

Fathers (and Mothers) and Children's Development: Evidence from Early to Middle Childhood

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Early research on
absent fathers:
Host of negative
outcomes for
children



Recent research on
present fathers:
How do they
matter?
(*What happened to
mothers?*)

What fathers do when they are present...



Theoretical frameworks

➤ Attachment theory

- Beginning at infancy, the early childhood period is a significant period where caregivers establish close relationships with the baby that form the foundation for child well-being and development

➤ Family systems theory

- Families are dynamic and change over time as family adjusts to child
- Family subsystems are interdependent and influence one another

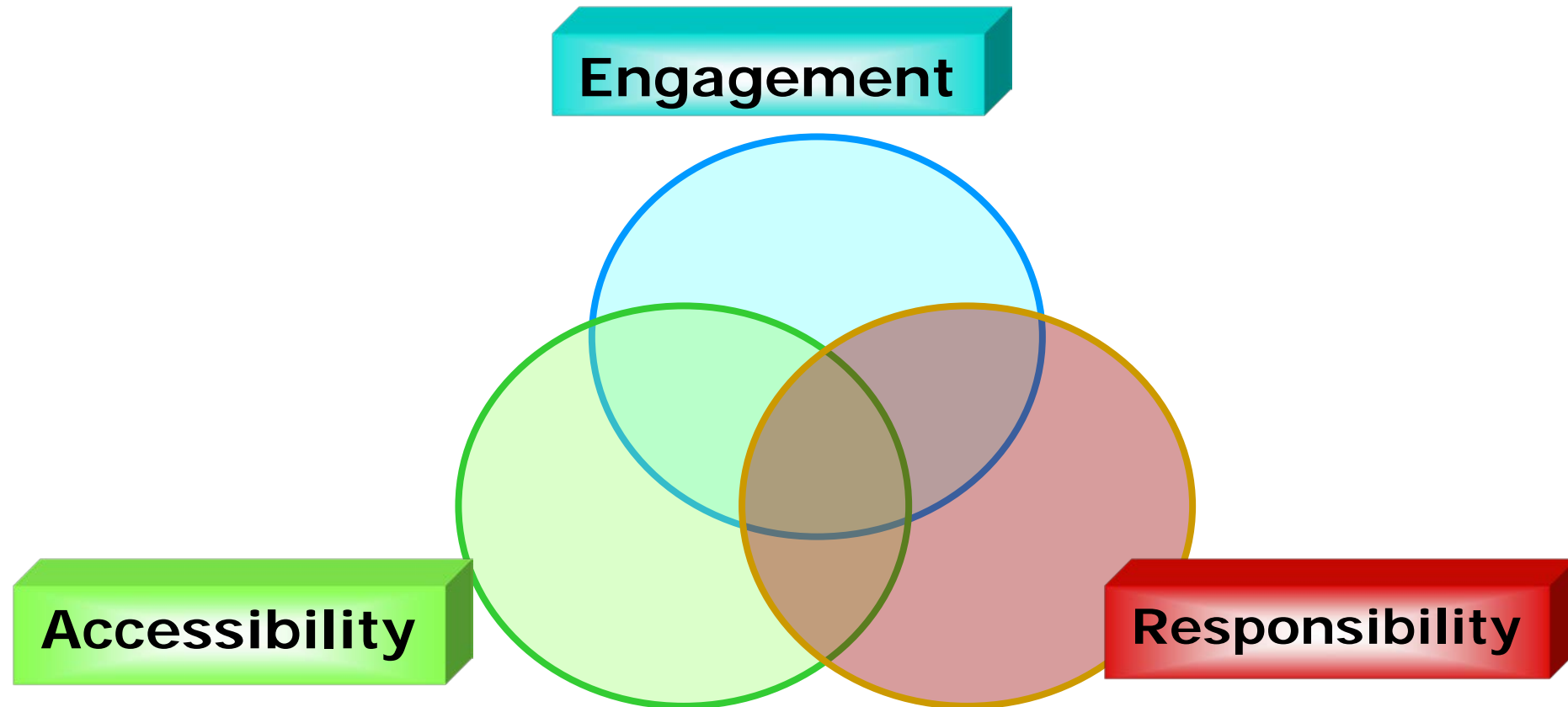
➤ Resource theory

- Parents with more resources (income, education, social resources) are able to invest more in their children

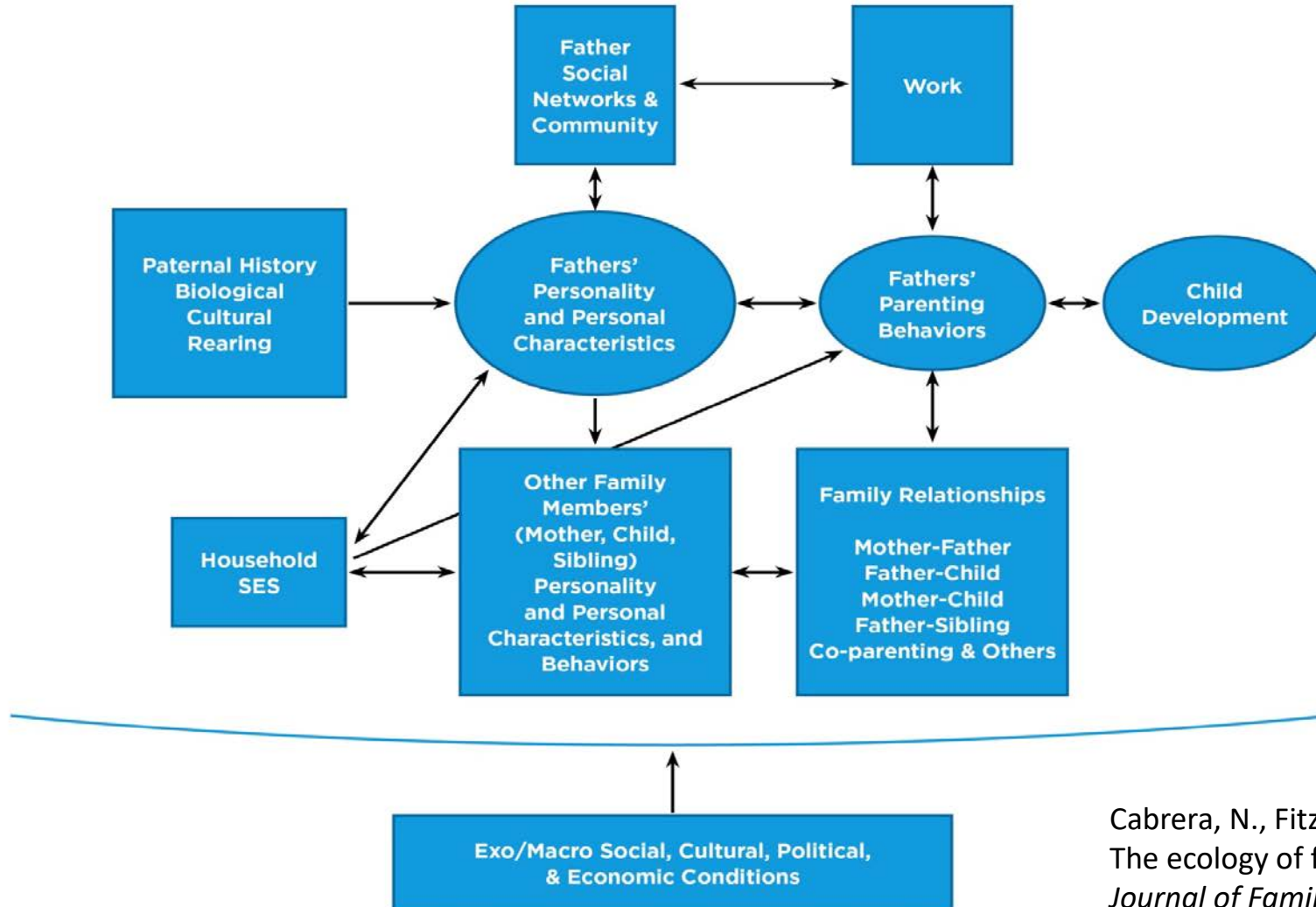
➤ Parenting models

- Belsky's 1984
- Cabrera et al 2007

Typology of Father Involvement



Typology of Father Involvement



Cabrera, N., Fitzgerald, H. E., Bradley, R., & Roggman, L. (2014). The ecology of father-child relationships: An expanded model. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 6, 336-354.

Data Sources

- 1. Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**
 - N=3800
- 2. EHS National Father Research Consortium**
 - N=3000, moms & dads in random-control design
- 3. ECLS-B**
 - N=10688; 2001: 9, 24, 48 months
- 4. FAMILIA (qualitative & quantitative)**
 - N=40, 46 mothers and fathers: observations, interviews, and direct child assessments

Fathers are involved early and stay...

Prenatally involved fathers were still engaged at years 1 and 3 because they became more committed to each other (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2011)

But, there's variability..

- for White and Latino fathers, residence at birth was a stronger predictor of father leaving
- for African American fathers, no prenatal involvement was a stronger predictor of father leaving (Shannon & Cabrera, 2008)



Fathers play with their children

Fathers who engage in high quality play have children who are more regulated and less aggressive (McDowell & Parke, 2009; Paquette, 2008; Shears & Robin, 2005)

In our own work,

- EHS data shows that mothers and fathers are just as playful, which is related to **language** (fathers) and self-regulation (Cabrera et al., 2007)
- High quality play (positive control, reciprocity, cooperation) at 24 months predicted children's emotion regulation (LEITER-R) at 48 months.



Fathers discipline their children

Fathers use various strategies to help their children follow directions:

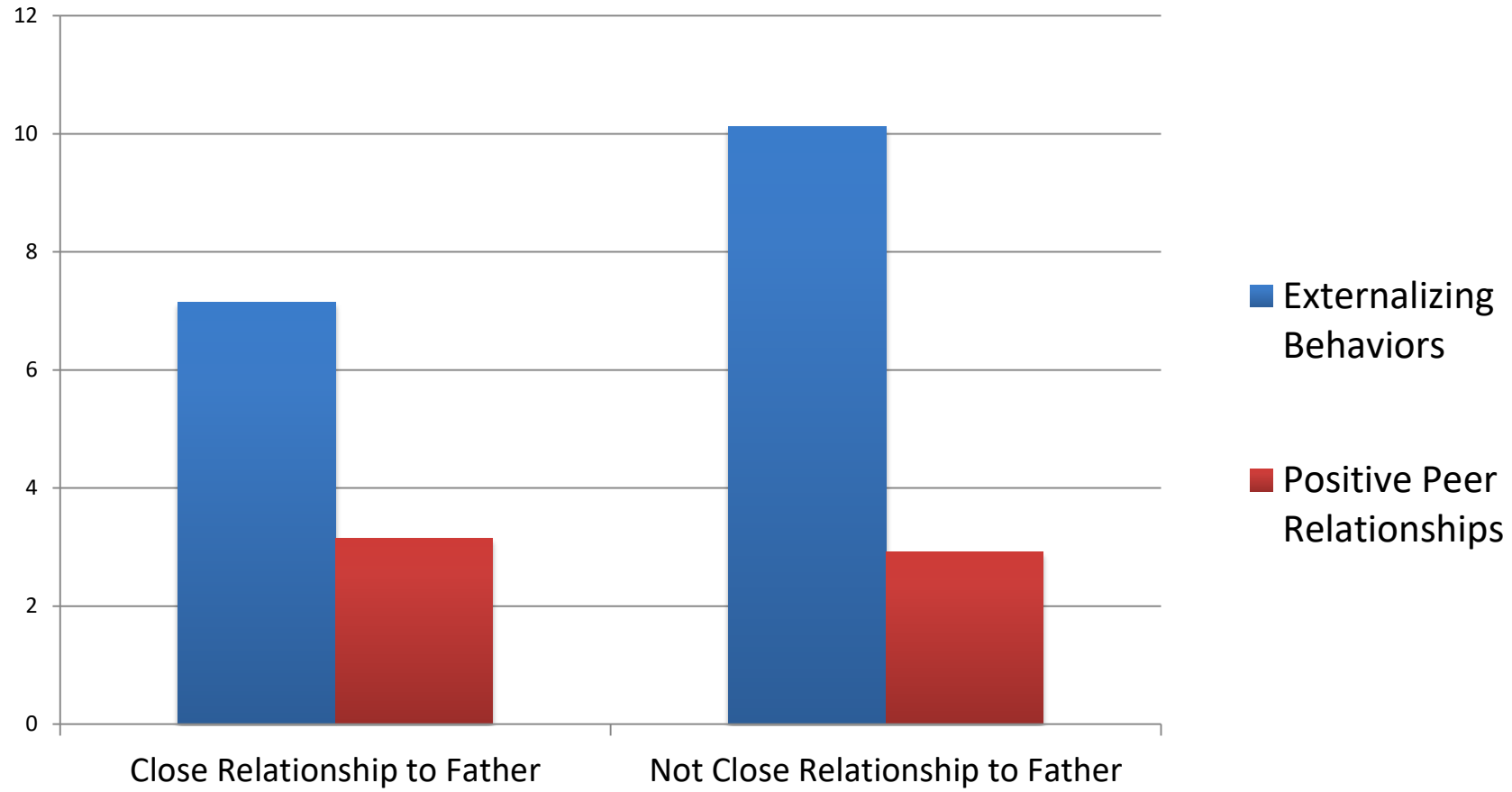
- At 24 months, fathers use more **regulatory language** than behavioral
- Boys heard more regulatory language than girls
- Children with less vocabulary had fathers using more behavioral compliance

24 months → Pre-K

- Fathers' behavioral strategies → child sustained attention
- Fathers' regulatory language → child emotion regulation

Malin, J, Cabrera, N., Karberg, E., Aldoney, D., & Rowe, M. (in preparation). Low-income fathers' compliance-promoting strategies and children's regulatory skills.

Father Relationships and Child Social Adjustment



FATHERS AND CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT



From my own lab's research...



Father-toddler communication in low-income families: Education and depressive symptoms

Participants

- n=80 racially and ethnically diverse sample of low-income fathers and their 2-year-old children

Measures

- Father and child language
 - Transcribed father-child using CHAT and CHILDEs to analyze transcripts
- Father depression
 - CES-D

Father-toddler communication in low-income families: Education and depressive symptoms

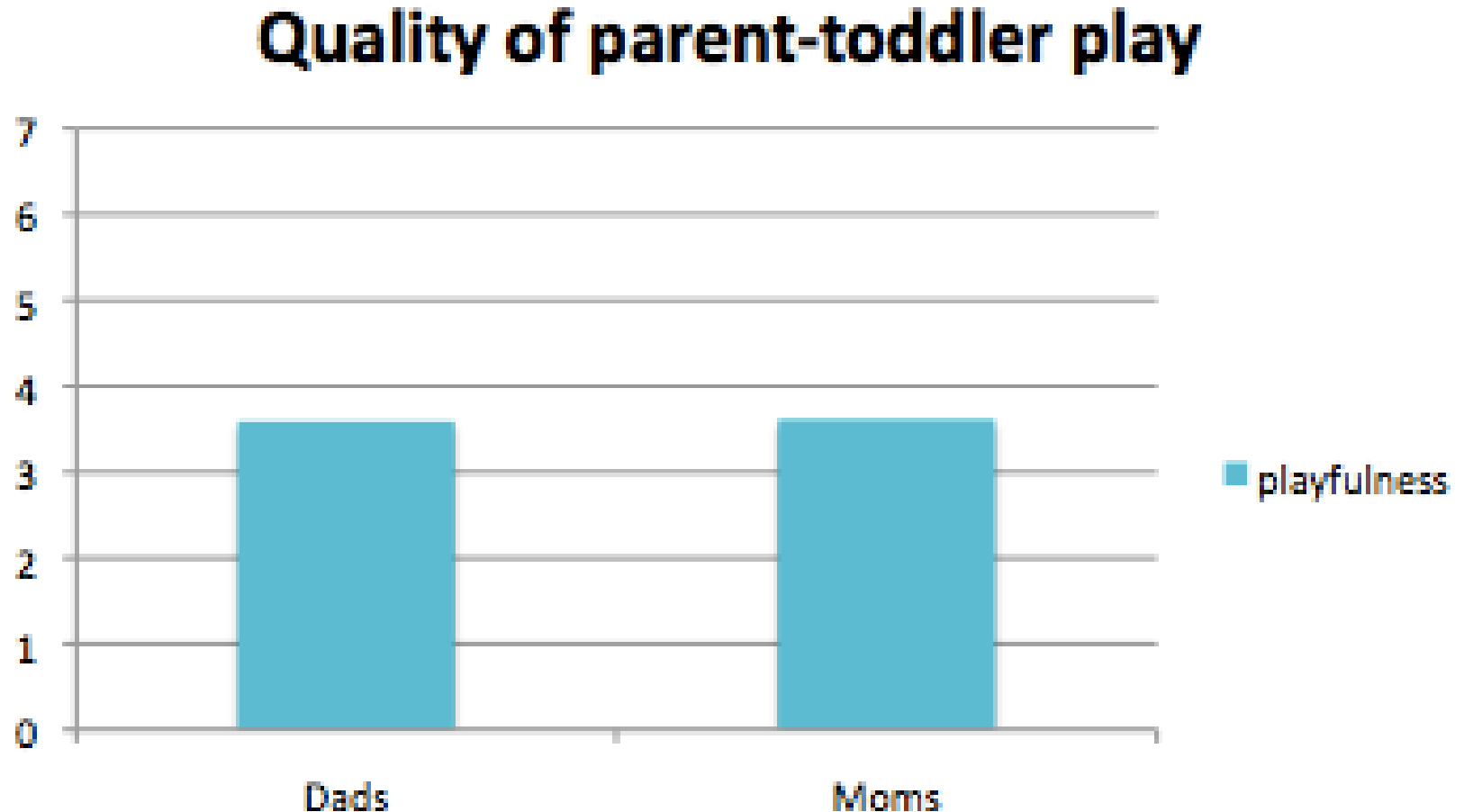
Large variability in quality & quantity of language

Three main findings:

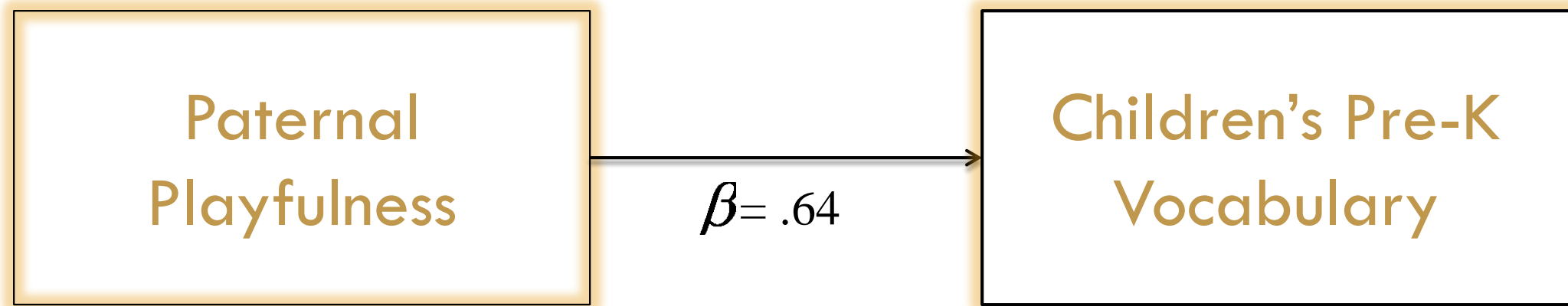
- Fathers' education predicted children's language: more utterances & diverse vocabularies (i.e. word types)
- Fathers' depressive symptoms related to less grammatically complex language (i.e. smaller MLUs)
- Fathers' depressive symptoms & education and children's language outcomes were partially mediated by fathers' **quantity and quality of language**

Play: Fathers are just as playful as mothers

Mothers & fathers were equally playful with their toddlers and spent ½ of time in concrete play
($t = -.12, p = .90$)



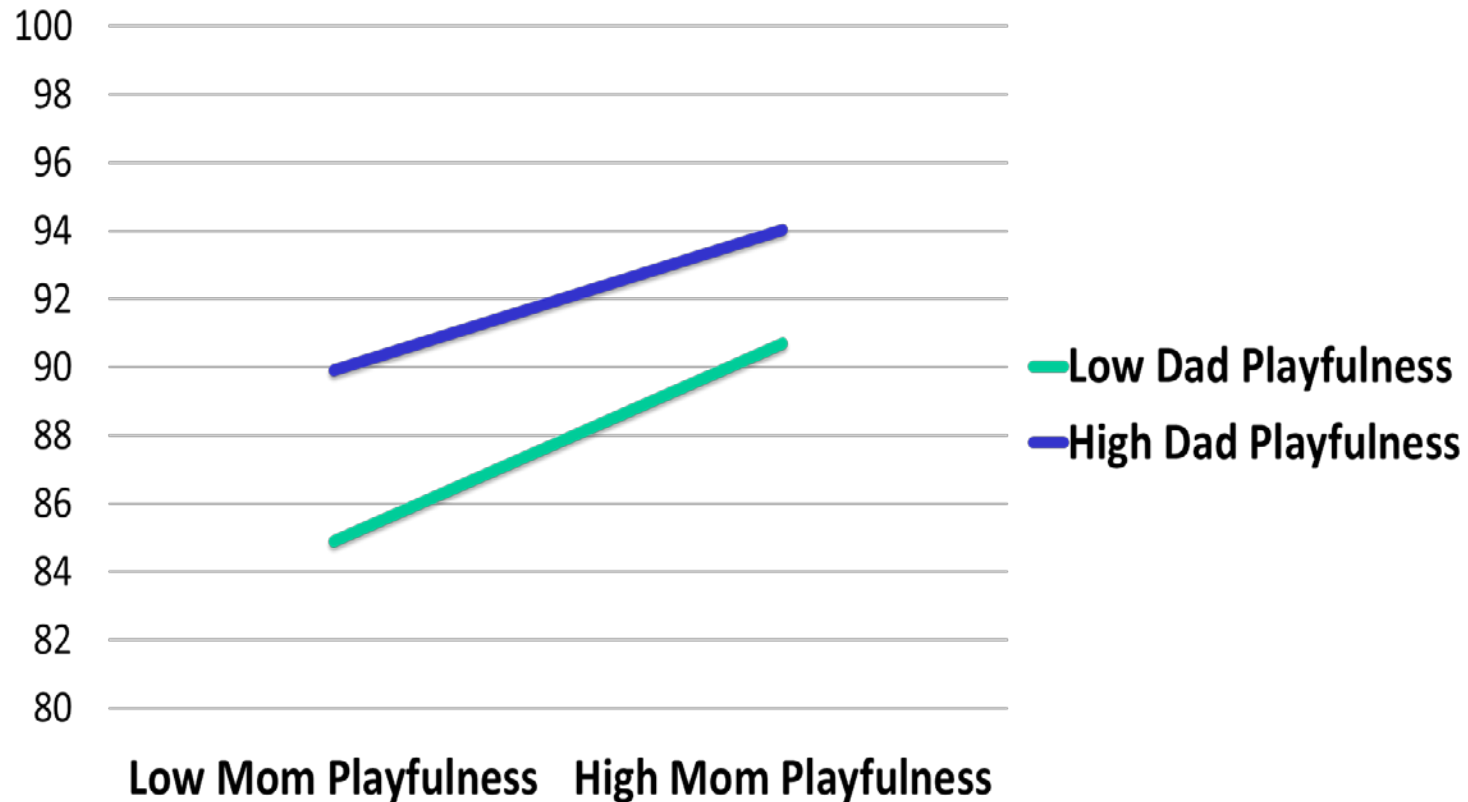
Fathers' playfulness is related to children's vocabulary



Over and above parental responsiveness,
playfulness was related to ER and
vocabulary

Mothers and fathers working together

Interaction of mother and father playfulness predicting children's pre-kindergarten receptive vocabulary



The association between maternal playfulness and children's vocabulary at pre-K was significant **only when fathers were highly playful** ($\beta = .25$)

Discussion

Low-income fathers are important contributors to children's school readiness

- Fathers are just as playful as mothers, but their playfulness matters differently
- Fathers' playfulness is related to language whereas mothers' playfulness is related to emotion regulation

We find evidence of:

- That moms AND dads working together are better for vocabulary
 - Maternal playfulness matters **only when** high paternal playfulness
- Fathers effects are independent of mom's – fathers are not substitutes for moms –
- Both parents matter in different ways

THANK YOU!

