



Fathering Alone: A Case Study of a Single Father's Parenting Practices and Their Implications for Early Childhood Development

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the parenting experience of a father who single-handedly raises four children, including a two-year-old toddler, after his wife worked abroad as a migrant worker in Taiwan for eight years. The study employs a qualitative descriptive design, drawing from interviews, observations, and document reviews. Findings reveal that the father assumes full responsibility for his children's emotional, physical, and educational needs, shaping a family culture of independence and mutual care. However, the absence of maternal presence and limited social interaction appear to influence the children's confidence and emotional expression. The study draws on Bowlby's and Ainsworth's Attachment Theory to interpret the emotional dynamics within the father-child relationship and identifies key implications for early childhood education and family policy.

Keywords: *Fathering, Attachment Theory, Early Childhood Education, Parenting, Family Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Parenting in early childhood plays a crucial role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. While maternal involvement has traditionally dominated the discourse, recent studies emphasize the importance of father involvement as a determinant of child well-being and adaptive behavior (Lamb, 2010). In Indonesia, a growing number of fathers are assuming caregiving roles due to economic migration of mothers, particularly those working as migrant workers abroad (TKI). This socio-economic shift creates a unique context of father-led parenting, often under challenging emotional and practical circumstances. This shift in family dynamics brings new challenges, particularly

in how fathers manage parenting responsibilities while maintaining their role as economic providers. Previous studies have mainly focused on the impact of maternal absence on children's emotional well-being or academic achievement (Rahmawati, 2021; Santoso & Idrus, 2020).

This study focuses on a father who has raised four children independently for eight years while his wife works abroad. The youngest child, aged two, does not attend kindergarten due to the father's limited time and resources, highlighting the complexities of balancing work, caregiving, and child development responsibilities.

The theoretical lens of this study is grounded in John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969), which postulates that early relationships with caregivers form the foundation of a child's emotional security and social competence. Mary Ainsworth (1978) further expanded this theory through her 'Strange Situation' experiments, identifying secure and insecure attachment patterns. In the absence of maternal care, a father's sensitivity, responsiveness, and consistency become pivotal for ensuring the child's emotional stability. Research suggests that father involvement enhances children's self-regulation, empathy, and resilience (Cabrera et al., 2018), while limited interaction can lead to social withdrawal and reduced confidence.

Thus, this research aims to describe and analyze the experiences of a single father in performing daily caregiving roles and to identify the developmental impacts on his two-year-old and older children. It also seeks to contextualize these findings within global discourses on fatherhood and early childhood development.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive design to provide an in-depth understanding of the subject's parenting experience (Yin, 2018). The participant was a single father living with his four children, one of whom is a five-year-old child. His wife has been working in Taiwan for eight years as a Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (TKI). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and documentation. Interviews focused on the father's daily routines, caregiving strategies, emotional interactions, and perceived challenges. Observations were conducted to capture the children's social and emotional behavior at home. Data were analyzed through the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework thematically through coding, categorization, and interpretation aligned with the theoretical framework of attachment and family resilience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Father's Commitment and Parenting Philosophy

The study found that the father assumes full responsibility for his children's upbringing without relying on extended family support. He emphasizes independence and mutual responsibility among his children. Daily routines include preparing meals, managing school needs, and maintaining household chores together. The father balances multiple jobs such as vending and manual labor to provide for the family. The five-year-old child receives consistent care from the father, who manages feeding, bathing, and emotional comfort. Despite these efforts, the child does not attend kindergarten due to logistical and financial constraints. Observations indicate that the younger children exhibit signs of attachment to their father but limited social exposure. The eight-year-old daughter, in particular, demonstrates low self-confidence, shyness, and limited peer interaction. The five-year-old child shows obedience and early independence, managing self-care routines such as bathing and eating alone. "Anak-anak itu tanggung jawab saya. Mereka milik saya. Saya yang harus mendidik dan menemani mereka," (Father, interview, 2025).

This finding supports the notion that fathering is not merely a substitute role but a primary caregiving identity (Dermott, 2008). It highlights a nontraditional model of masculinity one that combines breadwinning with nurturing responsibilities challenging conventional patriarchal norms in Indonesian culture.

These findings suggest that while paternal care ensures basic needs and emotional security, it may not fully substitute the diverse socialization experiences typically available in preschool settings. The children's emotional patterns reflect both secure attachment to the father and social withdrawal linked to limited peer interaction. The father has taken full responsibility for raising his four children since his wife left to work in Taiwan eight years ago. He expressed that his children are his "own responsibility," and he refuses to entrust them to grandparents or relatives. This philosophy represents a deep sense of paternal obligation rooted in emotional attachment and moral duty.

2. Daily Routines and Role Overload

The father performs all household and caregiving tasks, from preparing meals and cleaning to earning income through informal jobs. His days are characterized by a continuous cycle of work and caregiving, with minimal rest. Despite fatigue, he consistently prioritizes the children's needs, demonstrating strong resilience and commitment. This condition, however, aligns with role strain theory (Goode, 1960), where multiple social roles (breadwinner, caregiver,

educator) compete for limited time and energy. Consequently, the 5-year-old child often remains at home, unable to attend kindergarten because the father cannot manage drop-off and pick-up schedules. This reflects how structural constraints, rather than parental neglect, limit children's access to early education.

3. Children's Adaptation, Independence, and Sibling Dynamics

Observation data revealed that all children developed a high level of independence. They manage daily routines such as preparing school uniforms, tidying the house, and caring for the younger siblings collaboratively. However, the 8-year-old girl exhibits shyness, low self-confidence, and social withdrawal, preferring to play only with her 5-year-old sister rather than peers. This finding reflects successful internalization of autonomy and responsibility, which is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding through social interaction in this case, between siblings rather than between parent and child.

However, the data also indicate psychosocial trade-offs. The 8-year-old girl exhibits shyness, low self-confidence, and social withdrawal, preferring to play only with her 5-year-old sister rather than peers. This condition can be interpreted through Erikson's psychosocial theory (Industry vs. Inferiority stage), suggesting that limited peer interaction and lack of maternal warmth may hinder the development of self-efficacy and social competence. When fathers assume the primary caregiving role, their ability to foster independence and provide emotional security becomes essential for children's confidence, social competence, and sense of identity. Erikson's theory thus provides a lens for analyzing the emotional and behavioral outcomes of children raised primarily by their fathers.

4. Emotional Climate and Limited Social Networks

Although the home environment is harmonious and filled with affection, it is also socially isolated. The children rarely interact with neighbors or extended family members despite living nearby. The father avoids troubling others and prefers self-reliance, which limits the children's external social exposure. This finding resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) specifically, a weakened mesosystem (interaction between home and community) that limits the child's opportunities for social learning. The absence of community engagement and formal schooling has reduced the variety of developmental stimuli available to the children.

5. Emotional Bond and Developmental Impact on the Youngest Child

The 5-year-old child is highly attached to the father and shows distress when separated. Observations indicate limited verbal expression and minimal interaction with peers. While physical needs are met, the lack of stimulation through structured play or early education may contribute to delayed language and social development. This aligns with studies showing that parental time investment and social interaction significantly influence early language acquisition and socio-emotional growth (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children's cognitive development is fundamentally a social process mediated by interaction with more knowledgeable others parents, peers, and community members. Through the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, he asserted that learning occurs when adults or peers provide guidance that enables children to perform tasks beyond their independent capabilities. In the context of single-father parenting, Vygotsky's framework helps to explain how the father's engagement, communication style, and shared daily activities contribute to the child's cognitive and socioemotional growth, even in the absence of a mother figure. The father's deep affection cannot fully substitute for the diversity of stimuli usually available through maternal care or preschool environments.

6. Cultural and Policy Implications

This case exemplifies the emerging transformation of fatherhood roles in Indonesia, especially among families affected by labor migration. It shows how men redefine caregiving identities within socio-economic hardship, yet without institutional support, the sustainability of such fathering practices remains limited. Chaudhary (2011) emphasized that parenting is not merely an individual or biological act but a deeply embedded sociocultural practice. According to Chaudhary, the meaning of caregiving behaviors varies across societies, reflecting cultural values and social institutions that influence how parents interpret their responsibilities toward children. This has strong implications for early childhood education policies and social protection programs targeting transnational families. There is a pressing need for: (1) Flexible child care services or community-based PAUD for working fathers; (2) Public awareness campaigns that normalize and support paternal caregiving; (3) Reintegration programs for returning migrant mothers to rebuild shared parenting dynamics.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

Thematic Focus	Key Observations	Implications
Father's Philosophy	Children are his sole responsibility	Redefines masculinity and paternal identity
Role Overload	Balancing caregiving and work	Emotional strain and limited time for schooling
Child Independence	Strong self-help habits	Early autonomy but limited social exposure
Psychosocial Impact	Shyness and low confidence in 8-year-old	Need for emotional and social stimulation
Isolation	Minimal community interaction	Risk of developmental stagnation
Educational Access	2-year-old not attending TK	Structural barriers, not parental neglect

This study's findings align with Bowlby's notion that secure attachment emerges when caregivers consistently respond to a child's needs with warmth and sensitivity. The father's continuous presence and commitment exemplify a compensatory attachment model, where paternal caregiving substitutes for maternal absence. However, the observed signs of social withdrawal and low confidence among the older daughter resonate with Ainsworth's concept of 'insecure attachment' resulting from restricted social interaction and limited external validation. Previous research by Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda (2017) suggests that engaged fathers positively influence children's language, emotional regulation, and cognitive skills. Nonetheless, the absence of broader socialization may restrict the development of social competence. Studies on father-led families in Asia (Lee & Park, 2020; Rahman, 2021) emphasize the dual burden of work and caregiving, often leading to parental fatigue and constrained social opportunities for children. The study reveals that solo fathering in the context of maternal migration presents a complex interplay between affection, responsibility, and structural limitation. While the father demonstrates emotional resilience and commitment, his dual role restricts the child's access to formal early education and optimal social stimulation. This case highlights the need for community-based child care support, early childhood outreach programs for working fathers, and policy inclusion of paternal roles in migrant family welfare frameworks. The findings also contribute to the discourse on gender and parenting roles. While caregiving has been culturally constructed as maternal, this case demonstrates the evolving flexibility of paternal roles in Indonesian society. Yet, systemic support for father caregivers remains minimal, reflecting the need for inclusive childcare and early education access.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results highlight the importance of community-based and policy-level interventions to support single fathers as primary caregivers. Early childhood education programs should adopt flexible attendance models to accommodate working parents. Community childcare centers could provide safe, accessible spaces for children whose parents work long hours. Furthermore, parent education programs should include modules on emotional communication and social development to strengthen attachment and resilience in single-parent families. At the policy level, social welfare institutions and local governments should integrate father-inclusive family programs. Recognition of paternal caregiving as an equally valid form of parenting can reshape early childhood policy and research priorities in Indonesia and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the resilience and dedication of a single father who fulfills the dual roles of provider and caregiver. While his efforts foster independence and emotional security among his children, limited social exposure poses developmental risks. The findings reaffirm the significance of attachment theory in understanding the emotional needs of children raised in non-traditional family structures. Strengthening community and policy support for such families is essential to promote inclusive and equitable early childhood development.

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