



ENGAGEMENT OF FATHERS IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Harriet G. Isaboke

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Research Fellow, Kenyatta University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the evolving engagement of fathers in children's development in African contexts, with emphasis on evolving male roles in care both at home and in community environments. Using a descriptive research methodology guided by a socio-cultural theory, father involvement was examined in major dimensions of emotional availability, physical care, economic provision, and moral direction. The research targeted African fathers, including teen fathers, social fathers, and biological fathers with varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Evidence was collected by conducting a broad literature review of empirical studies, policy documents, and national and international reports of various African countries. Purposive sampling was used in choosing case studies illustrating diverse fatherhood experiences in both urban and rural settings. The data were thematically coded to explore the effect of father involvement on children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. The findings indicate that increased levels of paternal involvement have a strong positive effect on child well-being, academic achievement, emotional adjustment, and reduced levels of behavioral problems. The study also reveals how recent changes in society—such as women's greater entry into the workforce and changed family forms—have stimulated more active parenting roles for men. Teen fathers and non-traditional fathers shared similarly ambivalent, often conflicted views of their position as caregivers and breadwinners. Despite these shifts, the majority of fathers still see economic provision as their core function, often leaving active caregiving responsibilities aside out of cultural or socio-economic necessity. The study calls for policy and interventions in favor of father-inclusive early childhood development (ECD) programs, raising the consciousness of the expanded fathering role of men as parents, as well as institutional facilitation of fathers' participation. Overall, the study underlines the necessity but traditionally overlooked role of fathers in the completing child development and calls for a cultural shift towards more equitable parenting approaches in Africa.

Key words: Emotional Wellbeing, Psychological Development, Children

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, research on fatherhood has increased due to the associated benefits of fathers on their children. Financial support, social value, cognitive development, emotional well-being and social competence are some of the foreseen benefits of male parenting (Murray & Hwang, 2015). According to Quesenberry, Ostrosky and Corso (2016), the term “father” is used more broadly to describe men who are important in the life of a child. This broader definition is in no way meant to undermine the importance of the role of the biological father in the life of a child. Instead, it serves to highlight the positive impact that men such as grandfathers, uncles, and stepfathers can have on young children. Similarly, Levtov, van der Gaag, Greene, Kaufman and Barker (2015) highlighted that fathers are a diverse group. They include biological and adoptive fathers; fathers who are resident and non-resident, heterosexual, gay, and transgender fathers; married, cohabitating, separated, divorced, and widowed fathers. “Social fathers” abound stepfathers, mothers’ boyfriends, foster fathers, legal guardians, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and other important relatives and friends who play significant fathering roles in children’s lives.

Whether through legal or emotional ties, men interact with and care for children in their families and communities in many different ways. A study conducted by Levtov et al. (2015) based the word “father” on men’s equal participation in domestic work in their households, daily care of children and care of others in the household. According to Opondo, Redshaw and McGlynn (2016), paternal involvement can be characterized by: fathers’ accessibility to their children measured by their frequency of contact with the child, co-residence with the child or even presence at the child’s birth, their engagement in childcare activities such as playing, feeding and bathing and their demonstration of responsibility in providing for the material and emotional needs of their children.

Similarly, Quesenberry et al. (2016) explains that father involvement can be measured by availability and accessibility of fathers which refers to both physical and emotional presence for their children, and engagement and interaction between a father and his child, which involves play activity and providing basic care activities, such as bathing and feeding their children. Fathers’ responsibility for day-to-day care can be measured in two ways as posited by Lopez, McWhirter, Rosencrans and Giuliani (2019) who explained that direct care, or actual physical care for the child, is measured in terms of the time fathers spend with their sons and daughters doing things such as bathing, feeding and dressing children. Further, Lopez et al. (2019) explained that indirect care includes things like arranging for child care, scheduling play dates, and talking with teachers on the phone about a child’s experiences at school. In this way, fathers share responsibility for the other aspects of parenting, which are often complex and require planning.

Fatherhood can be understood as a biological, social and cultural role fathers have taken on various roles in the family from patriarch, disciplinarian, and breadwinner to the modern involved co-parent (Marcisz, 2013). It is understood that fatherhood is shaped by a host of diverging influences, including history, culture, society, economics, biology, gender, class and race and it is often viewed as part of a collective responsibility in keeping with traditional patterns of extended family formation, or new, evolving ones (Marcisz, 2013). According to Tawwanda (2013) fatherhood in the sub-Saharan African context is a collective responsibility in keeping with traditionally extensive patterns of family formation and kinship network that seeks to meet the needs of children. In such families, which include men, children are exposed to multiple adult figures who may participate in childrearing. where by, when biological fathers are unable to meet the needs of children, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, related kin and clan members, close friends, and neighbours step in to help.

According to Alemann, Garg and Vlahovicova (2016), fatherhood encompasses active participation of men in protecting and promoting the health, wellbeing and development of their partners and children. It also involves them being emotionally connected with their children and partners even when they may not be living together, including through emotional, physical and financial support. Plan International and Promundo-US, (2020) elucidate that men need to take joint responsibility with their partner for the workload including unpaid care work, child rearing, and paid work outside the home and foster a respectful and caring co-parent or couple relationship if living together; make informed decisions with their partners and support their partner's autonomous decision-making; resolve conflicts in a constructive and peaceful way and work to prevent violence by promoting caring and respectful relationships in the family.

Research has demonstrated that there is both continuity and change in the ways that families today are defined (Quesenberry et al., 2016). The change is caused by many factors including high number of working mothers, evolving family dynamics due to social trends such as cohabitation, separation and re-partnering, as well as economic migration, incarceration, armed conflict, and the impact of HIV and AIDS, which in some contexts has led to an increase in single-parent households and in children being raised by guardians other than their biological Parents (Levtov et al., 2015). This means that many children will spend time living in families where one parent, more commonly the father is a non-residence.

However, researchers argue that non-residence does not mean absence, as fathers often maintain varying degrees of involvement with their children. For instance, a study conducted by Levtov et al. (2015) reported that in South Africa, where 52 percent of children under the age of 15 live in mother-headed households, close to half of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children several times a month or more often. Therefore,

fatherhood goes beyond mere father physical presence because a father might be physically present, but emotionally absent, or physically absent but emotionally supportive. Further, studies have highlighted that children can thrive in all types of families; however, children who live with both of their biological parents throughout their childhood tend to be safer and have better outcomes than children who experience family disruption (Adamsons, 2016). Most importantly though, research shows that having multiple, supportive caregivers can improve children's wellbeing (Levtov et al., 2015). This means that all men who are part of a child's life can play an important role in their development.

Changing Role of Men as Caregivers at home and in settings outside the home for Young Children

Over the years, the role of fathers and father-figures has changed dramatically. Massive changes in the workplace and in households are bringing changes to men's participation as caregivers (Levtov et al., 2015). Historically, fathers have been regarded mainly as providers (Mazembo, Hayley & Karabo, 2013), with mothers doing most of the task-oriented caring and nurturing of children (Opondo, Redshaw & McGlynn, 2016). However, social changes including women's increasing entry into the labour market has resulted in a shift towards a new fatherhood model which has emphasized the need for fathers to be involved in all aspects of parenting including care-giving activities. Hence, Bhamani (2013) points out that today's fathers are relatively more involved in their children's development than before.

Due to the changing state of the world's fathers, the role of fathers in their families has evolved, from conceptions of fathers as breadwinners to a more holistic recognition that they are equal co-parents (Lopez, McWhirter, Rosencrans & Giuliani, 2019). According to Opondo, Redshaw and McGlynn (2016), father involvement has increased over the past several decades, and simultaneously, the levels of father availability, accessibility and engagement have significantly increased as fathers

are becoming more and more involved in the lives of their children. For instance, Murray and Hwang (2015) examined how married African American fathers perceived their role as fathers. The study established that the role of African American fathers was multidimensional, all fathers noted that they had various roles in the family which included; role model/sex-role model, disciplinarian, supporter, spiritual teacher, and guide/teacher. Further, the study reported the fathers recognized that children need physically and emotionally presence of fathers but they described the characteristics of a good or responsible father as breadwinners and providers. This finding suggests that these fathers viewed providing for their families as paramount or something that they must do.

A study conducted by Angelia, Rhonda and Hsiao (2011) examined how teen fathers define and perform the father role. Being emotionally involved, physically present, and/or nurturing were the principle attributes that made good fathers, according to majority of the teen fathers. "Being there" was defined as providing emotional support to children, spending "quality time" with them, and being involved in care-giving activities such as feeding, dressing and putting to sleep. Some adolescent fathers who primarily defined fathering as being involved and nurturing also cited "being a provider" as an important aspect of fatherhood as observed:

Being a father means being a real man. A real man will do what he has to do. He takes care of his own . . . He gets a job. He goes to work. He provides for his kids . . . He does what he has to do.

I mean spending quality time with my girl. Being a key part of her life. When she gets older, I want her to know that she can count on her daddy. I don't want her to think that I'm just there to give her money whenever Carlissa can't, I want her to know that I'm there for her when she needs someone to

talk to. I want to her to know that I'll be there.

Further, the study reported that although less common, some teen fathers together with their parents were not able to make monetary contributions as observed:

A lot of people think we're [teen fathers] just running from our responsibilities because we don't want to take care of our children. There might be some like that, but I know that I'm not one of them. I want to be a good father, but there's only so much I can do. I know I need to be able to buy Kenis what he needs, but I'm just 15. I know I need to get a job, but I'm in school. Should I drop out? I know they don't want me to drop out. . . . I almost feel like I'm an uncle or something—you know someone that just drops by or gives you something every now and then. I don't feel like a good father, or a real father for that matter.

Another study involving teen fathers was conducted in South Africa by Sphiwe and Carol, (2017). The study explored teen fathers' perceptions and experiences of fatherhood. Twenty-five teenagers who fathered a child between 16-19 years participated in in-depth interviews. The study results revealed that fatherhood came as a surprise to teen fathers who reacted with shock, denial, and fear. Their perceptions of good father emphasized on being a financial provider for the child and most of them were transformed by the experience of being a father as observed:

I am a very good father, the little money that I make through my part time job; the first thing I think of is my child. I buy things for him before I buy for myself

So far I see myself as a good father because in my life, in everything that I do, I think of my child. I always think of him when I make plans

I do not see myself as a good father because I am supposed to be there and take care of her [child]. I do not even take money to her [child] (Forward; fathered a child at 19

I do not see myself as a good father because I am not working and I am unable to buy things for him [child]. Once I have my own things, I believe I will be a good father

For most of the teen fathers, involvement with the child meant providing the material needs of the child, spending time with the child, and feeding the child:

I make follow up about the child every month, like if she is sick. It is as if I am staying with her even if I am not. I make sure that her health is good. I take responsibility just like how my parents are looking after me (Kevin; fathered

I try where I can to buy clothes for him. I do not change or feed him..., but sometimes I do spend time with him

I buy nappies and things like snacks with the money I make in my part-time job at the car wash

This therefore evident that today's fathers recognize their role as providers with the inclusion of other fatherhood roles such as spending quality contact time with their children and participating in other care-giving activities such as feeding, dressing and putting to sleep.

Justification of enhancing engagement of males in Child Development

Father-child relationships at all stages of a child's life have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime (Levtov et al., 2015). There is a growing understanding and recognition among researchers and practitioners that the involvement of fathers or father figures in child rearing, and quality time spent by both the parents, wherever possible, results in enhanced cognitive, emotional, and social development for both

children and parents (Levtov et al., 2015). On the other hand, Freeks (2017) highlights that father absence and fatherlessness is a worldwide phenomenon and a worldwide tendency in communities which negatively affect children. For instance, Freeks (2017) points out that in America, 63% of suicides come from fatherless homes, 70% of juveniles in state operated institutions come from fatherless homes, 80% of rapists motivated by displaced anger come from fatherless homes, 85% of children with behavioral problems come from fatherless homes, 90% of homeless children come from fatherless homes, 71% of children who do not finish school come from fatherless homes. Based on this statistics, it can be concluded that paternal absence has consequences on development and well-being of children.

Research has demonstrated that the nature of parenting in a child's early years is thought to play an important role in influencing the child's immediate and long term well-being (Opondo, Redshaw & McGlynn, 2016). According to Levtov et al. (2015) and Alemann, Garg and Vlahovicova (2016), fathers' positive engagement in their children's upbringing has been linked to children's improved physical and mental health, better cognitive development and educational achievement, improved peer relations and capacity for empathy, fewer behavioral problems (in boys) and psychological problems (in girls), higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of depression, fear and self-doubt into adulthood, lower rates of criminality and substance abuse, and more openness to critically examining traditional gendered roles. It is evident that positive engagement of fathers in their children's lives has a lot of benefits therefore, it is important for the society to enhance engagement of males in child development.

Fathers' impact on various developmental areas of children is discussed below:

Fathers' Influence on Children's overall Health and Cognitive Development

Research on early brain development points to the importance of experiences in the earliest years of life as critical in shaping a child's future cognitive, social, and emotional development as well as physical and mental health (Glen & Betty, 2015). Studies have shown that involvement of fathers before, during, and after the birth of a child has positive effects on maternal health behaviors, women's use of maternal and newborn health services, and fathers' longer-term support and involvement in the lives of their children (Levtov et al., 2015). Therefore, it has become clear that fathers can and do distinctly contribute to foundational components for children's growth and development including nutrition and safety, early learning and responsive care.

Fathers' involvement has been linked to higher cognitive development and school achievement, better mental health for boys and girls, and lower rates of delinquency in sons (Levtov et al., 2015). In addition, research has found that early positive father-child interactions can reduce cognitive delay of infants and can also improve weight gain in preterm infants and boost early language skills (Sarah, Khan, Victor, Ricki & Converse, 2017). When fathers are involved in children's lives at a young age, toddlers develop greater abilities to start school with higher levels of academic readiness (Sarah et al., 2017). Therefore, fathers' involvement affects children in much the same ways that mothers' involvement does.

A study conducted by Murray and Hwang (2015), reported that children with involved fathers had better cognitive and verbal skills compared to kids with absent or overbearing father. Further, the study reported that children with involved fathers were more confident and successful in solving complex mathematical and logical puzzles. Similarly, the Child and Family research Partnership (2017) reported that children who grow up with involved fathers are: 39% more likely to earn mostly A's in school, 45% less likely to repeat a grade, 60% less likely to be suspended or expelled from school, twice as likely to go to college and find stable

employment after high school, 75% less likely to have a teen birth, and 80% less likely to spend time in jail.

In Zambia, a study was carried out by Simweleba and Serpell (2020) to assess whether an intervention to enhance the interaction of parents with children in homework would improve the learners performance in Mathematics. Results showed that Post-test scores of learners in Mathematics in the intervention school were significantly higher. A paired sample *t*-test showed that for the control school there were no significant changes between the Mathematics pre- and post-scores ($t[41] = 0.510, p = 0.613$). On the other hand, for the intervention school, the post-test scores in Mathematics posttest scores were significantly higher than the pre-test scores ($t[41] = 6.205, p < 0.001$). The authors concluded that interventions which empower parents with knowledge and skills for greater involvement in their children's homework can be effective in improving the learners' performance.

In Nigeria, Fasina (2015) conducted a study which established that parental involvement has a very big influence on early childhood education, particularly the academic performance of the child. Similarly, Kathomi (2015) sought to establish a relationship between parental involvement and literacy development of preschool children in Langata Division, Kenya. The study established that there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and the literacy development of preschool children. On the same breath, Njeru (2018) explored the level of father's involvement in their children's reading activities. The findings on fathers' involvement revealed that fathers participated more in pre-school activities that related to financial support and less in those that required them to sacrifice their time. Therefore, there is need to increase parents' awareness on the importance of getting involved in early childhood development and this could be done by encouraging fathers to create time for their children and participate in preschool activities.

Fathers' Influence on Children's Emotional and Psychological Wellbeing

In addition to the increased overall health and cognitive development experienced by children when fathers are present and involved, fathers also can impact a child's emotional and psychological well-being (Levtov et al., 2015). For example, infants who receive high affection from their fathers have a tendency to be more securely attached, enabling them to more freely explore their environment as well as to more readily accept comfort from their parent after being briefly separated (Levtov et al., 2015). A study which was carried out by Murray and Hwang (2015) established that boys and girls who grew up with an involved father, as well as an involved mother, had stronger cognitive and motor skills, enjoyed elevated levels of physical and mental health, became better problem-solvers and were more confident, curious, and empathetic. Further, Murray and Hwang (2015) reported that boys and girls who grew up with an involved father also showed greater moral sensitivity, self-control and were substantially less likely to be sexually involved at an early age, have babies out of wedlock, or be involved in criminal or violent behavior.

Reports on scientific studies have also linked positive fatherhood involvement with lowered levels of disruptive behavior, acting out, depression, and telling lies (Murray & Hwang, 2015). In addition, positive fatherhood involvement has been linked to higher level of self-control in school, high levels of obedience, high self-esteem, being kind to others, and being responsible, fewer behavioral problems in young boys and girls being happier, more confident, and willing to try new things (Murray & Hwang, 2015). In addition, Murray and Hwang (2015) highlighted that children with highly involved fathers, in relation to children with less involved fathers, tend to be more cognitively and socially competent, less inclined toward gender stereotyping, more empathetic, and psychologically better adjusted. Similarly, (Levtov et al., 2015) highlighted that high levels of father involvement is

associated with greater child tendencies to be more patient and increased aptitudes for handling the ongoing stressors associated with schooling when compared to children with fathers who are less involved.

According to Levtov et al. (2015), fathers can help promote a child's independence, sense of self, and a positive lens through which they can view the outside world. Fathers impact children of each gender in unique ways. How fathers play a role in shaping their children's attitude toward romantic relationships, peer relationships, school, and work. For young boys, fathers can provide the answers to questions of approval and validation that a young boy may seek and for young girls, fathers can help them meet their need to be seen as desired and valuable (Levtov et al., 2015). A study by Daniel, Madigan and Jenkins (2015) examined the longitudinal associations between paternal warmth and maternal warmth and children's prosocial behaviors in a sample of 381 mother-father-child triads from Canada. They found that paternal warmth at 18 months of age was positively associated with paternal warmth at 54 months of age via paternal warmth at 36 months of age. Maternal warmth at 18 months of age was positively associated with maternal warmth at 54 months of age via maternal warmth at 36 months of age. Children's prosocial behavior, maternal and paternal warmth at 18 months of age were linked to prosocial behavior at 36 months of age, which in turn was associated with children's prosocial behavior at 54 months of age after controlling for child age and gender, maternal and paternal education, and family assets and income.

A longitudinal study conducted by Opondo, Redshaw and McGlynn (2016) explored the nature of paternal involvement in early child-rearing and estimated its effect on behavioral outcomes of children in the southwest of England. Out of the 14 701 children in the cohort who were alive at 1 year, 10 440 children were living with both parents at 8 months and were therefore eligible. Paternal involvement was measured using factor scores

obtained through factor analysis of fathers' responses on their participation in, understanding of, and feelings about their child's early upbringing. The study identified three factors in the factor analysis: Factor 1 described fathers' emotional response to the child; factor 2 measured the frequency of fathers' involvement in domestic and childcare activities; factor 3 characterized fathers' feelings of security in their role as parent and partner. Children of fathers with high scores on factors 1 and 3 had 14% (OR 0.86, 95% CI 0.79 to 0.94, $p=0.001$) and 13% (OR 0.87, 95% CI 0.79 to 0.96, $p=0.006$), respectively, lower adjusted odds of behavioural problems at 9 years. Factors 1 and 3 were associated with comparable reduction in adjusted odds of behavioural problems at 11 years (OR 0.89, 95% CI 0.81 to 0.98, $p=0.017$ and OR 0.89, 95% CI 0.81 to 0.99, $p=0.034$, respectively). Factor 2 was not associated with the outcome. The study concluded that it is psychological and emotional aspects of paternal involvement in a child's infancy that are most powerful in influencing later child behavior and not the amount of time that fathers are engaged in childcare or domestic tasks in the household. Further, the study explained that how new fathers see themselves as parents, how they value their role as a parent and how they adjust to this new role appeared to be associated with positive behavioral outcomes in children rather than the amount of direct involvement in childcare.

Empirical evidence has made abundantly clear that involved and caring fathers are important to the optimal development of children. According to Sarah et al. (2017), whether it is biological, adoptive or stepfathers, living in or outside of the home, fathers impact their children at every stage of development, and their absence has long last repercussions. Murray & Hwang (2015) explained that although the absence of the father is not an isolated risk factor, it affects children who struggle with feelings of abandonment and low self-esteem, due to the lack of a father's love in their lives. Some of these children turn to drugs, alcohol, risky sexual activities, unhealthy relationships, or

other destructive behaviors to numb the pains of fatherlessness. There is no doubt that fathers are important contributors to social-emotional development and psychological well-being of children, therefore, they need to be more involved in child development.

The Impact of Father Involvement on Women

Men's participation as fathers and as caregivers also matters tremendously for women's lives (Levtov et al., 2015). Globally, women earn on average 24 percent less than men do, in large part due to their greater burden of care work (Levtov et al., 2015). In many countries, the wage gap between genders has been well established with women earning significantly less than men (Levtov et al., 2015). Studies have reported that the wage gap becomes larger when men and women have children, with men's wages increasing after they have children, and women's wages decreasing (Levtov et al., 2015). However, studies have shown that in countries where fathers hold more egalitarian views towards childrearing and non-paid care, the wage gap is smaller (Andringa, Nieuwenhuis, & van Gerven, 2015). By sharing the caregiving and domestic work, men support women's participation in the workforce and women's equality overall (Levtov et al., 2015) which also brings economic benefits to nations.

According to Sarah et al. (2017) women whose partners are involved prenatally use more health services on average, experience lighter workloads, and have a lower risk of post-partum depression. In addition, studies have reported that men's caregiving also offers a route to breaking cycles of violence that are underpinned by harmful beliefs and attitudes around masculinities (Levtov et al., 2015). Further, involved fatherhood also carries forward across generations; fathers who are more involved in the home promote future generations of involvement and gender equality (Croft, Schmader, Block, & Baron, 2014). Levtov, et al. (2015) reported that men who have seen their own fathers engage in domestic work are themselves more likely to be involved in household work and

caregiving as adults. Their daughters are more likely to have higher career aspirations and their sons are more likely to engage in more gender equal behaviors in their own relationships.

Impact of Father Involvement on Fathers

Studies have shown that involved fatherhood makes men happier and healthier (Levtov et. al (2015). According to Sarah et al. (2017), one overlooked beneficiary of involved fatherhood are fathers themselves. Men who are involved in meaningful ways with their children report this relationship to be one of their most important sources of well-being and happiness (Sarah et al. (2017). Levtov, et al. (2015) explained that fathers who report close, non-violent connections with their children live longer, have fewer mental or physical health problems, are less likely to abuse drugs, are more productive at work, and report being happier than fathers who do not report this connection with their children. It is evident that male biological parent, brings unique contributions to the job of parenting a child that no one else can provide. Although the absence of the father is not an isolated risk factor, it definitely can take a toll on the development of children and affect the well-being of mothers as well fathers.

Studies have reported direct and indirect hypothesized pathways through which fathers (both residential and non-residential) impact child development. They can directly contribute to enhanced child development outcomes such as cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills through stimulation, nurturing interactions as well as providing for their needs and promoting their development and health. Research shows that fathers strengthen development when they take an active role early and often in the lives of their children, even before they are born. Research has found that the value of father involvement is determined by the quality of the interaction between fathers and their children. And, although a father involved early and often is considered best practice, it's never too late for fathers to re-connect and engage with their child. Studies have argued that father's physical location and child involvement are two completely separate dimensions in the father-child relationship. A high level of involvement by nonresident fathers may moderate the negative effects of their absence on their children's adjustment. Taken together, father absence does not automatically mean lack of involvement, and by the same token, mere presence does not always guarantee father engagement.

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