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Children's behaviour is linked to contact with real father

Child Health News
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The importance of a father figure in children's lives has been demonstrated by a new study of families with separated parents in Bristol.

After looking at couples who had split up, researchers found there was a direct relationship between their children's behavioural problems and the amount of contact they had with their natural father, and the quality of the relationship between father and child.

The effect was more pronounced in single parent families, particularly teenaged mothers. In these families the children were particularly vulnerable if they had no contact with their real father.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* were based on data collected by the [Children of the 90s](#) study based at the [University of Bristol](#).

Professor Judy Dunn from the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College, London, studied 162 children whose parents had separated, over two years.

Of those children, 18 per cent had no contact with their father, and 16 per cent had contact less than once a month. There tended to be less contact if the mothers had been

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relatively young when pregnant.

Researchers interviewed all 162 children (initially at an average age of eight and a half) about their relationship with their mothers, fathers and stepfathers. The mothers were asked to report on children's behaviour, on whether they were aggressive or delinquent (externalising behaviour) or withdrawn, anxious, or depressed (internalising).

There were fewer externalising problems according to the child's relationship with both mother or non-resident father, and according to the extent of child-father contact and the quality of this relationship.

Internalising problems were associated with the quality of the relationship with the mother, and to infrequent or no contact with the father.

The report notes: "Earlier studies have reported some inconsistent findings on the significance of contact.

"Our findings were unequivocal: more frequent and more regular contact (which included communication by telephone) was associated with closer more intense relationships with non-resident fathers and fewer adjustment problems in children."

Professor Dunn notes that the amount of contact between a child and a father was related to the relationship between the parents.

She says:"This underlines the importance of parents developing a good working relationship over children's issues and of keeping any problems in their own relationships separate from their parenting."

Children's perspectives on their relationships with their nonresident fathers: influences, outcomes and implications. Judy Dunn, Helen Cheng, Thomas G. O'Connor, and Laura Bridges. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45:3 (2004), pp 553-566.

ALSPAC - The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (also known as Children of the 90s) is a unique ongoing research project based in the University of Bristol. It enrolled 14,000 mothers during pregnancy in 1991-2 and has followed the children and parents in minute detail ever since. <http://www.bris.ac.uk>