



National Center on Fathers and Families

**BRIEF**

*NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. The Brief, Intergenerational Learning, is one of seven developed upon NCOFF's seven Core Learnings as a literature review written for NCOFF by Vivian L. Gadsden of the University of Pennsylvania and Marcia Hall of Simmons College. Designed to examine in-depth issues in the Core Learnings, the seven literature reviews were the centerpiece of discussion in the 1995-1997 Fathers and Families Roundtable Series which brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to examine issues surrounding the NCOFF Core Learnings and findings thought to be essential in working with fathers. Copies of literature reviews, Roundtable proceedings, and related reports are available from NCOFF in paper form, or via the internet (<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>).*

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## **Intergenerational Learning:** **A Review of the Literature**

### **Key Findings**

- Most people base their parenting practices on the way they were raised, sometimes modeling and sometimes reacting against the techniques of their parents. However, the specific mechanism for intergenerational transmission and the actual effects of father involvement are difficult to determine.
- Grandparents, and often great-grandparents, are increasingly a source of support for families and may contribute to children's attitudes and beliefs as much as parents do.
- Parents affect adult children's attitudes and behaviors most clearly in the areas of religious practices and beliefs, political activism, and educational values, with some differential effects appearing in mothers' influence on daughters' activism and fathers' influence on sons' religious practices.
- There is still no clear-cut evidence about the effects of divorce on adult children, although increasingly studies associate divorce with a range of problems experienced by children in and out of school as well as single parenting in the next generation. The decline in a family's standard of living may explain many of the negative outcomes for children.
- Dysfunction in the family of origin seems to increase a person's propensity toward alcohol abuse. There is also evidence for a cycle of physical abuse which is generational and role-specific; men and fathers tend to be the ones who abuse, and women and mothers are abused.
- Most studies continue to rely on the comparative model in which family formation patterns of White, middle-class families are used as the norm; researchers try to determine how Black families "measure up" to White families.

### **Recommendations for Research**

- Researchers should examine the continuum of fathers' positive and negative impact.
- Researchers should increase the number and quality of studies that focus on intergenerational learning. However, researchers need to expand the subject and informant pool in order to understand how learning occurs in different populations and across social classes and emphasize strengths within ethnic families, particularly with respect to how they can be used to enhance support efforts.
- The increasing role of three- and four-generational families requires that researchers investigate how these multiple generations connect around children's development and what the long-term implications are for families. Researchers and practitioners must recognize the important role of grandparents as surrogate parents and thereby encourage public support and services that will facilitate their contributions to the healthy development of children.
- Although we should continue to examine the intergenerational effect of "healthy" homes, substantial work needs to focus on the negative consequences of living in a home in which there is abuse, alcoholism, or drug addiction and the differential effects of father involvement and absence.

***Recommendations for Practice***

- Along with researchers, practitioners must construct effective ways to invite fathers into children's educational experiences and sustain their participation in the learning process.
- Programs can not focus only on the issues the fathers identify but must address also issues derived from their families of origin: that is, practices, beliefs, father presence and absence, and parenting.
- Programs should offer fathers useful approaches to working with their children and planning for future generations within their families.

***Recommendations for Policy***

- Workplaces and government systems must overcome stereotypes that portray fathers primarily as breadwinners rather than caregivers, and actively promote paternal involvement through parenting education, flextime, parental leave, and other pro-family policies.
- Policymakers should build into grants incentives for grantees to include fathers during the course of the program and increase support for research and evaluation components that encourage researchers and practitioners to work collaboratively in the development and implementation of programs.

## **Intergenerational Learning:** **A Review of the Literature**

Research on intergenerational learning in families includes a range of studies that focus on the transmission of beliefs and practices and the modeling of behaviors from generation to generation. Despite growing interest in intergenerational learning, research on the effects of father involvement on children's development represents but a small strand of work. In the absence of a critical core of research on fathers and intergenerational learning, the authors of the review focused on the broader issues of intergenerational, family, and life-course development. Most studies continue to rely on a comparative model in which White, middle-class family patterns are used as the norm.

The review is divided into five sections summarizing the literature. The first section provides an overview of the issues that link intergenerationality and father involvement, including a brief discussion about fathers' perceptions of gender roles and their relationships with sons and daughters. The second section focuses on intergenerational and life-course issues that have emerged over the past 25 years, and the third section reviews some of the research that examines parental influences on children. Next, the authors describe some of the consequences of intergenerational learning within families described as "unhealthy." The fifth section addresses a subset of studies that focus on specific racial and ethnic groups. The authors conclude by commenting on some of the limitations of the research, reviewing critical issues from the previous sections, and offering recommendations for research and policy analyses.

***Intergenerationality and Fathers***

Research focuses on children and parents because of the important role that parents play in children's daily lives

and in their subsequent well-being as adults. Both research and public discussions about fathers and their children tend to focus on the importance of fathers' relationships with sons. Studies that have included fathers typically have excluded their daughters. When research examines daughters, it is centered often on issues of gender identification or mending fractured and painful father-daughter relationships. During the 1960s and early 1970s, a large body of research emerged to suggest that fathers were more involved than mothers in reinforcing femininity in girls and masculinity in boys. Fathers stated explicitly that they felt more responsibility toward a male child than a female child. More recent work suggests that fathers consider their primary responsibility to be socializing their sons into the male world and protecting their daughters. The authors suggest that fathers who see their role as primarily the family provider may assign more importance to this aspect of their sons' future paternal responsibility, may consider it as outside the immediate concern of girls, or simply may feel unprepared to enter into conversations about their personal experiences, expectations, and hopes with their daughters.

**References:**

Billier and Weiss, 1970; Gilbert et al., 1982; Johnson, 1963; Kristal, 1979; Lozoff, 1974; MacNabb, 1993; Walker and Thompson, 1983.

***Frameworks for Understanding Intergenerational Learning***

After identifying some of the major areas of intergenerational work on fathers, the authors of the review introduce frameworks and concepts used for understanding intergenerational learning. A traditional perspective on

intergenerational learning asserts that parents are the principal agents of socialization in childhood, and that children learn their parents' beliefs, values, and attitudes through both direct teaching and indirect observation. This perspective assumes that childhood socialization is so powerful as to continue throughout adulthood. Research from the 1980s challenges this perspective by asserting that the similarities between children and parents may be as much a result of shared social and cultural statuses as of parents' socialization of children. Social statuses provide a comfortable context for beliefs to persist unchallenged because they cohere with or explain the life circumstances of individuals. A second challenge to the traditional perspective on intergenerational learning suggests that this learning can be bidirectional, as in the case of the Head Start program, in which a program designed for young children resulted in significant changes in parents' behavior as well.

As another framework for understanding intergenerational learning, the authors discuss life-course approaches that examine the relationship between individual change and the timing of major life events, e.g., the onset of schooling. Family life-course frameworks emphasize the continuity and reciprocity of life experiences and suggest that families are units of individuals and that the events and episodes that affect individual family members also influence the unit and the course of family life.

#### **References:**

Acock, 1984; Elder, 1973, 1984; Gadsden, in press; Germain, 1994; Slaughter et al., 1987.

### **Parent and Family Relationships**

The discussion of the impact of parents and families on intergenerational learning is divided into five general topics: (1) parenting and grandparenting, (2) relationships and intimacy, (3) educational, religious, and social behaviors and values, (4) family instability and divorce, and (5) status attainment.

**Parenting and Grandparenting.** Children are likely to emulate the parenting behaviors to which they are exposed during their childhood. Generally, these are the behaviors of parents, but often they include grandparents. Many intergenerational studies have found that children who experience positive home environments tend to create similar environments for their children. Children who were exposed to corporal punishment appear to adopt less harsh parenting styles than their parents. For instance, grandparents in the Simons et al. (1991) study were more aggressive in parenting than the generation of parents actively engaged in childrearing. (Grandparents typically do not exact the same discipline on their grandchildren as they did on their own children.) Ijzendoorn (1992) suggests that little is known about the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of parenting and that it is difficult to ascertain how people specifically learn to parent.

**Intimacy.** Children's experiences with their parents influence their perceptions about the quality of their intimate relationships and their mate choices. Fathers affect daughters' mate choices more than sons' choices. Fathers appear to play

a key role in sex-role development for daughters and in the postures they assume in intimate relationships. Sons and daughters whose fathers were present and involved in the home report the greatest comfort around issues of sexuality.

**Attitudes and Beliefs.** Relationships between parents and adult children appear strongest for mothers and daughters, with mothers having more influence on daughters' perceptions of gender roles. Parents seemingly affect adult children's attitudes and behaviors most often in religious practices and beliefs, political activism, and educational values, with some differential effects appearing in mothers' influence on daughters' activism and fathers' influence on sons' religious practices.

**Divorce and Marital Instability.** Studies published through the 1960s and early 1970s found either no effect or little effect of living with a single parent. Since the 1980s, there has been an upsurge in studies that suggest that marital disruption has deleterious consequences for children. Despite inconsistency across studies, there is some agreement that parental divorce is associated with liberal attitudes toward divorce in adulthood. Much of the research since the 1980s makes reference to the impact of marital disruption on children's academic achievement, school experiences, psychosocial development, criminal behavior, and early parenting. Many of these effects are tied to the decline in the standard of living following divorce.

**Status Attainment.** There are some data suggesting that there are intergenerational effects of poverty. More specifically, men who come from families with a history of welfare receipt are more likely to have low economic status themselves. The same negative relationship holds true for men who come from low-income, nonwelfare families. For women, there is some evidence that parents' level of college education indirectly shapes daughters' educational attainment and career choice.

### **Negative Effects of Intergenerational Learning: "Unhealthy" Families**

The perpetuation of abuse over generations within a family is perhaps the most negative example of intergenerational continuity. Egeland et al. (1987) found that 70 percent of mothers abused as children abuse their own children. Victims who do not continue the cycle of abuse are those who are able to develop trust and intimacy by rising above the obstacles of an abusive childhood, at least in part through the support of loving partners and spouses and supportive networks in their adult lives. Despite differences in parenting practices across cultural and ethnic groups, large numbers of American families condone and use physical punishment in the rearing of their children, according to the National Family Violence Survey.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

The issues of race, ethnicity, and class are among the least studied areas in intergenerational learning. There has been an historical bias in work on families and African Americans; in traditional studies, Black families are labeled often

as different from the norm if not deviant. However, much of the work emerging in the 1960s and 1970s was developed around an alternative perspective that emphasized the strengths of African American families. Many of these studies aimed to respond to earlier work that described Black families as pathological. Several studies continued the focus on family strengths into the 1980s while exploring other directions for work in the field. More recent studies are attempts to advance the arguments in favor of the "strengths of Black families" and expand the perspective to include a variety of family types over time.

### References:

Allen, 1985; Benson et al., 1992; Billingsley, 1968; Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Duncan and Duncan, 1969; Egeland et al., 1987; Fry, 1993; Gadsden, 1995; Gutman, 1976; Hogan et al., 1990; Ijzendoorn, 1992; Jedlicka, 1984; Simons et al., 1991; Stack, 1974; Stack and Burton, 1993; Straus, 1991.

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