Emotional bond with hands-off fathers 'is key to children's behaviour'

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FATHERS who are emotionally involved with their children and feel confident as a parent are less likely to raise offspring with behavioural problems, research suggests.

A new study from Oxford University found that a father's emotional attachment and strong bond with a child - as opposed to how much practical childcare they carried out - had the strongest effect on whether a child suffered problems.

Experts looked at markers of involvement such as fathers being confident with their child, forming a strong bond, feeling fulfilled and parenthood making them feel closer to their partner.

The researchers, writing in the journal BMJ Open, concluded: "The findings of this research study suggest that it is psychological and emotional aspects of paternal involvement in a child's infancy that are most powerful in influencing later child behaviour and not the amount of time that fathers are engaged in childcare or domestic tasks in the household.

"How new fathers see themselves as parents, how they value their role as a parent and how they adjust to this new role, rather than the amount of direct involvement in childcare in this period, appears to be associated with positive behavioural outcomes in children."

Data was taken from the long-running Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children in the south-west of England.

The parents of 10,440 children living with both their mother and father at the age of eight months were asked to complete a questionnaire about their and their child's mental health as well as things such as attitudes to parenting, time spent on childcare, child behaviour and development.

Data was also available for more than 6,000 children when they were aged nine and 11.

The results showed that fathers who scored well on having an emotional response to their child and feeling secure in their role as a parent had children who were up to 28% less likely to suffer behavioural problems in their pre-teens than fathers who scored lower.

The researchers said: "Positive parenting by fathers may contribute to good outcomes in children in a number of ways.

Involved fathers may influence children indirectly by being a source of instrumental and emotional support to mothers who provide more of the direct care for children.

"The potential positive effect of this on mothers' well-being and parenting strategies may then lead to better outcomes in children.

"There is evidence that fathers' involvement can also alleviate the impact of factors such as maternal depression which are known to increase children's risk of behavioural problems.

"Greater paternal involvement may also lead to or be a manifestation of a happy and cohesive family, and this may bring about better outcomes in children."