

Inclusive Fathering and Early Childhood Character Development: A Multidimensional Narrative Review

*Anis Ruhizzati Ahmad Riffai¹ & Nurul Khairani Ismail²

¹Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

²Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500586>

Received: 08 May 2026; Accepted: 14 May 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

ABSTRACT

The role of fathers in early childhood character development has gained increasing attention in contemporary educational and developmental research, particularly within the context of inclusive education that recognizes children's diverse abilities and needs. This study presents a general review aimed at identifying key forms of paternal involvement that contribute to the development of positive character traits in early childhood across varied developmental contexts. Five primary dimensions of father involvement were identified: emotional support, role modeling, cognitive guidance, physical engagement, and the establishment of daily routines. Findings indicate that fathers' emotional support plays a critical role in fostering children's self-confidence, emotional regulation, and social competence, including among children with additional developmental or learning needs. Fathers as role models contribute significantly to moral development and prosocial behavior, particularly through inclusive practices such as empathy, acceptance of differences, and respectful interactions. Cognitive guidance provided by fathers enhances moral reasoning and self-discipline through reflective and developmentally responsive communication strategies. Furthermore, physical engagement through active play promotes self-regulation, resilience, and risk-taking confidence, especially when activities are adapted to accommodate children's sensory and motor differences. Consistent daily routines established by fathers support the development of discipline, responsibility, and predictability, which are particularly beneficial for children requiring structured environments. Collectively, these dimensions contribute to the development of balanced, adaptive, and inclusive character formation in early childhood. Overall, the findings underscore that fathers are not merely providers of material support but serve as critical agents in shaping children's character development. Importantly, this role extends to fostering inclusive values and practices that support diverse developmental needs, highlighting the significance of responsive and engaged fathering in early childhood education.

Keywords: Father involvement; inclusive parenting; early childhood development; character development; prosocial behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The role of fathers in early childhood development has increasingly attracted attention from researchers and the general public. In the past, mothers were often regarded as the primary figures in caregiving; however, modern research has demonstrated that fathers also play a highly significant and unique role in shaping children's character, emotions, and behavior from an early age (Puglisi et al., 2024). Children benefit not only from attachment relationships with mothers, but also from the active involvement of fathers in their daily lives (Pekel-Uludağlı, 2023).

Changes in social norms have led to fathers becoming more directly involved in caregiving, early education, and character formation, rather than solely fulfilling their traditional role as economic providers (Li, 2020). Although the level of father involvement may vary across cultures and family structures, research consistently shows that responsive and consistently involved fathers have a positive impact on children's character development (Shapiro, 2024).

Character refers to a fundamental construct involving an individual's capacity and inclination to act morally (Berkowitz, 2002). The development of character during early childhood is critical because children possess an extraordinary capacity to absorb information and imitate behaviors from their environment (Buchsbbaum et al., 2011). The formation of personality and behavioral patterns in adulthood is also largely shaped by experiences during childhood (McCauley & McCullough, 2022). This reinforces the importance of father involvement in character development during early childhood.

Despite extensive findings supporting the importance of paternal involvement, certain aspects of the father–child relationship remain underexplored, such as how emotional support, discipline, and play contribute to shaping children's character and behavior. In the context of modern challenges such as time constraints, work pressures, and evolving family structures, understanding the role of fathers becomes increasingly crucial to ensure that children develop balanced character traits.

This study is grounded in inclusive education principles, which emphasise equity, accessibility, and responsiveness to diverse developmental needs. Unlike traditional approaches that assume homogeneity in child development, inclusive frameworks recognise variability in cognitive, emotional, and behavioural trajectories. Within this context, father involvement must be understood not as a uniform construct, but as an adaptive and responsive process that accommodates individual differences. This perspective aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm, which views developmental differences not as deficits but as natural variations requiring supportive and flexible caregiving approaches. In addition, this study is informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which highlights the role of family, particularly fathers, as a critical microsystem influencing children's developmental outcomes. Therefore, father involvement is conceptualised as a dynamic interaction shaped by broader social, cultural, and contextual factors, particularly within inclusive early childhood environments. Thus, this review aims to address this gap by examining father involvement through an inclusive lens, focusing on how paternal practices support diverse developmental needs in early childhood.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a narrative review approach to synthesize and interpret existing literature on inclusive fathering and early childhood character development. Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews provide a more flexible and interpretative approach to understanding broad research themes (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

Relevant literature was identified through academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on publications between 2017 and 2025. Search terms included “father involvement”, “inclusive fathering”, “early childhood”, and “character development”. Articles not related to father involvement, outside early childhood contexts, or lacking relevance to character development were excluded. The review focused on studies involving children aged 0–6 years and publications addressing paternal involvement in relation to children's socio-emotional, moral, and behavioral development.

A total of 39 articles were selected based on their relevance to the study objectives. The selected literature was analyzed qualitatively using a thematic synthesis approach. Findings were organized into five major themes: emotional support, role modeling, cognitive guidance, physical engagement and play, and daily structure and routines. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional role of fathers in shaping early childhood character development without adhering to rigid systematic review procedures.

FINDINGS

Based on this narrative review approach, the findings were analyzed and organized into several key themes that reflect forms of paternal involvement in early childhood character development. Five identified themes include emotional support, role modeling, cognitive guidance, physical support, and the establishment of daily routines.

Emotional Support

Emotional support provided by fathers is a fundamental component of children's character and emotional development. A responsive, warm, and consistent father-child relationship creates a psychologically safe

environment, thereby strengthening children's self-confidence, emotional regulation, and social competence. This is particularly significant for children with diverse developmental needs, such as those experiencing sensory sensitivities, emotional dysregulation, or communication challenges, where consistent paternal emotional support serves as a stabilising and adaptive mechanism. From a character development perspective, daily emotional support from fathers has been shown to enhance children's self-evaluation across various social roles. Cheon and Chung (2020) found that children who receive continuous emotional support from fathers demonstrate higher social confidence, although the effects vary depending on educational level and socioeconomic status. These findings highlight that paternal emotional support not only benefits children's immediate emotional well-being but also influences the long-term development of their self-concept.

The role of fathers in guiding children's emotions is further evidenced through interventions focusing on social and emotional skills. Programs such as Dads Tuning in to Kids (Dads TIK) demonstrate that when fathers are trained in emotional coaching, it leads to reduced behavioral problems and improved emotional regulation in children (Havighurst et al., 2019). This reinforces the notion that fathers are not merely providers of material needs, but also key contributors to children's emotional competence and behavior through reflective and empathetic interactions.

Emotional support from fathers also operates indirectly through their relationship with mothers. Fathers who actively support co-parenting reduce maternal stress, thereby creating a more stable and conducive family environment for children's emotional development (Garcia et al., 2022). According to Bentenuto and Venuti (2019), when fathers contribute emotionally and mentally to their partner's well-being, children benefit from a more responsive, less stressful, and more harmonious home environment.

Furthermore, paternal emotional support influences the development of children's emotional intelligence, which is a critical trait in mature character development. Fathers' involvement in fostering self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills helps children build better social relationships and reduces negative interactions (Santana-Ferrández et al., 2025). Studies on paternal affective profiles also indicate that fathers' ability to regulate their own emotions directly affects children's behavior. For instance, fathers with lower levels of negative emotions tend to raise children with fewer externalizing problems, highlighting how paternal emotional stability serves as an important model for children (Orri et al., 2019).

Role Modeling

The role of fathers as moral role models represents one of the most important forms of involvement in early childhood character development. Through processes of social imitation as described in Bandura's social learning theory, children observe and imitate the behaviors, values, and moral principles demonstrated by their fathers (Vahedi et al., 2020). This modeling occurs naturally in daily routines, where the way fathers handle situations, regulate emotions, demonstrate integrity, and interact with others becomes a strong reference for children's moral development (Saka, 2024).

Research indicates that fathers play a significant role in transmitting values such as responsibility, patience, and respect to children through consistently demonstrated behavior (Ott, 2024). In different social and cultural contexts, paternal moral behaviors such as respecting elders, adhering to rules, and resolving conflicts in a mature manner become internalized by children and ultimately shape their own moral orientation (Vahedi et al., 2020). Children who observe fathers practicing positive values are more likely to imitate prosocial behaviors, including empathy, cooperation, and self-discipline.

Within inclusive contexts, such modeling also plays a critical role in shaping children's attitudes towards diversity, fostering acceptance, empathy, and respect for individuals with different abilities, backgrounds, and social characteristics. Findings also emphasize that moral modeling by fathers is not merely conveyed through verbal instruction but is more powerfully transmitted through concrete behavioral examples. Fathers who demonstrate honesty, perseverance, and consistency in daily actions help children understand how moral values are applied in real-life situations (Kislitsyna & Melnichenko, 2025). Therefore, practical examples presented by fathers become a more authentic and effective medium of moral learning compared to advice alone.

Moral modeling also occurs in everyday interactions such as when fathers work, complete household tasks, make decisions, or face stress. Through these exposures, children learn to develop their own interpretations of ethical values and apply them in social contexts (Dragon & Poulin-Dubois, 2025). Research shows that the stronger the father–child relationship, the greater the tendency for children to imitate paternal attitudes and behaviors, thereby increasing the significance of fathers as moral models.

In addition, findings indicate that fathers are among the earliest moral educators for children, where paternal behavior becomes a foundational reference for moral development from an early age (Badeni & Saparahayuningsih, 2019). Preschool-aged children, in particular, are highly sensitive to social observation and are easily able to actualize moral behaviors they observe into daily actions (Chaq, 2024). Therefore, fathers who consistently demonstrate positive values contribute to the development of more stable, mature, and ethical character in children.

Cognitive Guidance

In addition to moral modeling, fathers' involvement in early childhood character development is also realized through cognitive guidance. Cognitive guidance refers to the ways in which fathers stimulate thinking, provide explanations about cause-and-effect relationships, and engage children in moral dialogue that promotes the development of ethical reasoning (Sorariutta & Silvén, 2018). When fathers read with their children, explain rules, or discuss social situations, children not only acquire new information but also develop an understanding of concepts of right and wrong (Kim & Tse Crepaldi, 2021). In inclusive developmental contexts, this process often requires fathers to adapt their communication strategies, including the use of simplified language, visual cues, or scaffolded explanations, particularly when supporting children with language delays or neurodevelopmental differences. Such interactions are important because they help children develop more mature moral reasoning, which is the ability to make moral judgments based on cognitive understanding rather than mere instruction.

Research shows that fathers' involvement in activities that stimulate curiosity, such as intellectual games, storytelling, and open dialogue, has a direct impact on early cognitive development in children (Duursma et al., 2020). Through such cognitive stimulation, children learn to evaluate information, understand cause-and-effect relationships, and connect daily experiences with moral values. This cognitive foundation subsequently supports the development of self-discipline and more structured ethical judgment.

Cognitive-based social interactions, such as discussions about disagreements, justification of actions, and moral reasoning, also play a critical role. Li and Tomasello (2022) explain that such experiences create cognitive disequilibrium, a condition in which children must reassess their thinking, thereby helping them transition from rigid moral understanding to more flexible and socially grounded reasoning. Fathers who engage in open discussions about differing perspectives or ask children to justify their decisions help develop children's ability to evaluate moral dilemmas more critically.

Furthermore, cognitive development is closely associated with the development of moral reasoning because it enables children to evaluate ethical choices based on personal and social standards of justice (Senzaki et al., 2022). With cognitive guidance from fathers, children are able to organize their thinking, understand others' perspectives, and consider the moral consequences of their actions. This process involves the integration of cognitive and emotional elements, which are essential components of mature moral decision-making. As demonstrated by Beauchamp et al. (2013), the ability to take perspective and empathize, which develops through structured dialogue and guidance, is a crucial foundation for the development of moral reasoning in childhood.

Physical Support

Physical support through fathers' involvement in active play is one of the important forms of paternal engagement in early childhood character development. Physical activities such as rough-and-tumble play, outdoor play, and exploratory activities not only promote quality interaction between fathers and children but also contribute to the development of resilience, emotional regulation, and self-confidence (St George et al., 2021). Importantly, inclusive physical engagement involves adapting play activities to accommodate children's motor, sensory, or behavioural differences, ensuring accessibility while maintaining opportunities for challenge

and developmental growth. Research indicates that fathers' involvement in physical play creates controlled challenging situations in which children learn to manage stress, regulate impulsive behavior, and develop problem-solving strategies (Freeman & Robinson, 2022).

Studies also emphasize that fathers tend to have a more active and challenging play style compared to mothers, which stimulates exploratory behavior and curiosity in children. Through such play interactions, fathers create an environment that promotes cognitive learning and early intellectual skills (Vallotton et al., 2020). These exploratory situations help children test their abilities, foster motivation, and develop more independent character traits.

Fathers' involvement in physical play is also associated with the development of courage in children. Paquette and St George (2023) explain that play involving safe risk-taking encourages children to develop bravery and adaptability in new situations. Through such structured interactions, children learn to understand physical boundaries, make decisions, and develop self-confidence, all of which are closely linked to character development.

In addition, physical play provides opportunities for fathers to model positive behaviors such as managing frustration, cooperating, and exercising self-control when facing challenges. Barish (2020) states that interactions during active play often serve as a natural platform for teaching children coping skills and developing self-regulation. This is consistent with findings by Bocknek et al. (2017), which report that routine active play with fathers is closely associated with improved self-regulation among young children.

This involvement also contributes to socio-emotional development through the strengthening of the father-child bond. Consistent and responsive physical play reinforces this relationship, which in turn supports children's social, emotional, and behavioral development (St George et al., 2017). Other studies also show that active play enhances children's social maturity and motor competence, thereby contributing to more stable social character development (Feleghi et al., 2023).

The long-term effects of fathers' physical involvement are also evident in behavioral development. Craig et al. (2021) found that early paternal engagement acts as a protective factor against later behavioral problems. Children who have early experiences of active play with fathers tend to demonstrate better emotional and behavioral regulation throughout their development.

Development of Daily Routines

The establishment of consistent daily routines is one of the forms of paternal involvement that contributes to children's character development. Fathers' involvement in setting daily schedules, household rules, and basic responsibilities such as sleep routines, study time, and simple tasks creates a stable environment that supports the development of discipline and responsibility. This is particularly beneficial for children who require structured and predictable environments, such as those with autism spectrum conditions, where consistent routines significantly support emotional stability and behavioural regulation. This clear structure helps children understand social expectations and daily routines, while encouraging perseverance and self-control from an early age (Palkovitz, 2019).

Fathers' involvement in basic tasks, including daily caregiving and household management, is also associated with a reduction in behavioral problems among children. The presence of actively involved fathers in daily routines enhances clarity of rules and provides more balanced emotional support, thereby reducing the risk of problematic behaviors (Orri et al., 2019). In terms of discipline, fathers often play a role in setting boundaries and ensuring that children understand the consequences of their actions. This role not only helps shape appropriate behavior but also forms the foundation of children's understanding of social boundaries and moral responsibility (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the structure established by fathers is closely linked to the development of prosocial behavior and emotional stability in children. A structured environment provides opportunities for children to learn emotional regulation and develop better social interactions, as consistent routines create a sense of security and predictability (Menéndez et al., 2023). Research also shows that the regularity of daily routines serves as a

mediator between parental relationship quality and children's school readiness. This highlights that routines are not merely practical but have direct effects on the development of early skills that are essential for academic and socio-emotional success (Ren et al., 2022).

Stable family routines also help strengthen the relationship between fathers and children. The regularity of family activities, such as shared mealtimes or agreed daily rules, reduces differences in perception between parents and children regarding their relationship, thereby creating a more harmonious family environment (Boat et al., 2025). In a broader context, fathers' roles in discipline and structure vary across cultures but consistently emphasize the importance of establishing clear boundaries. Although some cultures emphasize paternal authority more strongly, there is a global shift toward more responsive and non-harsh disciplinary approaches to avoid negative outcomes such as poor social skills or difficulties in self-regulation (Macleod & Lesch, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review extend existing literature by positioning father involvement within an inclusive developmental framework. Rather than viewing paternal roles as static, this study highlights the adaptive nature of fathering practices in responding to children's diverse needs. This aligns with inclusive education principles, where responsiveness, flexibility, and individualisation are central. The integration of inclusive perspectives suggests that effective father involvement is not solely defined by frequency of interaction, but by the quality and adaptability of engagement across different developmental contexts. This study found that fathers' involvement in early childhood character development occurs through five main forms, namely emotional support, role modeling, cognitive guidance, physical involvement, and the establishment of daily routines. These five forms of involvement are interconnected and collectively form a comprehensive ecosystem of character development.

Emotional Support as the Foundation of Character Development

The findings indicate that fathers' emotional support plays a fundamental role in shaping children's self-concept, emotional regulation, and social confidence. This is consistent with Bowlby's attachment theory, which posits that caregiver responsiveness and warmth form the foundation for the development of the Internal Working Model (IWM) (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). The IWM is a mental framework that influences how individuals perceive themselves and others in relationships. It guides expectations and behaviors in future relationships, thereby affecting personality development and social interaction (Dazzi & Zavattini, 2011).

Children who develop secure attachment are more likely to build positive self-concepts and trust in others. In contrast, children who do not experience secure attachment may struggle with self-esteem and interpersonal trust, which subsequently affects their character development (Boccatto & Capozza, 2011).

Intervention programs such as Dads Tuning in to Kids (Dads TIK), which train fathers in emotional coaching, have been shown to have significant effects on children's behavior and emotional well-being (Havighurst et al., 2019). These findings are consistent with research by Walter et al. (2024), which reported that fathers' emotional involvement not only enhances children's emotional intelligence but also reduces behavioral problems. The report indicates that children of emotionally involved fathers exhibit fewer behavioral issues, highlighting the importance of paternal involvement in emotional and social development. This demonstrates that fathers are not merely caregivers but also foundational agents in the development of emotional intelligence, which is a crucial dimension of character development.

The findings further reinforce the study by Lee et al. (2023), which suggests that fathers' emotional support affects children not only directly but also indirectly through improvements in maternal parenting quality, resulting in a more harmonious family environment. This indicates that the role of fathers in character development does not operate in isolation but functions within the broader context of family relationships.

Fathers as Role Models in Moral and Behavioural Development

The findings show that moral modeling through daily observation is one of the key forms of paternal involvement in character development. This aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the

importance of observational learning, where individuals, especially children, imitate behaviors observed in their role models (Vijayalakshmi & Rajakumari, 2025).

The findings also indicate that moral modeling is more effective when fathers' behavior is consistent and authentic, rather than limited to verbal advice. This is supported by Rote and Flak (2022), who reported that although verbal communication is important, the effectiveness of parenting practices often depends on how they are perceived and internalized by children. This underscores that authentic and consistent actions by fathers are more meaningful than verbal advice alone, as children are more likely to imitate behaviors they observe.

The study also shows that the strength of the father-child relationship increases the likelihood of children imitating paternal behaviors. This finding is supported by Parent-Boursier and Hébert (2014), who reported that secure and positive relationships are essential for fostering trust and encouraging children to emulate their fathers' actions. This has important implications, as warm relationships enhance the effectiveness of fathers as role models.

Furthermore, fathers' modeling of values such as patience, respect, and mature conflict resolution shapes early moral orientation, which ultimately influences children's long-term behavior. These findings indicate that fathers play a unique role in character development that cannot be fully replaced by mothers or other environmental influences.

Cognitive Guidance as a Mechanism for Developing Moral Reasoning

Fathers' roles in stimulating cognitive development through moral dialogue, explanations of cause-and-effect relationships, and intellectual activities were found to have a significant impact on the development of moral reasoning. This aligns with the theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, which emphasize the role of cognitive disequilibrium and social interaction in fostering more advanced moral development (Lin et al., 2017). Both theorists argue that moral growth occurs through active engagement with dilemmas and social interactions that challenge existing cognitive structures and promote higher levels of reasoning.

Discussions involving disagreement and justification expose children to new perspectives, thereby helping them move from literal moral understanding to more complex moral reasoning. These findings are supported by Elm (2019), who reported that cognitive guidance not only develops intellectual capacity but also enables individuals to evaluate moral dilemmas more effectively by integrating rational thinking with ethical principles. This demonstrates that fathers' cognitive guidance is not merely an educational activity but a fundamental component in shaping children's moral reasoning and intellectual character.

Physical Support as a Catalyst for Self-Regulation and Courage

The findings indicate that physical support and fathers' involvement in active play serve as important catalysts for the development of self-regulation and confidence in children, which are key components of character formation. Unlike other forms of involvement, physical interactions such as rough-and-tumble play, outdoor activities, and exploration create controlled challenging situations that allow children to learn emotional regulation, impulse control, and adaptive behavior in dynamic contexts. This is consistent with research by St George et al. (2016), which reported that fathers who engage in physical play with their children contribute to the development of self-regulation and more stable character traits.

In addition, fathers' more stimulating and challenge-oriented play styles contribute to the development of courage in children. This is supported by Feldman and Shaw (2021), who reported that risk-taking in play, when supported by fathers, allows children to experience failure in a safe environment. In this context, fathers act as facilitators who provide opportunities for children to try, fail, and try again, thereby strengthening courage, self-competence, and emotional resilience. This demonstrates that physical experiences not only support motor development but also play a critical role in shaping more resilient and confident character traits.

Overall, these findings emphasize that fathers' physical involvement plays a crucial role in developing self-regulation and courage through active and contextual learning experiences. Therefore, fathers' participation in

physical activities with their children should be viewed as an essential component of parenting practices that support holistic character development.

Development of Daily Routines as the Foundation of Discipline and Responsibility

The findings show that fathers' roles in establishing structure and daily routines form a fundamental basis for early childhood character development, particularly in terms of discipline and responsibility. This is consistent with research by Fiese and Everhart (2008), which reported that fathers' involvement in setting daily routines such as mealtimes, study schedules, storytelling before bedtime, and other routines helps create a consistent and predictable environment. Repeated routines also teach children social norms such as sharing and turn-taking, while training them to adhere to rules, thereby forming positive behavioral habits.

In addition, routines established by fathers contribute to the development of responsibility, which is a key component of character formation. Through guidance and the establishment of clear boundaries, children learn to understand the consequences of their actions and develop a sense of responsibility toward themselves and their environment. This finding is supported by Patrikakou and Weissberg (2014), who reported that fathers' active participation in daily routines fosters a structured environment that supports the development of responsibility in children. Overall, the establishment of daily routines by fathers plays a crucial role in shaping disciplined and responsible character in children.

Limitations and Future Implications

While the findings highlight the importance of paternal involvement in early childhood character development, the influence of fathers may differ according to cultural values, socioeconomic conditions, and family structures. Parenting roles and expectations vary across contexts; therefore, these findings should be interpreted within diverse family and social environments. Future studies may further examine how contextual factors shape father involvement and children's character development outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that fathers play a comprehensive and multifaceted role in early childhood character development through emotional support, moral modeling, cognitive guidance, physical engagement, and the establishment of daily routines, all of which function synergistically to shape children's socio-emotional, cognitive, and moral competencies. Fathers contribute not only by creating psychologically safe and structured environments, but also by fostering self-confidence, emotional regulation, resilience, and responsible behavior through consistent interaction and modeling. Importantly, this study advances the discourse by positioning father involvement within an inclusive framework, emphasising that effective fathering must be responsive, adaptive, and sensitive to children's diverse developmental needs, including variations in ability, learning, and socio-emotional functioning. This highlights the necessity for parenting practices, policies, and future research to integrate inclusive principles that ensure all children receive equitable and meaningful developmental support within diverse early childhood contexts.

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