



Research Brief

Low-income fathers are emotionally resilient: A qualitative exploration of paternal emotions across early parenting

Key Findings

1. Racially diverse US fathers with low income reported feeling both positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness) and negative emotions (e.g., sadness, disappointment) across the perinatal and early childhood periods. Furthermore, fathers reported feeling encouraged by their social support networks (e.g., family members, fatherhood program staff, other fathers in the community) that further aid their parenting, but felt marginalized by systematic barriers (e.g., negative stereotypes and biased images, high incarceration rates of Black fathers).
2. Importantly, fathers' negative emotions were associated with positive behavioral intentions, such as resolving to stay involved in their children's lives and changing behaviors to do right by their children. Fathers also used various creative coping strategies for emotion regulation.
3. Infant and early childhood professionals could support the parenting of racially diverse fathers with low income by engaging in education around emotional awareness and regulation, helping fathers identify and leverage their interpersonal and intrapersonal resources, and advocating for anti-racist family policies and employing culturally responsive practices to serve fathers of color raising young children.

Study Overview

Emotions play an important role in fostering positive parenting and healthy child development. This qualitative study explored the affective experiences of racially diverse US fathers with low income across the prenatal, postnatal, and early childhood periods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 fathers. Interview questions asked about fathers' early parenting experiences that elicit parenting emotions of different valence. Results from thematic analysis demonstrated activation of multiple emotions depending on different proximal and distal experiences. Specific to proximal experiences, fathers reported feeling both excited and anxious about pregnancy and joyful and disappointed at childbirth. Related to distal experiences, fathers reported feeling encouraged by their social support

networks that further aid their parenting, but feeling marginalized given systematic barriers (e.g., societal bias, high incarceration rates of Black fathers). Most importantly, fathers' parenting emotions, especially negative ones, led to them resolving to stay involved in their children's lives, gaining a sense of responsibility, and changing behaviors to do right by their children. Fathers resorted to various coping strategies to regulate their negative emotions. Overall, fathers with low income are emotionally resilient. Infant and early childhood health professionals should support fathers' mental health to promote father-child engagement and thus, ultimately, young children's mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Overall, our study results highlight the importance of the emotions—those that are activated, engaged, and regulated—of fathers with low income across the early parenting period. Social workers serving mothers, infants, and young children are likely to come in contact with fathers and thus may be in ideal positions to serve their needs, including their affective needs, by engaging in father-inclusive practices. Plans for future include leveraging father involvement to promote child health equity within major social systems (e.g., child welfare, health).

About the researchers

Dr. Joyce Y. Lee has expertise in child welfare and family strengthening research with a special focusing on promoting child and family wellbeing through leveraging father involvement. Dr. Shawna J. Lee has expertise in fathers' parenting risk behaviors, child maltreatment prevention, and community-based interventions.

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About the research

The larger context of the study entails highlighting the beneficial role of fathers in child wellbeing and development within adverse contexts (e.g., child maltreatment, poverty, systemic racism).



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