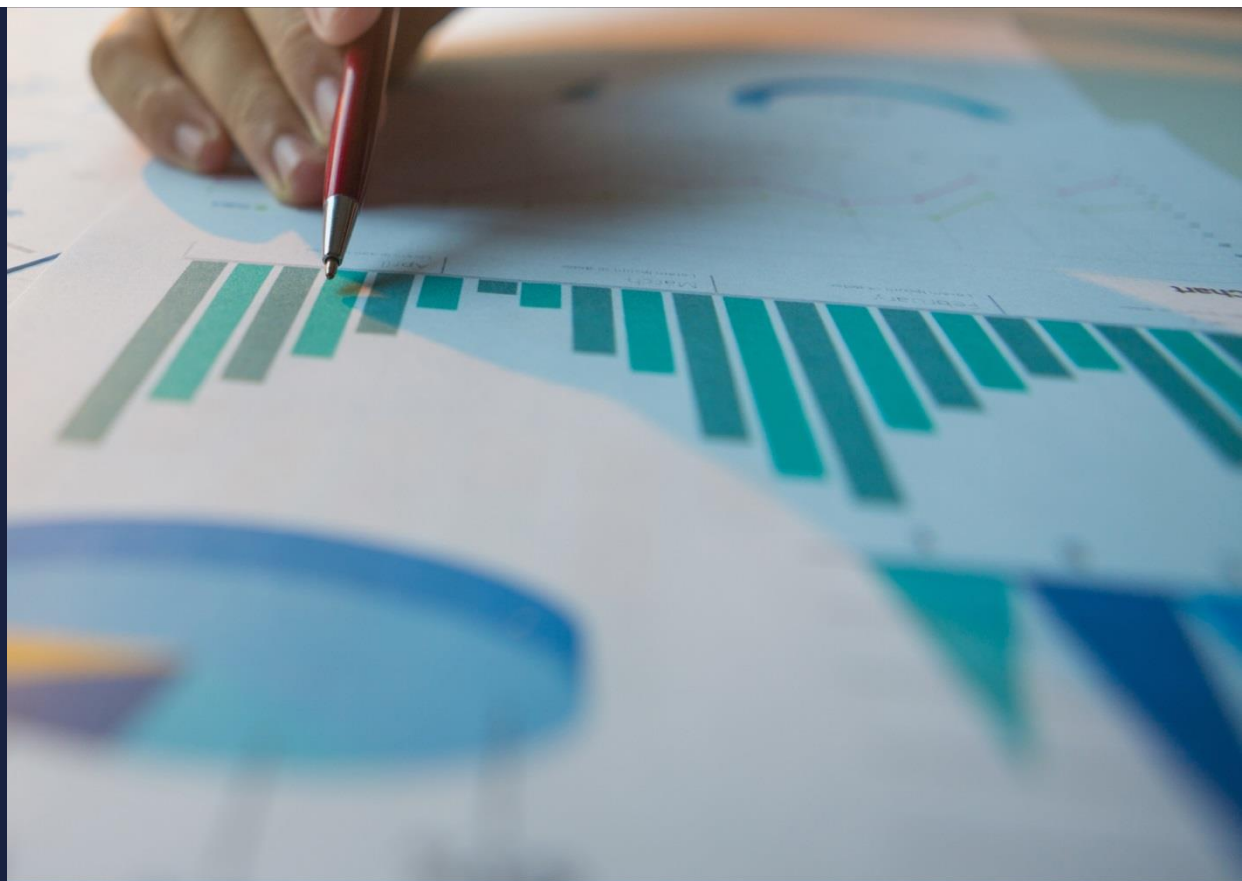


Fathers and children from infancy to middle childhood

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VENUE
ESRI, Whitaker Square,
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- Members of programme steering group
- Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) Study Team
- GUI families



Background to the study

Introduction

- Lack of research on fathers in Ireland but rich information in the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study
- Use GUI Cohort '08 to follow fathers and children from nine months to nine years
- Mainly focus on those in two-parent families for all waves and where fathers completed the SCG questionnaire
- Information on 4,090 father-child dyads
- Numbers of lone father and same-sex households in the sample were too small for analysis

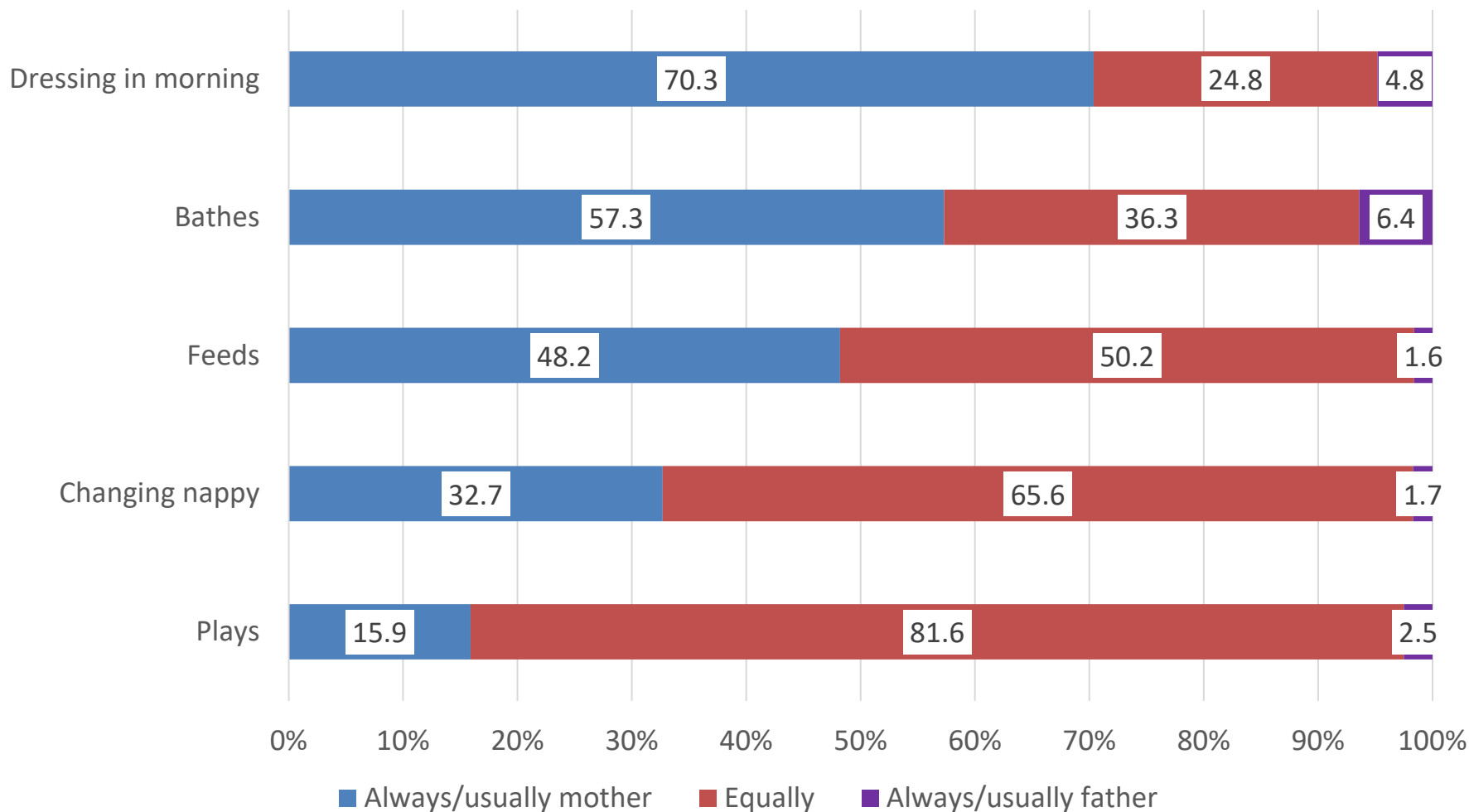
Research questions

1. What activities do fathers engage in with their children from nine months to nine years? How does this vary by father and child characteristics?
2. What is the quality of relationship between fathers and children, as reported by fathers and (at age 9) children?
3. What factors are associated with parental stress among fathers from infancy to middle childhood?
4. What is the relationship between the nature of the father-child relationship (activities, relationship quality and parental stress) and selected child outcomes: namely, cognitive development, physical activity and wellbeing?



Father-child involvement

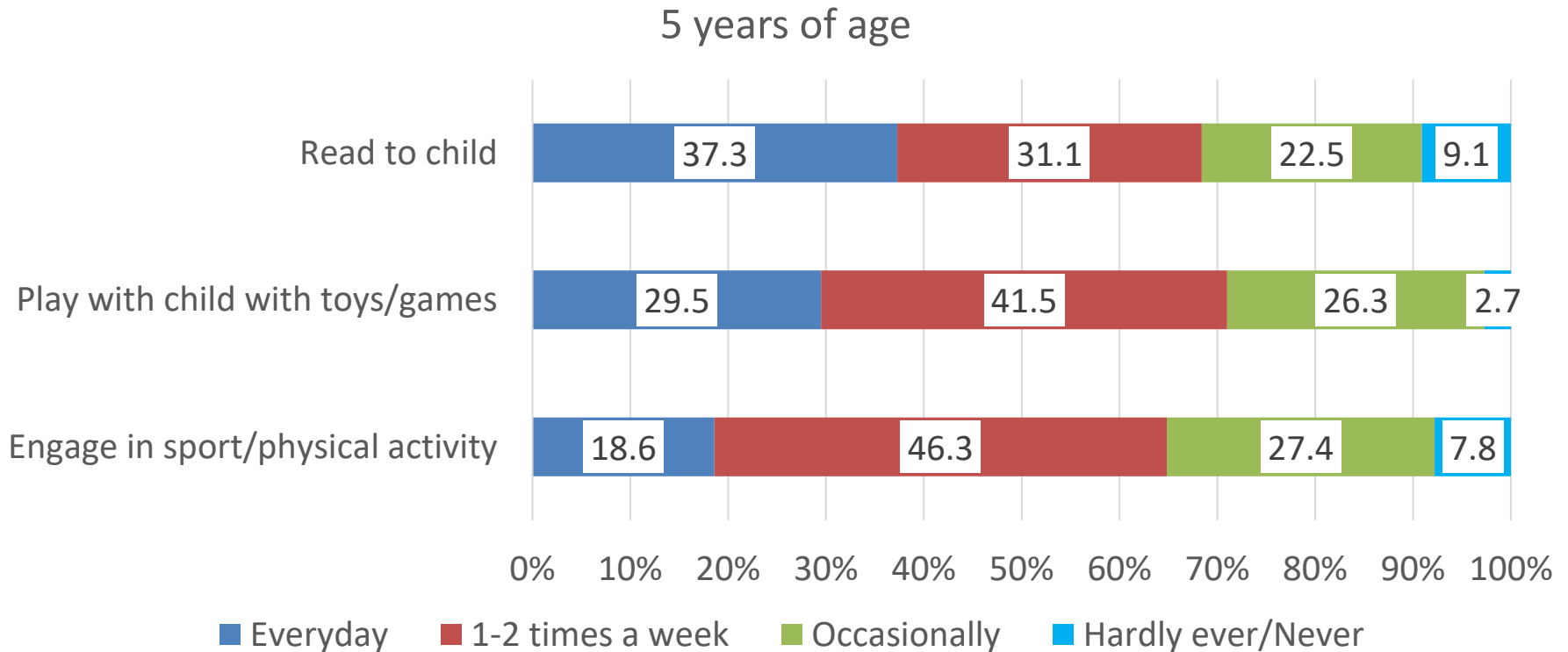
Care for, and play with, 9-month-old baby, as reported by father



Variation between fathers

- **Greater involvement:**
 - Fathers with lower levels of education
 - Non-employed fathers
 - Mothers in full-time employment
 - Child is a twin or triplet
- **Less involvement:**
 - Fathers working >40 hours
 - Larger families
 - Father has more traditional views on role
- **No difference by child gender**

Involvement at 5 and 9 years of age



At 5 and 9, the measures focus more on play and outings than on personal care.

Variation between fathers

- More frequent involvement:
 - Sons
 - Fathers with higher levels of education
 - Fathers of migrant origin
 - Father had availed of family-friendly work practices
 - Mothers working longer hours at 9 months
 - Father more involved with child at 9 months
- Less frequent involvement:
 - More traditional views
 - Father working longer hours when child was 9 months old



The quality of the father-child relationship

Father reports of relationship quality

- High levels of attachment in infancy and closeness in early and middle childhood, with low levels of father-child conflict
- Fathers report being slightly closer to their daughters, despite more frequent involvement with sons
- Closeness is enhanced by early involvement with, and attachment to, the baby
- Conflict is greater where fathers hold more traditional views and where the parents and/or child have a chronic illness or disability

Child reports of relationship quality

- 78% of 9-year-olds get on ‘very well’ with their fathers (80% for mothers)
- More positive: daughters; fathers who are more involved; where fathers report a close and non-conflictual relationship with the child
- Less positive: fathers have more traditional views of their role
- Children not living with their fathers:
 - 65% (of the approx. 850 who answered) get on ‘very well’ with their fathers
 - More positive if frequent contact (especially sleep-overs) and a more positive relationship between the mother and father



Parenting stress

Parenting stress

- Fathers and mothers report low to moderate levels of parenting-related stress; highest in infancy
- Greater stress:
 - Fathers with higher levels of education
 - Increasing financial strain
 - Migrant fathers
 - First-born children
 - Twins or triplets
 - Large family
 - Illness (mother and/or child)
 - More traditional views
- Protective role of closeness to child and involvement in activities with them



Fathers and child outcomes

Child outcomes at 9

- Outcomes:
 - Cognitive development (Drumcondra vocabulary test scores)
 - Physical activity levels (based on child self-report);
 - Child self-image (Piers-Harris freedom from anxiety, happiness/life satisfaction and behavioural adjustment subscales).
- Not significantly related to levels of involvement
- But relationship quality mattered: children who got on very well with their fathers reported less anxiety, greater happiness and better behaviour on average
- Father-child conflict was associated with poorer self-image among boys
- Higher levels of parental stress were linked to poorer academic outcomes and less frequent engagement in physical activity

Implications for policy

- New insights into the role of fathers in child development in Ireland
- Policies to facilitate care responsibilities of those in employment:
 - Cohort was born before paid paternity leave was available
 - But family-friendly work arrangements did facilitate greater paternal involvement while longer hours operated as a barrier
 - Findings show that involvement and attachment are formed early, highlighting the importance of the State and employers facilitating such involvement
 - Issues of level of payments and access to ‘top-up’ payments
- Information and support for parents – potential for tailored information for fathers, emphasising the importance of their role