

The Relationship Between Father Involvement and Maternal Stress in Intellectual Disability Parenting

Erlina Khaerunnisa¹, Ima Sukmawati¹, Elis Roslianti², Yuyun Rahayu¹, Rosidah Solihah³

¹Department of Nursing, STIKes Muhammadiyah Ciamis, Ciamis, Indonesia

²Diploma of Nursing, STIKes Muhammadiyah Ciamis, Ciamis, Indonesia

³Department of Midwifery, STIKes Muhammadiyah Ciamis, Ciamis, Indonesia

Correspondence Author: Ima Sukmawati

Email: imasukma90l@gmail.com

Address: Jl. K.H Ahmad Dahlan No. 20, Ciamis, West Java, Indonesia, +6281214958445

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Children with intellectual disabilities require more intensive and continuous caregiving, which often places significant psychological and emotional burdens on mothers, who typically serve as the primary caregivers. The demands associated with caregiving responsibilities—ranging from managing daily activities to addressing complex emotional and behavioral needs—can result in elevated levels of maternal stress. Prolonged exposure to such stress may adversely affect a mother's physical and psychological well-being, ultimately impacting her overall quality of life. One of the contributing factors that may alleviate this burden is the active involvement of fathers in caregiving tasks. Paternal involvement is believed to offer both emotional reassurance and practical support, which can significantly ease the caregiving load carried by mothers. **Objective:** This study aimed to examine the relationship between paternal involvement in caregiving and maternal stress levels among families raising children with intellectual disabilities. **Method:** A correlational study design with a cross-sectional approach was used. The sample consisted of 49 mothers recruited using a total sampling technique. Instruments used in this research were developed by modifying the Nursing Outcome Classification (NOC) to measure paternal involvement and adopting the Parental Stress Scale to assess maternal stress. Data were analyzed using the Spearman rank correlation test with a significance level of 0.05. **Result:** Findings revealed that 33 mothers (67.3%) reported high paternal involvement, 11 (22.4%) moderate, and 5 (10.2%) low. Regarding maternal stress levels, 22 mothers (44.9%) experienced low stress, while 27 (55.1%) experienced moderate stress. No respondents reported high stress. **Conclusion:** Statistical analysis showed a significant positive correlation between paternal involvement and reduced maternal stress levels ($r = 0.088$; p

= 0.048). These results suggest that increased paternal engagement in caregiving contributes to lower maternal stress and better maternal well-being.

Keywords: caregiving, paternal role, stress level

Introduction

Family support plays a crucial role in assisting parents to navigate the complex and often challenging demands of parenting. A strong family network can serve as a source of emotional, practical, and informational support for parents as they face various situations that may arise throughout the child-rearing process. Through family support, parents can feel heard, understood, and provided with appropriate solutions to address the issues they encounter. Moreover, family involvement can help reduce stress levels by sharing the burden of responsibilities, offering parents time to engage in self-care, and providing a safe and nurturing environment for children. Family support also enables parents to expand their social networks, gain new insights, and learn from the experiences of others who may have faced similar challenges (Anis, 2018).

The role of fathers has often been associated with providing physical protection and ensuring the financial needs of the family are met. However, the understanding of a father's role has evolved, recognizing that fathers have a significant impact on other aspects of a child's life, including emotional, social, and cognitive development. Fathers who are actively involved in child-rearing provide strong role models for their children, helping them to understand concepts such as responsibility, cooperation, and communication. Furthermore, a father's presence and involvement contribute to the development of children's self-confidence and independence (Irwan, 2021).

Dealing with the special needs of a child can give rise to various uncertainties, anxieties, and feelings of inadequacy, all of which may increase parental stress levels (Sukmawati & Faoziah, 2022a). Their roles as supporters, caregivers, and guides for children with special needs require significant investments of time, energy, and emotional resources. Additionally, parents often experience stress due to feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and pressure from their surrounding environment. Challenges in navigating special education systems, medical care, and support services can further contribute to the burden of parental stress (Evi dkk, 2021).

Based on a preliminary survey conducted by the researcher at SLB Negeri Ciamis, the school principal stated that no previous study had examined "The relationship between father involvement in parenting and the stress level of mothers with children experiencing intellectual disabilities at SLB Negeri Ciamis." According to the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2017, more than 1 billion people, or 15% of the world's population—approximately 1 in 7 individuals—live with some form of disability, with between 110 million (2.2%) and 190 million (3.8%) people aged 15 years and older experiencing significant functional difficulties (WHO, 2018). Furthermore, it is estimated that 93 million children, or approximately 1 in 20 children under the age of 15, live with moderate or severe disabilities and experience both mental and physical impairments. According to the results of the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) conducted by Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2016, there were 6,008,661 individuals with disabilities in Indonesia. Among them, approximately 1,780,200 individuals (29.62%) were visually impaired, 472,855 individuals (7.86%) had hearing and speech impairments, 402,817 individuals (6.70%) were intellectually disabled, 616,387 individuals (10.25%) were living with mental retardation, 170,120 individuals (2.83%) had

severe mental retardation with difficulties in self-care, and around 2,401,592 individuals (39.96%) were living with multiple disabilities (Ministry of Health, Republic of Indonesia, 2017).

Based on data from the Ciamis District Education Office in 2023, there were 772 recorded cases of Children with Special Needs (CSN). Data from Ciamis District also reported that in the State Special Needs School (SLB Negeri) of Ciamis, there were 112 students enrolled, consisting of 12 students with visual impairments, 5 with physical disabilities, 43 with hearing impairments, 49 with intellectual disabilities, and 3 students with autism (Student Register Book of SLBN Ciamis, 2023). Intellectual disability is a global issue with significant implications, particularly in developing countries. It is estimated that severe intellectual disability occurs in approximately 0.3% of the total population, and nearly 3% of the population has an IQ below 70. According to the 2013 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), the disability prevalence rate in Indonesia was 11% of the total population. Meanwhile, the disability prevalence rate in Aceh, based on the 2013 Riskesdas, was 12.7% of the Aceh population, with the proportion of Down syndrome cases recorded at 0.13% (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

Father involvement significantly influences family dynamics; beyond psychological aspects, a lack of paternal engagement can also affect health outcomes. Research by Hafidz (2019) indicates that the father's role, particularly during pregnancy, has a significant association with maternal behavior. The study showed that fathers who were highly supportive (92.20%) encouraged mothers to attend regular prenatal check-ups. Conversely, lack of paternal attention was associated with an increased risk of complications during pregnancy (Hafidz, 2019).

Traditionally, child-rearing has been predominantly associated with mothers. However, recent studies have increasingly explored the role of fathers in parenting, including in families with children with special needs, such as those with intellectual disabilities (Sukmawati, Rahayu, et al., 2023a). Fathers play an essential role in the development of children with intellectual disabilities. Several studies have found that optimal paternal involvement is associated with reduced behavioral problems and better socio-emotional development in CSN. Furthermore, active father involvement positively impacts maternal mental health and enhances the overall family quality of life. Nevertheless, in Indonesia, paternal involvement in caregiving still faces several challenges. Although some fathers are relatively involved in raising children with special needs, much of this involvement remains indirect. Factors such as child acceptance, gender norms, financial conditions, employment status, and psychological well-being influence the degree of father participation in caregiving (Hafan, 2022).

Caring for children with special needs often requires considerable time, energy, and additional effort. Mothers commonly face challenges such as communication difficulties, the need for extra medical care, and constant supervision. Meeting the complex needs of children with intellectual disabilities can place significant stress on mothers, as they struggle to provide adequate support, coordinate with service providers, and seek appropriate information (Sukmawati & Faoziah, 2022b). Mothers also frequently experience feelings of isolation, as they may find it difficult to share their experiences with others who do not face similar situations. Lack of personal time and concerns about the child's future further contribute to high levels of maternal stress (Khoirunnisa et al., 2023; Sukmawati, Noviati, et al., 2023).

Father involvement in childcare is significantly related to the stress levels experienced by mothers. When fathers are actively engaged in caregiving, the burden of responsibility and attention is more equitably shared between both parents. This active participation helps to

reduce the stress experienced by mothers, as they no longer feel solely responsible for the caregiving challenges, especially in raising a child with special needs such as intellectual disabilities (Irwan, 2021).

Objective

This study aimed to assess the relationship between paternal involvement in caregiving and maternal stress levels in families with children with intellectual disabilities.

Method

The design used in this study was a quantitative analytic design with a cross-sectional approach. The study population consisted of 49 mothers who have children with intellectual disabilities enrolled at SLB Negeri Ciamis. The sampling strategy employed was total sampling, conducted from November to December 2024. The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire based on the Nursing Outcomes Classification (NOC). Data analysis was performed using univariate and bivariate analyses (Chi-square test).

The instrument to assess paternal involvement consisted of 27 positively worded (favorable) items. A Likert scale with five response options was used: Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), and Always (5). Meanwhile, the Parental Stress Scale consisted of 18 positively worded (favorable) items, also using a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), and Strongly Disagree (5).

The scores for both the paternal involvement questionnaire and the Parental Stress Scale were categorized as follows: Good if the respondent scored >76%; Moderate if the respondent scored 51–75%; and Poor if the respondent scored <50%.

Result

a. Parental Stress Scale

Table 1. Parental Stress Scale

Stress Scale	Frequency	Percentage
Low	22	44.9%
Moderate	27	55.1%
Total	49	100%

It can be concluded from this study that the maternal stress level remains moderately high, at 55.1%.

b. Father Involvement

Table 2. Father Involvement

Stress Scale	Father Involvement		p-value
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Low	5	10,2	0,048
Moderate	11	22,4	
High	33	67,3	
Total	49	100	

Based on the results of the Spearman rank test, a significance value of 0.000 ($p = 0.048 < 0.05$) was obtained, indicating a significant relationship with father involvement.

c. Maternal Stress Level

Table 3. Maternal Stress Level

Stress Scale	Maternal Stress Level		<i>p-value</i>
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Low	22	44,9	0,048
Moderate	27	55,1	
High	0	0	
Total	49	100	

Based on the results of the Spearman rank test, a significance value of 0.000 ($p = 0.048 < 0.05$) was obtained, indicating that the maternal stress level is low.

d. The Relationship Between Paternal Involvement in Caregiving and Maternal Stress Levels

Table 3. The Relationship Between Paternal Involvement in Caregiving and Maternal Stress Levels

Stress Scale	Father Involvement		Maternal Stress Level		<i>p-value</i>
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Low	5	10,2	22	44,9	0,048
Moderate	11	22,4	27	55,1	
High	33	67,3	0	0	
Total	49	100	49	100	

The results of the Spearman rank test showed a relationship between father involvement in parenting and maternal stress levels, as indicated by a significance value (2-tailed) of 0.048, which is less than 0.05.

Discussion

1. Father Involvement in Parenting

The results of a study conducted at Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Ciamis indicated varying levels of father involvement in parenting children with intellectual disabilities. Among 49 respondents, 67.3% (33 respondents) demonstrated a high level of involvement. This suggests that the majority of fathers in the study were actively engaged in parenting activities, including assisting with children's learning, providing emotional support, and participating in household tasks that support the needs of the child. Meanwhile, 22.4% (11 respondents) fell into the moderate involvement category, indicating reasonably good but possibly inconsistent or partial participation. A total of 10.2% (5 respondents) were categorized as having low involvement, suggesting minimal contribution to caregiving.

The dominant proportion of high paternal involvement (67.3%) may be attributed to increased awareness of the father's role in the development of children with special needs, as well as support from family and community environments. However, the moderate and low involvement rates highlight several challenges, such as time constraints due to work, lack of knowledge about the child's needs, and sociocultural pressures that traditionally regard caregiving as primarily the mother's responsibility. This study underscores the importance of enhancing education and support programs that promote consistent father involvement, as shared parenting responsibilities can yield greater positive outcomes for children with intellectual disabilities.

These findings are consistent with a study by Cahya, E.D., et al. (2021), which reported that 86.6% of fathers were involved in their child's care and that there was a positive relationship between father involvement and children's independence in daily activities. Another study by Fadlilah et al. (2020) also demonstrated that active parental roles, including those of fathers, significantly impacted the independence level of children with intellectual disabilities (Noviati, Sukmawati, Kurniawan, et al., 2022).

2. Maternal Parenting Stress Levels

Research on the level of stress experienced by mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in SLBs in Ciamis showed that the majority experienced low to moderate levels of stress. A total of 44.9% (22 respondents) were categorized as experiencing low stress, indicating that although they face challenges, most mothers manage their stress effectively. Additionally, 55.1% (27 respondents) were in the moderate stress category, reflecting a greater psychological burden, though still manageable. Notably, no mothers reported high levels of stress, suggesting the presence of adequate coping mechanisms or environmental support among the respondents.

In this study, the highest proportion of maternal stress was found in the moderate category (Noviati, Sukmawati, Ningrum, et al., 2022). The fact that 55.1% of mothers experienced moderate stress highlights the challenges of raising a child with intellectual disabilities, particularly in meeting emotional, educational, and social needs. However, the availability of support systems—whether familial, institutional, or community-based—appears to assist mothers in coping with these pressures. This research emphasizes the need to provide access to psychological support services, specialized parenting training, and peer support groups to help mothers manage stress more effectively. With appropriate interventions, maternal stress can be reduced, enabling mothers to better support and care for their children with special needs.

This is in line with research conducted by Suryani et al. (2022), which showed that 70% of respondents experienced mild stress levels. The study indicated that low family support could increase stress among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. The findings highlight that a lack of familial support can lead to increased maternal stress, thus emphasizing the importance of social support in promoting the well-being of mothers facing parenting challenges. Furthermore, a study by Nurmalia et al. (2021) found that the majority of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities experienced moderate levels of parenting stress.

3. The Relationship Between Father Involvement and Maternal Stress in SLB in Ciamis

The findings of the study examining the relationship between father involvement in parenting and maternal stress levels in SLBs in Ciamis revealed a significant correlation. With a significance value (2-tailed) of 0.048 (< 0.05), the study indicated that higher father involvement is associated with lower maternal stress levels. This suggests that a father's role in caring for a child with intellectual disabilities positively impacts the mother's psychological condition. Active paternal contribution not only alleviates the physical burden but also provides essential emotional support in managing the challenges of raising a child with special needs.

This finding highlights the importance of both parents' involvement in childcare, particularly in circumstances requiring special attention. High levels of father involvement can foster a more harmonious caregiving environment and reduce the stress experienced by mothers. The study also underscores the need for educational and family intervention programs that enhance fathers' awareness and skills in parenting children

with special needs. With adequate support, families can establish a more balanced caregiving system that benefits not only the mothers but also the developmental outcomes of the children (Sukmawati, Rahayu, et al., 2023b).

These findings align with a study by Uswatun and Hasanah (2019), which also demonstrated a relationship between father involvement and maternal stress, although with a negative correlation coefficient—indicating an inverse relationship. In contrast, the current study identified a positive relationship with a correlation coefficient of 0.088, highlighting the beneficial impact of active father involvement on maternal stress reduction.

Conclusion

The distribution of paternal involvement in caregiving showed that 67.3% was categorized as high. Meanwhile, the distribution of maternal stress levels was mostly in the moderate category, with a percentage of 55.1%. The results of the study indicated that there was a relationship between paternal involvement in caregiving and maternal stress levels among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities at SLB Negeri Ciamis.

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