

## Research Brief: Generative Fathering

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Fathering has been frequently overlooked in parenting research in favor of mothering, but father-specific research is growing. Generative fathering is a theory that focuses on fathers' strengths, including their desire to make positive contributions to their children and their unique adaptive role in their children's lives. Everyone must face the challenges of growing and learning, and fathers can be supportive and responsive to benefit their children and themselves.

Fathers and families in the United States represent a variety of races and ethnicities. Families with children under 18 including married couples, unmarried couples, and single parents total about 37 million families (United States Census Bureau, 2022a). These families are 74% White, 15% Black, and 11% mixed or other races, and they are 22% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2022a). 28% of adult men have biological children under 18 years old (United States Census Bureau, 2019), and about 55% of men aged 16 and over have a biological child of any age (United States Census Bureau, 2022b; United States Census Bureau, 2021a), so the role of fathers in the lives of their children and society is relevant to a large number of men and families in the United States. There are 73 million children in the US, and they are 53% White, 13% Black, 5% Asian, 19% Mixed Race, and 26% Hispanic or Latino of any race (United States Census Bureau, 2021b). Since 1965 fathers have been increasing their time performing childcare, and 57% of fathers find their identity as a parent to be extremely important to their identity (Livingston & Parker, 2019).

Erik Erikson first developed the concept of generativity as part of the theory of stages of psychosocial development (McLeod, 2023). This theory is about an individual's psychological development and how they interact with society, and it applies to men and women. The stages span a person's lifetime with specific goals for each of the eight stages, and the level of success at each stage has implications for outcomes. Generativity is part of middle age, an adult stage that develops the virtue of care, and it is characterized by a person making beneficial contributions to society and family. This includes raising children, and it has positive benefits for the child, the parent, and the community. Generativity is a way to have a lasting positive effect in the world, helps develop a sense of connectedness to family and community, and creates feelings of usefulness and accomplishment. Failing to become generative in their family or society leads people to feel stagnant, unproductive, and disconnected.

Generative fathering expands this concept specifically to fathers and the ways they contribute to raising their children. Generative fathering is "fathering that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them" (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998). There are seven challenges of the human condition that generative fathering is called to address. This is done through multiple strategies that all contribute to the outcomes, which include committing to the relationship with the child; choosing to meet the child's needs day to day; creating or procuring needed resources for the child; consecrating significant personal resources to the child's benefit, often requiring sacrifice; caring for the child; changing responses according to the child's changing needs; connecting in healthy ways with the child; and communicating with the child verbally and non-verbally (Dollahite et al., 1997).

Early development of generative fathering relied heavily on personal narratives of fathers, both to understand the ways generative fathering occurs and as examples to teach generative fathering strategies to others (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998; Dollahite et al., 1997). When used in the context of educating fathers and families on beneficial parenting strategies, personal narratives have some specific benefits (Dollahite et al., 1997). The goal of parenting well is relevant in an everyday, family setting where prescriptive instructions and scientific facts are not always easily applied or understood. In this setting, personal narrative examples of generative fathering show how to apply the concept in complex ways. They prompt the listener to interpret the story in a way that is personally relevant, to think about similar experiences, and to reflect on how the lessons of the story can be applied in their own life.

An important aspect of generative fathering is the focus on the strengths of fathers and the practical application of the concept (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998). Dollahite and Hawkins note that a lot of research focuses on the ways fathers are inadequate, assumes that mothering alone is enough to meet the needs of children, ignores the internal motivations of fathers to parent effectively, and reinforces low expectations and gatekeeping of fathers in the work of parenting. In contrast, their concept of generative fathering emphasizes that fathers desire and are able to do the challenging work of meeting the complex needs of their children. Generative fathering is not about the roles that society has defined, but about supportive family relationships that benefit all members of the family.

Recent research on generative fathering is still qualitative, analyzing narrative descriptions of generative fathering (Walker, 2010; Rossetto et al., 2017). Walker's (2010) exploration of fatherhood in men that had been incarcerated gathered stories that support the

principles of generative fathering even in a challenging situation. The men's stories described how much they valued their identity as a father, and acknowledged both how difficult it was to parent while justice-involved as well as how much they wanted to be good fathers. In particular, Walker noted that their identity as fathers prompted significant reflection on how much their crimes cost their families and themselves. In line with the strengths focus of the generative fathering concept, Walker found that participants were committed and able to maintain their relationships with their children while incarcerated. These relationships were resourceful, productive, and generative for both the child and parent.

Rossetto et al. (2017) explored how young adults experienced fathering as they transitioned into college. In this situation, the parent-child relationship changes because of circumstances including the relocation of the child, the child's new academic environment, and the new life challenges the child faces. The researchers found that fathers provided a wide range of support to their children. This included emotional support, maintenance talk, and encouragement, which are usually considered maternal forms of support. In addition, the young adult participants reported that their fathers' interactions had changed from what they were before the transition to college, increasing support, expressiveness, and communication quality. Many of these changes were seen as unprompted by the participants, indicating that the fathers may have recognized the changed circumstances of the relationship and adjusted their fathering accordingly, aligning with the concept of generative fathering.

As father-specific research grows in the social sciences, generative fathering is a valuable study perspective because of its focus on the strengths and contributions of fathers, as well as fathers' personal identity, character development, and exploration of values.

Motherhood may have a more obvious role biologically and culturally in a child's life, but the significance of the unique contributions of fatherhood is becoming more appreciated as fathers and generative fathering are studied specifically and intentionally. Existing research of generative fathering describes benefits for fathers and children, and suggests that further research will show the beneficial effects in families and communities including varied racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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