

# How can we Measure Paternal Involvement? A Test of the Millennium Cohort Study

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## Abstract

Measuring paternal involvement in childcare is becoming increasingly important due to its centrality in sociological and political debates. However, defining the term ‘paternal involvement’ is complicated as it comprises multiple dimensions within cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains. Measuring paternal involvement, therefore, is not straightforward, meaning studies of it tend to be qualitative. However, using data from the UK’s Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) – a longitudinal study of children born in Britain around 2000- Norman and Elliot (2015, paper in preparation) created a quantitative measure of paternal involvement. Using factor analysis on data from five sweeps of the MCS, Norman and Elliot created five composite measures of paternal involvement – each related to one sweep of the MCS, or age of the child sampled (child at 9 months, 3, 5, 7 and 11 years). This paper tests the validity of Norman and Elliot’s measure by conducting qualitative experiments and interviews with 33 fathers from the North West. In the experiment, participants grouped each of the MCS child-care variables into categories they regarded as useful, to explore the conceptual validity of Norman and Elliot’s scales. Participants were then asked what was missing from the MCS variables if to be used as a measure of paternal involvement, and how they would define the term. Results from this research validate Norman and Elliot’s measure as a measure of paternal *engagement* rather than paternal *involvement* – defining engagement as just one dimension of involvement. Indeed, the results show that many important aspects of paternal involvement (including emotional care, feelings of commitment and responsibility, and teaching) are not included in the MCS variables meaning they do not measure involvement entirely.

**Keywords:** Fathers, Paternal, Involvement, Engagement, Childcare, Measurement, Scales

## **Introduction**

In Britain, attitudes towards fathering have changed significantly over recent decades, becoming more supportive of gender equality, with Dads taking a more active role in child care (Park et al. 2013; Norman et al. 2017). Whether these attitudes are reflected in practice is another matter; ideology may not match reality. The extent to which fathers are involved in child care has been explored (see Barry et al. 2011, Dermott 2003, Miller, 2011). However, these studies tend to be qualitative, using small samples, limiting the reliability of their findings.

The lack of quantitative work in this area may (in part) be due to the complexity of defining the term 'paternal involvement'. Paternal involvement may be viewed as a multi-dimensional, multifaceted, and therefore highly ambiguous term (Dermott 2003; Norman 2017). Sanderson & Sanders Thompson (2002) argue it can be manifest in cognitive, affective and behavioural domains while Hawkins and Palkovitz (1999) suggest it includes direct as well as indirect contact with a child. This complex nature makes paternal involvement difficult to operationalise and thus quantify. Indeed, there exists no universally accepted definition or measure of the term.

In acknowledging this lack of quantitative measure of paternal involvement, Norman and Elliot (2015; paper in preparation) created a measure from a bank of variables included in the Millenium Cohort Survey (MCS). The MCS variables measure how often a father did certain activities (e.g. read, play, feed) with or for their child. The aim of this paper is to assess the validity of Norman and Elliot's measure by interviewing fathers about whether they believe the MCS variables from which it is derived capture what it means to be an involved father. In fulfilling this aim, this paper offers a critique of Norman and Elliot's (2015, paper in preparation) measure of paternal involvement and, more generally, considers how and whether the term paternal involvement can be quantitatively defined and measured.

## **Defining Paternal Involvement**

Marsiglio et al. (2000) argue that every epoch of time prescribes what it means to be an effective or good father. Over the decades this has shifted from moral teacher, to breadwinner, to (most recently) involved father (Dermot 2003; Morman & Flloyd 2006). Indeed, a distinction is often drawn between 'traditional' fathering based upon 'breadwinning', and 'modern', and improved, fathering based upon 'involvement' (Dermot 2003; Lamb 1986; Griswold 1993; Cohen 1993). In this way, involved fathering has become synonymous with good fathering, and something separate to financial provision (Williams 2008; McGill 2014; Norman 2017).

But what does it mean to be an involved father? One might assume the term involvement implies a 'hands-on' component, with Dad spending time with the child. However, Sanderson and Sanders Thompson (2002) claim that paternal involvement incorporates a range of thoughts and feelings, as well as behaviours. Based upon this argument, a definition of paternal involvement is not restricted to activities a father does but includes cognitive and emotional aspects of fathering, e.g. planning activities, thinking through problems, feeling love, even when apart from the child. This idea is consistent with Hawkins and Palkovitz's (1999) notion that paternal involvement incorporates direct as well as indirect contact with a child.

One of the most commonly cited definitions of paternal involvement is that offered by Lamb (1986), who claims it has three dimensions. The first dimension, labelled 'accessibility', means being physically present and available to a child, e.g. being available for child-care. This type of involvement will not always include direct engagement with the child, but can include non-interactive care when the child is sleeping or playing on their own. The second dimension - 'engagement' - means a father having one-on-one interaction with the child, for example feeding them, helping them with homework or playing with them. Lamb (1986) makes clear that engagement does not include time a father spends multi-tasking, i.e. if he is interacting with a child while doing other things such as housework. The third dimension is 'responsibility' for the child's welfare and involves knowing what the child needs, planning for, and providing it, e.g. making and taking them to dentist appointments.

Now decades old, Lamb's (1986) conceptual model arguably excludes other important elements of paternal involvement, including cognitive and emotional manifestations (Sanderson & Sanders Thompson 2002). Palkovitz (1997) proposes 15 general categories of paternal involvement that include planning, financial support, protecting, providing emotional support, teaching, monitoring, showing affection, and sharing activities. More recently, Hofferth (2003) suggests a four-dimensional model comprising: Time spent with the child; warmth (meaning affection and telling child they love them); monitoring and control (enforcing rules regarding the child's behaviour); and responsibility (doing things for the child in terms of physical care, driving them places and arranging appointments).

Hofferth's (2003) dimensions of time spent with a child and responsibility may mirror Lamb's (1986) dimensions of engagement and responsibility. However, Hofferth's dimensions of warmth and monitoring - also mentioned by Palkovitz - have no place in Lamb's. Warmth and monitoring might be grouped within Lamb's (1986) 'engagement' dimension (one-on-one interaction between father and

child) but these types of behaviour are not made explicit in the model. Acknowledging that Lamb's (1986) definition of paternal involvement excludes notions of warmth and monitoring, Pleck (2010) proposes an alternative three-component model with the dimensions 'positive engagement activities', 'warmth and responsiveness' and 'control'.

The fact that warmth is not included in Lamb's (1986) model of paternal involvement, but acknowledged in more recent models (Hofferth 2003; Palkovitz 1997; Pleck 2010) is consistent with the suggestion that intimacy between fathers and their children has only recently been prioritized (Furstenberg 1995; Brannen et al. 1994). Dermott (2003), through interviewing a sample of fathers, found many of them talked about being emotionally intimate with their children and that the importance they placed upon this intimacy was a key component in the shift from traditional 'breadwinner' fathering to new 'involved' fathering. In defining what emotional intimacy was, Dermott's (2003) interviewees referred to communicating with their child on their level, understanding them and sharing their emotions. To these Dads emotional connection with their children was essential to being a good Dad.

The models discussed above offer broad definitions of paternal involvement. As an alternative, Morman and Floyd (2006) offer a more finite definition. In their study which asked fathers and sons what they believed made a good father, the following categories emerged: Love, availability, role model, involvement, provider, control, sacrifice, forgiveness, listener, teacher of moral/religious issues, teacher of non-moral/religious issues, protector, discipline, support (emotional or relational support), affection, friend. Thus, according to Morman and Floyd (2006), involvement is just one aspect of good fathering, rather than a concept which entirely captures it. They distinguish involvement from other aspects of good fathering, such as availability, discipline and affection, even though these aspects are regarded in the other models just discussed as sub-components of involvement. More simply than the multi-dimensional models of paternal involvement, Morman and Floyd (2006) suggest involvement is simply doing activities with the child and showing an interest in them.

Consistent with Morman and Floyd's (2006) summation, Pleck (2010) argues that 'engagement' is the most important component of Lamb's (1986) three-dimensional model. He claims that engagement and involvement may even be regarded synonymous while the other two components (accessibility and responsibility) have received less attention. This suggestion, that involvement equates engagement, offers a much tighter definition of paternal involvement; Lamb (1986) defines engagement as simply one-on-one interaction with the child, consistent with Morman and Floyd's (2006) definition of

involvement.

## **Measuring Paternal Involvement**

The way paternal involvement is defined affects the way it is measured. Defining paternal involvement as merely engagement (one-on-one interaction with a child) as proposed by Morman and Floyd (2006) renders its measurement relatively simple. Regarding it as a multi-dimensional concept (Lamb 1986; Palkovitz 1997; Hofferth 2003; Pleck 2010) makes its measurement more complex. This is especially so if dimensions of paternal involvement incorporate emotional and cognitive factors, such as care and intimacy, which are less observable than behaviour.

One could argue that emotional and cognitive states, such as intimacy, manifest in certain behaviours making them easier to measure (Ehrensaft 1987). However, Dermott (2003) claims there is a flawed logic in presuming intimacy in fathering translates into specific actions such as playing or reading with a child. None of her interviewees mentioned such activities when talking about intimacy in fathering. In fact, some of them had very limited time with their child but still talked about being intimate with them. Indeed, Jamieson (1998) distinguishes between knowing and understanding (which she defines as intimacy) and practical caring activities, suggesting the two may not correlate.

If we define paternal involvement as including emotional, cognitive and behavioural components, and agree that emotional/cognitive involvement is not observable via behaviour, valid measures of paternal involvement need to incorporate cognitive and emotional measures as well as behavioural ones. Marsiglio and Cohan (2000) suggest that a range of observational, ethnographic and in-depth qualitative interview approaches should be used to assess paternal involvement to enable the exploration of these different (cognitive, emotional, behavioural) domains. Indeed, most research investigating paternal involvement is qualitative in nature (see Barry et al. 2011, Dermott 2003, Miller, 2011). Qualitative research does not require a finite measure of paternal involvement but allows for its subjective definition by participants, enabling deep exploration of the topic. However, qualitative research tends to mean small samples, making cross-group and time comparisons unreliable. Such multivariate analysis requires a quantitative measure of paternal involvement.

Unfortunately, as no finite definition of paternal involvement exists, quantitative measures of the term are hard to come by, yet some do exist (Crouter et al. 1987; Klein 1983; Carlson 2006). Carlson's (2006) measure includes items from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 that measure whether fathers talk about important decisions with a child, listen to them, know their whereabouts,

attend important children's events and activities, share ideas with them, talk to them about things that matter, spend time with them and feel close to them. Thus, Carlson's quantitative measure includes emotional, cognitive and behavioural domains.

More recently Norman and Elliot (2015, paper in preparation) created measures of paternal involvement from variables included in five sweeps of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). This longitudinal survey collects data from parents of 18,552 children born in the UK around 2000. Sweep one data (2001-2) was collected when the child was aged nine months, sweep two data (2003-04) when the child was three, sweep three data (2006) when the child was five, sweep four data (2008) when the child was seven and sweep five data (2012) when the child was 11.

In 2015, Norman and Elliot identified several variables from sweep one of the MCS that relate to paternal involvement with a child at age nine months. These variables include four direct measures of child care (frequency father looks after baby on his own, frequency father feeds baby, frequency father changes baby's nappy, frequency father gets up in the night for baby<sup>1</sup>) and three measures of indirect child care related to housework (frequency father cooked, frequency father cleaned, frequency father did laundry). Using a combination of Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis techniques, Norman and Elliot found the seven variables loaded on two main factors. The four direct measures of child care loaded on a factor they labelled 'engagement', while the three measures of housework loaded on a factor they labelled 'responsibility'. Norman and Elliot (2015) used these results to support Lamb's (1986) three-dimensional model of paternal involvement (with the dimensions of accessibility, engagement and responsibility). While they did not find evidence for the dimension of accessibility, Norman and Elliot claim this is because it cannot be captured by the variables in sweep one of the MCS.

Using Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Norman and Elliot (paper in preparation) also created a composite measure of paternal involvement using data from all five sweeps of the MCS. This time factors emerged by sweep or age of child, i.e. five scales were created, one measuring all child care activities when the child was nine months old, a second measuring all child care activities when the child was three years old, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> A variable measuring how often the parent looked after their child when they are ill was also included in sweep one but Norman and Elliot (2015) excluded this variable because they claim it does not constitute a core activity because it does not require an ongoing daily commitment.

## **Aim and Method**

The aim of this study is to test the validity of Norman and Elliot's (2015, paper in preparation) measure of paternal involvement. It does so by conducting qualitative research with a sample of 33 fathers from North West England, discussing with them whether the MCS variables (from which Norman and Elliot's measure is derived) are a valid measure of paternal involvement.

Table 1 shows the MCS variables included in Norman and Elliot's measure that they define as *direct* child care activities. While Norman and Elliot's work also included measures of *indirect* child care – measures of housework (cooking, cleaning, laundry) – for simplicity, these variables are not considered here. If, therefore, we accept Norman and Elliot's summation that the MCS measures of direct child care mirror Lamb's (1986) concept of engagement, while the measures of housework mirror that of responsibility, the variables considered in this study focus only on paternal engagement. Whether engagement is something distinct from involvement, and what this means for the validity of Norman and Elliot's measure is discussed in detail later.

**Table 1: Variables from MCS (sweeps 1-5) that measure activities done for and with a child**

Sweep 1 (child aged 9 mths)	Sweep 2 (child aged 3)	Sweep 3 (child aged 5)	Sweep 4 (child aged 7)	Sweep 5 (child aged 11)
Change [baby's] nappy	Look after [child] on your own	Look after [child] on your own	Get [child] ready for bed	Play sports or physically active games outdoors or indoors with [child]
Feed [baby]	Read to [child]	Read to [child]	Tell stories to [child] not from a book	Play with toys or games indoors with [child]
Get up in the night for [baby]	Play with [child]	Get [child] ready for bed	Play music, listen to music, sing songs or nursery rhymes, dance or do other musical activities with [child]	Talk to [child] about things that are important to her/him
Look after [baby] on your own	Get [child] ready for bed	Tell stories to [child] not from a book	Draw, paint or make things with [child]	
		Play music, listen to music, sing songs or nursery rhymes, dance or do other musical activities with [child]	Play sports or physically active games outdoors or indoors with [child]	
		Draw, paint or make things with [child]	Play with toys or games indoors with [child]	
		Play sports or physically active games outdoors or indoors with [child]	Take [child] to the park or to an outdoor playground	
		Play with toys or games indoors with [child]		
		Take [child] to the park or to an outdoor playground		



## *Method*

To fulfil the research aim, the team<sup>2</sup> designed a card sorting exercise for the participants to complete. Each activity shown in Table 1 (27 in total) were printed onto individual cards. The activity and age of child was listed on each card, e.g. 'feed baby at age 9 months', 'read to child at age 5'. The cards were laid in front of the participant who was then asked to sort them into groups of his choosing – in any way that made conceptual sense to him. Participants were asked to repeat this task up to five times (creating up to five different typologies) to exhaust the different ways in which they might be grouped. The interviewer used cognitive interviewing throughout this process, meaning the participant was asked to explain his decisions during the card-sorting process. The aim of this exercise was to investigate whether the five-factor measure created by Norman and Elliot (paper in preparation), based upon the child's age and sweep of the MCS, made conceptual sense to the participants. Or, if there were other dimensions within the variables that could be identified, e.g. according to type of activity rather than age of child.

Prior to the card-sorting exercise the participants were *not* told why they were being asked to sort the cards into groups. However, once the exercise was complete, it was explained that the activities listed were being used as a measure of paternal involvement. Following this disclosure, each participant was then interviewed. This interview was semi-structured, based upon the following two questions:

1. Is there anything you regard as important to being an involved father that is not included on the cards?
2. How would you define being an involved father?

The participants were asked *not* to draw on personal experience in answering either of the interview questions (i.e. by talking about what they did or did not do with their child) but to consider the questions as objectively as possible.

The card sorting exercise and interview were conducted one-on-one with each participant, in a private and confidential space. With permission, the process was audio recorded. Each exercise/interview lasted between 25 minutes and an hour. A pilot study with three participants (University colleagues who fitted the participant criteria) was conducted prior to the main study. The pilot highlighted only minor methodological issues which were resolved before the main study. Results from this pilot are therefore included in the study's main findings as its methodology was almost identical to that of the

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<sup>2</sup> The research team consisted of myself, Dr Helen Norman and Professors Mark Elliot and Colette Fagan, all based at the University of Manchester.

main study.

### *Sample*

The team aimed to recruit a diverse sample of 30 fathers to take part in the research. Each participant was required to have at least one child aged 11 or under - the age range captured by the MCS. Eligible fathers were contacted via local primary schools. Head Teachers of every primary school within a three-mile radius of the University of Manchester (49 in total) were sent a letter asking them if they would allow a researcher to approach fathers on the school playground at the start and end of the school day to ask if they would be interested in taking part in the project. Five of the schools agreed to this. In addition, one of the research team was granted access to the playgrounds at two schools in Cheshire through contacts she had with teachers there. Thus, participants were recruited from a total of seven schools. Two of the schools were located within a mile of the university. Fathers from these schools were asked to travel to the university for their interview. Fathers recruited from the other five schools were interviewed at the school so they did not have to travel.

We did manage to recruit 30 fathers which, including the three pilot participants, gave us a sample of 33. Recruiting participants from both inner-city Manchester and Cheshire meant a highly diverse sample. Ten of the 33 fathers (30%) were not born in the UK. Amongst the non-UK born fathers, the amount of time they had lived in the UK ranged from three to 34 years, though most had lived in the UK at least ten years. Those who had only been in the UK four years or less were students at the university. 24 participants (73%) defined themselves as White British or Irish, three (9%) as Black, three (9%) as South Asian and three (9%) as Other or Mixed.

Most of the sample were either employed full-time (N=16; 48%) or self-employed (N=10; 30%). Two (6%) were employed part time, three (9%) were unemployed and two (6%) were students. Amongst those who were employed, around 12 (36%) were in unskilled or semi-skilled employment, nine (27%) were in skilled employment and 12 (36%) were in professional employment. Half (50%) lived in a home they owned outright or with a mortgage; 18% rented from a private landlord and 32% rented from social housing. Most of the sample (82%) were married and living with their spouse, just one of the participants (3%) was cohabiting, five (15%) were living alone, two of whom were separated or divorced. We did not recruit any fathers in a same-sex partnership. The age of the participants' children ranged from one to 13. Almost half of the sample (16 participants) had two children. Finally, the ages of the Dads ranged from 24 to 52, with a mean of 38.5.

To note a couple of limitations regarding the sample: First, our sample mainly included fathers who could be interviewed between the hours of 9am and 5pm (when the school was available to use), favouring the unemployed, self-employed, or those working shifts above fathers with more traditional working hours<sup>3</sup>. Second, in six out of the seven schools, the sample was limited to fathers who help drop off/collect their child from school<sup>4</sup> meaning particularly involved fathers might be over-represented in the study.

## Results

### *Identifying types of paternal involvement: Results from card-sorting exercise*

*Age groups:* Organising the 27 cards (MCS variables) by age was the most popular strategy, i.e. assigning all the cards ending ‘at age 9 months’ into one group, all those ending ‘at age 3 years’ into another group and so forth. Almost half the participants (N=15) organised the cards this way and nearly all in this group (N=15) chose this as their first method of grouping. Eight of these 14 participants did not then want to organise the cards any other way - no other type of grouping was apparent to them. The other six participants in this group easily chose other ways of organising the cards.

Some participants explained their reason for grouping the cards by age with the view that the same activity can look very different at different ages of a child. One respondent used the example of playing games with a five-year-old compared to an 11-year-old; the latter is more about creating a friendship with that child who, by age 11, may be uninterested in spending time with a parent. Another participant compared taking a child to a park at age three with taking them at age seven, the former being more interactive, the latter being more observational. Indeed, fathers might take a much more observational rather than interactive role in many activities as the child gets older and so more independent.

18 participants did not choose age as their first method of grouping, though many in this group did choose age as a subsequent method (participants were asked to regroup the cards up to five times). Amongst the other groups or categories created, the following list describes the most commonly identified:

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<sup>3</sup> The researcher did manage to recruit a few full-time working fathers who happened to be on holiday when the school playground was visited.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the schools the Head Teacher forwarded an email inviting participation in the experiments to every father meaning they were all given the chance to participate.

**Core childcare:** The most commonly used category behind different ages was that which might be labelled 'core childcare', though different participants called it different things. This included activities required for the basic care of a child. 15 participants created this type of category. The activities included in it differed slightly but nearly always included looking after the child on their own (at ages 9 months, 3, 5 and 7), changing a child's nappy (at age 9 months), getting up for a child in the night (at age 9 months), feedings the child (at age 9 months) and getting the child ready for bed (at ages 9 months, 3, 5 and 7 years).

**Non-core childcare:** Among the 15 participants who had created a 'core childcare' category, some placed all the remaining cards into one other group one might label 'non-core-childcare'. The remaining activities included reading, telling stories, taking the child to the park, playing with toys and games, playing sports, doing musical activities and drawing and painting with the child. The participants used different labels for this second group including: 'development of child', 'providing opportunities for child', 'fun', 'bonus activities to reward the child'.

However, many of the 15 participants who had created a 'core childcare' category did not place all the remaining activities into a single group but separated them into two or more other groups. The most popular were:

**Cognitive development:** This included activities that participants believed would involve the child learning something. Reading to the child (at ages 3, 5 and 7 years) was always put in this category. Telling stories, doing musical activities, drawing, painting or making things and playing with toys or games indoors were placed in this category by some participants if they believed these activities involved learning. Again, this type of group was given different labels by different participants.

**Physical development:** A second group among the 'non-necessities' can be labelled physical development. Some participants placed the activities taking the child to the park (at ages 5 and 7 years) and doing sports or physically active games with the child (at ages 5, 7 and 11 years) into a single group because they all involve physical activity.

**Fun:** A third popular group can be labelled 'fun'. Taking the child to the park (at ages 5 and 7 years) and doing sports or physically active games with the child (at ages 5, 7 and 11 years) were always put in this category when created. Telling stories, doing musical activities, drawing, painting or making things and playing with toys or games indoors were placed in this category by some participants, if they were

not defined as cognitive development. Thus, this latter list (telling stories etc.) seemed to ‘float’ between the categories of cognitive development and fun.

In the card sorting exercise, most variability occurred in the placement of ‘talk to child about things that are important to her/him at age 11 years’. Sometimes this was placed in the ‘necessities’ category, sometimes in the ‘non-necessities’ category, though often it was left on its own regarded as so dissimilar to all the other activities.

### *Items missing from the MCS variables*

In response to the first interview question, the participants listed various items they thought were missing from the MCS variables if they were to be used as a measure of paternal involvement. The most commonly mentioned items can be grouped as follows:

***Other core childcare:*** Activities that would have been added to the ‘core childcare’ category. These included feeding, or cooking for, a child beyond age 9 months, taking a child to doctors’ or dentist appointments and buying them basic goods such as clothing.

***Excursions/holidays:*** Taking children on days out (e.g. to the museum, zoo or beach), taking them swimming or to the cinema, going on holiday and watching films and TV together.

***School related activities:*** Helping a child with their homework, taking them to/picking them up from school and attending parents’ evenings and school plays.

***Teaching:*** Teaching practical skills such as cooking, swimming and riding a bike, instilling values such as honesty, hard work and respect, and transmitting beliefs, including religious beliefs.

***Emotional care:*** Giving physical and verbal affection to children (e.g. kisses and cuddles and saying ‘I love you’). Asking the child how their day was and talking to them about any problems they might be having.

### *Defining paternal involvement*

Participants’ responses to the second interview question (how would you define being an involved father?) can be organised into four themes. Two of these themes mirror the last two groups of missing

activities listed above (teaching and emotional care), suggesting a limitation in using the MCS variables as a measure of paternal involvement. The four themes are:

***'Being there':*** When defining paternal involvement, many of the participants used the term 'being there'. Not everyone defined what this term meant, as if it was universally understood, but some explained that it meant being available for the child, no matter what, suggesting a deep sense of commitment and reliability. One father talked about *being on call 24/7* (Jon).

This unwavering availability of an 'involved' father was discussed extensively by one participant who said, *[being involved] is that day-to-day commitment to do things when you're too tired to do them....An [involved] father is someone who...read[s] the child a...bedtime story, not just when he's got a free moment, he's not tired and he's got a gap between when he wants to watch something on TV but just because it's the time....so having the commitment to prioritise that.* (Russell) This same father later said, *it's someone who does get involved in their children's lives even when it's kind of, when you're unsure about how to handle it.'* (Russell).

***All-encompassing care:*** Several participants talked about involved fathering incorporating every aspect of a child's care. One father said, *[it] is being involved in everything....you are responsible for your child's development in every part of their lives* (James). Another stated similarly, *it's being involved in every aspect of your child's life, no matter what that is* (Jon). In many of the interviews, this idea that involved Dads are involved in every aspect of a child's care was linked to the notion of 'being there' –depicting unwavering commitment and responsibility to the child. The notion that involved fathers are available for a child 'no matter what' suggests there can be no finite list of activities that fathers engage in but rather engage in all parts of a child's upbringing.

Viewing paternal involvement as incorporating all aspects of a child's care meant several participants did not like to distinguish between the roles of father and mother. These participants preferred to talk in terms of parenting more generally, rather than fathering as something distinct from mothering. One father said, *being [paternal] is being a parent. Irrespective of whether my wife's there or not....I do everything that she does, she does everything I do....I think as a society we need to.... change attitudes so that that is the norm rather than, you know....she gets up in the night to feed the baby or she changes the nappies and I take them to the football....as parents we should be doing everything really* (Billy). Another father said, *an involved father does everything the Mum does. I don't think there should be a difference between being a Dad and being a Mum in terms of responsibilities. Everything that the Mum is expected to do the Dad should be expected to do....I don't*

think there's a difference between parents. (Colin) In this way, some participants referred to paternity as 'working as a team' or 'working in partnership' with the mother.

**Emotional care:** When participants discussed the concept of 'being there' for a child, there was an emotional as well as physical aspect to it. One father defined paternal involvement as, *being there for them emotionally and physically, supporting them.....if they've got problems in school, or, you know, if they've got any worries or anything, just be there for 'em.* (Colin) Another participant said: *[an involved father] makes it easy for [the child] to approach [the Dad]....or....mum for anything that's going on in their lives....there's always someone for them to talk to about it and get it off their chest.* (Marcus) Indeed, a couple of participants talked about involved fathers being approachable for a child to talk to and confide in.

In more practical terms, some participants described this emotional availability as asking a child how their day had been, if they were happy and really listening to what they had to say. One father said, *it's a bond you have with your child. It's all about talking to your child. To really listen to them.* (Chris) Another said paternal involvement means *you sense they're unhappy, [probe], follow...it through, [don't] just leave [them] to talk to Mum.* (Russell)

**Teaching life skills:** When asked what being an involved father meant to them, most participants talked about the importance of teaching children the 'rules of life' so they could function in wider society. One father said that, to be an involved Dad, means *to give my child the best opportunity to be a happy and involved person in the world she lives in.....preparing a young person for the modern world....helping my child to be a good person* (Jon). Another said: *[Fathers have] a responsibility to care and protect and to educate the child to be a good person and ultimately.....teach them about the world outside, you know, the responsibilities they've got towards other people* (Andy). The specific life skills mentioned included teaching children how to be healthy, solve problems, socialise with people and make friends. Others mentioned qualities that fathers should instil in their children such as a strong work ethic, a desire to care for others, respect for those who are different, and a love of education.

In talking about the importance of teaching in paternal involvement, one participant emphasised how this was lacking from the MCS variables. He said: *When you look at that list....involvement is about entertaining the child and for me being involved is more than entertaining them, it's more than....keeping them happy....it's teaching them how to function in society.....passing on life skills, teaching them....how to work and to study.* (David)

As well as explicit teaching moments (e.g. teaching a child to swim or dress themselves), many participants suggested that the way in which fathers taught their child was by example. Some described fathers as ‘role-models’ as it was *their* knowledge, beliefs and values they were instilling on the child as the child observed how they behaved.

## **Discussion**

Findings from this study support results from Norman and Elliot’s (paper in preparation) analysis, suggesting that the MCS variables can be grouped together by age of child to create composite measures of paternal involvement. While Norman and Elliot show that grouping the variables by age is statistically robust, this study shows this grouping also makes conceptual sense to fathers as they claim the same activity (e.g. reading, playing) can be very different depending upon the child’s age. However, age of child was not the only way participants grouped the MCS variables, suggesting there may be other valid dimensions or types within them. The alternative groups proposed (core child-care, non-core childcare, cognitive development, physical development and fun) may provide alternative ways to create composite measures, although the Factor Analysis (conducted by Norman and Elliot) does not suggest them.

More generally, this study highlights some limitations in using the MCS variables as a measure of paternal involvement. First, the variables exclude important activities that fathers may do with or for their child including cooking, taking them to appointments, shopping, going on holiday and days out and supporting them in school. The omission of these activities, however, is less concerning than the themes that were identified when participants were defining paternal involvement (‘being there’, all-encompassing care, emotional care and teaching life skills) as none of these themes are contained within the MCS variables.

One minor exception to this is the variable ‘talking about things that are important to the child at age 11’ which may denote emotional care. However, similar variables should arguably be included at younger ages and ‘talking about things that are important’ does not go very far in describing the different ways in which fathers can offer emotional care (e.g. asking the child how they are, providing physical and verbal affection). Further, in addition to any physical act that provides emotional support, emotional care is likely to have cognitive and emotional components for both the father and child - beliefs and feelings that denote a sense of intimacy between them.



The emotional and cognitive domains (which are not captured by the MCS variables) are also significant to the two themes ‘being there’ and ‘all-encompassing care’, central to the participants’ definitions of paternal involvement. While it might be possible to measure the extent to which a father is physically ‘there’ for a child and engages in every aspect of their care, these themes more likely depict psychological states within a father, incorporating beliefs that he is completely committed to, and available for, the role. Instead, the MCS variables offer a list of activities a father can engage in for a finite period, making fathering something that can be scheduled around other activities, rather than something woven into his very being. Paternal involvement described by the participants through the themes ‘being there’ and all-encompassing care suggest a deep cognitive and emotional commitment to the task rather than just a physical presence for certain activities.

Consistent with this point, one participant observed that the MCS variables offered a very ‘Truman-show like<sup>5</sup>’ measure of paternal involvement, failing to capture the ‘messiness’ of fatherhood. He made this observation while talking about taking his child to the toilet multiple times while she was potty training. This example highlights the unrelenting nature of fathering rather than a series of activities as described in the MCS variables.

Despite these criticisms, which can be applied to quantitative data more generally, one might argue that, the measures included in the MCS variables offer an indirect measure of all the four themes identified by the participants (‘being there’, all-encompassing care, emotional care, teaching life skills); the more often a father engages in the listed activities (e.g. feeding, reading, playing) the more likely he is to have/engage in these other types of involvement.

One could further argue that the activities listed in the MCS variables facilitate the four themes of involvement. Some of the participants made this point. One said, *[being involved] means putting her to bed, looking after her as if, you know, mummy wasn't there and then she can turn to me and I can solve her problems, it doesn't have to be mummy* (Michael). This father was arguing that by doing practical care activities, the child learns that they can turn to their father for emotional care. For this father, involvement was as much about a belief that the child had in the care of their father, he said *[being an involved father means] the child knows that they can turn to you for any aspect of their care....it means they are comfortable with you in most settings* (Michael). He continued, *I know some people that don't do any of this*

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<sup>5</sup> This is a cultural reference to the film ‘The Truman Show’ in which family life is depicted to be picture-perfect.

stuff [meaning the activities listed in the MCS variables] and they're a little bit, they're not awkward with their children....they're just not as comfortable (Michael). While Jamieson (1998) argued that intimacy (knowing and understanding) are distinct from caring activities, perhaps the latter facilitates the former.

In addition, it would, of course, be more methodologically complex to include direct measures of any of the four themes. Teaching life skills might be viewed as the most straight forward here; one might measure how often a father engages in explicit teaching such as teaching a child how to ride a bike or read. However, the process of instilling values and beliefs is much more difficult and, as the participants suggested, is likely done through example.

Linking these findings to existing theoretical models of paternal involvement, a few interesting points can be made. First, the four themes identified by the participants support Sanderson and Sanders Thompson's (2002) argument that paternal involvement incorporates thoughts and feelings as well as behaviours. As discussed above, the notions of 'being there' and all-encompassing care seem to denote psychological states as much (if not more than) behaviour, while emotional care incorporates emotional and cognitive elements. Further, the centrality of emotional care to the participants' definitions of paternal involvement strongly supports the qualitative findings of Dermot (2003) and the importance her interviewees placed upon emotional intimacy in fathering.

Results from the study highlight potential gaps in Lamb's (1986) model of involvement in which there is no explicit mention of emotional care or teaching. While emotional caring activities (hugging a child, talking to them about problems) and teaching activities (teaching the child how to read) may fall within Lamb's (1986) category 'engagement', direct interaction with a child cannot depict emotional intimacy between father and child (a closeness they *feel* together) or the continuous way in which a father teaches a child through example. Further, beliefs and feelings held by the father in terms of them 'being there' (deep sense of commitment and responsibility) are not depicted in Lamb's (1986) model.

In offering a critique of Lamb's (1986) model, this study supports the alternative models of paternal involvement proposed by Palkovitz (1997), Hofferth (2003) and Pleck (2010). Palkovitz (1997) includes emotional support, showing affection and teaching (among others) as dimensions of involved fathering; both Hofferth's (2003) and Pleck's (2010) models include a 'warmth' dimension. However, teaching is not included as a distinct dimension in either of these latter two models. Further, all three

of these models (Palkovitz 1997; Hofferth 2003; Pleck 2010) include 'control' or discipline as a dimension of fathering, while this topic was not once discussed by the participants in this study.

The participants' definition of paternal involvement is most consistent with Morman and Floyd's (2006) definition of 'good fathering' which includes (among others) the categories of love, role model, sacrifice, listener, teacher of moral/religious issues, teacher of non-moral religious issues, protector, support (including emotional), affection and friend. In this definition, Morman and Floyd (2006) regard involvement as just one aspect of good fathering, alongside the others just listed. In doing so, they offer a very finite definition of involvement as simply engagement (direct interaction between father and child).

This then becomes a question of semantics. If 'involved fathering' is simply used as a synonym for 'good fathering' then it may be viewed as incorporating some, or all, of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours outlined in the models above, as well as those suggested by the participants in this study. However, if we can separate the term 'involved' from 'good', viewing involvement as just one component of good fathering, then measuring involvement is much simpler and the MCS variables become a more valid measure of it.

## **Conclusion**

This study tested the validity of Norman and Elliot's (2015, paper in preparation) measure of paternal involvement, created using variables from the Millennium Cohort Study. It validates results from their Factor Analysis that suggest composite measures of paternal involvement can be formed from the MCS variables by grouping them according to age of child (or sweep of data). However, this study suggests other dimensions of paternal involvement may exist within the MCS variables. These include core child-care activities, non-core child-care activities, learning activities, fun activities, cognitive development activities and physical development activities.

The participants' definition of paternal involvement is more consistent with the models proposed by Palkovitz (1997), Hofferth (2003) and Pleck (2010) than with Lamb's (1986). The participants regarded teaching, emotional care and a deep sense of commitment (depicted through the notions of 'being there' and all-encompassing care) as key to involvement, none of which are contained in Lamb's model. As this study supports these multi-dimensional definitions, its findings suggest that the MCS variables cannot offer a valid measure of paternal involvement; the variables fail to measure any

cognitive or emotional aspect of fathering (e.g. emotional care and feelings of commitment to the child) or any measure of teaching.

Norman and Elliot's (2015) conclusion that the MCS variables measuring direct child-care<sup>6</sup> only depict Lamb's (1986) dimension of engagement, rather than his entire model, is supported by these findings. Indeed, based upon Lamb's (1986) and Morman and Floyd's (2006) definitions of engagement - meaning one-on-one interaction with a child - this study suggests that the MCS variables provide a more valid measure of this *one* dimension of involved fathering than involvement as a whole.

At the risk of reducing this study to a question of semantics, if we accept Morman and Floyd's (2006) definition of paternal involvement as simply engagement (distinguishable from other components of *good* fathering such as teaching and giving affection) then the MCS variables become a more valid measure of the term. However, Morman and Floyd's (2006) proposition is unusual, with most scholars and fathers using the term 'involved fathering' to mean a multi-dimensional concept synonymous with 'good fathering'. As such, this paper concludes that the MCS variables do not provide a useful measure of paternal involvement but only engagement, or time spent with a child.

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<sup>6</sup> As explained earlier, Norman and Elliot's (2015) study also included measures of indirect child care from the MCS, which measure how frequently fathers engage in housework (cooking, cleaning, laundry), however only the measures of direct child-care are included in this study.

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