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Student Dads Have a Lot on Their Minds: School Stress Squeezes Mental Space for Kids

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Student Dads Have a Lot on Their Minds *School Stress Squeezes Mental Space for Kids*

ORONO, Maine - While workplace hassles often spill over into the home and deter dad's interaction with the children, academic stress on student fathers might be more a matter of having too much on their minds. The stress of exams, grades and term papers doesn't appear to affect fathers' overall participation or responsibility in meeting their children's physical, emotional and social needs, according to a study by a University of Maine graduate student. However, school-related stress can cloud dads' mental focus on their children during the day.

This psychological presence of children - characterized by thinking about the child or talking about the child to others - stood out among the variables measured in his study says Brian P. Masciadrelli. He conducted the research during the spring 2001 semester at UMaine and reported the results in a thesis for his master's degree in human development.

"As academic stress increases, psychological presence decreases," says the former social worker, "Stress puts other things on people's minds and crowds out the psychological presence of child to father."

Masciadrelli also found that fathers who are more involved in daily routines with their children tend to have a higher father-child psychological presence. However, having multiple children in a family lessened a father's potential for keeping a single child present in his thoughts.

The study included 38 fathers, ranging in age from 20 to 49. The majority were undergraduates (66 percent), studying full time (81 percent), married (89 percent) and holding a job (65 percent). In responding to the questionnaire, fathers of multiple children were instructed to limit reference to one child under age 12.

With siblings competing for full potential psychological presence, fathers of multiple children scored lower than fathers of a single child when stress was factored in. Even when fathers tried to limit their responses to one child, their capacity for psychological presence seemed to be distributed across all their children.

The survey looked at three key dimensions of fathering: the frequency of direct interaction (caregiving, playing); accessibility of the father (attending children's events and programs, leading activities such as scouting troops); and responsibility taken for the child (arranging health care appointments, buying food and clothing, seeing that homework is done).

In summing up his review of national research, Masciadrelli points out that existing studies, particularly those looking at emotional spillover, tend to indicate a negative relationship between

stress and fathers' involvement with their children. Fathers - more often than mothers - tend to withdraw from interaction with their children when confronted with overly demanding workloads and pressures.

But Masciadrelli found no significant correlation in gauging the relationship between academic stress and fathers' interaction with their children. Academic pressure had no effect on fathers' involvement in daily caregiving activities. The nature of routine caregiving, such as planning and preparing meals and bathing children, is relatively involuntary, he explains. "These are activities required for daily living regardless of the stress being experienced, and the tasks are almost automatically accomplished."

Student fathers occupy multiple roles much of the time and school-related pressure might only be a minor factor on top of other types of stress, Masciadrelli notes. While the study was small and relied on fathers self reporting their perceived behavior, he believes the findings invite further investigation, particularly in the relationship between stress and fathers' real or potential mental involvement with their children

Stress is a difficult thing to watch for, often building up to a high level before fathers - or anyone - are readily aware of its presence, according to Masciadrelli. "It's important to pay attention to how we are feeling, especially when with our children," he says. "When stress takes over, it's often easy to forget that our kids don't always understand what is distracting dad's attention."

Be aware of stress, Masciadrelli advises, and when it becomes consuming, take a break. For fathers, one of the best respites from stress is a "play break" with his child. "Even a 10-minute play break can give father and child a chance to relax and connect and benefit," he says. "The child gets positive attention, and dad gets to unwind."

A native of Westfield, Mass., Masciadrelli earned his bachelor's degree in psychology from Westfield State College and a master's in social work from Simmons College. This fall, he enters the doctorate program in human development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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