



# Social policy suggestions of Turkish fathers to increase father involvement

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## Abstract

Father involvement is known as one of the most important issue in the family system for the healthy development of children almost all stages of development. Today there are a lot of studies indicating that positive and high levels of father involvement have a positive effect on children's social, cognitive, emotional and physical development. Fathers' active and positive participation to all kinds of child-related activities in the family as much as mother is required to support children's healthy development. Unfortunately, still most of the studies indicate that fathers do not participate in all child-related activities in the family as much as mothers if the society they lived does not support high and quality father involvement. Although this seems as a personal preference, it is not since today we clearly known that father's involvement can be encouraged through societal expectations and father-friendly social policies that encourages fathers' involvement. Strong and father-friendly social policies have the power to promote father involvement and egalitarian parental roles in the family. In Turkey, social structure and social policies are not so strong to support high father involvement. Instead, they encourage traditional gender roles that emphasize provider role of fathers and primary caregiver role of mothers. In this qualitative descriptive study, 20 biological-resident father of 4-6 years old children were asked to suggest social policies which they thought to promote fathers' high involvement. Fathers' answers are discussed in the context of Turkish social policies.

**Keywords:** Father involvement, social policies, early years, Turkish fathers

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Introduce the problem

Father involvement is a research area that have been getting higher attention in the family related literature since 1970s. These studies on father involvement can be gathered on three main groups. The first group of father-related research focused on the definition of father involvement (exp Lamb, Pleck, Charnov & Levine, 1987; Palkovitz, 1997). The second group of research focus on the consequences of father involvement on the part of children, mothers and fathers (exp. Cebrera and Bradley, 2012; Clarke-

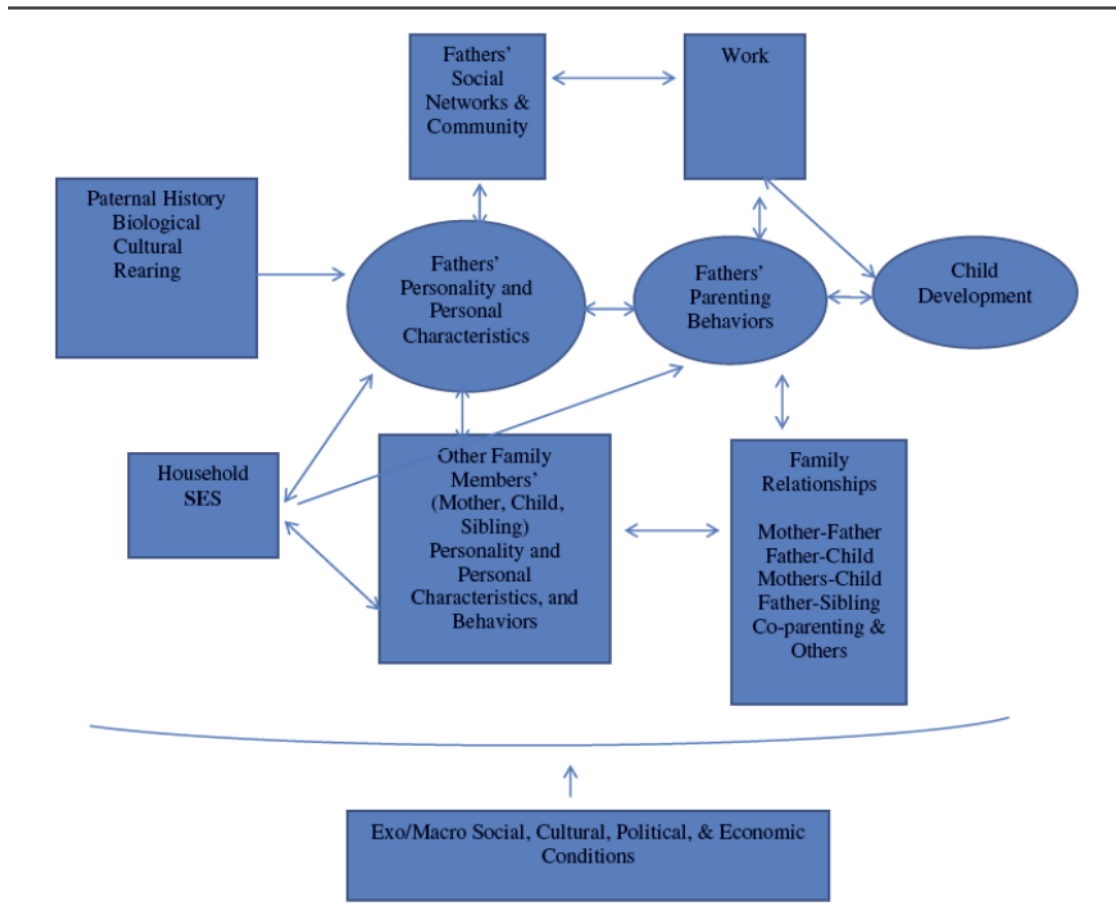
Stewart, 1978; Coley & Schindler, 2008; Horstman, Riem, Alyousefi-van Dijk, Lotz, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2022); while the third group of research focus on the determinants of fathers' different levels of involvement (exp. Adamsons, & Pasley, 2013; Cabrera, Hofferth, & Chae, 2011; Freeman, Newland & Coyl, 2008; Ishii-Kuntz, 2013 ; Knox, Cowan, Cowan, & Bildner, 2011; Ünlü-Çetin, 2010; Paulson, Dauber & Leiferman, 2011; Peterson, Cramer, & Thompson, 2022; Wilson & Durbin, 2010 ). Although all these studies seem to be independent from each other, in fact, they all complement and improve each other. That is research focusing on the definition of father involvement lead new studies that are able to provide deeper understanding about how different types of father involvement influences healthy child development, mothers and fathers, as well. Similarly, studies indicating the influence of father involvement on family well-being encourages studies that try to explain the reasons of different levels of father involvement. Therefore, today there are many different models that explains how father involvement is influenced by many different factors. One of the recent model that explains how father involvement is shaped by many factors belongs to Cebrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley and Roggman (2014). Through integrating latest research that based on dynamic systems concepts and transactional and dialectic process, their model presents fathering "as broadly contextualized, embedded in dynamic systems, and involving reciprocal processes that evolve through time" (Cebrera et al., 2014, p. 341).

They define this model as informal and heuristic and they believe that the bidirectional arrows (Figure 1) that they integrate to explain relationship between factors represents the dynamism in the system. That is, according to their model changes in the family system and the child' maturity and understanding resulted in changing parent-child interaction which is also influenced extra-familial factors such as public policies (Cebrera et al., 2014, p. 342). As seen in Figure 1, in this model many factors influencing father involvement like personal history, personality characteristics of fathers, fathers' social networks, socioeconomic status, work conditions, child's development and family relations are taken into account to explain father involvement; social, cultural, political and economic conditions are presented as moderators of the relationship between father and children since the impact of father involvement is determined not only the things that father does but also to the extent that things father does fit into the larger system of the family and the community (p. 347). This highlights the fact that father involvement need to be supported and encouraged by larger system in order to be effective for the child's healthy development. In other words, it can be said that in societies where high father involvement is not the norm, expected and supported situation, it is open to debate how much positive effects father involvement will have on the child.

One of the most effective ways of making the high involvement of the father a social norm and even an expectation is the construction of social policies in this direction. Social policies, in the broadest definition, are purposeful interpretations structured by the state to redistribute resources among the citizens to create a welfare system (Baldock, Mitton,

Manning & Vickerstaff, 2012). Governmental actions that have a purpose to improve the wellbeing of children and the families with children is a field of social policies called as family social policy (Kamerman, 1983).

Figure 1: A model for Father Involvement



Resource: Cebreira et al. (2014, p. 342).

According to Kamerman (1983) family social policies has to power to shape males and females roles in the families and in most cases they encourages males' and females' traditional gender roles. During the history, in many countries family social policies focus on the caregiver role of women while put the father's economic role to the center (Kamerman, 1983). Turkey is one of those countries that encourages traditional gender roles of males as economic providers and females as care takers through social policies.

It is clear that, in order provide equality in the family and to make high father involvement a norm and the expected, there is a certain need to modify social policies. One of the best ways to encourage an androgynous perspective on parenting might be making family social policies that support economic roles of females and males and caretaking roles of both parents (Kamerman, 1983).

At this point, the first question that comes to mind may be how to determine the social policies that support this situation. According to LaRossa (1985) fatherhood has two main domains; the culture and the conduct of the father involvement. The conduct of the father involvement refers to the actual behaviors of fathers while the culture of the fatherhood refers to social expectations. During the history, in spite of the quick change of the culture of the father involvement, the changes in the conduct of father involvement occurs slowly. According the Burgess and Russel (2004) fathers are so influential of national fatherhood discourses that influence the actual practices of fatherhood. By depending on this idea, it is believed that the best social policies which shapes the culture of father involvement might come from fathers themselves.

It is the underlying motivation for this study that understanding fathers' own point of views about the ways to promote high father involvement might steep up ever-evolving father involvement practices. Hence, the main aim of this qualitative descriptive study conducted in Turkey is to exhibit fathers' social policy suggestions that are thought to increase fathers' involvement level with their children in a country that family policies encourages fathers' economic role and mothers' caregiving role instead of androgynous family roles.

### *1.2. Related literature*

Although father related research does not go beyond 1970s, during this time research highlighted the aforementioned mutual relationship. Almost for the first time, LaRossa (1988) stated two main domains of fatherhood; the culture and the conduct of fatherhood, are highly social. The former refers to the “specifically the shared norms, values, and beliefs surrounding men's parenting” while the latter refers to the actual behaviors of fathers (p. 451). LaRossa (1988) differentiated these two domains according to their resistance to change. Based on LaRossa's conceptualization, it can be inferred that the culture of fatherhood is less resistant while the conduct of fatherhood is highly resistant to change. In other words, the mind of society, the expectations from fathers and maybe the definition of good fathering and high father involvement changed quicker than the actual fathering behaviors. Therefore, changes in the culture of fatherhood cannot be effective on the conduct of fatherhood unless they are strong enough and meet the need of fathers, as well.

By combining this claim with the model of Cebrera et al (2014), it can be said that the conduct of fatherhood, can be only changed through strong father-friendly changes in in the social and cultural level, i.e. in the culture of fatherhood. On one hand, the structure of family is so important for a man to engage in co-parenting has been indicated through research that consistently found the capacity of men to fulfil the role of fathering is “embedded in his relationship with the child’s mother” and marital quality is an important contributor for high father involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale 1999; Egeland & Carlson 2004; Knox et al.,2011). On the other hand, it is known that, policies that provide opportunities to strengthen couple relationship resulted in high relationship quality among couples lead to increase quality and quantity of father involvement (Knox et al, 2011). Similarly, father-child relationship in the first year of the child have an impact on later father-child relationship and to what extent father had a chance to spend quality time with his new-born child in the first year via paternity leave rights is perhaps the most important factor that help fathers to strengthen their relations with new-born child. Bittman (2004) mentioned that “men have shown a willingness to spend more time with their children... (p. 200); but, social policies that support this willingness is so limited. There are few countries that provided almost equal chance for parental leave to both fathers and mothers. All around the world, only Nordic countries along with countries like Canada and Portugal provides parental leave after birth of the child with a full-paid wages (O’Brien & Wall, 2017, p. 4).

In these countries it is seen that fathers involve more to their children’s lives than the other countries that “policy developments have focused weakly on the enhancement of fathers’ entitlements to leave” like UK, Spain, France, Switzerland, Japan (O’Brien & Wall, 2017, p. 4) and Turkey, as well. Although the number of fathers using parental leave is still lower than mothers, in the countries that the paternity leave is legal right, the number of fathers’ using paternity leave is increasing day by day (Haas & Philip Hwang, 2009). One of the best examples is Sweden, a country which is “the first nation to offer fathers paid parental leave and has arguably made the most effort over time to encourage fathers to take leave” (p.304). According to the longitudinal study of Haas and Philip Hwang (2009) the level of support for fathers to use paternal leave provided by work-place was increased between the years of 1993 and 2006.

Having an opportunity to take paid-paternal leave and be together with the child in the first weeks of its life encourages fathers to involve more in the following months. For instance, in Australia, fathers who used 2-to-4-week paternal leave at the birth of their children were found to provide more sole care to their 4-19 months old children at the week-ends (Hosking et al. 2010). Shanahan and Macmillan (2008) claimed that social policies and societal context constrain the family and work trajectories, choices and

actions of fathers. A very clear example was recently experienced in Portugal. Wall and Leitão (2017) stated that in Portugal after introducing three major changes in “Initial Parental Leave”, a term which was initially Maternity Leave, (1) sharing-bonus, (2) increased paid-paternity leave to 4 weeks and (3) compensation of complementary parental leave (at 25 % of previous earnings) the number of fathers who use initial parental leave increased 0.6 % in 2009 to 20% in 2010. All of these examples indicate that in order to change the conduct of fatherhood, there is a need for strong and father-friendly social policies which both influence the society’s mind -related to the fatherhood, good fathering and high father involvement and also fathers’ behaviors, their life conditions and their roles in the family. Social policies, then, gains more importance at this point since they have a power to influence both the mind of the society, i.e. the culture of fatherhood, and also the actual behaviors of fathers, i.e. the conduct of the fatherhood.

### *1.3. Social Policies that influence fathering*

According to Burgess and Russel (2004) there are five social policy areas that influence father-child relationship. These are employment, health, education, separation & divorce and vulnerable children policies. Through the taxation and employment regimes, governments designate the roles of males and females in the family; they decide who will earn money for the family and who will provide care. For instance, economy and taxation policies such as “setting women’s wage levels lower than men’s and reduced national insurance contributions for married women” encourages traditional gender norms in a society by distributing the role of breadwinning to men and primary caring to women (Burgess & Russel, 2004, pp.114-115).

High identification of males with the provider role as the result of these social policies inhibits the active involvement of fathers in child-care (Kameraman, 1983). Additionally, these policies resulted in father-blind childcare policies such as very few or no parental leave right for fathers, day-care policies which specifically related with mothers only, father-free family leave policies etc... According to Burgess and Russel (2004) almost all around the world educational policies and practices are not father friendly. In many societies, parents’ visibility in education is provided through parent involvement policies and unfortunately when it is said “parent involvement” it is referred to mothers instead of fathers (Ünlü-Çetin, 2016). Based on the studies indicated that fathers’ involvement in their children’s education creates a significant difference, it can be said that there is a need for engaging fathers more in their children’s education. Health policies and practices, such as ante-natal education, childbirth and early childhood education, are another area in which fathers are invisible (Levy & Kotelchuk, 2022; Burgess & Russel, 2004; Steen, Downe, Bamford, Edozien, 2012).

In the world, the general tendency related to child and family related health policies is focusing on the mother and the new born child “without any recognition of the fact that fathers’ motivations, behaviors and experiences” are also influential both on the mothers’ and the child’s health and well-being (p.125). Additionally, in many societies policies related to divorce and separation and vulnerable children as well as welfare regimes are not father-friendly. According to Burgess and Russel (2004), laws related to the custody, supports provided to vulnerable (mostly poor) children and welfare system reproduce three main traditional gender discourses; “(1)men should have more power than women, (2)the roles of men and women are different and (3) men’s roles and ways of thinking should have greater value than women’s” (p. 112).

According to Burgess and Russel (2004), discourse refers to the way a topic is visualized, spoken and written about and there is a mutual relationship between social discourse about fatherhood and social policies; policies have a power to shape or reshape social discourses related to fatherhood, similarly social discourses have a power to influence social policies related to fatherhood. In many societies, a “deficit perspective”, the wildly believed negative statements used to define fathers or males as parents (Hawkins and Dollahite (1999), is dominated in the social discourses. According to Fisher (2003) some deficit perspectives about fathers are; “if there is no support from a woman, fathers cannot cope with a child; a father can only be interested in the caring role if there is a woman who pushing him to do so; an absent father does not influence child’s development; men’s main interest is their jobs instead of their parenting roles; it is more possible for a man to harm a child when compared with a woman” etc... (as cited in Burgess and Russel, 2004, p. 113). All of these statements are not realistic and highly deficit but also very familiar and main barriers for fathers to involve in their children’s lives. Therefore, social policies should mainly work with these deficit perspectives and try to change them among the society.

#### *1.4. Social policies that shapes fatherhood in Turkey*

Turkey is located within the welfare system that has been identified as Southern European or Mediterranean Welfare System. The Southern European System is family-oriented or familial and it is based on the idea that the family is the institution that provides basic welfare (Naldini & Guerrero Jurado, 2009). Turkish family has an important role to provide the welfare to its members. Caring of its children, elders and disable family members is the responsibility of family. That is, there is not strong social welfare system in Turkey as in other countries in Southern European systems (Hosseinnezhad- Hendvari, 2019).

Actually, in Turkey families are the both the actor and the receiver of the family policies. Family policies in Turkey are implicit instead of being explicit (Baş, 2017). Although, Turkey is one of the countries in the world that firstly enfranchisement of woman in 1934 (Özer, 2013); it is only 2004 that the codes of “Men and women has equal rights and government is the responsible to implement this equality” added to the National Basic Law (Baş, 2017). The welfare regime of Turkey, is also traditionally shaped by single earner family model, therefore, all over the history women employment rate is lower than the man’s employment rate and the social insurance system is based on full-time male employees in the formal sector (Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2015,p.724). For instance, in 2020 the employment ratio was only 27% for women (TUIK, 2020). These characteristics of Turkish welfare regime and social insurance system highlights the traditional provider role of fathers and inhibit fathers’ high involvement in child-rearing.

In Turkey, maternity leave consists of 16 weeks, 8-week-pre-birth and 8-week-post-birth. Unfortunately, paternity leave is only 10 days for fathers who work in the public sector; it is 5-day for blue-collar workers and it is only 2 days for contractual male workers (Akçınar, 2017, p.30). There is also one-year unpaid parental leave only for civil servants. After birth, only women civil servants or workers can use part-time maternity leave up to the two months for the first-born child; up to four months for the second- and up to the 6 months for the third-born child (Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2015,p.735). As the result of these policies, women are not preferred as employee or pregnant women are discharged because of their maternity leave right. These policies again reproduce the traditional gender roles which highlighted the role of women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners. According to a study conducted by Akçınar (2017) with 3235 fathers in 51 different cities, 56,3% of fathers reported that they did not use their paternity leave right. Reasons are either they did not know about this right (28%), the work place did not allow them to use their paternity leave (%21), there was someone who helps to the new mother (%23), no one use paternity leave in the surrounding (5%) or fathers’ opinions that they don’t have the ability to help their spouses for child-care (4%). As seen from these results, father involvement is not a norm in the Turkish culture.

Child-caring policies in Turkey similarly inhibits fathers’ involvement. Since there is not free child care or early childhood education opportunities in Turkey, the percentage of child care provided by the mother 0-5 years old children is 88 percent. The average time that women spend through caring is 22 hours in Turkey, while it is only 2,2 hours in OECD 18 (OECD, 2011). This primary caregiver role is encouraged through workplace policies, as well. According to a code regulated in 2013, if there are 100-150 women employee in a company there should be a breastfeeding room and if there are more than 150 women employee, the company should have a child care center for children under the



age of six which imply the message that women are the responsible for child-care. As the result of these regulations, it is frequently seen that some companies limit the number of women employee in order not to open breast feeding room or child-care center (KEFEK, 2013, p. 68). Additionally, in 2014 whole-day early childhood education services provided by the government was reduced to half-day services. Although the aim is to reach more children, these regulations decrease the women employment rate, encourages traditional gender roles in the family and inhibit fathers' involvement with their children since providing the family is left to the fathers only.

In Turkey, health policies mainly operated under the responsibility of Ministry of Health. Based on the 60th Code of Basic Law, "everyone has social security right. Government takes the responsibility to provide this right to each individual", the health right of all individuals is secured. In 2002, with the slogan of "Health to Everyone", some basic social policy goals were established such as; "including all citizens under the general health insurance, gathering all different health institutions under one roof, introducing the family medicine practice, paying special attention to mother and child health etc..." (İleri, Seçer, Ertaş, 2016, p.182). As seen, mother and children paid a special attention while fathers are not even mentioned in these health policy goals. Although health policies related to prenatal education, childbirth and early childhood development are known to have significant potential impacts on fathers' participation (Burgess & Russel, 2017, p. 124), these goals were expanded in 2003 and 2007, and yet nothing about paternity or paternal involvement was added. Some health policies in Turkey are explicitly exclude fathers; for instance, although there are many research indicating that being there in the birth room has positive effect on fathers' relationship with their children (Ferketich & Mercer, 1995; Sullivan, 1999), during the birth, it is forbidden for fathers to enter the birth room in public hospitals while in many private hospitals, it depends on the father and mother to decide whether the father will be there during the birth.

Fathers are again out of sight in educational policies in Turkey. National early childhood education curriculum gives specific attention to parents' involvement and in later educational levels parents' involvement is not legally required from schools or teachers. In early childhood education, parent involvement is unfortunately equated with mother involvement as in many European countries. The number of fathers who actively involved in their children's early childhood education is very low. Ünlü-Çetin (2015) found that fathers mostly leave the responsibility of establishing partnership with preschool to mothers. Although it was found that fathers' involvement might be increased through the support that the center is provided for fathers to involve (Gürşimşek, Kefi & Girgin, 2007), the preschools' efforts to involve father into education system is not enough in Turkey. One of the main reason for this might be the female domination of early

childhood education system and lack of male teachers in the system (McBride & Rane, 1997; Rohrmann, 2019; Ünlü-Çetin, 2020). According to latest statistics there are 98.825 early childhood educators totally in public and private sectors and only 5910 of them are male teachers, 4967 of them are working in public early childhood education (ECE) centers while only 943 of males are working in private ECE centers (MEB, 2020). This situation is also very parallel with the widely accepted social discourse that emphasizes the role of women in the care and education of young children. The low levels of fathers' involvement and very low numbers of male teachers in the field of ECE creates a male-free environment for young children which reproduces traditional gender role perceptions among the next generations. Although this gap between the numbers of male and female teachers is narrowing in the upper levels, it is seen that there are still more female teachers in almost all grades than males. The number of male teachers exceeded the level of female teachers only in Vocational and Technical Secondary Education level (n of male teachers = 73 435, n of female teachers = 70 820) which is again very consistent with the traditional gender role attitudes which match the technical works with masculinity. As mentioned before, fathers' involvement into the education of their children is more common in early childhood education level, yet according to the Ünlü-Çetin (2016), resources providing for early childhood educators to promote parental involvement points out very traditional gender roles instead of encouraging gender-equality. For instance, in the content analysis of the OBADER (a guidebook for ECE teachers to increase parent involvement), Ünlü-Çetin (2016) found that there is not any specific emphasis on fathers' involvement, used family photos in the book mainly reinforce traditional gender roles (for instance the photo of father-child dyads mostly used under the topic of disciplining the child; in family photos women are setting the table while father and children sitting on the table etc).

As the result of all these social construction, on behalf of AÇEV, Akçınar (2017), in its large-sample survey study found that, 50% of the fathers never bring their child to the toilet, 36% of fathers never change their children's diaper, 35% of fathers never cut their children's nails, 13% of fathers never and 21% of them rarely attend any school activity of their children, 86% of fathers spend time with their children through watching TV at home and only 23% of fathers who have 0-3 years old children read to their children and the rate is 39,3% for 4-10 years of children. The activities that fathers mostly involve are being there for the sick child (84%), explaining good and bad behaviors (83%) and teaching about social rules (76%) which is very consistent with the fathers' traditional role of disciplining the child. The results of this study indicated that there is a huge need for very strong and father-friendly social policies which has a power to encourage fathers to involve more into their children's lives. The main idea behind this study is the fact that, top down reforms would not be strong to change both the culture and the conduct of

fatherhood instead there is a need to understand fathers' need. Therefore, in this descriptive qualitative research the main aim is to understand what kinds of social policies that Turkish fathers thought would increase fathers' involvement level. Then, the research question of the study is; "What are the social policies suggestions of Turkish fathers to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's early life?"

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Design of the study*

This study is designed as a qualitative descriptive study which "entails a kind of interpretation that is low-inference" (Sandelowski, 2020, p. 335). Although all descriptions include a little bit inference from the part of descriptor, "the description in qualitative descriptive studies entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language." (p.336). In this study, the main aim is to understand what kinds of social policies are discoursed by fathers to encourage father involvement in the Turkish society which is highly characterized with traditional gender roles and low father involvement levels.

### *2.2. Participant (subject) characteristics*

According to Sandelowski (2020), any kinds of purposive sampling method suggested by Patton (1990) can be used in qualitative descriptive studies. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that different purposive sampling strategies can be used with combination. In the current study, "typical case & criterion" sampling was used. Typical case sampling "is used to illustrate or highlight what is typical, normal, average, and give greater depth of understanding to the qualitative meaning of a statistical mean" (Patton, 1990,p. 2). Criterion sampling aims to involve some specific individuals "based on the assumption that they possess knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest and thus will be able to provide information that is both detailed (depth) and generalizable (breadth)." (Palinkas et al., 2015, p.538)

### *2.3. Sampling procedures*

Ankara, the central city of Turkey, is known as a representative to the country in some indicators like labor distributions and schooling ratio. For instance, except for very few occupations, the average distribution of occupations in the whole country and in the Ankara is very similar (Memiş, 2016). Similarly, the total schooling ratio for 4-5-year-old is 52,42% and it is 71,22 % for 5 years old children in all around the country while in Ankara schooling ratio of 4-5 years old children is 53,00% and it is 68,96 % for 5 years. In Turkey, nuclear family with a mother, child and a biological resident father is the dominant family type in the society and so as in the Ankara (TAYA,2011). Based on these

characteristics, in the current study the typical case is represented as resident employed biological fathers.

Based on the study of Marsiglio et al. (1991), there is a curvilinear relationship between the child's age and fathers' involvement level. That is, during infancy father involvement is low while it reaches its peak level during children's early childhood years and later during middle childhood and adolescent years the level of father involvement decreases again. Therefore, in the study the first criterion for the participants is having a child in early childhood years. Also, in Turkey, as in many countries, it is difficult to recruit fathers individually. Early childhood education centers are rich resources to recruit fathers; therefore, the second criteria for the participants is having a child who is registered to an ECE center. Therefore, to reach participants, a public early childhood education center was chosen randomly in the central city of Ankara, and then fathers of this preschool were asked to participate to the study by the help of teachers.

#### *2.4. Sample size, power, and precision*

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003) it is important to reach 12-20 participants to achieve variation in the lived experiences of participants. Based on this assumptions, the participants of the study constitute 20 biological-resident fathers of 4-6 years old children who are registered to a public preschool. The ages of fathers ranged between 30 and 45 with the average age of 35.29. All of the fathers are employed fathers; 15 out of 20 fathers coming from dual-earner families. 11 of them has female and 5 of them has male children and only four father has both male and female children. 10 fathers have one child, 8 of them has two and only one father has three children. 12 out of 20 fathers have university graduation degree while one of them has PhD degree and 7 of them has high-school graduation. Therefore, the results of this study is reflects only biological-resident fathers of 4-6 years old children.

#### *2.5. Research Instrument*

The current research drew on a semi-structured interview guide which was developed by the author. The interview protocol included two core topics acting as prompts for fathers' narratives: demographic information about the father, spouse and the child and fathers' suggestions about social policies which have a power of increasing father involvement level in Turkish society. The expert opinion was given by three experts from the fields of sociology, qualitative research and early childhood education. After their comments, the final version of the questions was decided. The last version was piloted with one father who is 32 years old biological resident father with 4-year-old male child.

All but one of the interviews took place in the online meeting programs. Only one interview was conducted at participant's house. All interviews began with a warm up

process and followed by a short talk about the purpose of the research and rights of participants. Later questions about demographic information were asked and lastly the main question “In your opinion, what kind of social policy practices should be implemented in order to increase the involvement levels of fathers in our country?”. Based on participants’ answers, some probing questions like “How can government promote fathers’ involvement level? How can NGOs promote fathers’ involvement level? and How can preschools promote fathers’ involvement?” were asked to participant.

The time of interviews ranged between 40 to 60 minutes and responses were taped and transcribed verbatim. Each participated were given a number from 1 to 20 in order to provide confidentiality (participated fathers will be presented with these number as F1, F8 or F20 in the findings parts). The recorded and fully transcribed interviews were analyzed through thematic analyses. As in parallel with the design of the study, fathers’ suggestions were not interpreted by the researcher instead facts yielded from the data were grouped under codes, categories and themes.

### **3. Findings**

Thematic analysis of fathers’ social policy suggestion yielded two main themes; (1) educational policies and (2) employment policies. The following part provide detail explanation for each theme.

#### *3.1. Educational policies*

Education policies are strongly highlighted by fathers. This theme consists of following categories; (1) parenting education embedded in formal schooling, (2) parenting educations for adults, (3) school-based activities that encourage fathers to involve. The first category, parenting education embedded in formal schooling, includes social policy suggestions such as parenting classes embedded in elementary school, high school or university education. Some participants revealed that fathering cannot be improved or learned through some-week long courses, an egalitarian perception of parenting and an awareness about the importance and roles of fathers should be developed among next generation to increase father involvement in Turkish society. For instance F1 who has a male child said; “ I do not believe that 10-12-week courses would help fathers to change their perceptions or behavior in long-term. I learned fathering from my father, is he a wonderful father? Absolutely not... Am I wonderful? I try to be a better father; but to what extend I succeed it, is unknown. I think children should learn about parenting as early as they are in elementary school. They can meet with good role models. They can learn different types of parenting. I did not see any other example for fathering than my father... Even there should be some courses with different names but similar context

during whole formal schooling years. Children should be talked about good parenting in different courses with different examples...”.

Some fathers emphasized that parenting courses embedded formal schooling might change next generations ideas about parenting, but these kinds of courses might not be effective for adults. For instance, one father (F3) who has three female children said that, “This is a long-term educational issue. To my mind it is so difficult to change a man’s perceptions about his role as a father in adulthood. In our culture most of the fathers would say ‘Am I going to learn fatherhood from you?’ or ‘Would I learn the fatherhood at school?’. But if information on parenting and fathering is given in early ages, it would have a power to change minds of young potential fathers.” It is also thought that, embedded parenting and fathering educations into formal school system might have chance to reach more people. For instance, F18 said that “ how many father could you reach for this research? It is difficult to reach fathers, our working conditions are difficult, our time is limited. Now, I do not have time to participate an education but when I was young there were so much time. If parenting courses are added to formal school curricula, then more and more people hear about appropriate fathering and best practices. They also have a chance to evaluate their own parents. Maybe even this might change parenting practices at homes...”.

The second category under the theme of educational policies is parenting educations for adults. In this category mainly emphasized issue was compulsory pre-parenting courses. At that point, some fathers have used metaphors like “driving-license”, “military service” or “compulsory health report taken for marriage”. For instance, F12 said that; “Before marriage we have to go and get health report; in order to drive a car, we need driving license. I think, each partner should take a parenting-license before having a child. Because we do not know how to support a child’s development. We learn it on-the-job. We, unknowingly, harm our own children. The state must make it mandatory to have parenting-license before having a child, and again the state should take the responsibility to provide these compulsory course free of charge”. Another participant, F11, suggested “compulsory courses on child development” and he stated that “Just as military service, attending these courses before the birth or in the child’s first year must be compulsory”.

Another category under the educational policies is school-based activities. Many fathers stated that there should be “father-specific compulsory days/activities/meetings; father-child workshops at schools, special dates for fathers to spend at school, fathering classes in schools”. As expected, majority of fathers stated that mothers are main parents who attend their children’s school activities. Only two fathers stated that they are active in

the school and one of them was mentioned that he is a member of school council. Majority of fathers stated that they do not feel comfortable at their children's preschool since majority of parents are mothers. One participant, F7, stated that; "I feel bad when I enter into the preschool. That place is not for me, being there is strange for me. When I say preschool, mothers come to my mind. When I was a child, my mother also come to my preschool, she cared everything about the school. I cannot suit fathers in a place in preschools." This father then suggested that "But if father-child workshops like father-child camps, ceramic workshops, bird-watching activities are done at school I might also use to be there... Maybe...". Similarly, F5 said; "I went some parent meetings, but 28 out of 30 parents were women. Then, for example, I think that, 'maybe if I were not here, they-mothers- would be more relax, they would talk more freely'... I do not feel comfortable when I think in this way. Therefore, preschools should encourage fathers' presence. If I saw more fathers, I would want to attend that meeting in the next time".

Special days or dates for fathers to be at school is also suggested by some fathers. For instance, F12 said that, "...there should be compulsory dates for fathers to be at school. At that days, fathers' workplaces must also provide paid permission...". F6 similarly emphasized compulsory father involvement activities and stated that "... schools must call both fathers and mothers. Actually even if they call both of them, again some fathers would not come. There can be specific father days at schools, father meetings for example. Participation should be compulsory...Otherwise, it is difficult to reach fathers..."

### *3.2. Employment Policies*

The second theme is employment policies and it consists of following categories; (1) workplace policies like equal rights for each father working in different sectors; flexible working conditions; (2) compulsory paternity and family leave and (3) childcare policies like recreational areas for father-child dyads, monitoring child development and increasing maternity benefit.

In the sample, there are fathers who are civil-servants, who have their own work places and who are working in private sector. Except civil-servant fathers, fathers who has their own workplace and who works private sector perceived many inequalities among fathers in the society. For instance, two of the fathers (F11 & F14) who has their own workplaces stated that they are working in a "competitive environment" and therefore they need legal regulations to involve more with their children. Both of these fathers, suggested "legal compulsory holidays". One of the participant, F14, who has his own workplace stated that "Because of my occupation, I frequently travel to Gaziantep. In there, there are some special holiday dates for each sector; it is called "esnaf sahresi". For instance,

all tool shades are closed between the 15th and 30rd of June, all hairdressers must be closed in the first week of July, or all crafts working in the air-conditioning sector closed their shops spontaneously at the same dates. The people living in Gaziantep knows these dates and do not use these services in these off days or weeks. This application should be spread to all country. As a craft, I cannot say to my customers “I am not available at this moment”, if I say this I lose my customers. Therefore, I never have a specific holiday dates to be with my child.” Similarly, F11 stated that; “... I want to spend more time with my children. I wish I was not working on Saturdays as civil servants do. However, if you want more holidays in the private sector probably you would be laid off.”

Workplace policies is another category under the theme of employment policies. Mostly suggested workplace policy is flexible working conditions. Fathers suggested equal opportunities to have right for attending child-related events, have an opportunity to use family leave and lessening working hours. Most of the fathers mentioned that in spite of slow changes in Turkey, it is difficult for man to take permission from the workplace for child-related issues, such as looking for a sick-child, attending a child’s school event or bringing the child to the hospital within the working hours. These kind of suggestions mostly came from fathers working in private sector. They mentioned that in labor market man’s family leave demands is not widely acclaimed. For instance, one soldier father (F20) stated that; “... It is not easy for a low-ranking soldier in the military to get permission from his supervisor, even if his child is sick... There are some brass hats who explicitly says “Doesn't your child have a mother? Why are you going?”... If you are a brass hat, it is a little bit more easy to take some permission when your child need your presence...”. Another father who is working in private sector (F6) mentioned that, “When a female employee asks for leave on a child-related issue, it is considered very normal. But if you as a man asking for permission about the same issue, people at work find it strange...”. Based on these experiences, some fathers suggested that there should be legal rights for fathers to use family leave when their child is sick or when there is a special day about the child like birthday, a school-event etc.

Legal right for paternity leave is another issue suggested as workplace policies. In one side, 18 fathers stated that 10-day paternity leave for civil servants and 3-day paternity leave for private sector is not enough for fathers to get used to new family form, to help their wife and to be with the child. For instance, F17 who is working as a store manager said; “...it (maternity leave) is 8 weeks for mothers but two-three days for us. What will two days be enough for; to help for spouse or to care for the child? For instance, last month one of my personal had a child, he could only take 3 days leave. Although I have staff who can replace him and I know that 3 days is not enough, I cannot extend this period. I think, there should be one-year maternity and at least one month, or one month



might be too long, at least fifteen-day compulsory paternity leave. By this way, fathers could spend time with his children at the beginning of their life... Maybe it does not matter for the child but this would be very helpful for mother.” As seen from this quotation, one-month paternity leave is seen as more than necessary. Also, the idea that paternity leave is not for the child’s wellbeing but it is needed to help the mother is widely acclaimed among participated fathers. For instance, one civil servant father (F10) said that “as far as I know there are ten-day paternity leave right for me. I did not used it since there were my mother and father-in-law to provide help to my wife when she gave birth”. In the opposite side, two fathers who do not believe the idea that there is a need for paternity leave, emphasized on the cultural norms, support of close relatives after birth and widely accepted “female is the primary caregiver” perception in the country. For instance, F11 said that; “In Turkey, I do not think that men use paternity leave even if they had a chance to use it. Civil servants have this right; do you think they look after the child during that leave period? I hear from some fathers that in that ten days they even do not stay at home. In Europe, since the percentage of young population is low, states encourage all parents to have more child and therefore provide these kinds of opportunities. But in Turkey, there is no need like this, also all close relatives come to the house to support new mother. Paternity leave would not be used in Turkey, to my point of view... I would not prefer to be a ‘house-man’ and I think majority of the population in our country think like me...”. The other father who do not believe the necessity of paternity leave ( F3) stated that; “...If I had a right maybe I use it, but for instance in my second child’s birth my mother and father-in-law were here to support us, also my mother and father visited us frequently... My wife did not need my support... Also, I am not sure whether people at work perceive very long paternity leave as a norm or right...”

The last category under the employment policy theme, child-caring policies, includes three main policy suggestions (1) recreational areas for father-child dyads, (2) monitoring child development and (3) increasing maternity benefit\*. Only one father (F8) stated that maternity benefit should be increased in order to relieve fathers economically. He stated that, “when our child was born, I got 300 YTL. What is this money enough for? Even a newborn's diaper money cost more. This maternity benefit should be higher and it should continue at least for the first year of the child.”

\*Birth support is a money paid to mother account after she gave birth. For the first child couples are paid 300 YTL (14.93 Euro and 15.90 USD) for the second child they get 400 YTL (19.91 Euro and 21.21 USD) and for the third of further children couples are paid 600 YTL (29.87 Euro and 31,81 USD) just-once after birth.

Again only F9 suggested a monitoring system for the child development. He stated that; “We don't know much about child development. We raise our children as our parents raised us or as we hear from around. We cannot determine their abilities and characteristics very well. However, if the state monitors each child's development, determines what talent he has, what he has to do with, and guide their parents, children will be happier in the future...”. Almost all other fathers, other than this father, stated that local governments or the state should provide free quality places for fathers to spend their free time with their children. For instance, F20 stated that, “There is not such a beautiful large playground or garden in our surroundings. If we get out, we have to take children to the mall. Kids see a lot of things in malls and naturally want to have it all. We cannot afford them all. This causes friction between parents and the child, the time that we spend together become upsetting for the child. But if there are quality and free places in our neighborhood where we can spend quality time with children, fathers and children would have a better time and to my point of view this would result in better father-child relationship.”. Similarly, F2 said, “For example, in our district, Altındağ, there are women's education and culture centers and youth centers affiliated to the municipality. In these centers, young people and women are given a lot of free of charge trainings, and they are provided with quality time. Such centers can be opened to fathers.... Here, fathers can participate in different activities with their children. Fathering courses might be provided in here...”. In parallel with this idea F10 said, “Frankly, I would like to have opportunities to have a better time with my child. We cannot think of different activities that are good and enjoyable for the child. We play a little with whatever he wants, and we try to teach him something. However, if there were free areas that provide opportunities for fathers and children to have a good time and to do better quality activities, I would gladly go there with my children...”

#### **4. Discussion**

Data gathered through biological-resident fathers of 4-6 years old children from mostly dual-earner families, was analyzed to understand fathers' own social policy suggestions to promote fathers' involvement in Turkey. According to Burgess and Russell (2004) five major social policy areas influence fathers' involvement; (1) taxation and employment, (2) health, (3) education, (4) separation & divorce, and (5) vulnerable children. However, in this study, father's suggestions fall into two policy groups; (1) educational and (2) employment policies; while health policies, policies about divorce or custody, or policies about vulnerable children were not even encountered. One of the main reason for this might related to the political and social structure of the country. According to İçağasıoğlu-Çoban and Özbesler (2009), the globalized world economy and social changes lead states to transfer the responsibility of citizens care and health services to the family; that is, family seen as an institution that is responsible for health and care of its

members. This is also valid for Turkish society. Although Turkey is called welfare state, contemporary social and family policies transferred the responsibility of providing health and care services to the family. Therefore, it should be regarded as normal that fathers did not expect health services from the state for their children, spouse or even themselves. Also, since all fathers participated to this study are resident fathers, it is normal that they did not offer any policy related to divorce, custody or child support.

In the current study, fathers mostly suggested educational policies. Long-term parenting education which is integrated to formal education system is mostly emphasized way of increasing fathers' parenting abilities and involvement level. Addition to this, pre-marriage educations or pre-parenting educations were seen as necessary by fathers. This result is not surprising for several reasons. Firstly, there is not free-and-widely-inclusive parent education programs in Turkey and parenting in general and fathering in particular is mostly learned in the family of origin from the own fathers or on the job, i.e. during fathering the own child (Akçınar, 2017; Ünlü-Çetin, 2015). This makes fathering difficult in today's conditions since the expectations of both children and society is not similar with old ages; the needs of children are so different and majority of old fashion parenting behaviors are perceived as wrong because of increased ability of people to reach knowledge via various sources like media. At that point a need for social policies that provide better knowledge on parenting and fathering is very natural.

Secondly, studies conducted in USA or Europe indicated that, father education programs or couple relationship strengthening programs influence fathers' parenting behaviors and involvement levels in the positive ways (Knox et. al., 2011). Similarly reports provided by Mother and Child Health Organization(AÇEV) indicated that participation to BADEP, a father education program provided to fathers of 0-6 and 7-12 years old children in Turkey, increased the quality of participants' fathering behaviors and the time they spend with their children (Atmaca-Koçak, 2004). However, in Turkey, policies regarding family education and consultancy services are not accessible for many families and although there are some family education programs provided by Ministry of Education, universities, NGOs, municipalities, hospitals or private sector, none of them is overarching for all of citizens (İçağasıoğlu-Çoban and Özbesler, 2009). Abovementioned father education program, BADEP, is one of the most inclusive father education program in the country. However, since AÇEV is a non-governmental organization, it is impossible to create a nationwide effect through reaching all fathers. For instance, in the current study there were fathers who never heard about BADEP before. These situations might be the reason why fathers' pointed out a need for social policies that provide education opportunities for fathers.

In the current study, majority of fathers suggested workplace policies and one of the mostly suggested one was flexible working hours and legal rights for fixed-holidays which is followed by compulsory paternity leave policies. There are several reasons that explains these findings. Firstly, a need for flexible working hours is very natural when it is considered Turkey is at the first order in all around the world regarding the average weekly working hours (47.9 hours) according to OECD reports (Ünker, 2018) and the percentage of working women is only %22 while remaining 78% women either housewives, student or retired (KONDA, 2019). This information clearly indicates that fathers are the primary breadwinner of their families and to provide their families they have to work very long hours which inhibits their high involvement. Secondly, according to Roy (2008) states social policy regimes have a power to define or redefine fathers' role in the family and shape the rights and duties of father, if fathers experience failure in their provider role, which mainly encouraged by social policies, desertion from fathering either physically or psychologically becomes the result. Therefore, employment policies that support fathers in establishing the balance between their work and family is very important for high father involvement and quality fathering behaviors. These policies like flexible working hours, mandatory paternity leave are frequently emphasized in the father involvement literature and revealed to have a positive effect on paternal involvement. For instance, in Sweden, that applies strong highly-paid paternity leave policies (Haas & Philip-Hewang, 2009), fathers highly involve into their children's lives (Duvander, Haas & Thalberg, 2017). Similarly, Portugal, a country that mainly fathers are the sole breadwinner while mothers are the primary caregivers (Aboim, 2010), changed its parental leave policies and shifted 5-day paternity leave to 10 mandatories and 10 optional paternity leave days and introduced a "sharing bonus" and it is observed that shared leave rates which was .5 % in 2005 increased to 26.1% in 2014 (Wall & Leitão, 2015). However, in Turkey there is only 10-day paternity leave for civil servants, 3-day paternity leave for private sector's workers. The time that is provided to fathers is not enough either for getting used to the new family structure or establishing close relation with the new born child. Also, based on participated fathers' statements it can be clearly inferred that Turkish fathers experience difficulties in the workplace when they want to use their legal paternity leave rights. The reasons for difficulties are negative attitudes of administrators regarding the use of paternity leave, social discourses emphasized on the role of mother as primary caregiver and support from close-relatives which decreases the need for fathers' involvement.

Additional to these workplace policies, very few fathers suggested some child-care policies. These suggested policies include establishment of recreational areas for father-child dyads, services for monitoring child development and increasing maternity benefit. As seen fathers did not suggest child-care policies like free child-care-and-education

services. According to Burgess and Russell (2004) "...the childcare debate is usually father blind..." (p.116). Similarly, early childhood education and child-care policies are presented as a gift for women in Turkey by the state and social discourses in Turkey mostly emphasized that care-giving is the main duty of women instead of men (Karlıdağ-Dennis, Temiz, & Cin, 2022; TAYA, 2011). These facts might be the reason why fathers did not make any suggestion on early childhood education policies or child-care services. Another interesting issue is the fact that although some fathers explicitly said that they feel strange when they are at preschools, or they do not feel preschools as a place for them none of the father suggested any policy to increase the number of male teachers in early childhood education. This can be the result of widely accepted social discourse that women are better than males at child-care related works and the current situation in which the number of female teachers exceed the number of male teacher in almost all levels of education.

One of the most striking points in the study is that when talking about social policies that has a power to promote fathers' involvement, almost all fathers' emphasized that these policies should be "compulsory". In so much that, majority of fathers used statements like "if these were not compulsory, increasing father' involvement is very difficult". Bittman's (2004) claimed that "Although recently men have shown a willingness to spend more time with their children... change has been very slow and the proportion of men assuming equal responsibility is currently very small" (p. 200) and this seems valid for Turkey, as well.

In conclusion, Turkey, as a welfare state, unfortunately do not have effective and strong social policies that promote fathers' nurturing/caretaking role in the family. Majority of applied social policies promoting traditional gender roles in the family. That is Turkish fathers encouraged to become the primary breadwinners for the family and mothers are encouraged to be primary caregivers. According to Turkish fathers, employment and educational social policies should be strengthening to promote fathers' involvement in their children's lives through long-term parenting educations integrated to formal schooling years, pre-marriage and pre-parenting compulsory educations on parenting and child development. Also there is a need for workplace policies that help fathers to establish a balance between the work and family like flexible working hours, compulsory paternity and family leaves and child-care policies that help fathers to spend quality time with their children.

Although this study is limited to the perceptions of biological-resident and mostly dual earner fathers of 4-6 years old children, it is available first study that discusses

fatherhood understanding in Turkey in the context of social policies and put forward the social policy suggestions of fathers. Therefore, this study is believed to pave a way for further studies that might be conducted with non-resident, single and social fathers to understand their needs and their social policy suggestions.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study aimed to understand what kinds of social policies Turkish fathers' suggested to increase father involvement. Findings of the study indicated that social policies are not enough strong to encourage high father involvement instead they encourage traditional gender roles among the family which requires fathers to be the provider of the family while mothers to be the primary care giver. This study clearly indicated that there is a need for social policy makers to consider softening the strict working conditions of fathers to encourage them involve more to their young children's lives. Also, educational policies and health policies need to be more inclusive for both of the parents. One step for this might be the changing the words. That is, policy makers might use parental leave instead of maternity leave and paternal insurance might be used instead of maternity insurance. Although this seems a little change, it paves a way to create more inclusive understanding about the responsibilities of both parents both economic and caretaking roles.

Although this study is one of the first that investigated fathers' social policy suggestions in Turkey, it has some limitations. First, this study included only biological-resident fathers of 4-6 years of children. However, today there are many different family structures with step-fathers, single fathers and divorced fathers. It should be kept in mind that these different group of fathers might need different social policy regulations to involve more into their children's lives. Today many research indicated that father involvement decreases with the age of children and early childhood period is the period that father involvement reach its peak point. Therefore, there is a need for further research to understand what kinds of social policies are needed to encourage, fathers' of older children to involve more in their children's lives.

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