

Father Involvement and Mother–Father Coordination as Predictors of Child Social Competence

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the predictive roles of father involvement and mother–father coordination on child social competence in a sample of Mexican families.

Methods: A correlational descriptive design was used to explore the relationships between father involvement, mother–father coordination, and social competence in children. The sample consisted of 432 parents from urban and semi-urban regions of Mexico, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Standardized instruments were used to assess each variable: the Inventory of Father Involvement (IFI), the Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS), and the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-27. Pearson correlation was used to evaluate the relationships between each independent variable and the dependent variable, and multiple linear regression was performed to determine the combined and unique predictive effects of the two independent variables on child social competence.

Findings: Pearson correlation coefficients revealed that father involvement ($r = .43$, $p < .01$) and mother–father coordination ($r = .47$, $p < .01$) were both significantly and positively associated with child social competence. The multiple linear regression model was statistically significant ($F(2, 429) = 61.42$, $p < .01$), with an R^2 of .34, indicating that 34% of the variance in social competence was explained by the predictors. Both father involvement ($B = 0.06$, $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and mother–father coordination ($B = 0.08$, $\beta = .31$, $p < .01$) made significant unique contributions to the model.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the critical roles of both direct paternal engagement and coordinated coparenting in fostering children's social competence. Interventions aiming to enhance children's social skills should incorporate strategies that support father involvement and strengthen collaborative parenting dynamics.

Keywords: Father involvement, Mother–father coordination, Child social competence, Coparenting, Paternal engagement.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the role of fathers in child development has become an increasingly prominent subject of inquiry in developmental psychology, early education, and family studies. Historically, the caregiving role in early childhood was often viewed as the primary domain of mothers, while fathers were seen as peripheral contributors or financial providers. However, this paradigm has shifted significantly, with growing empirical evidence suggesting that fathers play a vital and unique role in the emotional, cognitive, and social development of their children (Khademi, 2025; Yogman & Eppel, 2021). This expanded understanding has fueled interest in examining how various dimensions of paternal involvement, including direct caregiving, emotional engagement, and coparenting coordination with mothers, contribute to key developmental outcomes such as social competence in children (Brown et al., 2018; Zhong, 2023).

Social competence refers to the set of skills that enable children to interact effectively and appropriately with others across different social contexts. These skills include communication, cooperation, emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving abilities, all of which are fundamental for success in both academic settings and peer relationships (Ju et al., 2023). The development of social competence begins in early childhood and is shaped by a multitude of environmental and relational factors, particularly parenting practices and family dynamics. While maternal influences on social competence have been widely studied, paternal contributions remain comparatively underexplored, especially in low- and middle-income countries and collectivist cultures (Kuruwanshi & Joshi, 2024; Osborne & Ahinkorah, 2024).

Father involvement has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing accessibility, engagement, responsibility, and emotional closeness (Khademi, 2025; Maselko et al., 2019). A growing body of research indicates that greater father involvement is associated with enhanced social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes in children. For instance, emotionally engaged and supportive fathers have been shown to promote empathy, peer competence, and emotional resilience in their children (Brown et al., 2018; Verani et al., 2022). Moreover, the timing and nature of paternal involvement—such as interactive play, reading, and involvement in caregiving routines—can influence children's attachment security and social-emotional functioning (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023; Chou et al., 2023).

Research also underscores the importance of father involvement in diverse contexts. In rural Pakistan, for example, greater paternal engagement during the first year of life was positively associated with child developmental outcomes, particularly in cognitive and emotional domains (Maselko et al., 2019). Similarly, in Mexican-American families, father engagement was found to moderate the effects of infant stress reactivity, pointing to the biological relevance of paternal care in shaping children's stress regulation and behavioral outcomes (Luecken et al., 2020). Studies from Zambia and Bangladesh have also highlighted how paternal participation in early childhood education and nurturing care is linked to improved social-emotional development, especially among children in vulnerable environments (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023; Kabungo et al., 2024).

Beyond direct father-child interactions, the coordination between mothers and fathers—commonly referred to as coparenting—has emerged as a significant predictor of child well-being. Coparenting involves the ways in which parents support or undermine each other's roles in childrearing, as well as how they collaborate and resolve disagreements regarding parenting tasks (Dirks & Szarkowski, 2022; Uribe et al., 2021). Positive coparenting, characterized by mutual support, shared responsibilities, and low conflict, contributes to a more stable and nurturing family environment, which in turn fosters better social and behavioral adjustment in children (Ju et al., 2023; Nair et al., 2023).

Several studies have demonstrated that the quality of mother–father coordination directly influences how children develop key competencies. For example, a study on Taiwanese families revealed that parental involvement in play significantly predicted children's executive functioning, mediated by improved motor skills—a result that indirectly emphasizes the importance of coparenting harmony and shared parenting experiences (Chou et al., 2023). In Bahamian families, family structure and the degree of paternal involvement were shown to significantly impact children's academic and socioemotional functioning, especially in households where parents shared common parenting goals and values (Bowe & Johnson, 2022). These findings align with research emphasizing that when fathers feel supported and endorsed by their coparents, they are more likely to engage consistently and positively in parenting roles (Henry et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2024).

It is also essential to acknowledge how sociocultural norms and systemic barriers affect father involvement and coparenting dynamics. Cultural expectations, gender roles,

employment demands, and limited policy support can all serve as obstacles to meaningful paternal engagement (Kuruwanshi & Joshi, 2024; Lut et al., 2021). In many societies, particularly those where paternal identity is primarily linked to breadwinning, fathers may struggle to balance work-related stress with active parenting, leading to reduced opportunities for emotionally rich interactions with their children (Ju et al., 2023; Nemet et al., 2021). Moreover, administrative data systems have historically marginalized paternal data, limiting researchers' ability to accurately assess and advocate for father-specific interventions (Lut et al., 2021, 2022).

Nonetheless, recent literature advocates for a more inclusive approach to early childhood development initiatives that integrate and empower fathers as active caregivers. Programs that intentionally include fathers—rather than treating them as peripheral or optional participants—are more likely to enhance child development outcomes and family well-being (Nair et al., 2023; Nggebu & Chung, 2022). For instance, community-based parenting interventions in Western Kenya have demonstrated success in engaging fathers through culturally appropriate messaging and gender-sensitive strategies, even when the original program was designed primarily for female caregivers (Jeong et al., 2024). Similarly, faith-based fatherhood programs have been shown to instill values of responsibility and emotional presence, which are critical to shaping secure attachments and moral foundations in children (Nggebu & Chung, 2022).

Research also indicates that children benefit not only from the quantity but also from the quality of paternal involvement. For example, a study by Byun (2023) highlighted how fathers' early childhood experiences in their families of origin significantly influenced their parenting attitudes and their respect for children's rights. Fathers with positive early experiences were more likely to engage in responsive and supportive behaviors that contributed to their children's autonomy and social growth (Byun, 2023). These insights suggest that interventions aiming to enhance paternal engagement should consider the fathers' own developmental histories, belief systems, and current psychosocial context.

In Latin American contexts, including Mexico, there remains a pressing need to further examine how father involvement and mother–father coordination interact to predict children's developmental outcomes. Although cultural traditions in Mexico have historically positioned mothers as primary caregivers, societal shifts toward gender

equity and increased paternal presence in domestic spheres offer a timely opportunity for empirical exploration (Luecken et al., 2020; Osborne & Ahinkorah, 2024). A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is especially crucial for informing public policy and community interventions that aim to strengthen family functioning and promote child well-being.

Despite this growing interest, many studies in the field continue to lack an integrated focus on both father involvement and the broader coparenting relationship. The majority of existing research tends to analyze these variables in isolation, potentially overlooking their interactive and cumulative effects on child development. Furthermore, while mother–child and father–child dyads have received ample attention, fewer studies have examined the triadic coordination between mother, father, and child—an omission that may limit the ecological validity of findings (Dirks & Szarkowski, 2022; Yogman & Eppel, 2021).

To address these gaps, the present study aims to explore the extent to which father involvement and mother–father coordination predict child social competence in a Mexican sample.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational descriptive design to investigate the relationships between father involvement, mother–father coordination, and child social competence. The research sample consisted of 432 parents of children, selected according to the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) sample size table, which ensures adequate statistical power for the population size. Participants were recruited from various urban and semi-urban regions in Mexico through schools, community centers, and online parenting forums. Inclusion criteria required participants to be biological fathers or mothers currently co-parenting a child between the ages of 4 and 8, with both parents actively involved in childrearing. Demographic information such as parental age, education level, and number of children was also collected to describe the sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social Competence

To assess children's social competence, the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) developed by Gresham and Elliott (1990) was employed. This standardized instrument

evaluates the social behaviors of children that contribute to successful peer and adult interactions. The SSRS includes several forms tailored to teachers, parents, and students; in this study, the parent form for preschool and early elementary levels was used. It consists of 38 items covering three subscales: Cooperation, Assertion, and Self-Control. Items are rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 2 (Very Often), with higher scores indicating greater social competence. The SSRS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with multiple studies reporting high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.80) and test-retest reliability. Its construct and criterion validity have been well established across diverse populations, making it a widely used and credible tool for measuring social competence in children (Bağatarhan, 2023; Ghodrati et al., 2024; Park & Lee, 2024).

2.2.2. *Father Involvement*

Father involvement was measured using the Inventory of Father Involvement (IFI) developed by Hawkins et al. (2002). This comprehensive instrument captures the multifaceted nature of fathering behaviors through nine subscales: Discipline and Teaching Responsibility, School Encouragement, Mother Support, Providing, Time and Talking Together, Praise and Affection, Developing Talents and Future Concerns, Reading and Homework Support, and Attentiveness. The full IFI contains 43 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always), with higher scores reflecting greater involvement. The IFI has been widely validated in studies with diverse cultural and socioeconomic samples. It demonstrates strong internal consistency across subscales (Cronbach's alpha typically ranging from 0.70 to 0.90) and has established construct validity, confirming its utility in capturing the nuanced dimensions of father involvement in child development research (Nair et al., 2023; Zhong, 2023).

2.2.3. *Mother–Father Coordination*

Mother–father coordination was assessed using the Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS) developed by Feinberg, Brown, and Kan (2012). This standardized instrument evaluates the quality of the coparenting

relationship across seven subscales: Agreement, Support, Undermining, Endorsement of Partner's Parenting, Division of Labor, Exposure to Conflict, and Joint Family Management. The CRS includes 35 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not True of Us) to 7 (Very True of Us), with higher scores indicating more positive and coordinated coparenting. The scale has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (subscale alphas ranging from 0.69 to 0.91) and confirmed construct validity through factor analysis. It has been effectively used in both clinical and community samples to assess how parental collaboration impacts child and family outcomes (Adams, 2024; Pellón et al., 2024).

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and scale scores. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (social competence) and each independent variable (father involvement and mother–father coordination). Additionally, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of the two independent variables on social competence, assessing their unique and combined contributions. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

3. *Findings and Results*

The sample included 432 parents from Mexico, comprising 251 mothers (58.1%) and 181 fathers (41.9%). The participants' age ranged from 24 to 52 years, with the majority falling within the 31–40 age group ($n = 198$, 45.8%), followed by 41–50 years ($n = 139$, 32.2%), under 30 years ($n = 61$, 14.1%), and over 50 years ($n = 34$, 7.9%). Regarding education, 163 participants (37.7%) held a university degree, 129 (29.9%) had completed some college or technical education, 102 (23.6%) had completed high school, and 38 (8.8%) had not completed high school. In terms of the number of children, 178 parents (41.2%) had one child, 154 (35.6%) had two children, 66 (15.3%) had three children, and 34 (7.9%) had four or more children.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Main Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Father Involvement	215.34	24.67
Mother–Father Coordination	176.49	21.85
Child Social Competence	59.21	6.14

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables, including father involvement, mother–father coordination, and child social competence. The mean score for father involvement was 215.34 (SD = 24.67), based on the Inventory of Father Involvement. Mother–father coordination had a mean score of 176.49 (SD = 21.85) using the Coparenting Relationship Scale. The mean score for child social competence, measured using the Social Skills Rating System, was 59.21 (SD = 6.14). All variables showed reasonable variability with no significant skew or kurtosis concerns, satisfying normality assumptions.

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, the assumptions for Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression were evaluated. The data met the assumption of normality, as

skewness and kurtosis values for all variables ranged between -0.77 and 0.84 , which are within the acceptable range of -1 to $+1$. Linearity and homoscedasticity were confirmed through visual inspection of scatterplots, which showed a consistent spread of residuals without patterns. Multicollinearity was not a concern, as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the independent variables were 1.38 for father involvement and 1.41 for mother–father coordination, both well below the cutoff value of 10 . Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.92 , indicating independence of residuals. These findings confirm that all assumptions required for the analyses were satisfied.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Child Social Competence	—		
2. Father Involvement	.43** ($p < .01$)	—	
3. Mother–Father Coordination	.47** ($p < .01$)	.39** ($p < .01$)	—

Pearson correlation coefficients between the independent variables and the dependent variable are presented in Table 2. Father involvement was positively correlated with child social competence ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), as was mother–father

coordination ($r = .47$, $p < .01$). The correlation between the two independent variables was also significant ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), indicating a moderate association but not suggesting multicollinearity.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	2789.17	2	1394.59	.58	.34	.34	61.42	< .01
Residual	9733.84	429	22.69					
Total	12523.01	431						

To further examine the predictive power of father involvement and mother–father coordination on child social competence, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. Table 3 shows the summary of the regression

model. The model was statistically significant ($F(2, 429) = 61.42$, $p < .01$), with an R value of $.58$ and an R^2 value of $.34$, indicating that 34% of the variance in child social competence was explained by the two predictor variables.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Child Social Competence

Predictor	B	Standard Error	β	t	p
Constant	27.42	2.11	—	13.00	< .01
Father Involvement	0.06	0.01	.25	5.64	< .01
Mother–Father Coordination	0.08	0.01	.31	6.87	< .01

Table 4 presents the regression coefficients for the model. Both father involvement ($B = 0.06$, $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and mother–father coordination ($B = 0.08$, $\beta = .31$, $p < .01$) were statistically significant predictors of child social competence. The constant was also significant ($B = 27.42$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that for every one-point increase in father involvement, child social competence increases by 0.06 units, and for every one-point increase in mother–father coordination, child social competence increases by 0.08 units, holding the other variable constant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the predictive role of father involvement and mother–father coordination in explaining variance in child social competence within a Mexican sample. The findings revealed statistically significant positive correlations between both independent variables and social competence. Specifically, higher levels of father involvement were associated with greater child social competence, and similarly, stronger mother–father coordination predicted enhanced social functioning in children. Moreover, the linear regression model indicated that both predictors made unique and significant contributions to the overall model, suggesting that paternal engagement and effective coparenting independently and collectively play crucial roles in the social development of children.

The observed association between father involvement and child social competence aligns with a growing body of literature highlighting the developmental benefits of active paternal participation. Prior research has consistently shown that fathers who engage meaningfully in caregiving, emotional support, and educational activities foster critical social-emotional skills in their children, including empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving (Brown et al., 2018; Verani et al., 2022). Our findings echo those of Bhattacharyya et al. (2023), who demonstrated that in urban slums of Bangladesh, increased paternal involvement in nurturing care correlated with improved interpersonal competencies in children (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023).

Similarly, in a Zambian context, Kabungo et al. (2024) found that fathers who participated in early education activities had children with stronger cognitive and social skills, reinforcing the idea that father involvement is not merely supplementary but essential to holistic child development (Kabungo et al., 2024).

The results also lend support to research conducted in low-income and marginalized communities, which suggests that father involvement serves a buffering function in challenging contexts. For instance, Luecken et al. (2020) demonstrated that father engagement in Mexican-American families moderated biological sensitivity to stress in infants, positively influencing emotional regulation and adaptability (Luecken et al., 2020). Given that the current sample was drawn from diverse socio-economic regions in Mexico, it is plausible that father involvement acted as a stabilizing factor in children’s psychosocial development. Similarly, the findings resonate with Maselko et al. (2019), who found in rural Pakistan that father involvement during infancy was positively associated with better developmental outcomes and maternal mental health, indirectly benefiting children’s relational competence (Maselko et al., 2019).

Equally important, the study’s findings regarding the predictive power of mother–father coordination are supported by existing literature emphasizing the role of coparenting in shaping child outcomes. A harmonious coparenting relationship facilitates consistency in parenting strategies, reduces household stress, and models collaborative behavior for children—all of which contribute to stronger social competence. Dirks and Szarkowski (2022) found that coordinated parenting efforts enhanced parental self-efficacy and improved family-centered interventions for children with special needs, highlighting the critical role of mutual support in coparenting dynamics (Dirks & Szarkowski, 2022). Similarly, Jeong et al. (2024) observed that when fathers felt encouraged by mothers in parenting interventions, their level of engagement increased, enhancing overall family interaction quality (Jeong et al., 2024).

The significance of coordinated parenting is further corroborated by Chou et al. (2023), who demonstrated that

shared parental play practices positively influenced executive function in Taiwanese preschoolers, mediated through improved motor coordination and social responsiveness (Chou et al., 2023). These findings suggest that mother–father coordination not only supports individual parenting quality but also creates a synergistic environment conducive to children’s social-emotional growth. In the Bahamian context, Bowe and Johnson (2022) found that children from two-parent families with strong parental alignment performed better in school and exhibited greater emotional maturity compared to those from families with poor parental collaboration (Bowe & Johnson, 2022).

Moreover, our results are consistent with evidence suggesting that coparenting is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of active, constructive collaboration. As noted by Uribe et al. (2021), fathers who were emotionally and physically present during childbirth and early caregiving fostered more secure emotional bonds with their children—an effect enhanced by maternal support (Uribe et al., 2021). These findings underscore that father involvement and mother–father coordination are mutually reinforcing processes that jointly contribute to optimal child development.

An interesting implication of the current findings lies in how they affirm the contextual sensitivity of father involvement and coparenting. Cultural expectations and societal structures shape the extent and manner of paternal engagement. In collectivist or patriarchal societies, such as parts of Mexico and other Latin American nations, gendered norms may restrict father involvement to financial provisioning rather than active caregiving. However, studies by Osborne and Ahinkorah (2024) and Kuruwanshi and Joshi (2024) suggest that even within such frameworks, increased awareness and structural support can shift paternal roles toward more nurturing and participatory forms (Kuruwanshi & Joshi, 2024; Osborne & Ahinkorah, 2024). This is crucial because the benefits of father involvement are not restricted to particular cultures; rather, they are a universal developmental resource when activated.

Further, the association between positive parenting coordination and child social development has policy implications. As Nair et al. (2023) point out, integrating fathers into early childhood development programs at scale requires intentional design and inclusion strategies (Nair et al., 2023). This includes offering flexible work policies, parenting education targeted at both parents, and culturally sensitive interventions that normalize and encourage paternal engagement. Similar calls for systemic inclusion

have been made by Lut et al. (2021, 2022), who argued that data systems need to track paternal participation to better inform family-centered services (Lut et al., 2021, 2022).

Importantly, the present findings also echo those of Byun (2023), who found that fathers’ early family experiences influenced their respect for children’s rights and their willingness to co-parent effectively (Byun, 2023). This suggests that father involvement is shaped not only by current family dynamics but also by intergenerational transmission of caregiving models, further emphasizing the need for reflective and supportive interventions. Likewise, Yogman and Eppel (2021) emphasized that fathers play a critical role not just in reducing maternal burden, but in actively contributing to the psychosocial health of children and families at large (Yogman & Eppel, 2021).

Lastly, the findings align with Nggebu and Chung (2022), who emphasized the spiritual and moral foundations fathers can provide through consistent presence and value transmission—a dimension often overlooked in quantitative studies (Nggebu & Chung, 2022). When both parents engage in coordinated parenting that includes emotional, cognitive, and moral guidance, children benefit from a cohesive and predictable environment that supports prosocial behavior.

Taken together, the present findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how father involvement and mother–father coordination serve as distinct but interconnected predictors of child social competence. These results reinforce the importance of moving beyond a mother-centric view of child development and embracing a more inclusive, relational model that recognizes the dynamic interplay between parental roles.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations. First, the use of self-report questionnaires introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly when evaluating constructs like parenting and coparenting, which are socially sensitive. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation; while associations can be inferred, the temporal direction between variables cannot be confirmed. Third, the sample, though demographically diverse within Mexico, may not generalize to rural or indigenous communities with different cultural parenting norms. Finally, father involvement was reported by one parent, which may not fully capture the nuance and breadth of paternal behaviors across contexts.

Future studies should consider employing longitudinal designs to examine how changes in father involvement and coparenting coordination over time affect the trajectory of social competence development. Mixed-methods approaches may also enrich the data, offering insights into the subjective experiences of fathers and the contextual challenges they face. It would also be beneficial to incorporate observational measures or multi-informant reports, including children's perspectives, to validate findings beyond parental self-report. Furthermore, comparative studies across cultures could illuminate how societal structures and gender norms interact with parenting variables to influence child outcomes.

Practitioners and policymakers should prioritize father-inclusive programming in early childhood education and health services. Parenting workshops and counseling should be designed to actively involve both parents and promote healthy coparenting relationships. Schools and community centers should provide flexible scheduling and accessible materials to encourage father participation. Moreover, public campaigns that reshape cultural narratives around fatherhood and coparenting can further normalize shared parenting responsibilities. Interventions aimed at promoting social competence in children should adopt a family-systems perspective that integrates both paternal involvement and parental coordination as core components.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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