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RECONCEPTUALIZING FATHERHOOD: INFLUENCES ON PATERNAL ENGAGEMENT IN GREECE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Fathers play a crucial role in children's development, yet their involvement has historically received less attention than mothers'. In Greek society, cultural norms and work demands can limit paternal engagement, highlighting the need to explore fathers' experiences and contributions to child-rearing.

Methodology: This qualitative study involved 11 fathers from Chios, Greece, with children up to 3½ years old. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2025 and November 2025, focusing on paternal involvement, family dynamics, and parenting experiences. Data were analyzed using grounded theory, with open coding to identify themes and categories. Trustworthiness was ensured through repeated reading, triangulation, and peer review.

Results: Fathers reported active involvement in child-rearing, although work obligations often limited direct interaction, and only three were present at childbirth. Mothers were generally more central in daily care, yet fathers emphasized positive co-parenting, consistency in discipline, and building strong emotional bonds. Family-of-origin experiences influenced parenting approaches, and only one father attended a formal parent-preparation course. Most fathers expressed satisfaction with their relationship with their children while wishing for more time together.

Conclusion: Fathers in Greek families play an active, multidimensional role in their children's lives despite work and contextual pressures. Supportive family climates and cooperative co-parenting foster richer paternal engagement, yet formal preparation programs remain underused. Targeted father-focused services and family-friendly workplace policies could strengthen father-child bonds, enhance overall family functioning, and shape more positive intergenerational parenting patterns. Recognizing and actively supporting fathers' contributions should therefore be a clear priority for policy and practice.

Keywords: Father, Parental role, Child, Family

1 INTRODUCTION

The father's role in the family is as important as that of the mother for the development and well-being of children [1]. Despite its significance, paternal involvement has historically received less attention than maternal research, even though fathers contribute critically to overall family functioning [2]. Traditionally, fathers were viewed primarily as protectors and economic providers, often limiting their interaction with children and partners [3,4].

Historically, families functioned largely as economic units, with women and children occupying subordinate roles [5]. Industrialization reinforced a model of fathers as breadwinners and mothers as primary caregivers, although mothers often contributed economically [6,7]. Over time, marriage and family relationships shifted toward personal and emotional dimensions, while economic dependency of women persisted [8,9].

Modern fatherhood encompasses economic support as well as emotional involvement, caregiving, and responsible participation [10,11]. Active paternal engagement is associated with better child outcomes, including social competence, behavioral regulation, and self-confidence [12]. Fathers themselves also benefit, experiencing enhanced emotional maturity, psychological well-being, and a sense of purpose [13,14].

The objective of this study is to investigate the extent of fathers' involvement in child-rearing and household responsibilities and to examine how paternal age, education, occupation, and child gender are associated with this involvement. By exploring the determinants of paternal engagement, the study seeks to advance understanding of fathers' roles in contemporary family life and child development.

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design, Setting, Methodological Approach, and Participants

This qualitative study was conducted with a purposive sample of eleven fathers residing in Chios, Greece, between August 2025 and November 2025. The research site was selected based on practical considerations, such as ease of access to participants, reduced data-collection costs, and minimized time requirements. Grounded theory was employed to explore fathers' involvement in child-rearing and family life, allowing for the development of conceptual categories derived directly from participants' narratives. This methodological approach supports the generation of theoretically informed, transferable, and verifiable findings [15,16]. Eligible participants were fathers who were willing to share their experiences of fatherhood and provide insight into the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Fathers were identified via primary schools and personally invited to take part by the researcher. Further participants were then enrolled using snowball sampling, whereby interviewed fathers informed other eligible fathers about the study. Eligible participants were biological or social fathers of at least one child, who were currently involved in childcare, willing to discuss their experiences of fatherhood, and sufficiently fluent in Greek to understand the interview questions and participate in an in-depth interview.

2.2 Data Collection

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 fathers. The sample size was guided by principles of qualitative inquiry, aiming for rich, detailed accounts rather than statistical representativeness. Recruitment continued until no new themes emerged in the data and the research team judged that thematic saturation had been reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed multiple times to ensure deep immersion in the data. The interview guide explored fathers' involvement in childcare, perceptions of parental roles, family dynamics, and personal experiences of parenting.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of grounded theory, beginning with open coding. Each transcript was examined line by line to identify recurring concepts related to paternal involvement and parenting practices. Codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text and compared across participants through constant comparison. Analytic memos were used to capture emerging ideas and relationships between concepts. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories that formed preliminary thematic constructs, which were refined and interpreted in relation to existing literature. This process enabled the development of themes that captured fathers' experiences, perceptions, and roles within their family contexts.

2.4 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, and peer debriefing were applied. Repeated reading and coding enhanced data immersion, while an experienced qualitative researcher reviewed

emerging themes to minimize bias. Detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and clear documentation of coding procedures support the transferability of findings. Ethical standards were upheld throughout the study, including voluntary participation and confidentiality.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Participant Demographics

The study included 11 fathers residing on the island of Chios, each with children aged up to 3½ years. Fathers' ages ranged from 32 to 42 years: three fathers were 32, 34, and 35 years old; five were 37; one was 39; and two were 41 and 42 years old. Regarding educational attainment, 10 fathers had completed tertiary education, while one held a secondary education diploma. Participants' occupations included medical professionals ($n = 3$), a public sector employee ($n = 1$), private employees ($n = 3$), and self-employed individuals ($n = 4$). Among the children, eight were boys and three were girls. Children's ages ranged from 17 months to 3½ years: three were 17–19 months old, two were 21 months, two were 2–2½ years, and four were 3–3½ years. Figure 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participating fathers and their children.

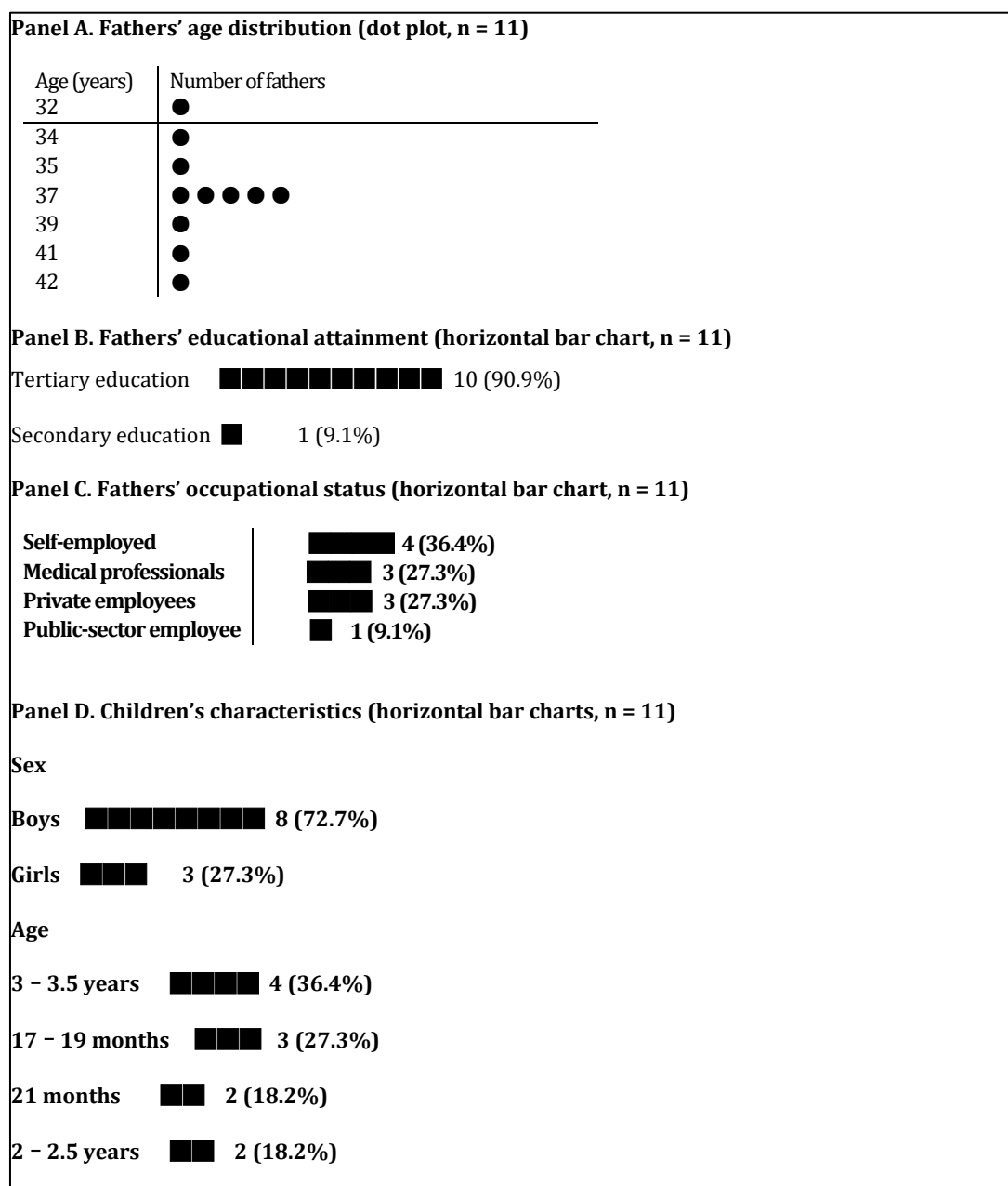


Figure 1: Demographic characteristics of participating fathers and their children. The figure presents the age distribution, educational attainment, and occupational status of the 11 participating fathers, as well as the sex and age distribution of their children.

3.2 Role of the Father in Child-Rearing

All fathers reported active participation in raising their children, although several noted limited availability due to work commitments, and one described his primary contribution as financial. Only three fathers were present at the birth of their children, with absences generally attributed to cesarean sections or delivery room restrictions; however, all expressed a desire to attend. Fathers described strong emotions upon first meeting their newborns, while some emphasized that forming a close bond developed gradually. Only two fathers reported spending substantial time with their children, whereas the remaining participants indicated that professional obligations restricted opportunities for direct interaction.

3.3 Parent Relationship and Impact on Child-Rearing

Three fathers perceived no difference between maternal and paternal roles, while the remainder acknowledged that mothers typically assume a more central role in daily childcare, with children often feeling closer to them. All fathers agreed that a positive parental relationship is essential for children's emotional balance and behavioral regulation. They highlighted the importance of presenting a unified approach to child-rearing, particularly in maintaining consistency in discipline and expressions of praise or support.

3.4 Influence of the Father's Family on His Role

Family support emerged as an important influence. Six fathers reported receiving encouragement from their families, and six described how father figures from their own upbringing shaped their approach to parenting. Some participants received critical feedback from family members, while others preferred to make independent decisions regarding child-rearing. A few noted ambiguity in interpreting the influence of family, distinguishing between their family of origin and the family they had formed with their partner.

3.5 Parenthood

Only one father had attended parent-preparation courses, facilitated by his partner's profession as a midwife. Most fathers did not consider formal preparation necessary, relying instead on experience, observation, and gradual adaptation. All participants emphasized the importance of cultivating a strong relationship with their child, grounded in honesty, dialogue, daily interaction, trust, attentive listening, love, care, and quality time.

3.6 Father's Satisfaction in the Relationship with the Child

Most fathers expressed satisfaction with their parent-child relationship. Ten reported feeling content, while seven identified areas for improvement, particularly the need to spend more time with their children. Fathers emphasized the importance of continuous effort to strengthen the relationship, noting that the quality of the father-child bond evolves over time and with consistent engagement.

4 DISCUSSION

In contemporary Greek society, paternal involvement is recognized as crucial for child development, yet it continues to be shaped by cultural and social factors [17]. Recent cross-national studies from Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey indicate that fathers perceive their role as important and wish to participate more actively in raising their children [18]. Nevertheless, traditional gender role expectations and social structures often limit their daily engagement, particularly in rural areas, where childcare remains predominantly a maternal responsibility, with fathers assuming a supplementary role. Educational and social support programs for fathers are increasingly necessary to promote active involvement in childcare and parenting.

This qualitative study employed structured interviews with 11 fathers aged 32–43 years, most of whom were highly educated, and four were self-employed. The majority were fathers of boys, with most children aged 3–3½ years. The analysis of the interviews indicated that the study objectives were achieved. All participants emphasized that the father's presence in the child's life is essential, highlighting the emotional, social, and caregiving contributions of fathers within the family context.

Regarding fathers' contribution to child-rearing and family responsibilities, participants confirmed active involvement, although limited time due to professional obligations was common. Only one father emphasized financial support as a primary contribution. Consistent with Opondo et al. [19], psychological and emotional aspects of early paternal involvement, not merely the amount of time fathers spend in childcare, are associated with long-term positive behavioral outcomes in children. According to participants, building a strong parent-child relationship requires honesty, dialogue, daily interaction, trust, attentive listening, love, care, and quality time, alongside clear boundaries without creating distance.

Only three fathers reported no perceived differences between their role and that of the mother, acknowledging that mothers often spend more time with the child. The remaining fathers highlighted differences due to breastfeeding, child care tasks, child–mother bonding, and maternal abilities. Contemporary meta-analyses suggest that parental behavior and active engagement, regardless of gender, play a critical role in developing children’s executive functions during preschool, including impulse control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, which are foundational for future cognitive, emotional, and academic progress [20]. Positive parental behaviors, such as warmth, sensitivity, and scaffolding, strongly enhance these skills, whereas negative behaviors, like strict control, are associated with adverse outcomes.

Globally, fathers increasingly participate in the childbirth process. In this study, only three fathers were present during delivery, with absences largely due to cesarean sections or restrictions, despite their desire to be present. Similar findings were reported by Dragonas [21], although only 10% of the population attended childbirth at that time. In Sweden, Ledenfors and Bertero [22] found that fathers wished to participate in childbirth but required more preparation from midwives to assume an active role.

Parent-preparation and psychoprophylaxis courses were generally perceived as less relevant by the fathers in this study. This contrasts with findings by Johansson and Fenwick [23], who reported that such programs offer substantial benefits for fathers, enhancing preparedness for pregnancy and childbirth as well as strengthening couple relationships. Nearly half of the fathers in this study reported family encouragement for their parenting role, while the other half did not consider it necessary. Similarly, about half had the presence of their own father during childhood, while the remainder experienced paternal absence due to work, with one noting emotional distance due to personality traits. Research shows that paternal support can have a significant impact on early child outcomes, such as breastfeeding success, which may also reflect fathers’ deeper involvement in caregiving [24]. Paternal age did not appear to influence fathers’ involvement in childcare. In contrast, while education level was not associated with the paternal role, the type of employment held by fathers did show a notable impact on their level of engagement. Fathers with irregular or nonstandard work schedules reported wishing they had more time with their children. This finding aligns with research showing that variable or demanding work hours can reduce opportunities for paternal engagement [25]. Child gender did not appear to significantly affect paternal involvement, which is consistent with findings from large-scale cohort data [26].

The father’s role in child socialization is multidimensional and essential, facilitating the transition from the family to broader social contexts. While mothers remain important mediators, paternal engagement provides unique models of identification and social behavior, particularly for boys, promoting masculine identity and self-esteem. Warm, supportive, and consistent father–child relationships enhance children’s social competence and psychological resilience, regardless of gender. Furthermore, the quality of the relationship fathers experienced with their own fathers influences their capacity and willingness to engage actively in childcare and parenting [27].

Intergenerational experiences play a significant role in shaping fathering behaviors. Parke [28] noted that men often model their own parenting practices on the involvement of their fathers, consistent with social learning theory [29]. Conversely, the compensation hypothesis suggests that men who experienced limited or deficient relationships with their fathers may seek to compensate by demonstrating higher levels of engagement and involvement with their own children [30–33]. Together, these perspectives highlight how past paternal experiences can influence contemporary fathering practices, shaping both the quality and nature of fathers’ interactions with their children. Also, Corneau [34] argues that fathers’ involvement during the first two years is critical for boys’ behavioral, moral, and cognitive development. Even in cases of paternal absence due to death, positive symbolic memories of the father can help mitigate negative effects. Today’s fathers are aware of different models of paternal behavior but make individual choices based on personal, familial, and social considerations.

According to Doherty et al. [32], a responsible father is one who plans for a child and feels both emotionally and financially prepared for parenthood, legally acknowledges the child, provides physical and emotional care from pregnancy onward, and assumes financial responsibility beginning in the prenatal period. Active paternal involvement is shaped by both interpersonal family relationships and broader environmental factors influencing the child–mother–father triad. Lamb [35] identified four key determinants of paternal care: motivation, skills and confidence, support, and institutional practices [30,31,36]. Consequently, fatherhood is both individualized and reflective, requiring continuous negotiation and adaptation to family dynamics and societal contexts [37].

Fathers play a vital, multidimensional role in modern Greek families, contributing emotionally, socially, and cognitively to child development. While employment constraints and family dynamics influence paternal involvement, factors such as child gender, education, and age are less significant. Supporting fathers through parent-preparation programs, workplace flexibility, and societal recognition enhances both child outcomes and family functioning, fostering positive intergenerational parenting patterns.

4.1 Limitations of the Study

One of the main limitations of this study was the subjectivity of the data, as it relied on fathers' personal statements. Additionally, interviewees may not have been entirely candid due to personal insecurities. Furthermore, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of fathers.

4.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the aforementioned limitations, future research should consider conducting a longitudinal study that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure the collection of primary data from a larger sample. Additionally, it is recommended to compare the perspectives of fathers who already have children with those of expectant fathers, in order to identify convergences and divergences regarding the paternal role.

5 CONCLUSION

Fathers in contemporary Greek families play a vital and multidimensional role, contributing emotionally, socially, and cognitively to their children's development. While work commitments and family dynamics may limit direct engagement, most fathers demonstrate active participation and a strong desire to nurture close, supportive relationships with their children. The presence of paternal role models, family support, and societal recognition further enhances involvement. Interventions such as parent-preparation programs and workplace flexibility can support fathers in balancing caregiving and professional responsibilities, ultimately benefiting both children and family functioning. Future research with larger, diverse samples is needed to deepen understanding of the factors shaping active fatherhood and to inform policies and programs promoting equitable parental engagement.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of West Attica, Athens, Greece (Reference Number: 66024/10-07-2025).

Statement of informed consent

All participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation; anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

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