



The kids are alright

Adolescents and their fathers in the UK

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RESEARCH GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Other reports in this series can be found at:

www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/contemporary-fathers-in-the-uk

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FATHERHOOD INSTITUTE

The Fatherhood Institute is a UK charity working to build a society that values, prepares, and supports men as involved fathers and caregivers. Evidence shows that involved fatherhood has unique and significant impacts on children, mothers, and fathers themselves; improves children's wellbeing and outcomes; and helps progress towards gender equality at home and in the workplace. Our work focuses on research, policy, and practice. We publish research reviews, take part in new studies and test promising family interventions; advocate for policy change; produce practice resources; and train practitioners in perinatal, early years, education, and social care services. Visit www.fatherhoodinstitute.org

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The 'Contemporary Fathers in the UK' series

Between 2014 and the present day, the Nuffield Foundation has funded the Fatherhood Institute to systematically compile and critically review UK research on fathers and fatherhood, identify evidence gaps and share findings and insights which could enhance research, policy and practice. Download all the reports from the series at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/contemporary-fathers-in-the-uk.

Underpinning this work is the Fatherhood Institute's online digital library, also supported by the Nuffield Foundation. Held in Endnote Software and with its contents now available beyond the Institute, this currently contains 4,259 categorised records – mainly academic articles, book chapters and research reports – about fathers, fatherhood and interparental relationships in the UK and related policy and practice issues, together with international research reviews, methodology papers and publications relating to genetics and epigenetics. [Find out how to access the library](#) (see page 6).

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1. Research gaps in quantitative data and analysis about fathers and children's adolescence

1.1. Research gaps identified in *The kids are alright* research review

In the *research review*, we looked at UK quantitative evidence relating to father influences on young people's¹ mental health/wellbeing, risk behaviours and educational outcomes. Although we gathered UK research on other father-adolescent-links, only these three adolescent outcomes had a substantial quantitative evidence base (in terms of father-factors)² that merited synthesis for *The kids are alright research review*. This means that father influences on virtually all other adolescent outcomes are, in effect, evidence gaps for the UK. We note particularly the lack of evidence on co-parenting specifically related to father-factors (within and across households); on the impacts of Own Household Fathers (OHFs)³ and of fathers from different ethnic groups; and on the influences of fathers on young people aged between 18 and 24 years – including no evidence on fathers' influences on occupational/career choices.

Further, some of the evidence we cite is from studies of adolescents decades ago (e.g. National Child Development Study, British Cohort Study, British Household Panel Survey). This is particularly obvious in relation to educational outcomes where the findings are mainly from adolescents growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. This points to a research gap drawing on the more recent Millennium Cohort Study, *Understanding Society* or *Growing up in Scotland* data. Researchers will be able to spot evidence gaps due to published analyses only being based on the older data by referring to the footnotes in the *research review* where, throughout, we identify the dataset on which a specific published analysis has drawn. Any topic explored which does not cite recent data can be considered a research gap.

Quantitative analyses of fathers of adolescent children – and the associations between earlier father-factors and adolescent outcomes – which are specific to OHFs, 'father figures' (sometimes called 'stepfathers') or Global Majority⁴ fathers are rare, even among ethnic groups well established in the UK, such as fathers of Caribbean, African and South Asian heritage. We found no quantitative (and little or no qualitative) analyses specific to adoptive and foster fathers, LGBTQ2+ fathers and trans men fathers, fathers with

¹ Aged 10-24 years inclusive

² Fathers' behaviours, circumstances, characteristics, attitudes, relationships with their child/ren and 'genetic bequests'.

³ Fathers whose main home is a separate household from his child/ren's main home – he lives elsewhere for all or most of the time.

⁴ A term, currently gaining traction, which we use for fathers who are Black, Asian, dual-heritage or from a non-White ethnic minority in the UK, or whose heritage is from 'the Global South'.

disabilities, fathers of adolescents with disabilities, and migrant and refugee fathers. Data and methods should enable multiple markers of difference and marginalisation and the implications of intersectionality to be addressed.

Quantitative analyses on the impact of the parenting roles, behaviours, characteristics, attitudes and circumstances of OHFs on adolescent outcomes was rare. We found only a small number of analyses of the impact of the frequency of time together, father-child closeness and child maintenance, which we have cited in the *research review*. Qualitative research was also scant; and we did not find any parental separation research that included both time since separation and at least one ‘OHF variable’ – let alone many.

We found only two studies that explored associations between early father involvement (including time spent on domestic activities) and adolescent mental health/wellbeing. Associations with other adolescent outcomes, such as gender role attitudes, were also rarely explored.

Few studies explored associations between fathers’ physical health and adolescent mental health/wellbeing. There was a small literature on associations with adolescent physical health, such as BMI – not reported in the research review because adolescents’ physical health was not one of the outcomes within scope of our evidence synthesis. We did not find any studies reporting on associations between young (or old)-father-age and their children’s outcomes in adolescence or young adulthood.

Studies exploring associations between fathers’ substance misuse, or physical or sexual abuse of their children and adolescent/young people outcomes including their mental health/wellbeing or risk behaviours were almost non-existent – as were studies of the roles of non-abusing fathers in families in which children had been abused. None of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) literature that we could find disaggregated findings about the links between parental ACE factors and adolescent (or child) outcomes by sex or gender-of-parent. In future ACE studies, this needs to be rectified.

We found very few studies that explored intergenerational transmission of values (including beliefs and attitudes) from father to adolescent. These are not reported in the *research review* (other than where an association with educational outcomes was found or, in one case, where there was a *null* association with adolescent sexual risk behaviours). That literature, such as it is (and it is not extensive), may be worth exploring in relation to adolescent outcomes other than those studied here (e.g. gender role attitudes and behaviours, voting behaviours).

An important research gap is exploration of epigenetic and genetic factors alongside psychosocial and environmental mechanisms in the links between father-factors and adolescent outcomes.

Analyses which control for the same father-factor at an earlier or later point in time, so that the timing of the father-factor-effect is known, are few and far between. If early father

involvement impacts on an adolescent outcome, is this an effect of early father involvement on later father involvement which then affects the adolescent outcome during adolescence? Or an effect of early father involvement on the same child outcome at an earlier age, with the child outcome (e.g. good educational progress; poor child mental health) remaining through childhood until measured in adolescence?

Finally, we did not find any analyses of data in any of the datasets on the share of childcare and housework undertaken by mothers and fathers in two-parent households when their children are in adolescence.

The kids are alright research review can be found at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/contemporary-fathers-in-the-uk

1.2. Research gaps identified in *The kids are alright review of data in six UK longitudinal studies*

This review of six of the UK's large-scale longitudinal studies is for an audience of researchers and research funders, with the aim of identifying 'fathers-in-adolescence'⁵ gaps in both data collection and data analysis; the implications of study design for data about fathers; and opportunities for future analysis. The six longitudinal datasets reviewed are: the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), the first *Growing Up in Scotland* birth cohort study (GUS), the first and second Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE) studies (*Next Steps* and *Our Future*) and *Understanding Society* (the UK Household Longitudinal Study).

Resources for research studies are tight, and these multi-purpose studies have broader aims than researching fathers. Yet collecting equivalent data about fathers and mothers is central to researching the lives and development of children, including adolescent children.

This review found that some important questions about fathers during their children's adolescence have not been asked ('data collection gaps'⁶ – see **Appendix A, below**); and that some of the data collected has not been used in published analyses ('data analysis gaps'⁷ – see **Appendix B, below**).

⁵ Aged 10-18 years inclusive.

⁶ A review of published survey documentation for the six studies was carried out to identify questions asked of fathers, mothers, children and teachers about fathers, father-adolescent relationships, and co-parenting during the children's adolescence.

⁷ For the same six studies, the content of published analyses in the Fatherhood Institute's extensive and systematically collected Literature Library was compared to the range of questions asked about father involvement, fathering, co-parenting and father-adolescent relationships.

1.3. In summary

1.3.1. Data collection gaps

Despite around 40% of adolescents having a birth father living elsewhere for all or most of the time, and at least half of those seeing him regularly, far less data has been collected about these Own Household Fathers (OHFs), who were rarely included in data collection, than has been collected about co-resident⁸ fathers.

Questions about father *accessibility* (which may be especially relevant during adolescence) and father *responsibility*, as well as fathering-related beliefs, feelings and attitudes, have been less extensively asked than questions about fathers' direct *engagement* with their children (which generally declines during adolescence) and (for co-resident fathers) *father-adolescent relationships*. Co-parenting is also a key data collection gap, both where parents live together and where they live separately.

Given that educational attainment is such a policy focus, less data has been collected about fathers' involvement in their children's education than would be expected, even in studies focusing on educational and vocational outcomes.

1.3.2. Data analysis gaps

Least used in published analysis, in relation to both co-resident fathers and OHFs, are questions about the extent of father and child co-residence, types of father engagement, father involvement in their children's education, father responsibility, and co-parenting.

Several analyses of MCS, ALSPAC and other data in the Fatherhood Institute's Literature Library frame OHFs as 'absent', and parental separation as 'father loss' and do not incorporate the data that have been collected about OHF involvement in their children's lives.

Few published analyses were found of the large-scale longitudinal data most recently collected in the UK about the fathers of contemporary adolescents: in the Millennium Cohort Study, *Growing Up in Scotland*, and *Understanding Society* (including parenting style).

Factors in explaining why researchers have not so far used the collected data in analysis may include sample sizes and data quality, the data only recently becoming available for analysis, and researcher knowledge of the data that have been collected.

The kids are alright review of data in six UK longitudinal studies can be found at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/contemporary-fathers-in-the-uk

⁸ By 'co-resident', we mean that the father and child/ren live together for all or most of the time.

2. Recommendations for future research

2.1. Recommendations for data collection

Equivalent data should be collected about ‘father-factors’ and ‘mother-factors’ in quantitative studies of influences on children during adolescence and young adulthood. The ‘father-data’ should include father characteristics, fathering ‘status’ (birth, ‘step’, adoptive or foster; co-resident for all or most of the time, or Own Household Father), father involvement, fathering style, father-child relationships and co-parenting.

In child cohort studies, father-factor-data should be collected throughout childhood and adolescence, since earlier father characteristics, fathering and father-child relationships influence later child outcomes.

Both co-resident fathers and Own Household Fathers should be included in research studies of adolescents and younger children.

Involved Own Household Fathers should be asked a similar range of questions about father involvement, fathering, father-child relationships and co-parenting as asked of co-resident fathers.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies providing data for research about families and children should incorporate from the outset those resources and fieldwork practices that will be likely to achieve high engagement from fathers as research participants. In longitudinal studies, this includes continued participation from parents (usually fathers) who leave a child’s main household during the study.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) should have a standard set of definitions of fathers and father-figures for statistics about children and families, which could also be used by public services and government departments. In producing official statistics, ONS and government departments should collect and report data both about fathers cohabiting for all or most of the time with their children, and fathers living full-time or part-time in another household, differentiating between these categories of fathers where appropriate, especially in comparisons with mothers.

Qualitative studies should be carried out to investigate the mechanisms and processes in families which underlie the statistical associations found between father-factors and adolescent outcomes. This would inform policy and practice to support fathering and father-child relationships and mitigate risk factors.

2.2. Recommendations for research analysis and reporting

Research publications about children and their families should give evidence specific to fathers and to mothers, rather than for ‘parents’ as a single category in order to explore similarities and differences in relation to situation or gender. Using the term ‘parent’ as a euphemism or synonym for mother excludes consideration of father-factors and may ‘mask’ the absence of fathers from the sample. When children/young people are asked to provide information about, for example, their relationship with their ‘parents’ they may find responding difficult, as they are likely to have different experiences of each parent.

Analyses of the impacts of family structures and parental separation should not explicitly or implicitly conceptualise or label Own Household Fathers as ‘non-resident’ or ‘absent’ or even ‘separated’.⁹ They should incorporate into analysis the data collected about OHFs’ involvement in their children’s lives, including part-time co-residence.

Quantitative researchers and research funders in the fields of fatherhood, families and adolescence should investigate the rich data available in the UK’s large-scale longitudinal studies for developing the evidence base about fathers and adolescents, as documented in *The kids are alright review of longitudinal studies*.

⁹ Some OHFs have never lived with their child and the child’s birth mother together at the same address; and a proportion of these fathers were never in an ongoing romantic relationship with the birth mother.

APPENDIX A

Data collection gaps across the six UK longitudinal studies (where questions have not been asked)	
The topics below are relative or absolute ¹⁰ questionnaire gaps, for Cohabiting Partner Fathers (CPFs) ¹¹ and/or Own Household Fathers (OHFs) ¹² .	
Broad category	Questionnaire gaps
Contextual factors	<p>Father's gender role attitudes</p> <p>For CPFs – Division of household jobs and overall childcare</p> <p>For CPFs – Financial responsibilities (e.g. child maintenance or education-related) for and contact with children living elsewhere</p> <p>For OHFs – Features of employment</p> <p>For OHFs – The quality of the current relationship between birth/adoptive parents living separately (e.g. friendliness, degree of direct contact); why the relationship ended; and any court or mediation involvement (then/ongoing)</p> <p>For OHFs Where a child spends substantial time in two parental households, co-residence of the OHF with a partner and/or children for all or most of the time</p> <p>For involved OHFs with a cohabiting partner where the child spends substantial time in their household– Characteristics of and parenting by the partner; the quality of the partner-child relationship; the quality of the OHF-partner couple relationship (and any partner violence); and the division of household jobs and childcare between the OHF and their cohabiting partner</p> <p>Partner violence/ Violence between parents living apart</p>
Father involvement: accessibility	<p>Questions which incorporate the notion of the father being 'on call' i.e. available to respond to the child's needs and requests for conversation, time together or practical or emotional support</p> <p>How frequently the father is at home with the child when not directly interacting, so that he can be 'on call' – for example the frequency with which he is co-present with the child after school or during the evening, or the amount of time (using time use diaries)</p>

¹⁰ Data on some of these sub-topics have not been collected in any of the set of six studies; whereas others have been collected in a minority of the studies.

¹¹ Cohabiting Partner Fathers (CPFs) are those fathers (birth, adoptive, 'step'/parent's cohabiting partner, or foster) who are co-resident with their child/ren **and with a cohabiting partner** for all or most of the time. The vast majority of co-resident fathers are CPFs, with the remainder being 'single' or 'lone' fathers.

¹² Own Household Fathers (OHFs) are those fathers whose main home is a **separate household from his child/ren's sole or main household** – he lives elsewhere for all or most of the time.

	<p>Whether the father responds to¹³ the child's needs for emotional support and conversation, including 'virtually' (by phone and messaging) – <i>Not relying on 'significant adult' questions which capture only one adult providing support</i></p> <p>Being 'on call' for transport – and (more relevant for CPFs) when the child is unwell</p> <p>For OHFs – Geographic distance or travel time between the two parental households</p> <p>For OHFs – When the father and child were last in contact (if not currently)</p> <p>Children's time use diaries which can record 'in-person accessibility' (e.g. the father and child at home at the same time) as well as direct father-child engagement</p>
Father involvement: <i>direct engagement</i>	<p>Pattern/timing and total time (c.f. frequency) of engagement together, including 'solo parenting' by the father (without the mother also present), for CPFs as well as for OHFs</p> <p>Types of routine and leisure activities and outings together</p> <p>Engagement by phone and through messaging when physically not together, for CPFs as well as OHFs</p> <p>Conversations with the child about specific issues such as schoolwork, friendships and risk behaviours</p> <p>Father's, child's or mother's perception of amount of time that father spends with child, for OHFs as well as CPFs</p>
Father involvement: <i>responsibility</i> ¹⁴	<p>Whether one parent takes a dominant 'responsibility' role; or instead this role is shared between the parents – Questions which do not assume that one of the two parents is a 'primary caregiver' or has 'main responsibility'</p> <p>Organising what the child needs (not with the child) which may include supporting and advising the child to get what they need</p> <p>Father monitoring of the child's whereabouts and activities</p> <p>Cognitive and emotional labour and the 'mental load' including for less involved OHFs</p>
The father-child relationship and co-parenting	<p>Questions about the father-child relationship and emotional support/conversation which are asked symmetrically of fathers (including OHFs) and children</p> <p>Equivalent and relevant questions for OHFs who are research participants, potentially with different questions for involved OHFs and for less involved OHFs</p> <p>Whether one parent takes a dominant 'supervision' or 'disciplinary' role; or instead this role is shared between the parents</p> <p>Co-parenting between parents living together and/or apart</p>

¹³ Questions about the child seeking out the father for emotional support feature across the studies, but less so whether the father meets this need.

¹⁴ Data collected on 'breadwinning', economic activity and income were not included in the 'responsibility' broad category in *The kids are alright* framework, unless they were specifically in relation to the adolescent child.

	<p>Parenting style questions for involved OHFs as well as for CPFs, and which go beyond parental monitoring and knowledge of the child's activities (<i>including giving praise and physical affection; and shouting and negative or harsh parenting behaviours</i>)</p> <p>Physical punishment and abuse by the father</p>
<p>Fathers' beliefs, feelings and attitudes in relation to the parental role or child</p>	<p>Feelings of competence and confidence as a father including for less involved OHFs</p> <p>Fathers' beliefs about adolescent development and behaviours; and the parental role during this life stage of their child/ren; (including their values and aspirations in parenting an adolescent child)</p> <p>Children's perceptions of their father's feelings and attitudes in relation to them</p>
<p>Fathers' reports of their child's personality and behaviours</p>	<p>Fathers' perceptions and ratings of their child's personality and behaviours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The child may behave differently with each parent (including with the OHF in a different household), and each parent may have a different perception of or response to the same child behaviour · Collecting at least some 'child – outcome' data from fathers/'partners' as well as from mothers/'main respondents' would reduce shared methods variance in analyses
<p>Fathers' involvement in their child's education, school and schoolwork</p>	<p>Day to day (or week to week) conversations between the father and child about schoolwork and 'school life'; as well as more infrequent discussions, for example about post-16 educational and vocational options.</p> <p>Help with homework</p> <p>Involvement/contact with the child's school</p> <p>Aspirations and expectations for child's educational and vocational progress and outcomes</p> <p>All of above for OHFs as well as for CPFs</p> <p>For OHFs – Payments/purchases (e.g. education-related) for child outside of regular child maintenance</p>

APPENDIX B

Data analysis gaps ('under-studied data') across the six UK longitudinal studies	
Cohabiting Partner Father (CPF) variables collected but little (or not at all) used in the published analyses in the Fatherhood Institute's Literature Library	
Variable	Comments
Extent of co-residence of CPF and child in household	The most extensive set of variables has been collected in the MCS, including part-time co-residence/second addresses of CPFs
Father involvement – <i>direct engagement</i>	No analyses found of GUS variables on types of father-child leisure and routine activities No analyses found of fathers' perception of the amount of time together (collected in ALSPAC, MCS and GUS) The MCS time use diaries may offer analytic potential for children with no OHF who have coded time spent with their 'father' (assumed to be their CPF) in their diary for specific activities.
Father involvement – <i>responsibility</i>	No analyses found of:- MCS and GUS questions about parental monitoring by fathers GUS and <i>Understanding Society</i> items relating to father cognitive or emotional load
Parenting style	No analyses found of GUS data on father autonomy/control ¹⁵ Only one analysis found of the rich <i>Understanding Society</i> 'parenting style' module data for fathers of 10-year-olds
Beliefs, feelings and attitudes about the parental role or the adolescent child	No analyses found of GUS variables collected about fathers' confidence about their parenting ¹⁶ ; nor of GUS variables (age 10) about children's perceptions of their father's feelings towards them No analyses found of MCS questions on fathers beliefs about adolescent anti-social behaviour
Involvement in the child's education or schoolwork	No analyses found of MCS variable on advice from fathers to their child about educational options No analysis found of GUS variable on fathers' help with homework; and only one descriptive analysis of a similar <i>Understanding Society</i> variable

¹⁵ This has been recently analysed for mothers ('main carers') but not for fathers ('partners') (Scottish Government, 2022).

¹⁶ This has been recently analysed for mothers ('main carers') but not for fathers ('partners') (Scottish Government, 2022).

	<p>No analysis found of fathers' attendance at parents evenings (collected in several studies)</p> <p>No analysis found of MCS and GUS variables about fathers' involvement in school or the child's 'school/college life'</p> <p>Only one analysis found of fathers' aspirations or expectations for their child's educational or vocational outcomes (collected in MCS, GUS and <i>Understanding Society</i>)</p>
Co-parenting in relation to CPFs/co-resident mothers	No analyses found of GUS data on co-parenting between parents living together with the child (using the Feinberg scale)
<p>Own Household Fathers (OHF) variables collected but little (or not at all) used in the published analyses in the Fatherhood Institute's Literature Library – <i>N.B. there are particularly substantial gaps in published analyses of variables collected about OHFs</i></p>	
Variable	Comments
Father involvement – accessibility (including the extent of co-residence)	<p>Analyses found of MCS variables on overnight stays with OHFs – but no analyses found of more recent GUS and LSYPE2 data about overnight stays, or <i>Understanding Society</i> data on whether the child considers that they live in two homes</p> <p>Only one descriptive analysis found of the GUS '<i>People in My Life</i>'¹⁷ (PIML) variable on OHF emotional accessibility (child-reported)</p>
Father involvement – engagement (quantity and types)	<p>No analyses found of questions about OHFs looking after young adolescents when their birth mother was working, or as a form of 'childcare' (collected in MCS, GUS and <i>Understanding Society</i>)</p> <p>Little analysis found of GUS and MCS variables about 'virtual' forms of OHF-child contact</p> <p>Only one descriptive analysis of the GUS variable about whether the child would like more or less time with their OHF</p> <p>The MCS time use diaries may offer analytic potential for children with no CPF who have coded time spent with their 'father' (assumed to be their OHF) in their diary for specific activities</p>
Father involvement – responsibility	Only a couple of analyses of MCS data on purchases and payments (including child maintenance) by OHFs for their child; similar data were collected in other studies
The quality of the father-adolescent relationship	<p>No published analyses of:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the set¹⁸ of '<i>People in My Life</i>' questions (child-reported) about OHF-child relationships that has uniquely been collected in GUS

¹⁷ Ridenour et al., 2006.

¹⁸ Only one descriptive analysis was found – this included only one question in the *People in My Life* set of six items.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · MCS and <i>Understanding Society</i> questions¹⁹ relating to father-child relationships
Involvement in the child's education or schoolwork	<p>No published analyses found of:-</p> <p>MCS questions about fathers' interest in their child's education (teacher-reported²⁰);</p> <p>MCS data on fathers' conversations with their child about educational options²¹</p> <p><i>Understanding Society</i> question on 'father' and 'stepfather' help with homework (both mother- and child-reported)</p> <p>OHF's attendance at parents evenings (collected in several studies)</p>
Co-parenting in relation to OHFs/co-resident birth mothers	No analyses found of MCS and <i>Understanding Society</i> data on co-parenting between birth parents living apart

¹⁹ Asked in relation to 'father' but could be analysed for children with an OHF who do not have a CPF.

²⁰ Asked in relation to 'father' but could be analysed for children with an OHF who do not have a CPF.

²¹ Asked in relation to 'father' but could be analysed for children with an OHF who do not have a CPF.