

COPARENTING BY FAMILY TOWARD EARLY CHILDHOOD WITH MIGRANT WORKER MOTHERS

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Abstract. Indonesia is one of the countries with a large number of migrant workers worldwide. Research shows that many children under the age of six years old are left by their mothers who work as international migrant workers. The role of the mother in the growth and development of children is often delegated to families, including fathers, grandparents, or others. This study aims to describe the practice of coparenting among families with children in the absence of the mother's direct presence. The study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design. Informants were selected purposively, consisting of 6 families with young children aged 4-6 years old and 3 teachers. Data validity was obtained using triangulation techniques. Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti in stages, involving condensation, presentation, data compilation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study showed that families carry out coparenting. Coparenting involves communication and cooperation between family members, including the mother. The mother's surrender and trust in the family are the basis for parenting. Inappropriate forms of parenting carried out by families are physical punishment, threats, harsh language, and following all the child's wishes. Education for migrant worker families is necessary to enhance the quality of childcare and promote child development.

Keywords: coparenting, early childhood, family, mother, migrant worker

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest number of migrant workers globally. This, economically, provides benefits for the families left behind (LIPI, 2020). The latest data on the number of Indonesian migrant workers placed in 2024 were 297,434 placements, representing an increase of 0.11% compared to the previous year. The number of migrant workers is dominated by women, who are 201,343 people. As many as 138,412 migrant workers are married (BP2MI, 2025).

When parents, in this case mothers, choose to become migrant workers, their children have the potential to lose sufficient care and affection. According to KPAI, the number of children left by their mothers to become migrant workers in 2016 was 11.2 million children (Puspitasari et al., 2020). Women or mothers are generally considered the primary caregivers when a family has young children (Aini & Hernawati, 2016). Previous studies by Bowlby have shown that mothers are the primary figures influencing child development (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018). Research indicates that maternal thinking in the first years of a child's life is positively correlated with the child's mental abilities in preschool age (Meins et al., 2018). The quality of interaction between parents and children, also known as attachment, affects the child's ability to regulate themselves (Saltzman et al., 2018). We can emphasize that the mother remains very important for the child's growth and development.

Research shows that more than 60% of children are still under 6 years old when their mothers first become migrant workers (SMERU, 2013). Children who are left by their mothers do not experience economic problems, but they face the problem of psychological needs. They often feel lonely, lack attention, and live chaotic and messy lives (Puspitasari et al., 2020). Children of migrant workers also face family problems that are vulnerable to divorce, financial management conflicts, and parenting problems (Suyadi et al., 2022). They have socio-emotional problems such as leaving without saying goodbye, neglecting to study and worship, skipping school, and being impolite and disrespectful to parents (Muslihata et al., 2020), being spoiled (Muchimah, 2020), feeling less cared for (Utami et al., 2022), lacking manners, and often disturbing their friends (Rizki et al., 2017), having no friends (Suryadi et al., 2022), lacking affection, and attention (Puspitasari et al., 2020). They are fragile and have low wellbeing (Alfiasari et al., 2022).

As we are based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, children's attitudes, behavior and development are a reflection of the surrounding environment (Cross, 2017; Härkönen, 2007). In this case, the family is the child's nearest environment. Therefore, parenting is a crucial aspect that requires understanding. Previous research had focused on child development but did not delve into parenting in families with migrant worker mothers. Parenting is an effort by parents to care for their children, enabling them to develop and grow day by day (Handayani, 2018). Parents need to recognize and understand the quality of their parenting as a process of loving, caring for, listening to, guiding, and supporting their children (Santrock, 2011). Parenting has a long-term impact on children's lives in the future (Miller, 2016).

The researcher's initial observation revealed that children with migrant worker mothers were often cared for by more than one adult. Caregivers are a combination of grandmother and father, father and aunt, grandfather and grandmother, and others. One of the issues in caring for children with migrant workers is the difference in practices or concepts of care between grandmothers and parents (SMERU, 2013). Children with migrant worker mothers tend to be in a vulnerable position regarding their growth and development and experience attachment problems with their parents (Massalam, 2014; Wijayanto et al., 2022). Therefore, the researcher is interested in getting an overview of the practice of coparenting carried out by families.

METHODS

Researchers conducted interviews with several health care providers and community leaders at the research location, specifically Magersari Village, Patebon District, Kendal, Central Java. Magersari Village is one of the villages with a high number of migrant worker mothers. More than 30 adult women were migrant workers who left their children behind to work.

A researcher determining research subjects or informants uses the purposive sampling method. The subject criteria are families who have young children aged 4-6 years who are left behind by mothers working as migrant workers. In this study, there were 7 early childhood children in six families with migrant working mothers, and 3 teachers.

Researchers employed interviews, observation, and documentation to collect data. Interviews were conducted with caregivers and teachers, while observations were conducted with the children. A semi-structured interview was used in this research. The coparenting concept, as outlined by Feinberg, served as the basis for the interview guidelines.

Table 1. List of informants

No	Child	Informant
1	Mf	Grandmother, Father, Teacher
2	Hm	Grandmother, Father, Teacher
3	Ky	Grandfather, Grandmother, Teacher
4	Ft	Aunt, Teacher
5	Jg	Grandmother, Father, Teacher
6	Ar and Hf	Aunt, Father, Teacher

Observation is also used in data collection. The observations carried out were participant observations. Researchers visit schools and children's homes, acting as teachers for the children. Researchers also use the worksheet to gain insight into the child's development.

The validity of the data is obtained by testing credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. Credibility testing is conducted through three types of triangulations: source, technique, and time triangulation. The transferability test was carried out by including various research reports such as interview transcripts, observation reports, coding reports from Atlas.ti and data presentation. Confirmability tests are carried out by confirming the respondent's answer or asking again about something. Dependability testing is carried out by discussion with the lecturer. Data analysis was carried out with the help of Atlas.ti in stages by means of condensation, presentation, data compilation and then drawing conclusions.

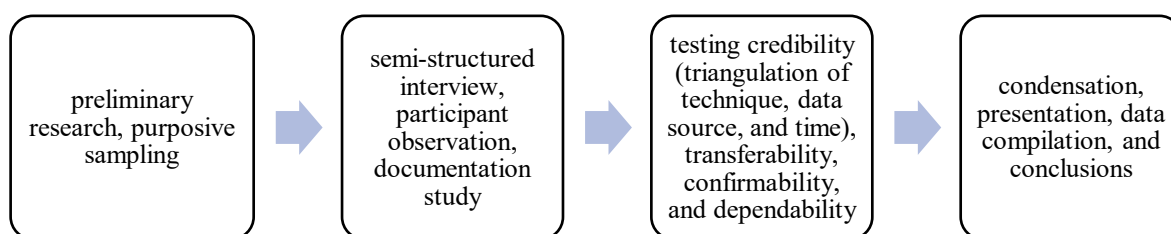


Figure 1. Process of Collecting and Analyzing Data

RESULT

The research results reveal diverse parenting patterns within each family studied. However, they have similarities in several crucial ways. Firstly, there is a main figure who serves as a substitute for the mother, fully responsible for caring for and fulfilling the child's daily needs, education, and completing household tasks. In Mf, Hm, and Jg the main caregiver figure is the grandmother. Grandmother simultaneously completes all household work, meets the child's physical needs, and takes the child to school. Ky's main caregiver is his grandfather. Grandpa fulfills Ky's needs regarding food, personal hygiene, such as bathing, and others, as well as taking him to and from school. Ft, Ar, and Hf are raised by their aunt.

The father, even though the mother goes to work, does not necessarily become the main caregiver in place of the mother. However, fathers still have a role to play in accompanying their children, even if only a small one. There are even some fathers who live separately from their children. Fathers usually take care of educational administration at the beginning of the school year, occasionally taking the children to school, accompanying them to the doctor, and taking them

for walks during their free time. Mothers try to be present in the care as much as possible via telephone connections nowadays, which are increasingly easy. However, not all children want to be invited to communicate with their mothers via telephone. The mother participates in limited parenting by asking her husband about the child's news and offering parenting advice when necessary.

Table 2. Role of the Caregiver

No	Child	Role Main Caregiver	Role Father	Role Mother
1	Mf	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	Playing together when we have time	Discuss with father about health problem, video call conversation with Mf
2	Hm	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	Pick up at school when grandmother didn't	Discuss the health problem with your father. Anxious and sad because Hm didn't want to communicate with mom
3	Ky	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	No role (divorce)	video call conversation with Mf
4	Ft	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	Take Ft to school; there's no play together or studying because Ft is afraid of her father.	Anxious and sad because Ft didn't want to communicate with mom
5	Jg	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	Playing together when we have time	Discuss with father about the education plan for the child
6	Ar & Hf	Feeding, Schooling, Health, and doing household chores	Playing together, taking children to school, and helping do the household	Discuss with father about the education plan for the child

When a mother chooses to work as a migrant worker, she trusts someone capable to care for her child. Research shows that children are often left by their mothers at a young age, such as 3 months, 8 months, 9 months, and 4 years. At these ages, children are typically not yet independent and still need substantial help from caregivers. Mothers frequently entrust all caregiving to substitutes like grandmothers, grandfathers, or aunts. The mother does not specify particular care standards for the substitute caregiver. Regardless of the parenting style the substitute adopts, the mother allows it. Parenting arrangements rely on trust and submission, which can include the substitute using strict discipline, threats, and harsh words without objections from the parents.

Grandmothers, grandfathers, and aunts, who are the main caregivers in this study, also perform all the household work. Fathers who are not primary caregivers sometimes help when they can. Grandma or grandpa never deliberately or by plan asked for help with household chores. However, one father from 6 families, Ar and Hf's father, takes quite a lot of roles, starting from

accompanying the children to play, accompanying them to sleep, taking them to school, washing clothes, and fetching clean water for cooking purposes. Ar and Hf's father did that even though he was also working. In this case, Ar and Hf's father and aunt had the best cooperation compared to other families in the study.

Children of mothers with migrant workers are accustomed to growing and developing without the mother's direct presence. Children often form strong attachments to their grandmothers, grandfathers, or aunts as primary caregivers. Fathers and mothers, as the parties who ask the main caregivers for help in caring for their children, trust and submit to whatever parenting techniques are used. The main caregivers in this study exhibited varying parenting styles, including the use of threats and punishment, harsh words, and strict adherence to the child's daily rules. Research shows that neither fathers nor mothers ever protest against the way their children are raised. Fathers and mothers prefer to be grateful that their children have someone to care for.

Conflicts in parenting or household work are something that rarely occur between grandmothers, grandfathers, fathers, and/or aunts. The submission that mothers and fathers have towards the main caregiver means that fathers and mothers do not complain about how their children are cared for. Communication and cooperation between the father and the main caregiver are also carried out, if necessary, for example, when taking the child to the doctor, seeking solutions to the child's health problems, and the father helping with some household tasks.

Table 3. Overview Coparenting Practice

Childrearing agreement	Labor Division	Support-Undermining	Conflict Management
Agreement replaced by parental submission.	No intention to share the household chores. The main caregiver does almost all the household.	Parents support all forms of parenting from the primary caregiver. The main caregiver is the parent or biological family of the father or mother.	No conflict between adults. Everyone supports each other and accepts whatever form of parenting is carried out.

DISCUSSION

Women or mothers are generally considered the primary caregivers when a family has children at an early age (Aini & Hernawati, 2016). This study shows that the mother was not present as a caregiver. For some reason, her mother chose to work as an international migrant worker, leaving her very young child behind. Mothers are generally considered to be the primary caregivers responsible for raising children (Syarif, 2018). However, when the mother chooses to become an international migrant worker, the mother is no longer a child caretaker, and an imbalance (disequilibrium) occurs. The absence of a mother in a family is considered non-normative. According to functionalism theory, the imbalance caused by the absence of the mother will make other parts move towards balance (Fakih, 2022). In this unequal and normative situation, family members take on the role of the child's primary caregiver. The substitute caregiver is usually a woman, namely a grandmother or aunt (Massalam, 2014). Father's care is still not considered significant (Pruett et al., 2017).

There are various forms of family, such as nuclear dyad family, nuclear family, binuclear family, extended family, blended family, and single-parent family (Kaakinen et al., 2010). The phenomenon that exists in rural areas, especially in the family that is the research context, is the extended family. The families in this study consisted of father, mother, grandmother, grandfather,

and aunt or other family members. Various theoretical studies have demonstrated that the Western concept of the nuclear family is not in alignment with social reality in everyday life in many Third World countries. Developing countries often have diverse family structures, despite patriarchy still being strongly embedded (Fakih, 2022). However, many studies in the 1990s showed that many children throughout the world live in extended families that may consist of father, mother, younger siblings, older siblings, grandmothers, aunts, and others (Bornstein, 2002). The results showed that all families in this study were large families. This occurs when the mother has to play no role in parenting because she is working; the father does not automatically become a substitute caregiver but rather a grandmother, aunt, or grandfather.

Mother's Surrender and Trust

The first component of coparenting is child-rearing agreement. The agreement component in parenting is related to differences in opinion regarding values, such as moral values, discipline, educational standards, and priorities, as well as security, relationships with peers, and others (Feinberg, 2002, 2003). The practice of coparenting requires an agreement in parenting regarding this matter. The research results show that there is no difference in values in parenting. Fathers and mothers all follow the parenting methods and values held by the main caregiver, be it grandfather, grandmother, or aunt. This is out of gratitude, surrender, and respect for caregivers who are parents or siblings.

This research reveals that there are three children who are primarily cared for by a grandmother as their main caregiver. Apart from being the main caregiver, the grandmother also does almost all the household work. The parents then provide remuneration in the form of material on an ongoing basis (Septiani & Kewuel, 2021). Grandma's many roles automatically make fathers and mothers more resigned and less inclined to follow their own parenting ways. This is in accordance with the opinion of Feinberg (2003), who states that when there is one caregiver whose role is very dominant, the non-dominant caregiver will tend to accept and follow all the decisions of the dominant caregiver.

This agreement in parenting is related to the values and rules that become daily habits and patterns in parenting. However, the quality of care should be improved because, according to research, inadequate care from parents or grandmothers has a negative influence on the education of migrant workers' children (Kusumawati & Rindrayani, 2024). Research findings show that inappropriate parenting methods, such as threatening, punishing, locking up, nagging, speaking harshly, and in a high tone, are then agreed upon, normalized, and condoned. Research indicates that parenting styles that are either too authoritarian or too permissive can have a negative impact on a child's personality (Miller, 2016). Parenting style also has an impact on educational success.

A mother's surrender and trust manifest in the parenting that closely follows the parenting of grandma or grandpa. Grandma and grandpa, of course, are not the best in parenting. Parents should learn about recent parenting or at least positive parenting and share it with their grandparents, aunts, or uncles so that their child receives the best care.

Communication and Cooperation

The second component is support or undermining, which relates to the support parents provide for one another. Do parents recognize each other's competence and value each other's contributions to parenting and support each other's parenting decisions and authority (Feinberg, 2002). The research results indicate that parents support one another in healthcare. Children who get sick easily, children who experience developmental delays, and solutions are all sought together and

mutually agreed upon. This indicates that the family fulfills a healthcare function even when the mother is not present. The role of healthcare is crucial for families (Kaakinen et al., 2010), particularly in early childhood.

The mother, who is generally the primary caregiver, should assume a supervisory role and fulfill the child's needs (Bornstein, 2002). In migrant worker families, this role is often assumed by the grandmother, who collaborates with the father. Parents who support each other and have minimal conflict in front of their children will provide good experiences and impacts on the child's development (Trisnadi & Andayani, 2021). Other research indicates that parents who can effectively manage their behavior and emotions tend to provide their children with better socio-emotional development and less disruptive behavior (Murano et al., 2020). In this research, the family, comprising a grandmother and father, an aunt and father, and a grandfather and grandmother, supports each other.

Father's Minimum Role

The third component is the labor division, which relates to the division of obligations, duties, and responsibilities for daily routines, childcare, household tasks, financial, legal, and health matters, among others. Many mothers report that the main issues that give rise to postnatal conflict are everyday household issues (Feinberg, 2003). Research even shows that mothers often experience depression 3 years after giving birth due to a lack of family support and daily routines (Santos et al., 2024). Coparenting within a family has been shown to reduce maternal stress and increase satisfaction (Lu et al., 2024).

In the case of this research, the grandmother, aunt, or grandfather typically occupies the mother's position as caregiver and is also responsible for household affairs. Therefore, support and assistance, as well as cooperation between family members, are crucial to provide them. The existing patriarchal culture means that women are always the main actors in parenting and domestic affairs (Fakih, 2022). Of the 6 families, 4 placed women, namely grandmothers or aunts, as caregivers and household managers responsible for cleanliness, neatness, and food needs. This is in line with other research, which states that when mothers become migrant workers, fathers are unable to care for children and leave them with the family (Astuti, 2013). The role of fathers in caregiving is still small in this era, even in developed countries (Pruett et al., 2017). The research results show that only two families have men playing an active role in caregiving or household work, namely Ky's grandfather and the twins' father.

It can be concluded that in this component, there is no clear division of tasks. However, the division of roles just happened naturally. Although several studies indicate that the role of fathers also has a significant impact on children's development (Cardenas et al., 2022). The father's role is also important in preparing the foundation for children's development in any family situation (Pruett et al., 2017). The family atmosphere is very important because the family is a microsystem where children are directly and continuously influenced by the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cross, 2017; Härkönen, 2007).

No Conflict Interaction

This fourth component is parental management in interaction patterns within the family, which has three aspects, namely: conflict, coalition, and balance. The first aspect of conflict between the two parents has often been linked to the child's aggressive and emotional behavior, and triggers internal disturbances and other problems. The influence of internal parental conflict that begins at an early age will trigger stress in children (Feinberg, 2003). Good mental health from parents has

been shown to have a significant impact on children, even in the womb (Cardenas et al., 2022). Therefore, conflict management is very important in the family. Children's life experiences in early childhood are crucial for their cognitive and socio-emotional development (Rodrigues et al., 2021); therefore, an environment with minimal conflict is essential for children. Previous research indicates that stress resulting from poor conflict management can have genetic effects on early childhood (Cardenas et al., 2022).

In this research, it was found that there was very little conflict between fathers and/or mothers and grandmothers, aunts, or grandfathers who were the main caregivers. The relationship between fathers and primary caregivers, most of whom are mothers, and children or brothers and sisters, fosters respect and trust, allowing fathers to surrender all caregiving responsibilities to them, thereby minimizing conflict. A sense of trust, respect, and gratitude means that conflict never occurs. An environment with minimal conflict and threats for children will foster their trust in the world and optimal development (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

The dominant role of grandmothers, grandfathers, or aunts in parenting and the household also makes fathers and mothers trust and follow the care of whichever grandmother, grandfather, or aunt is involved. Even though parenting by grandmothers or grandfathers is often associated with inappropriate parenting, such as permissiveness that frees children (Haryani et al., 2022), fathers and mothers still have complete trust in caregivers who have been given their trust from the start. The coparenting that occurs in the families of these informants is based on submission, trust, and gratitude, resulting in minimal conflict. Apart from that, cooperation with each other remains as long as there is time. Mothers also strive to be present in their children's lives through telephone calls. Father and mother, as the child's primary caregivers, also maintain intense communication regarding the child's progress in growth and development.

CONCLUSION

Families carry out coparenting for early childhood with migrant worker mothers. The family agrees on rules and discipline in parenting that is based on submission and trust. The primary caregiver in this study was a grandmother, grandfather, or aunt. They have the main task of caring for and doing household chores. Fathers often have a limited role in parenting and household work. However, all family members, including mothers, respect each other, support one another, communicate effectively, and work together in raising their children. Inappropriate but mutually agreed-upon forms of parenting are still found, such as threatening, punishing, or using harsh language. The recommendation is to provide education for the families of migrant workers to improve the quality of care and stimulate children's development.

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