

Fathers as Active Caregivers

By Prof Jean Yeung, Provost's Chair Professor, Department of Sociology;

CFPR Director; Research Leader, Asia Research Institute, NUS

As featured on Lianhe Zaobao, 4 June 2017

Research has shown that fathers' involvement is beneficial to children's well-being, marital relationship, as well as father's own health and other aspects of development as an adult, such as adopting mentoring, nurturing, or leadership roles in a community. Recent findings also show that there may be a positive association between men's involvement in child care and an increase in the likelihood of a couple having a second child.

As labor market participation among women with young children grows, and gender ideologies become more egalitarian, a heightened expectation for "new fathers" to be more actively engaged in the physical and emotional care of children in addition to their provider role has also grown around the world. Studies have shown an increase in fathers' involvement in childrearing since the 1970s, and that fathers' roles have expanded beyond that of traditional financial provider and disciplinary figure, albeit at varying rates and in different cultural, and policy contexts.

Time diary data show that fathers in Scandinavian countries take on more child care responsibility and there is a highest level of men taking family leave. Compared to men in Western societies, Asian fathers have a relatively lower level of involvement despite the equally high participation of Asian women in the labor market in many countries. Their level of involvement remains considerably lower than that of mothers, especially in terms of caregiving activities and emotional support. The breadwinner role remains central to the identities of Asian men and their long work hours keep many of them from spending more time with their children. However, many contemporary Asian fathers feel they are not spending enough time with their children.

In terms of the type of child care activities, fathers spend the most time in play and companionship activities and significantly less time in personal care, achievement-related activities, and household activities. Research in the U.S. found that fathers who were raised by a biological father received more education, and those who had a working partner engaged more in the basic and routine aspect of caregiving such as changing diapers, washing, and feeding a child.

Many factors are related to how fathers are involved in child care. Studies over studies have shown that a father's education is the most important factor that determines his caregiving activities. Education is related to gender ideology; men with more egalitarian attitudes share more housework and child care and take more parental leave when their children are born.

Fathers' childhood experiences are also found to be linked to their adult caregiver role. If men's own fathers were more involved in caregiving and if they grew up in a household where housework were shared more equally, then they tend to take on more caregiving responsibilities. Other factors that align with father involvement in child care include his income and work hours, and mothers' earnings. Specifically, fathers who earn more and work longer hours during the week may spend less time with their children during the week though not necessarily so during weekends. Interestingly, mothers' work hours have no effect on children's time with fathers. However, when mothers earn a substantial portion of the family income fathers are found to have a higher involvement.

Other scholars also note that a father's age is also an important factor in their involvement, as men at different life stages vary in their energy levels, health status, socioeconomic resources, and lifestyles. Younger Asian men are more involved in a wide range of activities than their own fathers were. In addition, a father's motivation, knowledge, and skills are linked with his fathering behavior. Men who are more motivated, who know what is good for children's development, and who believe that they are capable of taking care of children tend to be more involved. Further, when fathers have a more supportive relationship with their partner or with their wider social network, they tend to be more involved fathers. In this regard, a mother can be either a facilitator or a "gatekeeper" to the father's involvement with his children.

Compared to fathers in the West, some factors are found to be unique in shaping Asian fathers' caregiving roles. For example, deep-seated traditional gender norms and values ingrained in Confucian teachings, Islam, and Hinduism remain strong; thus, patriarchy and intergenerational hierarchies shape fatherhood ideology and behavior powerfully. Second, Asian fathers feel they lack role models of involved fathers. Third, extended families and domestic helpers play a greater role in child care in Asian families in regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore compared to Western countries. These can have varying effects on fathering ideology and behavior in families of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Contemporary fathers are negotiating, challenging, and creating meanings of fatherhood under different socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural contexts. Significant variation exists among fathers of different social classes, ethnicity, and religions. More research is needed to understand men's fatherhood trajectory and how their attitudes and identities change over time as they move through different fathering stages and under different cultural contexts.

Although fathers' involvement is generally increasing, it should be noted that there is an increasing number of children growing up with their fathers absent due to paternal divorce, migration, or death in Asia. Attention to special groups such as non-resident fathers, low-income fathers, "social father" figures (grandfathers, stepfathers, or uncles) is needed as the family system undergoes transition. Men need more support to be active caregivers.

In countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, Myanmar, and South Korea, a substantial portion of men (about 20–30 percent) remain unmarried by the age of 40, thus have never entered fatherhood. These experiences present unique socio-psychological and structural challenges for men, their families and for the society as a whole.

Providing knowledge of fathering and child development, support from social networks such as mothers, other men, and within the community, will lead men to be more confident and happier caregivers. There is an increasing recognition that family services need to engage men and respond to their needs. Policies that help men to secure stable jobs and income, promote collaborative parenting, and facilitate fathers' caregiving roles such as paternity leave, flexible work hours, and attempts to change work culture have had varying effects in different cultures. Scandinavian countries provide the most expansive and fundamental provisions, which are shown to have had significant impact on men's family roles since the 1970s while the more recent and more limited provisions in most East Asian countries have been found to have no or limited impact so far. Therefore, greater consideration should be given to policies and programs that support Asian fathers.