

Father-child bonding and its impact on pediatric developmental outcomes

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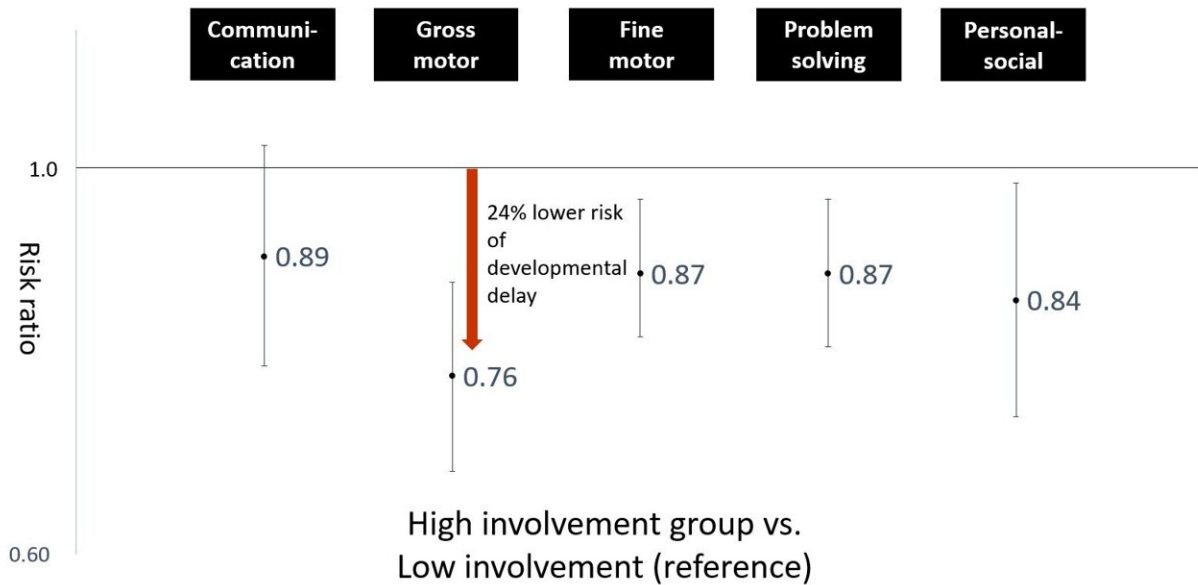
The early physical and mental development of a child sets the stage for lifelong progress and fulfillment. Spending quality time with their parents can bring out significant positive changes among children during

their formative years.

Across Japan, the extent of fathers' participation in [childcare](#)-related activities has historically been limited because of the entrenched gender-based division of labor. Fathers, especially those in their 20s–40s, are expected to show full commitment towards work and have been prioritizing their professional commitments over family. Consequently, a significant number of these fathers have found their engagement in childcare to be limited, regardless of their personal inclinations.

At the same time, the number of mothers in Japan who are engaged in full-time employment has been on the rise in recent years. Compounded by the lack of support from other family members, the lack of paternal involvement in childcare has become a major social issue. In addition, because of the low fertility rates, the central government has actively been promoting paternal childcare.

As a result, Japanese fathers are now expected to be co-caregivers, and not just the primary breadwinners. Indeed, recent trends show that they are increasingly spending more time with their children. However, despite the increase in paternal childcare across Japan, the impact of such active involvement on a child's developmental outcomes remains largely unexplored and poorly understood.



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Adjusted risk ratios with 95% confidence intervals for the associations of paternal involvement in childcare. Credit: Tsuguhiko Kato from Doshisha University

A recent study based on the largest birth cohort data in Japan examines the association between paternal involvement and developmental outcomes in infants. It also assesses the impact of the reduction of maternal parenting stress on developmental outcomes.

The study, led by Dr. Tsuguhiko Kato from the National Center for Child Health and Development and Doshisha University Center for Baby Science, Japan, was published in *Pediatric Research* on July 8, 2023. The team included several researchers from institutes across Japan, including Dr. Shoji Itakura from the Center for Baby Science, Doshisha University; Dr. Kumiko Kanatani from Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine; and Dr. Takeo Nakayama from the Kyoto

University School of Public Health, among others.

"In developed countries, the time fathers spend on childcare has increased steadily in recent decades. However, studies on the relationship between paternal care and child outcomes remain scarce. In this study, we examined the association between paternal involvement in childcare and children's developmental outcomes," says Dr. Kato.

The research team used data from the Japan Environment and Children's Study to investigate the association between paternal involvement in childcare and developmental outcomes. A total of 28,050 Japanese children who received paternal childcare at the age of 6 months were assessed for various developmental milestones at the age of 3 years. The potential mediation effect of maternal parenting stress was also examined at 1.5 years.

"The prevalence of employed mothers has been on the rise in Japan. As a result, Japan is witnessing a paradigm shift in its parenting culture. Fathers are increasingly getting involved in childcare-related parental activities," explains Dr. Kato.

During the course of this study, paternal childcare was assessed with the help of seven key questions pertaining to important childcare-related tasks such as feeding, changing diapers, bathing, putting kids to sleep, playing with kids at home, taking children outside, and changing their clothes. Fathers were then rated based on the extent of their involvement in childcare. For instance, fathers who "never" offered any help with a certain task were awarded a score of 0 for that particular activity.

On the contrary, fathers who "always" facilitated a childcare activity were awarded a score of 4. These results were then correlated with the extent of developmental delay among infants assessed using the Ages and Stages questionnaire.

"Our research findings indicate that increased paternal engagement in childcare could yield advantages for both children and mothers alike," asserts Dr. Kato.

The results of this extensive population study are indeed reassuring. High paternal involvement in childcare is associated with a lower risk of developmental delay across skill sets, including gross-motor, fine-motor, problem-solving, and personal-social domains, relative to low paternal involvement. Additionally, the [fathers'](#) active involvement in childcare during infancy may also promote young children's development partially by reducing maternal parenting stress.

More information: Tsuguhiko Kato et al, Paternal involvement in infant care and developmental milestone outcomes at age 3 years: the Japan Environment and Children's Study (JECS), *Pediatric Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41390-023-02723-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-023-02723-x)

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