

Father's Experience and Roles in Raising Children with Special Needs: A Qualitative Analysis of Family Functioning

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the experiences and roles of fathers in families with children with special needs (CSN), focusing on the dynamics of family functioning. The research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how fathers perceive and manage the challenges associated with raising children with unique needs, and how these experiences influence family dynamics. Semi-structured interviews with five fathers were conducted online and in-person. The analysis used coding and theme identification. The findings highlight that fathers assume multiple roles—caregiver, provider, and emotional supporter—and face challenges like financial stress, mental health issues, and societal stigma. Engaged fathers contribute to their children's emotional security and social development. The study emphasizes the importance of education, support networks, and mental health resources for fathers. Encouraging shared parenting responsibilities can foster collaboration and strengthen family bonds. This research contributes to understanding father involvement in families with CSN, emphasizing culturally sensitive support systems that acknowledge fathers' multifaceted roles. Empowering fathers through education and support can enhance family functioning and improve quality of life for all family members.

Keywords: Family Functioning, Children, Special Needs, Father, Role

1. Introduction:

Families play a crucial role in the development of children, particularly those with special needs (CSN). In this context, the father's perspective becomes highly relevant, as paternal involvement in caregiving can significantly influence family functioning and child development. Fathers serve not only as financial providers but also as emotional supporters and active caregivers. Research indicates that a father's engagement in raising children with special needs can enhance the child's achievements, aid in their adjustment

process, and foster their self-confidence. However, the challenges faced by fathers in raising children with special needs are often more complex than those encountered with typically developing children. Fathers may experience feelings of shame or disappointment when confronted with the reality of their child's special needs. If not addressed properly, this can lead to disharmony within the family. Conversely, many fathers demonstrate deep acceptance and affection for their children, striving to provide the necessary support.

Mental health issues among fathers are a serious concern, as their mental well-being directly affects their involvement in caregiving. Empirical evidence shows that mentally healthy fathers tend to be more engaged in parenting, and the opposite is also true (Baker, 2014). Furthermore, this condition can significantly impact families with children with special needs (Pisula & Porębowicz-Dorsmann, 2017). Similar to mothers, fathers of children with special needs are vulnerable to mental health issues due to the burdens and challenges associated with caregiving (Picardi et al., 2018; Toledano-Toledano & Dominguez-Guedea, 2019). Despite these challenges, fathers and mothers face different burdens. Research indicates that in families with children with special needs, mothers often feel more burdened by subjective stressors such as feelings of sadness or loss of hope, while fathers are more burdened by objective stressors like financial difficulties and job-related issues (Picardi et al., 2018).

Father involvement is a crucial factor in child development, including for children with special needs. Previous studies have reported that optimal father involvement is significantly associated with reduced behavioral problems and improved socio-emotional development in children with special needs (Lopez et al., 2019). Furthermore, father involvement positively impacts mothers' mental health and the overall quality of life for families with children with special needs (Laxman et al., 2015). The positive influence of father involvement on children, partners, and families does not imply that this role is without challenges. Parenting is a demanding role for men as fathers, and it becomes even more challenging for those with children who have special needs. One indication of this is the prevalence of mental health issues among fathers, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Dunn et al., 2019; Giallo et al., 2015).

In addition to the burdens and challenges they face, fathers and mothers are known to have different parenting styles. Research has found that fathers tend to engage in physical play, act like peers, and follow their children during play, while mothers tend to be more structured, directive, and

empathetic in their communication (John et al., 2013). Additionally, fathers are reported to take on the role of supervisors, monitoring and evaluating their children, while mothers provide direct care and nurturing (Parke & Cookston, 2019). This discussion illustrates that the differences between fathers and mothers are not due to physiological or biological issues but are more a result of gender constructs (Jones et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding the issues surrounding father involvement cannot rely on the same lens used for mothers (Cabrera et al., 2018). Moreover, father involvement is a multidimensional concept that differs from maternal caregiving (Fagan et al., 2014).

Father involvement encompasses the presence and engagement of fathers, where they fulfill their parental roles by protecting, equipping, shaping, and nurturing their children (Flouri, 2005). Thus, a father's role in caregiving extends beyond providing financial security and protection for the family; it also plays a significant part in the growth and development of the child. Conceptually, the construct of father involvement is multidimensional (Lamb, 2010). This means that a father's engagement cannot be assessed from a single dimension (Fagan et al., 2014). In the socio-cultural context of Indonesia, the father's role in caregiving is often influenced by gender norms and societal expectations. While many fathers are involved in caregiving, some may feel alienated from this role due to factors such as work and social pressures. Therefore, it is essential to understand these dynamics to provide better support to families with children with special needs, particularly from the father's perspective. By examining family functioning from the father's viewpoint, it is hoped that more effective strategies can be identified to support the caregiving of children with special needs and enhance the overall quality of life for families.

2. Research Methods:

2.1 Design:

This study employs qualitative research methods using a narrative study approach. Qualitative

research is conducted in the natural environment of a phenomenon, with the researcher maintaining a focus on building sensitivity towards the research subjects. The narrative study approach centers on describing a series of events or experiences lived by the research subjects (Creswell, 2018). The aim of this research is to obtain authentic, direct information related to fathers' perceptions regarding family functioning in families with children with special needs. This study was conducted to provide better insights into how families can overcome challenges in raising children with special needs, as well as to help develop more effective interventions to support families and improve their quality of life. The data obtained is then described in detail, in accordance with the information provided by the research subjects.

2.2 Research procedure:

The data collection technique used in this research process is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fathers to obtain data on their perceptions regarding the functioning of their families with children with special needs. The interview process in this study was conducted online for the first and second subjects and in person for the third subject. The interviews were carried out using an interview guideline developed by the research team based on theories from the literature review. The semi-

structured interview technique provides flexibility for researchers to explore the necessary information. Additionally, the semi-structured interview data collection technique allows for adjusting the interview questions to the interviewee, enabling the acquisition of more in-depth and specific information. The use of an interview guideline developed based on theories from the literature review can also help ensure that all aspects relevant to the research topic are covered in the interviews and facilitate more systematic and structured data analysis.

2.3 Participants:

The subjects in this study were selected using a method called selective sampling. Selective sampling is a technique for determining samples by choosing research subjects based on specific considerations aligned with the research objectives set by the research team, ensuring that the data collected is more representative. Additionally, the selection of research subjects took into account various aspects such as roles, status, research location, and other relevant factors (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). A total of five subjects were involved, all of whom are fathers of children with special needs. The search for subjects was conducted by distributing a form online. Furthermore, the research team also reached out to relatives who met the criteria and requested their willingness to participate.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Research Subjects

No.	Initials	Gender	Age	Work
1.	Jw	Man	40 years	Employee
2.	P	Man	41 years	Lecture
3.	Bw	Man	39 years	Employee
4.	Ks	Woman	35 years	Engineer
5.	Tl	Woman	32 years	Engineer

2.4 Data analysis:

The steps involved in the data analysis process for this study are as follows (Creswell, 2018):

- a. **Data Organization:** This step involves arranging or managing the information collected during the data collection process by grouping the data.
- b. **Overall Reading of the Data:** This step entails interpreting the database by reviewing the collected data and taking notes or memos to highlight important information. This involves reading through the entire interview transcripts and marking significant data from the interviews with the subjects. After identifying important data, the research team ensures that the information gathered is clear for each point to be explored.
- c. **Data Coding and Theme Identification:** This step consists of grouping textual or visual data based on theory-driven principles using the McMaster Model of Family Functioning. The data coding process is carried out manually by the research team, who read the data obtained from the interviews and create a coding table. After coding, the grouped data is classified based on content and themes derived from the findings. Following the classification, the research team compiles the data by creating descriptions of the findings for each subject.
- d. **Data Interpretation:** This step involves making sense of the data obtained based on the results of the data coding to derive complex meanings. Data interpretation incorporates theories or previous research findings sourced from scientific literature. During this phase, researchers read and gather references from books and journals that can support and explain the findings from each subject.
- e. **Data Presentation:** This final step of data analysis involves presenting the findings from the research in the form of text, tables, or charts/figures.

3. Results:

The dynamics of family life are profoundly affected when a child has special needs. Family

functioning encompasses various aspects, including communication, emotional support, and problem-solving abilities among family members. Fathers play a pivotal role in these dynamics, influencing not only their children's development but also the overall well-being of the family unit. This article explores the functioning of families with children with special needs (CSN) through the lens of fathers, highlighting the challenges they face, their roles, and the factors that influence their involvement.

The Role of Fathers in Family Dynamics:

Fathers in families with CSN often take on several roles, including caregiver, provider, and emotional supporter. Their involvement can lead to better outcomes for children, such as improved social skills and emotional regulation. However, many fathers face unique challenges that can affect their engagement.

- a. **Caregiver Role:** Fathers who actively participate in caregiving can foster resilience and independence in their children. Engaged fathers contribute to their children's emotional security, which is vital for children with special needs.
- b. **Provider Role:** As primary breadwinners, fathers often feel the pressure of financial responsibilities. This can create stress, impacting their ability to be present and engaged with their children.
- c. **Emotional Support:** Fathers who provide emotional support help their children develop a sense of self-worth and security. Their involvement can also enhance the emotional well-being of mothers, leading to a more harmonious family environment.

Challenges Faced by Fathers:

Fathers of children with special needs may encounter several challenges:

- a. **Acceptance of the Child's Condition:** Coming to terms with a child's diagnosis can be difficult. Some fathers may experience denial or frustration, which can hinder their involvement.

- b. Societal Expectations: Traditional gender roles often dictate that fathers should be providers rather than caregivers, which can limit their participation in nurturing activities.
- c. Mental Health: Fathers may experience stress, anxiety, or depression related to the demands of parenting a child with special needs. These mental health challenges can affect their ability to engage positively with their children.
- d. Isolation: Many fathers feel isolated in their experiences, lacking support from peers or community resources, which can exacerbate feelings of stress.

Factors Influencing Father Involvement

Several factors can influence the level of father involvement in families with CSN:

- a. Personal Acceptance: Fathers who accept their child's condition are more likely to engage actively in caregiving.
- b. Socioeconomic Status: Financial stability allows fathers to dedicate more time and resources to their children, enhancing their involvement.
- c. Cultural Norms: Evolving societal perceptions of fatherhood encourage more active participation in caregiving roles.
- d. Psychological Well-being: Fathers who maintain good mental health are better equipped to provide emotional and practical support.

Strategies for Enhancing Father Involvement:

To promote better family functioning, several strategies can be implemented:

- a. Education and Awareness: Providing fathers with information about their child's condition and available resources can empower them to take an active role.
- b. Support Group: Establishing support networks for fathers can create a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation.
- c. Counseling Services: Access to mental health resources can help fathers navigate the

emotional challenges of parenting a child with special needs.

- d. Encouraging Shared Responsibilities: Promoting shared parenting responsibilities between mothers and fathers can foster collaboration and strengthen family bonds.

4. Discussion:

Family functioning can be defined as the quality of the interactions and relationships among family members. It includes how families communicate, resolve conflicts, and provide emotional support. In families with CSN, the presence of a child with unique needs can significantly impact these dynamics. Research indicates that families with CSN often encounter numerous challenges that can disrupt their functioning, such as:

- a. Emotional Stress: Parents may experience a range of emotions, including grief, anxiety, and frustration, which can affect their interactions with one another and their children.
- b. Societal Stigma: Families may face societal stigma and discrimination, leading to isolation and reduced social support.
- c. Resource Limitations: Access to appropriate resources, including educational and therapeutic services, can be limited, putting additional strain on family functioning.

Fathers in families with children with special needs often assume several critical roles: caregiver, provider, and emotional supporter. Each of these roles contributes significantly to the well-being and development of their children, particularly in the unique cultural context of Indonesia. In Indonesia, the role of fathers as caregivers is increasingly recognized, although traditional gender norms have historically placed this responsibility primarily on mothers. Engaged fathers who actively participate in caregiving can foster resilience and independence in their children. Research indicates that father involvement is linked to positive developmental outcomes, including improved social skills and emotional regulation in children with special needs (Lamb, 2010). Fathers who take an active role in caregiving provide emotional

security, which is especially vital for children with special needs. This emotional security can help children navigate their challenges more effectively. In Indonesian culture, where collectivism and family cohesion are highly valued, fathers' involvement in caregiving can strengthen family bonds and promote a supportive environment. A study by Supriyadi et al. (2020) found that fathers who engage in caregiving activities contribute to their children's emotional and social development, leading to better adjustment and well-being.

As primary breadwinners, fathers in Indonesia often experience significant pressure related to financial responsibilities. This pressure can create stress, impacting their ability to be present and engaged with their children. The economic landscape in Indonesia, characterized by a high level of informal employment and varying job security, can exacerbate this stress. Many fathers work long hours or multiple jobs to provide for their families, which can limit their availability for caregiving activities. The economic burden can lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration, particularly when fathers perceive that they cannot meet their children's needs effectively. According to a study by Hidayati et al. (2021), fathers who experience financial stress may struggle to engage emotionally with their children, which can negatively affect family dynamics. This highlights the need for policies and support systems that alleviate economic pressures on fathers, allowing them to fulfill their roles more effectively.

Fathers who provide emotional support play a crucial role in helping their children develop a sense of self-worth and security. In Indonesian culture, where emotional expression may not always be openly encouraged, fathers who actively engage in emotional support can significantly impact their children's mental health. Their involvement can enhance the emotional well-being of mothers as well, leading to a more harmonious family environment. Research has shown that fathers who are emotionally available and supportive contribute to their children's resilience and coping skills (Laxman et al., 2015). In the context of families with children with special

needs, this emotional support can be particularly beneficial. A study by Purnamasari et al. (2019) found that fathers who provided emotional support not only improved their children's self-esteem but also fostered a positive family atmosphere, which is essential for the overall well-being of the family unit.

Despite the positive impacts of father involvement, many fathers in Indonesia face unique challenges that can affect their engagement. Traditional gender roles often dictate that fathers should primarily be providers, which can lead to feelings of alienation from caregiving roles. Additionally, societal stigma surrounding children with special needs can create barriers to involvement, as fathers may feel embarrassed or uncertain about how to engage with their children in public settings. Moreover, mental health issues among fathers, such as stress and anxiety related to caregiving and financial pressures, can hinder their ability to be present and engaged. Research by Giallo et al. (2015) indicates that fathers of children with special needs are at higher risk for mental health issues, which can further complicate their roles within the family.

Several factors significantly influence the level of father involvement in families with children with special needs (CSN). These factors can be categorized into four main areas: personal acceptance, socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and psychological well-being. Each of these aspects plays a critical role in shaping how fathers engage with their children and the overall family dynamics. In Indonesian culture, personal acceptance of a child's special needs is often intertwined with religious beliefs, societal expectations, and family dynamics. Many fathers may initially struggle with the diagnosis of their child, experiencing feelings of denial, disappointment, or even shame. This emotional journey is significant, as fathers who successfully navigate this process tend to engage more actively in their child's upbringing. Research indicates that acceptance can foster a positive attitude, enabling fathers to seek resources and support for their children. For example, a study found that fathers

who accepted their child's condition were more likely to participate in activities that promote their child's development, such as therapy and educational support (Siron et al., 2020). In contrast, those who struggled with acceptance may withdraw, impacting their involvement and overall family dynamic. Cultural and religious beliefs can play a significant role in shaping fathers' acceptance of their child's special needs. In Indonesia, where Islam is the predominant religion, some fathers may interpret their child's condition as a test from God or a punishment for their sins. This belief can lead to feelings of guilt and difficulty in accepting their child's special needs. However, many Islamic teachings emphasize patience, resilience, and the importance of caring for those with disabilities, which can help fathers find meaning and purpose in their journey.

Socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influences father involvement in Indonesia. Fathers from lower SES backgrounds often face multiple challenges, including financial stress and limited access to resources. This can hinder their ability to participate fully in caregiving activities. For instance, many fathers may work long hours in informal sectors or manual labor jobs to provide for their families, leaving them little time to engage with their children. A qualitative study conducted by Anggraini (2013) emphasized that fathers who have stable jobs and financial resources are better positioned to support their children with special needs. They can afford therapies, educational materials, and other resources essential for their child's development. Conversely, fathers with unstable jobs may struggle to balance work and caregiving, leading to reduced involvement and increased stress within the family. In Indonesia, where the social welfare system is limited, families with CSN often rely on their own resources or support from extended family members. This can put additional strain on fathers, who may feel the pressure to be the sole provider for their family. Initiatives that provide financial assistance, such as subsidized healthcare and educational services, can alleviate this burden and enable fathers to participate more actively in their child's care.

Cultural norms in Indonesia significantly shape the perceptions of fatherhood and caregiving. Traditionally, Indonesian society has viewed fathers primarily as breadwinners, with mothers taking on the caregiving role. This division of labor can limit fathers' participation in nurturing activities, creating barriers to their involvement. However, there is a gradual shift in these cultural norms, with more fathers embracing active roles in their children's lives. Research by Asfari (2022) indicates that changing societal expectations are encouraging fathers to participate more fully in caregiving, particularly for children with special needs. This shift is vital, as active father involvement is linked to better emotional and developmental outcomes for children. Fathers who engage in nurturing behaviors, such as playing, teaching, and providing emotional support, contribute significantly to their children's self-esteem and social skills. The evolving cultural landscape in Indonesia is fostering a more inclusive view of fatherhood, which can enhance family functioning and child development. Cultural influences can also shape the way fathers interact with their children. In some Indonesian communities, physical affection and verbal expression of love may be less common, as fathers are expected to maintain a more authoritative role. However, research suggests that fathers who adapt their communication style to be more emotionally expressive and physically affectionate can have a positive impact on their children's well-being (Lamb, 2010).

The psychological well-being of fathers is another critical factor influencing their involvement. Fathers who experience mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety, may find it difficult to engage positively with their children. The stress of raising a child with special needs can exacerbate these issues, leading to a cycle of disengagement. Access to mental health resources is essential for fathers navigating these challenges. Studies have shown that fathers who receive mental health support are more likely to engage in positive parenting behaviors and foster healthy relationships with their children (Doherty et al.,

1998). In Indonesia, the stigma surrounding mental health can be a barrier to seeking help. However, increasing awareness and access to mental health services can empower fathers to take a more active role in their children's lives. Cultural beliefs and societal expectations can also shape fathers' perceptions of mental health and their willingness to seek support. In some Indonesian communities, seeking help for psychological issues may be seen as a sign of weakness or as a failure to fulfill one's duties as a father. Breaking down these stigmas and normalizing discussions around mental health is crucial for supporting fathers in their caregiving roles.

Fathers play a crucial role in the functioning of families with children with special needs. However, to enhance their involvement and support family dynamics, several strategies can be implemented. These strategies must consider the unique cultural context of Indonesia, where traditional gender roles and societal expectations can influence father engagement. Providing fathers with comprehensive information about their child's condition and available resources is vital. In Indonesia, where access to information may be limited, educational initiatives can empower fathers to take a more active role in caregiving. Workshops, seminars, and informational materials can help fathers understand their child's needs, available therapies, and educational resources. Educational programs should be culturally sensitive and tailored to the local context. For instance, integrating local beliefs and practices into educational materials can make them more relatable and effective. Research by Supriyadi et al. (2020) emphasizes that culturally relevant education can enhance fathers' understanding and acceptance of their children's conditions, leading to increased involvement.

Establishing support networks for fathers can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and provide a sense of community. In Indonesia, where familial and communal ties are strong, support groups can foster connections among fathers facing similar challenges. These groups can serve as safe spaces for fathers to share their experiences,

discuss concerns, and seek advice. Participating in support groups can help fathers gain insights and coping strategies from one another. A study by Hidayati et al. (2021) found that fathers who engaged in support networks reported feeling less isolated and more empowered in their parenting roles. Additionally, these groups can facilitate the sharing of resources and information about local services available for children with special needs.

Providing access to mental health services is crucial for fathers navigating the emotional challenges of parenting a child with special needs. In Indonesia, mental health stigma can hinder individuals from seeking help. Therefore, community-based mental health programs that promote awareness and reduce stigma are essential. Counseling services should be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by fathers. For instance, incorporating traditional healing practices alongside modern psychological approaches can enhance acceptance and effectiveness. Research by Giallo et al. (2015) highlights the importance of culturally competent mental health services in improving the well-being of fathers of children with disabilities.

Encouraging shared parenting responsibilities between mothers and fathers can foster collaboration and strengthen family bonds. In many Indonesian families, traditional gender roles often dictate that mothers take on the primary caregiving role. However, promoting a more equitable division of responsibilities can benefit both parents and children. Initiatives aimed at changing societal perceptions of fatherhood can encourage fathers to engage more actively in caregiving. Campaigns that highlight positive father involvement and showcase successful father figures can challenge traditional norms. Research by Cabrera et al. (2018) suggests that promoting shared responsibilities not only enhances father engagement but also improves family dynamics and child outcomes. Organizing family workshops that focus on collaborative parenting strategies can help both parents understand and appreciate each other's roles. These workshops can provide practical skills for effective communication,

conflict resolution, and joint decision-making, fostering a more harmonious family environment.

5. Conclusion:

The functioning of families with children with special needs is significantly influenced by the father's involvement. While challenges exist, there is a growing recognition of the importance of active father participation in caregiving. By understanding the dynamics at play and implementing supportive strategies, families can enhance their functioning and improve the quality of life for all members, especially the child with special needs. Continued research and support systems are essential to promote father involvement, ultimately leading to better outcomes for children and families alike.

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