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## Fatherhood and Mental Health: Challenges and Detachment with Child

**Sakshi Kirti**

Research Scholar, Banaras Hindu University, India

**Dr. Swapana Meena**

Associate Professor, Banaras Hindu University, India

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the growing crisis of paternal detachment and its impact on child development and mental health, within the broader context of changing family structures and socio-cultural dynamics in India. With rising instances of emotional disengagement among fathers—particularly in urbanized and economically stressed environments—the paper investigates the psychological, behavioral, and developmental consequences on children. It highlights the distinct challenges faced by fathers, including societal expectations, lack of institutional support, and limited recognition of paternal mental health needs. Using a sociological and psychological lens, the study incorporates rural-urban comparisons, theoretical perspectives on attachment and gender roles, and empirical insights. The paper also examines policy and institutional gaps that perpetuate the invisibility of fatherhood in caregiving discourse. Finally, it offers recommendations for inclusive policy reforms, mental health interventions, and community-based strategies to redefine and support engaged, emotionally present fatherhood. The study advocates for a paradigm shift in how fatherhood is perceived and supported in contemporary Indian society.

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### 1. Introduction:

Fatherhood, traditionally perceived through the lens of financial provision and authority, is undergoing a transformative shift in contemporary society. As gender roles evolve and emotional well-being becomes



central to parenting discourse, the mental health of fathers has emerged as a critical but underexplored domain. While mothers have long been the focus of psychological and healthcare interventions during parenthood, fathers often remain invisible in such frameworks, particularly in relation to their mental and emotional struggles. This oversight has significant consequences—not only for the fathers themselves but also for the emotional development and psychological health of their children.

In many cultures, the notion of masculinity continues to be linked with stoicism, strength, and emotional suppression. These cultural scripts deter men from acknowledging or addressing their mental health issues, especially those triggered by the profound life changes associated with fatherhood (Connell, 2005; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Studies show that between 8–13% of fathers experience postnatal depression, with many more experiencing anxiety, stress, and adjustment difficulties (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). Yet these numbers are likely underreported due to stigma, lack of screening, and limited awareness among healthcare professionals. Unlike maternal mental health, which is more systematically monitored, paternal mental health remains on the margins of both policy and public discourse.

The psychological challenges of fathers are not limited to the postpartum phase. As children grow, fathers face immense pressure to conform to multiple, often conflicting, roles—provider, nurturer, disciplinarian, and partner. The demands of modern work culture, combined with limited paternity leave, poor social support networks, and rigid gender expectations, contribute to emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and eventual detachment from their children (Garfield & Isacco, 2012). Emotional unavailability can further be reinforced by intergenerational norms where many men themselves were raised in environments devoid of open emotional expression. The cumulative effect is a relational disconnect that impacts children’s emotional, social, and cognitive development (Lamb, 2010). The consequence of paternal detachment has ripple effects on the broader family and societal fabric. Children deprived of paternal involvement are more likely to face behavioral issues, emotional instability, and difficulties in school and peer relationships (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). At the same time, the emotional suppression experienced by men often culminates in midlife crises, marital breakdowns, and deteriorating mental health. This disconnection contributes to a broader pattern of intergenerational alienation—evident in the increasing number of children in institutional care and the elderly in old age homes, both reflective of eroded family bonds (Uberoi, 2006; Chopra & Ghosh, 2021).

In India, the experiences of fatherhood and mental health are deeply shaped by the rural–urban divide. In urban settings, the increasing pressures of professional life, rising costs of living, nuclear family structures, and the breakdown of extended kinship networks often leave fathers emotionally isolated.



Urban fathers may have better access to healthcare and awareness of mental health, but the fast-paced, individualistic lifestyle often discourages open emotional expression. The stigma around male vulnerability persists, particularly in middle-class households where masculinity is tightly bound to success, financial stability, and stoic behavior (Verma & Mahajan, 2018). This emotional bottling can lead to burnout, depression, or detachment from the familial space, including children. In contrast, rural fathers experience a different set of pressures. While extended family systems may provide some social support, patriarchal norms and conservative gender roles dominate in many regions, further reinforcing emotional suppression. Men are expected to be providers and disciplinarians, often with little encouragement or opportunity for emotional bonding with children. Mental health services are sparse in rural India, and the awareness about paternal psychological struggles is virtually nonexistent. Moreover, rural fathers

facing poverty, agrarian distress, or underemployment are at greater risk of chronic stress and substance abuse—factors that can lead to increased aggression or emotional absence within the household (Ramasubramanian & Shrivastava, 2020; NFHS-5, 2021). Interestingly, the disconnection between fathers and children may manifest differently across these settings. In urban areas, it may appear as emotional neglect due to overwork or digital distraction. In rural areas, it often takes the form of authoritarian parenting and physical absence due to seasonal migration for work. Both environments contribute uniquely to a culture where paternal mental health is neither acknowledged nor addressed, leaving a significant gap in the emotional development of children and in the well-being of fathers themselves.

Despite these challenges, there remains a significant research and policy gap in addressing fatherhood as a mental health issue. Most family welfare policies and parenting programs still focus predominantly on mothers, leaving fathers out of critical emotional and caregiving conversations. In India, for instance, there is limited institutional recognition of paternal depression or psychological stress, and mental health services are seldom designed to be gender-inclusive (Ramasubramanian & Shrivastava, 2020). This paper aims to explore the complex intersection of fatherhood and mental health, focusing particularly on how unresolved psychological struggles contribute to paternal detachment from children. Using sociological and psychological frameworks, it investigates the causes, consequences, and institutional oversights surrounding this issue. By doing so, the research underscores the urgent need to reconceptualize fatherhood—not only as a social role but also as an emotionally vulnerable and support-worthy identity.



## **2. Theoretical Framework:**

This study draws upon a multidisciplinary theoretical framework combining Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, attachment theory by Bowlby, and the bioecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner to explore the complex

interplay between fatherhood and mental health. Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity helps explain how sociocultural norms promote emotional suppression in men, positioning vulnerability and caregiving as incompatible with masculine ideals, thus discouraging emotional intimacy with children. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) underscores the importance of early relational bonds in child development, suggesting that a father's emotional availability significantly impacts a child's sense of security and socio-emotional growth. When paternal mental health is compromised, these bonds may be weakened or disrupted, leading to intergenerational emotional detachment. Finally, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory situates fatherhood within layered social contexts—family, workplace, community, and cultural norms—emphasizing how external pressures such as economic strain, migration, and institutional neglect shape paternal behavior and mental health outcomes. Together, these theories provide an integrated lens to examine not only the individual psychological struggles of fathers but also the structural and cultural dynamics that perpetuate emotional disconnection within families.

## **3. Mental Health Challenges Among Fathers:**

While the mental health of mothers during the perinatal and child-rearing stages has received considerable scholarly and clinical attention, the psychological struggles of fathers remain largely marginalized. This invisibility is particularly troubling given the growing body of evidence indicating that fatherhood is accompanied by a distinct set of emotional and psychological stressors. These stressors—ranging from postnatal depression and performance anxiety to intergenerational trauma and role conflict—can significantly impair a father's ability to emotionally bond with his child, contributing to long-term detachment and familial strain.

### **3.1 Paternal Postnatal Depression and Anxiety:**

Contrary to popular belief, psychological disturbances are not exclusive to mothers in the postpartum phase. Recent studies reveal that 8–13% of fathers experience some form of postnatal depression, often beginning during the partner's pregnancy and peaking several months after childbirth (Paulson &



Bazemore, 2010). These symptoms include emotional numbness, irritability, low mood, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. However, unlike maternal depression, which is increasingly screened for in primary healthcare settings, paternal depression often goes unnoticed, misattributed to work stress, or internalized due to prevailing masculine norms (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). In India, where mental health remains stigmatized across genders, the silence around men's postpartum struggles is even more entrenched.

### **3.2 Masculinity Norms and Emotional Suppression:**

Traditional constructions of masculinity inhibit fathers from expressing vulnerability or seeking emotional support. From an early age, boys are socialized to perceive emotional sensitivity as weakness. This conditioning becomes a barrier when men enter fatherhood and face new, emotionally demanding responsibilities. Emotional suppression not only leads to internal distress but also weakens the father's capacity for emotional engagement with his children. Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity helps explain how societal ideals of male dominance, control, and stoicism continue to shape fathering behavior, reinforcing emotional distance and contributing to mental health challenges. In rural India, these pressures are intensified by entrenched patriarchy, where emotional expression by men is often ridiculed or perceived as a threat to their authority. Men are expected to be protectors and economic providers, and there is little space in the social script for them to be caregivers or emotionally engaged fathers. Even in urban India, where gender roles are gradually shifting, fathers struggle to balance expectations of being both breadwinners and emotionally present parents. The tension between these roles creates chronic stress, and in the absence of support systems, it often leads to burnout or psychological withdrawal (Verma & Mahajan, 2018).

### **3.3 Work–Family Conflict and Role Strain:**

Fatherhood often brings with it a complex negotiation between professional obligations and familial roles. This work–family conflict is especially acute in neoliberal urban economies where long working hours, job insecurity, and economic pressures dominate daily life. Many fathers report feelings of guilt over not spending enough time with their children, yet feel compelled to prioritize employment due to financial obligations. According to a study by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR, 2020), more than 70% of urban middle-class fathers cited work-related stress as a major reason for emotional unavailability at home. In rural contexts, the nature of stress differs but remains equally intense. Agrarian



crises, low income, and seasonal migration for work leave fathers absent for long stretches, physically and emotionally distancing them from their children. Migration for survival, especially in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand, has been associated with absentee fatherhood, where emotional bonding is virtually non-existent during the early developmental years of children (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). In such settings, children are often raised by mothers or grandparents, reinforcing gendered caregiving patterns and sidelining the emotional role of the father.

### **3.4 Relationship Strain and Lack of Support Systems:**

Fatherhood often coincides with stress in the marital or partner relationship. Lack of communication, fatigue, disagreements over child-rearing, and reduced intimacy can strain partnerships. These tensions, if unresolved, often push fathers into emotional isolation. Men, due to social conditioning, are less likely to seek counseling or engage in open dialogue, making them susceptible to prolonged emotional suppression. The result is a cycle of withdrawal—from the partner, the child, and the broader family unit. Support systems for fathers are extremely limited. In India, while maternal and child health programs are expanding, there

is almost no institutional recognition of paternal mental health. Community health workers like ASHAs and ANMs are trained to support mothers but not fathers. Similarly, there are no mainstream support groups or psychoeducational programs targeting new fathers, even in urban healthcare systems. This lack of visibility not only perpetuates silence but also isolates men during a critical transition period in life.

### **3.5 Substance Abuse and Aggression:**

Mental health issues in fathers can also manifest through negative coping mechanisms, such as alcohol use, smoking, or aggressive behavior. In both rural and urban areas, some fathers cope with psychological distress by turning to substances or asserting control through anger, distancing themselves further from children and family members. These behaviors, while often normalized or excused in patriarchal cultures, are indicative of deeper emotional turmoil and unaddressed trauma. The National Mental Health Survey (2016) of India found a significant correlation between depressive symptoms in men and substance abuse, particularly in the 30–45 age group—a phase commonly associated with fatherhood.



### **3.6 Intergenerational Trauma and Role Modelling:**

Fathers who themselves experienced emotionally distant or abusive parenting often lack emotional literacy or confidence in their own parenting roles. This intergenerational transmission of trauma leads to repeated patterns of emotional detachment, neglect, or authoritarian parenting. Without intervention, these fathers may replicate the very behaviors that harmed them, normalizing emotional distance and reinforcing it across generations. Studies have shown that men raised in emotionally repressive households are more likely to struggle with intimacy and emotional communication in their roles as parents (Fonagy et al., 2002; Lamb, 2010).

The mental health challenges of fathers are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with cultural expectations, socioeconomic pressures, and systemic neglect. From postnatal depression and role strain to lack of institutional support and intergenerational trauma, fathers experience a range of psychological stressors that remain largely unacknowledged. These challenges, if left unaddressed, not only harm the individual but also erode the quality of parent–child relationships and family stability. Recognizing and addressing paternal mental health must become a priority in both research and policy if we are to foster emotionally resilient families and break cycles of emotional detachment.

### **4. Detachment from Children: Causes and Manifestations:**

Paternal detachment—defined as the emotional, physical, or psychological withdrawal of a father from his child—is a growing concern in contemporary family dynamics. While the phenomenon may vary in intensity and visibility, its root causes are complex and often embedded in broader structures of gender roles, mental health stigma, socioeconomic pressures, and intergenerational trauma. This detachment can manifest as emotional unavailability, absenteeism, authoritarian control, or even complete estrangement. Understanding the multilayered causes and how they manifest is crucial to addressing the consequences for both children’s development and the father's psychological well-being.

#### **4.1. Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood:**

One of the foundational causes of detachment is the deeply ingrained cultural construction of fatherhood, especially in patriarchal societies. In India, the father is traditionally perceived as the provider and disciplinarian, not as an emotional caregiver. This binary division between the nurturing mother and the



authoritative father leads many men to internalize the belief that emotional bonding or caregiving is not their domain (Chopra, 2011). Consequently, even when present in the household, fathers may remain emotionally absent, interacting with children primarily to enforce discipline or fulfill financial duties. Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity further explains how societal ideals of masculinity—emphasizing control, stoicism, and authority—discourage fathers

from expressing affection or engaging in emotionally sensitive parenting. This role distancing becomes a learned pattern, passed from one generation to the next, where men model the distant fathering style they experienced in childhood.

#### **4.2. Psychological Distress and Mental Illness:**

Unaddressed psychological distress—such as depression, anxiety, or unresolved trauma—significantly contributes to paternal detachment. Men who suffer from these conditions often experience emotional numbness, irritability, and a reduced capacity for empathy, all of which hinder positive interaction with children (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). In both urban and rural India, mental health conditions in men frequently go undiagnosed due to stigma, gender norms, and inadequate access to care (Patel et al., 2016). Fathers may withdraw into silence, substance abuse, or workaholism as a way to cope, further weakening the parent-child relationship. Postpartum depression in fathers—although less recognized than maternal postpartum depression—is also a critical issue. Fathers experiencing perinatal mental health struggles are more likely to avoid caregiving, withdraw emotionally, or show increased conflict within the family unit (Ramchandani et al., 2008). These patterns are not temporary; they can set the tone for long-term disengagement from the child.

#### **4.3. Economic Pressures and Migration:**

In the Indian context, particularly among rural populations, economic hardship is a significant driver of paternal absence and emotional detachment. In regions such as Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand, seasonal migration for labor often leaves children physically separated from their fathers for extended periods (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). These fathers may remit money but have little opportunity to form consistent emotional bonds with their children. The intermittent presence of the father figure disrupts attachment processes, leading children to rely more on mothers or grandparents, which may in turn reinforce a father's sense of emotional redundancy. In urban settings, while fathers may not be physically absent, professional demands, long working hours, and the pressures of urban



survival contribute to psychological absence. Many urban fathers report feeling emotionally distant from their children due to fatigue, stress, or a perceived lack of competence in parenting roles (Verma & Mahajan, 2018). When emotional detachment becomes routine, it is often normalized as “pragmatic parenting” in nuclear families, masking deeper emotional disengagement.

#### **4.4. Intergenerational Trauma and Parenting Insecurity:**

A significant number of men enter fatherhood without ever having experienced secure emotional attachment in their own childhoods. This intergenerational trauma—rooted in emotionally distant or abusive parenting—can lead to insecurity in their parenting capabilities. According to attachment theorists like Bowlby (1969), individuals who lack secure attachment figures are often unable to form strong emotional bonds as adults, especially under stress. Fathers with such histories may feel emotionally inadequate or overwhelmed, leading them to avoid parenting responsibilities and disengage from their children’s emotional lives. This parenting insecurity is rarely addressed in mainstream discourse. In Indian families, the past trauma of men is often dismissed or minimized due to prevailing gender expectations. Fathers are expected to ‘move on’ and perform their roles without reflection or emotional processing. As a result, trauma responses are internalized and acted out through detachment or overcompensation in the form of authoritarianism.

#### **4.5. Relationship Breakdown and Marital Conflict:**

Marital discord or divorce also contributes to paternal detachment, especially in a legal and social environment that often prioritizes maternal custody and caregiving. Fathers separated from their children due to divorce or marital breakdown may experience grief, helplessness, or alienation. In India, joint custody is still rare, and non-custodial fathers often struggle with limited access and reduced emotional involvement, which over time may lead to complete disengagement (Kapur, 2017). Even within intact families, strained spousal relationships can impact the father’s bond with children. A hostile or emotionally

disconnected marital environment can create a barrier between the father and the child, where the father either withdraws to avoid conflict or is excluded from parenting decisions and routines. In both cases, the child may perceive the father as absent or irrelevant to their emotional world.



#### **4.6. Manifestations of Paternal Detachment**

Paternal detachment does not always take overt forms such as physical absence or abandonment. It often manifests in subtle and normalized ways:

- **Emotional Distance:** Fathers may be physically present but emotionally disengaged, showing little interest in the child's feelings, thoughts, or social life.
- **Minimal Communication:** Interaction may be limited to logistical or disciplinary conversations, lacking depth or emotional attunement.
- **Authoritarian Control:** In some cases, detachment is masked by rigid control or excessive discipline, substituting emotional connection with authority.
- **Passive Involvement:** Fathers may fulfill duties such as paying school fees or attending parent meetings but remain uninvolved in day-to-day emotional or developmental interactions.
- **Digital Distraction:** Particularly in urban contexts, overuse of digital devices can reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction between fathers and children.

These patterns, while socially tolerated, significantly affect a child's self-esteem, emotional security, and social development. Children with emotionally detached fathers often report feelings of rejection, insecurity, and difficulty forming trusting relationships later in life (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002).

Detachment from children is not an individual flaw but a systemic outcome shaped by gender norms, mental health neglect, economic precarity, and intergenerational legacies. Its manifestations—ranging from subtle disinterest to complete absence—can have long-lasting psychological consequences for both father and child. Addressing this issue requires not only individual awareness and counseling interventions but also societal transformation in how we conceptualize fatherhood, mental health, and emotional expression among men.

#### **5. Impacts on Children's Development:**

The psychological and developmental impacts of paternal detachment on children are profound, long-lasting, and often intergenerational. While early child development is typically discussed in the context of maternal care, recent interdisciplinary research has increasingly emphasized the crucial role fathers



play in shaping emotional regulation, cognitive growth, social competence, and identity formation (Lamb, 2010). In settings where fathers are emotionally or physically absent, children are more vulnerable to a range of developmental risks, including mental health issues, behavioral problems, and reduced academic achievement. The impacts are nuanced and shaped by variables such as gender, socio-economic context, and the presence or absence of other support figures.

### **5.1. Emotional and Psychological Development:**

Children raised with emotionally detached or absent fathers often struggle with poor emotional regulation, low self-esteem, and a persistent sense of abandonment. The absence of consistent paternal affection and validation can create a void in the child's developing sense of self-worth. According to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, secure emotional attachment is foundational to healthy development. When this attachment is compromised—due to the father's detachment—the child may internalize feelings of rejection and unworthiness, manifesting in anxiety, depression, and interpersonal withdrawal later in life.

In the Indian context, studies reveal that children from father-absent households report higher levels of emotional distress, particularly in patriarchal cultures where the father's role is viewed as central to family structure and authority (Sriram & Sandhu, 2013). Sons, in particular, may feel pressured to prematurely take on responsibility, while daughters may struggle with self-confidence and future relationship trust.

### **5.2. Behavioral and Social Consequences:**

Behaviorally, paternal detachment correlates with increased aggression, defiance, delinquency, and antisocial behavior—especially among adolescent boys. Flouri and Buchanan (2002) found that children with low paternal involvement were more likely to exhibit conduct problems and engage in risky behavior during adolescence. The absence of a nurturing and guiding male role model often leaves children vulnerable to external peer influences, including substance abuse and gang affiliation. This pattern has been noted in both urban and rural Indian settings. For instance, children in slum areas of Delhi or Mumbai, where absentee fatherhood is common due to labor migration or alcoholism, often display impulsive and oppositional behavior (Das, 2015). The lack of paternal discipline combined with inconsistent caregiving environments exacerbates developmental risks. In rural contexts, particularly among denotified tribes and marginalized caste communities, children growing up with detached or



migratory fathers face identity crises and challenges in forming a sense of belonging. This sociocultural alienation can amplify deviant behavior or internalizing disorders like depression and withdrawal.

### **5.3. Cognitive and Academic Outcomes:**

Cognitive development and academic success are also significantly influenced by paternal engagement. Fathers who are emotionally involved tend to stimulate cognitive curiosity and language development through direct conversation, problem-solving play, and educational encouragement (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Conversely, children who experience paternal detachment are often found to perform poorly in school, have lower IQ scores, and show limited interest in academic achievement. In India, the disconnect is particularly acute among children whose fathers are either absent due to migration or emotionally disengaged due to work-related stress. According to a study by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), children in Bangalore whose fathers reported high occupational burnout and emotional

unavailability were found to have significantly reduced attention spans and slower language acquisition in early childhood (NIMHANS, 2017). Moreover, socio-economic stressors often correlate with both paternal detachment and educational deprivation. When fathers are consumed with economic survival, their capacity to support children's education, emotionally or financially, is diminished. This trend is particularly visible in low-income households where both parental support and institutional aid are minimal.

### **5.4. Gendered Effects of Detachment:**

The impact of paternal detachment varies by gender. Boys often exhibit externalizing symptoms—such as defiance, aggression, and risk-taking—while girls may internalize their pain, resulting in depression, low self-esteem, and future relationship difficulties (Pleck, 2010). For daughters, the absence of a nurturing father figure can affect their emotional expectations of men and relationships, contributing to vulnerabilities such as early marriage or dependency in intimate partnerships. In patriarchal societies like India, this effect can be particularly harmful. Girls may feel diminished self-worth due to the absence of validation from a male parental figure, especially in cultural settings where the father represents moral and social authority. Furthermore, girls who experience paternal detachment are more likely to struggle with decision-making autonomy and self-assertion, both of which are crucial for empowerment and personal agency (Kaur & Garg, 2012).



### **5.5. Identity Formation and Long-Term Effects:**

The process of identity formation during adolescence is significantly influenced by parental involvement. A father's detachment can disrupt a child's ability to develop a coherent self-image and clear life goals. Children who grow up without a meaningful paternal presence often report confusion about gender roles, career ambitions, and their place in society. Erikson's psychosocial development theory emphasizes the importance of role models in helping adolescents navigate identity vs. role confusion. The absence of such modeling from the father can

lead to an incomplete or fragile sense of identity. Long-term, these children are more susceptible to intergenerational transmission of emotional dysfunction. Adults who experienced paternal detachment in childhood may replicate similar patterns in their own parenting, thereby perpetuating cycles of emotional disengagement and insecure attachment (Amato & Keith, 1991). In rural India, where traditional fatherhood models dominate, the stigma attached to absent or disengaged fathers can also spill over into the child's social life, reducing marriage prospects and peer respect. In urban nuclear families, meanwhile, emotional neglect by fathers is often less visible but no less impactful, manifesting in adult children's reluctance to start families, unresolved emotional trauma, and attachment disorders.

### **5.6. Protective and Mediating Factors:**

Not all children of detached fathers experience negative outcomes. The presence of a supportive mother, extended family, or community network can buffer some of the psychological and social risks. Moreover, children's individual resilience and access to educational or psychosocial interventions can mediate the effects of paternal disengagement. However, these protective factors are unevenly distributed across class, caste, and regional lines in India. Community-based parenting programs and school-based mental health initiatives can offer early interventions to children showing signs of emotional or behavioral distress. However, these remain limited in rural India, and often do not address paternal engagement explicitly. Father-child detachment, especially when chronic and emotionally unaddressed, has far-reaching consequences for a child's emotional, cognitive, social, and identity development. In the Indian context, these impacts are magnified by cultural norms, gender expectations, and socio-economic conditions that either marginalize or overlook paternal mental health and caregiving roles. Addressing the developmental consequences of paternal disengagement requires a structural reimagining of fatherhood—not as a mere



provider or disciplinarian, but as an emotionally present and psychologically engaged caregiver.

## **6. Policy and Institutional Gaps and Recommendations:**

Despite growing awareness of the role fathers play in child development and the increasing burden of paternal mental health concerns, policy frameworks in India remain heavily skewed toward maternal and child health, often ignoring paternal well-being and involvement. Government schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram focus primarily on maternal nutrition, immunization, and early childhood education, but fail to acknowledge or integrate paternal mental health or emotional engagement into their outreach (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2020). Similarly, the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), while aiming to provide accessible mental health care, does not include targeted interventions for fathers undergoing psychological distress due to parenting pressures, marital conflict, or economic hardship (Patel et al., 2016). Additionally, the absence of workplace policies promoting paternal leave and flexible hours—especially in the unorganized sector—reinforces the outdated assumption that caregiving is the mother’s responsibility, thereby structurally excluding men from early bonding experiences with their children (Barthwal, 2018). The judiciary also tends to favor maternal custody in cases of separation or divorce, often sidelining the father's potential to be an emotionally available parent (Kapur, 2017). Furthermore, there is a lack of school or community-based programs that actively include fathers in parenting workshops, counseling, or developmental activities for children, thereby deepening the detachment. These institutional silences and structural exclusions not only limit paternal engagement but also contribute to cycles of emotional absenteeism and intergenerational neglect.

To address the multifaceted issue of paternal detachment and its psychological repercussions on both fathers and children, a multidimensional policy and social intervention framework is essential. First, national mental health programs must

explicitly include paternal mental health as a targeted area, integrating psychological counseling for fathers within primary healthcare and child welfare services. Paternal mental health screenings during antenatal and postnatal periods, similar to maternal checks, can help identify early signs of emotional distress. Second, policies should promote gender-equitable parenting by expanding paternity leave across both public and private sectors and encouraging flexible work arrangements to facilitate paternal bonding (Barthwal, 2018). Third, community-level parenting programs—especially in rural and underserved areas—must be restructured to involve fathers through sensitization workshops, peer-support groups, and



family counseling. School-based initiatives can also include father-focused sessions to strengthen emotional ties and break intergenerational cycles of detachment. Additionally, media campaigns and educational curricula must challenge traditional notions of masculinity that discourage emotional expression among men and portray fatherhood as merely financial provision. Lastly, legal frameworks related to custody and guardianship should recognize and uphold the emotional rights and responsibilities of fathers in a child's development. Together, these changes can shift the discourse from paternal neglect to paternal engagement, bridging critical developmental gaps and fostering healthier family dynamics.

### **Conclusion:**

the challenges of fatherhood and the growing detachment between fathers and children reflect broader socio-cultural transformations, mental health neglect, and institutional apathy within both urban and rural India. As traditional paternal roles evolve in the face of modern individualism, economic stress, and changing family structures, many fathers struggle to emotionally engage with their children— often resulting in psychological distress for both. This emotional distance has tangible consequences on children's development, including behavioral issues, academic struggles, and long-term identity conflicts. The issue is compounded by gendered expectations that discourage emotional vulnerability in men, as well

as policy frameworks that rarely account for paternal well-being or active caregiving. Bridging this gap requires a systemic reimagining of fatherhood— one that centers emotional availability, mental health, and equitable parenting. Addressing these concerns through targeted policy reforms, community support systems, and cultural reorientation is not only essential for healthier families but also for a more emotionally resilient society. Recognizing fatherhood as a site of emotional labor, rather than solely economic duty, is a critical step toward holistic child development and gender-equitable caregiving.

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