

Father involvement during early childhood: A systematic review of qualitative studies

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Funding information

This work was supported by the Portuguese
Foundation for Science and Technology to
Eva Diniz (CEECIND/04111/2017 and
UIDB/04810/2020).

Abstract

Objective: In this research, we analyze and integrate the qualitative empirical studies of father involvement, specifically examining his involvement in the multiple functions and dimensions of care during early childhood.

Background: Father involvement is a relevant social and scientific topic given the changes in fathers' role in contemporary families. Fatherhood involving presence, affection, support, nurturance, as well as prioritizing child's needs, seems to be a perspective dominantly shared by parents. However, studies tend to focus on intact White middle-class families, neglecting other backgrounds and family configurations, which may be easily examined through qualitative approaches.

Method: A database search was performed using a combination of relevant keywords in the title, abstract, and keywords.

Results: Initially, 1,102 records were identified, with 58 manuscripts being assessed for eligibility. Finally, 16 articles were included. The analysis of the corpus identified three main themes: (a) the definition of father involvement and the description of main dimensions in which he was involved, (b) main challenges and facilitators of father involvement, and (c) the influence of intergenerational values on it.

Conclusions: Findings provide insights about the multiple dimensions and roles related to father involvement, and they open new avenues for future research.

Implications: The results reflected the state of the art about father involvement in qualitative research. Suggestions are made to reinforce fathers' full involvement in childcare, at personal and social levels.

KEYWORDS

father involvement, fathering, psychosocial aspects, qualitative studies, systematic review

Author note: All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

INTRODUCTION

Father involvement is currently a relevant social and scientific topic given the changes in fathers' role in contemporary families (Cabrera et al., 2018; Dermott & Miller 2015; Pleck, 2010). Demographic and cultural changes in the labor force and family configurations introduced a new understanding of the father's role (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Fathers are no longer perceived as the family's breadwinners or as distant moral figures responsible for the child's discipline. Instead, they play a key role in family dynamics, provide emotional and nurturing support, and influence the child's well-being and development (Cabrera et al., 2018; Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010). Thus, it is now expected that fathers engage not only in childcare, but also in household tasks, sharing those responsibilities (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cabrera et al., 2018; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Gregory & Milner, 2011; Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010).

Previous reviews on the topic have uncovered psychosocial aspects related to father involvement (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018; Diniz et al., 2021), namely its influence on child socioemotional and cognitive development (e.g., Sarkadi et al., 2008). Still, most of the studies tend to focus on Western middle-class families, leaving unexplored the diversity and complexity of father involvement in families from diverse backgrounds and configurations, which are more easily explored through qualitative approaches (Cabrera & Volling, 2019; Palkovitz & Hull, 2018; Parke & Cookston, 2019). Given the importance of father involvement in children's early years, reflected in a wide range of positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018; Sarkadi et al., 2008), this review aims to analyze and integrate the qualitative empirical studies of father involvement during child's early childhood.

Conceptualization of father involvement

The role of the father in family dynamics has changed over the last years, influenced by social changes in gender roles, the labor market, and the complex demands of parenting. Despite the lack of a consensual definition concerning father involvement and an established theory to conceptualize it (Cabrera, 2020; Parke, 2000), the psychology field has made important contributions to the topic, namely by disentangling father presence versus father absence, highlighting the multiple ways in which fathers may be involved (Cabrera, 2020; Parke, 2000). Diverse psychosocial models arise, detailing the multiple dimensions in which fathers may be involved, such as direct interactions with the child, responsibility for managing child-related tasks, or the monitoring of child activities and social interactions (e.g., Lamb et al., 1987; Palkovitz, 1997; Pleck, 2010). These models allowed us to better understand how fathers interact with their children, the differences between mother and father involvement with the child, and importantly how these interactions have evolved over time.

Because father involvement operates differently across diverse family developmental contexts (Lamb et al., 1987; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010), being influenced by personal (e.g. beliefs, motivations, marital status), interpersonal (e.g., coparenting, quality of marital relationship), and social (e.g., parental leaves, socioeconomic/cultural backgrounds, work environment) factors (Cabrera et al., 2000; Palkovitz & Hull, 2018; Parke, 2000), it is critical to summarize and integrate its influence to contemporary fatherhood over the last years.

Contemporary approaches to father involvement

The emerging trend of a "new fatherhood" is mainly due to the increased number of women in the labor market, as well as the increased diversity in family structures and dynamics, such as higher divorce rates, appealing to greater equity for both men and women's commitment to

child caregiving and household tasks (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Wall et al., 2016). It is also expected that fathers balance their professional role with family life, enrolling in family dynamics and responsibilities (Cabrera et al., 2014, 2018; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010). New family configurations, together with the increased number of women in the paid workforce and the social recognition of fathers' role in children's lives, introduced changes in father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2018; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). In the last decade, fathers tended to spend more time involved with child-rearing related activities and widening the type of activities in which they engage, namely in non-Western cultures (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Parke & Cookston, 2019; Rush & Seward, 2015). The changes in fathers' role were also reflected in social policies of most of the Western countries, namely by introducing paternal leaves around the time of birth and early weeks after it (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Koslowski et al., 2020). However, parental leaves, which focus on early periods of the child's life, reflected the low attention of social policies on fathers' role in later periods of the child's development (Dermott & Miller, 2015).

Nevertheless, the view of contemporary fathers sharing breadwinner and caregiver tasks may not apply to all, with social and contextual aspects influencing it (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). For instance, stay-at-home fathers, albeit rare, have been increasing in the last few years (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Pleck, 2010; Rush & Seward, 2015), mainly due to the gender education gap. Women with a higher education tend to have a better income, and the greater unemployment rates faced by men introduced changes in traditional caregivers' roles: There has been a greater rate of men fully committed to childcare, whereas mothers are working outside the home (Kramer & Kramer, 2016). Although there is a general lack of perception regarding this issue, 17% of stay-at-home parents in the United States in 2016 were fathers (Livingston & Parker, 2019).

Indeed, income disparities have been related to the variability in the ways fathers are involved with their children, namely due to social class resources (Furstenberg, 2014; Parke & Cookston, 2019), which is often more evident within cultures than across them (Henz, 2019; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Parke & Cookston, 2019; Rush & Seward, 2015). More educated and economically advantaged parents tend to have increased time involved with their child's care across cultures (Doucet, 2006; Furstenberg, 2014; Henz, 2019; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Parke & Cookston, 2019; Rush & Seward, 2015). This may be due to more educated fathers' greater availability. On the one hand, they tend to benefit from more flexible work schedules, which allows a greater involvement with the child. On the other hand, they value their involvement as a way to increase children's human and social capital (Dex & Ward, 2007; Henz, 2019; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Moreover, the latter is reflected in globalization trends that introduced shared expectations and values about what fathers are supposed to do to improve child's development (Rush & Seward, 2015; Wang & Chang, 2012; Xu et al., 2014).

This is true even for traditional and patriarchal societies, such as India or China, which have also adopted a child-centered approach because of their "urbanization and Westernization" (Xu et al., 2014, p. 16), particularly in middle-class urban families. In these cultures, fathers are no longer valued by their educational and moral role, perceived as emotionally distant from their children, as they were in the near past, but by the commitment to their care (Wang & Chang, 2012; Xu et al., 2014). Similarly, in Brazil, fatherhood used to be related to power and control over children but now emerges through the value of fathers' involvement with childcare and house chores, particularly among young, well-educated fathers (Martínez et al., 2014). This corpus of research suggests that currently there is more convergence than divergence on the ideals concerning fatherhood across cultures (Rush & Seward, 2015). Still, most non-Western countries face specific challenges related to father involvement, such as the lack of public policies concerning father involvement, or the migration for employment, which often leaves families apart. These challenges limit the generalization of the findings of Western cultures to other ones, particularly to less educated, nonurban families (McHale et al., 2014; Rush & Seward, 2015).

The goal of fatherhood involving presence, affection, support, nurturance, and prioritizing child's needs seems to be a perspective dominantly shared by parents worldwide (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Xu et al., 2014). However, these findings often relied on mothers' reports (Cabrera et al., 2018), with mothers portrayed as the main caregivers, whereas fathers are still perceived (and perceive themselves) as secondary to mothers (Cabrera et al., 2018; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Henz, 2019; Rush & Seward, 2015). A recent systematic review has outlined how research has progressed over the last decade, exploring the diversity of paths related to father involvement and the role of fathers in child development, family relationships, and well-being (Diniz et al., 2021). Still, father involvement has been mainly assessed with intact White middle-class families. These studies tend to value behavioral scripts of fathering, disregarding affective and cognitive ones (Cabrera et al., 2018; Diniz et al., 2021; Pleck, 2010). Hence, key aspects of father involvement on diverse backgrounds and family configurations, as well as their experiences, feelings, and beliefs may be easily captured by qualitative approaches.

Qualitative studies are helpful to uncover nuances and diversities related to father involvement, as well as to better understand how different people experience it, shedding light on the understanding of the role of the father on child's life (Volling & Cabrera, 2019). This is critical, given the diversity of fathers' roles, with reviews focused on quantitative approaches, limiting the understanding of what shapes their experiences expectations, and developmental outcomes, namely by eliciting different challenges and needs (Cabrera & Volling, 2019; Palkovitz & Hull, 2018; Parke & Cookston, 2019). Findings from qualitative research may provide important insights into how fathers are involved with their young children, as well as on the definitions and experiences of their roles, clarifying their expectations and beliefs about father involvement. The current research aims to analyze and integrate the qualitative empirical studies of father involvement, specifically by examining his involvement in the multiple functions and dimensions of care during early childhood.

METHOD

A systematic review was conducted following the general guidelines presented in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021) and Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ; Booth, 2016; Tong et al., 2012) guidelines for the identification, assessment, and synthesis of qualitative research examining father involvement during early childhood.

Methods for the identification of studies and study screening

A systematic literature search was performed using the PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus databases. Systematic searches were conducted from databases' inception to October 28, 2021, using the following final string: (father* OR paternal OR paternity) AND (involvement OR engagement) AND (infant OR child OR toddler OR baby) AND (qualitative). The combination of these terms was searched in title, abstract, keywords, and topic (or MeSH terms when possible), resulting in 1,102 records (see Figure 1).

For abstract screening the following inclusion criteria were established a priori: (a) empirical articles with available abstracts published in peer-review journals; (b) articles published in Portuguese, English, French, or Spanish (languages mastered by the authors); and (c) qualitative articles aiming to examine father involvement with children during early childhood (until 6 years old according to the World Health Organization); and (d) adult fathers. A hierarchical criterion of exclusion was also created for the screening of the articles: (a) infant or

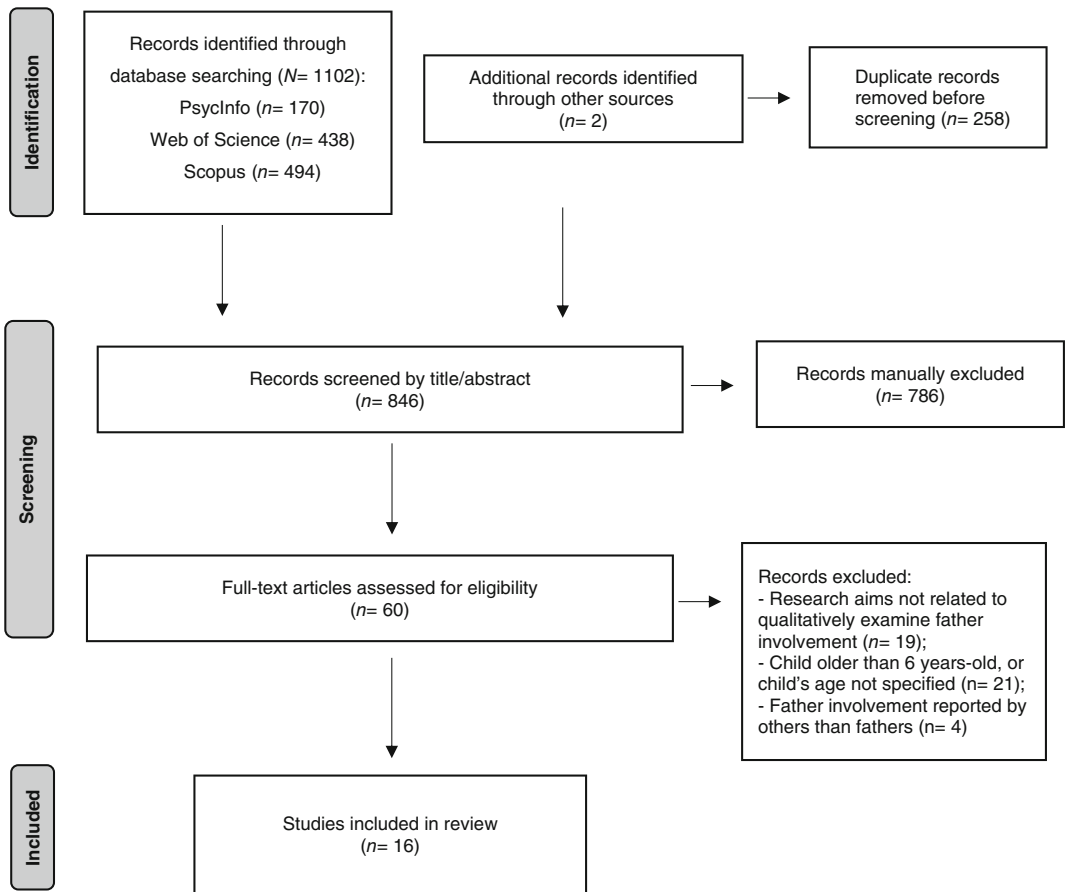


FIGURE 1 Flowchart of the studies' identification and selection process

parents not living in natural contexts (e.g., institutionalized children, incarcerated fathers); (b) father involvement reported by others (e.g., mothers, health professionals) than fathers; (c) father involvement in the contexts of physical and/or mental illness, or addictive substance usage; (d) father involvement exclusively related to pregnancy, labor or birth, or breastfeeding; (e) specific dimensions of involvement, such as education or physical activities; (f) intervention programs focusing on parental practices; and (g) articles aiming to develop, adapt, or validate measures of father involvement.

The research was constrained to articles published in peer-reviewed journals in an effort to ensure the general credibility of the studies, namely regarding methodological procedures, data analysis, and report of studies' findings (Booth, 2016; Saphiang et al., 2019). As suggested by the literature, studies that looked at father involvement only as providing financial support to the child were not included in the current review. Although we are aware that financial support is an important dimension of the father responsibility component, it is not enough to capture the variability and multidimensionality of the role (Pleck, 2010; Sarkadi et al., 2008; Yogman et al., 2016). In this review, we included studies in which men were presented as paternal figures involved in caregiving, despite marital status or biological relation (Sarkadi et al., 2008; Yogman et al., 2016). Only the term *qualitative* was included given that it allows us to capture different types of qualitative approaches, such as ethnography and observation. In the case of mixed-methods studies, only qualitative data were included. Also, for studies that had multiple

research goals only those concerning father involvement were considered. Similarly, when multiple participants were assessed, only fathers' reports were considered.

After duplicate records were removed, 846 articles were submitted to the title and abstract screening by the first author. According to the established inclusion criteria, 786 articles were excluded at this stage. The remaining 60 articles were independently screened by the first two authors to assess eligibility for inclusion based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed above, as well as subsequent text reading, which led to the exclusion of 44 articles. The full-text screening of the articles was also made by the first two authors by hand. Finally, after a full-text review, 16 studies were considered eligible (Figure 1).

Data extraction and synthesis

Data extraction encompassed details of the article's objectives, methodological details, and main findings. Specifically, an extraction table was used to detail the country where the data were collected, participants' background, type of data collection and analysis, the research's aim, and the main findings. Data extraction was independently performed by the first two authors; disagreements were discussed and resolved by consensus. Participants' illustrative quotes were retrieved, coded, and tabulated. Coding was predominantly undertaken by the first author, with regular discussion and verification with all the coauthors.

Following the data extraction phase, gathered data were analyzed relying on the principles of thematic analysis to compare findings from all included studies. The goal was to elicit an abstraction of common elements, leading to formalizing the identification and development of themes related to father involvement during early infancy (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Multiple readings of the articles' findings were done by the two first authors, guided by the theoretical frameworks of father involvement (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Lamb et al., 1987; Pleck, 2010), to identify how fathers were involved in daily early childcare.

For the current review, the initial data abstraction form was used to identify and compare key themes in primary studies. Afterward, similar content was linked and categorized to create a synthesis of themes and subthemes across the included papers. Qualitative studies were synthesized through the identification of key themes related to father involvement and their supportive statements. Three main themes were mainly identified and elaborated on a bottom-up process to characterize how parents perceive and describe father involvement during early childhood: (a) the definition of father involvement and the description of main dimensions in which he was involved, (b) main challenges and facilitators of father involvement, and (c) the influence of intergenerational values.

RESULTS

General description of the studies

Studies were performed in different countries with a dominance of Western ones. Eight of the studies in this review were based on fathers in Western countries (i.e., four in the United States of America, one in Australia, one in Austria, one in Canada, and one in the United Kingdom). Another five studies were based on samples from fathers in Brazil. Two studies examined fathers' experiences from Asian countries, and one from Africa (see Table 1). Although the search had no restrictions concerning the year of the study's publication, included studies were published between 1999 and 2020. Most of the studies examined father involvement with infants (child's age range 3–60 months). Fathers' ages ranged between 23 and 55, but some studies only informed that fathers' age was over 18 years old. The same happened for the mean length of the relationship with the child's mother (ranging from 3 months to 30 years for those

who reported this type of data) and marital status (for those who reported this information, most of the fathers were married or cohabiting). With regard to parents' education, studies tended to inform that most of the fathers had completed secondary or higher education. Most of the studies assessed fathers from intact middle-class families. Exceptions were a few studies focusing on low-income fathers (ID #8, #14, #15, #16) and two studies that examined father involvement in different family configurations, for example, adoption (ID #2) and gay fathers (ID #4).

As displayed in Table 1, semistructured interviews were commonly used, mainly analyzed through content or thematic analysis. Most of the studies relied on content analysis or thematic analysis. Some did not specify how data were analyzed.

Qualitative research examining father involvement during early childhood

Most of the studies included in the current review aimed to define father involvement and the description of main dimensions in which fathers were involved. Discussion about the main challenges and facilitators of father involvement was also a relevant topic in current research. Finally, the influence of intergenerational values on father involvement was also an emerging trend among included studies (see Figure 2 for details). These themes will be detailed next, illustrated with quotes from participants.

Definition and dimensions of father involvement

The perceptions of father involvement and the identification of fathers' domains of engagement were one of the main goals of included studies, which involved samples from different cultures and backgrounds and identified different dimensions of involvement, as detailed below.

The multidimensional role of father involvement

Father involvement tended to be portrayed as multidimensional, but the nurturing role and the importance of engagement with their child's daily activities were emphasized by participants. Good fathers were portrayed as being involved in their child's routine of care and nurturing, and as sensitive and supportive of their child's needs, as illustrated below:

Being there when they need you, helping them when they get hurt, playing with them, having a good time with them, just showing them you're part of their life, and they can always be dependent on you to be there for them (Summers et al., 2006, p. 150).

Some participants also reflected on how they have moved forward from previous generations, developing a "new model of fatherhood," that is, going beyond the traditional breadwinner and moral roles to a nurturing, sensitive, and present figure (ID #1, #6, #14, #15). This trend was also emphasized by indigenous fathers, who described fatherhood as a "new journey," in opposition to a cultural background where men were traditionally not seen as caregivers but as providers and protectors of the family: "Now there's a shift going on, where there has to be a balance where both parents have equal involvement in their kids' lives" (Ball, 2010, p. 7).

Despite fathers from more traditional backgrounds theorizing about the multiple ways in which they may be involved with the child, they still described themselves as "helpers" of mothers (ID #2, #3, #5, #10): "For me when the mother is busy and if the baby is throwing up, then I go and clean him up" (Rakotomanana et al., 2021, p. 5). Others described their involvement in specific dimensions of care, highlighting the type of activities in which they were absent: "I spend a lot of time with her, but feeding her, or change the diaper I barely do, is mainly her mother" (Bueno et al., 2017, p. 4). In this sense, the involvement with leisure and play activities

TABLE 1 Characteristics of included studies (N = 16)

ID #	Study	n	Country	Participants' background	Type of qualitative research and analysis' method	Research aim
1	Ball (2010)	80	Canada	Men who self-identified as fathers (included biological fathers & men engaged in fathering roles) from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds	Semistructured conversational interview; comparative analysis	Development of new understanding of indigenous fatherhood, namely its experiences
2	Bueno et al. (2017)	4	Brazil	Adoptive fathers (married) from middle socioeconomic background	Semistructured interviews; qualitative content analysis	To examine the relation between adoptive fathers' involvement and family structure
3	Castoldi et al. (2014)	6	Brazil	Married fathers from different socioeconomic backgrounds	Longitudinal collective case study; structured interview; content analysis	Father involvement over the first year of the infant
4	Dempsey (2012)	3	Australia	Biological gay fathers from middle-class	Case study; semistructured individual interviews	How biological fathers and their partners understand and enact their involvement with children in lesbian parented families
5	Gabriel & Lopes (2016)	4	Brazil	Married fathers from middle-class families	Longitudinal; collective case study; qualitative content analysis	To examine father's involvement over the first 6 months of the infant in the day care
6	Henwood & Procter (2003)	30	United Kingdom	Fathers (mostly married) from different socioeconomic levels	Longitudinal semistructured interviews; qualitative data analysis	Explore men's accounts or sense making about fatherhood practices and ideals in the months shortly after their transition to first time fatherhood
7	Lau (2016)	17	Hong Kong	Chinese fathers (mostly married) from middle-class families	Mixed method study; qualitative study; focus group with semistructured interviews; constant comparative method of the grounded theory	Fathers perceived influencing factors of father involvement
8	Linnenberg (2012)	62	United States	Married fathers from low socioeconomic status	In depth longitudinal qualitative interviews; qualitative analysis	To explore how work status affects the degree to which fathers can be involved in the lives of their children and the differences in father involvement among coresidential fathers

(Continues)

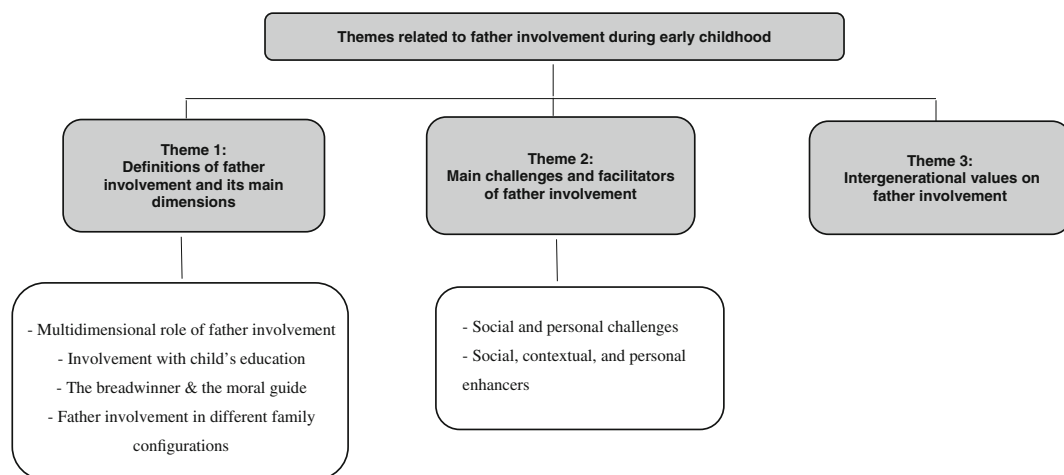


FIGURE 2 Representation of themes and subthemes

was often described by these fathers, emphasizing how these moments were important to reinforce bonds with the child (ID #2, #3, #7, #9, #10, #11, #13, #14): “I play with them ... When they smile and they’re happy as can be, you can tell it on their face” (Summers et al., 2006, p. 157).

However, a significant trend of studies highlighted how fathers conceptualize their involvement as to share responsibilities concerning house and child chores. This perspective was particularly relevant when both parents work out of home, even in more traditional societies (ID #2, #3, #6, #8, #13–#16): “You cannot just give everything to your wife to do, because she’s a working mother also” (Shorey et al., 2019b, p. 10).

Indeed, some research uncovered how fathers start to emerge as figures fully involved in childcare, conciliating work and child demands: “We’ve been working separate shifts. So that way we can make sure that somebody’s always with the baby and don’t have to like go for daycare and stuff” (Linnenberg, 2012, p. 213). Stay-at-home fathers described their ability to fully care for the child, identifying their likes and dislikes, their schedules and routines. One of the fathers described his involvement in comparison to mothers: “Yeah, it’s a lot more I’m home. I’m like her second mommy!” (Linnenberg, 2012, p. 214).

Father involvement with child’s care and education

This theme gathers the different ways in which fathers described their role with their child’s education. The greater involvement of fathers in a wide range of aspects related to childcare, or the child’s routines, which were typically addressed to mothers, was uncovered by the included studies.

An emerging trend of fathers committed to aspects of indirect care, such as the concern about the quality of food intake or quality of school, was depicted by the included studies. It was uncovered how fathers rely on coparenting to talk and share decisions with their partner concerning their child’s care and well-being, as exemplified by the following quote (ID #5, #7, #9, #11, #13): “I tell her to tell her mother things I don’t like she [the grandma] does. She [the infant] doesn’t need candy, she doesn’t need it. We will decide when to give it to her, and the grandma must respect that” (Polli et al., 2016, p. 203).

The importance of father involvement with school-related activities was also recognized by fathers at different levels (ID #5, #7). Some addressed how their regular involvement with their child’s school activities improved the child’s well-being. Particularly, in Asian contexts, involvement with school activities was also perceived as a way to improve the child’s academic skills: “Although I always come back to volunteer, I won’t say that I am here for the school’s benefit. I come back because it makes him [the child] very happy” (Lau, 2016, p. 1031).

The breadwinner and the moral guide

The description of father involvement focused on financial and moral responsibilities typically emerged in more traditional families, in which the father was the only working figure. In some cases, fathers described the need for higher workloads to ensure the family's comfort level, even if that means being less available to the child. In this sense, fathers portrayed themselves mainly as breadwinners (ID #3, #5, #11, #13, #15): "Pay the bills, lah, mostly [laugh] I would say that's the largest part I have to play, lah, to really financially support the whole household ... Ya, I guess that's about it, lah" (Shorey et al., 2019b, p. 9).

In contexts of social vulnerability, the figure of the father was portrayed as protective in an economic point of view, but also from the moral one. Fathers described how they protect their children from poverty, external danger, and from social injustice (ID #6, #14, #15). Fathers emphasized their role as providers, valuing the importance of sustaining a child's needs, namely by providing additional items, such as toys, medical treatments, or more expensive clothes. Moral guidance was also highly valued by fathers as a way to ensure their child's social adjustment in challenging developmental contexts: "Get them well-grounded in morals early so when they grow up they won't have problems" (Summers et al., 1999, p. 154).

Indeed, fathers' role in guiding their child's values and ethics, emphasizing important values about "right and wrong" and how to get along with others in life, was described by fathers from diverse social backgrounds: (ID #9, #11, #14, #15): "I talk with him, showing what is right or wrong: 'Take care of the flower. Is from nature you need to be careful with it!' I like to talk and explain things to him" (Polli et al., p. 201).

Father involvement in different familiar configurations

How fathers were involved with childcare in diverse family configurations, namely in the context of divorce and adoption, started to be uncovered by the included studies. Divorced fathers highlighted how their ex-spouse introduced them as the child's full caregivers (even if just for a couple of days; ID #1, #15, #16). This life event was often presented as the moment in which they created fathering skills to fully care for the child: "I think I am doing the best I can to raise him and I changed my life all for it. Instead of being young and partying all the time, I settled down and decided to raise him. I get a good outcome for him and that makes me the happiest" (Ball, 2010, p. 8). However, low-income fathers identified how their full involvement is hampered by economic circumstances, namely difficulties related to housing arrangements: "I don't have no money. I don't have a stable home for them. I don't have a stable home for myself" (Waller, 2009, p. 9).

Adoptive fathers, like biological ones, described their greater engagement with leisure and play activities, rather than other dimensions of care (ID #2). The study with gay biological fathers explored a specific context of involvement: gay couples in which one of the partners is a biological father of a child in a lesbian-parented family (ID #4). These fathers described their availability to be in the child's life—they often requested to help when needed, such as during school holidays or a night or day off, and perceived themselves as a source of support to the child's mothers. However, they lacked a formal agreement to be involved with the child as they wished: "We have both discussed a need to be more proactive with the girls about organizing definite events and times to catch up" (Dempsey, 2012, p. 10).

Indeed, barriers and tensions concerning father involvement, as well as some of its facilitators, were commonly identified by the participants and will be detailed next.

Main challenges and facilitators of father involvement

This theme gathers information about personal and social aspects challenging or enhancing father involvement.

Social and personal challenges of father involvement

The main challenges related to father involvement were related to the difficulty of balancing work and family demands, mostly due to the rigid work schedules and lack of flexibility in labor activities. Fathers described how work conditions hampered their involvement with child-related tasks, limiting not only the time available to be involved with the child but also the opportunity to be engaged in some of the care activities (ID #2, #6, #8, #9, #10, #11, #12, #13):

My gripe is that I am in a position where I am, unfortunately, with work conditions, etc, will be a part-time father, and that is not what I wanted in any shape or form. I want to be there every night. I want to see the changes but it's not going to be possible. So, yes, I have got animosity I am pee'd of [*sic*] that's the situation (Henwood & Procter, 2003, p. 347).

Social gender bias against fathers' abilities to care for the child was often mentioned as an important barrier to their full involvement with the child (ID #1, #5, #6, #7, #11, #13). Fathers described a dominant "mother's world of care" in domains of childcare, such as education and health services, as well as in family and social relationships. These social biases were described by fathers as making them feel peripheral to mothers:

My daughter has been studying here for three years. Every time I come in, I get asked, "Mr. C, did you take a day off? Why are you so free today?" The whole school is like this, it's not just the principal; even the teachers ask if I am taking a day off today. They are like your friends greeting you (Lau, 2016, p. 1034).

Moreover, fathers addressed how most activities related to the child, namely school-based activities, were typically dominated by women and idealized by and for women, limiting the ways in which fathers may be integrated (ID #5, #7). Indigenous fathers also argued against the social bias favoring mothers and called for social policies to recognize and increase their involvement in child-rearing tasks:

So the people that are trained to deal with parenting and children are so focused on the woman ... family support workers, education, daycare workers and people like that need to be trained to deal with fathers. They need to know that there are fathers out there that are trying and they should be pushing for that (Ball, 2010, p. 9).

Belonging to social minorities was also addressed by fathers as an important limitation to their full involvement with their child (ID #1, #16). Indigenous fathers highlighted their acute sense of social exclusion from social programs and policies, with their abilities to parent being underestimated. Moreover, poverty was addressed as an important limitation to unmarried fathers being involved with their child. Economic and housing instability limited their continued care of their child. Difficult housing situations was addressed as limiting long periods with the child, where the only option is to schedule visits with the child (ID #16).

Concerning personal challenges, fathers identified the lack of time to carry on personal activities and the loss of personal autonomy. Hence, fathers addressed the importance of engaging in extra work and family activities, such as sports and leisure, to improve their availability to be involved (ID #6, #9, #12):

That time when I'm not working and when I'm not with family is I think very, very important to my sanity, you know, and if I didn't have that, and if I didn't make sure that I got that regardless, you know (Schmidt et al., 2017, p. 348).

Social, contextual, and personal enhancers

Fathers addressed how social, contextual, and personal aspects (e.g., presence at prenatal medical appointments, paternal leave) enhanced their involvement at different levels. On a social level, parental leave was pointed to as crucial to increasing fathers' involvement not only in direct care activities but also in feeling greater responsibility about childcare (affective involvement), planning daily routines (cognitive involvement), and concrete hands-on activities (behavioral involvement). In line with this, the return to work was identified by participants as an aspect triggering the availability to be fully involved (ID #2, #11, #12):

On the one hand, I was more relaxed, because there was no stress from work anymore. On the other hand, I think I have more responsibility, because you have to look after a small child who depends on you. When she sleeps, you do have more time to do other things, such as household chores and so on, which are almost impossible or more difficult to reconcile with office work (Schmidt et al., 2017, p. 150).

Contextual circumstances were addressed by some participants as improving their fathering role by stimulating their involvement in a wider range of activities. For instance, fathers' unemployment was presented as placing them as the main caregivers of the child while mothers are working (ID #8, #16):

I'm the one taking care of both of them ... it's something that a lot of men don't do, or don't have the opportunity to do.... Instead of being the nine to five father, and coming home and having a couple of minutes or an hour or two with them, [I] take the whole day with them (Waller, 2009, p. 5).

Greater father involvement was also influenced by diverse personal aspects, such as parenting satisfaction, bonding with the infant, and child's outcomes (ID #3, #5, #6, #11, #13): "She now understands everything and it becomes much more pleasure" (Silva & Piccinini, 2007, p. 568). In addition, fathers' perceptions of themselves as playing a role in their child's care and being part of family life dynamics and decisions, in which they acquired new skills as parents, were related to greater involvement with the child (ID #1, #8, #16): "I'm learning as I go ... I'm not trying to instill any big, big lessons in him, he's only a baby right now ... I know as [he] gets older, the teaching process ... will go into effect" (Waller, 2009, p. 10).

Intergenerational values and gender role perspectives on paternal involvement

Fathers described how their own childhood experiences, namely the quality of the relationship with their parents (or parental figures), set the stage for their current involvement as fathers (ID #1, #6, #11, #15): "I have looked at a lot of the good things from my mom and duplicated that. Like reading to him and teaching him about different countries, languages and stuff. My mom did all of that sort of stuff with us kids" (Ball, 2010, p. 9). On the contrary, when these past experiences were less positive, due to father's absence or negative parental practices, fathers emphasized their wish to have different attitudes and behaviors with the child (ID #1, #3, #6, #13, #15). These fathers described the importance of being part of their child's life and being sensitive to their child's needs by providing them a sense of love and emotional support: "Not being what my dad was or what my stepdad was, sort of never there. You know always doing their own thing. I mean not giving a hoot about us but no I will be there for her and all her needs" (Henwood & Procter, 2003, p. 343).

DISCUSSION

The current review aimed to systematize qualitative studies examining father involvement to better understand how it has been conceptualized and experienced, and to provide insights into the multiple dimensions and roles related to fathering in different contexts.

General characteristics of the studies

Studies included in this review were conducted across distinct countries, portraying father involvement in different cultures, although most of them still relied on Western intact middle-class families. This result is in line with the results of previous reviews (Cabrera et al., 2018; Diniz et al., 2021), limiting the understanding of interconnections between fathering, social class, and culture (Cabrera & Volling, 2019; Parke & Cookston, 2019). Despite the call to examine fathering in diverse social contexts and configurations (Cabrera et al., 2018; Palkovitz & Hull, 2018), studies still tend to offer a narrow approach to father involvement, typically focusing on structured families from middle-class backgrounds. For instance, how fathers engage with their children in single or noncohabiting families or same-sex families remained largely unexplored, and consequently, their main challenges and barriers were mainly overlooked.

This review, however, identified studies that start to uncover how fathers are involved with their children in specific familiar contexts, namely in divorced, gay, and adoptive families. Findings suggested a great variation concerning the amount of time that these fathers spend with their children and identified specific forms of contact and challenges related to it (Fagan et al., 2019; Parke & Cookston, 2019).

Regarding methodological approaches, most of the studies relied on interviews, limiting the understanding of the topic to self-perceptions. Other methods, such as focus groups and observation, should be considered to broaden the scope of how and in which type of activities fathers engaged with their children (Cabrera & Volling, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2018). Still, the identified experiences on fatherhood allowed us to better understand how contemporary parents conceive fatherhood, identifying strengths and barriers to its effective engagement, which will be discussed next.

Definitions and dimensions of father involvement: Playmate and other emerging roles

Overall, fatherhood was portrayed by presence, nurturing, and affection. Fathers presented themselves as engaging with an overall set of activities concerning childcare and education, describing the importance of being present in their child's daily lives, as well as being sensitive to their needs, namely as a supportive and nurturing figure. These descriptions are in line with the concept of new fatherhood, underlying the contributions of father to child development and family life, postulating the goal of equity in care (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Pleck, 2010).

Nevertheless, a significant corpus of studies identified that a large number of fathers, in practice, are dominantly involved with play and leisure activities, often perceiving themselves as peripheral in relation to mothers. This is particularly evident in families in which only the father works—mostly in Latino, African, and Asian samples. These samples also shared a more traditional view of father involvement, appealing to the role of fathers in the child's moral and disciplinary education, and as breadwinners (Rush & Seward, 2015; Xu et al., 2014). However, an emerging trend of fathers fully involved with their children is increasing worldwide, particularly among higher educated parents working full-time. This trend reflects how women's greater

involvement in the workforce leads to greater involvement of the father (Henz, 2019; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000).

New ideals about parenting and fatherhood are being incorporated in current families worldwide and do not seem to be exclusive to a particular socioeconomic background (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Pleck, 2010). Despite the literature description that more educated and economically advantaged fathers tend to be more involved with their child's caregiving (Doucet, 2006; Furstenberg, 2014; Henz, 2019; Parke & Cookston, 2019), this was not found in the identified studies: Greater father involvement was often related to flexible work schedules and better conditions, but it was not anchored in increased socioeconomic conditions. Indeed, some fathers described their decision to work less, namely, to work on night shifts, as a way to be more available for childcare during the day. Nevertheless, studies focusing on low-income fathers uncovered their greater vulnerability to be fully involved, namely due to housing and job instability (ID #6, #14, #15, #16).

Although most of the studies neglected the influence of cultural aspects on fathering, one study with indigenous fathers uncovered how contemporary indigenous fathers are reframing their identity and performance as fathers. This was described as a "new journey" in the definition of fatherhood, in opposition to their traditional culture, where fathers were mainly perceived as guardians and providers of the community rather than caregivers or nurturing figures (ID #1). An emerging corpus of research has also started to uncover how new family configurations, namely divorce, introduced new forms of father involvement. On the one hand, divorce introduced new possibilities of involvement, with fathers accessing a wide range of childcare activities that were previously relied on by mothers (ID #6, #14, #15, #16). On the other hand, housing and work arrangements emerged as sensitive topics, placing conditions on fathers' involvement, particularly among low-income ones (ID #14, #15, #16).

Findings also disclosed fathers' involvement beyond their behavioral scripts, emphasizing cognitive and affective dimensions, such as worry concerning the child's well-being or the importance of affection and support to the child's development. Therefore, qualitative studies seem to be a step forward from quantitative ones, which were mainly focused on behavioral forms of involvement (Diniz et al., 2021; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010). Relational aspects, such as the quality of the relationship with the child's mother, or coparenting, however, were barely mentioned by participants despite their importance on father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2018; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Jia et al., 2016; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Because the father-mother relationship influences patterns and qualities of father involvement, this should be specifically explored by future research.

Challenges to father involvement: The difficult balance of work and family

The difficulty to fully engage with their child's caregiving was often identified by fathers as being related to work demands, namely a full work schedule, lack of work flexibility, and lack of parent-friendly policies. These aspects were addressed as the main barrier to being as fully involved in their child's care as they would have expected or desired. Considering this, paternal leave was displayed as an example of a time frame in which fathers were fully available to engage in the wide dimensions of caregiving, as well as to support mothers' needs. However, by paternal leave being too short and limited to a specific period, it constrained the dimensions and levels in which fathers may engage (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2017). These descriptions highlighted how well fathers understand and address how their available resources influenced the type of engagement with their child and how it differs from what they had hoped for (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018).

On the one hand, when both parents were full-time workers there was a greater engagement of fathers on a wide range of care roles, namely hands-on activities (Lewis, 2002; Morgan, 2002).

On the other hand, parents in the job market face the duality between competitive incentives at work and the consequence of diminished time spent with their child (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Lewis, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Waller, 2009). Despite this tension, this aspect, together with a smaller kin network and higher divorce rates, have contributed to the increased visibility of fatherhood in children's routines and the call for changes on social policies on the topic (Dermot & Miller, 2015; Gregory & Milner, 2011).

Despite the growing agenda of gender equality on care, particularly in European countries (Gregory & Milner, 2011), fathers still perceived their presence as secondary to mothers, namely in the contact with health, social, labor, and educational services, leading to tensions and difficulties in father involvement (ID #1, #5, #6, #11, #13). These imbalances may be culturally reinforced by the existing stereotypes of mother–father roles, rather than innovative representations of involvement and care. This may be because real social change tends to be slower than the public debates suggest (Gregory & Milner, 2011).

Some studies identified the influence of past experiences on current fathers' attitudes and behaviors, namely the experience of (un)supportive relationships with their own fathers (ID #1, #6, #11, #15). However, contrary to what is stated in previous studies, in which negative experiences during childhood led fathers to be less present in their child's care (e.g., Pougnet et al., 2012), fathers in the included studies reported that their fewer positive experiences led them to adopt different attitudes and behaviors, aiming to be more involved in their child's care both in terms of instrumental and emotional support.

Cultural specificities related to father involvement

The current review suggests that qualitative studies of father involvement, like quantitative ones (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018; Diniz et al., 2021), were still dominantly focused on Anglo-Saxon middle-class parents, limiting the understanding of its definitions and meaning-makings in other cultural contexts. Nevertheless, perceptions of fathers in Austria, Brazil, Hong Kong, Madagascar, and Singapore, as well as of Canadian indigenous fathers, were tapped by the current review.

Overall, these studies uncovered how father involvement was understood, across distinct familiar contexts and cultures, as requiring presence, affection, support, nurturance, and prioritizing child's needs (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Rush & Seward, 2015; Xu et al., 2014). Fathers worldwide emphasized a child-centered approach, revealing a convergence of father involvement ideals across cultures, valuing children's human and social capital (Dex & Ward, 2007; Henz, 2019; Rush & Seward, 2015). This may be due to globalization, reflecting an urbanization and Westernization of fatherhood, particularly in middle-class urban families (Xu et al., 2014).

However, some differences in the main activities in which fathers were involved emerged. In Latino, African, and Asian samples, fathers tended to be more involved in specific activities, such as play or education, rather than direct or indirect care ones, particularly when only the father worked. Interestingly, these behaviors seem to be anchored on distinct views about fathering. For instance, Brazilian fathers often disclosed their wish to be more involved in all types of childcare activities, but they valued their role as breadwinners, with work schedules limiting their availability to be present in daily care; whereas Madagascan fathers reflected on their lack of natural skills to perform some of the caregiving activities. Otherwise, Asian fathers regarded their role as educators and moral guides, in comparison to the other sort of activities. These differences suggest that the way fathers are involved with childcare is deeply connected with their beliefs about their contributions to child development and wellbeing (Rush & Seward, 2015; Xu et al., 2014).

Findings also depicted how fathers in general, and those from ethnic and social minorities in particular, struggle to overcome social barriers to be fully involved with their children. A study with indigenous fathers in Canada (ID #1) and fathers from impoverished backgrounds

(ID #6, #16) uncovered how personal paths, such as single parenthood, introduced new perspectives and beliefs about their roles and the social barriers faced to having their rights of parenthood ensured. Overall, the engagement of fathers from vulnerable backgrounds seems to be the same as the others, but with specific concerns regarding safety and community services (ID #6, #14, #15, #16).

Conclusion

The current review uncovers how father involvement has been explored and analyzed, identifying main concepts, barriers, and strengths related to it. Still, some limitations need to be addressed. First, by only including qualitative articles published in peer-reviewed journals, potentially relevant sources to the topic, such as book chapters or gray literature, were left out, disregarding contributions produced by laypeople. Second, due to our goal of qualitatively understanding everyday father involvement in the family context, studies examining pathological processes, or father involvement in nonfamilial contexts (e.g., incarcerated fathers) were not included. Third, studies focusing on father involvement often neglected important related aspects, such as the quality of mother–father relationship, coparenting, or mother’s behaviors and attitudes concerning father involvement, limiting the understanding of family dynamics. Finally, given that most of the included studies focused on middle-class families, the transference of findings to families from other contexts and configurations is limited. Despite these limitations, this review adds to the literature by identifying and systematizing how father involvement is conceived by contemporary fathers, which dimensions they engaged in, and main barriers to it. This allows us to identify directions for future research.

First and foremost, it remains necessary to examine father involvement beyond structured, middle-class families, instigating the understanding of involvement, concerns, and expectations of fathers from diverse social backgrounds and family configurations. Indeed, the current review uncovered how despite low-income fathers seeming to be engaged the same as the other parents, they manifest specific concerns, namely regarding housing arrangements, work conditions, child safety, and community services. As economic inequality seems to spread, as well as the growing qualification of women on the job market, new challenges and opportunities for father involvement may emerge, depending on social classes or groups (Furstenberg, 2014; Parke & Cookston, 2019), which may inspire future studies.

Second, this review offers a broad approach to father involvement, moving beyond the behavioral scripts, revealing affective and cognitive dimensions related to decision-making on child-rearing, and uncovering thoughts and/or feelings related to parenting (Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010). This should be deeply explored by future studies, namely to better understand its influence on paternal behaviors. Third, how interpersonal aspects and other sources of support, such as family or community services, shape and influence father involvement are aspects that are barely known and should be further explored (Cabrera et al., 2018; Parke & Cookston, 2019). Specific challenges related to father involvement in non-Western countries, such as migration for work, or father involvement in nonurban families remain unexplored and must be also included in future studies (McHale et al., 2014; Rush & Seward, 2015).

Finally, this review uncovered a wide range of personal and contextual aspects influencing father involvement that should be targeted by public policies. Overall, there is a call to “family friend” public policies, focusing on a gender equality agenda, namely the increase of paternal leaves, as well as on the improvement of work arrangements for fathers of young children. Findings revealed a need of public policies focused both on fathers’ role in childcare and on the reduction of stereotypes about fathers’ abilities to provide childcare, namely in medical and educational settings (Ball, 2010). Moreover, there is a call for specific policies to support single fathers, particularly those living in vulnerable backgrounds, in which the lack of housing

conditions, for instance, may limit their involvement (Waller, 2009). In line with this, public policies should pay special attention to the importance of work conditions and paternal leaves on father involvement. This is particularly relevant to increase father involvement, not only with childcare, but also with house chores, which still remain a privilege of some. Moreover, shared parental leaves contributed to a decrease in the gender gap in parenting and house chores despite socioeconomic levels (Strader, 2022). Regarding work conditions, men's employment conditions are addressed as the main barrier to full involvement with their children. Moreover, underemployment and/or unstable work, by limiting life conditions, have detrimental consequences on fathers' availability and involvement with their children. Indeed, "employment can simultaneously provide an opportunity for and a constraint on men's involvement" (Waller, 2009, p. 12). Flexible work hours and schedules seem to be an important facilitator of father involvement across backgrounds and cultures and that should be addressed by public policies worldwide.

Implications

The findings of this review provide information that may be helpful to promote fathers' involvement. Shared parental leaves are pointed to as an important step to enhance father involvement not only in childcare but also in house chores, decreasing gender imbalances. However, data revealed how this period is perceived by fathers as too short and limited to the first weeks after the baby is born, introducing constraints on fathers' involvement after parental leave ends. In this line, findings also uncovered the need for policies focused on work arrangement to stimulate the conciliation between professional and familial demands. This is critical not only to enhance father involvement in the wide range of activities related to childcare, but also to decrease the still dominant negative stereotypes about fathers' lack of abilities to perform childcare and house chores.

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How to cite this article: Diniz, E., Brandão, T., & Veríssimo, M. (2023). Father involvement during early childhood: A systematic review of qualitative studies. *Family Relations*, 72(5), 2710–2730. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12858>