

EARLY BRAIN &
BIOLOGICAL
DEVELOPMENT:
A SCIENCE IN
SOCIETY SYMPOSIUM

Supporting Father Involvement: Co-parenting as Resilient Context

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Evidence Base for Paternal Engagement as a Protective Factor in Families of Young Children

- Changing family roles in Canada highlight significance of positive fathering
- Co-parenting enhances positive impact of sensitive mothering and fathering
- SFI; 800+ RCT in California shown improved mental health outcomes in parents, couple relationships, parenting stress, harsh discipline, violent problem-solving and child behavioral outcomes
- Salient clinical implications for building more resilient familial context in face of ACEs (conflict, isolation, poverty, toxic stress, etc.)
- Canadian replication (Alberta) already reaching depressed families feeling high levels of stress /negativity



Protective Factors

Child factors

- Age older than 5 years, high self-esteem

Parent factors

- Parental competence, mother's and father's mental health (e.g., low depression scores)

Environmental factors

- Availability and strength of social support
- Less negative emotional climate in the family



Canadian 'New Dad' Stats: More Involved

- Men's housework increased 51% to 69% between '86 and '05; women's remained steady at 90%
- Time husbands spend doing housework rises along with wives' income
- Over 90% of women with preschool-aged children involved in primary child care in both '86 and '05
- Men's primary child care up 57% to 73%. '05 fathers with children under 19 at home spent 1.0 hour per day in primary child care; increase from 0.6 in '86



Do 'involved' fathers interact differently with children?

- Dads **rough-house** with/activate kids more than moms; even among stay-at-home dads
- Dads emphasize hazards of misbehavior; relational consequences more emphasized by moms while **'real world'** implications /troubles emphasized by dads when disciplining
- Dads tend to permit higher levels of frustration as child works at task for 'problem-solving' value; use more play tactics than moms
- Dads less upset by temper tantrums, hitting, biting; more by sleeping, eating problems



Children of involved fathers tend to:

- be more sociable as infants
- be more positive and accepting toward a second-born sibling
- have a greater capacity for empathy, better peer relationships
- have fewer behavioral problems

As they age they tend to:

- solve problems better, higher educational achievement
- delayed onset of sexual behavior
- have more satisfying adult relationships, adapt better to stress



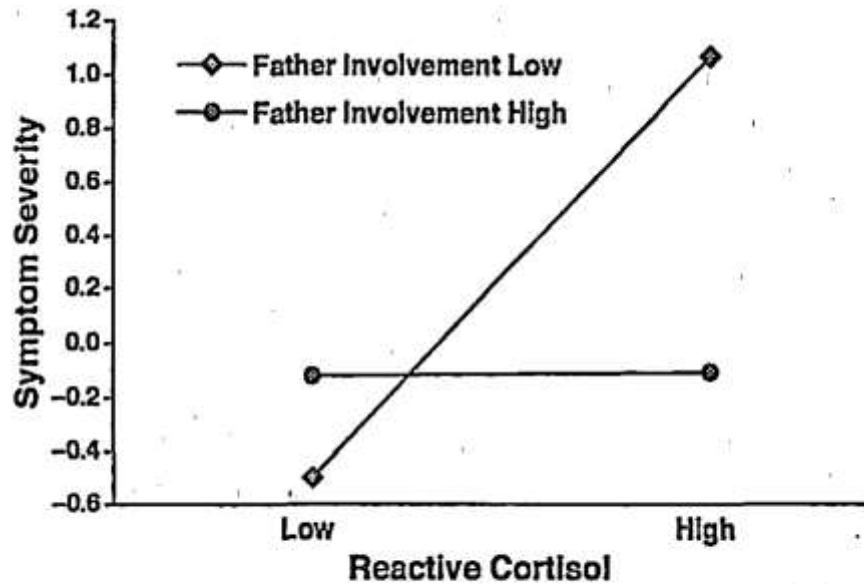


Fig. 2 Interaction of reactive cortisol and father involvement. Slope tests: father involvement low: $\beta = .951$, $t_{108} = 2.171$, $p = .03$; father involvement high: $\beta = .004$, $t_{108} = 0.045$, $p =$ not significant.

Boyce (2006); early father involvement (at age 1) may later help children (at age 9) cope and adapt to difficult life situations. When father involvement is high, higher stress reactivity no longer constitutes a vulnerability factor for later mental health symptoms.



Men who are involved fathers tend to:

- be healthier and live longer
- have a more positive self image
- be happier with their work, reach career success by midlife
- have more satisfying adult romantic relationships

Women married to involved fathers tend to:

- experience lower parenting stress and depression (postnatally)
- be more sensitive and responsive to their children
- return to work following birth of baby; less likely to leave workforce



**ALL lower children's risk of being abused
and/or neglected!**



Supporting Father Involvement

Development and Evaluation Team

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Random Assignment to:

**Information
Session**

**16 week
Fathers
groups**

**16 week
Couples
groups**

Case management for all families

Bi-monthly consultation for site staff

- Pre-intervention assessment for each parent
- Post-intervention assessment 9 months after baseline
- Follow-up assessment 18 months after baseline



Phase I (Bio Dads); First 289 Families

Results compared groups for fathers, couples, and a one-time meeting (control):

- Control parents didn't change/got worse; their children's behavior problems increased
- Fathers groups helped men get more involved in children's care; children's problem behaviors remained stable
- Couples groups helped fathers get more involved, reduced parenting stress, depression and anxiety, kept couples' satisfaction and children's behaviors stable



Phase II (Father figures incl): Fathers and couples groups as -or more -successful

- Parents' adaptation as individuals
- Fathers' involvement in caring for children
- Couple relationship quality
- Parenting stress
- Children's behavior problems



SFI replicated in all five California countines with positive effects in nearly 600 low-income families – Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American families.



Impact on relationship status: Phase I/II combined

Married vs. living together vs. living apart

- Married couples stay that way – 92%
- Cohabiting couples: 18% marry; 10% split up
- Not living together: depends on condition to which they were assigned. Couples group participants more likely to begin living together.

All significantly different from control group.



Couples not living together at start

Changes in status over time			
	Remain not living together	Living together	Married
Controls (n=4)	100%		
Fathers groups (n=14)	64%	21%	14%
Couples groups (n=23)	43%	22%	28%



Phase II: Who benefits from the intervention?

In terms of couple relationship satisfaction, group interventions equally effective for:

Parents with low/high levels of

- Education
- Income
- Attachment security
- Depressive symptoms
- Age
- Work hours



Re: Father Involvement

Greater increase in father involvement when:

- Mothers don't work, are insecurely attached, or high in depressive symptoms
- Fathers have less than high school education
- Partners not living together at start



**SFI INTERVENTION HELPS BREAK THE CASCADE OF
REPETITIVE NEGATIVE SPILLOVER OF FAMILY
RELATIONSHIPS:**

COUPLE → PARENTING → CHILD OUTCOME



Worth the trouble ...

*** Findings in children:**

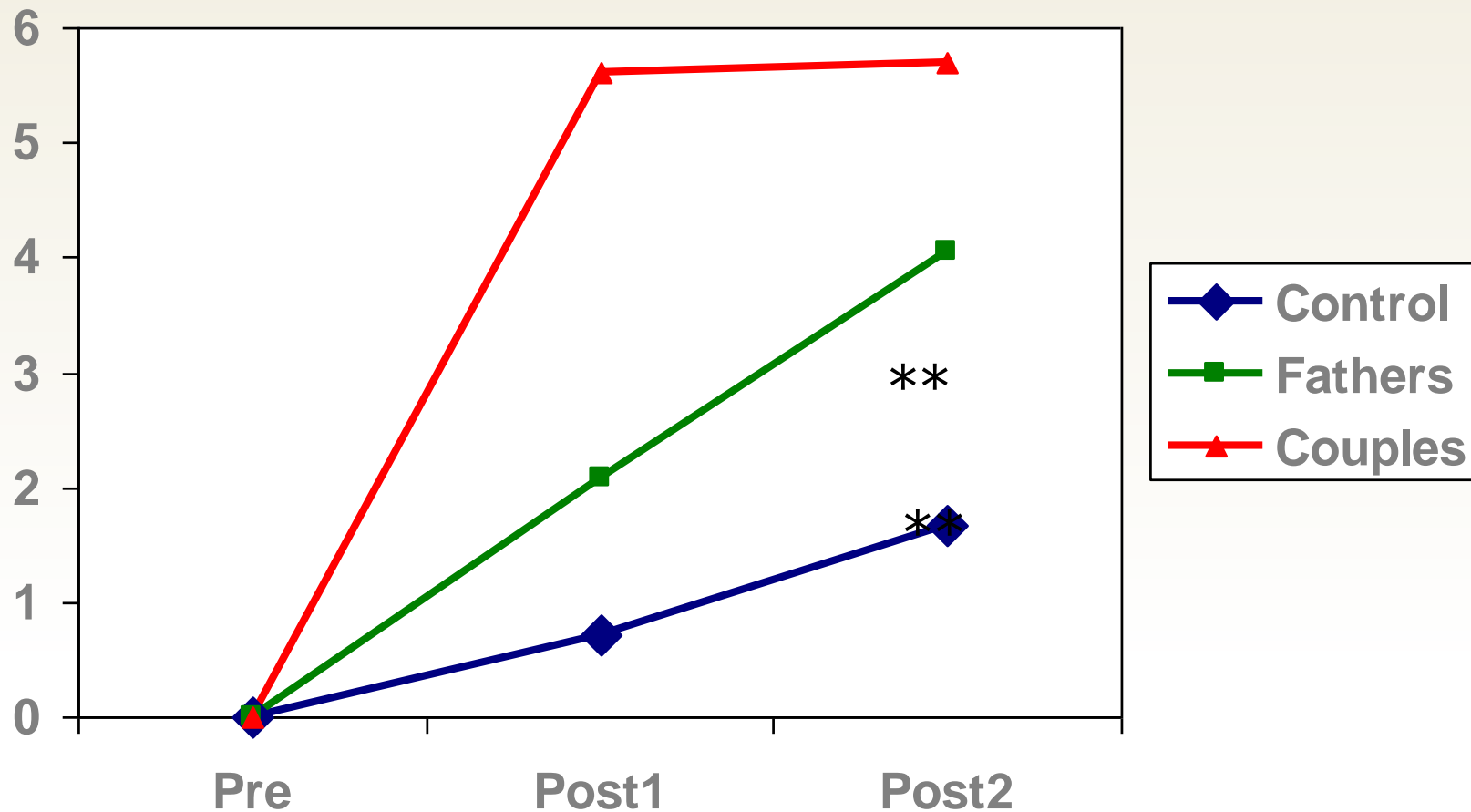
- Reduced hyperactivity
- Reduced aggression

*** Findings in institutions:**

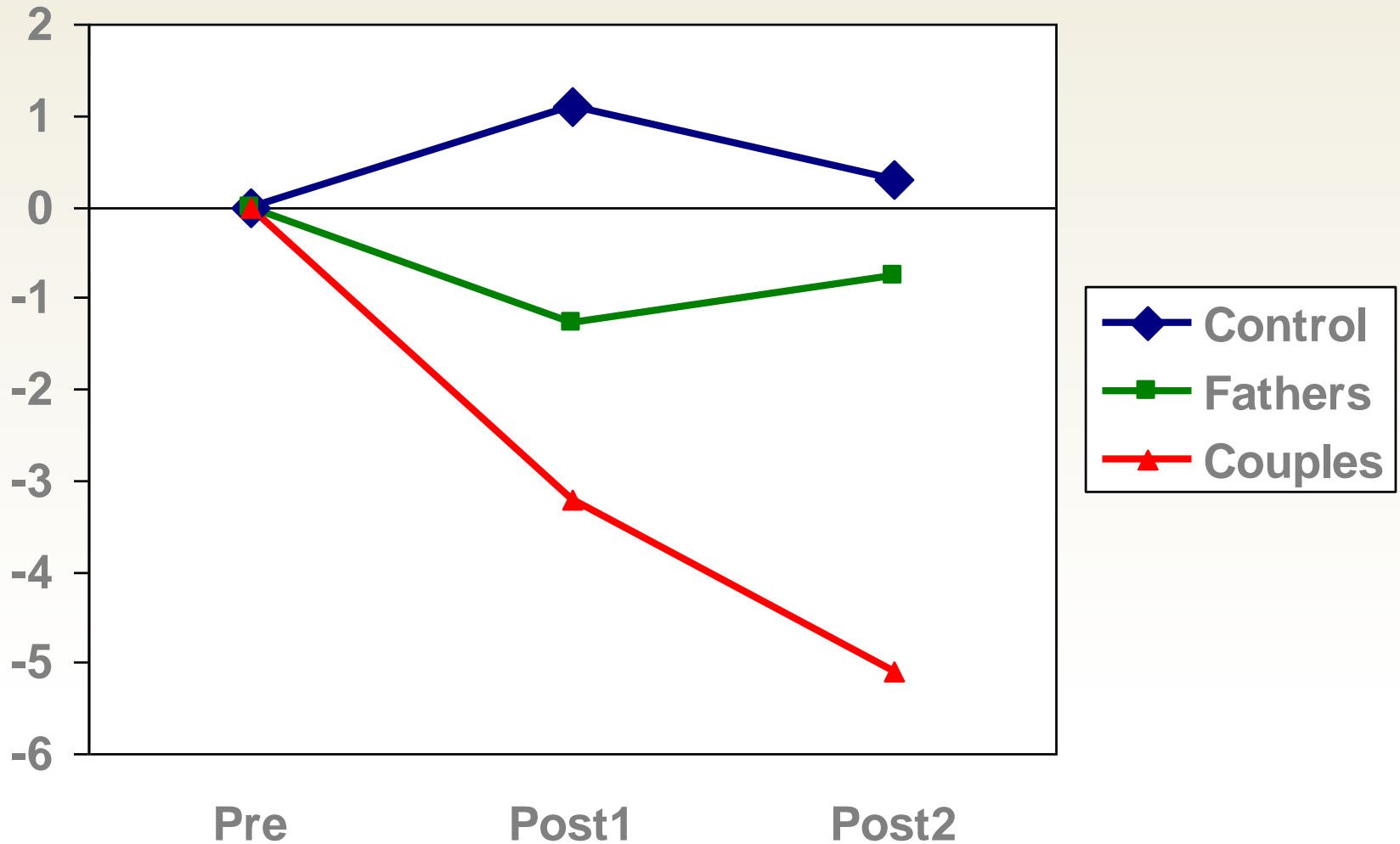
- Improved overall 'Father Friendliness' for the life of grant (5 years out)



Increase in father involvement with child

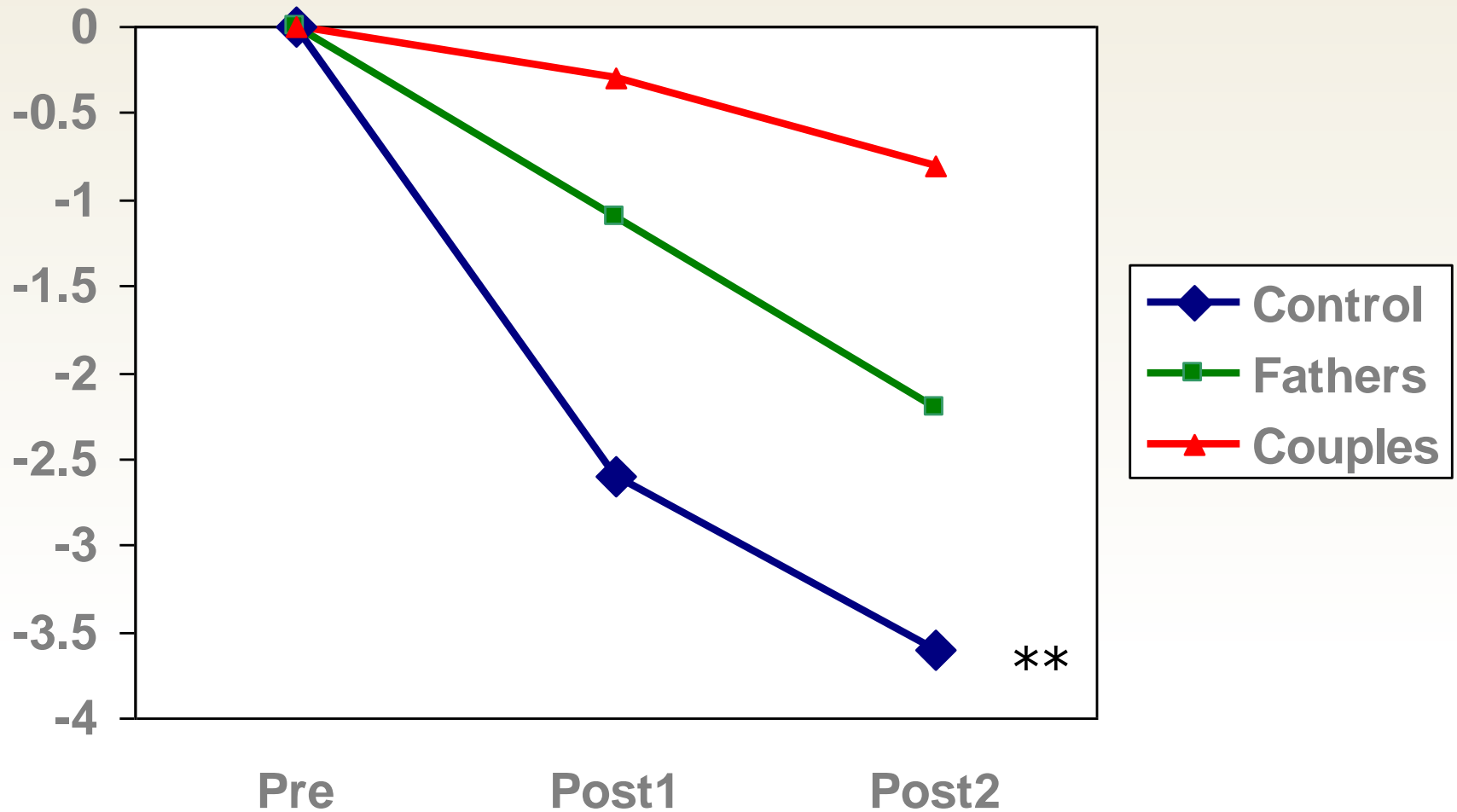


Change in parenting stress



**

Decline in couple relationship satisfaction



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Final Phase

50% CWS FAMILIES

- referred by Child Welfare staff
- couples assessed as safe to work with together; child not being abused now

50% NON-CWS FAMILIES

- recruited as in previous phases



Data from:

181 families (last time - 100)

- **75% couples groups**
- **66% immediate groups**

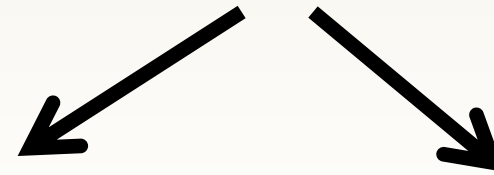
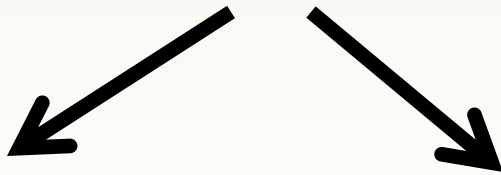
[50% CWS]



Random Assignment to:

**COUPLES
GROUP**

**FATHERS
GROUP**



NOW DELAY

NOW DELAY



Intervention effect?

Intervention effect?



Significant Treatment Effects (Now vs. Delay):

MOTHERS' SCORES



FATHERS' SCORES



Non CWS

CWS (abuse)

INDIVIDUAL

Anxiety

✓

✓

Depression

✓

Alcohol use

✓



Non CWS

CWS (abuse)

COUPLE

Conflict

✓ ✓

Conflict re: children

✓

Violent Prob. Solving

✓ ✓

Avoidant Prob. Solving

✓

✓ ✓

Collab. Prob. Solving

✓



Non CWS

CWS (abuse)

PARENTING

Father Involvement

✓ ✓

✓ ✓

Harsh Parenting

✓

✓ ✓



Non CWS

CWS (abuse)

CHILD

Anxiety/Depression

✓ ✓



Non-abusing and Abusing Families

- Show almost no differences on Pre- or Post- intervention measures
- ...except child abuse potential /domestic violence assessment
- i.e.; not simply a “faking good” on the part of families referred for child abuse



Canadian (Albertan) Replication

Baseline assessment data emerging from Norwood, Red Deer, Cochrane, Lethbridge sites in Round 1

- both parents wish for more equal division of family labor (WDW)
- relatively high incidence of couple conflict/disagreement (CCOM)
- moms/especially dads feel 'borderline distressed' as couple (QMI)
- CES-D depression scale for parents yields 'borderline clinically depressed' average score
- Albertan parents likely to describe their children as 'difficult' (PSI)

