

# Childcare involvement of Italian fathers

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show the degree of father's participation in mundane child-tending tasks and to evaluate the individual or couple's characteristics associate with this involvement. Our analysis, based on data from the 1998 Multipurpose Italian survey on Family and Social Actors, carried out by ISTAT on a national representative sample of private households, has confirmed that the childcare burden rests mainly on the woman's shoulders. Only a small minority of fathers performs daily all the routine activities of childcare. However, father's commitment increases substantially if the mother is employed and both partners have a high level of education. Factors such as professional condition and working hours, and their combination between partners, have a considerable impact in shaping gender roles with special regard to the childcare. Our findings reveal that gender-roles reconciliation can be facilitated when – other things being equal – father is a blue-collar or works a reduced number of hours.

## Introduction

The increasing prevalence all around Europe of the “dual-earner” couple model, instead of the traditional “male breadwinner model” is changing the gender role-set within the family. In all countries fathers are more and more involved in childrearing and in some countries this process has been encouraged by specific policies. The European Community directive on parental leave (n.96/34/CE)<sup>1</sup>, imitating Scandinavian law, for instance, introduces the principle of replacement between working parents in childcare and gives to fathers some rights previous guaranteed only to working mothers.

A body of previous research carried out in several countries (Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999 on UK; Knijn and Selten, 2002, on Netherlands; Halberg e Klevenmarken, 2001, on Sweden; Smith, 2004, on European Community countries; Bianchi, 2000, on US) shows that mothers are responsible for the majority of childcare, but fathers are caring more than ever before. In Italy, however, father role seems to be still shaped according to the traditional gender role-set, despite the increasing women participation to the labour market. A recent comparative research (Smith 2004) reveals that in Italy only 11% of fathers dedicate a substantial amount of time to their children<sup>2</sup>, while this proportion is 57% in Denmark, 31% in Finland, 24% in Britain, 20% in Germany and 16% in France. A higher degree of participation to childcare is found more often among more educated Italian fathers, blue-collar, with more children and with a working partner (Smith 2004). Some factors are therefore linked to indispensable “needs” of bigger families and dual-earner couples, others to the availability of father’s time to dedicate to children.

In this paper, we focus on Italian fathers to evaluate their degree of involvement in mundane child-tending tasks and to evidence either the individual or couple’s characteristics associate with their involvement. Particular attention is devoted to both partners’ job and education features.

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<sup>1</sup> The directive has been transposed into the Italian legal system in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> “Substantial” indicates more than 28 hours per week.

## 2. Fatherhood and gender role-set crisis

The experience of parenthood often implies a sort of crystallization of gender roles, with an increase of female time spent in housework and childcare, as well as a decrease of free-time. This can result for working mothers in what it is called *dual burden*, because of the double active presence at home and in the labour market. As it is well known, the reconciliation of roles within and outside the family is more difficult for a mother: empirical data show that the birth of a child increases working women' stress (Cromton 2004) and reduces the satisfaction of couple relationship (Coltrane 1996). Sometimes women, as a consequence of difficulties encountered for the first child, feel an authentic "violation of expectations" by their partner as fathers, and renounce to have a second child (Kalmuss *et al.* 1992, Romito and Saurel-Cubizolles 1998). Hochschild (1989) called "*stalled revolution*" this situation where higher women employment rate is not followed by men' increasing responsibility for domestic chores and childcare.

Only recently, fertility theory has taken into consideration gender inequality as possible explanation of lowest-low fertility in Southern Mediterranean countries (Ongaro 2002). McDonald (2000) in particular, suggests that the very low fertility may be the result above all of a hiatus that has developed in some developed countries between "high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social institutions". If in recent decades women have been given the same opportunities as men in education, and to some extent, in the labour market as well, this has not happened within union and family relationships. Indeed, women's job opportunities can be seriously compromised by having children. This situation can in itself drive some women to reduce the number of children they have or even induce them to forego altogether (Matthew 1999, Scisci and Vinci 2002). It is not difficult to observe, in fact, that the developed countries with a very low fertility are the ones with a less equal gender system compared with countries where fertility is relatively higher (counterpoising the countries of the South with those of Northern Europe).

Only few recent studies have analysed this subject with micro data (see Olah 2004, on the transition to second child in Hungary and Sweden; Miller Torr and Short 2004 on US; Cooke, 2003 on Italy and Spain; Mencarini and Tanturri 2004, on Italian urban contexts; Mencarini 2005 on Italy, Tazi-Preve et al. 2004 on Austria). All results show that time–squeeze for working mothers is relevant, and, where childcare services are not available, fathers behaviour is so needed that the gender symmetric role-set of parents can even increase their likelihood to have one more child.

Women and men, according to the hypothesis of “incompatibility of roles”, can perceive the problem of reconciliation between working activity and family differently (Lehrer and Nerlove 1986). For men, the working activity can be an instrument to exercise their role of “*providers*”, according to prevalent social norms. Whereas for women, social norms have traditionally prescribed the role of family *carer*. Time spent for remunerate work outside the family can therefore conflict with that spent for the family, at home.

### **3. Father childcare involvement and couple’s characteristics**

#### *3.1. The framework*

Using data from the Multipurpose Italian survey carried by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 1998, on a national representative sample of private households, we devote our research to assess what is the degree of Italian fathers involvement in mundane child-tending tasks. The focus of the analysis is on fathers participation in the routine care activities, such as 1) helping children to dress, 2) feeding children, 3) changing nappies, 4) bathing them, 5) putting them to bed, tasks which have been traditionally performed by mothers.

It is well known that fathers, in general, prefer more interactive activities (e.g. playing), more rewarding, but at the same time just occasional and not related to the essential needs of the babies (Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003). However, chores are believed to foster more intimate relationship with children and to develop mutual emotional sensitivities, also for fathers (Coltrane

1996). This is of paramount importance for encouraging also a positive relationship with fathers as the children grow up.

According to the “*relative resources and bargaining theory*” (Lundberg and Pollak 1996) or “*power rule*” (Thomson 1990), higher the job position and professional success of a woman, greater is her bargaining power with the partner on childcare. On the one hand, if a mother works the father participation to childcare can be a necessity – and therefore the degree of his involvement could be merely dependent on woman characteristics –; on the other hand, it is likely that also personal characteristics of the father can play an important role. We can assume, according to the existent literature, that more active fathers would be the younger ones, due to their more recent and egalitarian socialisation, or the more educated ones, who are usually more conscious of paternal role for physiological development of their children and also more keen to a less traditional and more egalitarian gender role-set within the couple (Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003). Other authors have underlined also the importance of both position and time schedule of fathers job. Fathers who are successful as providers would develop also good relationship with their children (Halle and Le Menestrel 2000), although blue-collars fathers would be those more involved into childrearing, probably because of a favourable time schedule (Smith 2004).

In Italian context, we also expect to find a significant effect of external help, such as the availability of a baby-sitter or kindergarten – especially among richer dual earner couples – and also of the grandparents proximity and their practical help – due to Italian strong family ties. Moreover, we suppose a lower involvement of fathers resident in Southern part of Italy, compare to those resident in centre or northern parts, and in non-urban areas, because of a more traditional gender role-set still present in South and small towns and villages.

### *3.2 The level of father involvement: a description*

The Multipurpose Italian survey provides information on how frequently fathers carry out some routine child-tending tasks (*everyday, few times a week, once a week, few times a month, few*

*times a year, never*), with children under six years old (Table 1). First of all, it is evident that the activities fathers more frequently performs are those of putting their children to bed and feeding them, carried out respectively by 25% and 21% of fathers whose children are less than three years old and by 23% and 21% of those whose children are between three and five years old. A father out of five changes nappies everyday to his children under the age of three. If there is a certain number of fathers tending their children everyday, there is also a high proportion of them who never perform specific activities, such as changing nappies (30% of fathers of younger children and 50% of fathers with older children) or bathing (around 38% for both groups). The proportion of inactive fathers is more relevant both in the South of Italy and in the Islands and among fathers with a lower level of education. No important differences among the age groups have been found.

This kind of analysis provides some interesting insights on how frequent the father performs a specific care activity, but does not allow giving a global evaluation of the father role in our Country. Therefore, we decide to summarise the results in a composite index, giving a score to each frequency, summing the score for all the activities and then standardizing the sum. The Index of Fathers Involvement (IFI) is equal to 1, when a father performs all the activities every day, and it is equal to 0, when a father never carries out any task. We calculated the indexes separately for children who are less than three years old and between three and five.

Results show that only a small minority of fathers (less than 5 %) is involved in the routine activities everyday, with children under three years old. Therefore, it is sensible to argue that in Italy child-care is still demanded almost completely to the mothers; even when fathers reveal a certain degree of participation, they – most of times – merely support mothers, performing only few tasks among those essential for childrearing. The mean score of IFI is equal to 0.56, and it should be noted that 8% of the fathers never performs any of the basic activities. For older children (3-5 years old) the situation does not change substantially, but if for babies the prominence of the mother role can be justified by biological reasons (first of all breastfeeding), for older children the motivation is basically cultural. It should be noted that among this group of fathers there is a lower proportion of

the extreme cases: 4% are the more active fathers and less than 6% are those who are absolutely inactive.

Successively, we calculate the mean value of the IFI by specific father or couple characteristics (Table 2). First of all, it is useful to notice that the differences between categories are wider among fathers having younger children. It might be argued that fathers with specific characteristics develop more dissimilar behaviour when they have to take care of a newborn. Level of father involvement is higher in the Centre and North of Italy. Among fathers of children under three years old, it increases with the size of the municipality: this finding seems to corroborate the idea that in the cities gender role are shaped in a less traditional way. Conversely, the hypothesis that younger fathers play a more important role in care activities does not seem to be confirmed. More educated fathers have a higher mean value of IFI, and the differences are particularly important for fathers of children under three.

Working as either a teacher or a clerk is associated with a higher level of father participation, probably because these professions are characterised by more compatible working time schedules, also for men, as it has already been observed for women. The self-employed, together with a residual category, show the lowest level of involvement, regardless of the child age. It is possible that very intense time schedules prevent them to spend much time with their babies. If we take into account couple characteristics, it is immediately evident that where both partners are highly educated, fathers play a much more active role. It is interesting to remark that, despite the small numerosity, for both children age groups, the highest level of paternal activity is registered for couple where the wife is graduated and the husband has a secondary-school diploma.

As expected, there is a very dissimilar degree of fathers' involvement in dual-income and male-breadwinner household: for the former group, it is possible that a more active father participation is encouraged by the need.

### *3.3 Which fathers are more involved? An explorative analysis*

We are indeed interested to investigate in which cases fathers are more involved in mundane child-care activities. In order to do that, we estimated some multiple linear regression models, separately for two groups of fathers, according to the age of their children. In a first couple of models (Table 1) we consider, as covariates, only father characteristics, while in the second we include couple features (Table 2).

In the first two models (Table 1) regional differences are evident. Less involved fathers are in the South, for children under three years old, and in the Islands, for children under six. The dimension of the municipality seems not to have any significant effect, other things being equal. At a first sight, the hypothesis that father's participation increases with the dimension of the offspring does not find empirical evidence<sup>3</sup>.

It is surprising to notice that the presence of external sources of aid, as grandparents and baby-sitter, do not substitute paternal care, but rather the opposite is true: where other people care for the baby, fathers are more active as well. It is conceivable that this is the result of a higher maternal propensity to delegate other people, including fathers, to childrearing. But it is also possible that a certain "quota" of maternal time, especially in the case she works, is left to other actors – including fathers – to be substituted. Younger fathers do not seem to be more involved for babies, while the opposite is true for older children. Less educated fathers are less likely to perform routine tasks, even if the effect is stronger for children under three years old.

The professional position seems not to differentiate the paternal attitude to younger children care, once we consider working time schedule in the model. Conversely, for older children, results seem to confirm previous studies findings (Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003, Smith 2004): teachers and clerks are more likely to tend children. Manager, entrepreneurs and independent professional men are the less involved categories of fathers, contrasting with the theory of Halle and Le Menestrel

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<sup>3</sup> However this result should be interpreted with caution, because all the information is referred to the activity of the father for a specific child in a certain age bracket. Therefore, a father having more children might share his time among all their children, and thus dedicate less time to each of them, even if in general he is more involved.



(2000), according to which professional success would make fathers more active. This is probably specifically linked to the important role played by working time schedule – heavier on average for high level job position – in limiting fathers' participation, especially for younger babies requiring continuous cares.

It is interesting to notice that the issue of work and family balance has been usually considered by literature only as a women's problem. Our findings reveal that this topic is relevant also for shaping father's role. Less intense working time schedules for men might facilitate their involvement and, therefore, have an impact on gender role reconciliation and, possibly, on fertility.

Eventually, we consider as control variable, mothers' occupational condition. As expected, where women are housewife, fathers are less likely to perform routine care activities. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that in Italy fathers' involvement is often determined by the need to substitute mother's care when she works for the labour market.

In the second group of models (Table 2), we considered the characteristics of both partners as covariates and in particular: the age difference between spouses, the combination of education level and the combination of working time schedules. The hypothesis that spouses of the same age or where the woman is older have a more symmetric role-set seems to be confirmed by the results, only when children are less than three years old.

Similarly, the different combinations of education level play a significant role only for younger children, while for the older ones the effect seems to be absorbed by the combination of working time schedule. It is immediately evident the minor father involvement in couples where both partners have a lower education level, with respect to the reference couple where the spouses have both a diploma. Fathers perform more care activities when they have a diploma, while their spouse has either a lower or a higher level of education. Therefore, it is plausible that those couples where the male partners are more educated are more aware of the importance of the paternal role and more prepared to adopt non-traditional gender roles.

The effects of the combination of working time schedule are similar between the two groups of fathers with younger or older children. In particular, fathers' involvement is less intense for couple in which both spouses work more hours in the job market, with respect to the couple working average hours. Besides, fathers perform less care activities when they work more hours than the average (36-44 hours per week) and their wife less than the average. In couples where both spouses work less than the average, fathers seem to be less involved in routine child-tending tasks.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the level of father's involvement in mundane child-tending tasks. We are particularly interested to assess how father's involvement is linked to specific father and couple characteristics. Our analysis has shown that, in general, the childcare burden rests mainly on the woman's shoulders. Fathers' participation is discontinuous, often limited to selected activities (e.g. putting children to bed) and frequently performed just in case of need. Only a small minority of fathers performs daily all the routine activities necessary to the primary care of children. It should be remarked, however, that father's commitment increases substantially if the mother is employed. This can be seen as a first indication of a low, but conceivably progressive, adjustment of fathers to the new responsibilities required in a dual-earner household. It is also possible that this is the result of an increased power of working-women to negotiate gender roles within the couple, as it is argued by part of the literature (Lundberg and Pollack 1996; Thomson 1990). Moreover, it is useful to recall that if mother's care time is substituted by external aids, also fathers result to be more involved.

Education level, the number of working hours, and their combination between partners, have a considerable role in shaping gender roles with special regard to the care of babies. On the one hand, it seems that values and cultural aspects have an impact. For instance a higher level of education might increase fathers consciousness of the importance of their role for children well being, but also their willingness to question traditional gender roles. On the other hand, also time

constraints seem to affect father's involvement, similarly to what happen for the mothers. Our findings reveal that role reconciliation can be facilitated when – other things being equal – fathers belong to specific professional categories (e.g. clerks and teachers) or work a reduced number of hours. If parental leave policies have contributed to encourage father's active role, it is possible that measures aimed at reducing working time schedule or at allowing part-time job during the children's first years of life, for both parents, might also represent a stimulus towards a full sharing of tending care activities and, perhaps, to have a (or another) child.

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**Table 1: Routine care activities performed by fathers of children under 6, by children age class.**

ACTIVITIES	Age of children			
	0-2 years old		3-5 years old	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Bathing children</b>				
Everyday	61	8.0	69	8.1
Few times a week	230	30.0	214	25.1
Once a week	63	8.3	61	7.2
Few times a month	89	11.7	111	13.0
Few times a year	32	4.2	67	7.8
Never	289	37.8	333	39.0
<b>Putting children to bed</b>				
Everyday	196	25.6	200	23.3
Few times a week	314	41.1	338	39.5
Once a week	48	6.2	57	6.7
Few times a month	56	7.3	76	8.9
Few times a year	36	4.7	60	7.0
Never	115	15.1	125	14.6
<b>Feeding children</b>				
Everyday	160	21.0	180	21.1
Few times a week	291	38.1	331	38.7
Once a week	48	6.2	40	4.7
Few times a month	85	11.2	89	10.4
Few times a year	21	2.8	54	6.3
Never	159	20.8	161	18.9
<b>Changing nappies</b>				
Everyday	158	20.7	113	13.2
Few times a week	236	30.9	189	22.1
Once a week	35	4.6	28	3.2
Few times a month	73	9.6	65	7.6
Few times a year	25	3.3	39	4.5
Never	237	31.0	422	49.3
<b>Helping children dress</b>				
Everyday	124	16.2	124	14.5
Few times a week	299	39.2	330	38.6
Once a week	49	6.5	53	6.2
Few times a month	82	10.7	115	13.5
Few times a year	21	2.7	58	6.8
Never	189	24.76	175	20.4

**Table 2: Index of Father Involvement (IFI) in routine care activities.**  
Standardized index=0 if father is not involved at all, =1 if father is completely involved.

CHARACTERISTICS	Age of children					
	0-2 years old			3-5 years old		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Dev std</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Dev std</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>932</b>	<b>0.56</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>1911</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.25</b>
<b>Regional Ares</b>						
North and Centre	514	0.61	0.25	998	0.58	0.25
South and Islands	418	0.48	0.27	913	0.50	0.25
<b>Municipalità dimension</b>						
Large	150	0.58	0.32	296	0.56	0.31
Medium	368	0.57	0.27	810	0.53	0.25
Small	414	0.51	0.24	805	0.55	0.22
<b>Age at interview (Male)</b>						
Less then 30	124	0.53	0.27	122	0.54	0.29
31-35	352	0.56	0.28	527	0.56	0.25
More then 35	456	0.56	0.26	1262	0.54	0.24
<b>Education level (Male)</b>						
Degree	121	0.63	0.25	225	0.56	0.26
High school	297	0.61	0.26	652	0.56	0.24
Less than High school	514	0.50	0.27	1034	0.53	0.25
<b>Professional Condition (M)</b>						
Managers, ind. professional man, entrepreneurs	117	0.58	0.27	256	0.51	0.25
Teachers and clerk	274	0.61	0.27	568	0.58	0.24
Manual worker	293	0.55	0.25	595	0.54	0.25
Self-employed and others	198	0.47	0.26	387	0.49	0.25
<b>Couple characteristics</b>						
<b>Education</b>						
<i>He</i> degree, <i>She</i> degree	63	0.65	0.24	123	0.59	0.23
<i>He</i> degree, <i>She</i> < degree	58	0.60	0.25	102	0.51	0.29
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> degree	38	0.71	0.27	67	0.60	0.26
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> High school	182	0.58	0.26	382	0.56	0.24
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> < High school	77	0.61	0.25	203	0.56	0.24
<i>He</i> < than High school, <i>She</i> High school or more	162	0.59	0.24	277	0.55	0.25
<i>He</i> less than High school, <i>She</i> less than High school	317	0.47	0.28	668	0.52	0.25
<b>Type of household</b>						
Dual earner	416	0.64	0.25	873	0.60	0.24
Male breadwinner	406	0.48	0.27	803	0.48	0.25

**Table 3: Multiple regression models for father characteristics predicting the level of father involvement in routine child care, by children age class.**

VARIABLES	Age of children					
	0-2 years old			3-5 years old		
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>
<b>Intercept</b>	16.803***		2.113	15.156***		1.169
<b>Regional area (Centre and North)</b>						
Island	-1.037*		0.701	-1.493***		0.377
South	-2.957***		0.545	-0.845***		0.290
<b>Municipality dimension (Intermediate)</b>						
Large	-0.199		0.578	-0.036		0.320
Small	-0.722		0.534	0.166		0.285
<b>Number of children (Two)</b>						
One	1.544***		0.495	1.224***		0.274
Three or more	-1.037		0.782	-0.788***		0.393
<b>External aids (None)</b>						
Baby-sitter	1.762**		0.842	1.589***		0.480
Grand-parents	0.805*		0.484	0.272		0.291
<b>Age</b>	0.012		0.052	-0.072***		0.028
<b>Education level (High school )</b>						
Degree	-0.215		0.746	-0.337		0.428
Less than High school	-1.977***		0.572	-0.557*		0.295
<b>Professional condition (Clerk and teacher)</b>						
Managers, ind. professional man, entrepreneurs	0.295		0.777	-1.267***		0.426
Manual worker	0.332		0.635	-0.595*		0.341
Self-employed and others	-0.546		0.741	-1.040***		0.377
<b>Number of working hours per week (36-44)</b>						
Less than 36	-1.774**		0.796	0.235		0.433
44-60	-1.258**		0.568	-0.636**		0.303
60 and more	-3.530***		0.755	-1.028***		0.427
<b>Spouse occupational condition (employed)</b>						
Housewife	-2.355***		0.489	-1.433***		0.270
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.183			0.093		

Significance \*\*\*  $\leq 0.01$ ; \*  $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$ ; \*  $0.05 < p \leq 0.1$

**Table 4 : Multiple regression models for couple characteristics predicting the level of father involvement in routine child care, by children age class.**

CHARACTERISTICS	Fathers with children aged:			
	0-2 years		3-5 years	
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>St. Error</i>
<b>Intercept</b>	14.852***	0.880	11.625***	0.415
<b>Regional area (Centre and North)</b>				
Island	-1.796***	0.702	-1.464***	0.378
South	-3.440***	0.543	-0.938***	0.291
<b>Municipality dimension (Intermediate)</b>				
Large	-0.327	0.581	0.052	0.320
Small	-1.187**	0.536	0.078	0.285
<b>Number of children (Two)</b>				
One	1.596***	0.489	1.924***	0.275
Three or more	-1.284*	0.763	-1.051***	0.382
<b>External aids (None)</b>				
Baby-sitter	2.330***	0.854	3.522***	0.948
Grand-parents	0.917*	0.488	1.715***	0.441
<b>Age difference (He older - 1-3 years )</b>				
Same age or she younger	1.229**	0.623	0.302	0.345
He older - more than 3 years	0.481	0.507	0.115	0.273
<b>Education level (He: diploma, She: diploma)</b>				
He degree, She degree	1.883**	0.899	0.494	0.492
He degree, She < degree	0.950	0.900	-0.672	0.538
He High school She High school	2.389**	1.135	0.503	0.661
He High school., She < High school	2.423***	0.848	0.594	0.404
He less than High school, She High school or more	1.680	3.526	2.053	1.360
He less than High school, She less than High school	-9.644***	3.077	0.951	2.508
<b>Number of working hours per week (He: 36-44, She: &gt;24)</b>				
He > 44, She > 44	-3.266**	1.508	-2.019***	0.773
He > 44, She <= 44	-2.435***	0.693	-1.863***	0.368
He 36-44, She < 24	-1.369**	0.772	-2.071***	0.409
He <= 36, She > 24	1.120	0.953	0.335	0.495
He <= 36, She <= 24	-2.118**	0.875	-0.781**	0.467
<b>R^2</b>	0.167		0.096	

Significance \*\*\* <= 0.01; \* \*0.01<p<=0.05; \*0.05<=p<=0.1