

# **Changes in Concept of Fatherhood during Child's Transition to Primary School**

Beate Minsel, Wassilios E. Fthenakis and Uta Deppe  
State Institute of Early Education, Munich, Germany

Paper presented at the  
9th European Conference on Developmental Psychology:  
Island of Spetses, Greece, September 1-5, 1999

## **1 Theoretical Background**

Family development can be conceptualized as consecutive phases, which are separated by transitional periods. During transitions people have to adapt to the new situations in family and the broader social environment. The most often studied transition in family development is transition to parenthood. Besides other changes, the becoming parents change their self-concepts during this time, they have to establish a mother-child-relationship and a father-child relationship, and their marital quality also changes (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Belsky and colleagues claimed, that during the transition to parenthood, marital quality is a resource, which facilitates adaptation to the new family situation (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine & Volling, 1991).

We assume that in later transitions in family life, parents also have to change their self-concepts, and marital quality is a resource for successful adaptation too. In this paper, we will discuss the period, when the first child enters school.

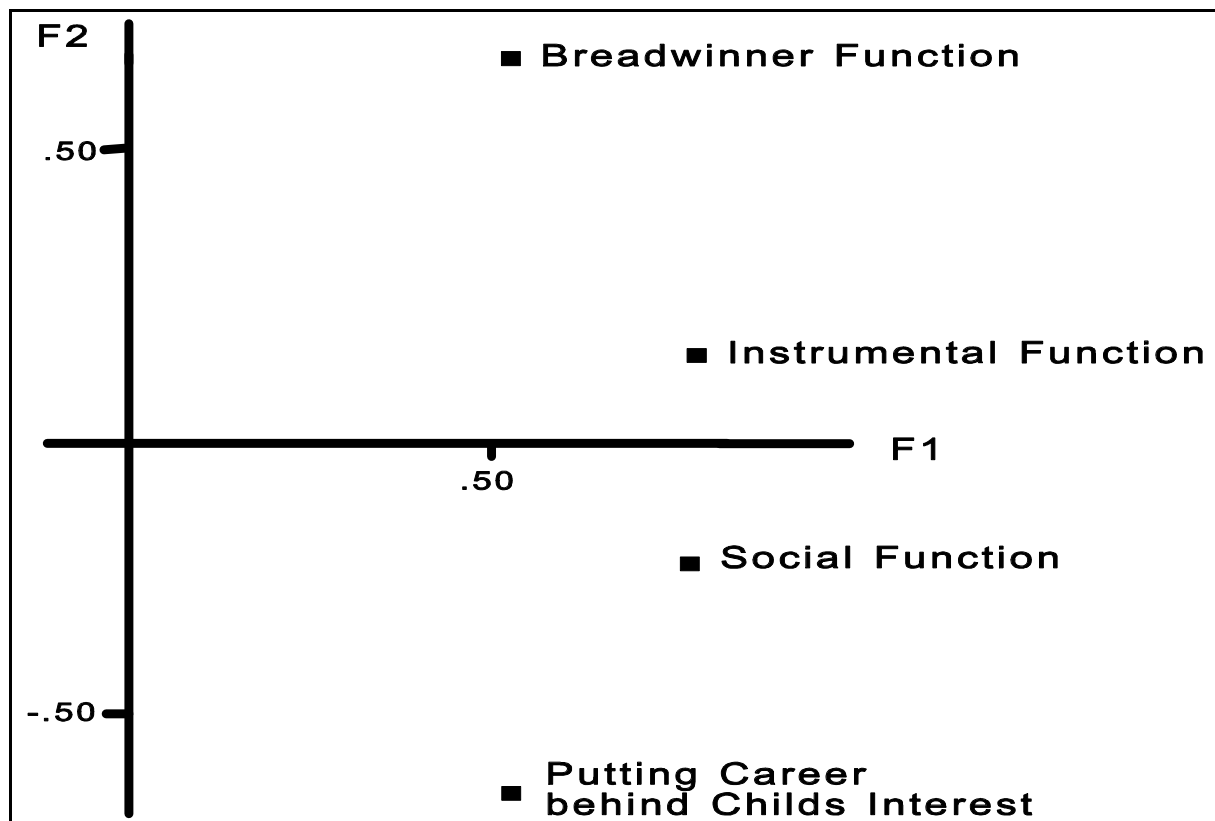
Entering school is a critical life event for most kids. There is a broad body of literature, stating that some children react with fear, or that they have problems getting along with so many other children. Some children will also show immature behaviors (Einsiedler, 1988, Ramey & Ramey, 1994; Paetzold, 1988). We assume that adjustment to school is the easier for the child the more emotional support he or she gets from his parents. Emotional support is part of the parent's social capital (Amato, 1996), and it is interrelated with their marital quality (for an overview see Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997). Poor marital quality will especially lead to poor father-child-relations. Besides emotional support parents will show other behaviors to help the child: Talking with the child about school matters, monitoring the child's homework, etc. Concurrently parents will also develop new social contacts with other parents of school children as well as with teachers.

This paper deals mainly with the concept of fatherhood and its changes during the child's transition to school. The concept of fatherhood is assessed by a 29-item-questionnaire, asking for

different domains of ideal paternal responsibilities. The questionnaire shows a four factor structure:

- **Breadwinner-function** (eg. "To earn the living for the family");
- **Putting career behind child's interest** (eg.: "Working less in order to have more time for the child");
- **Social function** - these are items describing what a father does with his child (eg.: "Being present on the child's first day at school");
- **Instrumental function**, what a father does for his child (eg.: "Looking that the child is educated according to her or his interests").

These four domains of ideal paternal responsibilities are rated differently: Parents think that father's Social function is most important, and Putting career behind child's interest is least important. However, there are differences between subjects: Some fathers feel that the Breadwinning function is more important than all other aspects. As the four facets of the concept



of fatherhood are slightly correlated, a second order factor-analysis shows two factors.

The first factor can be named "General Involvement of the Father", because all four first order factors show positive loadings. The second factor separates the Breadwinning function from Putting career behind child's interest, with quite low loadings for the Social and Instrumental functions. The factor is named "Father as Worker". Accordingly fathers can be assigned to two types: Those who feel that Breadwinning and not Putting career behind child's interest is more important than Social and Instrumental functions, and those who feel the other way round. The

first type of fathers we call "The father as Worker", the second we call "The father as Educator". The concept of fatherhood is interrelated with paternal behaviors, namely with paternal involvement in child-related tasks.

## 2 Research questions and hypotheses

The main question is, whether the concept of fatherhood changes during child's transition to school. In which direction does the change go, and can the change be explained by other variables? As we regard marital quality as a resource for adjustment to transitions, we state the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Under the condition of high marital quality the concept of fatherhood will change in the direction of "The father as Educator". Under the condition of bad marital quality this change will not take place.

**Hypothesis 2:** Marital quality and concept of fatherhood are not or only slightly correlated before the child enters school. However, marital quality before the child enters school and concept of fatherhood in the time when the child is in school are correlated. This is because marital quality is supposed to be a precondition for attitudinal change.

The changes in concept of fatherhood will have the following consequences:

**Hypothesis 3:** Fathers who change into the direction of "The father as Educator" will enhance their marital quality. Fathers who change into the direction of "The father as Worker" will lower their marital quality.

**Hypothesis 4:** Changes in the fatherhood concept will result also in changes in mood. Fathers changing in the direction of "The father as Educator" show lower depression scores than fathers changing in the direction of "The father as Worker".

## 3 Method

135 fathers and their spouses were assessed 1 month before and 6 months after the child had started school. At both points of measurement they answered the Concept of Fatherhood Questionnaire and a Marriage Quality Questionnaire with the scales "marital communication", "sexuality" and "marital conflict" (Hahlweg et al., 1982). Besides these trait-oriented measures a state-oriented depression questionnaire was given which asks for depressive mood during the last week (Hautzinger & Basler, 1993).

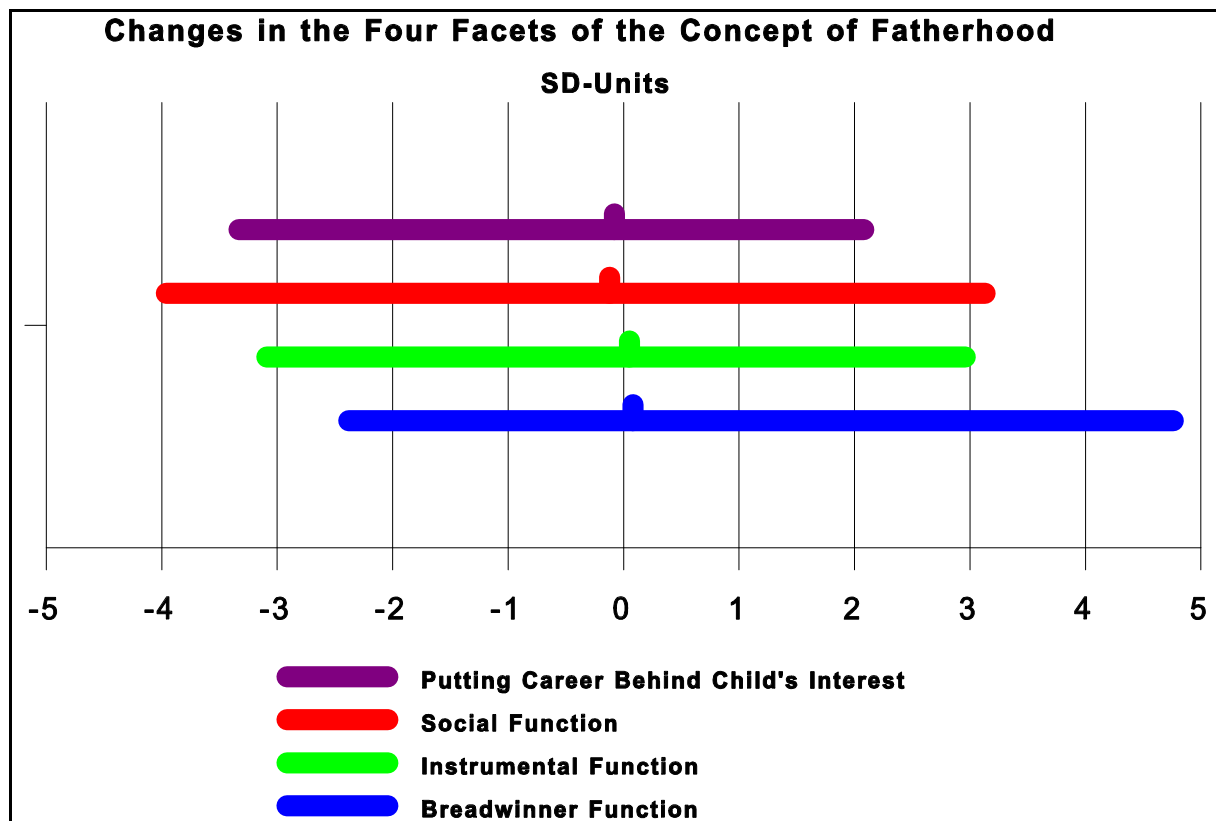
In this paper we use the fathers' concept of fatherhood. When we look at marital quality, we use the wives' perspective.

## 4 Results

The means of the four facets of the concept of fatherhood change quite little. The MANOVA for the four facets with the within-factor "Point of Measurement" (PoM) showed the following effects. PoM:  $F_{1, 129}=.29$ , n.s.; Facette:  $F_{3, 387}=199.84$ ,  $p=.000$ ; PoM by Facette:  $F_{3, 387}=2.27$ ,  $p=.08$ . The four facets are rated differently. The insignificant interaction "Facette by Point of Measurement" indicates no differential change of the facets.

If this were a cross-sectional study, we would say that the concept of fatherhood seems to be a measure of high stability, which is not affected by transition.

However, in our two-measurement study we see, that there is a large variation in change: The stability coefficients are rather low (Breadwinner-Function: .45; Putting Career behind Child's Interest: .47; Instrumental Function: .54; Social Function: .50), and the variation of differences between first and second measurement is relatively high.



Also, changes in different facets correlate positively. Some fathers change into a direction of more general paternal involvement, while others go into the opposite direction (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Correlations among the change scores ( $t_2$  minus  $t_1$ ) of the facets of the concept of fatherhood.

	B	C	I

Change in Breadwinning Function	(B)			
Change in Putting Career behind Child's Interest	(C)	.11		
Change in Instrumental Function	(I)	.34***	.22*	
Change in Social Function	(S)	.13	.39***	.31***

In terms of type, about 75 percent of the fathers don't change during the child's transition. 17 fathers change from Worker to Educator, and about as many (15) change from Educator to Worker (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Types of concept of fatherhood before child enters school and 6 months later.

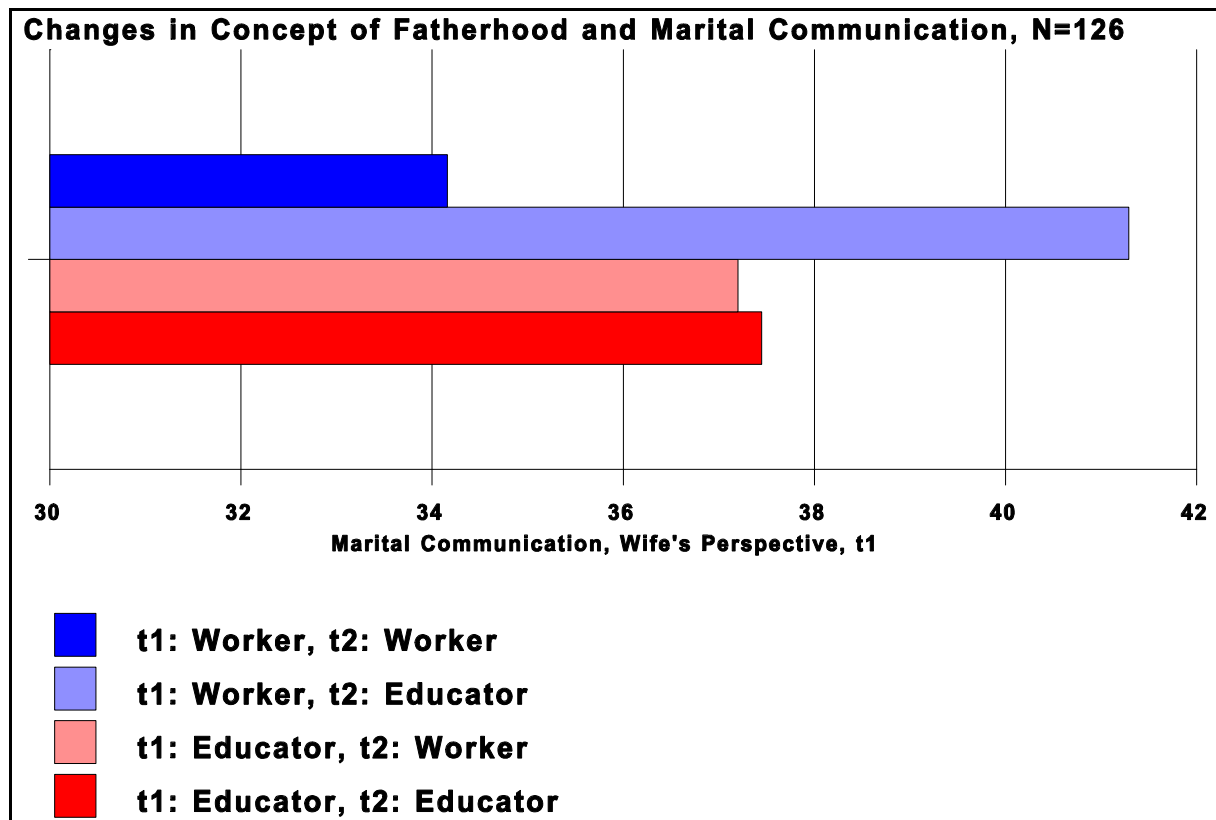
1rst point of measurement	2nd point of measurement		Sum
	Father as Worker	Father as Educator	
Father as Worker	25 (20%)	17 (13%)	42 (33%)
Father as Educator	15 (12%)	70 (55%)	85 (67%)
Sum	40 (32%)	87 (68%)	127

McNemar-Test n.s., Chi Square (Fourfold) = 21.60,  $p=.000$

However, the two change directions are not equally probable: The change from Worker to Educator happens relatively more often than the change from Educator to Worker. The significant fourfold Chi Square stems mainly from the cells "Worker-Worker" (Chi Square component=10.58 - observed frequency about double as high as expected) and "Educator - Worker" (Chi Square component=5.12 - observed frequency lower than expected). This latter change is relatively rare.

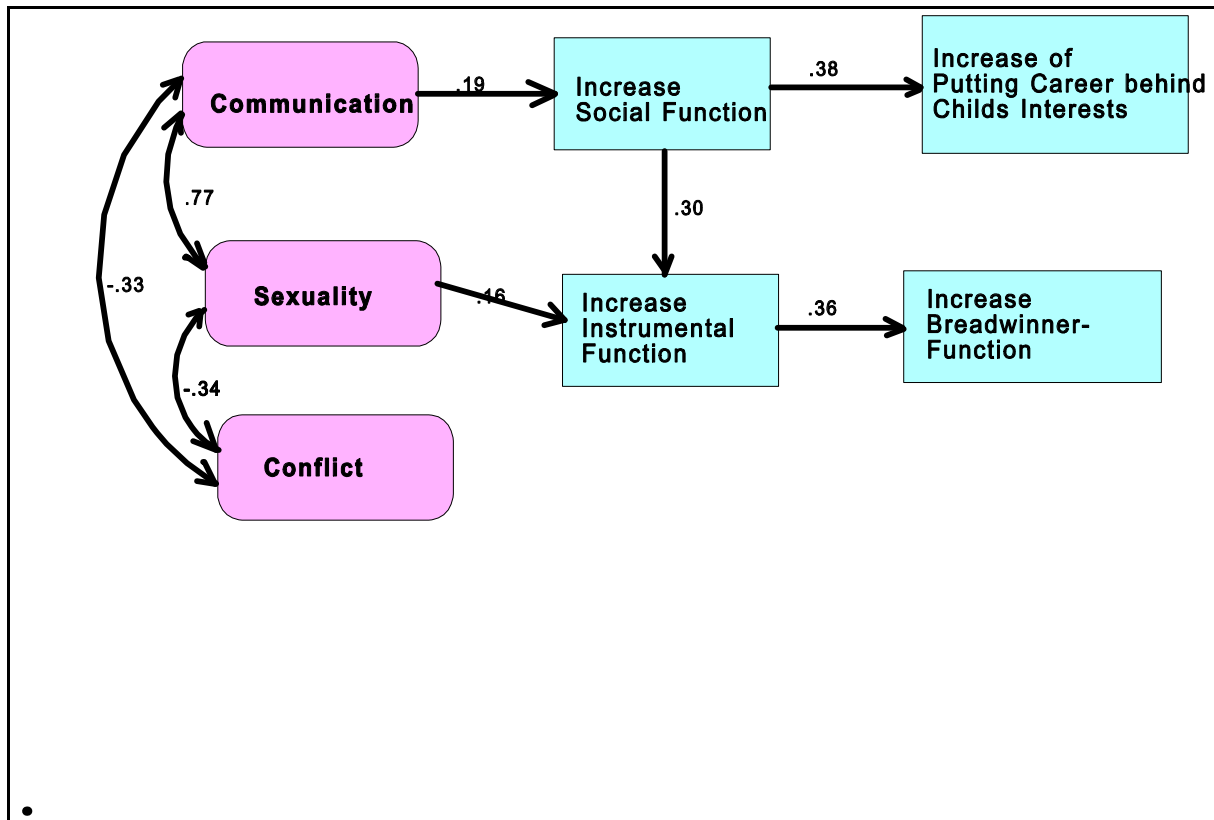
#### 4.1 Determinants for the changes in the concept of fatherhood

We expected, that high marital quality would influence fathers to change their concept of fatherhood: They should value the Social and Instrumental functions higher. Accordingly, these fathers should more often belong to the type "Father as Educator" than to the type "Father as Worker" (hypothesis 1). This hypothesis can be confirmed:



Marital communication seems to be the crucial variable: If communication with the spouse is good, there is a high probability, that the concept of fatherhood changes from "Father as Worker" to "Father as Educator". On the other hand, men with lower marital communication more often stay in the type "Father as Worker" (ANOVA for Marital Communication/ 1. point of measurement by Father group:  $F_{1,122}=3.81$ ,  $p=.012$ . ANOVAs for Sexuality and Conflict are not significant).

If we look at the changes of the four facets, we find the following:



Change in the Social function is determined by marital communication. Increase of the Social function leads also to increases in Instrumental function as well as in Putting career behind child's interest. The Instrumental function will increase the more, the better sexuality in marriage is. If the Instrumental function increases, the Breadwinner function also will go up.

High marital quality leads to higher general paternal involvement during the child's transition to school. What also can be seen in the path diagram, is the central role of the Social function in the concept of fatherhood. This function is not only the most important one of the four facets, its change also influences the change of the others. That means, when a father feels that he should take his time to be together with the child, to talk to him, and to be present at important occasions, he also is ready to do something for his child - teaching the child, being concerned about her or his school career, or earning the living for the family.

Marriage quality and concept of fatherhood are not interrelated before the child enters school. However, marriage quality before the child enters school does predict the Social and Instrumental functions after the child has entered school.

**Table 3:** Correlations between Marital Communication (wife's perspective, 1 month before child enters school) and concept of fatherhood (husband's perspective).

	Breadwinner Function	Putting Career behind Child's	Instrumental Function	Social Function

		Interest		
1 month before child enters school	-.04	-.09	.09	.04
6 months after school has started	.06	.07	<b>.25**</b>	<b>.21*</b>
6 months after school has started, partial correlation with same facette at first point of measurement held constant	.09	<b>.15<sup>(+)</sup></b>	<b>.20*</b>	<b>.19*</b>

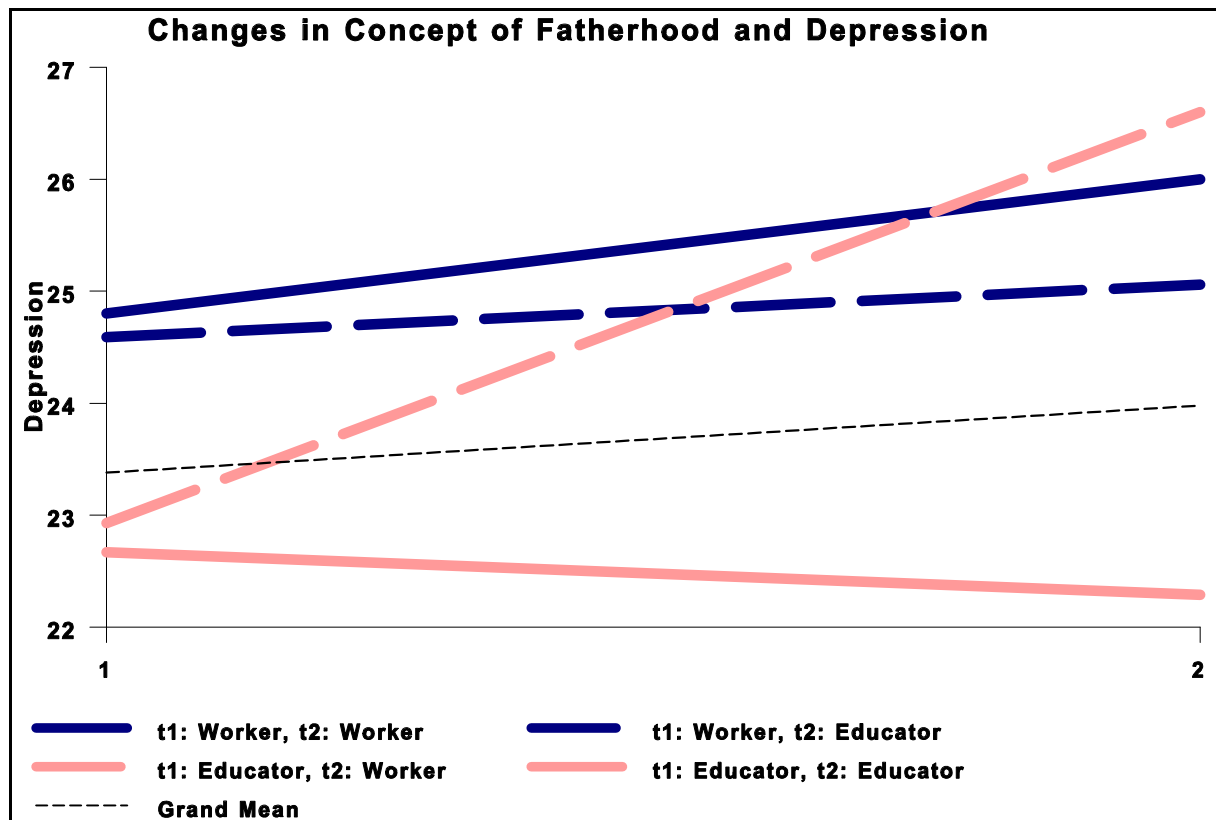
This is a confirmation of hypothesis 2: Good marital communication before transition leads to higher valuation of the Social and Instrumental functions in fathers after transition. The significant partial correlations show that there is a substantial increase in Social or Instrumental function when communication is good, and a real decrease when communication is low, respectively.

## **4.2 Consequences of change in the concept of fatherhood for the father himself and for marriage quality**

### **4.2.1 Consequences for depression**

Fathers who stay with their concept of fatherhood and fathers who change it, do not differ in depression in the beginning, but they show different depression scores at the second point of measurement. The MANOVA for Depression by Type (Worker/ Worker, Worker/ Educator, Educator/ Worker, Educator/ Educator), and the within factor Point of Measurement (PoM) shows the following effects: Type:  $F_{3, 120}=3.91$ ,  $p=.010$ ; PoM:  $F_{1, 120}=4.29$ ,  $p=.040$ ; Type by PoM:  $F_{3, 120}=2.11$ , n.s.. There are no significant linear contrasts between types in the first PoM. In the second PoM, "Educator/ Educator" differs significantly from "Educator/ Worker" and from "Worker/ Worker".



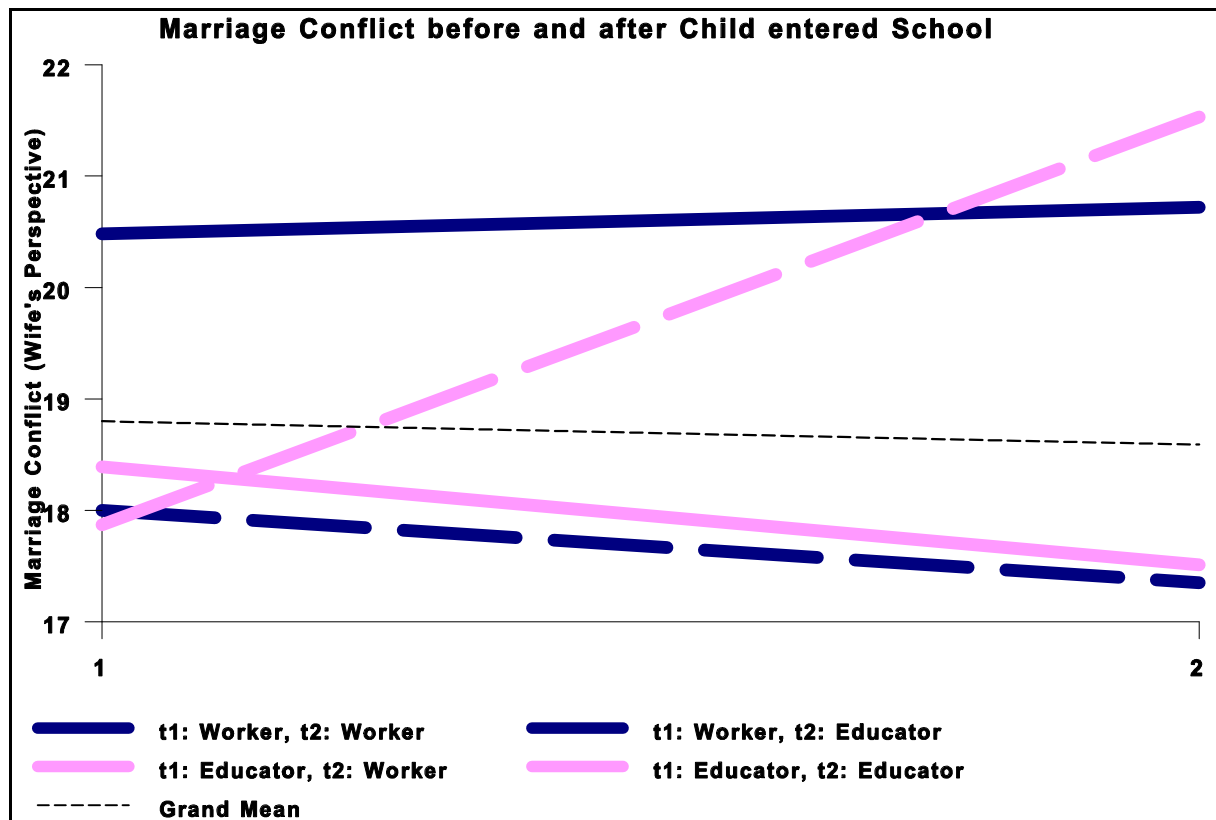


The change of Educator to Worker, which we regard as dysfunctional during the child's transition, might be seen as unfavorable by the fathers themselves as well, and therefore lead to higher depression. Hypothesis 4 can be partly confirmed: Changing into a more traditional direction, i.e. changing to type "Father as Worker", increases depression. However, the opposite is not true. Changing into the type "Father as Educator" does not lower depression. These fathers stay on the same depression level. So do the fathers, who do not change, but stay in the type Worker.

The only group of fathers who stay in a relatively low level of depression over time, are the fathers who stay in the type "Father as Educator". These fathers may have been quite close to the child all the time and therefore adjust to the transition easier, with lower emotional costs, than other fathers.

#### 4.2.1 Consequences for marital quality

As the stability of the three scales in the Marriage Quality Questionnaire are substantial (Communication: .67, Conflict: .65, Sexuality: .55), we computed covariance analyses in order to investigate the influence of change in concept of fatherhood on marriage quality. The MANOVA for Communication showed no significant effects. So didn't the MANOVA for Sexuality. However, there was an effect for Conflict. The MANOVA for Conflict (second point of measurement) by Type (Worker/ Worker, Worker/ Educator, Educator/ Worker, Educator/ Educator) and the covariate Conflict (first point of measurement) showed the following results:



Regression:  $F_{1,121}=90.55$ ,  $p=.000$ ; Type:  $F_{3,121}=2.71$ ,  $p=.048$ , Covariate:  $t=9.52$ ,  $p=.000$ .

Looking at the fathers who started in the type "Father as Worker" (dark blue lines), one can see again the impact of marriage quality on concept of fatherhood change. Fathers who do not change (straight line) show a higher conflict level than fathers who change (broken line). The pink lines represent the fathers belonging to type "Father as Educator" at the first point of measurement. Both groups show low conflict levels at the first point of measurement. Fathers who stay in the type "Father as Educator" also stay on the low conflict level. Fathers who change to the type "Worker" show an increased conflict level (effect size 0.46 SD units).

Maybe these fathers' wives are especially disappointed, because their spouses had been quite functional fathers before the transition, and also the marriage had been good, but nevertheless the men have changed into an unfavorable direction. This might have led to arguments between the spouses and raise the conflict level.

The question is, why these fathers with good preconditions change into the "wrong" direction. There could be a lot of reasons. Maybe, something happened to the marriage, or there has been a large number of critical life events, which might have been stressful.

As we have seen in figure 5, the group of fathers who change from Educator to Worker, show increased depression scores at the second point of measurement also. So, the question arises, in which way depression and marriage quality are interrelated. If we conceptualize depressive mood as a reaction either to inner conflict or to situational characteristics, one can imagine the following scenario: Before the child comes to school the father has a concept which values the

Social and Instrumental functions higher than breadwinning. He experiences high marital quality and good mood. During the child's transition to school something happens. Maybe his employer wants him to work more. Maybe, there is a need for more money in the family. Whatever the reason is, the father starts to work longer hours. (There is, in fact, a tendency of more work load.) It might well be, that the father feels stress, because he experiences an inner conflict between originally willing to have more time for the child and instead putting more time into the career. Changing the concept of fatherhood could be a strategy to reduce the cognitive dissonance. But instead of being better off by this, he is faced with a disappointed wife who starts arguing about his behaviors. This increases the conflict level in marriage, and the increased conflict level leads to higher depression scores.

## 5 Discussion

This paper has shown that the child's transition to school is structurally equivalent to transition to parenthood, insofar as paternal attitudes change and as marital quality is a moderator for the direction of change.

Interestingly, there exists no interrelation between marital quality and concept of fatherhood shortly before the child enters school. One could expect an interrelation, because the child is already six years old, and fathers have interacted with the child all these years. Why shouldn't marital quality have worked as a resource during that time? We think, it does have worked, but the coming transition hides the interrelation, because some fathers start earlier than others when adjusting to the new situation. As transition is a period of accelerated development, the measurement takes place when some fathers are already in the process of change, while others still have not started to think about the new situation. Also, the concept change might not go linear into one direction. Six months after beginning of school, however, most fathers have found their new concept of fatherhood, and the interrelation with marital quality can be seen clearly.

Marital quality is not only a precondition for attitudinal change in fathers, but also a consequence of it. We expected that concept change in the direction of "Father as Educator" would enhance marital quality. This is not true. What we found is, that change into the unfavorable direction interrelates with lower marital quality and depression as well. No positive changes in mood or marital quality can be found as consequences of functional attitude change, but negative changes as consequences of dysfunctional attitude change. We do not know yet, whether the functional attitude change had already led to behavior changes in fathers. Maybe, their concept of fatherhood had already changed, but their actual involvement in child-related tasks had not. Or maybe, these fathers have started to do more with the child or for the child, but these behaviors created a new situation in the family, which mothers and kids must get used to.

Further research is needed to find out, how long it takes until not only attitudes but also behaviors are well established, and under which circumstances the new attitudes and behaviors will stay.

## 6 Literature

Amato, P.R. (1996). More than money? Men's contributions to their children's lives. Paper presented at the Men in Families Symposium, Pennsylvania State University.

- Belsky, J. & Rovine, M. (1990). Patterns of marital change across the transition to parenthood: Pregnancy to three years postpartum. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52, 5-19.
- Belsky, J., Youngblade, L., Rovine, M. & Volling, B. (1991). Patterns of marital change and parent-child interaction. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53, 487-498.
- Cowan, C.P. & Cowan, P.A. (1992). When partners become parents. The big life change for couples. New York: Basic/Harper.
- Cummings, E.M. & O'Reilly, A.W. (1997). Fathers in family context: Effects of marital quality on child adjustment. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), The role of the father in child development (S. 49-65). New York: Wiley.
- Einsiedler, W. (1988). Schulanfang und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung. Grundschule (10) 20-23.
- Hahlweg, K., Schindler, L. & Revenstorf, D. (1982). Partnerschaftsprobleme: Diagnose und Therapie. Berlin: Springer.
- Hautzinger, M. & Basler, M. (1993). ADS - Allgemeine Dpressions Skala. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Paetzold, B. (1988). Familie und Schulanfang. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt.
- Ramey, S.L. & Ramey, C.T. (1994). The transition to school. Why the first two years matter for a lifetime. Phi Delta Kappa, 76, 194-198.