

UNDERSTANDING FATHERS' CONTRIBUTION TO BEHAVIORAL FORMATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This phenomenological study provides an in-depth examination of fathers' lived experiences in relation to early childhood behavioral development (ages 3–4) in Indonesia and Malaysia. The urgency of this research stems from the gap between the demands of contemporary parenting including digital literacy and the persistence of traditional masculinity constructs that often impede fathers' emotional involvement. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews with four fathers of children aged 3–4 years, the core findings reveal that modern fathers have transitioned into vital agents of the Complementary Parenting Model. They specifically foster children's independence, resilience, and exploratory courage while simultaneously acting as digital gatekeepers through restrictive mediation practices. Theoretically, these results contribute to strengthening the Complementary Parenting Model. However, the study also highlights a significant challenge: the masculinity dilemma, which leads to difficulties in emotional regulation and affective communication (emotional literacy), often managed through rigid expressions of assertiveness. The study underscores the critical need to transform fathering education programs from mere awareness campaigns into comprehensive training initiatives that emphasize specific competencies, particularly consistent positive discipline and emotional literacy, to enhance the quality and effectiveness of paternal involvement in early childhood development.

Keywords: Father Involvement, Complementary Parenting, Emotional Literacy, Early Childhood

Background

The transformation of family structures in the modern era, both in developing and developed countries, has generated increasingly complex patterns of family relationships. Within this context, there has been a significant shift in gender roles within the household, in which fathers are no longer positioned solely as breadwinners, but also as active figures in childrearing¹. Gonzalez² emphasize that paternal involvement in children's daily activities such as playing, feeding, or accompanying them to sleep has risen sharply over the past two decades, particularly among highly educated families. Nevertheless, from both cultural and structural perspectives, many fathers continue to face barriers in practicing equitable parenting due to the persistence of patriarchal values and traditional gender role divisions within society.³

Unfortunately, the pivotal role of fathers has not yet been fully reflected in parenting practices across various social contexts⁴. Many fathers are indirectly marginalized from childrearing responsibilities due to heavy work demands, limited knowledge of child developmental needs, or insufficient social support for paternal caregiving⁵. Therefore, gaining an in-depth understanding of how fathers perceive and enact their roles in early childhood parenting becomes an urgent research agenda, particularly in uncovering the psychosocial dynamics that shape their involvement. By foregrounding the voices and subjective experiences of fathers, this study seeks to provide contextualized and nuanced insights

into the forms, meanings, and impacts of paternal roles in shaping the behavior of children aged three to four years.

Several factors have been identified as underlying causes of fathers' limited involvement in early childhood caregiving. One of the primary factors is the pressure of work and financial responsibilities, which often lead fathers to perceive the provision of economic support as their principal contribution to the family.⁶ Hadfield⁷ in their study of Syrian refugee families, revealed that time constraints, excessive workloads, and economic insecurity were the major barriers preventing fathers from active participation in caregiving activities. In addition, persistent social norms rooted in traditional gender stereotypes further reinforce the perception that parenting is primarily the mother's domain. In many cultural contexts, including Asia and the Middle East, fathers are predominantly regarded as figures of authority or disciplinarians rather than as sources of emotional closeness, playful interaction, or equal communication with their children⁸.

In Indonesia, approximately 20.9% of children grow up without an active paternal role, according to data from UNICEF and BKKBN⁹, and only 37.17% of children aged 0–5 are raised by both parents, based on national statistics¹⁰. Local research in the Greater Jakarta area indicates that the average father-involvement score across six parenting dimensions is 3.4 (on a 1–5 scale) for fathers of children aged 2–4 years, which is higher than the score for fathers of children aged 5–12 years¹¹. In Malaysia, adolescent-perception studies

¹ E Davies, "Family, Men's Involvement In," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosf014.pub2>.

² J C Gonzalez et al., "Intervention and Implementation Characteristics to Enhance Father Engagement: A Systematic Review of Parenting Interventions," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-023-00430-x>.

³ K Hadfield et al., "Father Involvement and Child Development: A Prospective Study of Syrian Refugee Families," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-024-02809-y>.

⁴ M Kotelchuck, "The Impact of Fatherhood on Men's Health and Development," 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75645-1_4.

⁵ Annisa Wahyuni et al., "Peran ayah (fathering) dalam pengasuhan anak usia dini" 2 (2021).

⁶ Y Han, K Liu, and Y Xie, "Factors Affecting Father Involvement in Parenting and Solutions," *Journal of*

Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v8i.4624>.

⁷ Hadfield et al., "Father Involvement and Child Development: A Prospective Study of Syrian Refugee Families."

⁸ R Novianti and N Islami, "Parenting in Cultural Perspective: A Systematic Review of Paternal Role Across Cultures," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1287>.

⁹ Antara News, "20,9 Persen Anak Indonesia Tumbuh Tanpa Peran Ayah," 2024, <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/4956325/209-persen-anak-indonesia-tumbuh-tanpa-peran-ayah>.

¹⁰ Badan Pusat Statistik, "Profil Anak Indonesia: Persentase Anak Tinggal Bersama Kedua Orang Tua" (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023), <https://www.bps.go.id>.

¹¹ M Marzuki, K S Dewi, and D P Paramita, "Father Involvement Pada Ayah Bekerja Di Jabodetabek," *INTUISI: Jurnal Psikologi Ilmiah* 11, no. 1 (2019),

report an average father-involvement score of 3.67 out of 5, with “responsibility” identified as the highest dimension and “accessibility” (presence) as the lowest¹². The age of 3–4 years represents a critical developmental phase, as children undergo a preschool transition marked by rapid language acquisition, emerging motor and social independence, and the development of emotional regulation and foundational cognitive skills that strongly shape school readiness and long-term developmental outcomes.

Globally, there has been growing attention to the role of fathers in child-rearing, in line with the recognition that fathers are not merely economic providers but also caregivers who exert a profound influence on children’s socio-emotional development¹³. Nevertheless, research in developing countries indicates that paternal involvement continues to face significant barriers, particularly during the ages of three to four, a developmental stage considered highly sensitive for behavioral formation¹⁴. At this age, high-quality paternal engagement provides essential positive stimulation for children’s cognitive growth, social competence, and emotional regulation skills¹⁵. Unfortunately, empirical evidence suggests that in many cultural contexts, fathers’ involvement at this stage remains limited, both in terms of quantity and quality.

The ages of three to four represent a critical developmental stage during which children begin to establish patterns of social interaction, imitate behaviors from authoritative figures, and learn to regulate basic emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy¹⁶. At this stage, fathers play a pivotal role as role models in shaping prosocial behaviors, including empathy, impulse control, and conflict resolution skills¹⁷.

Although research on parenting continues to expand, the majority of studies still concentrate on the maternal role in early childhood caregiving, often positioning fathers as peripheral figures¹⁸. In the context of children aged 3–4 years a critical stage for character formation and social behavior there remains a significant lack of studies that specifically explore paternal experiences¹⁹. Diniz²⁰ in their systematic review, highlighted that qualitative research addressing fathers’ perspectives remains scarce, with most investigations focusing merely on quantitative aspects such as the frequency of daily involvement. Strugarek²¹ further emphasized that such an approach creates a knowledge gap, as the emotional and subjective dimensions of father involvement cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach is highly relevant and necessary.

<https://journal.unnes.ac.id/nju/index.php/INTUISI/article/view/20115>.

¹² R Rasdi, M Ismail, and S Wook, “How Do Malaysian Adolescent Children Perceive Their Fathers’ Involvement in Their Parenting?,” *Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2015), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282851733_How_do_Malaysian_Adolescent_Children_Perceive_their_Fathers%27_Involvement_in_their_Parenting.

¹³ R H Lestari and S K Alam, “Mother’s Perception of Father’s Involvement in Developing Social–Emotional Development of Early Childhood,” in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Learning Innovation and Quality Education (ICLIQE 2019)*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2991/ASSEHR.K.200129.011>.

¹⁴ M Giannotti et al., “The Role of Paternal Involvement on Behavioral Sensitive Responses and Neurobiological Activations in Fathers: A Systematic Review,” *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2022.820884>.

¹⁵ N Puglisi et al., “Father Involvement and Emotion Regulation during Early Childhood: A Systematic Review,” *BMC Psychology*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02182-x>.

¹⁶ H Herawati and R Yulia, “Pemberdayaan Ibu Rumah Tangga Sebagai Upaya Mengembangkan

Kemandirian Dan Budaya Kreatif Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Almunin Di Kelurahan Way Kandi Bandar Lampung,” *Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat Indonesia*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55606/jpkmi.v3i1.1054>.

¹⁷ M Brantasari, “Peran Pengasuhan Ayah Terhadap Perilaku Empati Anak Usia Dini,” *Pendas Mahakam: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran Sekolah Dasar*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.24903/pm.v6i2.861>.

¹⁸ Lestari and Alam, “Mother’s Perception of Father’s Involvement in Developing Social–Emotional Development of Early Childhood.”

¹⁹ A G Craig et al., “The Long-Term Effects of Early Paternal Presence on Children’s Behavior,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10826-018-1206-1>.

²⁰ E Diniz, T Brandão, and M Veríssimo, “Father Involvement during Early Childhood: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies,” *Family Relations*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12858>.

²¹ P Strugarek and J Wendland, “Paternal Cognitions and Strategies Related to Sleep Problems of Toddlers: A Qualitative Study from the Father’s Point of View,” *Early Child Development and Care*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.2022657>.

Phenomenology provides researchers with the means to explore the subjective realities of fathers how they construct meaning in their caregiving roles, the challenges they encounter, and the values they internalize in their interactions with their children²². By effectively addressing and offering insights into this significant knowledge gap, phenomenology emerges as an essential and highly relevant framework for this exploration²³. By effectively addressing and offering insights into this significant knowledge gap, phenomenology emerges as an essential and highly relevant framework for this exploration. It offers researchers an invaluable opportunity to immerse themselves deeply in the diverse and subjective realities experienced by fathers examining in detail how these individuals perceive their caregiving roles²⁴, the multitude of challenges they face on a daily basis, and the core values they embody while engaging in meaningful interactions with their children²⁵.

This study is grounded in two major theoretical frameworks within developmental psychology: John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of emotional bonds between children and their primary caregivers, including fathers, as the foundation for healthy social and emotional development. Fernandes²⁶ found that consistent emotional closeness between fathers and their children from an early age significantly contributes to emotional regulation, adaptive skills, and the development of a child's sense of security. This theoretical grounding is further reinforced by Giannotti²⁷ whose systematic review demonstrated

that paternal involvement in caregiving influences children's sensitive behavioral responses and activates neurobiological processes that support social learning.

Meanwhile, Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that children develop social behaviors through processes of observation, imitation, and interaction with significant figures in their environment²⁸. In this regard, the father's role as a primary role model becomes pivotal in shaping children's social character, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills²⁹. Nevertheless, most previous studies have tended to generalize fatherhood without examining in depth the dynamics occurring within the specific developmental stage of ages 3–4 a critical phase that marks children's transition toward social and emotional independence.

In this study, the primary focus of the research background is threefold: (1) to examine the essence and practices of contemporary fathering in children aged 3–4 years, with particular attention to the specific strategies fathers employ in shaping children's behavior and character including moral and spiritual values as well as in fostering social competence and courage; (2) to analyze how the paternal role is enacted as a form of parenting that is complementary to maternal caregiving, including the development of co-parenting partnerships and fathers' responses to modern challenges such as their function as Digital Gatekeepers; and (3) to identify and critically explore the enabling factors (e.g., awareness of involved fathering) and the internal challenges faced by fathers especially dilemmas of masculinity and limitations in

²² L Go and M F Pang, "Phenomenography in the 'Lived' Context of Parental Learning," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211016160>.

²³ A Alhazmi and A Kaufmann, "Phenomenological Qualitative Methods Applied to the Analysis of Cross-Cultural Experience in Novel Educational Social Contexts," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.785134>.

²⁴ E Dri et al., "Providing Care to a Family Member Affected by Head and Neck Cancer: A Phenomenological Study," *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S00520-019-05026-2>.

²⁵ S Nageswaran and S L Golden, "Establishing Relationships and Navigating Boundaries When Caring for Children With Medical Complexity at Home," *Home*

Healthcare Now, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1097/NHH.0000000000000636>.

²⁶ C Fernandes et al., "Early Attachment to Mothers and Fathers: Contributions to Preschoolers' Emotional Regulation," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.660866>.

²⁷ Giannotti et al., "The Role of Paternal Involvement on Behavioral Sensitive Responses and Neurobiological Activations in Fathers: A Systematic Review."

²⁸ S Manik et al., "Theory of Bandura's Social Learning in The Process Of Teaching at SMA Methodist Berastagi Kabupaten Karo," *Jurnal Visi Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.51622/pengabdian.v3i2.729>.

²⁹ "Teori Pemodelan Bandura," *Jurnal Multidisiplin Madani*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.55927/mudima.v2i7.692>.

emotional literacy that may hinder the effectiveness and quality of their emotional involvement.

Method

This study employed a qualitative³⁰ approach with a phenomenological design, aiming to explore in depth the subjective experiences of fathers in shaping the behavior of children aged 3–4 years. The phenomenological approach was applied to understand the meanings attributed by fathers to their caregiving roles, particularly in the domains of affection, social interaction, and the development of children's prosocial behavior. Phenomenology is especially appropriate when researchers seek to capture emotional and cognitive dimensions that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods³¹. By focusing on the perceptions and lived experiences of fathers, this study allows for a deep and contextual exploration of paternal involvement in early childhood parenting.

The data sources in this study consisted of four fathers who have children aged 3–4 years and are actively involved in their children's daily caregiving. The participants were purposively selected to reflect diversity in socio-professional backgrounds, including fathers employed as company employees, traders, and individuals working in the social sector. In addition to occupational variation, the fathers represented a range of ages between 30 and 45 years. This heterogeneity among participants provided rich and contextualized perspectives on paternal caregiving practices, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of fathering dynamics in early childhood within everyday family settings. Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, guided by open-ended prompts to allow participants to freely elaborate on their experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to select informants based on specific criteria,

including the child's age, the father's level of caregiving involvement, and willingness to participate. The data were analyzed using a thematic³² analysis framework, which included the processes of transcription, open coding, theme identification, and interpretation of meaning across shared patterns of experience. To ensure data validity, the study applied member checking and data triangulation³³, thereby confirming that the researcher's interpretations aligned with participants' perspectives and were supported by consistent evidence³⁴. This methodological framework was expected to yield findings that are valid, meaningful, and contributive to both theoretical development and practical applications in gender-based parenting.

Results

The interview data provide robust evidence that fathers' involvement in the care of children aged 3–4 years extends beyond material provision and encompasses formative contributions to early character development. Participants described a caregiving pattern characterized by emotional responsiveness, the cultivation of psychological security, and the demonstration of consistent behavioral models within daily routines. Several fathers reported intentional practices such as maintaining warm, developmentally appropriate communication, offering physical affection to reinforce emotional bonding, and engaging children in shared religious activities including congregational prayer as mechanisms through which they nurture socio-emotional competencies.

These accounts resonate with established developmental theories highlighting the salience of paternal sensitivity and availability in early childhood. Consistent with the findings of Syamsuddin et al.³⁵, the data suggest that active paternal engagement, particularly in the domain of emotional support, exerts a measurable influence on children's socio-emotional outcomes. Such

³⁰ U Sulung and M Muspawi, "Memahami Sumber Data Penelitian: Primer, Sekunder, Dan Tersier," *Edu Research* 5, no. 3 (2024): 110–16.

³¹ J W Creswell and C N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

³² V Braun and V Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

³³ L J Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, Edisi revisi (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2019).

³⁴ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan R&D*, Edisi terbit (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2022).

³⁵ A Syamsuddin, Y Pratama, and S Handayani, "Father Involvement and Socio-Emotional Development of Early Childhood in Indonesia," *Early Childhood Research Journal* 8, no. 3 (2020): 210–20, <https://doi.org/10.31004/ecrj.v8i3.567>.

involvement appears to contribute notably to the emergence of early self-confidence, autonomy, and adaptive social behavior, thereby reinforcing the critical role of fathers as co-constructors of early developmental trajectories.

This section presents the central findings of the phenomenological study exploring fathers' lived experiences in shaping the behavior of children aged 3–4 years. The data were generated through in-depth interviews that captured the essence of participants' subjective experiences. A rigorous thematic analysis conducted independently from the interpretive engagement with existing literature in the Discussion section identified four interrelated overarching themes: (1) Communicative Partnership in Parenting, which highlights the construction of two-way communication and the collaborative division of caregiving roles with mothers; (2) Spiritual and Positive Character Formation, encompassing the cultivation of honesty and the early habituation of religious practices; (3) Child Self-Development Strategies, focusing on fathers' efforts to foster confidence, courage, and emergent masculinity; and (4) Paternal Physical and Affective Involvement, referring to emotional closeness and the regulation of children's digital media use. These core findings are substantiated by substantial verbatim excerpts reflecting participants' authentic voices, thereby ensuring strong empirical credibility.

This theme highlights how the fathers in this study conceptualize and enact their roles as parental partners who stand on equal footing with mothers. The central emphasis lies in the use of effective communication strategies with their young children and the presence of a mutually agreed-upon division of caregiving responsibilities between partners.

Fathers positioned themselves as communication partners for their children by intentionally entering the child's world to understand their needs and social experiences. The findings indicate that fathers did not merely act as authority figures; rather, they consciously placed themselves as conversational partners or companions for their young children. To achieve effective interaction, participants acknowledged the need to "step into the child's world," which involves using age-appropriate language and perspectives aligned with the developmental level

of children aged 3–4 years. The primary aim of this strategy is to access deeper insights about the child's needs, emotions, and peer-related challenges information that would remain undisclosed if communication were strictly one-directional or purely instructional.

This process was described in detail by Participant R, who stated: "The first thing is fostering two-way communication; it's not easy to build that between a father and his child. So, I personally try to, how to say, adjust my language and really step into their world. That way, I can pick up important points information about what they need, for example, what happens when they play with friends, when someone bothers them, what they do in those situations. Those are things you learn from their social interactions. If a father cannot speak as a partner or in the child's own language, it becomes very difficult."

The division of parenting responsibilities between fathers and mothers was generally established through informal, unwritten agreements in which fathers concentrated on cultivating leadership qualities, responsibility, and religious obligations in their children. Although participants did not formalize these arrangements in written form, they acknowledged the presence of a clear delineation of roles within the parenting system. Mothers typically assumed responsibility for day-to-day caregiving due to their greater time availability, whereas fathers took on specific tasks related to instilling foundational character values that were more cognitive and normative in nature. In this context, the paternal role emphasized responsibility (e.g., personal and environmental cleanliness), religious duties (e.g., prayer), and the development of early leadership traits.

Participant R illustrated this division of roles as follows: "There is an unwritten agreement nothing explicit or written down but clearly there are parts handled by the father and parts handled by the mother. For example, matters related to shaping attitudes fall more to me as the father, focusing on responsibility and obligations such as prayer and worship. Since the mother spends more time with the children daily, that part naturally becomes her role."

These findings indicate that fathers in this study assumed a specialized role in transmitting normative values and fostering responsibility elements that are closely associated with the

development of independence and early leadership in young children.

This second theme reveals the fathers' primary emphasis on internalizing fundamental moral and spiritual values in their children aged 3–4 years, with fathers taking an active role as the principal educators in this domain. Within the subtheme Early Habituation of Religious Practices, all participants highlighted the importance of introducing religious values and worship behaviors during the preschool years, typically through modeling and consistent routine practices³⁶.

Participant Am demonstrated a firm and structured approach to early religious habituation, stating: "When it comes to worship, I have been strict from the beginning, because I personally did not experience that strictness as a child and feel that I missed out because of it. So I have instilled it from an early age. Going to the mosque, for example, has been made a routine when the call to prayer is heard, we immediately rush to go, and I have accustomed him to this since he was very young." In contrast, Participant Mr F emphasized a gentler, model-based approach with minimal direct instruction, reinforcing the role of fathers as behavioral exemplars³⁷. As he explained: "In my daily life? I don't really give my child many instructions; I mostly try to model the behavior. So I try not to get angry, and if I do feel angry, I stay quiet. And if I want to teach my child to perform congregational prayer at the mosque, then I go to the mosque first myself. So yes, I just try to set an example." Together, these accounts illustrate the diverse yet complementary strategies fathers employ to cultivate spiritual grounding and positive character traits, reaffirming the centrality of paternal role modeling and early moral guidance in shaping children's foundational values.

A subsequent subtheme, Instilling Honesty and Responsibility, demonstrates that fathers do not focus solely on ritual practices but also prioritize broader moral character formation. Fathers actively taught abstract concepts such as honesty by defining them in simple,

developmentally appropriate terms and reinforcing responsibility through the consistent use of consequences³⁸. Participant R described his effort to clarify the meaning of honesty so that his child would feel confident acknowledging mistakes without fear of reprimand. He explained: "Yes, honesty so even when he misbehaves, he is honest. We explain it to him by first defining what honesty is. Honesty means saying things as they are... To this day, even when he takes someone else's belongings, he will say, 'I took something from someone,' or 'I found something over there.' That is something he still holds onto, so whenever something happens, he can be honest."

The findings also show that the establishment of discipline through consequences operates in tandem with role modeling, both of which are closely connected to the development of responsibility. Fathers' involvement in shaping discipline and moral character particularly through providing examples and setting clear boundaries is recognized as essential for fostering children's self-control and prosocial behavior.

This theme examines the specific methods fathers employ to strengthen their children's psychological and social capacities, particularly focusing on internal strengths and emerging gender identity. Within the subtheme Building Confidence and Courage, fathers recognized their role in encouraging children to face challenges and overcome shyness. They used positive affirmations and created opportunities for children to perform or try new activities. Existing literature indicates that active paternal involvement especially in the form of emotional support is critical in fostering children's self-esteem and confidence, which subsequently enhances their willingness to explore³⁹.

Participant R described how he encouraged his child to develop the confidence to perform in public: "To build his confidence, we explain it to him even if at first he feels insecure and we tell him that he can do it. Eventually, he agrees. Just like at the recent TPA event, he wanted to participate

³⁶ R Gultom et al., "Peran Ayah Dalam Membangun Karakter Anak," *Jurnal Pendidikan Sosial Dan Humaniora* 4, no. 1 (2024): 587–96, <https://publisherqu.com/index.php/pediaqu/article/view/1638>.

³⁷ Halodoc, "Kata Psikolog: Pentingnya Peranan Ayah Pada Karakter Anak" (Halodoc, 2022),

<https://www.halodoc.com/artikel/kata-psikolog-pentingnya-peranan-ayah-pada-karakter-anak>.

³⁸ S3 PAUD F I P UNESA, "Pentingnya Peran Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini" (S3 PAUD FIP UNESA, 2025), Akses URL.

³⁹ PrimaKu, "Peran Penting Ayah Dalam Membangun Rasa Percaya Diri Anak," 2024, <http://https://...>

even before his friends were finished. He asked for the microphone because he wanted to recite Al-Fatihah. At first he laughed, but then he became serious.”

A further subtheme, Fathers’ Role in Self-Defense and Masculinity, highlights the father’s function as a figure who teaches assertiveness and appropriate gender-role behavior⁴⁰. Fathers guided their children to defend themselves when they believed they were in the right, while simultaneously fostering positive masculinity through daily interactions and play-based activities. Participant R articulated clear boundaries regarding when children were permitted to act aggressively (specifically in self-defense) and how they should regulate negative emotional expressions. He explained: “Developing courage first, confidence. Whatever the situation, if you are right and have the advantage, then you must be brave enough to defend yourself or to appear in public. I always tell him that. If he is still being bothered, it’s okay for him to defend himself. He has his ‘weapon,’ like scratching so it’s fine, as a warning. But after scratching, if he cries, I tell him as much as possible not to cry.”

Participant R also consciously instilled a sense of masculine identity through masculine-oriented language of appreciation and through activity preferences. He described: “I show him that he is a boy... That’s one way to help him get used to it so he does not drift into overly feminine behavior. So, I start by using masculine expressions of appreciation during our interactions... and by introducing certain games. Even though toys are not inherently gendered, at least we guide it like playing ball, or similar activities.”

These accounts demonstrate how fathers intentionally introduce assertiveness, emotional control, and positive masculine identity as part of their broader strategy for shaping children’s emerging sense of self and social functioning.

This role further underscores fathers as key figures who promote courage, exploration, and the development of kinesthetic skills dimensions that

often differ from mothers’ roles, which tend to emphasize pure emotional support⁴¹. The fathers’ self-development strategies centered on encouraging independence, bravery, and an early understanding of gender roles, all of which were intended to prepare children to become resilient and socially adaptable individuals⁴².

A similar dynamic was highlighted by Participant S, who illustrated the interplay between children’s exploratory tendencies and fathers’ protective responses: “His exploratory interest already overwhelms us when the gate opens, he runs anywhere. Even during prayer at the mosque, when other children are there, he suddenly disappears, and we get worried. So when we go somewhere, he already has his own plans, sometimes different from his parents’ plans. Even when buying sandals, he chooses them himself, but later refuses to wear them and tells us to give them to someone else.”

Firmness as a Manifestation of Masculinity. Participant S equated the enactment of fatherhood or masculinity with being “constantly strict or angry,” reflecting a traditional construction of paternal authority. Within this framework, firmness and behavioral boundaries set by fathers are often interpreted as integral to helping children develop emotional regulation and responsibility⁴³. However, his account also reveals a challenge: he struggled to articulate or enact masculinity in more positive, constructive forms beyond mere firmness. This suggests that some fathers rely on culturally inherited notions of masculinity rather than fully developed, reflective models of positive fathering.

Impact on Gender Role Development: Active paternal involvement has been shown to strengthen the development of masculinity in boys and provide distinct emotional experiences typically more challenging and explorative compared to maternal interactions, which are often characterized by gentler forms of engagement⁴⁴. Fathers’ difficulties in articulating and expressing their parental roles may have implications for their

⁴⁰ Yeny Duriana Wijaya, Fakultas Psikologi, and Universitas Esa, “Hubungan Keterlibatan Pengasuhan Ayah Dengan Maskulinitas Mahasiswa Pria Universitas ‘X’ Di Jakarta,” 2004.

⁴¹ Annisa Wahyuni, Syamsiah Depalina Siregar, and Riris Wahyuningsih, “Peran Ayah (Fathering) Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini,” *AL IHSAN: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini* 2, no. 2 (2021): 55–66.

⁴² UNESA, “Pentingnya Peran Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini.”

⁴³ Silvie Mil et al., “Pengaruh Pengasuhan Ayah Terhadap Perilaku Insecure Anak Usia Dini” 7, no. 4 (2023): 4752–63, <https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i4.4877>.

⁴⁴ Wijaya, Psikologi, and Esa, “Hubungan Keterlibatan Pengasuhan Ayah Dengan Maskulinitas Mahasiswa Pria Universitas ‘X’ Di Jakarta.”

children: boys may emulate forms of masculinity that are rigid and dominant, while girls may struggle to develop an understanding of male figures who are warm, communicative, and emotionally expressive⁴⁵.

The final theme, Physical and Affective Father Involvement, highlights the significance of paternal roles manifested through physical contact and the structuring of the child's interactional environment. This theme demonstrates that father involvement is not solely instructional but also deeply emotional and protective. First, Physical Closeness and Presence reflects how fathers intentionally use physical proximity and everyday presence as mechanisms to provide motivation, emotional support, and psychological safety. Affective engagement (affection) and physical interaction (touch) from fathers have been empirically shown to play a crucial role in fostering children's self-confidence and reducing stress-related hormonal responses⁴⁶. Father A emphasizes the importance of daily affectionate routines as an emotional foundation, explaining: "Physical closeness is essential. Every morning, I make sure to hug and kiss him before he leaves. That is what makes him feel safe and motivated."

In line with this perspective, Father R views his presence in the child's social environment as a form of protection as well as a source of encouragement. Active and consistent paternal participation in children's daily and social activities fosters a sense of security and supports the development of emotional autonomy⁴⁷. As he explained: "Whenever there is a school or social event, I try to be present, even if only briefly. Our presence is important for them; it becomes a source of psychological safety."

Second, Digital Media Restriction for Interaction reflects fathers' heightened awareness of the risks associated with digital exposure. This awareness drives them to implement strict limitations on digital media use, both in terms of content and screen-time duration (television/gadgets). Such restrictive mediation strategies aim to prevent digital addiction, exposure

to violent content, and the potential negative effects on children's behavior and mental health⁴⁸. Father R underscores the importance of tight monitoring, while also observing children's natural inclination to prefer real-life social interaction when given the opportunity. As he noted: "I strictly control their screen time and what they watch. But fortunately, children today when their friends come over will always choose to play with their friends rather than watch TV or hold a phone. That is good." By positioning himself as a content regulator (restrictive mediator) while simultaneously encouraging real-world social engagement, the father supports healthier social development and reduces the risk of digital social isolation.

Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study on the role of fathers in the upbringing of children aged 3–4 years demonstrate a significant transformation in contemporary fatherhood. Rather than functioning merely as financial providers, fathers now emerge as actively involved caregivers emotionally present, development-oriented, and deeply engaged in shaping children's character, confidence, and moral conduct. The major themes identified in this study spiritual formation, self-development, affective engagement, and discipline offer rich insights into the multidimensional nature of paternal involvement. These themes can be interpreted meaningfully when situated within major theoretical frameworks in child development.

Attachment Theory, pioneered by John Bowlby, posits that children possess an innate need to form close and consistent emotional bonds with their primary caregivers. Traditionally, mothers have often been positioned as the primary attachment figures; however, the findings of this phenomenological study explicitly support and extend the role of fathers as essential secondary attachment figures in early childhood development⁴⁹. Rituals of physical and affective contact function as an emotional anchor for the child. Such warm,

⁴⁵ Jurnal Flourishing, "Dampak Ketidadaan Figur Ayah Pada Gender Role Development Seorang Anak," *Jurnal Flourishing*, 2023, Akses URL.

⁴⁶ Halodoc, "Kata Psikolog: Pentingnya Peranan Ayah Pada Karakter Anak."

⁴⁷ UNESA, "Pentingnya Peran Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini."

⁴⁸ Mil et al., "Pengaruh Pengasuhan Ayah Terhadap Perilaku Insecure Anak Usia Dini."

⁴⁹ Yuli Kurniawati Sugiyo Pranoto Septianingsih, "Kelekatan Aman (Secure Attachment) Ayah Terhadap Kecerdasan Sosial Anak Usia 4–6 Tahun," *Jurnal Studi Guru Dan Pembelajaran* 8, no. 2 (2025): 1038–49, Akses URL.

responsive, and consistent interactions contribute to the development of the child's Internal Working Model (IWM) regarding the father's availability and reliability a core component of secure attachment⁵⁰.

Secure attachment to the father (father attachment) serves a unique and critical function as a Secure Base that fundamentally supports children's exploration drive, independence, courage, and social competence during the critical 3–4 year age period. Diverging from the maternal role, fathers often stimulate the child through activities characterized by greater challenge and spontaneity. Consistent paternal physical and emotional presence instills profound psychological safety and warmth⁵¹, enabling children to be more daring in academic risk-taking and highly adaptable within their social environments. Furthermore, a secure father attachment correlates significantly with enhanced Emotional Regulation in early childhood⁵². Empathetic and responsive fathers, particularly through simple affective routines such as hugs and kisses prior to separation, effectively guide children in managing their emotions, leading to robust social skills⁵³. Conversely, the deficit of consistent paternal emotional support can critically impair a child's emotional control, trigger low self-esteem, or foster avoidant attachment behaviors.

Therefore, these findings reinforce contemporary literature indicating that the father's role in childrearing is no longer supplementary or substitutive, but rather complementary and essential in establishing a solid cognitive, emotional, and social foundation for young children. Early and active paternal involvement encompassing physical, affective, and cognitive dimensions provides the groundwork for the development of self-confidence, emotional security, and a strong capacity for grit when confronting future challenges⁵⁴.

The father's role as a Behavioral Model (Modeling) is pivotal during the critical 3–4 year age phase, as fundamentally underscored by Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT)⁵⁵. SLT posits that children internalize behaviors, moral values, and emotional responses not primarily through trial and error, but crucially through observation, imitation, and modeling from a figure possessing dominance and authority; within the familial context, the father functions as a salient live model⁵⁶. Phenomenological findings indicate that fathers consciously serve as visual and behavioral prototypes (e.g., in spiritual practices) to inculcate character and spiritual values. This modeling process inherently involves Vicarious Learning, wherein children closely attend to and learn from the consequences both reinforcements and sanctions experienced by the. By directing high-fidelity attention toward the father's actions, children internalize behavioral norms, a mechanism that plays a significant role in their moral character development⁵⁷.

In addition to transmitting moral values, the father's role within the Social Learning Theory (SLT) framework also centers on fostering children's self-efficacy, namely their belief in their own capability to succeed in specific situations. According to Bandura, high self-efficacy cultivated through sustained paternal encouragement enhances children's persistence, resilience in the face of failure, and capacity for adaptive coping⁵⁸.

Bandura further elucidated that human learning is a dynamic process occurring through the continuous, transactional interplay among cognitive factors (beliefs and thoughts), behavior (actions), and the environment (paternal influence),

⁵⁰ "Peran Attachment Dalam Kehidupan Sosial Di Masyarakat," *Orasi Ilmiah Universitas Kristen Maranatha*, 2024, Akses URL.

⁵¹ Anggita Zahra Ratusila Munifah Bahfen, Sriyanti Rahmatunnisa, "Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini Di Wilayah Kelurahan Ciater," *Jurnal UMI* 7, no. 1 (2023): 93–102, Akses URL.

⁵² Munifah Bahfen, Sriyanti Rahmatunnisa.

⁵³ Heny Wulandari Ratna Ganda Ningrum, "Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Emosional Anak Usia Dini," *Murhum: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 6, no. 2 (2025): 544–54, Akses URL.

⁵⁴ Mil et al., "Pengaruh Pengasuhan Ayah Terhadap Perilaku Insecure Anak Usia Dini."

⁵⁵ Keanu Pramudiantoro, "Upaya Guru Dalam Mengimplementasi Teori Belajar Sosial Albert" 9439, no. May (2025): 17–24.

⁵⁶ Syamsul Risal Debi Irama, Sutarto, "Implementasi Teori Belajar Sosial Menurut Albert Bandura Dalam" 12 (n.d.): 129–39.

⁵⁷ Robi'atul Adawiyah Masyhuri, M, "Analisis Peran Orang Tua Dalam Pembentukan Karakter Moral Pada Anak Usia Dini" 12, no. 4 (n.d.): 304–19.

⁵⁸ Frank Pajares, Dale H Schunk, and Self-Concept, "(Perspektif Teori Kognitif Sosial Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Pendidikan) Abd . Mukhid," 1994.

a concept formalized as Reciprocal Determinism⁵⁹. Within this mechanism, when the father provides a desirable behavioral model, the child internalizes this value (cognitive factor), which subsequently motivates them to emulate the positive behavior (behavioral factor). Consequently, paternal involvement actively shapes the child's cognitive schema regarding self-concept and their capacity for socialization and problem-solving. Overall, these findings underscore the father's unique and salient contribution as a Moral Model and Social Competency Catalyst, transforming religious and moral values into tangible, lived practices (role model), rather than confining them to theoretical constructs⁶⁰. Furthermore, the father's skill in providing appropriate reinforcement guides children toward adopting vital prosocial behaviors (such as honesty and courage), which form an essential foundation for social intelligence and moral character development in early childhood⁶¹.

The most significant implications of these findings are practical in nature, emphasizing the need for a transformative approach to fathering education programs⁶². The study shows that contemporary fathers require not only an understanding of the importance of quality time, but also specific skills to navigate modern parenting challenges, such as digital literacy and emotional discipline. For instance, the findings related to restrictive mediation (regulating digital content and screen time) underscore the need for father-training modules that position fathers as Digital Gatekeepers. Moreover, fathers' ability to implement consistent consequences as illustrated and their use of positive affirmations to foster children's confidence highlight the importance of training in Positive Discipline and Affective Communication⁶³. These implications call for family and educational institutions to design fathering curricula that emphasize behavioral

competencies rather than merely promoting role awareness.

Theoretically, this study offers an important contribution to strengthening the concept of Complementary Parenting. The findings indicate that paternal parenting dynamics such as fostering courage, encouraging exploratory challenges, and setting boundaries are distinct from but highly complementary to maternal parenting dynamics, which traditionally emphasize comfort and emotional security⁶⁴. Fathers function as agents who promote independence and resilience, enabling children to test the limits of their own abilities and their environment.

This process, reinforced by positive affirmations cultivates the self-confidence children need when transitioning into broader social environments such as school. Such balanced collaboration between parents is crucial; children who receive these two complementary parenting styles tend to demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, higher social competence, and more mature moral intelligence⁶⁵.

The findings of this phenomenological study significantly contribute to expanding the literature in Early Childhood Developmental Psychology by emphasizing that paternal influence is intentional and measurable. Father involvement is thus positioned not merely as a demographic variable, but as a complex interactive factor that impacts both observable behavior and the child's internal cognitive structure (such as self-efficacy)⁶⁶. This research provides critical qualitative empirical data offering an in-depth narrative of involved fathering practices in Indonesia, challenging passive masculinity stereotypes, and advocating for a paradigm shift from the father as the head of the household to an active, character-building, and affectionate "head of the madrasah" (school/spiritual guide).

⁵⁹ Rasdi, Ismail, and Wook, "How Do Malaysian Adolescent Children Perceive Their Fathers' Involvement in Their Parenting?"

⁶⁰ Rohita Sinta Krisnawati, "Peran Ayah Dalam Menanamkan Nilai Ibadah Pada" 2, no. 2 (2020).

⁶¹ Devi Wahyu Ertanti Ika Anggraheni, "Pengaruh Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Terhadap Perkembangan Karakter Moral" 10 (2024): 96–101.

⁶² "Pelatihan Parenting Skill Bagi Orang Tua Untuk Meningkatkan Keterampilan Dalam Mengasuh Anak," *Jurnal Unsia*, 2024, Akses URL.

⁶³ Efrianus Ruli, "Tugas Dan Peran Orang Tua Dalam Mendidik Anak," *Jurnal Edukasi Nonformal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 143–46.

⁶⁴ Novita Eka Nurjanah, Fasli Jalal, and Asep Supena, "Studi Kasus Fatherless: Peran Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini," *Kumara Cendekia* 11, no. 3 (2023): 261–70.

⁶⁵ M Putri et al., "Factors Inhibiting the Psychological Recovery Process of Children in Conflict with the Law" (Unpublished Manuscript, 2023).

⁶⁶ Pepi Nuroniah Alifia Nabila Sausan, Esya Anesty Mashudi, "Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Perkembangan Kognitif Anak Usia Dini: Sebuah Studi Korelasional," n.d.

Fathers now demonstrate a high awareness that their role is vital and irreplaceable in character formation, transcending the traditional role of sole breadwinner⁶⁷. This awareness precipitates intentional involvement for instance, serving as a role model for worship or morality aligning with contemporary views on father involvement that stress the importance of emotional presence⁶⁸. This emotional engagement and direct interaction consequently contribute to healthy emotional expression, self-control, and a positive self-concept in the child⁶⁹.

Second, the role of fathers as Digital Gatekeepers. The implementation of strict control and restrictive mediation by fathers consistent with the literature on parenting challenges in the digital era reflects an adaptive contribution of fathers as protectors⁷⁰. Amid increasing risks of exposure to harmful content and device addiction, fathers play a crucial role in guiding children toward responsible and meaningful technology use⁷¹. This approach is reinforced by the natural tendency of young children to seek social interaction and explore their physical environment rather than remain fixated on screens. Consequently, restrictive mediation exercised by fathers supports the development of self-control and facilitates more adaptive social engagement⁷².

Despite the high level of awareness, significant challenges emerge that are shaped by fathers' internal factors. One of the most prominent is the Dilemma of Masculinity and Emotional Language. Hegemonic masculinity in Indonesia often positions men as dominant, rigid, and less skilled in domestic matters or emotional expression⁷³. Fathers' difficulty in articulating feelings or verbally explaining disciplinary reasons often leads them to

default to rigid expressions of firmness (such as "anger"), which may hinder authentic emotional closeness and the quality of communication with their children.

This masculinity-related challenge is further exacerbated by the lack of skills needed to reconstruct gender roles. Fathers who remain confined within stereotypes of toughness are less able to become warm, sensitive, and emotionally supportive figures qualities that are essential for early childhood development. A child's self-concept, emotional regulation, and self-esteem are profoundly shaped by the quality of positive emotional and verbal interactions with the father⁷⁴. Therefore, the gap between fathers' good intentions and their limited emotional language competence represents a critical issue that requires targeted training interventions.

A contradictory factor undermining the ideal paternal role is the Overwhelm in Managing Child Exploration. While fathers are theoretically mandated to foster boldness and exploratory drive in 3–4-year-olds, this challenge emerges because many fathers have not fully mastered safe parenting strategies, such as the Scaffolding technique (the provision of incremental support tailored to the child's competence⁷⁵. When paternal response to exploration is predominantly restriction rather than purposeful guidance, this risks critically impeding the child's cognitive development and creativity⁷⁶ (Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, 2025). Consequently, this finding suggests the imperative for developing dedicated training programs to equip fathers as effective Exploration Facilitators, enabling them to provide robust emotional support and the necessary space for children to attempt autonomous activities under judicious supervision.

⁶⁷ Diva Ingriani et al., "Dampak Father Involvement Dalam Pengasuhan Remaja," 2025.

⁶⁸ Ratna Ganda Ningrum, "Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Emosional Anak Usia Dini."

⁶⁹ Ayu Isnaini, Nawang Warsi Wulandari, and Deasy Christia Sera, "Pengaruh Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan (Father Involvement) Terhadap Konsep Diri Remaja," *Jurnal Psikologi Tabularasa* 16, no. 2 (2021): 77–82.

⁷⁰ Yeni Rachmawati Airin Mutiarasari, Aan Listiana, "Strategi Dan Tantangan Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan Anak Usia Dini Di Era Digital," *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 8, no. 6 (2024): 5779–92, Akses URL.

⁷¹ Airin Mutiarasari, Aan Listiana.

⁷² DL Quarta H Yuliah, RA Aprianty, "Pengaruh Father Involvement Terhadap Kontrol Diri Pada Generasi

Z Di Kota Banjarmasin," *Innovative: Journal Of Social Science Research* 5, no. 4 (2025): 8703–18, Akses URL.

⁷³ Muhammad Robbi Sofyan and Vania Pramudita Hanjani, "RINEKA :," no. 1 (2025).

⁷⁴ Isnaini, Wulandari, and Sera, "Pengaruh Keterlibatan Ayah Dalam Pengasuhan (Father Involvement) Terhadap Konsep Diri Remaja."

⁷⁵ Akhmad Syah Roni Amanullah, Endang Sri Wulaningsih, and Indrayani Nurdiana Sari, "Implementasi Teknik Scaffolding Untuk Mengembangkan Kecerdasan Kognitif Anak Usia Dini," *Annaliyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* 5, no. 1 (2022): 94–106.

⁷⁶ Wiwien Dinar Pratisti Kamila Syafa Zahira, "Keterlibatan Pengasuhan Ayah Dalam Mendukung Kemandirian Anak Usia Dini," n.d.

Overall, fathering in early childhood emerges as a complex and ambivalent phenomenon. Contemporary fathers are increasingly motivated by a heightened awareness of their parental role and are able to apply specific skills such as digital gatekeeping as supportive factors. However, these positive intentions are simultaneously constrained by internal dilemmas related to masculinity and limited emotional literacy, which operate as opposing forces. This tension illustrates that the success of fathering in the future does not rely solely on paternal willingness, but also on the availability of structural and psychoeducational support systems that enable fathers to reconstruct traditional gender role definitions. Such support is essential for helping fathers develop into figures who are not only firm and consistent in discipline, but also warm, responsive, and competent in managing the emotional and exploratory needs of young children in a safe and developmentally appropriate manner.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study provides the first in-depth examination of fathers' lived experiences in relation to early childhood behavioral development in Indonesia and Malaysia. Overall, the findings indicate that paternal involvement plays a significant and distinctive role, complementing maternal functions in shaping well-balanced children through a complementary parenting model. Fathers act as challengers and motivators who specifically promote children's independence, resilience, and exploratory courage, while simultaneously serving as proactive protectors in the digital era through digital gatekeeping practices. However, the effectiveness of fathering is often constrained by internal emotional barriers rooted in traditional constructions of masculinity manifested in difficulties expressing and managing emotions, which may lead to rigid forms of discipline. Therefore, this study strongly recommends the development of targeted training interventions that extend beyond technical parenting skills to also address gender-role dilemmas and enhance fathers' emotional literacy. Such efforts are essential to ensure that fathers' presence becomes genuinely effective, warm, and supportive for the optimal development of young children.

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