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## EXPLORE VARIOUS DETERMINANTS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN CHINA: AN ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

Father involvement in family child-rearing is frequently disregarded in contemporary China, whether actively or passively. The phenomenon of 'widowed parenting', characterised by the presence of 'shadow fathers' and 'cloud fathers', has emerged as a significant challenge to family parenting and a contentious issue in the context of social development in China. In this study, a qualitative research methodology was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 urban Chinese fathers, with a view to exploring the factors influencing fathers' participation in parenting in contemporary Chinese society. The findings suggest that multiple influences on fathers' parenting involvement in contemporary China include fathers' role perceptions, fathers' self-efficacy, marital satisfaction, fathers' parental leave, and work-family conflict. The findings indicate that factors such as child gender and the number of children do not exert a significant influence on the level of father involvement. The findings of this study serve to expand the existing body of knowledge surrounding marital satisfaction and fathers' self-efficacy from a localised perspective, whilst concomitantly extending the exploration of the impact of peripheral environmental support and stressors, particularly information technology, on fathers' parenting involvement.

### Keywords:

Father Involvement, Father Role, Father Self-efficacy, Marital Satisfaction

## Introduction

The role of fathers has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past fifty years. They are no longer confined to brief periods of companionship outside of work, but are fully engaged in childcare, reshaping the meaning of traditional family roles. Today, fathers not only spend quality time alone with their children, but also take on a full range of parenting responsibilities (Lamb, 2013; Yogman & Eppel, 2022). Scholars have studied fatherhood through various disciplines such as family studies, psychology, medicine, law, sociology, social work, gender studies, and culture (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Findings suggest that father involvement is considered a key source of family well-being and positive child development (Diniz et al., 2023). There are series of studies examining the relationship between father involvement and school children's academic performance (Saifuddin, & Ezzi, 2024; Saifuddin et al. 2023; Gurkan et al., 2021); studies have generally shown that parental involvement is strongly associated with adolescents' academic performance (Boonk et al., 2018). Findings of Gurkan et al. emphasise the importance of that active father involvement has a beneficial impact on a child's educational journey, which improves the overall academic environment (Gurkan et al., 2021).

A series of studies have shown that fathers have an important supportive role in children's EQ development, with fathers' good modelling of emotion regulation, supportive emotion-related parenting practices and a positive father-child emotional climate being associated with higher emotion regulation skills in children (Fernandes et al. 2021; Gunawardena & Schuck, 2021; Fernandes et al. , 2021; Boldt et al., 2020) Fathers play the most prominent role in children's emotional intelligence development during infancy and early childhood (Islamiah et al., 2023). Research has shown that the stability of the reciprocal relationship established between infants and their fathers during infancy can last from infancy through adolescence. This stability has been shown to predict an individual's socio-emotional and psychological well-being during the preschool years, childhood, and adolescence (Abraham et al., 2018).

Fathers play a key role in children's neurodevelopment, physical health such as neurodevelopmental outcomes (Abraham & Feldman, 2022; Abraham et al., 2017; Abraham et al., 2014; Abraham et al., 2018; Abraham et al., 2016); obesity occurrence (Campbell & McPherson, 2019) and active health (Barker et al., 2017; Burt et al., 2022)

Several studies have noted that father absence may pose a potential threat to child development (Cabrera et al., 2018). Such absence is perhaps causally associated with poor child developmental outcomes (McLanahan et al., 2013) and may exacerbate the problem of intergenerational transmission of lack of family education (Pougnnet et al., 2012).

Most of the above studies have focused on North America and Europe, and although the positive impact of fathers' involvement in children's development on their resilience is widely recognised, Chinese fathers tend to be less involved in the parenting process compared to their mothers (liu, et al., 2022), and in terms of the size of China's population, Chinese fathers are the largest father community in the world (World Bank, 2019). Yet the role of Chinese fathers in and impact on family life - either as residents of their home society or as migrants - remains understudied and undertheorised (Li, 2020). There is a paucity of empirical research addressing Chinese fathers' involvement in parenting. Given the importance of fathers' involvement in parenting, an in-depth exploration of the factors that may influence Chinese fathers' involvement, including facilitators and impediments, becomes necessary. Given that the

existing literature uses quantitative research methods, to compensate for the limitations of quantitative research methods, this study used semi-structured in-depth interviews. Examining the factors influencing Chinese fathers' involvement in parenting, the interviews consisted of 15 Chinese fathers in China. Based on Palkovitz's (1997) model of father involvement and Belsky's (1984) theoretical framework, the themes of the interviews centred on the characteristics of fathers (father role beliefs, father self-efficacy), the characteristics of their children (number of children and gender), and peripheral environmental supports and pressures (marital relationship satisfaction, work-family conflict, fathers' parental leave).

### **Theoretical Models of Father Involvement**

Father involvement is a multifaceted concept, and fathers can play a role in parenting in many ways. Lamb and his colleagues first proposed the well-known Lamb (1985) foundational model, which outlines the various forms of father input that may occur in child rearing. It consists of three main aspects: (1) reciprocity (interaction): one-to-one activities between the father and the child, such as playing with the child, feeding the child, etc.; (2) proximity (accessibility): the physical and psychological closeness of the father to the child, which is important in terms of the child's physical and mental development; (3) responsibility (Responsibility: the father is responsible for the child's health and care, such as arranging for the child's care, knowing when the child needs to see a pediatrician, etc. This aspect does not necessarily require the father to have direct contact with the child. This aspect does not necessarily require fathers to engage in direct behavioral communication with children; expressions of worry, anxiety, etc., about the child when the father is doing something else are also manifestations of responsibility. Palkovitz (1997) expands on Lamb's (1987) foundational model by articulating a more nuanced theoretical framework of father involvement. Noting that father engagement is constructed from multidimensional content, including affective, cognitive, ethical, and observable behaviors, he advocated for a reexpansion of the categorization of father engagement into 15 categories:

- (1) communication (communication) such as talking, listening, expressing love, etc.;
- (2) education (teaching) such as role modeling, training, and developing interests and hobbies;
- (3) monitoring, e.g. checking homework, knowing who the child is friends with;
- (4) Thought processes e.g. anxiety, intentions, hopes;
- (5) Short-range activities (errands) such as taking the child to places, buying necessities, and other activities;
- (6) Caregiving (caregiving) e.g. feeding food, bathing, caring for a sick child;
- (7) child-related maintenance e.g. cooking, laundry, repairs;
- (8) shared interests e.g. reading with children, developing expertise;
- (9) availability e.g. effectively directing the child's attention or participation in activities, effectively spending time with the child;
- (10) planning, such as birthdays, vacations, plans for their future, etc.;
- (11) shared activities, e.g. going to the stores, playing together, working together;
- (12) Provision (providing) e.g. clothing, food, housing, health, etc.;
- (13) affection (affection) e.g. kissing, hugging, touching;

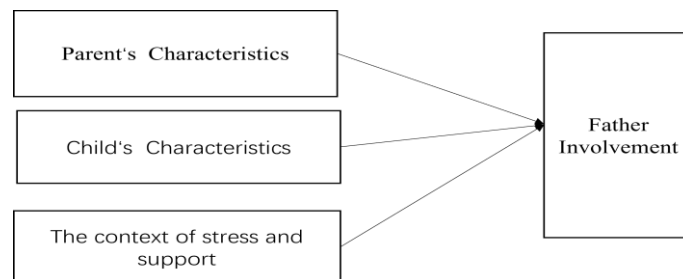
(14) protection (protection) such as monitoring the child's safety, providing a safe home environment for the child, and live

(15) emotional support (support emotionality) such as encouraging children, developing interests. This study used Palkovitz's theoretical model to explore father involvement.

### Theoretical Framework of this Study : Belsky (1984) Parenting Theoretical Framework

The present study employs the parenting theoretical framework developed by Belsky (1984), : Belsky (1984) parenting theoretical framework

In 1984, Jay Belsky developed a seminal theoretical framework (see Figure 1) that explained the multiple determinants of parenting. The argument proposed was that the practice of parenting was influenced by a number of factors, including parental characteristics (for example, personality, psychopathology), child characteristics (for example, temperament), and the family's social environment (for example, marital quality, social support).



**Figure1 Belsky (1984) Parenting Theoretical Framework**

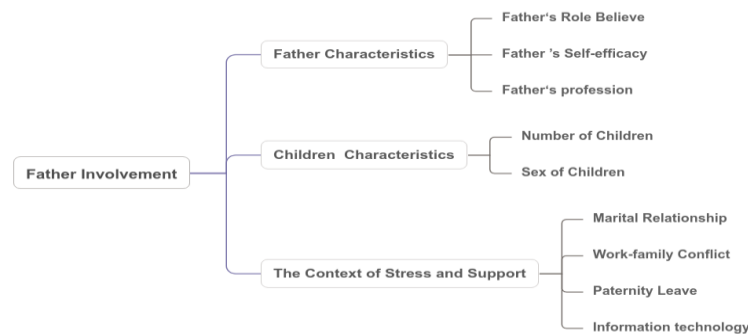
This theory has become a classic in the field of parenting and family psychology, having been cited over 4,400 times in the scientific literature (Taraban & Shaw, 2018). As Doherty and Beaton (2004) have observed, the model constructed by Belsky (1984) is considered to be one of the most pioneering and influential conceptualisation approaches in the field. It established a foundation for subsequent researchers to examine family processes and parenting from a multi-system, interrelational vantage point (Doherty & Beaton, 2004). As illustrated in Figure 2, the framework theoretical of this study is predicated on the aforementioned.

Over the past five decades or so, research on fatherhood has gradually received more attention (e.g., Flouri et al., 2016 ; McMunn et al., 2017 ). However, most of such studies currently focus on populations in Western countries, and there is a relative paucity of empirical research on Chinese fatherhood (Kwok & Li, 2015 ; Liu et al., 2016 ). Parental behaviors and beliefs are profoundly influenced by the sociocultural environment (Haslam & Mejia, 2017 ). China's traditional culture, coupled with patriarchal traditions, has had a significant and profound impact on Chinese fathers' perceptions and behaviors. Furthermore, in terms of the size of the Chinese population, Chinese fathers are the largest father community in the world (word bank, 2019). Compared with Western countries, which account for 5% of the global population, studying Chinese father involvement through interview methodology will further deepen the understanding of father involvement and contribute some literature to the diversity of father involvement. Given that existing research on Chinese father involvement mainly comes from the first-tier big cities in China where the economy is developed and people are more receptive to new things and ideas, this study will focus on fathers in small and medium-sized cities in

China where the economy is developing more slowly. Interviews were conducted with fathers in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China, as an example. Ganzhou City was chosen because it is a small city with slow economic development and people are more traditional in their thinking.

## Materials and Methods

### Data Collection



**Figure 2 The Framework Theoretical of this Study**

Source: (Authors' Compilation )

This study used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. Between September and November 2024, the researcher conducted 15 in-depth interviews with 15 fathers in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. These interviews were mainly in the library of Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. Each interview lasted about 1 - 2 hours. The interviews were semi-structured, and the order of the questions was adjusted to match the flow of the conversation based on the respondents' answers. The list of topics used can be found in Appendix a. After the interviews, we provided a gift worth 100 RMB (approximately \$14.75 USD) as compensation.

### Recruitment Enrollment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. We sought participants by posting an advertisement online (mainly on WeChat) briefly describing our study. Fathers were eligible to participate in the study when they had at least one child under the age of 3-18. This age criterion was chosen for two reasons. First, fathers are rarely involved in the day-to-day care of a child until the child is 3 years old, and are largely replaced by the child's mother and grandmother. Second, fathers spend less and less time with their children as they become adults. Father involvement conducted in Western contexts has focused primarily on young children (e.g., Brandth and Kvande, 2016; Eerola & Mykkänen, 2015; Joshi, 2021), and our age requirement will facilitate comparisons of results across studies.

Table 1 shows basic information about the participants. All 15 participants were heterosexual partners. All respondents were employed, one partner was a full-time wife, and all other partners worked in the labor market. All 15 participants were from Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. Except for two respondents who had one child and three respondents who had three children, the remaining 10 respondents had two children. In terms of educational attainment, there were two Ph.D. graduates, two master's degree holders, nine bachelor's degree

holders, and specialized degree holders 2 people. Our participants had a wide range of occupations, such as university teachers, Chinese medicine practitioners, entrepreneurs, tour guides, architects, employees of state-owned enterprises, and barbershop owners. In general, our participants are representative of both the middle class and the general class.

Table 1 Basic Information about the 15 Participants

Name and age	profession	Education background	Sex and age of the children
1.Fang 35	Environmental testing	Bachelor's degree	Girl (12) girl (8)
2 . Wang 39	University administrators	PhD degree	Boy (12)
3. Li 41	Tobacco Authority	Bachelor's degree	Girl (17) girl (9)
4. Lai 35	Electricity authority	Bachelor's degree	Boy (10) girl (3)
5.Liu 36	Tour guide	professional qualification	Girl (12) girl (8) boy (4)
6. Chen 36	Business proprietor	professional qualification	Boy (12)
7. Sun 46	University teacher	PhD degree	Girl (8) girl (4)
8. Gao 42	Doctor	Bachelor's degree	Girl (17) girl (7)
9. Wan 33	Middle school teacher	Bachelor's degree	Boy (12) boy (9)
10. Zhao 33	Architectural designers	Bachelor's degree	Girl (8) boy (4)
11.Ren 45	Construction Engineer	professional qualification	Girl(12) boy(5)
12.Lu 35	Police	Bachelor's degree	Girl(17) boy(7)
13. Zhou 47	Family educators	Master's degree	Girl (4) girl (1)
14. Niu 33	Barber Shop Owner	Secondary school education	Boy (17)
15.Yu 43	Doctor	Bachelor's degree	Boy (13) boy (5) girl (8)
			Boy (17) girl (8)

Source: (Authors' Collection )

### ***Thematic Analysis***

All interviews were conducted and fully transcribed in Chinese. The interviews were translated verbatim into transcripts using iFLYREC (an online audio-to-text service), and then the researcher carefully proofread the verbatim transcripts and repeatedly read and analyzed the data to generate the following six potential themes: fathers' roles in their children's development (playmates, role models, material providers, emotional supporters, and educators), criteria for good fathers, unique contributions of fathers, the well-being of fathers'



parenting experience, factors affecting fathers' involvement (influence of work-family conflict on fathers' involvement, influence of marital relations on fathers' involvement, influence of fathers' self-efficacy on fathers' involvement, influence of children's gender and the number of children on fathers' involvement, influence of socially friendly policies on fathers' involvement; influence of modern technological development on fathers' involvement). In addition, considering that some themes (e.g., the context of father involvement, unique contributions of fathers, and fathers' experiences of parenting well-being) were only sparsely visible in our data, four central themes were ultimately selected: (1) Father characteristics: including father role beliefs, father self-efficacy, and the impact of father occupation on father involvement. (2) Child Characteristics include: the number of children and the effect of child gender on father involvement. (3) The Context of Stress and Support and father involvement, including the effects of marital relationship, work-family conflict, and information technology on fathers' parental leave on father involvement.

### **Ethics**

A uniform informed consent form was prepared and verbal consent was obtained prior to each interview so that interviewees understood that they could stop the interview at any time without consequence. In this study, in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, each participant used a pseudonym.

### **Survey Results and Finds**

The survey data show that almost all respondents are involved (to some extent) in the daily parenting of their children. In addition, respondents indicated that they are aware of the importance of providing companionship for their children and expressing emotions in parenting, as well as the fact that father involvement cannot be achieved without the support of the children's mothers. Father role beliefs, marital relationships, work-family conflict, and self-efficacy are among the most important factors influencing father involvement; paternal parental leave also positively affects father involvement. Next, we will explore our findings around three themes: first, father characteristics (including father role beliefs, self-efficacy, and father's educational background), second, child characteristics (including number of children and gender of children), and third, context support and stress (including marital relationship, work-family conflict, and parental leave for fathers, technology information).

### **Fatherhood Characteristics and Father Involvement**

#### ***Father's Role Beliefs***

The concept of "fatherhood beliefs" relates to how fathers view themselves and how they deal with the various roles and obligations associated with father involvement, co-parenting, and father-child interactions (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). The majority of respondents in this study spoke about the influence of their fathers on their beliefs about their father's role.

The vast majority of the respondents in this study grew up in the last two decades of the 20th century, when China was in transition from a state-dominated planned economy to a market economy. With the increasing globalization of the economy, market dynamics were continuously stimulated, yet the welfare provided by the state was reduced, which put the responsibility of raising a family as well as caring for children back on the shoulders of

individual parents (Li, 2018). Under this socio-economic background, the family model of “the man is responsible for supporting the family and the woman is responsible for bringing up the children” is more common in the respondents' families of origin. When these male respondents recalled their interactions with their fathers, they often used words such as “strict father,” “traditional father,” “silent mountain,” “macho” to describe their father figures. They confessed that they had never experienced a close and intimate relationship with their fathers during their childhood, which became a deep regret in their hearts. As a result, they were determined to differentiate themselves from their own fathers and refused to be the stoic and strict father figure that their fathers had been. In order to become a new kind of father, these fathers actively embrace the idea of growing up with their children, emphasize the value of emotional communication, and actively participate in the day-to-day care and upbringing of their children.

Twelve of the 15 respondents talked about the significance of fathers' financial roles. These narratives about fathers as financial providers are consistent with the findings of other studies on the role of fathers (Cao & Lin, 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2021), suggesting that the notion of fathers as excellent providers is still prevalent in Chinese society. Particularly driven by the high cost of modern childcare, the role of fathers is highlighted by their financial support for their children's development (Xiao, 2016), which somewhat rationalizes the importance of Chinese fathers' financial contributions to their families.

In the eyes of the interviewees, the role of a father should not only be one of financial support, but should also show diversity, and in particular, need to be more involved in the process of raising and educating children. Mr. Zhao (daughter 12, son 5), who is an architect, said, “A really good father must be able to provide financially, but at the same time it is equally important to spend time with his children. In my opinion, if a father doesn't spend time with his children, then in a sense the children don't really belong to him.”

Mr. Lai (boy aged 10; girl aged 3) believes that fathers have to do the following three things: *First, they have to take up the most basic family responsibilities. It is the most basic duty to make sure that the family is well-fed and well-dressed, and to provide better education for the children as far as he can. Secondly, when accompanying children, not only to “accompany”, but also to “accompany”, to create a relaxed and pleasant environment for children to grow up, to satisfy their curiosity. For example, once his child said he had never seen dewdrops, Mr. Lai set an alarm for 5:00 a.m. Even though he had never gotten up this early before, he promised his child that he would take him to Forest Park to see the dewdrops. Third, cultivate your child's courage in the face of difficulties, and provide him with all the help he can when he needs it.*

### ***Father Self-efficacy:***

Coleman et al. suggested in 2000 that parental self-efficacy refers to parents' beliefs that they are competent in the role of parenting. It encompasses the beliefs held by parents and their assessment of their own proficiency in accomplishing tasks related to parenting (Coleman, & Karraker, 2000). Subsequently, they further elaborated on this concept in 2003, suggesting that parental self-efficacy is a parent's confidence in their ability to parent, i.e., a parent's belief that they are able to promote the positive and healthy development of their child by influencing their child's behavior (Coleman, & Karraker, 2003).



Most of the respondents realized that father's self self-efficacy is an important factor in father involvement (Mr. Zhao, Mr. Wan, Mr. Li, Mr. Sun, Mr. Zhou, and Mr. Lu). Fathers with high self-efficacy are more confident to deal with some of the problems encountered by their children; conversely, we are not confident enough to know what to do ourselves and may not have the ability to be able to solve them (Mr. Gao). If the father has low self-efficacy, he may avoid taking care of the child. (Mr. Zhao).

Regarding the aspect about enhancing fathers' self-efficacy, among the 15 respondents, three fathers have systematically studied offline courses on parenting and marital relationships (Mr. Zhao, Mr. Zhou, and Mr. Sun); five respondents have studied online only through short videos and public numbers (Mr. Lu, Mr. Li, and Mr. Wang, Mr. Fang, and Mr. Niu), and two respondents have studied through talking to their close friends (Mr. Gao) or relatives (Mr. Wan); and 1 respondent has participated in the lecturer group organized by the PTA of his/her child's classroom (Mr. Liu).

### ***Marital Satisfaction***

Marital satisfaction “is the degree of satisfaction an individual achieves in the marital state through subjective feelings and overall evaluation of the economic, physical, psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions of the marital relationship between the parties” (Liu, 2022; Liao, 2023). According to the description of the respondents, 11 out of 15 respondents had a close marital relationship (Mr. Fang, Mr. Wang, Mr. Li, Mr. Liu, Mr. Sun, Mr. Gao, Mr. Wan, Mr. Zhao, Mr. Lu, Mr. Zhou, and Mr. Yu), and 2 of them had a marital relationship that had gradually become closer after the study (Mr. Lai, and Mr. Chen); and 2 of them had an average marital relationship (Mr. Ren, and Mr. Niu). When exploring the influence of couple relationship on children's development, all respondents reached a consensus that a good couple relationship has a positive contribution to children's development; on the contrary, if the couple relationship is poor, children may lack a sense of security and self-confidence, and they are more likely to become emotionally agitated.

The influence and support of the child's mother is an important factor and motivation for the father's involvement. Mr. Zhao (Girl 12; boy 5) talked about: I have a good relationship with my lover and when she asks me to spend more time with my child, I respond and think about better ways to spend time with my child. Another five respondents were involved in learning about parenting systematically under the influence of their children's mothers (Mr. Lai, Mr. Sun, Mr. Chen, Mr. Lu, and Mr. Li). A good marital relationship can bring many positive, positive and sunny influences to children. One of them, Mr. Lai (Boy 10, girl 13), recalls fondly, “Every day when I came home for lunch, the moment I opened the door, my wife and my son would always say, ‘Welcome home, Daddy’. At that moment, my heart was filled with warmth, and I even felt like staying home every day, not wanting to go out to work.”

Mr. Fong (Girl 12; Girl 8) expressed some regrets: Before 2022, I worked abroad for a long time and spent little time with my family, resulting in many complaints and arguments from my loved ones, which led to my eldest daughter becoming emotionally agitated and my son becoming less confident. This caused my eldest daughter to become emotionally agitated and my son to become less confident, which I felt helpless about. 2022 onwards, I returned to my hometown to work and shared parenting with my wife, and the situation improved.

## Supportive and Stressful Surroundings

### *Work-family Conflict*

Work-family conflict is an important factor affecting father involvement. When asked how they viewed and reconciled work-family conflicts, there was a lot of helplessness, anxiety, and active coordination and communication among the respondents.

Mr. Liu (Girl 12; girl 8; boy 4), who works as a tour guide, talked about: first of all, for example, because of the working hours, there is no way for me to participate, and the parent-child relationship will be discounted. Secondly, the pressure of my work would affect my emotions, and I would vent my bad feelings to my own family and children, and this atmosphere is obviously unfavorable to the growth of such children. Mr. Chen (Boy 12; Girl 8; girl 4), who started his own business, said guiltily: I travel a lot, and thankfully nowadays communication is so advanced that I can communicate with my children through WeChat video calls. When I go back, if they are asleep. Only Sunday will take some time out to accompany their children. Mr. Wang (Boy 12), who is engaged in management work at the university, talked about: when work is very busy, it is obvious that it will affect the father's involvement, and the time and energy invested will be drastically reduced; at the same time, the degree of commitment and concentration in the process of parenting will be reduced. The quality of companionship and parenting at this time of year is not as high and the involvement is not as full as it should be, and I clearly feel this.

Most of the interviewees mentioned the conflict between work and family, especially the lack of sufficient time for fathers to be involved in the child-rearing process due to their busy schedules. They generally look forward to a special parental leave so that fathers can be more involved in their children's upbringing.

### *Parental Leave for Fathers*

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the introduction of fathers-only parental leave has led to an increase in the number of men taking such leave (Avdic & Karimi, 2018; Cools et al., 2015). Furthermore, research has shown that policies providing paternity leave and vacation time specifically for fathers are linked to greater paternal involvement in childcare and a more equitable distribution of household chores in Western countries (Hosking et al., 2010; Huerta et al., 2014). These policies have also been found to positively impact family dynamics, resulting in higher marital satisfaction for mothers, decreased household stress, and stronger bonds between couples and between fathers and their children (Petts, 2018; Petts, Carlson, et al., 2020; Petts & Knoester, 2019, 2020; Petts, Knoester, et al., 2020).

Paternity leave is currently available only in China, and is limited to government departments and State enterprises; it is not usually available to fathers in the private sector. With regard to parental leave for fathers, some interviewees suggested that the government should introduce relevant policies to clarify the system of parental leave for fathers. First, parental leave should be granted according to the different stages of a child's development. Second, these leaves should be flexible so that fathers can use them when needed (Mr. Zhou, Mr. Lai, Mr. Lu, Mr. Gao).

Several other interviewees suggested that parental leave for fathers could be tailored to the age stage of the child. For example, for school-age children, the father's parental leave could be synchronized with the child's summer and winter vacations, so that the father could take a vacation with the child and enhance the parent-child relationship (Mr. Wang, Mr. Niu, Mr. Gao, Mr. Yu).

Other interviewees said that for important events for children, such as school commencement ceremonies and Children's Day, the State should set up special public holidays to facilitate fathers' participation in their children's development process (Mr. Zhao, Mr. Niu, Mr. Lu). Mr. Chen, who owns his own business, expressed the hope that fathers in the private sector would also be able to enjoy parental leave for their fathers.

## **Characteristics of a Child**

### ***Impact of Number of Children on Children***

In the study, respondents generally agreed that the number of children does not significantly affect the level of father involvement in the family. They noted that fathers usually try to balance the attention given to each child to ensure that each child feels the love and support from the father. However, when there is more than one child in the family, the average amount of attention and involvement time that fathers allocate to each child may decrease. This is primarily because the allocation of time, energy, and resources needs to be balanced across multiple children. Nonetheless, fathers' overall level of involvement with all children does not decrease. They still try their best to meet the needs of each child and ensure the overall harmony and stability of the family. This view was reflected in the responses of several interviewees.

### ***Impact of Child Gender on Father Involvement.***

In exploring the impact of children's gender on fathers' involvement, a number of interviewees with multiple children indicated that they would not treat different children differently because of their gender. They emphasized that fathers would give equal attention and involvement to both boys and girls and try to create a fair family environment (Mr. Chan, Mr. Chiu, Mr. Lai, Mr. Yu). One of them, Mr. Chen (Boy12; Girl 8; girl 4), showed some regret and guilt when sharing his experience. He mentioned, "If I had more time, I would prefer to spend more time with my second daughter. Because she is emotional, maybe because she is the second oldest in line and has an older brother and sister, she would feel neglected." This interviewee realized that although he did not treat his children differently because of their gender, in reality, the family structure and the interrelationships between the children may result in some children feeling neglected. This emotional need also requires fathers to be more attentive and understanding in their involvement.

## **Information Technology and Father Involvement**

The development of information technology has provided many facilitating conditions for fathers' participation. First, it helps fathers break through spatial constraints and interact with their children remotely through video calls, social media, etc., so as to participate in their children's growth process. Second, by utilizing smart devices and apps, fathers can engage in online learning and game interaction with their children to enrich the forms of parent-child interaction. Third, information technology provides fathers with rich parenting knowledge and educational resources. Fathers can learn parenting knowledge and improve parenting skills through online courses, parenting forums and other platforms. Through instant messaging tools

and family management applications, fathers can learn about family affairs and children's needs in a more timely manner, enhancing the efficiency of family communication. Fatherhood in the digital age includes not only financial support but also emotional accompaniment and digital management, prompting fathers to take on more roles in the family.

In this study, Mr. Chen (Boy12; Girl 8; Girl 4), who travels a lot, talked about: during the start-up stage, I have to travel a lot. Usually, I use the evening time to talk to my children via video call to find out how they are doing at home on a daily basis. As mentioned earlier, several fathers talked about learning about parenting through online courses, Little red book, Bi Li Bi Li, WeChat public accounts, and other self-media accounts (Mr. Lu, Mr. Li, Mr. Wang, Mr. Fang, Mr. Niu). Mr. Sun (Girl7; girl7) talked about, "My wife is studying abroad and she often sends me some of the better parenting courses she sees in the media."

In addition, while information technology can have a positive impact on father involvement by providing some assistance, it is also important to note that algorithmic recommender systems can lead to parents being exposed to overly homogenized information, creating an "information cocoon," which can lead to systematic bias in parenting decision-making; parents may overly rely on technology to Parents may rely too much on technology to "watch" their children, reducing the time they have to spend with and educate them in person; while AI emotional companion tools can support parenting, over-reliance on these tools may weaken real interactions between parents and children, and may cause children to feel uncomfortable in real social environments, making it difficult for them to establish healthy emotional attachment patterns. Both parents and children may become overly dependent on electronic devices, reducing face-to-face communication and interaction. This phenomenon may lead to estrangement of family relationships and weaken the emotional connection between parent and child.

In conclusion, the use of information technology in parenting needs to be carefully balanced to capitalize on its advantages while being alert to its possible negative effects. Parents should be actively involved in the process of their children's technology use to ensure that they grow up in a healthy and safe environment.

## Discussion

This paper is concerned with how Chinese fathers in small and medium-sized cities discuss the multiple determinants that influence their participation. Fatherhood is a social status with many potential roles associated with it, including provider, protector, caregiver, and nurturer (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018;). Qualitative data based on 15 fathers in urban Chinese families suggests that the perception of fathers' roles as good economic providers is still deeply rooted in Chinese society. When men were asked about their responsibilities as fathers, 12 of the 15 participants viewed securing the family's economic security as one of their important duties. They believed that the key characteristics of a good father were a successful career and the ability to provide financial support to the family. This also reflects the fact that the role of fathers in providing financial support for their children's growth is becoming more prominent in the context of the current rising costs of childcare (Xiao, 2016), which to a certain extent reinforces the recognition of the importance of fathers' economic contribution to the family in Chinese society. This perception of fathers as family economic pillars is consistent with the findings of numerous related studies (Cao & Lin, 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2021).

This study confirms that father role beliefs significantly influence father involvement. Fathers' role beliefs determine the manner, content, and extent of their involvement. Fathers with a strong identity highly recognize their responsibilities. Traditional fathers prioritize economic and material support but provide insufficient companionship and emotional support. In contrast, "new fathers" emphasize daily companionship and emotional support while also valuing material provision.

The study also highlights that marital relationships are a crucial factor influencing father involvement. In China, the marital relationship extends beyond the couple to include the families of origin, particularly the mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship. Supportive mothers encourage fathers' active participation, whereas gate-keeping behavior by mothers hinders it.

The findings reveal that in modern Chinese society, especially in urban families, boys and girls have equal status, and fathers treat them fairly. The number of children does not affect the total amount of father involvement, which remains constant but appears reduced when averaged per child. Childcare is primarily a family responsibility in China, with a lack of structural and policy support, such as paternity leave. Balancing work and family life is a significant challenge for involved fathers.

The study also provides a local perspective on fathers' self-efficacy in non-Western societies. Unlike in Western contexts where fathers' self-efficacy is measured by parent-child relationships, in Chinese culture, it is often assessed based on children's academic performance. Fathers feel more accomplished and have higher self-efficacy when their children perform well academically, whereas poor academic performance can lead to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-efficacy.

There are some limitations to this study that readers should consider. All of the interviewees in our study were from one city, which may be under-representative, and the results of this study may not be generalizable to fathers in all cities in China; subsequent studies could recruit interviewees nationwide. The number of interviewees was only 15, and subsequent studies could increase the number of interviewers with a view to being more representative. The present study is a cross sectional study and the follow up study can be opened for longitudinal tracking study. The subjects of this study were fathers in nuclear families, and follow-up studies could examine family types such as single-parent families, adoptive families, and intergenerational families as interview subjects.

In addition, given the current changes in parenting policies (especially parental leave) in China, future research is encouraged to investigate to what extent and in what ways these policy changes have affected men's beliefs and practices of fatherhood.

## Conclusion

This study found that father involvement in China is influenced by a number of factors. Among them, the perception of fatherhood is the primary factor affecting father involvement. Fatherhood is diversified, i.e., as a provider of material goods, as well as an emotional supporter and companion. Second, marital relationship satisfaction was the second most important factor influencing father involvement. Again, the higher the father's self-efficacy, the higher the involvement, and vice versa, the lower the involvement. Work-family conflict is the main



barrier to father involvement in China, where more and more fathers are taking on the dual roles of caring for the family and providing for the family. However, due to a lack of structural support (e.g., paternity leave) and continued insufficient policy support, they face many conflicts between work and family, as well as financial pressures for childcare and a lack of parenting knowledge, all of which pose significant challenges to father involvement. Therefore, fathers have called on the Government to introduce and implement a series of measures, including the establishment of paid parental leave for fathers, the granting of parental allowances, the provision of regular subsidies from the Family Education Fund, and the launching of community training for new fathers. These initiatives will help to further promote the active participation of more fathers in parenting.

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