
Article:
Early, E., Fairbrother, H. orcid.org/0000-0001-9347-8625 and Curtis, P. (2019) Displaying good fathering through the construction of physical activity as intimate practice. Families, Relationships and Societies, 8 (2). pp. 213-229. ISSN 2046-7435

https://doi.org/10.1332/204674318X15213675247903

Families, Relationships and Societies

Displaying good fathering through the construction of physical activity as intimate practice.

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	FRS-D-16-00088R3
Full Title:	Displaying good fathering through the construction of physical activity as intimate practice.
Article Type:	Academic Article
Keywords:	children; fathers; Physical Activity; relationships; intimacy; qualitative; UK
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Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Funding Information:	University of Sheffield — Miss Dr. Victoria Earley

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Abstract

A close father child relationship is a potent cultural ideal in western, post-industrial societies. This paper poses physical activity as a practice through which fathers display intimacy in their relationships with their children. Utilising the premise of family display, this paper reveals the conduct of contemporary fathers to be suffused with meaning from the social convention that intimate fathers are 'good fathers'. It argues that intimate fatherhood represents a discourse, serving to shape what fathers do and how they and their children display and give meaning to fathering practices.

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Background

Fathers and Physical Activity

Fathers simultaneously display their doing of 'fatherly duty' and their masculinity through participation with their children in physical activity (Kay, 2007; Gottzén and Kremer-sadlik, 2012). Outdoor play in particular has been argued to have significance for men's sense of doing masculinity (Creighton *et al.*, 2015). Through outdoor play, gender conventions are reproduced and particular values and practices embedded within family life (Coakley, 2006; Willms, 2009; Starcher, 2015). Physical activity has therefore been argued to be integral to fathers' participation in family life as gendered parents (Coakley, 2006; Such, 2006) and to their parenting competence (Sallis, Prochaska and Taylor, 2000; Gustafson and Rhodes, 2006; VanDerworp and Ryan, 2016). Men's engagement with their children in physical activity has consequently become an important signifier of their status as 'good' fathers and emblematic of their involvement in, and influence over, children's everyday lives (Finn, Johannsen and Specker, 2002; Such, 2006; Kay, 2007; Trussell and Shaw, 2012).

Theorising Fatherhood

Fatherhood is, however, neither fixed nor static and theoretical approaches to understanding changing manifestations of fatherhood over time have emphasised two key processes. Firstly, a weakening of the structuring power of gender (Miller and Dermott, 2015), fostering new possibilities for individuals to self-determine their everyday lives. Secondly, an 'emotional turn' within notions of what fatherhood should 'look' like. Contemporary understandings of 'involved fatherhood' are now inextricably linked to emotional connectedness between father and child and, similarly, with constructions of 'good fatherhood' (Dermott, 2008), such that while the 'traditional father', is understood to be economically engaged, the contemporary 'involved father' is both economically *and* emotionally engaged (Miller and Dermott, 2015). Fathers also variably prioritise these forms of engagement, both in their understandings of 'good fatherhood' and in their fathering practices over time (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2015).

However, the extent to which such a conceptual shift and the competing obligations incumbent upon contemporary fathers are reflected in the everyday practices and perspectives of individual

fathers is less clear (Gregory and Milner, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2014, 2015; Humberd, Ladge and Harrington, 2015). Dermott (2008) has contended that, as an analytical lens, 'involved fatherhood' has perhaps over-emphasised what fathers 'do'. This critique has particular and continuing resonance, highlighting the limited focus, to date, on relationality and the meanings associated with fathering practices by family members. Notably, Dermott (2008) argues that, by theorising contemporary notions of 'involved fatherhood' as 'intimate fatherhood', greater potential to concurrently explore both the meanings *and* the 'doings' of fathering is opened up. Moreover, intimate fatherhood compels a focus on the ways in which intimacy is created and sustained between fathers and their children. It is, therefore, timely to consider what insights might be revealed in utilising this approach and applying it to the context of fathering through physical activity.

Intimacy, 'The Family', and Family Relationships

The negotiation of father-child intimacy takes place within the context of broader family relationships (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). Intimate and family practices are simultaneously connected to and distinct from each other. Jamieson (2011:1) has argued that "practices of intimacy refer to practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other." However, the theoretical premise of 'family practices' contends that family is 'made' through the doing of everyday family life (Morgan, 1996, 2011). As such, all family members participate in the construction of family and the negotiation of how family life is lived out over time. Drawing upon notions of family practices focuses attention upon how individual subjects interact and how they perceive and make sense of family life. However, as Morgan (1996) also points out, attending to family practices exposes the diversity of family experiences, which simultaneously are informed by and inform cultural understandings and expectations of family and family life. Family practices are therefore interwoven with particular notions of normativity and, significantly, "practices of intimacy and family practices overlap in cultures which valorise families and intimacy and take it for granted that intimacy is an aspect of family life" (Jamieson 2011:1).

Morgan (2011) further argues that the 'good family', and consequently the 'good father' (as normative ideals), have cultural status and constitute the basis against which families, and fathers, are evaluated, even when everyday practices diverge from such idealisations (Humberd, Ladge and Harrington, 2015).The 'good family' in developed western cultural contexts, has been typified as the 'Cornflakes packet' family (Morgan 2011:3). For Morgan (2011:3), this standard model of family life is portrayed as "a mother, a father and two children, one boy and one girl." It is, what is conventionally nominalised as, a nuclear family. This model constitutes a powerful cultural image of what family *should* look like and against which we reference how we live our lives (Gillis, 1996; Morgan, 2011). Furthermore, such 'truths' about family and fatherhood serve to govern how fathering, as part of family life, is 'done' and evaluated on an everyday basis (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011). Whilst the culturally normative representation of 'good fatherhood' emphasises the importance father-child intimacy (Dermott, 2008), such notions of intimately-involved fatherhood have, however, come to be strongly associated – largely implicitly – with particular family contexts. That is, 'good fathers' are part of 'good families'. This association is implied through the focus, in much of the work of fatherhood scholars, on problematic or problematised family contexts: contexts that include non-resident fatherhood, post-separation fatherhood and young fatherhood (Smart, 2006; Philip, 2013, 2014; Osborn, 2015; Shirani, 2015; Lau Clayton, 2016; Poole *et al.*, 2016), which constitute challenging environments for the development of idealised notions of intimately-involved fatherhood. Furthermore, 'intimately-involved fatherhood' has been argued to have a classed dimension, with middle class fathers reportedly aspiring to the 'involved father' ideal

more than their working class counterparts (Gillies, 2009). Consequently, middle class fathers have, conceptually, become 'intimately-involved fathers' despite limited consensus that the practices of fathering are starkly different between classed contexts (Dermott and Pomati, 2016). Intimately-involved fatherhood is therefore closely aligned with, and constitutes the aspirational focus of, what we have termed 'the normative family': the implicit reference against which fatherhood in problematised family contexts is considered. This 'normative family' can be characterized as a middle class family in which both mother and father co-reside with their children. In undertaking the study, we recognised that 'the normative family' exists as a cultural ideal and we recruited families whose structures reflected this ideal. Nevertheless, we also understood that participant families were diverse and the theoretical use of 'family practices' brought to light both the divergences and commonalities between these individual families. Notably, this construction of 'the normative family' closely aligns with Parsons' (1956) seminal work on family, demonstrating its ongoing resonance in contemporary western idealisations of 'proper' fathers and family life. It is, perhaps, this very resonance with the much critiqued Parsonian family that has rendered largely invisible what Smart (2007) terms the new 'traditional' family. Indeed, the dominant focus on problematised families in contemporary fatherhood scholarship has drawn attention away from fatherhood in normative families and assumed, yet simultaneously obscured, how 'relationism' (Smart, 2007) plays out within normative contexts.

Not surprisingly, therefore, there have been limited insights to date into children's perspectives on fathers and fathering in non-problematised family contexts, despite the centrality of the father-child relationship to the notion of intimate fatherhood. This is striking given that childhood scholars have, for some decades, asserted the need to recognise children as independent actors in their respective social worlds and to enable their effective participation in research (Punch, 2002; Christensen and James, 2008).Where children's views on family life have been sought, this has largely been with reference to 'parents', rather than delineating their views on mothers and fathers (Seymour and McNamee, 2012), reflecting the matrifocal leanings of large proportions of research on fathers (Gregory and Milner, 2011).

This paper therefore reports the perspectives of fathers and children living within normative family contexts. It details how fathers *and* children talk about physical activity and examines the understandings of fathering and fatherhood that are revealed. We begin by describing the study from which data for our analysis are drawn. The findings reported thereafter derive from our analysis of data generated only from fathers and children. We consider, firstly, how physical activity was invoked as an intimate practice. Second, we reflect on how this intimate foundation was seen to potentiate benefits for children. Lastly, we consider generational diversity in the construction and experience of intimate fathering practices between fathers and children.

The Study

The study from which data are drawn comprised a series of 10 in-depth family case studies conducted in the North of England. These explored family members' understandings and experiences of fathers and fathering. Families were recruited to reflect the characteristics that we have argued to be associated with 'normative families', in which 'intimately-involved fathers' are perceived to reside. For this purpose, the normative family was defined as comprising married, heterosexual, middle class parents living in co-residence with their own biological children. Participants self-determined their eligibility to participate against these criteria. Similarly, classed identity was self-determined by parents in terms of their employment in a 'professional' occupation, but income details were not collected. One unmarried, co-resident couple were also recruited, highlighting the subjective and diverse ways in which familial normativity may be constructed.

Fathers were all aged between 35 and 50 years old and all but one father, who was North African, were of Caucasian background. The children were aged between 4 and 17 years; 10 were boys and 6 were girls. A multi-perspective approach was intended to allow all participants, including children, to actively contribute to data generation and to fruitfully explore fathering as a relational phenomenon (O'Kane, 2008). Recruiting sufficient families required a variety of approaches. Families were initially contacted via a single family member, either through their response to recruitment posters placed in a variety of public and institutional locations or emails circulated around a Higher Education Institution, or via snowball sampling. Separate adult and child information sheets were then distributed within the family via the parent who made initial contact (Wigfall *et al.*, 2012) and the study was later explained verbally, by the researcher, to each family member who expressed an interest in participating. Written consent was obtained from each participating family member, though consent was seen as an ongoing process (Kirk, 2007; Lewis, 2009).

Methods

Data were generated using semi structured interviews with individual family members during 2014. 29 interviews were conducted with a total of 36 participants; 20 adults and 16 children. Interviews took place either in participants' homes or at the adult's place of work, as chosen by participants (Harden *et al.*, 2010; MacLean, 2011). Topic guides were produced for children's and adults' interviews respectively and provided a loose frame within which participants could narrate their perspectives (Mason, 2002). Adult participants were asked to reflect on their family lives now and on their experiences of being fathered during their own childhoods. Children were asked to reflect upon their contemporary family lives. Children also chose whether or not to take part in integrated tasks, a methodological choice designed to better facilitate their participation (Christensen and Prout, 2002). Tasks included drawing 'my dad' and responding to discussion prompts containing images and statements about fathers and their roles in everyday life. Participants chose whether they were interviewed separately or in pairs (Kirk, 2007; Maclean and Harden, 2014). 16 interviews with adults were undertaken, 12 with individuals and 4 with both parents together. 13 interviews with children were undertaken, 10 with individuals and 3 with sibling pairs. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the exception of any information which might identify participants. Children were invited to create their own pseudonyms.

Analysis

Initial data analysis took place concurrently with data generation. Analysis was, therefore, ongoing and iterative. Initial analysis involved familiarisation with the available dataset, following which descriptive codes were applied to the text and the data were grouped accordingly, using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo11 to promote a systematic and auditable approach (Mason, 2002; Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). As the analysis progressed, codes were iteratively developed, either confirming their singularity, or being redefined as concomitant to another code (Richards, 2009). Codes were then reduced into categories and, subsequently, themes (Fielding and Warnes, 2009). These early themes provided the basis for further interrogation and the exploration of relationships between and within cases (Stake, 1995). This inductive approach to analysis aimed to capture the conceptual and relational complexity of fatherhood in normative contexts.

Findings

Constructing physical activity as an intimate practice

Fathers referenced their own childhoods to construct direct contrasts between their own fathering practices and those of the grandfather generation. Fathers asserted that, as children, they generally had not had a close relationship with their own fathers. As Imran illustrated, while his own father had not left any fatherly duty unfulfilled, and had not been disinterested in Imran's life, neither had he made any specific effort to nurture an emotionally close relationship:

> *Obviously he was still my dad and he cares for things and he asks about but it's mainly, "How did you do at school or have you got good marks?" That kind of thing. There is no really let's just go and spend some time together and do a game or go fishing or whatever.*
>
> (Imran, Father).

An intimate connection between fathers and children was, therefore, seen by fathers to develop through specific practices characterised by physicality. This association between physical activity and fathering was also affirmed by children who described participating in such activities with their fathers rather than their mothers. Thus, children constructed physical activity as a special feature of, and generative of closeness through mutual enjoyment within, the father-child relationship and, therefore, as a form of intimate practice:

> *VE:* *So what makes your Daddy special then and different from all other daddies?*
>
> *Isla:* *Well he helps me with my bike when I'm afraid of going on them he is generous and kind.*
>
> *VE:* *That's lovely and what about you Rory?*
>
> *Rory:* *Tickles!*
>
> (Isla and Rory, Daughter and Son, 6 and 8 years old)

Intimate fathering practices, experienced through physical activity, were variably enacted, however.

Intimacy through shared activities

As children aged beyond infancy, fathers increasingly sought, and felt able, to engage with children in shared physical activities. This 'engagement' began as physical play when children were very young and, as children aged, developed into specific physical activities which were located beyond the family home and often in the outdoors. Activities included orienteering, camping, hiking, football, cycling, fishing and tennis. Many physical activities with children were, as one father explained, "led by what I'm interested in" (Bruce).

The potential for fathers to participate in children's lives through physical activity increased as children accrued physical skills and experiences as they aged. Fathers' participation was, therefore, mediated by children as they became more mobile, gained physical abilities, and began, for example, to understand the rules of games:

> *I've always played quite a lot with Rory, just sporty type things, throwing a football, kicking a ball around. It's got a bit more sophisticated.*
>
> (Dean, Father)

Some younger children reported feeling excluded because they had not yet accrued the necessary physical skills to share in particular activities with their father and were, therefore, not invited to

participate. As children aged, however, and were seen to be increasingly physically competent, fathers described children as enjoying shared physical activities and taking the lead in choosing or requesting particular pursuits:

> *If I felt that that [orienteering] was a hindrance to them and they didn't want that, then I would be more than happy to allow them to do it, but not necessarily have to do it with us. I don't want them to feel that they have to do things together, and I want them to be individuals who are able to go off and do things themselves.*
>
> (Edward, Father)

Similarly, for older children, their increasing abilities allowed them to develop a sense of closeness to their fathers through their shared physical activity. For Ben, challenging activities served to create special memories with his father; memories of mutual enjoyment and mutual recognition of his physical achievement:

> *When we, there was a walk we did when I was six, it was an eight mile walk, so it was really difficult, but it was like the first proper walk I did with my Dad so, obviously, it was quite a big thing, I really enjoyed that.*
>
> (Ben, Son, 17 years old)

Younger children did not always report the same enjoyment from these activities as did their fathers, especially when they found such activities physically arduous:

> *Noah: We usually climb mountains.*
>
> *I: Oh wow. And do you enjoy that?*
>
> *Noah: Sometimes.*
>
> *VE: When don't you enjoy it?*
>
> *Noah: When I'm tired and my legs hurt.*
>
> (Noah, Son, 11 years old)

Mutual enjoyment, therefore, was integral to the construction and experience of shared physical activity as intimate fathering practice. Father-child intimacy through shared physical activity was also intersected by children's age and perceived competence.

Intimacy through facilitated activities

Fathers also facilitated their children's independent physical activity. Such activities included swimming, netball, rugby, Scouts and tennis, all of which took place outside of the domestic environment. Fathers described helping children to seek out a sports club and transporting children to sports clubs and events. In many instances, fathers would then stay and watch. Both fathers and children felt that fathers were able to become attuned to their children in this way, experiencing pride and a sense of shared endeavour and enjoyment:

> *In terms of achievements, he's done, sort of, physically some things. He's done a five-mile swim, which I sat with him whilst he was doing and it was painful as a parent to see him doing and I was really proud of.*
>
> (Brendan, Father)

Whilst fathers noted their pride in seeing children overcome challenges and the privileged insights this gave them into their children, children emphasised the support their fathers offered them through these activities:

> *VE: Hockey? You want to be a professional hockey player?*
>
> *Billy: Mm-hmm.*
>
> *VE: And how can your Dad support you in doing that?*
>
> *Billy: Like well tell me what I might, what I could do, and like do stuff that will be helpful. Like, supporting me, and say 'go on Billy, go on Billy, good job.' That was great and all that. Supportive stuff.*
>
> (Billy, Son, 11 years old)

Further, it was through these facilitated activities that fathers might come to know about their children as *unique* individuals. Through this individualised attunement to their children, fathers felt they were able to reflexively shape the practices of their fathering in relation to each child's particularities. Similarly, children used these activities to mark the specialness of the relationship between themselves and their father and to delineate this from the relationships between their siblings and their father:

> *And my brother, at the end, he became an assistant patrol leader and I'm an assistant patrol leader now. So my Dad is quite happy about me becoming one so young.*
>
> (Josh, Son, 14 years old)

Facilitated activities were not as dependent on the mutual enjoyment of fathers and children, as were shared activities. Rather, children's enjoyment was emphasised. James (son, 8 years old) noted that, for him and his siblings, "the important thing is that we have fun." Children acknowledged the sacrifices that their fathers made in facilitating their interests. As Andrew suggested, foregoing his leisure time to facilitate his children's interests was worthwhile, even though it was not necessarily what he wanted to do:

> *It's a very logistical sort of thing, probably at the expense of anything that we want to do for a number of years, but you know, the taxi service, the buying the kit, making sure that they've got the things they need to do what they want to do.*
>
> (Andrew, Father)

Facilitated activities, therefore, allowed fathers and children to attach intimate meanings to their relationships with one another and to demonstrate the efforts fathers went to in facilitating physical activities for children.

Intimacy and masculinity

Fathers emphasised the 'naturalness' of doing physical activity for men and there was, perhaps inevitably, greater emphasis placed on the importance of engaging sons in physical activity. However, this may also have arisen from the greater number of male than female children in the study. The gendering of physical activity was largely communicated through the idea of 'lads and dads' time: seen as a necessary component of father-son interaction and characterised by their shared participation in physical activity:

I think it's really important for me to have that time, you know, just me and the boys and so I do like to have that time two or three times a year when we get out and we just go camping.

(Bruce, Father)

A gendered counterpart for daughters was not similarly explicit. However, when fathers reflected on 'lads and dads' time, they stipulated that this arose from a desire to treat children equitably, rather than from a perception of children as gendered subjects:

I feel as if I'm treating them differently because they've got different interests and different things that get them going.

(Andrew, Father)

Being responsive to what got each of his children "going" was, therefore, important to Andrew. As such, *not* doing physical activity with a child who did not enjoy it, also constituted intimate practice. For example, Andrew recounted playing football with his son (James), but not with his eldest daughter (Nina), who did not enjoy football. Yet, when James went to a holiday sports camp for which Nina was too young, Andrew replicated the sports camp at home so that Nina did not miss out. However, in James' own account, James demonstrated how intimate practices between fathers and children became, more or less, gendered:

VE: Yeah? And do you really like football?

James: Yeah.

VE: So do you ask Daddy to come and play or does Daddy just take you out anyway?

James: I ask him to play.

VE: And do you play with Samuel and Nina as well?

James: I play with Samuel, but not Nina.

VE: Is Nina not so keen on football.

James: She just doesn't like it.

(James, Son, 8 years old)

Andrew, nevertheless, displayed his attunement to each of his children and the personalisation of his intimate fathering practices to create uniquely special relationships with each child through such reflexivity and responsiveness.

Both shared and facilitated physical activity, therefore, provided opportunities for fathers to communicate with their individual children, to get to know and to support their children's development, both as individuals and as gendered subjects.

Building strong, intimate foundations for later life

Physical activity was understood by fathers to have both current and future benefit for children. Through shared and facilitated physical activity, intimacy was understood to be an ongoing project which developed over time between fathers and children. Whilst of value in itself, fathers further argued that an intimate connection also potentiated wider, social benefits for children.

Physical activities were perceived to expose children to a range of opportunities and to enable them to determine and develop their own passions and skills, whilst also encouraging children to be "socialising with other kids" (Imran, Father):

> *The more things you can give them access to the better really, the more chances there are of them finding something they enjoy.*
>
> (Dean, Father)

Fathers also argued that intimate connections constructed through physical activities allowed them to "better understand and motivate" (Brendan); to steer children toward a stage in later childhood where they might only need their "guidance" (Dean; Andrew; Bruce; Brendan). Further, and through such intimate practices, children were able to negotiate particular rites of passage, such as learning to ride a bike, or being taught how to swim. Again, the activities which facilitated these transitions were consistently undertaken by fathers, rather than mothers. Indeed, fathers were seen to have a monopoly on teaching children to ride bikes:

> *If you have two fathers like in my point of view it would be two guys teaching you how to ride a bike and I'd just be quite interested to see how that would pan out.*
>
> (Ben, Son, 17 years old)

Fathers saw these transitions as opportunities to forge close connections with their children and, in the process, for their children to gain important life skills. Discussing swimming, William (father) commented:

> *We are doing something that he knows he is learning a skill, something important. If he was to fall into a pond or something or a canal then he'd know how to get out now.*

Such benefits, however, were not always self-evident to children:

> *VE: Why do you think he wants you to ride a bike then?*
>
> *Billy: Because, well he's like a bike-ist, even though he runs a lot so like, it just doesn't make sense to me.*
>
> (Billy, Son, 11 years old)

Because of the fundamental importance of these skills to fathers, fathers claimed these practices as fathering and supported both their sons and their daughters through these transitions.

The construction of intimate fathering practices through such participation in physical activities was, therefore, a key way in which fathers sought to ensure success in their children's future lives. However, the link between physical activity and future success was not always evident to children.

Generational dissonance in the construction and experience of physical activity as intimate practice

Thus far, the idea that physical activity creates and sustains intimacy between fathers and children has been presented as a rather linear phenomenon. However, children both affirmed *and* problematised this dominant focus on physical activity, drawing attention to the consequent negative framing of other pursuits. Video games and television were seen in especially pejorative terms by fathers. Sisters Anja and Freya reflected this sentiment when they described watching television:

Anja: But it's important not to have too much television, because otherwise you're just sitting inside, and you could get fat or whatever, rather than having exercise, so Mum and Dad would like us to get out.

Freya: And you're not really communicating, because you're just sitting.

(Anja and Freya, Daughters, 11 and 10 years old)

By contrast, some children noted that their sociability was enabled by digital media, but these social networks largely precluded fathers who were seen, because of their lack of competence, to be unwilling or unable to participate. Children repeatedly asserted their superior command of technology relative to fathers. Indeed, technology was presented as an innate part of children's generational identity:

I was born with technology in me.

(Laserblast, Son, 8 years old)

Fathers, however, asserted digital media as challenging to father-child intimacy, making it necessary for parents to impose restrictions on their children's use of technology:

I've noticed he's spending more time on the iPad. It's a very new phenomenon. He's demanding less time, my time because we don't do the play, play time. We're starting to say, an hour's enough.

(Imran, Father)

Nevertheless, in families where children and fathers did use digital technology together, then, for children at least, it held intimate potential:

James: I like it that he plays on the Wii with us and when he plays with us he says 'I'm going to give you a good pasting' but he actually doesn't.

VE: That is a special thing.

James: Yeah.

(James, Son, 8 years old)

Fathers, in contrast, typically asserted their own and their children's mutual enjoyment of physical activity and, therefore, saw this as a predominant focus of their future interactions. Children, however, were more openly ambivalent about physical activity despite acknowledging its important role in father-child intimacy. Therefore, children also made reference to doing other, more sedentary activities with their fathers in their imagined futures:

VE: So, what about when you get bigger then and when you're grown up. What sort of things will Daddy do with you then?

Laserblast: Well he might still play video games with me. He might still do bike rides. He'll definitely still watch TV with me. I think most of the time he'll just be sitting there.

(Laserblast, Son, 8 years old)

Fathers' negative perceptions of digital media and their understanding that these held little intimate potential or wider benefit for children justified fathers' encouragement and enforcement of physical

activity. This was portrayed as permissible up to the point where it crossed a line and became coercion. The boundaries between coercion and encouragement, however, were not clearly defined. Rather coercion was something which 'other' fathers did, but encouragement was claimed and displayed by fathers in this study as a practice of their own intimate fathering:

> *I mean some it is the dreadful competitive parenting thing goes on where they all want their children to be Andy Murray or something. There is an element of that. I just think it's a nice thing to be able to be involved with.*
>
> (Dean, Father)

Through fathers' communication with and responsiveness to children, intimacy could be promoted and a balance between competing interests could be maintained. Intimate fathering practices, therefore, existed in fine balance with the exertion of generational power and were seen through generationally located lenses. Fathers in the study were keen to emphasise their efforts to minimise the impact of fathering practices which were seen as potentially injurious to father-child intimacy and consistently demonstrated their desire to forefront and display intimacy in their accounts of their everyday experiences of their relationships with their children.

Discussion

The findings presented here reinforce the centrality of involvement and intimacy in how fathers aspire to 'do fatherhood' that others have asserted (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2015). What is distinct within this paper is the association of physical activity with intimacy as a family practice of fathers, making it an intimate fathering practice. The substantive notion of intimacy constructed through our intergenerational approach to exploring father-child intimacy demonstrates the centrality of mutuality and father-child communication within this and adds nuance to existing work on father-child relationships (Dermott, 2008). Further, we have found a complex interweaving of children's age, gender and perceived benefit to children in determining which activities contributed to father-child intimacy within normative family contexts. Fathers felt that physical activities offered their children the opportunity find their own individual strengths and interests, to develop sociability and to gain important life skills. Whilst children generally agreed with fathers about the benefits of physical activities, they contested the idea that all benefits perceived by fathers were self-evident and that other activities, such as their use of digital media, were without value. The experience of intimate fathering practice, therefore, was notably shaped by unequal generational power and dissonant generational perspectives, with fathers steering children toward practices that they saw as potentiating intimacy in particular physical activities. Fathers had to ensure that their exercise of such power did not extend to coercion, which they recognised could be detrimental to father-child intimacy.

Dermott (2008:143) has suggested that 'intimate fatherhood' may permit movement beyond the "narrow formulations of fathers" wherein fathers are seen largely in binary, or paradoxical, terms. That is, that fathers are "attentive or absent," and the cultural ideal of fatherhood is in tension with the conduct of fathers. Utilising the analytical tool of 'family display' (Finch, 2007), we have argued that intimate fatherhood constitutes a discourse in itself and that where involved fatherhood and intimate fatherhood coalesce, they represent the "ethically normative divide" which "distinguishes between good and bad fathers" (Ives 2015:281). Intimate fatherhood, as a discourse, may lend greater legitimacy to particular fathers through their doing of intimate fathering practices. It also offers some insight into the ways in which intimate fathering practices are constructed, identifying physical activity as one specific form of such practices.

Through the everyday practices of fathering, fathers and families "convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions constitute 'doing family'" (Finch 2007:57) and, in this case, doing fatherhood. Within this study, the intention to nurture intimacy between fathers and their children was emphasised and displayed. We reiterate James and Curtis' (2010) argument that personal family life and the family displays enfolded within it also reflect 'social conventions,' (Smart 2007:51). These conventions, we argue, are what Eräranta and Moisander (2011) term the 'truths' which govern contemporary fathering practices and against which fathers are evaluated. Through fathers' and children's repeated referencing of the intimate connection created between them and their children through the intimate practice of doing physical activity, the connection itself becomes iconic and aspirational. For fathers, this was further reinforced by the criticism of digital technologies which were not considered to offer the same intimate potential. The reasons for this were not explicit within the data, but extant literature has asserted that fathers use physical activity as a means of expressing particular ideals in relation to their masculine identity. For example, Eräranta & Moisander (2011:517) assert that fathers role-model 'manliness' through their participation in children's lives as 'sports-coaches' and 'frisky play-mates'. Elsewhere, fathers have been noted to express a preference for engaging with children through leisure activities, thus allowing men to combine recreation and childcare (Seymour, 1992; Burnett *et al.*, 2013) yet this does not fully explain why fathers in this study elected to spend time undertaking physical activity, rather than digital, more sedentary leisure activities. There is, perhaps, a spatial intersection, wherein fathers express a preference for public displays of intimate fathering and this warrants further investigation. Nevertheless, fathers in particular demonstrated their keen awareness of the discourses which surround contemporary fatherhood and, specifically, father-child intimacy, seeking to emphasise their experiences of and efforts toward the promotion of father-child intimacy. That fathering in everyday life was not always lived out in accordance with fathers' ideals does not detract from the power of the idealised 'intimate father'. As James and Curtis (2010:1165) note, "even if these ideals are rejected in practice, in the ways in which people live out their lives, these cultural imaginings, nonetheless, wield a powerful currency." In this way, intimate fatherhood offers new insights into father involvement in physical activity with children through highlighting their construction and display of physical activity as an intimate fathering practice.

Also worthy of note is that children came to reproduce or contest these displays of idealised intimacy and physical activity as intimate fathering practice, indicating children's role as agentic cultural producers (Prout, 2005). Children asserted both the wider social benefits (Hughes and Hans, 2001; Bargh and Mckenna, 2004; Smith, Hewitt and Skrbiš, 2015) and the intimate potential of digital media and contested the intimate potential of physical activity for all, rather than some, children. Children challenged the idea that the benefits which fathers posed as gained through physical activities were self-evident. Further, children asserted the intimate potential of other, more sedentary activities with their fathers. Nevertheless, physical activities were a key mechanism through which children were able to assert the specialness of their relationship with their fathers, both as individuals and in relation to their siblings. In this way, children were able to express their agency as independent actors within the construction and experience of intimate fatherhood, but also demonstrated the ways in which their agency may be constrained by generational power imbalances, as Alanen (2001) has noted within family life more generally.

Both family practices and family display demand consideration of how family life may be intersected by social class, gender, generation and culture (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011). It is similarly necessary to reflect on their respective personal, cultural and social meanings (Finch, 2007; Smart, 2007; James and Curtis, 2010). This study explored a specific context (middle class, 'normative', families) and is, as such, limited by this framing in its reflective scope. Further, the financial privilege of participating

families shaped their ability to 'do intimate fatherhood' in the ways they described and is also worthy of comment. We recognise this as a classed intersection. Families' middle class status positioned them as having sufficient affluence and opportunity to permit the purchase of bicycles and other specialist equipment, the ownership of cars for transporting children to and from their chosen activities, and children's participation in various sporting clubs and activities, all of which required disposable income. Additionally, fathers anticipated that their children's participation in physical activities would offer them social advantages, reflecting the social and cultural capital also interwoven within fathers' accounts of intimate fathering practices. That participants themselves did not comment on these privileges perhaps reflects wider cultural blindness to class and its relationship with 'good fatherhood'. We also note the relative ethnic homogeneity of fathers in the study. However, the small sample size and the complexities of ethnic identity for individuals and within families would limit the potential to infer a relationship between the background of fathers and the construction and experience of intimate fathering practices, even had participating fathers been more ethnically diverse. A final potential limitation in the data generated requires comment. Interview topic pro forma did not make reference to physical activity, rather this was raised by interviewees in their conversations. Arising from this, there is minimal discussion of fathers' understandings and doing of physical activity with their daughters. While this is notable for its absence, further research is required to offer insight into the reasons underpinning this.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the debate on intimate fatherhood, detailing how it is lived through specific intimate fathering practices and understood both personally and socially within normative family contexts. In particular, the inclusion of children's perspectives illuminates the relational ways in which the discourse of intimate fatherhood is lived out. Utilising the premise of family display reveals interweaving of the conduct of contemporary fathers with discourses of intimate fatherhood. Furthermore, the paper connects two well-established areas of debate which have previously been largely distinct. Specifically, this paper explores how fathers are involved in children's lives through doing physical activity and what this means in terms of their aspiration to do intimate fatherhood and, therefore, to be 'good fathers'. It reinforces the notion that intimate fatherhood may serve to connect what fathers do with what this means (Dermott, 2008) and proposes a novel notion of father-child intimacy and the idea of 'intimate fathering practices'.

Acknowledgements

Would like to thank all the families who participated in the study. The research was funded by a University of Sheffield Faculty Prize Scholarship.

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