

Obstacle and Breakthrough of Father's Involvement in Early Childhood Education: An Analysis on Families with Different Structures

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Received: October 24, 2019

Accepted: December 2, 2019

Online Published: December 31, 2019

doi:10.5539/ass.v16n1p109

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v16n1p109>

Abstract

Father's involvement in early childhood participants can be influenced by family structures. Presently, the number of nuclear families is decreasing in China with the increase of families where fathers are absent or grandparents participate in parenting. Therefore, fathers in China are now facing the lack of motivations, skills, time, situations and method to participate in kids' early childhood education. To break them through, a father needs support from the society, the kindergarten and the family to assist him to try participating actively into parenting.

Keywords: father's involvement, child, family, parenting skills

1. Introduction

In recent years, the issue of fathers' involvement in early childhood education has gradually come into the view of scholars and parents. Studies have found that father's involvement in parenting is conducive to the development of children's cognition, social ability, personality, morality, gender roles and other aspects (Huang & Li, 2013). Boys whose fathers were more involved in parenting had higher levels of security and confidence, better interpersonal relationships, more openness to activities, and a more aggressive spirit. For girls, father's involvement in their education can also affect their self-concept, gender identities and marriage view, etc. (Ye & Xu, 2013). Although father's involvement in parenting is a great promotion to children's physical and mental development, relevant surveys have found that father's absence or lack of participation in parenting is one of the current difficulties in family parenting and children's growth (Liu, 2014). Scholars have actively explored various factors influencing father's involvement in parenting, which found that father's personal factors, family relationships and social or cultural background can all be influential. In terms of personal factors, the researchers found that the motivation of fathers, especially the sense of self-efficacy, could positively predict their investment in early childhood education. When fathers are confident in educating and taking care of their children, other factors rarely hinder their participation in parenting (Xing, Wu, & Hou, 2014, p. 391). In the study of family relations, it was found that the father's satisfaction with marriage and the relationship between husband and wife affects his participation in the parenting of children, and the wife's support or encouragement can promote the husband's participation in parenting (Chen & Wu, 2014). As for the influence of family structure, some research focused on the influence of whether father and son live together. Cooksey et al. found that fathers who did not live with their children were more involved in early childhood, spending more time interacting with their children than fathers who did (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996), while McBride et al. found the opposite result (McBride & Mills, 1993). Although no conclusion has been reached in previous studies, it still reflects that family structures affects fathers' involvement in early childhood education.

At present, nuclear family is still the major form of family structure in China, but structures have been becoming increasingly diverse, which includes the participation of grandparents in children's education which was a result of migrant working or divorce. In these families, father's absence is very common. The father's involvement in these families has not been detailly explored. This paper attempts to sort out the difficulties and solutions faced by fathers in the early childhood education in the nuclear family, the family where grandparents participated in parenting and the family where fathers were absent, so as to provide references for further research.

2. Dilemma of Fathers' in Families with Different Structures

2.1 *Fathers in Nuclear Families: The "Gardener" in a Disadvantaged Position*

A nuclear family is a family made up of parents and children. Since the implementation of the one-child policy in 1979, there has been subtle changes in nuclear families in mainland China, such as the number of children and the family size. The researchers found that during the 1911 revolution, the average family size in China was 5.17 members per family, which increased slightly after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The number decreased to 3.96 in 1990, 3.38 in 2003, and are still decreasing (Chen, 2000). Even when the country opened its two-child policy in 2015, people's desire to have a second child was not strong. When a family has only one child, the tasks of parenting decrease a lot. The mother alone can be competent for the basic parenting work, therefore the need for the father to participate in parenting decreases correspondingly, which is the dilemma faced by the father.

However, with less children, the family's demands on the quality of education generally will increase, leading to the father's lack of confidence in education. For having only one child, parents care a lot about his physical and mental development and have high expectations for his future life and career. As a result, parents put forward almost perfect requirements for the quality of parenting activities. Because of fathers' own lack of parenting skills and training to take care of their children, it is difficult to be competent for such a high standard of parenting tasks. Repeated reports of accidental casualties caused by fathers' careless behaviors also make the public and men themselves lack confidence in parenting, so as to avoid directly participating in children's lives. Relevant surveys on fathers' parenting attitudes show that fathers often believe that they have certain skills to educate their children, but feel inadequate in physical and life care (Xu, 2017).

Smaller family size also makes the disadvantage of fathers in parenting more prominent, and the motivation to participate in parenting further weakened. The "effect of Maternal Gatekeeping" proposed by Allen & Hawkins vividly depicts the authority of the mother in child rearing as well as the weak position of the father. They point out that in a nuclear family, the mother is the primary caregiver of the child and is at the center of the family. Taking the family as a garden where the children and parenting works are the flowers and trees, the mother often plays the role of "the Lord", while the father is just a "gardener". The mother acts as the qualification examiner for the father to enter the kindergarten, that is, the person who opens or closes "the door" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The "effect of Maternal Gatekeeping" is particularly prominent in today's Chinese families. In a nuclear family with multiple children before, the heavy parenting task was difficult to be completed by the mother alone, and the father's assistance was necessary. Therefore, a cooperative relationship emerged between husband and wife. Having more children also realized different parenting propositions of husband and wife on different children so that parents can establish deep emotional connection with different children and get enough emotional feedback from their children to support their parenting motivation. In a nuclear family with only one child or two, however, parenting jobs are relatively concentrated and emotional feedback from the children is very limited. Therefore, couples are likely to have competition in terms of who is the rule maker, the dominant of parenting behaviors, and the object of children's emotional dependence. Traditionally, mother is regarded as the responsible person of parenting, and the strong mother-child emotional bond formed in the early life of the child gives the mother an advantage in parenting and becomes more authoritative. In such a relationship, the mother will often prescribe, guide, demand, judge, correct, degrade and even reject the behavior of the father in parenting, the father is difficult to have their own parenting claims, so the motivation to participate in parenting is gradually weakened.

2.2 *Fathers from Families Where Grandparents Participate in Parenting*

Driven by many factors, such as increased work pressure, higher requirements on parenting quality, lack of confidence in parenting ability, and recognition of the elders' experience, young parents started to invite their parents to participate in children's parenting, which causes the dilemma of fathers'.

According to a study in Finland, in families with only 2 to 3 members, father has 2.7 hours every day on average to interact with children, and in a family of 4 or 5, the number drops to less than two hours. However, in a family with grandparents, the father has only 1.4 hours averagely with his children (Halme, 2009). This study shows that the involvement of grandparents can squeeze the time and space for fathers to spend with their children. Because of the meticulous care of grandparents, there is less need for parents' attention and company. The idea that children can live well without their own involvement makes it easier for fathers to feel that their involvement in parenting is not necessary.

Grandparents have rich experience and confidence in raising children, so it is common for them to judge the parents' skill of parenting. Fathers' unskilled behaviors are easy to be denied intentionally or unintentionally by

grandparents, making fathers afraid of not doing well and then step aside from parenting activities. In addition, in families with grandparents, it's easy to have different views on parenting. When fathers have disagreements with the old, fathers are more likely to compromise to keep a good relationship. Therefore, in families where grandparents participated in parenting, the status of the father is marginalized.

2.3 Fathers Being Absent from the Family

One of the challenges faced by families in mainland China today, especially in rural areas, is the absence of fathers. Since the 1990s, most young men in rural areas have gone out to work in cities, leaving behind tens of millions of left-behind children. Some fathers spend less than a month each year with their children, while others never come home for years. Similarly, there are quite a number of divorced families, in which children live with their mothers and have little contact with their biological fathers in time and space.

The main dilemma faced by these fathers is the lack of opportunities to interact with their children. For children, they are just a symbol, and there is nearly no direct interaction such as physical contact and emotional exchange. The importance of fathers is more reflected in indirect financial support.

Another difficulty faced by these fathers is that they are not good at expressing their emotions. Chinese traditional culture stipulates that males should be calm and reserved. Such rules make most men feel ashamed to express their emotions so that they are never used to do so. The traditional cultural positions fathers as "breadwinners", which also leads many fathers to work hard in silence, hoping to fulfill their fathers' responsibilities by meeting their children's material needs. Even though technology provides fathers methods to stay connected emotionally and show concern for their children, they still don't know how to communicate after getting on the phone or Skype. Some fathers choose the traditional way and make a long speech to express their care, making their children feel that they are not really understood or cared. Feeling that communication is necessary, some others try their wives as intermediaries when they expect to know about their children or want to express their love, while their children cannot feel the support directly from their fathers.

3. Resolutions

Family structure influences fathers' involvement in parenting, but the measures to resolve their dilemma in families should not just be confined to the families. The promotion of fathers' involvement in the activities of raising children requires the concerted efforts of the society, parenting institutions, families and fathers themselves.

3.1 Society: Advocate the Father's Role as "Parenting Collaborator"

The role of fathers has been changing since ancient times, from the head of the family (moral mentor), economic provider, and gender role model to the parent collaborator (Wu & Guo, 2012). The first three have been around for thousands of years, and they are deeply ingrained in society and men themselves. "Parenting collaborators" are the role requirements that women put forward to men after entering the modern society, having their own job and sharing the economic functions for the family. Many men are embracing this new role and are willing to help their wives with child-rearing activities, but traditional culture has limited their participation from meeting the level required by society and families. Therefore, the society should encourage fathers to accept their new role and reveal the value of fathers' involvement in early childhood education, which can change public opinions and cultural atmosphere supporting fathers' involvement in education. By shaping the model of fathers as "parenting collaborators", society can encourage fathers to identify with this new role.

3.2 Kindergarten: Provide Fatherhood Education

The kindergarten can provide education work for fathers as well as expectant fathers. The advantage of carrying out fatherhood education in kindergartens is that it is easier to organize activities for fathers of the similar ages in the same time and space, thus greatly improving the pertinence and adaptability of education. Drawing on Hong Kong's parent education programs and active parenting programs, kindergartens can organize seminars and programs to provide fathers with more access to parenting knowledge and skills (Leung, Leung, & Lau, 2003). Out of respect for the authority of the kindergarten and their children's education, fathers are more likely to attend activities required by the kindergarten. When the father is engaged in activities, learning how to fulfill his father's duties in the interaction with the child and learning how to be a competent co-parent, the child will also identify, imitate and internalize the father's behavior. When these children grow up and become parents, on the one hand, they can consciously participate in or support their spouses to enter the parenting activities, and on the other hand, they are ready for the corresponding parenting skills.

For the activities organized by the kindergarten, it is better to be specific for the father rather than the parents, so as to improve the father's enthusiasm to participate in the activities (Chen, 2011). On the premise of respecting

the father's gender advantage, it guides the father to learn and practice the skills of raising the child in the actual parent-child interaction. In such activities, it is necessary to provide opportunities for fathers to share, exchange and discuss parenting experience and feelings, and let them feel support from each other, so as to reduce the limitation of traditional cultural and strengthen their role identification of "parenting collaborator". When inviting fathers to participate in activities, the kindergarten should attach more importance to the quality of fathers' involvement rather than quantity and protect the feelings of the father, let them experience positive emotions as much as possible. They are also supposed to be prepared for any embarrassment that might happen to avoid making fathers awkward.

3.3 Family Members: Respect and Cherish the Uniqueness of Father's Involvement

In a nuclear family, the mother needs to understand and respect the uniqueness of the father in terms of the content and manner in which he participates in parenting. With the mother, for example, taking care of children and unconditionally accept them, while the father pays more attention to set the rules to regulate children's behavior, which will be conducive to help children out of psychological "self-centered" and be empathetic. This is of great value to a healthy personality of children and can promote their social adaptation. Therefore, the mother must "open the gate of the garden" and let the father participate in early childhood education. The study found that when father's performance in parenting is accepted and affirmed by the mother, fathers can be greatly enhanced in parenting motivation, sense of value, self-confidence, which makes them increase their investment in parenting activities. On the contrary, when the father's parenting claims and efforts are denied, it may weaken his parenting motivation and reduce his investment in parenting activities (Xin, Wu, & Hou, 2014). Therefore, mothers should cherish fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing, respect their unique parenting values, tolerate their unskilled behaviors, and actively invite and help them play a role in parenting. When the father shows a tendency to back off or avoid due to substandard parenting skills, the mother can share her successful experience and methods, help the father master parenting skills, accompany and guide the father to complete the task, and enhance his confidence in participating in parenting.

In families with grandparents' participation in the upbringing of children, the older need to "make way" for the father, so as not to marginalize the father. Grandparents must realize the importance of fathers' involvement in the upbringing of their grandchildren's physical and mental development, and clarify the responsibilities of each person in the children's upbringing so as to establish both psychological and behavioral boundaries with their children and grandchildren. In addition to being as supportive, appreciative and respectful of the role of fathers in parenting as mothers are, grandparents need to give fathers space and time to participate in child education. When the father is at home, grandparents should take the initiative to invite the father to participate in the care of children and the interaction with children, and try to step aside to create opportunities for father-son interaction. Accordingly, the mother in the family should also pay attention to coordination with the grandparents, and look for opportunities for the father so as to protect the time and space for parenting interaction. Facing the conflicts between parents and grandparents in big families, couples should support and keep consistent with each other, hold the right to educate children, and jointly take responsibility for children's present and future.

In families with absent fathers, mothers or grandparents should help fathers to "stay in position psychologically", especially creating opportunities for absent fathers to interact with their children. If the absence of father is caused by migrant workers, the mother should learn to indirectly refuse the role of intermediate, and encourage or assist the father to contact with the child. For fathers who are absent because of divorce, mothers need to see the importance of father to the child's healthy growth, and adjust their own state of mind to maintain interaction with her ex-husband as parenting partners and participate in child rearing activities together. Mothers also need to avoid parents' conflict from hindering the relationship between children and their father.

3.4 Fathers: Improve Parenting Motivation and Skills Actively

The father in the nuclear family should realize the limitation of traditional culture on his participation in parenting, and also recognize that participation in parenting is the inevitable requirement of the time. Remind himself that parenting can increase the sense of contribution and belonging to the family, and create a satisfactory relationship between husband and wife, bring happiness for of family members, etc. so as to motivate the father to join the parenting activities. At the same time, he should also face their weakness in parenting skills. Studies have shown that when fathers' self-confidence can make them less hindered by other factors in children's up-rising. Therefore, fathers should often read books about children's physical and psychological growth patterns actively participate in the relevant courses of fatherhood education, listen to lectures and so on. In learning, fathers should combine their own characteristics, and not only learn how to make rules to restrain children's behavior, but also to actively respond to children, encourage and communicate with

them on an equal footing. Fathers also need to be more sensitive to their children's physical and psychological needs and master appropriate ways to meet them. The child's growth stage is also of great significance, so fathers should adjust their own behavior in different stages, just like having a suitable "posture" to raise the child properly.

When grandparents are involved in children's education, fathers should recognize that their very influence on the development of children is irreplaceable by any other relative. On the one hand, like the father of a nuclear family, they can improve their parenting skills through actively learning and participation. On the other hand, when one's time and space to fulfill his father's duty are occupied by grandparents, one should insist on his right of giving company and education for children. If there is a disagreement with the grandparents on the issue of parenting, fathers should also communicate actively, thank the olds for the dedication and express their intentions, try to coordinate and reach a consensus. Importantly, insist on playing his role as a father and a family member instead of escaping from parenting and family.

According to the research, if parents who work outside can maintain communication with their children through telephone and Internet from time to time, and keep going home to accompany children during holidays or farming time, they can protect children from certain risk factors (Zhao, Liu, & Zhang, 2013). The development of modern communication technology has provided a solid material basis for maintaining parent-child contact. Absent fathers should understand that they can participate in the upbringing of their children at anytime and anywhere with the help of modern communication technology. Migrant fathers should keep regular communication with their children, preferably video. Through QQ, WeChat and other social media, fathers can guide and help their children to complete some homework or care about what they see, hear and feel, and share life and feelings outside with their children and keep themselves "in position" psychologically. When they go home on holidays, fathers should cherish the opportunity of direct interaction with my child, and spend more time playing games or communicating with them, so as to have a positive impact on the growth of them just like the father of a nuclear family. Divorced fathers without custody of children should also recognize their indispensable role to the children, in addition to daily communications, they should also pay a visit and play with children, exchange life experiences, thoughts and feelings, etc., and through this usual "appear" to ensure that they are psychologically "in position".

In conclusion, transformation of family structure caused by social development has brought fathers in China various of challenges, to go through which requires more motivation and skills. Additionally, help from the social organizations, education centers and the family members, which is the most significant, can provide unexpected support and assist for fathers.

Acknowledgment

Fund project: Center for Rural Childhood Education Research General Project (No. NYJ20140606), Important Project of Sichuan Mental Health Education Center (No. XLJKJY1406A).

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