



# The Role of Fathers in Early Child Development

- The involvement of fathers in maternal and newborn health and in their children's early years yields substantial benefits, affecting children's health, socioemotional, and cognitive development.

- **Preconception:** Critically, fathers' preconception health (including physiological and mental health, and biological age) affects the likelihood of successful conception to the lifelong health of the child.

- **Antenatal and Postnatal Periods:** Globally, studies have pointed out the maternal and newborn health benefits associated with fathers' involvement during pregnancy, birth, and early postpartum. Fathers can be involved actively from pregnancy till one year post-childbirth by participating in antenatal classes, hospital appointments, birth support, shared decision-making, skin-to-skin contact post-birth, and active infant care. Children then benefit either directly as a result of their fathers' parenting behaviours and forming strong father-infant bonds, or indirectly from the increased support of mothers.

- **Throughout Early Childhood:** Fathers, through their interactions with their children at different stages of early childhood development, especially in a child's infancy and toddlerhood, play a critical and unique role in enhancing their socioemotional and cognitive development, and physical health.

- **Socioemotional development:** By modelling

good emotional regulation (ER), adopting supportive emotion-related parenting practices, fostering a positive father-child emotional climate, and engaging in father-child physical play activities, fathers contribute critically to the development of a child's ER.

- **Cognitive development:** Through the use of complex language, engagement in achievement-oriented activities (e.g., reading and writing activities), and responsive parenting behaviours, fathers make unique, direct contributions to their children's literacy and language outcomes.

- **Physical health:** A comprehensive meta-analysis suggests that a father's level of physical activity uniquely predicts their son's activity levels but further work is required to understand the underlying mechanisms that drive this unique paternal influence, as well as to explore the long-term health implications for children of both sexes.

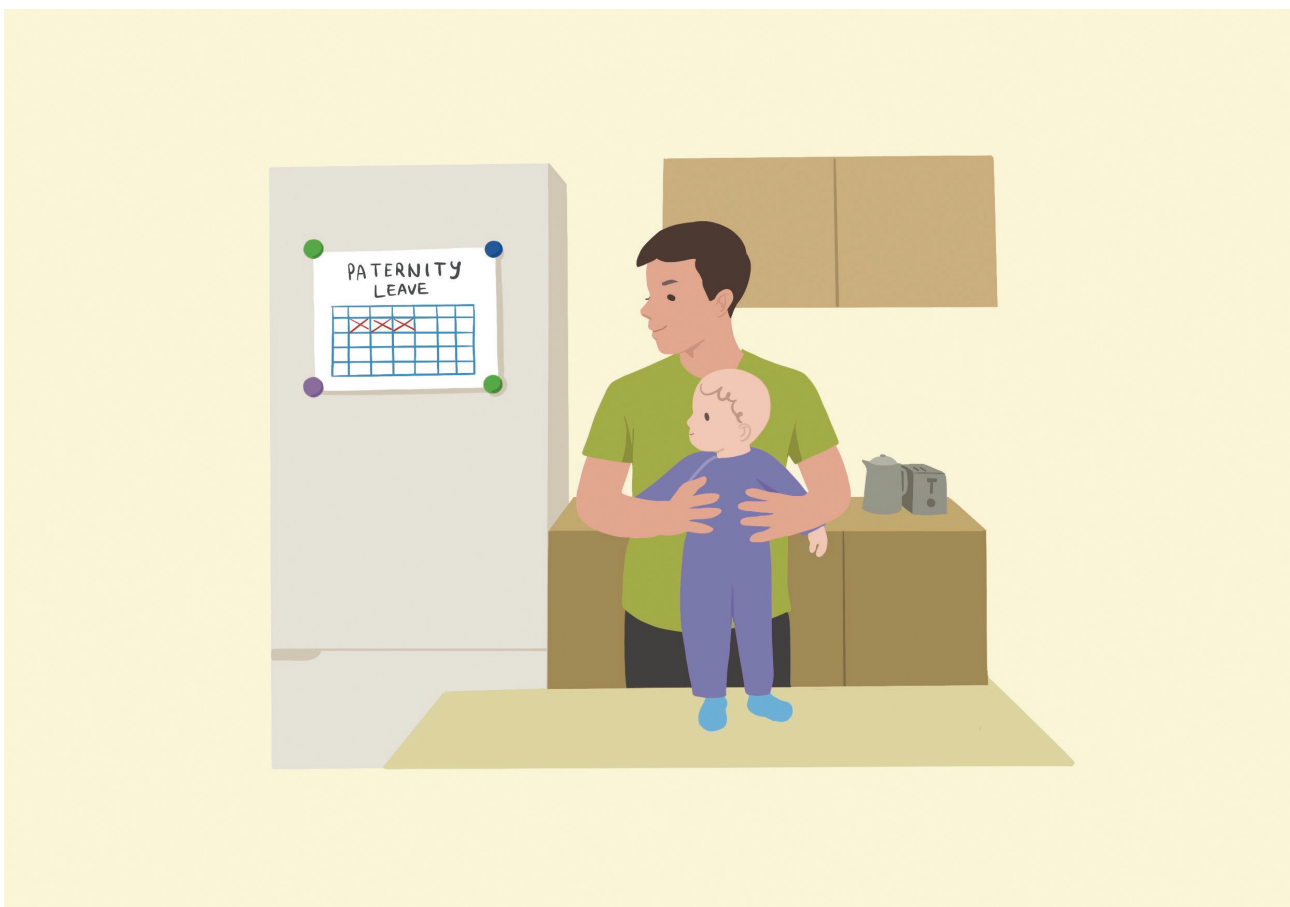
- Although Singaporean fathers want to be more involved in childcare, they face barriers (e.g. limited paternity leave, work obligations, cultural norms regarding household gender roles, and feeling ignored by healthcare systems) that prevent them from being more involved in childcare. The presence of additional caregivers including grandparents, foreign domestic help, and confinement nannies, has also been

correlated with a decrease in the time fathers spend with their preschool-aged children.

- Given the significant correlation between the amount of time spent by fathers with their children and the children's socioemotional and cognitive development, it is imperative to boost fathers' participation and involvement in childcare. More research is needed to investigate the cultural, social, and ethnic nuances in Singapore that influence paternal beliefs and behaviours. This will aid in developing tailored intervention programmes and evidence-based policies that can foster fathers' involvement across diverse family contexts.
- To give children the best start to life, healthcare programmes should provide men intending to become fathers with tangible support and guidance concerning paternal preconception care and involvement, including weight management, smoking cessation, and mental health.
- Antenatal programmes should include tailored elements that help prepare fathers for postpartum

challenges, including ways in which they can support infant feeding, care, and support for their partners. Support for fathers can be provided through home-visitation programmes and customised digital platforms to provide them with readily accessible and credible information on topics ranging from pregnancy and childbirth to childcare.

- Policy-making should adopt a family-centred model of perinatal care and emphasize parenthood as a shared transition with shared responsibilities between father and mothers.
- There is evidence demonstrating the positive effects of at least two weeks of paternity leave to strengthened family bonds, reduced parenting stress, and children's socio-emotional well-being. Given that the uptake of parental leave in Singapore is not widespread, policymakers should seek to understand the barriers faced by fathers in taking the full leave entitlement and engage with employers and new (and potential) fathers to implement approaches to remove these barriers and encourage all fathers to take their full entitlement of paternity leave.



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