



Educational Significance of Father–Child Play Interactions: Implications for Early Cognitive and Socioemotional Development

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Abstract: This study investigates fathers' unique contributions to the cognitive and emotional development of young children a dimension of early childhood education often overshadowed by maternal-focused research. It examines the evolving role of fathers from traditional authority figures to responsive play partners, the adaptive interaction strategies they employ, and the developmental outcomes of their engagement. Using a qualitative exploratory case study design, data were collected from 12 purposively selected fathers in Teluk Rendah Pasar Village, Tebo Regency, through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Thematic analysis validated through source triangulation (fathers, mothers, and children) revealed three major findings. First, fathers experienced a meaningful transformation toward emotionally engaged and pedagogically responsive caregivers. Second, they developed adaptive strategies emphasizing intentional quality time, play integration into daily routines, and symbolic family rituals such as "Saturday morning adventures." Third, paternal play fostered children's cognitive growth (problem-solving, focus) and socioemotional competence (self-regulation, confidence, and social skills). These findings highlight the educational significance of paternal play as a catalyst for holistic child development and call for father-education initiatives and family-friendly workplace policies that support sustained paternal engagement in early learning.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood, particularly from birth to eight years, is a critical period for physical, cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and moral-religious development, making consistent stimulation essential (Putri, Kamil, Hatimah, & Ardiwinata, 2023). Although fathers' contributions are increasingly recognized, they often receive less attention than mothers. Active paternal involvement enhances communication, emotional security, and character development, as daily home-based activities foster connections that make children feel safe and confident (Inten, 2024). Most research emphasizes general parental involvement, overlooking fathers' transformative role as playmates, shifting them from authority figures to responsive partners supporting cognitive and emotional growth (Rambe & Nisa, 2023). Addressing this gap, this study examines how fathers' play-based engagement promotes holistic child development. Fathers stimulate cognition and emotions through educational games, puzzles, Legos, reading, and simple learning tasks while fostering regulation, empathy, and social interaction (Reilly, 2021; Saptarini et al.,

2021; Kurniawan, 2023; Čaño et al., 2018; DeMartini & Hazen, 2020; Palkovitz, 2019; Rathore et al., 2023), strengthening concentration, curiosity, and problem-solving (Palkovitz, 2019; Reilly, 2021).

Fathers play a crucial role in children's emotional development by guiding emotion management, modeling empathy, and demonstrating positive social behavior (Čaño et al., 2018; Indriana & Santoso, 2023; Reilly, 2021; Saptarini et al., 2021). Consistent support fosters trust, self-confidence, and social adjustment (Čaño et al., 2018; Saptarini et al., 2021). Yet, fathers often receive less recognition due to cultural norms or limited awareness (Zhu et al., 2024). Limited involvement is linked to delays in cognitive and emotional skills, social interaction, secure attachment, and potential psychological issues (DeMartini & Hazen, 2020; Palkovitz, 2019; Indriana & Santoso, 2023; Kurniawan, 2023; Reilly, 2021; Bašer et al., 2023; Özyürek & Çetin, 2022; Su et al., 2024). Conversely, active father engagement promotes holistic development across cognitive, emotional, and physical domains (Inten, 2024). Promoting equitable involvement through education, community programs, and supportive policies enhances children's growth, resilience, and long-term well-being (Putri, Kamil, Hatimah, & Ardiwinata, 2023).

Studies demonstrate the multidimensional benefits of paternal involvement in early childhood development. Mutiarasari et al. (2024) show that warm, responsive father-child interactions enhance emotional, cognitive, social, and moral growth, with shared play fostering early cognitive skills from six months, problem-solving by one year, and IQ by age three. Erhamwilda and Adawiyah (2024) highlight fathers' contributions to motor development, finding that active physical play such as ball games or horsey play strengthens gross motor coordination and supports emotional regulation. Komarullah et al. (2025) emphasize that structured parental engagement through guided play and effective family-school communication improves cognitive outcomes, demonstrating how everyday toys can teach concepts like direction, color, shape, size, empathy, and affection. Collectively, these studies underscore the dual educational and relational value of paternal play, supporting holistic child development across cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and physical domains.

These insights underscore the need for greater recognition of fathers' roles in early childhood development and highlight the educational and practical implications of fostering active paternal engagement. By examining how daily father-child play contributes to cognitive and emotional growth, this study provides a foundation for developing targeted interventions, parenting programs, and family-centered policies that support fathers in sustaining meaningful, high-quality interactions. Ultimately, understanding and promoting fathers' transformative role as play partners can enhance holistic child development and inform broader strategies to strengthen family involvement in early learning environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design to investigate fathers' roles as playmates in stimulating young children's cognitive and emotional development (Baldwin, 2019). to investigate fathers' roles as playmates in stimulating

young children's cognitive and emotional development. The design was chosen to uncover how fathers transform from traditional authority figures to responsive playmates and to identify emerging patterns of father child interactions in everyday contexts. Research was conducted in Teluk Rendah Pasar Village, Jambi Province. Participants were selected purposively based on specific criteria: fathers living with children aged 2–8 years, engaging in regular daily interactions, and willing to participate in in-depth interviews and observations. This sampling approach ensured that participants could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, using interview guides, observation sheets, and field notes to capture natural father child interactions. Validity was ensured through source triangulation (fathers, mothers, and children) and method triangulation (multiple data collection techniques). Data were analyzed thematically, involving coding, categorizing, and identifying recurring themes related to fathers' transformative roles and communication strategies, ensuring findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences. The study involved 12 fathers of children aged 2–8 years, representing diverse ages (28–39 years), educational levels (high school to postgraduate), and occupations (private employees, civil servants, entrepreneurs, teachers, and drivers). This diversity enriched the data by capturing varied perspectives on how fathers balance professional and family responsibilities while engaging as playmates.

Table 1. Diversity of aspects of research subjects

Participant Code	Age (Years)	Education Level	Occupation	Number of Children	Children's Ages (Years)
AY01	32	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Private Employee	2	4, 6
AY02	35	Master's Degree (S2)	Civil Servant	1	5
AY03	29	Diploma (D3)	Entrepreneur	3	2, 4, 7
AY04	38	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Teacher	2	3, 6
AY05	31	High School (SMA)	Trader	2	4, 8
AY06	34	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Technician	1	5
AY07	36	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Manager	2	3, 7
AY08	30	Diploma (D3)	Mechanic	1	4
AY09	33	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Doctor	2	2, 6
AY10	37	Master's Degree (S2)	Lecturer	1	8
AY11	28	High School (SMA)	Driver	3	3, 5, 7
AY12	39	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	Consultant	2	4, 6

The collected data was analyzed using an in-depth phenomenological approach. This research explores fathers' lived experiences in interacting with their children through multi-stage thematic analysis, including open coding to identify significant statements, categorization of related ideas into broader themes, and condensation of meaning to interpret the essence of participants' experiences. Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing, triangulation of sources (father, mother, and child), and reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with written informed consent obtained, confidentiality maintained through participant coding (AY01–AY12), and secure data storage. All procedures adhered to ethical standards, ensuring respect,

privacy, and voluntary participation throughout the study. This research is expected to be a new finding in the world of education which always only reviews the realm of the learning process at school but without reviewing their activities with their parents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the study's findings on fathers' roles as playmates and their impact on early childhood development, followed by an in-depth discussion contextualized within existing literature. Daily father-child play interactions have been shown to enhance children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Robinson, 2021; Wright, 2023). Fathers' engagement fosters problem-solving, concentration, empathy, and social competence, reflecting the educational and relational significance of responsive play (Palkovitz, 2019; Reilly, 2021). By interpreting these findings in relation to current theories and empirical studies, this discussion emphasizes how structured, affectionate, and playful interactions contribute to holistic child development and offer insights for early education practices and family policy (Komarullah et al., 2025). Based on the analysis of in-depth interview data, participant observations, and documentation, this research identified three main themes that illustrate the father's role as a playmate in stimulating the cognitive and emotional development of early childhood children.

The Transformation of the Father's Role from Authority Figure to Playmate

This study reveals how fathers transform from traditional authority figures into responsive playmates in the context of child development. Through in-depth interviews, it was found that fathers increasingly recognize the importance of emotional involvement in supporting children's cognitive and socio-emotional growth. For example, one participant stated, "I used to always think that as a father, I had to be a figure my children feared. But after seeing their development, I realized they need a father they can talk to, one who understands their feelings. Now, I prefer to be their playmate." This statement reflects a paradigm shift from authoritative to more empathetic and interactive parenting. According to Lamb and Pleck (2010), father involvement consists of three main components: direct interaction with the child, responsibility for child care, and the father's availability and responsiveness. The observed role transformation aligns with this framework, highlighting the significance of active paternal engagement in children's daily lives.

The transformation of fathers' roles not only strengthens father-child relationships but also contributes to children's holistic development. Research indicates that father engagement in play enhances children's social and cognitive skills (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, & Cabrera, 2004). Nevertheless, challenges remain, including societal perceptions of fatherhood and structural barriers such as inflexible working hours, which may limit paternal involvement (Ikihele & Nosa, 2019). Therefore, social norms need to be addressed and policy support provided to enable fathers to participate fully and meaningfully in early childhood care, ensuring both children and families benefit from sustained and high-quality paternal engagement, as illustrated in Table 2, *Transformation of the Father's Role*. This table highlights how fathers gradually shift from traditional authority figures to responsive playmates, demonstrating practical examples of their

strategies, reflections, and daily interactions that support children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Table 2. Transformation of the Father's Role

The Father's Code	Profile	Interview Excerpts
AY01	32 years old, Bachelor's Degree, Private Employee, 2 children (4 and 6 years old)	"I used to always think that as a father, I had to be a figure my children feared. But after seeing their development, I realized they need a father they can talk to, one who understands their feelings. Now, I prefer to be their playmate." "The biggest change in me was when I started to understand that a father's strength doesn't lie in intimidating strictness, but rather in the ability to build emotional closeness. My child is more open to sharing when I approach them in a friendly and attentive way."
AY02	35 years old, Master's Degree, Civil Servant, 1 child (5 years old)	"The biggest challenge was changing my old mindset. I was raised by a very strict father who rarely played. Initially, it was really difficult to be more relaxed and to be able to play with my children. It took time to learn how to play with them properly."
AY03	29 years old, Diploma (D3), Entrepreneur, 3 children (2, 4, and 7 years old)	"As an educator, I understand that children learn more effectively in a fun atmosphere. When I started applying this principle at home, my relationship with my children became warmer. They are no longer afraid to ask questions or share their problems with me."
AY04	38 years old, Bachelor's Degree, Teacher, 2 children (3 and 6 years old)	

This study summarizes the findings of qualitative research on the transformation of the father's role, showing that fathers gradually shift from traditional authority figures to active playmates in child development, influenced by their growing awareness of the importance of emotional paternal involvement. Lamb and Pleck's comprehensive theory of father involvement identifies three main components: direct interaction with the child, responsibility for the child's care, and the father's availability and responsiveness (Clarkson et al., 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that paternal involvement positively impacts children's development across cognitive, socio-emotional, and academic domains (Campione-Barr, Rote, Killoren, & Rose, 2021), with children exhibiting better academic achievement, more positive behavior, and higher mental well-being when fathers are actively engaged (Henry et al., 2019). However, excessive or inappropriate paternal involvement can negatively affect children, particularly if the father-child relationship is poor, making the quality of the relationship a critical factor (Efendi et al., 2023).

Other factors influencing paternal involvement include socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and the child's health condition, with fathers of higher socioeconomic and educational levels, as well as those with children with special health conditions, tending to be more involved (Egbon et al., 2022; Soliman et al., 2018; Spurr et al., 2023; Witt et al., 2019). Despite these benefits, challenges such as negative societal perceptions, inflexible work hours, and lack of support services hinder fatherly involvement, highlighting the need for comprehensive efforts to change social norms and

provide adequate support for optimal engagement (Ikihele & Nosa, 2019; Nair et al., 2020; Treat et al., 2024).

The transformation of the father's role found in this research reflects an evolution in the paradigm of fatherhood, moving from a traditional model emphasizing authority and emotional distance towards a contemporary model that prioritizes closeness and responsiveness (Brown, 2012; Dykas & Smiler, 2024). This aligns with modern attachment theory, which underscores the importance of a responsive caregiver in shaping a child's emotional security (Rohner, 2021). This transformation also demonstrates fathers' adaptation to contemporary understandings of optimal child development (Zheng, 2026). The shift from an authority figure to a playmate, as revealed in this qualitative research, aligns with the views of experts who increasingly recognize the importance of multifaceted paternal involvement in a child's life (Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Puglisi, 2024). In the past, fathers were often perceived as strict and distant figures, but it is now increasingly understood that children need fathers who can actively interact, play, and show emotional closeness (Brown, 2012; Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). This change is not just a fleeting trend but reflects a deeper understanding of the positive impact of a father's presence on various aspects of a child's development (Zheng, 2026; Puglisi, 2024).

Experts like Lamb and Pleck have long emphasized that fatherly involvement is a multidimensional construct that extends beyond direct interaction with the child. It encompasses caregiving responsibilities, emotional support, and the father's accessibility and availability for the child's daily needs (Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 2010). Active paternal involvement has been consistently linked to a wide range of positive child outcomes. Children whose fathers are engaged in their lives tend to exhibit better academic achievement, more socially positive behavior, and greater emotional and mental stability (Cabrera et al., 2000; Sarkadi et al., 2008). This evidence indicates that a father's role as a playmate is not only a source of enjoyment for the child but also represents a meaningful investment in the child's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the quantity of involvement alone does not guarantee positive outcomes. The quality of father-child interactions plays a critical role in shaping the child's development. Effective paternal engagement is characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and supportive behaviors, which foster secure attachment and promote adaptive developmental outcomes (Cowan & Cowan, 2009; McBride et al., 2005). In other words, fathers who are highly involved but lack emotional attunement or supportive behaviors may not achieve the same developmental benefits as fathers whose involvement is both consistent and of high quality.

Effective Strategies Developed by Fathers

Fathers play a pivotal role in shaping their children's development, not only through their presence but also through the strategies they implement in daily interactions. Effective paternal strategies emerge from a combination of experiential knowledge, responsiveness to the child's needs, and an understanding of developmental principles. These strategies often encompass approaches to play, guidance, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and educational support, reflecting fathers' active engagement in

fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth. By observing, adapting, and responding to their children, fathers develop methods that are tailored to their child's unique temperament and developmental stage, highlighting the importance of intentional and thoughtful involvement in promoting optimal developmental outcomes. Fathers can employ several strategies to encourage and engage their children in play activities. Here are the findings from the researcher's interviews.

Table 3. Effective Strategies Developed by Fathers

The fathers code	Profile	Interview Excerpts
AY05	31 years old, High School graduate, Trader, 2 children (4 and 8 years old)	"My eldest child is a bit shy, so I couldn't just jump into conversation. I started with small things, like playing puzzles together. From there, he began to open up and wanted to tell me about school. Now he's much more confident in speaking."
AY06	34 years old, Bachelor's Degree, Technician, 1 child (5 years old)	"When playing LEGO with my child, I intentionally give small challenges. For example, 'try building a tall house that's still strong' or 'how about we build a bridge that toy cars can cross.' From games like these, I see my child's problem-solving skills developing well."
AY07	36 years old, Bachelor's Degree, Manager, 2 children (3 and 7 years old)	"I try to integrate learning into every play activity. When we play 'cooking,' I teach simple math concepts like counting, measuring, or comparing. The children don't feel like they're learning, but they're actually absorbing a lot of knowledge."
AY08	30 years old, Diploma (D3), Mechanic, 1 child (4 years old)	"Even though my time is limited due to work, I make sure 30 minutes of playing with my child is truly quality time. My phone is put away, and I'm fully focused on the child. I feel that 30 focused minutes are more beneficial than two hours while also on my phone or thinking about work."

Fathers develop communication strategies tailored to their child's characteristics, using play activities as a medium for communication, and building trust through consistency. Father-child interactions through play can help children adapt to the school environment and achieve better academic performance (Čaňo et al., 2018; Caughy et al., 2020; Vasalampi et al., 2018). Fathers can also support a child's academic motivation and skills (Li et al., 2024). Research indicates that a father's involvement in parenting has a positive impact on children's communication and development (Bauch & Or, 2021). Fathers can develop effective play strategies to build close interaction and communication with their children, such as engaging them in enjoyable, interest-aligned activities, thereby making children feel comfortable sharing their ideas and feelings (Jaggy et al., 2020; Tipan, 2023; Yoshimura et al., 2020). Furthermore, fathers can provide guidance and direction during play, ensuring the child's safety, and supporting their development by using play-based learning media that can increase children's interest and learning outcomes (Lv et al., 2022).

The implementation of these effective play strategies facilitates a child's holistic development, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional aspects, in line with the principles of play-based learning theory (López et al., 2021). Analytically, positive communication between a father and child during play is essential, as it builds the child's

strong mental well-being (Inten, 2024). Fathers can also leverage technology, such as augmented reality games, to provide cognitive and social benefits for their children (López et al., 2021), while a father's knowledge of child development stages ensures the stimulation provided is appropriate (Wibowo, 2022). These findings align strongly with interpersonal communication theory, which emphasizes that success in building healthy relationships including the father-child relationship rests on responsive and adaptive communication (Stamidis et al., 2019). Thus, the father's role as a playmate is dual: acting as both a pedagogical agent through play and a relational agent through adaptive communication, both crucial for achieving optimal developmental outcomes.

A range of strategies is actively developed by fathers to enhance engagement in their children's play activities, effectively addressing time constraints by emphasizing the quality and focus of interactions. Play is often integrated into daily routines, such as mealtimes and bathing, transforming ordinary moments into opportunities for enjoyable and meaningful engagement. Fathers also demonstrate a proactive approach to refining their parenting practices through diverse resources, including scholarly articles, instructional videos, and discussions with partners, reflecting a commitment to continuous learning and adaptation (Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 2010). Structured play rituals are established to ensure uninterrupted and focused time, promoting both relational closeness and developmental enrichment. Such strategies are particularly important in fostering secure father-child attachment, which research has shown to be associated with positive socio-emotional outcomes, including emotional regulation, social competence, and resilience (Brown, 2012; Dykas & Smiler, 2024; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). By intentionally creating high-quality interactions, fathers contribute not only to immediate enjoyment but also to long-term cognitive, emotional, and social development and can influence education and learning processes, highlighting the important role of responsive and involved fathers (Cabrera et al., 2000; McBride et al., 2005).

Fathers actively develop communication strategies that are tailored to each child's individual characteristics, frequently using play activities as the primary medium for interaction and establishing trust through consistency and responsiveness. These interactions not only facilitate children's adaptation to school environments and enhance academic performance, but also strengthen their motivation to learn and develop essential cognitive and social skills. Positive communication through play further supports children's emotional well-being and mental health, fostering secure and confident engagement in diverse learning contexts. In addition, fathers strategically incorporate technology, such as augmented reality games, to provide cognitive stimulation and promote social interaction, while drawing on their understanding of developmental stages to ensure age-appropriate engagement. This approach reflects principles from interpersonal communication theory, which emphasizes adapting communication styles and building trust, as well as play-based learning theory, which recognizes the father as an experienced and responsive partner in supporting holistic child development (Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 2010; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004; Brown, 2012). Communication plays an important role in the process of mental development and intelligence of children, because

children are born in a pure state that can follow directions according to the processes and circumstances they experience.

The impact of fathers' involvement on child development.

Understanding the impact of fathers' involvement on child development requires examining both the quality and nature of paternal engagement. Research consistently highlights that active, responsive, and intentional participation by fathers contributes significantly to children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. To gain deeper insights into how fathers influence these developmental outcomes, qualitative interviews were conducted, capturing first-hand experiences, strategies, and reflections from fathers themselves. The following excerpts illustrate the ways in which paternal involvement manifests in everyday interactions and its perceived effects on children's learning, behavior, and overall well-being. Here are the research interview excerpts.

Table 4. Impact of Paternal Involvement on Child Development

The Father's Code	Profile	Interview Excerpts	Wife/Mother's Perspective
AY01	Private Employee, 2 children	"If my child gets angry or sad because their toy is broken, I don't immediately scold them or become more patient and tell them to be quiet. I say, 'Papa knows you're sad, Papa understands how you feel.' After they calm down, then we look for a solution together."	"Since my husband started becoming more patient and understanding, the children have become more open. They are more willing to tell us their problems."
AY04	Teacher, 2 children	"I try to be a role model in managing emotions. When I'm angry, I show healthy ways to express anger. I say, 'Papa feels upset right now, but Papa will calm down for a bit.' That way, my child learns that it's okay to be angry, but it needs to be managed well."	"The children are now better at managing their emotions. If they used to throw tantrums often, now they can say 'Mama, I'm upset' more calmly."
AY06	Technician, 1 child	"My child, who used to be very shy, is now starting to speak up in front of others. I'm sure this is because they feel safe and their opinions are valued at home. When we play, I always listen to their ideas and give appreciation."	"The change in my child is very noticeable. He used to be quiet, but now he actively asks questions and wants to interact with others. His teacher also says he's more active in class."
AY07	Manager, 2 children	"Every Saturday morning is my special time with the kids. We have a rule: no interruptions, phones put away, just focus on playing together. This ritual has been going on for almost 2 years, and the impact is incredible. The kids always look forward to this moment, and our relationship gets closer."	"That Saturday morning ritual is very meaningful for the children. They feel like they have exclusive time with their father. This makes them feel cared for and loved."

Based on the interviews, fathers employ a variety of play activities that provide rich cognitive stimulation, including constructive play, learning-through-play approaches, and opportunities that encourage exploration and experimentation. Active paternal involvement in play with early childhood children (aged 2–8 years) has been shown to play a critical role in supporting both cognitive and emotional development (Lazović et al., 2022). Fathers serve as effective playmates who can enhance a child's emotional

intelligence and assist in managing or overcoming negative emotional states (Young et al., 2019). Participation in family-centered play activities, including fathers, also promotes the development of social bonds and strengthens overall family cohesion, contributing to a supportive and nurturing home environment (Campos-Uscanga et al., 2018). Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of intentional and responsive paternal engagement in facilitating holistic developmental outcomes for young children.

The research identifies three primary patterns of father-child interaction physical, constructive, and imaginative play each contributing uniquely to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Physical play fosters gross motor skills, constructive play enhances cognitive abilities, and imaginative play promotes creativity and language development, reflecting the principles of Play-Based Learning Theory, which highlights the father's role as an experienced partner in supporting a child's development through play activities (Jaggy et al., 2020). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that play provides a framework for shared attention, coordination, and cooperation, facilitating optimal child development (Tipan, 2023). Fathers' engagement in enjoyable play also has protective effects, helping high-risk children inhibit problematic behaviors and reducing the likelihood of delinquent behavior during adolescence (Fagan et al., 2023), while simultaneously enhancing social skills as children transition into formal education (Ding et al., 2020). Despite these benefits, fathers' involvement in parenting and play is often overlooked by mainstream services, which primarily focus on mothers (Love et al., 2018). Research indicates that fathers are motivated to be involved and recognize the importance of their role in promoting children's health and well-being, yet they frequently lack access to reliable information and support (Love et al., 2018). This underscores the critical need to provide targeted resources and guidance for fathers of children with complex disabilities, who often navigate intricate emotional challenges and competing demands on their time (Pancsofar et al., 2021).

Overall, research indicates that a father's active involvement in play has a significant and positive impact on child development. Nonetheless, gaps in paternal engagement persist, highlighting the need for targeted and structured support to optimize fathers' contributions. The communication strategies developed by fathers demonstrate a shift from directive approaches toward collaborative and responsive interactions, emphasizing adaptability to the child's individual needs. This approach aligns with social development theories, which stress the importance of tailoring interactions to support a child's learning and emotional growth. Utilizing play as a primary medium for communication reflects fathers' intuitive understanding of children's natural learning processes. Engagement in play and cognitive activities contributes substantially to children's cognitive and emotional development (Wells et al., 2020), enhancing literacy, numeracy, and overall cognitive skills (Robinson et al., 2021). Furthermore, positive reciprocal interactions between fathers and children are associated with improved language abilities and broader cognitive functioning, underscoring the critical role of responsive paternal involvement in supporting holistic development (Megally et al., 2021).

Based on the interviews, fathers employ a variety of play activities that provide rich cognitive stimulation, including constructive play, learning-through-play approaches, and

opportunities that encourage exploration and experimentation. Paternal involvement in these activities plays a significant role in supporting children's cognitive and emotional development (Lazović et al., 2022) and is effective in enhancing emotional intelligence while helping children manage or overcome negative emotional symptoms (Young et al., 2019). In addition, participation in family-centered play activities, including active paternal engagement, strengthens social bonds and promotes overall family cohesion (Campos-Uscanga et al., 2018). This research identifies three primary patterns of father-child interaction: physical play, constructive play, and imaginative play, each contributing uniquely to children's development. These patterns align with Play-Based Learning Theory, which highlights that different types of play mediate distinct aspects of development. Physical play fosters gross motor skills, supports emotional regulation, and can help inhibit problematic behaviors, potentially reducing the risk of delinquent behavior during adolescence (Fagan et al., 2023). Constructive play specifically enhances cognitive abilities, including problem-solving and spatial thinking, while imaginative play develops creativity, language skills, and social competence. Collectively, these findings underscore the critical role of responsive and intentional paternal engagement in promoting holistic child development.

Analytically, this framework is strongly supported by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which positions the father as a "more experienced partner" in the child's learning process (Jaggy et al., 2020; Tipan, 2023). Through play, fathers create a zone of proximal development that facilitates optimal growth by establishing a structure for shared attention, coordination, and cooperative engagement (Ding et al., 2020). Father-instigated play has been shown to uniquely enhance children's social skills, particularly as they transition into formal education, highlighting important pedagogical implications for parenting practices that promote school readiness. Based on the research findings, several practical strategies can guide fathers in embracing the role of an engaged playmate: dedicating 15–30 minutes each day for focused play, starting with activities that the child enjoys, actively listening to the child's stories, educating themselves about child development and monitoring the child's progress, creating unique and memorable shared experiences, and maintaining open and clear communication. Implementing these strategies not only strengthens the father-child relationship but also supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Strengthening the important role of responsive father involvement is certainly a positive aspect of the process that is able to encourage better quality in early childhood and be able to compete in the modern era.

This research has several limitations. First, it was restricted to fathers from middle socioeconomic backgrounds, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study was conducted within the cultural context of Indonesia, and cultural norms may have influenced fathers' behaviors and perceptions. Third, there is a potential for bias in participant self-reports. For future studies, we recommend conducting long-term investigations to examine the sustained effects of paternal involvement and intervention studies to evaluate the effectiveness of father-focused training programs. Despite these limitations, the research successfully elucidates the complexity of the father's role as a playmate in stimulating cognitive and emotional development in early childhood. The

findings indicate that positive paternal involvement independently predicts enhanced cognitive skills, improved emotional regulation, and greater prosocial competence in young children. The transformation of the father's role from an authority figure to an engaged playmate reflects an evolution in the paradigm of fatherhood, aligning with contemporary understandings of optimal child development. Adaptive communication strategies, diverse play activities, and consistent emotional support demonstrate that fathers contribute a unique and complementary parenting style to that of mothers, reinforcing the critical importance of responsive paternal engagement in early childhood.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of fathers in early childhood care within Desa Teluk Rendah Pasar, Tebo Regency. Through a qualitative investigation involving 12 fathers, three key findings emerged. First, fathers experienced a fundamental transformation from traditional authority figures to responsive playmates, driven by the recognition that active interaction and emotional closeness are essential for optimal child development. This shift reflects a broader contemporary paradigm in fatherhood that emphasizes engagement, responsiveness, and relational attunement. Second, fathers employed adaptive communication and engagement strategies, including prioritizing quality time, integrating play into daily routines, continuous self-directed learning, and establishing dedicated play rituals. These practices reveal a unique yet complementary parenting style alongside maternal caregiving. Third, active paternal involvement as playmates demonstrated a substantial impact on child development: cognitively, it enhanced problem-solving abilities, curiosity, and sustained attention; emotionally, it supported self-regulation, increased self-confidence, and fostered social competence. Collectively, these findings highlight the critical and distinctive contribution of fathers to holistic early childhood development. Despite the study's limitations, including a small sample size and a culturally specific context (Indonesia), the results underscore the need for targeted support mechanisms such as father-focused education programs, resources for skill development, and work-life balance policies to promote sustained and effective paternal engagement in childcare. The habit of interacting with parents is an effort to shape the quality of civilization and learning in the future. Future research should explore diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts and assess the long-term impact of father-child play on development outcomes to strengthen the evidence base for policy and practice.

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