origin also can affect his level of involvement (Quinn, 1999).

Fathers who lack the early socialization experiences that are so important for satisfactory involvement with their families can rectify this situation if they have access to community sources of support. Relationships with neighbors, church members, relatives and friends can have a significant impact on father roles and responsibilities. Participation in programs that

provide information about child development as well as opportunities to learn appropriate parenting skills can have very positive effects on fathers' willingness and comfort with parenting. Men who are not willing to seek this kind of help because they deny that it is needed, lack confidence in their abilities to be effective parents, or believe that they should function only as "backups" to their wives are not likely to become optimally involved with their children (Levine & Pitt, 1997).

Mothers' attitudes also can function as powerful barriers to father involvement. When mothers are comfortable with their roles as parents, have good relationships with their husbands, and are encouraging rather than critical of them and offer suggestions for how they can be involved, fathers are more likely to be receptive and make efforts to take on more child care responsibilities (Lamb, 2004; Quinn, 1999). On the other hand, if a mother's attitude is that only she is the "expert" when it comes to child rearing decisions, then it may be that fathers who want to be more involved are prevented from doing so by their wives who in these situations function as "gate keepers" (Ortiz, Stile, & Brown, 1999).

Finally, fathers' work schedules may facilitate or impede regular and sustained involvement in family life. Several researchers have found that fathers with employers who are sensitive to family needs and are willing to modify work schedules are more likely to be involved with their children than fathers who do not enjoy the same employment benefits. Fathers also are more likely to be involved in meetings with teachers, doctors, and therapists when professionals are willing to schedule appointments at times that allow fathers to participate (see Ortiz et al., 1999, for a more comprehensive review).



## Fathers of Children with Disabilities

There is very little research on fathers of young children with disabilities in which their involvement in family life has been empirically examined (Hornby, 1995; Lamb & Billings, 1997; Quinn, 1999). Moreover, much of the attention paid to fathers by researchers in the early childhood special education field has been to their involvement in infant-toddler, preschool, and public school programs (McBride, et al., 2005). This body of research is given only cursory attention at the end of this section because it does not relate to the involvement of fathers in family life.

During the decades of the 80s and 90s, what was known about father involvement in families of children with disabilities was largely derived from studies of mothers (Meyer, 1986; Minnes, 1998; Quittner, Opipari, & Regoli, 1992). Currently, this situation remains virtually unchanged. In most of the studies that were published before the turn of the century as well as those that have appeared since then, researchers made efforts to extrapolate from mothers' experiences to the possible associations between father involvement and family outcomes. However, direct examination of involvement based on father reports or observations of father behavior may provide a somewhat different and more accurate picture of the relationship between father involvement and family outcomes.

The information presented in this section is based largely on findings described in two reviews that were published in the 1990s (Hornby, 1995; Quinn, 1999). Unfortunately, a concerted effort to locate more recent review articles was not successful. All of the studies cited by Hornby were based on reports from individual fathers about family experiences. He found that father reports contained a number of different themes, including reaction to the initial diagnosis, adaptation to the disability, negative attitudes toward professionals, the stress of

caring for a child, concerns about finding suitable care, the intensity of both positive and negative feelings about the child, and acknowledgement of personal growth that resulted from having a child with a disability. Although these accounts suggested that fathers were deeply affected by the challenges of raising children with a variety of different disabilities, none of the studies provided empirical information about father involvement in day-to-day family routines or ways in which fathers actually engaged their children.

Quinn (1999) described only two studies of father involvement in which findings also were based on fathers' reports of their family experiences. However, unlike the Hornby review, the studies she described included measures of direct and indirect associations between father involvement and effects on fathers as well as other members in the family. Bristol, Gallagher, and Schopler (1988) found that the fathers and mothers of children with disabilities were not any more susceptible to depressive reactions, but were more at risk for marital adjustment problems compared to parents of typical children. Father involvement with the child who had the disability tended to decrease over time, but this was not the case for involvement with other children in the family. Emotional support offered by one spouse who perceived that the other spouse was in need of it was very important. Positive effects of support had greater impact on the spouse in need when there was close correspondence between spousal expectations and degree of support. In this kind of situation, the spouse in need (usually the mother) reported decreases in stress and increases in marital and general life satisfaction when fathers were more involved in family life.

In the second study described by Quinn (1999), Hadadian & Merbler (1995) examined the strengths and needs of fathers as caregivers. It was found that fathers expressed strong interest in being involved with their children but actually spent very little time with them. According to the fathers, work conflicts and scheduling were major barriers to involvement.

Fathers also expressed needs for more information about available resources and access to newsletters that might help them know what they could do to become more involved. They also indicated that, even when they attended meetings with their children's providers, they often felt uncomfortable about participating in discussions because they were not familiar with some of the jargon used by providers.

Recently, researchers have focused their attention on father involvement in early education and elementary programs (Fagan, 2000; Lamb, 2004). Children whose fathers are actively involved and emotionally committed tend to perform better in school (Nord et al. 1997) have stronger feelings of self-esteem, and interact more appropriately with peers compared to children with disabilities whose fathers are not very involved in school-related activities (Green, 2003). These kinds of findings attest to the general conclusion held by most researchers who study father involvement, namely, that the more fathers are involved with activities and programs that directly affect the lives of their children, the more likely the children will be affected in positive ways beyond the effects related to mother involvement.

In summary, the involvement findings that pertain to fathers of children with disabilities are very limited and usually describe father reactions related to the diagnosis and impact of having a child with a disability. Fathers' interest in and time spent with their children has received some attention from researchers and these findings are fairly consistent with what researchers have found for fathers of typically developing children. However, even when their interest is strong, the time that fathers actually spend with their children is far less compared to the time that mothers spend with them. Fathers usually indicate that work responsibilities and schedule demands preclude frequent and sustained involvement. In addition, very few studies of fathers who have children with disabilities include involvement measures of specific child care

and household responsibilities and associations with measures of child and family outcomes. The limited research that is available also is consistent with findings for families of typically developing children, namely, that mothers experience less stress and greater satisfaction with their marriages and life in general when fathers engage their children (e.g., in play activities) and provide assistance with child care and household tasks. Taken together, these studies suggest that fathers of children with disabilities who assume some of the child care and household responsibilities may be more likely to spend time with children engaging them in activities that are known to have important implications for promoting positive developmental outcomes. One group of child behaviors that may be related positively to this kind of father involvement is literacy experiences.

#### Father Involvement in the Literacy Activities of Young Typically Developing Children and Children with Disabilities

Although there is a fairly robust literature that documents the relationship between mothers' direct participation in literacy activities and a variety of positive outcomes for young, typically developing children, this relationship with fathers has not been examined nearly to the same extent (Saracho, 2007). This is unfortunate because there is some indication that fathers' direct involvement (e.g., reading practices) have considerable impact on their children's literacy development (e.g., reading ability, interest levels, and reading choices) (Lloyd, 1999). Based on these kinds of findings, some practitioners have advocated that parents try to strike a balance and share responsibilities for engaging their children in literacy activities (Marks & Palkovitz, 2004). Researchers have focused almost exclusively on mother involvement in children's literacy activities because they correctly assume that mothers are usually the primary caregivers (and

therefore have more opportunities to promote literacy development than fathers do), and because some researchers assume that mother accounts of father involvement are sufficiently accurate to draw conclusions about the associations between father involvement and child literacy outcomes (Clark, 2005; Dickinson, Temple, & Smith, 1992; Ortiz, 2004). However, there are no empirical findings in the literature to support this latter assumption.

Ortiz has done much of the literacy research that pertains to father involvement in literacy activities with typically developing children (Ortiz, 1994, 2000, 2004; Ortiz et al. 1999; Stile & Ortiz, 1999). He and his colleagues have found that involved fathers tend to use several reading materials and writing styles when engaged in literacy activities, both inside and outside the home environment. The majority of fathers included in the studies also engaged in weekly literacy practices with their children and approximately two thirds of them read to their children, not so much for purposes of promoting development, but more for enjoyment purposes. Ortiz and his colleagues also found that fathers who engage in early literacy experiences with their children tend to place importance on three major themes: *curiosity of print* (when fathers read to their children and then ask questions about the nature of the events described in the text); *personal values and beliefs* (when fathers model and verbally stress the importance of and pleasure associated with reading experiences), and *marital role function* (when fathers share the responsibility for engaging children in literacy activities).

Other researchers have found that fathers who participate in literacy activities with their children also are likely to monitor their progress (e.g., Hiebert & Adams, 1987; Karther, 2002). Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) reported that the few studies in which the association between father involvement and children's literacy interests and activities was examined, the findings always were positive. Lloyd (1999) and Loyd et al. (2003) also found that father involvement in

their children's reading experiences can positively affect children's interest in reading, their reading preferences, and their ability to read. Fisher, McCulloch, and Gershuny (1999) reported that shared reading activities between fathers and their typically developing children are likely to strengthen the emotional bonds between them. However, Clark's (2005) review of father involvement and child literacy outcomes suggests that many fathers may lack the motivation to engage in common print-related activities, even when they know that their children are experiencing literacy problems at school. These findings suggest again that non-involved fathers may say that literacy activities are important for their children's development and that they intend to participate in these activities more often in the future, but it is the rare uninvolved father who actually does become more involved. Ortiz et al. (1999) described several studies in which time constraints, co-parenting relationships, and mother's work status created major barriers for father involvement. It was largely these findings that led Ortiz et al. (1999) to recommend that fathers consider engaging in literacy activities with children that are much easier to integrate into their natural daily routines such as traveling with their children in cars, watching television, reading newspapers and magazines, using computers, and telling their children bedtime stories.

In the only study that has direct implications for the proposed research, Ortiz (1996) found that fathers who shared child care responsibilities with their spouses (e.g., feeding, bathing, and bedtime routines) were the same fathers who were more likely to participate in joint literacy activities with their spouses and children (e.g., reading a bedtime story together) compared to parents who divided child care responsibilities according to an agreed upon schedule. Ortiz (1996) concluded that fathers who engaged in child care responsibilities

simultaneously with their spouses also may be fathers who are more likely to promote literacy development such as reading and writing by participating directly in shared literacy activities.

Unfortunately, there are no other studies in which the relationship between father involvement and the literacy interests of children with disabilities has been examined empirically, even from the perspective of mothers. However, the father involvement literature that pertains to typically developing children as well as the literature that focuses on fathers of children with disabilities (but does not examine effects on literacy specifically) suggests that fathers who share responsibilities with their spouses in the areas of child care and housekeeping duties may also engage in activities that promote various forms of literacy development in their disabled children. The purpose of the proposed research is to explore this possibility, initially by focusing on a set of behaviors that reflect literacy interests in rather than the direct use of literacy materials in a sample of young children with disabilities.

There are many ways to measure young children's literacy interests. In the present study, two measures were used that were adapted from the Home Literacy Inventory (Marvin & Ogden, 2002). Each measure was derived independently from mothers' and fathers' reports of child behavior. The first measure consisted of parental judgments that the child either did or did not observe one or the other parent or some other adult in the home use literacy materials at least weekly. The second measure also consisted of parental judgments, but was a more direct measure of a child's interest in literacy materials. For this measure, both parents independently assessed which of the literacy materials the child either did or did not show an interest in on the same weekly basis.

Two measures of father involvement in child care activities also were included in the study. Fathers estimated the level of their own involvement in a variety of child care routines and

play activities and mothers also estimated their spouses' involvement in a similar but not identical set of routines and activities. Two socioeconomic measures were used to assess whether the relationship between the father involvement measures and child literacy interest measures was affected once these variables were controlled statistically. They included maternal reports of family income and educational attainment.

The following set of questions was addressed. Specific predictions about expected relationships and control effects were not made other than to say that the independent variable (father and mother measures of father involvement) and dependent variable (measures of child literacy interest) variables should be positively related, based on what generally has been found in the father involvement literatures that pertain to families of typically developing and disabled children. Because the research was highly exploratory in nature, it seemed more appropriate to pose a set of research questions rather than present a list of formal hypotheses. The questions of greatest interest were as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between father involvement and the two measures of child literacy interests when fathers rate their own involvement?
2. Is there a relationship between father involvement and the two measures of child literacy interests when mothers rate the level of father involvement?
3. How well do mother and father reports of father involvement correspond with one another?
4. How well do mother and father reports of their child's literacy interests correspond with one another?
5. How is the relationship between father involvement and child literacy affected when maternal education and family income are taken into account?



## Methods

### *Sample and Data Collection*

The data that were used in the study was collected by a team of researchers, who were members of the Pathways Research Project. The purpose of the project was twofold. First, to evaluate the family-centeredness of Tennessee's Early Intervention System (TEIS), the state birth-to-three service coordination program for infants and toddlers with disabilities; and second, to assess family outcome effects associated with TEIS service coordination practices. Families were eligible for participation in the Pathways Research Project if they were actively involved in or recently transitioned from TEIS, the parents spoke English fluently, and the child was not a ward of the state and placed in foster care.

Approximately 1,000 families were identified initially to participate in the study. A stratified random sampling method was used to select potential participants. Family samples were drawn from individual TEIS projects located in nine geographic districts across the state. The selection method yielded family samples from each of the nine districts that were in proportion to the number of total families served in the state. Thus, if a district served 20% of the total families served across the state, approximately 20% of the total research sample was drawn randomly from that district. Four hundred twenty-four fathers were invited to participate in the study. Two hundred sixty-six fathers signed IRB approved consent forms and agreed to participate. Of this total, 151 subsequently returned the questionnaire. The response rate among fathers who agreed to participate was 57 percent and the response rate of those who completed and returned the questionnaire was 36 percent. For every father that comprised the final sample, his spouse also participated.

The TEIS evaluation questionnaire was developed by members of the Pathways research team and was comprised of a number of field-tested and/or validated scales that provided information about service coordination practices and parental perceptions of these practices as well as their effects on various aspects of family life. Questionnaires were distributed to families by their personal TEIS service coordinators. After all service coordinators completed a training program that helped to ensure they would follow the same dissemination protocol, they arranged to meet with potential participants in their homes (or occasionally some other place designated by the family) and described the purpose of the research to the parent(s). The service coordinators did not help parents complete the questionnaire, but they did try to answer questions that parents might have that related to completing the questionnaire and returning it to the research team. Parents who agreed to participate were asked to complete the questionnaire on their own and not discuss items or responses with their spouses. After completing the questionnaire, each parent returned it by mail to the Pathways Research Project using a stamped envelope with a return address that was used for this purpose. A five dollar Wal-Mart card was given to all families who met with their TEIS service coordinators, regardless of whether they agreed to participate in the research. Only data provided by *both* parents (couples) were used in the present study.

### *Participants*

One hundred fifty-one couples were eligible to participate in the study but only 134 were included. Ten couples were excluded because too many responses were missing on the Father Involvement Scale. Six additional couples were excluded because they failed to complete enough items on one or more of the other scales. Based on information provided by the mothers, the

majority of the couples were Caucasian (93%). A small percentage was African-American (2%) or Asian (1%). The fathers were 37 years-old on average and the mothers were 35 years old. Eighty-three percent of the couples were comprised of biological parents. Approximately 10 % of the mothers and 11% of the fathers had a high school diploma or less, 32% of mothers and 43% of the fathers had some college or technical training, and 33% of the mothers and 46% of the fathers had a college or more advanced degree. Seventy-eight percent of the fathers were employed full-time, 12% were employed part-time, and 10% were not employed. Only 27% of the mothers had full-time jobs; nearly 60% were stay-at-home mothers.

The children's ages at the time of data collection ranged from birth to age four, with a mean age of 28.5 months. Children over the age of three were included in the sample because the Pathways researchers wanted to examine a sub-sample of children who had recently transitioned from TEIS to the public school system. Approximately 62% of the children were boys. All children included in the study had a developmental delay or diagnosed disability. Approximately 35% of the children were developmentally delayed, 28% of the children had speech and/or hearing delays, 10% were diagnosed with cerebral palsy, 6% with autism, and 8% were diagnosed with Down's syndrome. Another 25% of the children had "other" forms of disabilities, the names of which were written down by the parent in an area of the questionnaire provided for this purpose. Both mothers and fathers had opportunities to identify their child's type of delay or disability, but only the mother responses were used in the present study to compute classification percentages. An examination of the types of disabilities classified as "other" was made by all members of the research team. Over 90% of these classifications were comprised of conditions that would be considered "severe" by professional diagnosticians. In addition, mother and father classifications were compared for inter-parent agreement. The

parents listed or described the same diagnostic categories in 96% of the all the cases, including the “other” category.

### *Measures*

#### Child Literacy Interests

Measures of each child’s literacy interests were adapted from the Home Literacy Inventory (Marvin & Ogden, 2002). The first measure consisted of independent mother and father judgments of whether their child either did (“yes”) or did not (“no”) “see adults use weekly” any of 21 different print materials commonly found in the home. The second measure consisted of independent mother and father judgments of whether their child “looked at with interest” any of the same materials at least weekly. The print materials and response options are located in Table 1.

#### Father Involvement

One father involvement measure consisted of a 10-item self-report scale that was developed by Fox and Bruce (2001). The items provided information about a father’s level of involvement in child care, household, and play activities. Fathers responded to the questions “How often do you participate in these activities with your child with special needs?” by rating their own level of participation on each item using a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from “rarely/never” to “almost daily/daily”. A list of the scale items is located in Table 2.

A second measure of father involvement was created for use in the proposed research. It consisted of 13 items from the TEIS questionnaire that asked the mother to rate the level of assistance and support she received from the father in areas closely related to those represented

in the scale completed by the fathers. Mothers selected from one of five response options that ranged from “never helpful” to “always helpful”. The scale items are located in Table 3.

#### Socio-economic Index

Mother reports of family income and maternal education level were combined into one set of socioeconomic measures. Mothers selected from seven annual family income options that ranged from “less than \$15,000” to “more than \$75,000”. Eight education background options ranged from “Did not graduate from high school” to “received a doctoral degree”.

#### Data Analyses

All analyses were done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

### Results

Table 4 includes Chronbach Alpha coefficients for mother and father reports of the independent variable, father involvement, and two dependent variables, “child sees adult use” and “child looks at with interest”. All six of the coefficients fall within the .080 to .090 range, which indicates that each of the measurement scales has very good internal consistency.

#### Parents’ Perceptions of Father Involvement

In Table 5 the column structure includes the two dependent variables, “child sees adult use (CSAU)” and “child looks at with interest (CLAWI)”. It also includes a column for the combined control variables. The row structure represents two main independent variables, the mother’s report of father involvement (FI) and the father’s self report of his involvement. For each independent variable the interest is in the effect of FI, initially without the introduction of the combined control variable and then with the addition of this variable, which was comprised of education level of the mother and family income. The entries in

Table 5 are standardized regression coefficients with their associated significance levels. The F values for the change in the model  $R^2$  along with the associated significance levels and degrees of freedom also are included in Table 5.

For the variable CSAU, the mother's perception of FI is not correlated with her assessment of CSAU but is correlated with the father's perception of CSAU. For the variable CLAWI, the mother's perception of FI is not correlated with her own assessment of CLAWI but is correlated with the father's assessment of CLAWI. Thus, for each literacy interest measure, mother's perceptions correlate significantly only with the father's assessments of FI but not with her own assessments.

When the control variables are introduced, the mother's level of education is a significant predictor; it predicts the mother's perception that the child sees an adult use the literacy materials. Better educated mothers are more inclined to say that they see the child observe adults use the materials. When income is entered into the hierarchical model, the original effect of involvement is non-significant; the effect of education which was strongly significant now becomes non-significant, but the effect of income is significant. Thus, it appears that it is income and not education that is driving the socio-economic contribution to the CSAU literacy variable. In this situation, the mother's report of FI was the predictor variable and her perception of the child observing an adult use literacy materials was the outcome variable.

For the CLAWI variable, the involvement measure is not related to the mother saying she sees the child look at the materials with interest. In this case, adding education to the regression model did not contribute significantly to the literacy outcome. This finding is understandable because in the case of this literacy measure it is something the child does, not

something the parent does. When income is added to the regression model, the effect is still not significant.

When the same predictor variable is used, but now the dependent variable is changed from the mother's perception of FI to the father's perception of his own FI, there is a significant effect for the mother's report of FI on the father's report that the child sees an adult use the literacy materials (CSAU). This outcome is not affected when the mother's education level is added to the regression model, but when income is added the change is significant. This finding suggests that more well to do families are more likely to have fathers who say that the child sees adults use literacy materials at least weekly. Again, in this case family income and not the mother's education level seems to be driving the socio-economic contribution to the CSAU variable.

When the father's report of CLAWI is examined, the mother's report of FI is related to the father's report that the child looked at the literacy materials with interest at least weekly. This effect persists when the mother's education level is added to the model and continues to persist when family income is controlled. However, as before, the effects of income and education are non-significant. In this case, the socio-economic measures are not related to the child's interests in literacy materials whereas income in the previous analysis was related to the father's report of CSAU.

#### Correspondence between Parental Reports of Their Children's Literacy Interests and Reports of Father Involvement

When the rank ordering of mother and father reports of CLAWI was examined, the correlation was .486. The corresponding correlation for CSAU was .471. These findings suggest that mothers and fathers have fairly strong agreement among themselves about the

occurrence of their children's literacy interests. For mothers, there was a high correlation between whether the child sees an adult use literacy materials and whether a child looks at the same materials with interest ( $r = .496$ ). The same was true for fathers estimates of their children's literacy interests ( $r = .531$ ). Thus, for both mothers and fathers, the child seeing an adult use literacy materials is strongly correlated with the child looking with interest at the same materials. However, when the mother reports that she sees the child observing an adult use a literacy material, it is not as likely that the father reports that the child looks at a material with interest ( $r = .358$ ). The reverse relationship also is not very strong ( $r = .247$ ). All of these correlations were statistically significant.

The cross informant correlations are interesting because they reflect the independent observations of the same child behavior by both parents. Whatever the source of their agreement is, it is not in general because if it were, the lower correlations ought to be higher. Thus, there appears to be some distinctiveness across parental perceptions. This finding provides some degree of confidence that the parents observed common attributes in their child's behaviors.

With regard to the correspondence between maternal and paternal reports of FI, the correlation was  $.542$  ( $p \leq .000$ ), indicating a very high degree of agreement between the mother's report of father assistance and father's self assessment about his level of involvement in child care, play, and household routines. This finding provides some degree of confidence that the two measures of FI are tapping many of the same kinds of paternal behaviors, and more important, that the couples largely agree that fathers really did support their spouses and take some responsibility for child care and household routines.



## Discussion

The findings are very consistent with previous studies in which father involvement was examined in families with typical children (Coltrane, 2004; Hawkins & Belsky, 1990; Lamb, 1997, 2004; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Russell & Hwang, 2004). That is, when fathers provide support for their spouses by assuming some of the child care and household responsibilities, other family members are likely to benefit. In the present study, children were more likely to display an interest in adults who use literacy materials and also show an interest themselves in literacy materials when their fathers were involved in child care and household routines and also engaged them directly in activities such as play and visiting community settings.

More specifically, when the findings are examined for the same parent reporter and predictor outcome, they represent two possibilities of the four possible outcomes. In instances of the mother's report, the predictor variable was not related to the mother's report of father involvement for either CSAU or CLAWI. On the other hand, when the father's report is considered, his involvement was significantly related to both child outcomes at the .01 level. In addition, when the findings are examined for the mother's report of father involvement as reported by the father for both outcome variables, both were significant either at the .05 or .01 level. In the remaining case that was examined, the father's self-report of his own involvement on child outcomes as reported by the mother, only the effect on CSAU was significant at the .05 level. The effect of FI on CLAWI was not significant.

Thus, the findings provide quite clear evidence that father reports of child literacy outcomes are consistently well predicted by both the father's self-report of involvement and the mother's report of his involvement. This is the main finding of the study. Because the

mother's report of FI corresponded very closely to the father's report, a fair degree of confidence can be had in this finding because there is cross-informant verification of the relationship between involvement and outcomes, regardless of the educational status of the mother or the level of family income.

Most likely, the families in this study were very involved with the challenges of rearing a child with special needs. Because it is so difficult to find fathers who are willing to participate in early intervention research (or in any research for that matter), it seems reasonable to assume that fathers who participated in this study were very committed to promoting the development of their children and providing support to their spouses. Regardless, the present study strongly suggests that fathers who accept some responsibility for child care and household routines are likely to be quite aware of their children's interests in literacy materials. It is not too far-fetched to assume that these same fathers are likely to engage their children with special needs in literacy activities.

The findings are consistent with previous research in which significant effects of socio-economic variables were found to affect the relationship between father involvement and positive outcomes for typical children, but not because of the educational level of the mother. Rather, family income seemed to be the more important of the two socio-economic variables. In previous research, the educational status of both the mother and father as well as income level of the family affected the relationship such that the relationship between father involvement and positive child outcomes was more likely to occur in families with parents who were better educated and had higher incomes (Lamb, 2004). It may be that these variables would have been affected in much the same way had father reports of paternal educational attainment and family income served as the control variables. Or, the socio-

economic variable may not have had the same effect for father and mother reports regardless of the parental informant. Rather, it may be that the relationship between father involvement and a child's literacy interests remained unaffected in the present study because the special challenges posed by a child with special needs motivated the fathers to be more involved in family life in general and in activities that provided some degree of respite for the mothers in particular. There is some evidence in the Pathways data that supports this possibility. For example, most fathers who participated in the evaluation of TEIS also attended the initial Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) meeting and many of them attended follow-up meetings. Studies of parental participation in IFSP meetings consistently show that fathers are not likely to be involved in these meetings for a number of reasons, the most common being their work demands and daily schedules (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006).

Fathers in the present study who did participate in the IFSP meetings almost certainly had to make special arrangements to do so, which suggests they were highly committed to their children and families. It is precisely these kinds of fathers that may be very important sources of social-emotional and physical support for their spouses who also involved regularly and in varied ways in their children's day-to-day activities.

Regardless, this finding is not consistent with Ortiz et al. (1999) who found that fathers of children with special needs often said they intended to help with child care and household routines but often could not find the time to do so because of their heavy work commitments and rigid schedules. It also suggests that other barriers to father involvement (e.g., socialization limitations) that were reviewed by Quinn (1999), if they existed at all, were not sufficient to deter these fathers from being involved to a significant degree in day-to-day child care and household routines.

## Directions for Future Research

Future studies may want to include more direct measures of children's literacy behaviors. Just because a child shows interest in a literacy material does not mean she or he will use it and benefit developmentally. There are a number of literacy activities that might be the subject of study, but the one that has received the most attention from researchers is shared storybook reading. There is abundant empirical evidence that young typical children benefit from reading storybooks (Roskos & Twardosz, 2004) and some evidence that children with disabilities also benefit from it (Dolzal-Sams et al., in press). It would be interesting to know if fathers who are involved in child care and household routines also are likely to read to their child with special needs on a regular basis. It also would be interesting to see if the present findings are replicated when writing and drawing activities are included in the analyses.

Even though education level of the mother did not affect the relationship between fathers' perceptions of involvement and children's literacy interests, it would be important to learn whether this finding holds up in future studies. There also are other variables that might moderate the relationship, for example, family financial strain, the severity of the child's diagnosis, the emotional disposition of the parents, and the availability of both formal and informal sources of support. An examination of child gender differences also would shed further light on the often-reported finding that fathers of first-born boys with special needs tend to be more involved in family life compared to fathers who do not have first-born boys. The Pathways database includes measures of each of these variables, any one or combination of which could be used in future research.

Finally, this study is unique in the early childhood special education (ECSE) literature in that it included multiple, reliable measures of father involvement as well as multiples estimates of literacy interests in a fairly good-sized sample of young parent couples who have children with disabilities. The findings were not based just on the perceptions of mothers as has been the case in much of the previous research. Future studies would be strengthened and perhaps yield unanticipated findings if both mother's and father's perceptions are evaluated. There is no doubt that fathers are very difficult to recruit, but until they are involved the so-called "family focus" that is said to characterize ECSE research will remain essentially a maternal rather than a family literature.

#### Limitations of the Study

The study is based on a cross-sectional method of inquiry and, as such, limited in terms of identifying causal relationships and drawing strong conclusions about the generalization of the findings. In addition, the limitations of self-report measures are well known and documented. The study also is limited somewhat by the sample size, although a sample of 134 couples is to date the largest and only sample of its kind in the field of early childhood special education. The representativeness of the sample is a problem as well; there is little doubt that fathers who participated in the study are not representative of fathers in the state of Tennessee who have young children with disabilities. In this situation, generalization of the findings also is problematical. Finally, there is no way of knowing for sure if the mothers and fathers actually maintained their independence from one another when they completed the TEIS questionnaire, even though their service coordinators and well as written instructions on the questionnaire strongly urged them to do so. It is possible that some couples' responses

were contaminated by the sharing of information and thereby affected some of the findings.

For example, the correspondence data would have been particularly susceptible to this source of bias.

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## Appendix

*Table 1 Child Literacy Interest Materials*

	Magazines	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Novels/other adult books	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Dictionaries/encyclopedias	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Newspapers	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Catalogues	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Advertisement flyers	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Phone books	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Letters	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	TV/movie guides	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Cookbooks/instruction manuals	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Photographs of family/friends	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Checkbooks/budget books/bills	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Comic books	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Picture books for children	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Story books for children	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Notes (refrigerator notes)	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Greeting cards	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Food packages/logos	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Clocks/watches	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Logos on clothes	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Own name on papers or packages	<input type="radio"/>
	Other: _____	<input type="radio"/>

*Table 2 Father Involvement Items (father report)*

- 
1. I spend time one-on-one with my child(ren).

---

  2. My child(ren) and I play together.

---

  3. I join in activities my child(ren) like(s) at home.

---

  4. I teach my child(ren) new skills.

---

  5. I take my child(ren) to places (e.g. the mall, restraints, and parks) and activities (e.g. soccer, swimming, and camping).

---

  6. I help my child(ren) prepare for the day's activities (e.g. getting dressed and feeding).

---

  7. I help my child(ren) prepare for bedtime.

---

  8. I attend my child's therapy sessions.

---

  9. I watch TV with my child(ren).

---

  10. I do household chores with my child(ren).

---



*Table 3 Spousal Support Items (mother report)*

- 
1. How much help did you expect from your spouse/partner to give you with the baby after he or she was born?

---

  2. How much help have you received from the spouse/partner since the baby was born?

---

  3. How helpful has your spouse/partner been in:
    - a. providing money for the basics (e.g. cost of housing, groceries, clothing, and utilities)?
    - b. giving money for things the child needs (e.g. diapers, formula and bottles)?
    - c. feeding, bathing, and changing the child?
    - d. helping to get the child to bed in the evening?
    - e. taking the child to see the doctor, therapists, or other service providers?
    - f. helping around the house with laundry, meals, and dishes?
    - g. taking care of the child so that you have time to relax for a while and do what you want?
    - h. helping you to feel good about yourself as a parent?

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  4. How helpful was your spouse/partner before your family began to receive TEIS services?

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  5. How helpful has your spouse/partner been since your family began to receive TEIS services?

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*Table 4 Chronbach Alpha Coefficients*

Coefficient Alphas	Mother Report	Father Report
Father Involvement	.881	.849
Child Sees Adult Use	.849	.840
Child Looks at with Interest	.814	.824

*Table 5 Effects of Father Involvement on Child Literacy Outcomes*

	Control	Child Sees Adult Use		Child Looks at with Interest	
		Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Mother	None	.154	.221*	.189	.248**
Report	Edu & Inc	.131	.197*	.155	.235*
	F-Change	7.752**	3.181*	.906	1.084
	(df)	(2, 112)	(2, 112)	(2, 112)	(2, 112)
Father	None	.202*	.302**	.120	.294**
Self-Report	Edu & Inc	.193*	.299**	.109	.296**
	F-Change	3.757*	2.933	1.063	.139
	(df)	(2, 115)	(2,119)	(2, 115)	(2, 119)

\* = .05 significance level, \*\* = .01 significance level

*Table 6 Impact of Father Involvement on Child Literacy Outcomes Moderated by Financial Strain*

	CSAU	CLAWI
Hi Strain	.332**	.332**
Low Strain	.209	.261*

## Vita

Courtney Michele Barnes was born in Atlanta, Georgia on May 14, 1984. She graduated from Berkmar High School in Lilburn, Georgia in May of 2002. She then attended Spelman College and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in May of 2006. She received her Master of Science degree in Child and Family Studies from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2009. Courtney is employed by Social Security Administration as a claims representative while fulfilling her passion of helping children and families. She plans to obtain her Ph.D in the near future.