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Fathers' Role in Compassion-Based Prophetic Parenting in Early Childhood: A Systematic Literature Review in the Context of Indonesian Muslim Families

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ABSTRACT

Background: Father involvement protects early development, but Indonesian fathers remain less involved in emotional care. Studies on fathering and prophetic parenting remain separate, with no synthesis linking them through compassion (*rahmah*).

Methods: Following PRISMA 2020, Google Scholar, SINTA, and Scopus were searched (2016–2025); 10 of 70 records were analysed by thematic synthesis.

Results: Four themes emerged: fathers as moral-religious role models, as affectionate and responsive figures, and as supporters of social-emotional development, plus enabling and constraining factors. Evidence for the first theme is mainly conceptual.

Novelty: Unlike previous reviews, this study integrates father involvement, *rahmah*-based prophetic parenting, and early childhood development, separating normative principles from empirical evidence in a conceptual framework for Indonesian Muslim families.

Conclusion: *Rahmah* bridges father involvement and prophetic parenting, but causal claims require longitudinal studies with validated instruments.

KEYWORDS

father involvement; prophetic parenting; rahmah; early childhood; Islamic parenting.

Introduction

Father involvement has become a central concern in the global early childhood development agenda. The Nurturing Care Framework places responsive caregiving by both parents among the core components of early development (WHO, UNICEF, and World Bank Group 2018). Studies across cultural and socioeconomic settings link active paternal involvement with children's language, cognitive, and social-emotional outcomes (Cabrera, Volling, and Barr 2018; Rollè et al. 2019), and in low- and middle-income countries paternal stimulation is associated with better early development (Jeong et al. 2016). Fathers are therefore no longer viewed merely as breadwinners but as caregivers whose warmth and responsiveness make a distinct contribution to development (Lamb 2010).

Everyday paternal caregiving and play are also linked with children's attachment security, although the association depends on when involvement occurs and what it involves (Brown et al. 2018). Measurement work on fathering further shows that the quality of father–child interaction, not only its quantity, matters for children's regulation and adjustment (Volling and Cabrera 2019). Father

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involvement is thus better understood as a protective factor in its own right than as a complement to maternal care.

In Indonesia, paternal involvement faces structural and cultural barriers. Social norms still position mothers as primary caregivers and fathers as providers, and descriptive data indicate that fathers' involvement is concentrated in financial provision rather than emotional engagement and direct care (Nugrahani, Hastuti, and Herawati 2021). Parenting programmes in early childhood settings also rarely target fathers specifically.

Within Muslim families, prophetic parenting offers a value-based framework grounded in the example of the Prophet Muhammad, emphasising compassion (*rahmah*), gentleness, fairness, positive communication, and respect for the child as a trust (*amanah*) (Alwi and Rahmah 2024). The Prophet's statement that "whoever does not show mercy will not be shown mercy," made when he kissed his grandson al-Hasan (al-Bukhari, no. 5997), frames affection towards children as a religious obligation rather than a matter of temperament. However, research on father involvement has developed largely within developmental psychology, whereas studies of prophetic parenting tend to address Islamic parenting in general without examining fathers specifically.

Three gaps follow. Conceptually, the relationship between dimensions of father involvement and the principle of *rahmah* has not been mapped. Empirically, evidence on compassionate, responsive paternal practices and their links with social-emotional development has not been systematically appraised. Contextually, it remains unclear which links are supported by evidence relevant to Indonesian Muslim families and which still rest on normative arguments. Earlier reviews examined the determinants and impacts of father involvement (Sujalmo and Chusairi 2023; Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti 2025) but did not interpret them through prophetic parenting.

This review therefore synthesises the literature on father involvement in early childhood through the lens of compassion-based prophetic parenting. It addresses three questions: (1) what dimensions of father involvement are reported; (2) how *rahmah* is manifested in fathers' parenting practices and how it relates to children's moral-religious and social-emotional development; and (3) what factors enable or constrain such involvement. Its distinctive contribution lies in separating normative principles, reported paternal practices, and empirically supported child outcomes, and in integrating them into a conceptual framework relevant to Indonesian Muslim families.

Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review (Snyder 2019) reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al. 2021).

Search Strategy and Eligibility

Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, SINTA, and Scopus for articles published between 2016 and 2025. English and Indonesian keywords were combined with Boolean operators: ("father involvement" OR "paternal involvement" OR "peran ayah") AND ("early childhood" OR "anak usia dini") AND ("prophetic parenting" OR "Islamic parenting" OR "pengasuhan Islami"). The string was adapted to the search functions of each database, and all search and selection steps were documented. Eligibility criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Eligibility criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	Published 2016–2025	Published outside this period
Topic	Father involvement, compassion-based or prophetic/Islamic parenting, or early childhood development	Not related to the review focus
Source type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Non-peer-reviewed sources; duplicates

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Access and language	Full text available in Indonesian or English	Full text not accessible
Rigour	Clear research method or explicit conceptual argument	Insufficient methodological or argumentative clarity

Study Selection

The search identified 70 records (Google Scholar, n = 35; SINTA, n = 10; Scopus, n = 25). After 15 duplicates were removed, 55 records were screened by title and abstract, and 35 were excluded as irrelevant to the review focus. Twenty full texts were assessed, of which 10 were excluded because the full text was not accessible, leaving 10 studies for synthesis (Figure 1). Screening and eligibility assessment were carried out by a single reviewer.

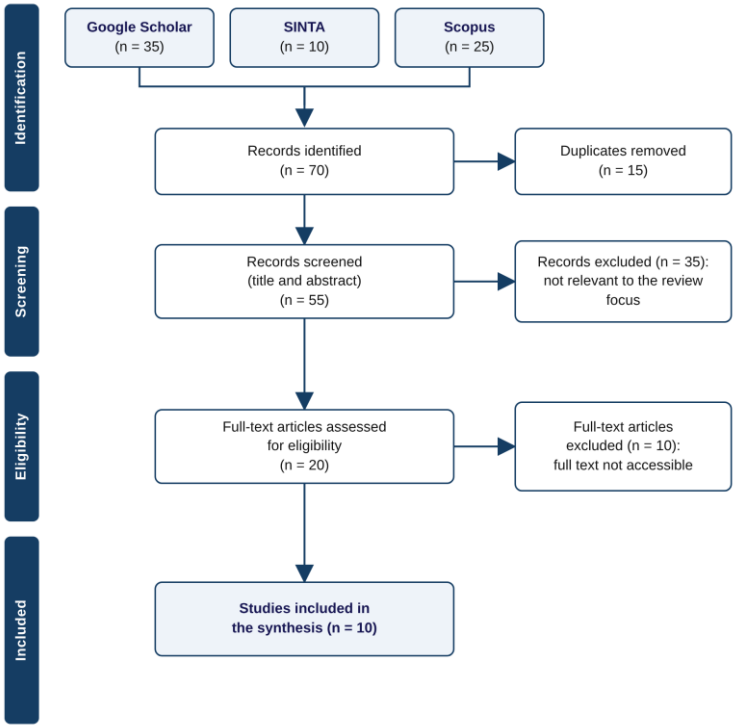


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection

Quality Appraisal and Synthesis

Methodological quality was appraised with a six-criterion instrument informed by the critical appraisal principles of the Joanna Briggs Institute, although it is not a standard JBI checklist: clarity of aims, appropriateness of design, relevance of participants or sources, clarity of data collection, transparency of analysis, and relevance of findings to the review focus. Each criterion was scored 1–3 (total 6–18), and articles were classified as high (15–18), moderate (10–14), or low (6–9) quality; only moderate- and high-quality articles were retained. All ten articles met this threshold. Scoring rationales were recorded on a structured sheet and rechecked for consistency; because appraisal was performed by one reviewer, inter-rater reliability could not be calculated.

Data were analysed using thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden 2008) in three stages: line-by-line coding of findings relevant to the review questions, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. For each theme, the supporting evidence was classified as normative-conceptual, Indonesian empirical, or international empirical, so that prophetic parenting principles could be distinguished from empirically supported outcomes.

Findings

Characteristics of the Included Studies

Table 2 summarises the ten included studies. Five concerned Indonesian families (Aryanti 2017; Nugrahani, Hastuti, and Herawati 2021; Aisyah and Fitriani 2023; Alwi and Rahmah 2024; Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti 2025), and five came from international contexts, namely the United States (Ancell, Bruns, and Chitiyo 2018; Brown et al. 2018; Yogman et al. 2016), India (Nair et al. 2020), and an international systematic review (Sujalmo and Chusairi 2023). By type, four were primary empirical studies, three were reviews, and three were conceptual articles. Only Brown et al. (2018) directly measured a child outcome, and none of the studies examined prophetic parenting longitudinally.

Table 2. Characteristics of the included studies (n = 10)

No	Study	Context	Design	Key findings
1	Ancell, Bruns, and Chitiyo (2018)	USA	Conceptual (practitioner)	Father involvement contributes to children's social, emotional, and learning readiness; programmes should engage fathers deliberately.
2	Aryanti (2017)	Indonesia	Conceptual review	Fathers act as role models, protectors, and character educators; warm involvement is linked to adaptive, confident children.
3	Brown et al. (2018)	USA	Quantitative; 80 father–child dyads (age ≈ 3)	Play on non-workdays and caregiving on workdays were associated with greater father–child attachment security.
4	Nair et al. (2020)	India	Implementation study within a cluster RCT	A monitoring, evaluation, and learning system enabled iterative adaptation of strategies to engage rural fathers.
5	Nugrahani, Hastuti, and Herawati (2021)	Indonesia	Descriptive study	Father involvement was dominated by financial provision rather than emotional engagement.
6	Yogman et al. (2016)	USA	Clinical report (narrative review)	Positive paternal involvement is associated with better cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes; services should engage fathers.
7	Sujalmo and Chusairi (2023)	Global	Systematic review	Fathers' psychological factors, partner support, and family relationships determine involvement with young children with disabilities.
8	Aisyah and Fitriani (2023)	Indonesia	Empirical study	Islamic values motivated fathers to engage more actively in children's education and character formation.
9	Alwi and Rahmah (2024)	Indonesia	Conceptual	Exemplary conduct, compassion, and positive communication form the core of the Prophet's parenting.
10	Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti (2025)	Indonesia	Systematic review (10 of 52 studies)	Positive effects on cognitive, social-emotional, and moral/self-identity development; low involvement tied to the provider-only role.

Theme 1: Fathers as Moral-Religious Role Models

Four studies portrayed fathers as role models who transmit honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, patience, and compassion through daily habituation, worship routines, and advice (Aryanti 2017; Aisyah and Fitriani 2023; Alwi and Rahmah 2024; Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti 2025). Their emphases differed. Aisyah and Fitriani (2023) stressed the internalisation of religious values through example, Alwi and Rahmah (2024) framed exemplary conduct and gentle communication as the core of the Prophet's parenting, and Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti (2025) reported benefits for moral development and self-identity. This theme, however, rests mainly on conceptual and descriptive evidence: indicators of "prophetic values" were not standardised, and no study measured children's moral-religious outcomes directly.

Theme 2: Fathers as Affectionate and Responsive Figures

Five studies described affectionate involvement through warm communication, shared play, accompaniment in learning, emotional protection, and participation in daily care (Ancell, Bruns, and Chitiyo 2018; Aryanti 2017; Brown et al. 2018; Yogman et al. 2016; Aisyah and Fitriani 2023). The strongest evidence came from Brown et al. (2018), who found that play on non-workdays and caregiving on workdays were associated with greater attachment security, showing that the type and timing of involvement matter, not only its amount. The Indonesian studies defined involvement mainly in relational and religious terms; some counted activities while others emphasised emotional closeness, which makes comparison across studies difficult.

Theme 3: Fathers as Supporters of Social-Emotional Development

Three studies linked father involvement with children's social-emotional competence, including emotion regulation, empathy, self-confidence, and prosocial behaviour (Ancell, Bruns, and Chitiyo 2018; Yogman et al. 2016; Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti 2025). These findings converge with broader evidence that involved fathers support children's adjustment (Cabrera, Volling, and Barr 2018; Rollè et al. 2019). Within the reviewed corpus, however, the association between prophetic parenting specifically and social-emotional outcomes has not been tested empirically; it is inferred from general father-involvement research.

Theme 4: Factors Enabling and Constraining Involvement

Enabling factors included fathers' awareness of their caregiving role, parenting knowledge, marital quality and spousal support, religious understanding, and wider family support (Sujalmo and Chusairi 2023; Aisyah and Fitriani 2023; Nursyahbani, Munawar, and Hariyanti 2025). Constraining factors included work demands, patriarchal norms that assign caregiving to mothers, and limited knowledge of early childhood development (Aryanti 2017; Nugrahani, Hastuti, and Herawati 2021). Nair et al. (2020) showed that a monitoring, evaluation, and learning system allowed a behaviour change intervention to adapt its strategies for reaching rural fathers, suggesting that these barriers are modifiable. Table 3 summarises the themes and the strength of the evidence behind them.

Table 3. Thematic synthesis and strength of evidence

Theme	Studies (Table 2)	Predominant evidence	Main gap
1. Moral-religious role models	2, 8, 9, 10	Normative-conceptual; Indonesian descriptive	Children's moral-religious outcomes not measured directly
2. Affectionate, responsive figures	1, 2, 3, 6, 8	International empirical; Indonesian descriptive	Inconsistent indicators of involvement quality
3. Social-emotional development	1, 6, 10	Reviews of mainly international evidence	Prophetic parenting–outcome link untested
4. Enabling and constraining factors	2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10	Mixed empirical and review evidence	Few father-focused interventions in Indonesia

Discussion

Social Learning and Attachment Perspectives

The role-model theme is consistent with social learning theory, which holds that children acquire behaviour by observing and imitating significant others (Bandura 1977). In the Indonesian studies, values such as honesty, trustworthiness, and patience were described as being transmitted more through paternal example than through verbal instruction (Aisyah and Fitriani 2023; Alwi and Rahmah 2024). In

Muslim families, observational learning thus extends beyond social competence to religious identity and *adab*, so a father's consistency between words and conduct becomes a pedagogical resource in itself. Whereas Western research on fathering foregrounds autonomy and social competence (Cabrera, Volling, and Barr 2018), the Indonesian literature foregrounds religious character formation.

The affectionate-responsive theme aligns with attachment theory, in which a sensitive caregiver provides a secure base for exploration and emotional regulation (Bowlby 1969). Brown et al. (2018) demonstrate that fathers become attachment figures through both play and caregiving, which challenges the provider-only role that remains dominant in Indonesia (Nugrahani, Hastuti, and Herawati 2021). In Indonesian Muslim families, closeness may also be built through shared religious practice, such as praying together, a plausible pathway that attachment research has yet to test.

Rahmah as a Conceptual Bridge

Across the themes, the reported practices of emotional attentiveness, accompaniment, positive communication, and empathy for children's needs correspond to manifestations of *rahmah*. *Rahmah* overlaps with the warmth and responsiveness emphasised in positive parenting but differs in its foundation: positive parenting derives from developmental psychology, whereas *rahmah* is grounded in the Prophet's example and framed as a religious responsibility (al-Bukhari, no. 5997). This dual grounding makes *rahmah* a useful lens for describing the quality, and not merely the quantity, of involvement in terms that resonate with Muslim fathers' own motivations (Aisyah and Fitriani 2023).

Figure 2 integrates these findings into a conceptual framework. Dimensions of father involvement are expressed through *rahmah*-based practices and are expected to support children's moral-religious character, attachment security, and social-emotional competence, with enabling and constraining factors moderating these pathways. The direct link between father involvement and child outcomes is supported by general father-involvement research, whereas the pathways specific to prophetic parenting remain propositions to be tested.

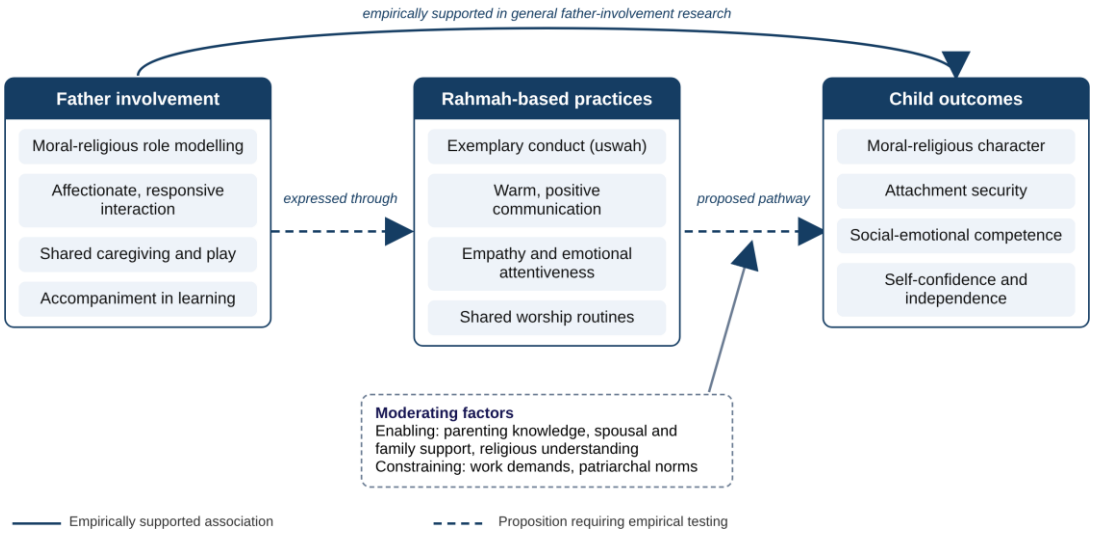


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of father involvement in compassion-based prophetic parenting

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

Three evidence gaps emerged. First, indicators of father involvement and of children's social-emotional and religious development varied widely, preventing direct comparison (Volling and Cabrera 2019). Second, most empirical studies were descriptive or cross-sectional and offer little evidence on long-term effects. Third, few studies integrated father involvement, prophetic parenting, and early

childhood development within one framework. Future research should develop and validate culturally sensitive instruments that capture both relational quality and religious practice, apply longitudinal and intervention designs, and evaluate father-focused parenting programmes in Indonesian early childhood settings (Jeong et al. 2021).

This review also has limitations. Screening and quality appraisal were conducted by a single reviewer, so inter-rater reliability could not be established. The search covered three databases and articles in Indonesian and English only, and grey literature was not included, which may introduce publication bias. Ten full texts were excluded because they were inaccessible, which may have omitted relevant evidence. Finally, the small and heterogeneous body of studies, several of them conceptual, limits the strength of the conclusions.

Conclusion and Implications

This review indicates that fathers' role in compassion-based prophetic parenting is associated with three domains of early childhood development: moral-religious character, social-emotional competence, and emotional security. *Rahmah*, exemplary conduct, positive communication, and active involvement emerge as its core elements, and *rahmah* provides a conceptual bridge between father-involvement research and the aims of prophetic parenting. Nevertheless, evidence for effects specific to prophetic parenting is still largely normative, and causal conclusions are not warranted.

In practice, early childhood institutions and policymakers should strengthen father-focused parenting education, build family–school partnerships that explicitly invite fathers, and develop programmes grounded in prophetic values that prioritise warm, responsive interaction over authority alone. Future studies should employ validated instruments and longitudinal or intervention designs to test the pathways proposed in Figure 2 among Indonesian Muslim families.

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