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Fathering and Early Childhood Adjustment in Polygamous Families: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

Polygamous family structures present unique challenges to early childhood development, particularly in terms of emotional security, social adaptability, and access to paternal care, yet remain underexplored in academic research. This study explores the role of fathering in shaping early childhood adjustment within polygamous family structures. It investigates how different levels of paternal involvement, such as caregiving, emotional support, and educational engagement, affect children's social and emotional development. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving two fathers who live separately from one or more of their wives and serve as the sole economic providers in their households. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns of fathering practices and their relation to children's adjustment outcomes. Findings reveal stark contrasts between the two parenting approaches. One father demonstrated high engagement, shared household responsibilities, and fostered autonomy in educational decision-making, contributing to the child's emotional security and social adaptability. In contrast, the other father adhered to traditional and authoritative roles, fully delegating caregiving to his wives and limiting his children's external social exposure, which may hinder their emotional development and peer interaction. This study highlights the importance of culturally contextualized fathering and calls for inclusive parenting programs that accommodate diverse family structures, especially within polygamous contexts. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and context-specific focus, which may constrain the broader applicability of its conclusions. Future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants across regions and apply longitudinal methods to explore long-term patterns of fathering and early childhood development within varied family configurations.

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Introduction

Polygamy is a marital system in which an individual is permitted to have more than one spouse simultaneously (Doodman, 2015). This practice not only affects the dynamics of marital relationships but also influences child development, particularly in early childhood. Although polygamy has attracted considerable media attention, scholarly discourse has predominantly emphasized its impact on women, while its consequences on children, especially regarding their social-emotional development and well-being, have received limited attention (Al-Krenawi, 2014; Bahari, 2021; Daoud et al., 2014; Naseer et al., 2021; Özer et al., 2013; Rabia, 2017; Shepard, 2013; Sinai & Peleg, 2021).

Research has demonstrated that children in polygamous families are vulnerable to psychosocial issues such as a lack of affection, limited social interaction, and low academic motivation (Adenike, 2013; Kee & Hassan, 2020). In this context, father involvement, or fathering, emerges as a pivotal factor in shaping children's adjustment capacities. However, existing studies predominantly focus on fathering within monogamous, middle-class Western families, thereby overlooking diverse cultural and structural contexts such as polygamous households (Diniz et al., 2021; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016).

In early childhood care, father involvement significantly contributes to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Puteri & Rudi, 2021; Wijayanti & Fauziah, 2020). Forms of engagement such as playing, comforting, and actively participating in educational processes have been associated with improved adaptability and well-being in young children (Diniz et al., 2023; Sari, 2022). Moreover, consistent emotional presence and responsive caregiving from fathers reinforce children's self-esteem and social competence (Cabrera et al., 2020; Nair et al., 2020).

In polygamous families, the distribution of time and responsibilities among multiple spouses and their children poses specific challenges. Fathers are often required to balance economic provision with emotional and physical availability for children from different households. Limited father involvement under such circumstances may hinder children's ability to adapt to broader social environments (Jeong et al., 2018; Kee & Hassan, 2020). Furthermore, unequal caregiving practices can lead to disparities in attention and emotional support, affecting children's identity development and attachment patterns.

Understanding fathering as a determinant of child well-being becomes increasingly important in complex family structures. The Father's role in fulfilling children's basic needs such as biological, security, love, self-esteem, self-actualization, curiosity, achievement, and guidance (Wijayanti & Fauziah, 2020)—is critical in supporting emotional regulation and social adjustment (Hipson et al., 2019; Karaçelik-Varol & Bekir, 2024). Therefore, this study addresses the knowledge gap by investigating the dynamics of father involvement in polygamous households and its impact on early childhood adjustment.

Specifically, this research aims to explore how fathers implement parenting strategies and how their presence or absence affects children's emotional and social adaptability. It focuses on families where fathers live separately from one or more wives, in situations where household economics are solely dependent on the father's income. By employing a qualitative case study approach and thematic analysis, the study seeks to generate conceptual and empirical insights into the role of fathering in supporting early childhood development within polygamous family structures.

This inquiry offers both conceptual and empirical contributions to early childhood education, family studies, and parenting psychology. It highlights the importance of inclusive parenting frameworks that respond to diverse family structures. The findings support the urgency of promoting culturally sensitive father involvement. Policies and programs must be tailored to reflect the realities of fathering in polygamous households.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate for achieving the research objective, which is to explore in depth the experiences and events encountered by research subjects within polygamous family structures. Qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observed behavior (Moleong, 2002). The case study design is selected to allow the researcher to explore thoroughly the adjustment strategies of early childhood and the implementation of fathering practices within polygamous households, especially given the assumption that mothering roles are more dominant in such contexts.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted from February to April 2025 in three urban locations in Indonesia where polygamous families with early childhood members were identified. The participants were selected using typical purposive sampling, aimed at choosing informants who represent the characteristics relevant to the research focus without being extreme cases. The primary informants included three fathers who had children aged 4–6 years from different wives and were responsible for their families' economic needs. Additional informants included two

mothers, two caregivers, and three neighbors or extended family members who were regularly involved in the children's daily lives.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three techniques: interviews, observation, and documentation. Structured interviews were conducted with the fathers using a guided questionnaire focusing on indicators of fathering and early childhood adjustment. Information was also obtained from secondary informants and supported by personal notes, daily activity records, and audio recordings. Observations were conducted in the children's home environment to capture real-time interactions, behavior, and caregiving patterns. The researcher documented these through field notes and reflective memos. Supporting documentation such as photographs, demographic data, and household records were also collected to enrich contextual understanding and triangulate findings.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on a systematic procedure for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). After transcription, the interview data were coded and categorized into emerging themes that reflected key patterns related to fathering and child adjustment in polygamous families. The analysis involved continuous comparison between cases, focusing on meaning construction, narrative coherence, and the interpretation of behavioral and emotional dynamics. Field observations and documents were also integrated into the analysis to ensure triangulation and comprehensive representation. The final results are presented in descriptive narrative supported by illustrative quotes and visual data.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher applied triangulation across sources and methods, conducted member checking by validating findings with key informants, and maintained an audit trail through systematic documentation of the research process. Ethical considerations were prioritized by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of their identities. The research adhered to ethical research principles involving families and children, particularly in addressing the sensitive context of polygamous parenting and early childhood welfare.

Result

This study involved two participants who met the selection criteria: Mr. T and Mr. H. Both participants gave their consent for the interviews to be recorded and confirmed their understanding that the information provided would be used for research purposes. Mr. T, aged 47, is married to two wives. His first wife lives in the main household with their two sons, one currently in high school and the other 4.5 years old, while his second wife resides in another city with one child. Mr. T works as a local coffee distributor and appears to be actively involved in family life.

In contrast, Mr. H is married to four wives and has a total of 26 children, six of whom are in early childhood. His four wives live in the same neighborhood but in separate houses. Mr. H works as a religious teacher (ustadz) and teaches the Qur'an daily at his residence. One of the children who became the subject of this study is his four-year-old daughter from his second wife. She does not attend formal schooling and learns at home with her mother. She is the fourth child of the second wife.

The parenting approaches of Mr. T and Mr. H differ substantially. Mr. T shows greater involvement in caregiving and family matters, while Mr. H places full responsibility for domestic tasks on his wives without personal involvement. To analyze these parenting dynamics, the study employed the Fathering Indicator Framework as a tool to assess the extent to which each father demonstrated meaningful fathering practices in the context of a polygamous family.

Interview data were coded and compared with the framework's dimensions to ensure analytical consistency.

Table 1. Interview Code

Code	Description
Get involved in parenting	Participant's statement of commitment to caring for and or caring for children
Close to children	Participants' understanding of things related to children (for example: knowing the child's character)
Religious	Participant's statement about something with a religious basis
Help with domestic work	Participants' understanding regarding the division of roles in taking care of the household and caring for children
Ignore children's health rights	Participants' statements tend to underestimate children's health from a medical perspective

Fathers' Efforts to Implement Fathering in Polygamous Families

The words "father" and "fatherhood" are patented in English and easily translated into other languages, but the same cannot be done for the term "fathering". In formal terms, "fathering" may mean "being and carrying out the duties of a father" in this case containing the status or identity and a series of male practices (actions) that are closely related to the welfare of a child. (Huttunen & Eerola, 2016).

Fathering itself has several forms that can be identified through specific categories and indicators. In this research, the forms of fathering are examined using the Fathering Indicator Frameworks, which provide structured dimensions for assessing paternal involvement (Gadsden et al., 2004).

Table 2. Fathering Indicator Frameworks used in this study (adapted from a structured framework for assessing paternal involvement) (Gadsden et al., 2004).

No.	Category	Indicators
1	Father Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Involvement (Engagement): direct care (feeding, dressing), physical play, games, recreation, sports, giving instructions, discipline. b. Availability: father's presence (direct/indirect) to interact and carry out activities with children. c. Responsibility: organizing playroom, limiting access to hazards (e.g. kitchen), arranging access to external environments (school, playground, recreation).
2	Caregiving (Parenting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Nurturing expressions: Physical (touching, hugging, kissing), Verbal (comforting words/sounds), Behavioral (listening, appropriate responses). b. Not coerced by others to parent. c. Shopping for children's needs (food, clothing).
3	Children's Social Competence and Academic Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Designs and provides social environments (e.g. early childhood programs). b. Engages in play to trigger emotional/physical interaction. c. Recreation or TV time with child. d. Communicates actively without dominating. e. Involved in academics. f. Participates in school-parent activities.
4	Cooperative Parenting	Builds mutual support and maintains a positive environment for child development.
5	Father's Healthy Living	Models healthy lifestyle and proper social behavior to instill social norms in children.
6	Material and Financial Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Provides financial support. b. Meets family's basic and additional needs. c. Works to earn a living.

From the results of interviews conducted with Mr. T and Mr. H, it can be seen that both subjects made efforts to apply fathering in their families, but in varying degrees. Mr. T demonstrated more direct and indirect involvement in childrearing, while Mr. H showed limited engagement. Mr. T's approach included active participation in daily care and household responsibilities, whereas Mr. H relied entirely on his wives to handle parenting duties. These contrasting behaviors reflect differences in parenting beliefs and the degree of paternal involvement in the household.

In terms of direct caregiving, Mr. T was highly involved in nurturing his children. He routinely prepared them for school, helped with meals, and even cooked on occasion. Mr. T willingly shared household tasks to support his wife and occasionally engaged in play and leisure activities with his children. This hands-on approach facilitated a close relationship between Mr. T and his children. As a result, he was able to describe his child's personality and daily interactions in detail during the interview.

Mr. T also observed that other parents entrusted their children to play at his house, indicating a level of trust and social comfort within the neighborhood. His ability to describe his son's friendships suggested that his child was well-socialized and integrated among peers. On the other hand, Mr. H did not engage in any form of household or childcare tasks. He explicitly stated that a father should not bathe his children, as such actions might compromise his strength and authority. This belief reflects a traditional perspective that clearly separates the roles of men and women in family life.

Mr. H maintained that mothers serve as the primary caregivers, referencing the concept of *madrasatul 'ula*, or the mother as the first school for a child. He viewed his role as limited to educating and guiding his wives so that they could care for the children properly. Consequently, Mr. H fully delegated parenting responsibilities to his wives and did not take part in day-to-day caregiving. His stance emphasized male authority and leadership, placing the burden of emotional and physical childrearing solely on the mother.

Regarding education, Mr. T admitted that he did not directly motivate his children to attend school. Instead, he advised them to pursue their desires and accept the outcomes of their efforts as personal fortune. He provided freedom in choosing their educational path and left the final decisions to his children and their mother. This permissive approach underscored a respect for autonomy and mutual trust within the family decision-making process.

Conversely, Mr. H did not allow his children to attend formal school. He believed that learning at home with the mother was sufficient. When one of his children requested to go to school, he refused to give permission. Mr. H only intervened in educational matters when his wife reported that the child needed motivation. If he received no report, he would not take any initiative, further illustrating his passive role in parenting.

Both Mr. T and Mr. H grounded their parenting practices in religious values. Mr. T prayed for his children daily but admitted to rarely communicating with his children who lived far away. He claimed that he followed traditional parenting methods without relying on modern tools like cellphones. Mr. H, meanwhile, imposed religious learning goals such as mastering *iqra'* for young children and reading the *yellow book* for older ones. His parenting beliefs were derived from religious teachings, with the father as leader and the mother as the primary educator at home.

In health-related matters, both Mr. T and Mr. H expressed resistance to the concept of insurance. Mr. T once purchased insurance not out of belief in its health benefits but to accommodate his wife's emotional needs. In contrast, Mr. H firmly rejected insurance entirely and had never considered using it for his family. Both fathers showed limited awareness of their children's health needs. Mr. T agreed to vaccinate his children only to satisfy his wife's preferences, while Mr. H refused vaccination altogether, relying instead on herbal remedies such as Black Seed. He believed in a holistic approach involving natural medicine, outdoor play, and interaction with nature, though this may lack balance in ensuring children's nutritional and developmental needs.

Early Childhood Adjustment Strategies Viewed from Fathering in Parenting in Polygamous Families

The parenting approach practiced by Mr. T reflects a nurturing and emotionally supportive pattern that has positively influenced his child's psychological and social development. From the interviews, Mr. T expressed that he routinely prepares his child for school, shares household tasks, and engages in playful interaction with his children. These behaviors indicate a form of fathering that is not only present but also emotionally invested. Mr. T also showed confidence in his role as a father, stating that he feels satisfied and proud of how he raises his children. Such confidence, combined with consistent involvement, is likely to contribute to the child's sense of security and well-being.

Mr. T's child demonstrates strong social adaptability, both in the home environment and when interacting with peers. The child is able to communicate clearly with adults and peers, showing signs of emotional flexibility and responsiveness to social cues. According to Mr. T, his child often initiates conversations and participates actively in group play, which are indicators of healthy peer interaction. These abilities seem to be nurtured by a parenting style that emphasizes openness and encourages active communication. The supportive environment and parental modeling of good interpersonal skills appear to play a critical role in the child's social development.

Data from the school teacher's questionnaire also supports the conclusion that Mr. T's child has a good level of adjustment to the school setting. The teacher reported that the child follows school rules, asks for help when confused, and is friendly to classmates. However, there were some minor reservations in the responses, particularly regarding the child's self-perception, such as feeling proud or having to get what he wants. This suggests that although the child shows generally positive adjustment, some emotional regulation aspects may still need to be supported. Nonetheless, the overall findings reinforce the view that Mr. T's parenting promotes adaptive social behavior.

In contrast, Mr. H's approach to parenting reveals a different perspective, particularly in how he limits his children's social exposure beyond the family. During the interview, Mr. H mentioned that he does not take his children to visit friends or allow frequent interactions with people outside the household. This parental choice may stem from a desire to maintain control over the social environment, ensuring familiarity and perceived safety. However, such restrictions might inadvertently limit the child's ability to practice important social skills like sharing and negotiating with others. Consequently, children may face challenges when required to interact in broader social settings such as school or the neighborhood.

Mr. H's child reportedly shows discomfort when interacting with unfamiliar adults and is not accustomed to being in peer groups outside the family. This lack of exposure can create barriers to the development of broader communication competencies. Limited interaction outside the immediate family may hinder the child's capacity to understand social diversity and adapt to differing cultural or behavioral norms. The tendency to confine social interactions within the family reflects a parenting strategy focused on internal cohesion rather than external adaptation. While it may offer emotional safety, it reduces opportunities for the child to navigate complex social environments.

Mr. H may perceive sibling interaction as sufficient for fulfilling his child's social needs, especially within the context of a large polygamous family. While these interactions indeed foster a sense of belonging and emotional support, they cannot fully substitute the developmental benefits gained from broader peer engagement. Social interactions outside the family are essential for learning about equality, difference, and conflict resolution. Without these experiences, children may face difficulties in adjusting to diverse social settings later in life. Therefore, combining internal familial interaction with external social exposure is vital to foster more balanced and healthy early childhood adjustment.

Discussion

The present study sheds light on the dynamics of fathering in polygamous families, highlighting stark differences in paternal involvement and their implications for early childhood adjustment. The contrast between Mr. T and Mr. H reflects how fathering practices vary not only across individuals but also within the same cultural and religious context. While both fathers operate within polygamous family structures, the degrees of engagement, emotional support, and caregiving involvement differ markedly. This disparity aligns with findings that indicate the effects of polygamy on children are closely tied to the quality of parenting, particularly the father's role (Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Bahari, 2021).

The use of Gadsden's Fathering Indicator Framework in this study allows for a nuanced examination of paternal presence, caregiving, and cooperative parenting. Mr. T fulfills multiple indicators of father involvement, from direct caregiving and nurturing expressions to organizing recreational activities and sharing household responsibilities. This active fathering corresponds with previous studies that highlight the multidimensional nature of paternal roles in early childhood (Diniz et al., 2023; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016). In contrast, Mr. H demonstrates minimal involvement in caregiving tasks, delegating responsibilities entirely to his wives, a pattern that can restrict children's opportunities for emotional bonding and learning by example (Diniz et al., 2021).

Father involvement plays a vital role in fostering emotional regulation and social competence among young children. Mr. T's child showed signs of positive adjustment, such as initiating conversations, interacting confidently with peers, and following school norms. These behaviors mirror the benefits identified in studies on father engagement, which emphasize its impact on social-emotional and cognitive development (Lindsey, 2022; Puteri & Rudi, 2021). Conversely, Mr. H's child exhibited discomfort in unfamiliar social settings, likely stemming from a limited range of interpersonal experiences (Kee & Hassan, 2020).

The differences in educational support also provide insight into fathering patterns. Mr. T offers autonomy in educational decisions, respecting his child's choices and encouraging self-driven motivation. This approach is consistent with research that associates autonomy-supportive parenting with healthier emotional outcomes and increased motivation (Cabrera et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022). Mr. H, however, restricts formal education, favoring home-based religious instruction. While this may reflect strong religious values, it potentially limits the child's broader academic and social experiences (Al-Krenawi, 2014).

Religious values influence both fathers' parenting approaches, but with different outcomes. Mr. T integrates his faith into parenting through daily prayers and traditional values while maintaining warmth and flexibility. In contrast, Mr. H adopts a rigid interpretation, asserting male authority and framing the mother's role as the sole educator. These practices resonate with findings that patriarchal family norms in polygamous settings often marginalize the father's emotional involvement (Shepard, 2013).

In matters of health, both Mr. T and Mr. H exhibit skepticism toward modern medical practices, especially vaccination and insurance. Mr. T acquiesced to his wife's preferences regarding health decisions, whereas Mr. H rejected them altogether, relying on herbal treatments. These attitudes reveal gaps in health literacy and reflect findings that stress the importance of meeting children's basic health needs for their overall well-being (Wijayanti & Fauziah, 2020).

The strategies of early childhood adjustment observed in this study underscore the central role of fathering. Mr. T's child exhibits adaptability, emotional security, and social competence, which can be traced back to consistent paternal presence and support. This aligns with findings that underscore the protective and developmental role of involved fathers (Diniz et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2018). Conversely, Mr. H's child, despite being part of a large family network, shows limited social readiness, suggesting that internal family bonding alone is insufficient for well-rounded development. Exposure to external social environments is

necessary to nurture empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills (Karaçelik-Varol & Bekir, 2024).

Ultimately, this study affirms that fathering within polygamous families is not monolithic. While structural and religious contexts shape paternal roles, individual choices and parenting philosophies greatly influence children's well-being. Future studies should explore broader samples across cultural settings to further examine how variations in fathering interact with polygamy and affect child development. Integrating culturally sensitive father engagement programs may offer valuable strategies to improve child outcomes in polygamous and patriarchal households (Anwar et al., 2024; Nair et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study reveals that fathering practices within polygamous families are far from uniform and significantly influence early childhood adjustment. Through a comparative case study of Mr. T and Mr. H, the research demonstrates that Mr. T's active involvement in caregiving, shared domestic responsibilities, and flexible educational support contributes positively to his child's emotional and social development. In contrast, Mr. H adopts a more traditional and authoritative role, delegating parenting entirely to his wives and limiting his children's social exposure, which may hinder the development of essential interpersonal skills. These findings extend the application of Gadsden's Fathering Indicator Framework to a non-Western, polygamous context, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive models of father engagement. The study also highlights the importance of designing inclusive parenting programs and early childhood policies that account for diverse family structures and promote balanced father-child interactions. Despite its limited sample size, this research offers valuable insights and sets the groundwork for future studies involving broader and more varied populations.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

The author affirms responsibility for all aspects of this study, including the conception of the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The author also prepared, reviewed, and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Additional Information

No additional information is available for this paper at this time.

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