

## Discovering the Presence of Fathers: A Study on Fathers' Involvement in Childcare in Madiun Residency

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The evolving understanding of fatherhood has drawn increasing scholarly attention to paternal involvement as a key dimension of child development. In Indonesia, cultural expectations and economic pressures often restrict fathers' direct participation in daily childcare, raising questions about how they negotiate their presence and involvement under such conditions. This study explores the nature of father involvement in the Madiun Residency, addressing the gap in understanding how limited physical time may be balanced by the quality of interaction. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data on the amount of daily father–child interaction were combined with qualitative interviews exploring fathers' perceptions, emotional engagement, and caregiving styles. The analysis examined how time and quality relate to children's developmental outcomes. The findings indicate that while physical interaction time is relatively limited, quality engagement plays a crucial role in supporting emotional and social development, whereas physical development correlates more directly with time spent together. Three typologies of fathering have been identified: permissive, democratic, and democratic–permissive. Each typology represents a distinct approach to paternal involvement and responsiveness, particularly within the constraints of time. The study concludes that effective paternal involvement in contemporary Indonesian families extends beyond the dimension of duration and is better understood through the quality, emotional resonance, and intentionality of fathers' interactions with their children. These insights have practical implications for family education and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening meaningful father–child relationships.

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### Public Interest Statement

Despite the growing recognition of shared parenting, fathers are still seen mainly as economic providers, minimizing their role in early childcare. This study addresses how limited paternal involvement affects children's development. Combining qualitative and quantitative insights, the study shows that children feel a profound absence without active paternal presence. It challenges cultural norms and offers practical recommendations, such as community-based care systems, to foster greater paternal engagement. These findings are significant for parents, educators, policymakers, and scholars in supporting healthier family dynamics and child outcomes.



### Introduction

In recent years, the role of fathers in childrearing has become a significant topic in family and developmental research. Traditional views that positioned fathers solely as breadwinners (Maskalan, 2016; Willis, 2000) and authority figures have gradually shifted toward a broader understanding of fatherhood as a multidimensional construct (Crespi and Ruspini, 2015). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that fathers contribute not only economically, but also

emotionally, socially, and cognitively to their children's growth (Munjiat, 2017). The absence of fathers in childcare has a neuro-and psychosocial impact, which is worse for boys than for girls (Chang et al. 2024). According to Zhou, teenagers experience a higher level of loneliness due to the absence of their fathers. This opinion is strengthened by Pratiwi, who states that the absence of fathers in childhood is one of the factors that hinders communication with partners due to the difficulty of trusting and maintaining communication (Pratiwi et al. 2024). This transformation reflects a global recognition that paternal presence extends beyond physical availability and includes emotional connection, communication, and shared experiences (Crespi and Ruspini, 2015).

Within the Indonesian context, fatherhood is still shaped by strong cultural and religious norms that emphasize men's economic responsibilities, and they will be Featherman because of this role (Lestari, 2023). Social expectations often define fathers as providers and moral guides, while caregiving tasks remain primarily associated with mothers (Yunianti and Mulya, 2023). Such a division of roles frequently limits fathers' direct involvement in daily childcare. In regions such as Madiun Residency, where most fathers work full-time and commute long distances (BPS, 2024), their time with children is highly constrained. This raises critical questions about how fathers maintain their involvement and express their presence under such structural limitations.

A growing body of research highlights that paternal involvement has substantial effects on children's development, including emotional well-being, social competence, and cognitive performance (Elia, 2000, Safitri and Hidayati, 2013). However, debates continue regarding which dimensions of paternal involvement matter most—fathers' time and availability versus the quality of engagement characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and communication (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Pleck, 2010). Some studies focus on the quantity of time spent between fathers and children (Rahayu, 2017), while others argue that the quality of interaction, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and communication, is more crucial (Elia, 2000). These differing perspectives suggest that paternal engagement cannot be fully understood through time measures alone, particularly in socioeconomic and cultural contexts where fathers' physical presence is limited by work obligations.

Despite this growing interest, empirical studies on father involvement in Indonesia remain relatively scarce and often focus on urban areas (Istiyati et al., 2020; Mirza et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2021). Few studies have examined how fathers in semi-urban or working-class areas navigate their parental roles within the confines of cultural expectations and time constraints (O'Shaughnessy, 2009). Moreover, little attention has been given to how fathers conceptualize their role as caregivers in a social environment that still primarily associates nurturing with mothers. Understanding how Indonesian fathers negotiate these tensions is essential for expanding the theoretical framework of father involvement beyond Western paradigms.

Parenting theories also suggest that fathers exhibit diverse approaches to interacting with their children, often influenced by personal beliefs, cultural norms, and socioeconomic contexts (Feldman and Shaw, 2021). These approaches range from permissive and authoritarian to democratic, each reflecting distinct attitudes toward control, warmth, and communication. However, empirical exploration of such patterns among Indonesian fathers is limited. Investigating these orientations could shed light on how cultural adaptation and work demands influence fathers' relationships with their children and the construction of their caregiving identities.

Given these conceptual and empirical gaps, this study explores the presence and involvement of fathers in childcare within the Madiun Residency. This study aims to identify how fathers allocate time to be with their children, how they perceive their parenting roles in balancing work and family responsibilities, and how the quality of father-child interaction relates to different aspects of child development. By employing a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative data on time use with qualitative insights from interviews, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of paternal involvement that extends beyond physical co-presence.

This study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on fatherhood in Indonesia by examining how fathers embody their caregiving roles amid cultural expectations and structural constraints. The findings are expected to deepen the theoretical perspectives on paternal engagement and provide a foundation for policy and educational initiatives that encourage more balanced and meaningful participation of fathers in childcare.

## **Literature Review**

To systematically organize the discussion, the literature related to fathers and childcare can be categorized into three major themes. First, child neglect and children's rights provide a broader conceptual and ethical context for understanding parental responsibility. According to Tustin, Child neglect refers to the failure to provide children with their fundamental necessities (Tustin & Rhode, 2021). Ansell stated that neglecting children is when children are not provided with essential needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, and education, which can negatively impact their health, development, and safety (Ansell et al., 2012). Research on childcare rights has shown

that children grow up primarily in a family environment where their parents provide love and protection and work together to educate them (Vani et al., 2014).

Second, it focuses on father involvement and caregiving models. Previous studies have examined how paternal roles have been conceptualized and practiced in family studies. Yogman (2016) stated that fathers play a significant role in the successful development of their children. Their involvement in childcare has many positive effects on children's growth, including cognitive, emotional, psychological, social, and physical development (Jeong et al., 2018). Fathers provide a model of masculinity and imbue their children with assertiveness, wisdom, discipline, and decision-making abilities (Abdullah, 2010). A clinical model of father-oriented practices was designed by Lamb, include: 1) interactions, referring to fathers' direct involvement in their children's lives. 2) Accessibility, concerning their physical and psychological availability for their children, that is, exhibiting responsive warmth, and 3) responsibility for their welfare and care or control (Bond, 2020).

Third, contextual factors such as labor migration and father absence reveal the socioeconomic dynamics shaping paternal engagement in childcare. According to Wen, children in rural areas with or without parental supervision when their parents migrate to urban areas for work are children who are “left behind” (Wen & Lin, 2012). Children with parental absence due to labor can experience trauma and anxiety and often face difficulties in mental flexibility tasks (Bengwasan, 2018).

In light of these discussions, the present study aligns most closely with the second category of literature on father involvement and caregiving models. This study emphasizes the qualitative dimension of paternal engagement in childcare. This study explores how Indonesian fathers interpret and enact their caregiving roles when physical interaction is limited due to work obligations. By identifying three typologies of paternal caregiving, permissive, democratic, and democratic–permissive, his study contributes to broadening the conceptual scope of father involvement beyond Western-centric models, situating it within the everyday realities of working fathers in the Madiun Residency

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative (70%) and qualitative (30%) data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of fathers' involvement in childcare. The quantitative component served as the primary foundation, focusing on measurable aspects of father–child interactions. Data were collected through a survey of 110 full-time worker fathers with children aged 4–6 years residing in the former Madiun Residency. The questionnaire included semi-open items addressing daily co-presence, time spent together, and fathers' contributions to various domains of child development. The responses were analyzed using SPSS with a Kruskal–Wallis test at a 0.05 significance level, and the mean rank values were used to identify variations in fathers' behaviors and their caregiving patterns. The quantitative results are presented in tabular form, describing the frequency, proportion, and intensity of paternal involvement.

Qualitative data were used to enrich and contextualize these findings, providing narrative depth and interpretive insight into the statistical outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of respondents to explore how fathers perceive and practice caregiving, either through direct physical interaction or through long-distance involvement due to work obligations. The qualitative narratives helped explain the meanings behind the quantitative patterns, revealing how fathers negotiate emotional presence, responsibility, and caregiving values beyond the duration of their physical contact. Thus, while quantitative data outlined the general trends of paternal involvement, qualitative insights gave voice to the lived experiences that shape the quality and interpretation of fatherhood in the Madiun cultural context.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on the survey conducted by the researcher, several key findings emerged regarding fathers' involvement in childcare within the former Madiun Residency. The data obtained from 110 respondents revealed variations in the amount of time fathers spent with their children, the types of activities they engaged in, and the extent of their contributions to different areas of child development.

### ***Negotiating Fatherhood: Work Constraints and Childcare Involvement in the Former Madiun Residency***

To provide an initial overview of fathers' involvement in childcare, this section first presents quantitative data on the amount of time fathers spend interacting with their children daily. Time allocation is a crucial indicator, as it reflects the extent to which occupational responsibilities shape opportunities for direct engagement in child care and developmental activities. The distribution of respondents across different time categories illustrates the varying levels of paternal presence within the household context of the former Madiun Residency.

Table 1: Average Time Spent Interacting with Children

Time	Total of Respondents
Less than 6 hours/day	50
Between 6–8 hours/day	30
More than 8 hours/day	24
Total of Respondents	104

Table 1 shows that out of 104 respondents, 50 fathers (48.08%) reported spending less than six hours per day with their children, 30 fathers (28.85%) spent between six and eight hours, and 24 fathers (23.07%) were able to interact for more than eight hours daily. The data derived from Rasch model mapping (Briggs, 2019) suggest that the optimal interaction time for fathers in this context ranges between six to eight hours per day, although this represents a minority of respondents. The findings confirm that the limited duration of father–child interaction primarily results from employment-related time constraints, as the majority of fathers act as primary breadwinners within their households, although a smaller proportion of mothers (28.25%) also work outside the home.

Table 2: Togetherness with Children

Togetherness with Children	Day	Evening
Yes	15	97
No	89	7
Total of Respondents	104	104

According to Table 2, further analysis shows that 89 fathers (85.58%) were unable to engage with their children during daytime hours, while 97 fathers (93.27%) reported spending time with them in the evening, suggesting that paternal presence is largely concentrated after working hours. Qualitative narratives complemented these quantitative findings. One respondent (RWS) expressed that he rarely saw his children awake when returning home, yet he consciously reserved weekends and holidays for quality time together, often engaging in recreational play at home or outside. Such accounts illustrate that although fathers' physical availability is limited, they actively attempt to maximize the quality of their time spent with their children.

Fathers engage in diverse activities to support their children's multidimensional development. These include fostering physical development through play and sports, such as cycling, soccer, or swimming; enhancing socio-emotional growth by assigning responsibilities, such as tidying up toys or helping others; promoting intellectual development through problem-solving and logical reasoning activities; and encouraging spiritual growth through religious practice and moral instruction. For instance, one participant (RDA) described teaching his children to attend communal Maghrib and Isya prayers at a nearby mosque and read the Qur'an as a means of nurturing spiritual discipline and moral awareness.

The findings affirm that fathers are essential figures in their children's overall development. As children progress toward maturity, the father's presence, although often brief, serves as a critical source of guidance and emotional stability. When such interactions are minimized by work-related absences, children may experience subtle forms of "being left behind," not in terms of material neglect but in terms of reduced relational engagement. In the Madiun context, fatherhood manifests as a negotiation between economic provision and emotional participation, where the quality of interaction compensates for limited duration.

### *Typologies of Fathering Practices in The Context of Balancing Time and Care*

The findings of this study reveal three predominant paternal caregiving typologies emerging from respondents' behavioral patterns: democratic, permissive, and democratic–permissive. These categories reflect variations in fathers' approaches to authority, communication, and responsiveness in child care.

Table 3: Typologies of Fathering Practices

Parenting Strategy	Total of Respondents
Permissive	28
Democratic	74
Mixed (Democratic–Permissive)	2
Number of Respondents	104

These typologies, as shown in Table 3, were determined through respondents' scores on items related to parenting behavior and attitudes. Of the 104 participants, 74 fathers (71.15%) demonstrated a predominantly democratic parenting style characterized by participatory communication, child-centered decision-making, and shared activity planning. Twenty-eight fathers (26.92%) adopted a permissive approach, granting their children greater autonomy with minimal regulation, while two fathers (1.92%) exhibited a mixed democratic–permissive pattern, reflecting a balance between structure and freedom. None of the respondents indicated a purely authoritarian approach, suggesting that coercive or discipline-oriented fathering practices are uncommon in this cultural context.

Although the majority of fathers in this study spent limited time with their children due to employment responsibilities, they appeared to optimize their interactions through parenting strategies that emphasized child engagement and emotional connection. The prevalence of democratic parenting (71.15%) reflects intentional efforts to nurture children's development through dialogue, cooperation, and shared experiences. Fathers reported allowing their children to select their preferred games, accompanying them during outdoor play, and encouraging participation in recreational or religious activities. These behaviors signify an adaptive response to time constraints, prioritizing the *quality* rather than the *quantity* of interaction to foster a meaningful father–child bond.

As a father who applies democratic parenting, RIM stated:

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*" I believe in allowing my child to choose the activities he wants to participate in at school rather than forcing him into anything. For instance, I let him pick whether he wants to do art or swimming. Initially, he was hesitant about swimming because he was scared of drowning. However, my spouse and I started taking him swimming every weekend, and eventually, he grew more interested in it."*

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Working fathers in the Madiun region face time limitations but exhibit adaptability in maintaining emotional bonds and fulfilling caregiving responsibilities within those constraints. This suggests that fatherhood in this socioeconomic setting is not solely defined by physical presence but also by the intentional effort to provide guidance, affection, and moral direction during available moments.

#### ***The Effect of Paternal Involvements on Children Growth Dimensions***

This study demonstrates that fathers' involvement contributes variably to different domains of child development. Although democratic parenting is the dominant style among respondents, the statistical results suggest that its measurable influence is limited primarily to the physical aspects of development.

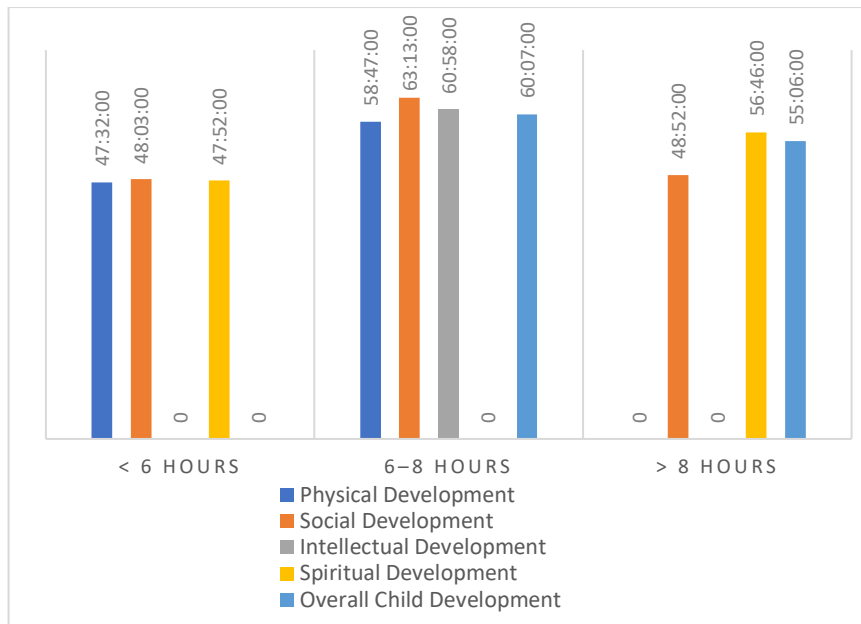


Figure 1. Children Growth Dimensions

The Kruskal–Walli’s test revealed significance values of 0.041 for physical development, 0.053 for social–emotional development, 0.158 for intellectual development, and 0.097 for spiritual development, indicating that only physical growth was significantly affected by the father’s presence ( $p < 0.05$ ). The activities that contributed most strongly to this domain included playing sports, cycling, swimming, and attending religious places together. Meanwhile, the influence on social–emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development was statistically insignificant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Despite this quantitative limitation, qualitative data show that fathers actively and meaningfully engage with their children whenever possible. Many respondents emphasized weekend interactions as opportunities to compensate for their weekday absences. A respondent identified as RWS stated:

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*“During the weekdays, I work out of town and come back home on Friday evenings. I leave again on Monday after Subuh prayers. Therefore, my weekends, Saturdays and Sundays, are special days for me and my children. We usually engage in activities such as playing, riding bicycles, and swimming. In the evening, we often play soccer in a nearby field and then take a shower before going to the mosque for the communal Maghrib and Isya’ prayers. During the breaks between prayers, my children and I read the Qur’an with other kids in the area.”*

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RWS further noted that these interactions were intentionally designed to reduce children’s dependence on electronic devices, showing how fathers used limited time to promote healthier behaviors. Similarly, other participants, such as RAM, adopted a democratic approach, granting children autonomy in daily decisions, such as choosing clothes and games, and even their own consequences for misbehavior. This pattern reflects an emerging shift in paternal identity, with fathers seeking to balance authority and empathy by aligning discipline with communication rather than control. As RAM stated:

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*“I do not force my child to participate in particular activities at school, such as art or swimming. Instead, I let him choose the activities he wants. Initially, he did not want to swim because he was worried about drowning. However, he became interested overtime after his mother and I took him swimming every Saturday and Sunday.”*

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Although time constraints remain a dominant structural factor, fathers' efforts to maintain high-quality engagement suggest that limited duration does not necessarily equate to emotional distance. The relational quality of father–child interactions can be as meaningful as maternal involvement when nurtured consistently and affectionately. Nevertheless, societal norms continue to excuse paternal absence based on breadwinning responsibilities, reinforcing gendered divisions in caregiving. Such an imbalance can indirectly lead to subtle forms of caregiving deprivation, which are associated with poorer executive functioning—especially mental flexibility—and lower cognitive/verbal functioning among neglected children (Bengwasan, 2018; Nadeau & Nolin, 2013).

In the context of the former Madiun Residency, these findings suggest that fatherhood operates within a framework of negotiated care, where economic responsibility constrains but does not eliminate emotional investment. Fathers adapt their parenting styles to maximize developmental benefits under temporal limitations, emphasizing the importance of quality engagement as a compensatory mechanism for a limited physical presence.

### ***Redefining Fatherhood and Shared Responsibility in Childcare***

This study's findings reveal an ongoing transformation in the understanding and practice of fatherhood among working men in the former Madiun Residency. Within the constraints of time and occupational demands, fathers are redefining their parenting roles from being merely economic providers to becoming active participants in their children's care and development. This shift signifies a gradual yet meaningful reconfiguration of gendered family responsibilities. Fathers are negotiating a more balanced approach to parenting, one that combines affection, guidance, and shared responsibility, despite structural and cultural expectations that often position them outside the realm of daily childcare.

Fathers' involvement in childcare reflects a more democratic orientation in the family. Rather than exerting authority, many fathers emphasize dialogue, empathy, and recognizing their children's individuality. Respondents demonstrated an awareness of their children's emotional and intellectual needs and adapted their parenting styles accordingly. For example, RJS avoided allowing his children to climb trees or ride bicycles for safety reasons, illustrating protective awareness without exerting authoritarian control. Another father, RKH, described giving his children small indulgences, such as ice cream or gadget access, as expressions of affection and rewards for positive behavior. These actions exemplify how modern fathers balance care and control, an approach rooted in communication and responsiveness rather than coercion.

The redefinition of fatherhood is further reflected in fathers' encouragement of their children's autonomy and confidence. For instance, RIM allowed his child to independently choose extracurricular activities, supporting his eventual comfort with swimming despite initial fears. Likewise, RAN emphasized the importance of intellectual development by visiting bookstores with his children and letting them select books based on their interests. Similarly, RAM allowed his children to select their clothes, make decisions about play, and choose appropriate consequences for their misbehavior. Such practices demonstrate fathers' commitment to fostering self-awareness, independence, and moral reasoning as key components of democratic parenting practices. These examples highlight a shared sense of responsibility, where children are treated as active participants in family life, rather than passive recipients of authority.

Despite the limited duration of fathers' physical involvement, often less than six hours per day due to occupational responsibilities, their interactions with their children reveal that the quality of engagement holds greater significance than the quantity of time spent together. The fathers' approaches demonstrate that meaningful connections, characterized by warmth, communication, and intentional interactions, can compensate for temporal limitations. In this context, fatherhood is redefined not by the number of hours shared but by the quality of presence. The emotional and developmental impact generated through limited yet purposeful encounters. This finding underscores a central argument in contemporary fatherhood studies: effective parenting is measured not by duration but by depth, responsiveness, and relational quality.

This rearticulation of paternal roles also challenges traditional gender norms that define men's primary identity as being through paid work. The fathers in this study described their efforts to balance public and domestic spheres, embodying a model of shared responsibility in which both parents collaborate in everyday childcare. In the shared parenting literature, Casado (2021) frames co-responsibility as requiring ongoing coordination and joint decision-making so that supervision, discussion, and problem-solving become collective parental tasks rather than gender-segregated roles.

These findings also resonate with a widely used child-rights framework—often summarised into four pillars: survival, development, protection, and participation—which is commonly referenced in Indonesian child-rights education and

advocacy. Fathers who adopt shared responsibility for childcare contribute not only to family well-being but also to creating a more nurturing and equitable environment for children's growth (UNICEF Indonesia, 2020).

Nevertheless, cultural perceptions continue to reinforce a public–private divide, associating men with productivity and women with domesticity, which can undervalue fathers' caregiving role. However, the fathers in this study challenge these assumptions through their consistent involvement in their children's everyday lives, particularly in providing moral, social, and intellectual guidance. Research on father inclusion and engagement also underscores the importance of actively involving fathers and strengthening cooperative parenting arrangements rather than maintaining rigidly divided parental roles (Fabiano & Caserta, 2018).

Furthermore, empirical studies show that paternal involvement—especially school-related engagement and the quality of father–child relationships—can be linked to adolescents' academic outcomes, including in contexts shaped by community disadvantage (Gordon, 2016). Indonesian scholarship likewise documents that fathers' caregiving roles may extend beyond financial provision and take diverse practical forms in early childcare (Muslihatun and Santi, 2022).

In this context, the redefinition of fatherhood in Madiun represents more than a behavioral shift; it signals a cultural and generational transition. Fathers are no longer defined solely by financial provision but also by emotional availability, moral guidance, and childrearing participation. By fostering shared responsibility, these fathers contribute to reshaping family dynamics toward equality and mutual care, thereby strengthening the discourse on modern fatherhood and gender roles in Indonesian society.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that fatherhood in the contemporary Indonesian context, particularly within the Madiun Residency, is undergoing a gradual redefinition. Despite the structural and cultural barriers that limit fathers' physical involvement in childcare, research reveals that paternal presence is not solely measured by the duration of time spent with children. Instead, the quality of interaction, expressed through attentiveness, emotional engagement, and shared meaning, emerges as a more significant determinant of developmental impact. Fathers navigate the competing demands of employment and family life by prioritizing meaningful connections, thereby transforming conventional notions of fatherhood into adaptive and contextually grounded forms of care.

The findings further identify three typologies of fathering: permissive, democratic, and democratic–permissive, which represent diverse strategies of engagement shaped by cultural expectations and occupational constraints. Among these, democratic parenting appears to be dominant, characterized by communication, mutual respect, and recognition of children's individuality. Quantitative analysis indicates that the limited duration of daily interaction most strongly affects children's physical development, while qualitative data emphasize that emotional and social growth are sustained through the depth and intentionality of fathers' engagement. Together, these insights underscore that the *quality* of father–child interaction, rather than its *quantity*, constitutes the essence of effective care.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on fatherhood by situating Indonesian paternal involvement within the global debates on caregiving, gender roles, and family well-being. This suggests that redefining fatherhood toward shared responsibility requires both cultural and institutional support through family education programs, workplace flexibility, and policy initiatives that value men's caregiving roles alongside their economic contributions. Ultimately, effective fathering should be understood as a multidimensional practice that integrates affection, responsibility, and emotional presence, offering a model of balanced masculinity that promotes holistic child development and strengthens the resilience of the family.

**Author Contributions:** There are authors who contributed to this article. The first author (EM) was responsible for managing all aspects of the research program, such as arranging the research instrument, data collection, data analysis, and writing the report. AA, as the second author, was responsible for creating the instrument. As the third author, LDM is responsible for analyzing the data. While the fourth researcher, AM, was responsible for collecting the data. Although every researcher has their own responsibility, they work together, from writing the report to preparing the journal article. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

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