

The Role of Fathers as Primary Caregivers in Children's Psychosocial Development

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of fathers as primary caregivers in supporting the psychosocial development of children whose mothers migrate for work in Wanadri Village, Bawang District, Banjarnegara Regency. Using a qualitative case-study approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving fathers, children, and a classroom teacher. The findings show that fathers perform caregiving through engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, including learning assistance, emotional communication, supervision, discipline, and fulfillment of daily needs. Although fathers face limited time, physical fatigue, and difficulty reading children's emotions, their consistent involvement strengthens children's self-confidence, social interaction, independence, emotional control, and responsibility. The study concludes that a supportive father can function as a protective factor for children facing family-structure changes caused by maternal labor migration.

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1. Introduction

The family is the earliest social environment in which children learn moral values, discipline, responsibility, and practical skills for everyday life. Children's development therefore depends strongly on how parents provide care, direction, and education from an early age (Muhdi, 2016). Balanced participation by fathers and mothers is especially important during elementary-school age, when children are consolidating identity, confidence, and social skills (Bastomi, 2016). Recent educational and socioeconomic changes have also shown that children's development cannot be separated from shifts in community life, access to learning resources, and the changing capacity of families to respond to social pressure (Hanif et al., 2024).

Children aged approximately 6-12 years are in a crucial period for building self-concept, social competence, emotional regulation, and responsibility. In Erikson's

psychosocial theory, elementary-school children enter the stage of industry versus inferiority, a phase in which they need support, appreciation, and opportunities to demonstrate competence (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023). When such support is weak, children may experience low self-confidence and doubt their own abilities.

The emotional presence of both parents also contributes to children's psychological security. The involvement of fathers and mothers helps children develop trust, discipline, and a sense of safety (Nurhayati, 2022). In many Indonesian families, caregiving has conventionally been associated with mothers, while fathers are positioned as heads of households and economic providers (Putri & Budi, 2023). However, socioeconomic pressures and labor migration increasingly alter this pattern. When mothers work away from home, fathers may become the main figures responsible for daily care, emotional support, and educational supervision. From a social-capital perspective, family function is strengthened when parents maintain trust, reciprocity, and daily support networks around children (Hanif, 2023).

In this situation, fathers are required to perform a dual role as breadwinners and primary caregivers. This transition can create strain, yet father involvement can also become a protective factor for children facing the absence of their mothers (Suprihatin, 2019). Active fathers help children feel safe, noticed, and emotionally supported. Conversely, weak parental involvement may affect children's emotions and social behavior, including sadness, withdrawal, low confidence, and difficulty adapting at school. For children from economically vulnerable or structurally changing families, identity negotiation and social mobility are often shaped by the continuity of family support (Hanif & Abyadah, 2026).

Preliminary observations at SD Negeri 2 Wanadri found several fourth-grade children being cared for primarily by their fathers because their mothers migrated for work. These fathers were not only responsible for income but also prepared school needs, accompanied learning, supervised friendships, and provided emotional support. Nevertheless, they faced constraints such as limited time, work-related fatigue, and difficulty understanding children's emotional conditions. This study therefore focuses on fathers' roles as primary caregivers in the psychosocial development of fourth-grade children at SD Negeri 2 Wanadri. It aims to describe forms of father involvement and their implications for children's self-confidence, social interaction, independence, emotional control, and responsibility.

2. Methods

This study used a qualitative method with a case-study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand social phenomena from the participants' perspectives and to interpret the meanings embedded in experiences, actions, and interactions (Sugiyono, 2013). Through this approach, the researcher obtained a direct description of fathers' caregiving experiences, father-child interactions, and the children's psychosocial adjustment while their mothers were working away from home.

The research was conducted at SD Negeri 2 Wanadri, Bawang District, Banjarnegara Regency. The site was selected because it represented a relevant

phenomenon: mothers migrating for work and fathers assuming primary caregiving responsibilities. The participants consisted of three fathers who cared for their children while the mothers were away, three fourth-grade children, and one classroom teacher as a supporting informant. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience with the caregiving situation under study.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to examine children's social behavior, father-child interaction, and fathers' involvement in daily caregiving practices. Interviews with fathers, children, and the classroom teacher explored caregiving experiences, children's psychosocial development, and challenges encountered by fathers. Documentation was used to complement field data, including school profiles, research activity records, and other supporting materials.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). Data condensation was conducted by selecting information relevant to the study's focus. The selected data were then presented in descriptive form to support interpretation. Credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation by comparing data from fathers, children, teachers, observations, interviews, and documents.

3. Literature Review

Studies on fathers as primary caregivers show that fathers can play a significant role in children's growth and psychosocial adjustment. The absence of mothers because of divorce, death, or work migration may require fathers to assume caregiving responsibilities that were previously performed mainly by mothers. In this context, fathers are not merely economic providers but also caregivers, educators, supervisors, and sources of emotional security. The emotional and cognitive dimensions of personality development are important because children respond to caregiving through both affective attachment and learned interpretation of their social environment (Hanif & Barokah, 2025).

Lestari and Amaliana (2020) found that single fathers perform various caregiving functions, including assisting learning, motivating children, guiding behavior, and instilling discipline. Daily father involvement helps children receive the attention and support needed for social and emotional development. This finding indicates that successful caregiving is not determined solely by the mother's presence but also by the quality of father involvement in children's lives.

Father involvement is commonly explained through Michael Lamb's three dimensions: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 2011). Engagement refers to fathers' direct participation in children's activities; accessibility refers to fathers' availability when children need help; and responsibility refers to fathers' commitment to meeting children's broader needs. These dimensions influence children's adjustment, sense of security, and social relationships. In educational contexts, social support has been shown to strengthen motivation and

psychological well-being, which are central to children's adaptation in school environments (Marjuki et al., 2024).

Fathers may also function as protective factors that reduce developmental risks caused by family change. A responsive and supportive father provides safety, emotional reassurance, and guidance when children face new pressures (Fakhri et al., 2023). The protective role is even more important in migrant-worker families because the father becomes the primary figure accompanying children in daily routines. Emotional intelligence also matters because children's academic and social success depends on the interaction between emotion, motivation, and the learning environment (Hanif et al., 2025).

From a psychosocial perspective, Erikson's industry-versus-inferiority stage explains that elementary-school children need recognition, structured guidance, and opportunities to develop competence (Desmita, 2019). If children receive consistent support from significant adults, they are more likely to build confidence, independence, and responsibility. If such support is weak, they may feel inferior and become less able to participate socially. In the school setting, child protection and prevention of violence or bullying are also crucial because children experiencing family transition require a safe educational environment that reinforces their emotional stability (Munjidah & Hanif, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings show that the absence of mothers due to labor migration changed the caregiving pattern in the participating families. Fathers became more involved in meeting children's physical, emotional, social, and educational needs. They prepared school equipment, monitored attendance, accompanied learning, supervised friendships, and maintained communication with children about daily problems. This pattern confirms that fathers in the study were not passive substitutes but active caregivers who adjusted to new family responsibilities.

The three fathers demonstrated engagement through direct participation in children's routines. They helped children prepare for school, reminded them to complete assignments, and accompanied study time when possible. Although their work schedules limited the amount of time available, the fathers attempted to remain present in important moments. This form of engagement contributed to children's sense of being noticed and supported.

Accessibility appeared in fathers' willingness to listen to children's complaints and respond when children needed help. Some children initially struggled with the mother's absence and felt less comfortable when school needs were prepared by the father. One child became quieter and less enthusiastic at school after the mother migrated. However, the father gradually built communication, provided reassurance, and helped the child adapt. This finding shows that accessibility is not only physical availability but also emotional readiness.

Responsibility was reflected in fathers' efforts to fulfill educational, health, discipline, and welfare needs. Fathers ensured that children went to school, supervised daily activities, and taught them to complete household or school-related

tasks. In this way, responsibility extended beyond providing income; it included managing children's routines and ensuring that developmental needs were continuously met.

The findings also show that fathers acted as protective factors. Their presence offered emotional security and helped children cope with the mother's absence. Fathers provided motivation, listened to children's feelings, encouraged communication with mothers through long-distance media, and collaborated with the school when problems emerged. This is significant because students' mental health has become a strategic issue in educational quality, particularly when children experience emotional pressure from family change (Hanif & Suherlan, 2026).

Father involvement also influenced children's self-confidence and social interaction. Children who received attention from their fathers became more willing to communicate with peers and teachers, participate in class activities, and express their opinions. The classroom teacher observed that children who were initially quiet gradually became more active after receiving consistent support from home and school. This indicates that psychosocial development is shaped by the interaction between family care and the school environment.

The fathers' caregiving contributed to children's independence. Children learned to organize school equipment, complete simple household tasks, and take responsibility for assignments. Fathers used daily routines as practical learning moments, thereby helping children develop self-management. These practices are consistent with the idea that education for the present generation should integrate cognitive growth, character formation, and adaptive life skills (Hanif, 2025).

On the emotional side, children who received support from fathers became more able to express sadness, disappointment, and longing for their mothers. Fathers who listened and responded patiently helped children regulate emotions and feel safe. This emotional support reduced the risk of withdrawal and encouraged healthier adaptation to the family situation.

The study further found that children's psychosocial development was not shaped only by family care but also by teachers, peers, and the surrounding community. Support from the classroom teacher and friends helped children remain involved in school activities. Fathers who maintained communication with teachers were better able to monitor children's behavior and learning. In the digital era, children's socialization is increasingly mediated by school, family, and communication technology, making coordinated guidance between home and school more important (Hanif & Salsabillah, 2024).

Nevertheless, fathers faced several challenges. They reported limited time because of work, physical fatigue from carrying two roles, and difficulty understanding children's emotional expressions. These challenges sometimes made the caregiving process inconsistent. However, the fathers tried to overcome these obstacles by building more intensive communication, involving extended family when necessary, maintaining children's contact with mothers, and asking teachers for support.

The findings therefore reinforce the relevance of father involvement theory. Engagement, accessibility, and responsibility appeared simultaneously in the fathers' daily practices. Their involvement functioned not only as caregiving labor but also as emotional protection, behavioral supervision, and educational support. The fathers' role was especially important because the children were in a developmental stage that required confidence, recognition, discipline, and social belonging.

Overall, fathers as primary caregivers contributed positively to children's psychosocial development. Their care supported self-confidence, peer interaction, independence, emotional control, and responsibility. Although fathers experienced role strain, consistent and supportive involvement helped children adapt to maternal migration. The study confirms that caregiving quality, rather than gender alone, is decisive in protecting children and supporting healthy psychosocial growth.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that fathers have a significant role as primary caregivers in the psychosocial development of fourth-grade children at SD Negeri 2 Wanadri whose mothers migrate for work. Fathers do not merely provide income; they also meet children's daily needs, assist learning, provide emotional support, supervise behavior, and cultivate discipline and responsibility. These practices show that fathers can perform sustained and direct caregiving when family structure changes.

Fathers also function as protective factors. Their presence provides children with safety, attention, protection, and emotional reassurance in facing the mother's absence. Such involvement contributes to children's self-confidence, social interaction, independence, emotional regulation, and responsibility in school and everyday life. Children who receive consistent support from fathers are better able to adapt to their social environment and show more positive psychosocial development.

Despite constraints such as limited time, physical fatigue, difficulty understanding children's emotions, and social pressure related to changing family roles, fathers in this study continued to develop practical caregiving strategies. They built intensive communication, maintained children's long-distance relationships with mothers, and collaborated with teachers and the surrounding environment. Thus, consistent, supportive, and responsible father involvement is essential for strengthening children's psychosocial resilience in families affected by maternal labor migration.

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