

Involved Fathers and Intensive Parenting in Czechia: Norms and Fathers' Contextualised Practices

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Abstract

Intensive parenting norms that emphasise high parental investment to optimise child development are increasingly prevalent in advanced economies. Although motherhood has been widely studied, fatherhood remains underexplored, especially in contexts like Czechia, where support for shared childcare between parents is limited. Using data from the Czech ISSP 2022 and qualitative interviews with Czech middle-class fathers and mothers (2022–2024), this study examines how intensive parenting norms shape the views and practices of fathers' involvement in childcare. The survey results show similar levels of support for intensive parenting norms among men and women, irrespective of expectations about paternal care. The interviews reveal three intensive parenting patterns: maternal-specialised, stimulation-oriented, and partially egalitarian. Although mothers bear the main emotional and logistical burden, fathers' participation in childcare remains selective. The findings highlight how intensive parenting norms are enacted in gendered ways, shaped by persistently gendered cultural and institutional constraints.

Keywords

fatherhood; intensive parenting; involved fathers; mixed-methods study

1. Introduction

This study explores the interplay between two main trends that have shaped contemporary parenting norms over recent decades: rising intensive parenting expectations and the growing ideal of "involved fatherhood" (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000), reflected in a marked increase in the time devoted to childcare by mothers

and fathers (Craig et al., 2014; Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016). Intensive parenting norms, originally conceptualised as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), are increasingly understood as universal parenting standards (Faircloth, 2014; Gauthier et al., 2021). They require parents to prioritise the needs of the child, invest extensive time and money in them, and follow expert advice to ensure the optimal development and future success of the child (Ennis, 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Gauthier et al., 2021; Hays, 1996). In parallel, shifting gender expectations have promoted the ideal of involved or nurturant fatherhood. Fathers are increasingly expected to take part in daily childcare and be emotionally engaged and build close relationships with their children (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000; McGill, 2014).

Together, these developments raise the question of how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers and their participation in daily care. Prior studies show that the endorsement of intensive parenting norms often coexists with competing gender beliefs—either with gender-essentialist beliefs that position mothers as naturally better suited to caregiving or with egalitarian beliefs that emphasise the shared responsibility of both parents (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Lankes, 2022). This pattern is also observed in the Czech context (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b). However, the link between the endorsement of intensive parenting norms and the actual participation of fathers in daily care remains underexplored.

Previous qualitative studies on intensive parenting in Czechia have predominantly focused on mothers, revealing a pronounced variation in manifestations of child-centred and time- and resource-intensive parenting practices. Interviews with mothers identified four intensive mothering repertoires, which differ in the emphasis on different forms of capital and in the extent to which they reflect gender-essentialist beliefs (Hašková & Dudová, 2025).

This study offers a novel contribution by examining how intensive parenting norms shape perceptions of fathers' involvement in childcare and fathers' childcare practices in Czechia. However, its contribution extends beyond the national level, as few studies have explicitly explored how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers' involvement in childcare. We examine whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' involvement in childcare, i.e., whether they reflect a shift towards less gendered parenting or whether they reinforce traditional divisions of roles within the family.

This study adopts a mixed-method design, combining quantitative analysis of nationally representative data from the Czech International Survey Programme (ISSP) 2022 with a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with Czech middle-class mothers and fathers. The survey data allow us to examine associations between support for intensive parenting and attitudes towards fathers' involvement in daily childcare and situate Czech attitudes within a broader European context. Qualitative interviews provide deeper insight into how middle-class mothers and fathers who endorse intensive parenting norms experience, negotiate, and make sense of father caregiving roles. By integrating these approaches, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers' participation in childcare, revealing both broad patterns in attitudes and the nuanced ways these norms are interpreted and enacted in everyday lives. The study contributes to the literature by showing how, in the Czech context, intensive parenting is enacted in gendered ways and how fathers' involvement is shaped by the interplay between cultural expectations and institutional constraints.

2. The Czech Context

Czechia provides a particularly relevant setting for studying the relationship between intensive parenting norms and fathers' involvement. It exemplifies broader patterns across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where intensive parenting ideals have emerged within policy frameworks that continue to prioritise maternal care. Like many other CEE countries, Czechia underwent major social and economic transformations in the 1990s, shifting from a centrally planned to a free market economy, and from policies supporting mothers' employment to gendered refamilialist policies marked by a significant drop in the number of childcare facilities and the introduction of other policies that undermined mothers' employment and enforced the traditional gendered division of work (Hašková & Saxonberg, 2016; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Overall, CEE countries are characterised by low cultural (Lomazzi, 2022) and weak policy support for fathers' caregiving and a limited emphasis placed on childcare services for children under the age of three. However, the specific policy mix varies among CEE countries, as there is more than one family policy model in the region (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020, 2023).

Even among CEE countries, Czechia ranks among those with the lowest provision of childcare services for children under the age of three (OECD, 2025). Its policies are explicitly familialist, are aimed at privatising childcare (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020, 2023), and provide fathers with comparatively short and poorly paid leave, which, together with the lengthy leave periods for mothers, limits the potential to support fathers in caregiving and transform gender norms (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020). Czech family policies combine limited availability of childcare for children under the age of three and low policy support for fathers' caregiving with extended parental leave that reinforces maternal primacy in early childcare (Hašková & Dudová, 2017; Nešporová, 2019a). Fathers are discouraged from taking parental leave due to its inflexibility, the flat-rate benefit, the structure of the Czech tax system, and the absence of nontransferable paid parental leave rights. Although the norm of full-time motherhood and breadwinner fatherhood during a child's early years remains predominant, expectations for higher father involvement in childcare have increased in Czechia in recent decades (Kuchařová et al., 2020).

CEE countries have also seen the increasing spread of intensive parenting ideals, shaped by the expansion of market-driven childrearing services and increasing parental concern with developing children's human capital (Gauthier et al., 2021; Kutrová & Nikolett, 2022; Lojdová & Manea, 2025; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020; Volejníčková Marková, 2024). These processes have been reinforced by the privatisation and diversification of preschool services (Jarkovská et al., 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020) and increased selectivity in schooling (Kogan et al., 2012; Straková et al., 2017). Recent findings show that support for intensive parenting norms in Czechia is moderate overall, with no significant gender differences. These norms are most strongly reflected in the emphasis on stimulating children's development, particularly through organised activities, which are endorsed by nearly two-thirds of the population (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b).

Czech time-use data show that mothers spend more time than fathers on basic childcare, while the gender gap in interactive care, such as talking and playing, is smaller and narrows as children grow. Higher-educated fathers spend more time in childcare than those with lower education, but the gender gap persists, as higher-educated mothers also increase their involvement (Klímová Chaloupková & Pospíšilová, 2024). In addition, increased caregiving time is associated with higher perceived time stress among mothers, but not fathers, suggesting that caregiving remains socially constructed as a maternal duty, whereas paternal involvement is often experienced as voluntary (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025a).

3. Theoretical Background and Previous Studies

3.1. *Intensive Parenting Norms*

Intensive parenting norms are commonly understood as a multidimensional set of beliefs that emphasise child-centredness, stimulating children's development, often through organised activities, personal responsibility for children's well-being, reliance on expert advice (Gauthier et al., 2021), and viewing parenting as demanding yet fulfilling (Liss et al., 2013). While originally framed as a maternal responsibility (Hays, 1996), recent studies show these norms can reflect both gender-essentialist or gender-egalitarian beliefs (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b; Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Lankes, 2022).

Even in the Czech context with rather conservative gender beliefs, support for intensive parenting norms is more associated with beliefs in shared family responsibilities than with support for maternal primacy in family responsibilities (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b). Still, about a third of those endorsing shared intensive parenting responsibilities believe that mothers are better suited for caregiving, highlighting the persistence of hybrid or transitional beliefs in Czechia (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b).

Prior quantitative studies have generally found limited gender differences in the endorsement of intensive parenting norms (Ishizuka, 2019; Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b), though women tend to score higher on parental responsibility (Gauthier et al., 2021). Findings from Sweden, in contrast, suggest that acceptance of intensive parenting norms is more prevalent among women than men (Mollborn & Billingsley, 2024).

Qualitative studies show that mothers and fathers internalise and enact these norms differently. In a study of Czech parents, Nešporová (2019b) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to enact elements of intensive parenting and often viewed their care as irreplaceable, reflecting their role as primary caregivers during early childhood. Fathers, by contrast, showed fewer signs of enacting intensive parenting practices (Nešporová, 2019b). Similarly, Shirani et al. (2012), in a study from the UK, found that while both mothers and fathers valued parental influence on child development, fathers were less shaped by expert parenting discourse and relied more on "common sense." Mothers, by contrast, felt a stronger moral responsibility and greater anxiety about meeting parenting standards (Shirani et al., 2012). In addition, a study from Belgium shows that mothers are more likely than fathers to internalise societal pressure to be a perfect parent, even when they do not personally endorse intensive parenting norms (Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Consequently, despite increasing support for shared family responsibilities (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b), intensive parenting norms may not necessarily translate into (preferences for) higher fathers' involvement in daily caregiving, which may still be seen as primarily the mother's domain (Nešporová, 2019b). These tensions between egalitarian ideals and the persisting primacy of maternal responsibility highlight the need to examine how fathers' involvement is conceptualised and enacted.

3.2. *Involved Fatherhood and the Dimensions of Paternal Involvement*

The ideal of "involved fatherhood" or "intimate fathering" emphasises fathers' emotional engagement and participation in daily care, contrasting with the traditional provider role (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000). Fathers' direct involvement with children is commonly described through three dimensions: engagement

(direct interaction with children, such as feeding or playing), accessibility (being physically and emotionally available), and responsibility (organising care, doctor visits, or school decisions; Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Nevertheless, this model remains fluid and diverse, and intimate fathering/involved fatherhood depends more on emotional engagement than on time spent together (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000).

In addition to active involvement with the child, the empirical evidence suggests that economic provision remains a key part of the way in which men see themselves as involved fathers (Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Shirani et al., 2012). This may be particularly relevant in the context of intensive parenting, which often requires significant economic investment in future child success, for example, through private schooling or organised extracurricular activities.

Prior research shows that intensive parenting operates as a moral ideal that guides parental aspirations but is enacted selectively, often limited by material resources and institutional settings (Faircloth, 2014; Minnotte, 2023; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Although fathers increasingly endorse intensive parenting ideals, they often express them through selective forms of engagement—such as educational, leisure, or emotionally supportive activities—rather than routine caregiving (Dermott, 2017; Shirani et al., 2012). Moreover, studies of fathers' involvement show that workplace and policy contexts crucially influence men's ability to participate in care, with long hours and inflexible jobs limiting engagement (McGill, 2014).

To address our overarching question—whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' engagement in childrearing—we examine two interrelated aspects of this relationship. First, we explore how intensive parenting norms shape attitudes towards fathers' involvement, that is, whether they align with egalitarian or traditional expectations about the division of childcare. In doing so, we also situate Czech attitudes in a broader European context. Understanding attitudinal patterns is essential, as norms set the moral and cultural boundaries within which parenting practices unfold. Second, we explore how these norms are enacted in practice concerning fathers' involvement and under what conditions intensive parenting norms reinforce or challenge gendered divisions of daily care.

4. Data and Methods

This study applies a convergent mixed-methods design, combining analyses of survey and interview data. The quantitative analysis explores general patterns in attitudes across the Czech population, while the qualitative analysis provides in-depth insight into how intensive parenting norms shape practices of fathers' involvement in caregiving.

4.1. The Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analyses draw on data from the ISSP 2022 (ISSP Research Group, 2025), a cross-national survey with recurring thematic modules. First, to situate Czech attitudes within an European context, we compared views on fathers' involvement in daily childcare and perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence across all European countries available in the 2022 international ISSP dataset (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked: "Please consider a family with a father and a mother raising a five-year-old child. In your opinion, who should take care of the child on a daily basis?" The response options were: *mostly the mother*, *somewhat more the mother*, *both equally*, *somewhat more the father*, and *mostly the father*. Perceived caregiving competence was

measured by agreement with the statement: "Fathers are equally capable of caring for children as mothers." The responses were measured on a 5-point scale.

Second, to examine the association between support for intensive parenting and attitudes towards fathers' involvement (see Table 1), we used the Czech ISSP 2022 sample (Hamplová & Klusáček, 2025). The Czech data include three additional questions covering key dimensions of intensive parenting norms: child-centredness, stimulation of child development, and reliance on expert advice (Gauthier et al., 2021; Liss et al., 2013). These are not available in internationally comparative data. These dimensions (in the order mentioned) were measured by agreement with the statements: "Children's needs should have priority over parents' needs," "Children should take part in various organised activities to reach their potential," and "Good parents should follow expert advice on child development." Responses were measured on a 5-point scale.

We estimated multinomial logistic regression models for the preferences that daily care be done *somewhat more by the mother and at least equally by the father* (reference category: *mostly the mother*), based on agreement with the three key dimensions of intensive parenting norms and perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence. The analytical sample includes all respondents with valid answers to the questions on intensive parenting norms, perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence, and the preferred division of childcare ($N = 1,225$: 496 men, 729 women). A robustness check limited to parents of minors is shown in the Supplementary Table S3. Models controlled for education, age, number and age of children, partnership status, and work status, which are expected to be associated with agreement with intensive parenting norms and the preferred gender division of daily childcare (Begall et al., 2023; Gauthier et al., 2021; McGill, 2014). Models were estimated separately for women and men to capture potential gender differences, as intensive parenting norms may have different meanings for mothers and fathers (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). In addition, preliminary analyses also revealed gender differences in these associations. For descriptive analyses using Czech ISSP 2022 data, we applied post-stratification weights. For international comparisons, we used a combined design and post-stratification weights to account for differences in sampling designs across countries.

4.2. The Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis draws on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022–2024 focusing on parenting. We interviewed 21 mothers and eight fathers (among them one couple; parents interviewed separately), each with at least one child aged 6–12. Participants were selected using snowball and purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of mothers and fathers who adhere to the norms of intensive parenting (Ennis, 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996).

The resulting sample was homogenous, with most participants university-educated, living with a partner, and belonging to the middle or upper-middle class. All fathers were employed full-time, while some mothers had not yet returned to employment or worked part-time, occasionally, or full-time. About half of the participants resided in large cities and half in small towns or villages, and had one to three children. The interviews covered parenting practices, the division of labour in the family, combining childcare with paid work, decisions regarding childcare institutions, schools, and extracurricular activities, parenting expert knowledge, ideals, emotions, and self-assessments. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet locations and lasted 60–90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudonymised, coded, and

analysed using Atlas.ti software. Participants provided informed consent for the interviews to be used for research purposes.

The semi-structured interviews made it possible to address the central theme of parenting while providing the flexibility to explore topics that participants deemed significant. The homogeneity of the sample enabled a focused examination of the parenting of higher-educated, partnered, middle-class parents and saturation in the basic analytical categories. Data collection and analysis were conducted using Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, which employs abstraction by integrating conceptualisation into the description, focuses on narrative, and aims to create an interpretive framework that reflects subjective realities. The strength of the constructivist grounded theory approach is its ability to produce an analytical narrative (or narratives) with explanatory and predictive power. The initial coding of the interviews involved categorising relevant sections into thematic groups and identifying new topics that emerged during the interviews. We then grouped the codes and explored the relationships between them, mainly focusing on categories interlinking narratives on intensive parenting norms and fathering. In this study, we focused on the interviews with fathers and on the coded sections of the interviews with mothers that concerned their partners and especially (but not exclusively) their fathering practices (or lack thereof).

The imbalance between the number of mothers and fathers interviewed resulted from the sampling design. We firstly interviewed mothers with a high level of time investment in childcare who practised parenting in accordance with the norms of intensive parenting and asked them to refer us to other parents with similar profiles or who used different parenting practices but adhered to the norms of intensive parenting. This approach enabled us to interview mothers with diverse styles of intensive mothering (Hašková & Dudová, 2025). However, the interviewed mothers only recommended other mothers. We subsequently focused on recruiting fathers but got few recommendations for other fathers from our interviewees—likely because fatherhood remains less discussed than motherhood in individual social networks in Czechia, and because fathering practices may be more hidden from outside observers than mothering. In Czechia, mothers are mostly the ones who interrupt their careers because of parenthood, attend children's clubs, and perform most of the daily childcare (Klímová Chaloupková & Pospíšilová, 2024). The smaller proportion of fathers among the interviewees is a limitation of this study, which could reinforce the perspective of mothers and marginalise the perspective of fathers in the analysis. The presented analysis is therefore based primarily on the interviews with fathers, which are analysed in relation to the interviews with mothers.

5. Results

5.1. Population-Level Attitudes Toward Fathers' Involvement in Childcare and Intensive Parenting

The ISSP 2022 data indicate that caregiving expectations in Czechia remain gendered, with fathers still largely viewed as secondary caregivers. Over half of respondents believe that mothers should take greater responsibility for daily childcare in families with pre-school children, while only 46% support equal sharing between parents. Although Czechia is not among the most traditional countries in this regard—such as Bulgaria or Slovakia—it also does not align with the strongly egalitarian norms prevalent in many Nordic and Western European countries, where equal division of care is widely expected (Figure 1). These patterns are reflected in beliefs about gendered caregiving competence: About half of the Czech respondents agree that mothers are better suited than fathers to caregiving, compared to roughly 20% in Norway, France, or

Germany. Still, Czechia remains less gender-essentialist than some other post-socialist countries, such as Hungary (59%), Slovakia (63%), and Bulgaria (71%).

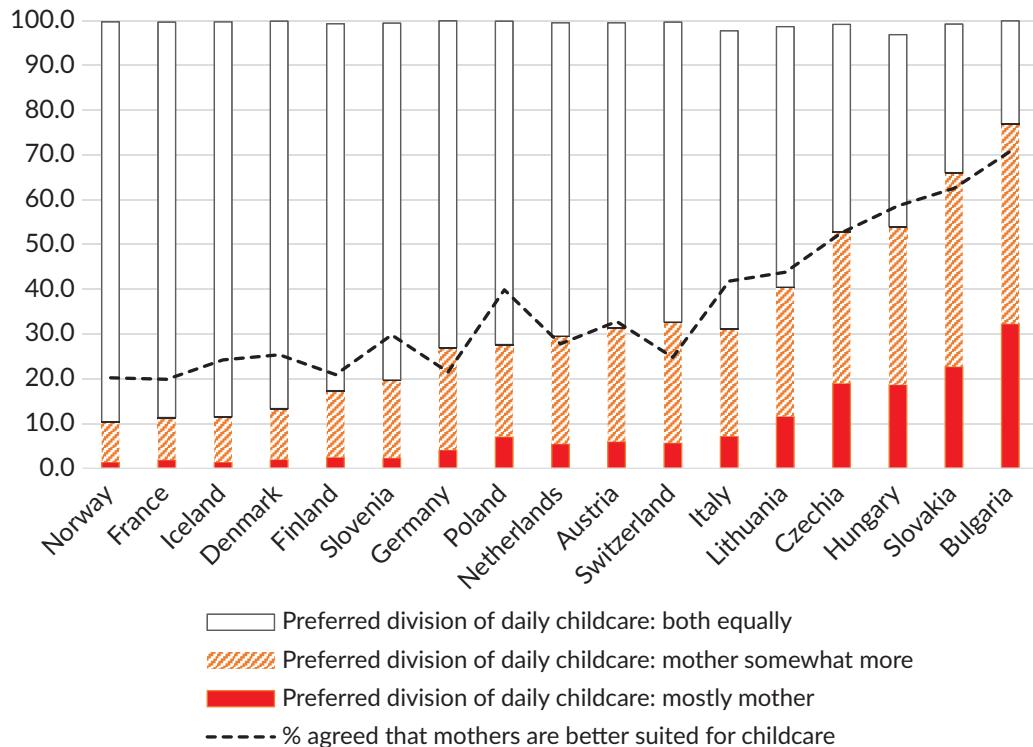


Figure 1. Attitudes on the daily division of childcare and gendered childcare competence in a comparative perspective. Notes: Based on ISSP 2022, using weights; responses referred to a family with a 5-year-old child; responses indicating “mostly the fathers” complete the total to 100%.

While daily childcare primarily remains associated with mothers in Czechia, if it comes to other domains such as play, leisure, teaching, behaviour, emotional support, and role modelling, Czech ISSP 2022 data show the prevailing norm favours equal parental involvement (see Supplementary File, Table S1). At the same time, a strong majority still sees financial provision to be the father’s role. Taken together, these findings show that Czechia reflects a partial and selective embrace of fathers’ involvement: Fathers are increasingly seen as engaged parents, but not as equal caregivers.

Table 1 summarises how attitudes towards fathers’ involvement in daily childcare relate to support for intensive parenting norms in Czechia. It presents the share of respondents within each attitudinal group on the daily division of childcare—those favouring primary maternal care, favouring somewhat more maternal care, or favouring equal sharing—who agree with each intensive parenting item. The results are shown separately for men and women to highlight gender differences.

The endorsement of intensive parenting norms does not necessarily translate into expectations of higher paternal involvement in daily childcare. For both men and women, support for child-centredness and for stimulating child development with organised activities does not significantly differ between those favouring primary maternal responsibility and those supporting shared childcare. However, views on expert-guided parenting vary by gender: among women, agreement is highest among those supporting maternal care (55%)

and lowest among those favouring equal responsibility (41%), while among men, differences across attitudes towards the division of daily childcare are not statistically significant.

Table 1. Support for intensive parenting norms and attitudes towards the division of daily childcare by gender.

Dimensions of intensive parenting norms	Men			Total	Women			Total
	Mother mostly	Mother somewhat more	Father at least equally		Mother mostly	Mother somewhat more	Father at least equally	
Child-centredness	56.4	48.9	48.80	50.2	43.8	44.7	47.8	46.0
Stimulation of child development	70.1	64.9	66.3	66.5	73.3	64.4	65.9	66.9
Expert-guidance	48.1	41.9	49.9	46.7	55.3	45.9	40.6	45.3*

Notes: Based on the Czech ISSP 2022, post-stratification weights; unweighted $N = 1,225$ (496 men, 729 women); * χ^2 tests $p < .05$; percentages show the share of respondents in each attitudinal group on the division of daily childcare who agree or strongly agree with each of the three key dimensions of intensive parenting norms; attitudes towards the division of daily childcare refer to a family with a five-year-old child; the column "Total" refers to the overall percentage of men and women (across all attitudinal groups) who agree or strongly agree with the given intensive parenting dimension.

To assess how support for intensive parenting norms relates to expectations about fathers' involvement in daily childcare while accounting for socio-demographic factors and beliefs about gendered caregiving competence, Figure 2 presents average marginal effects (AMEs) from multinomial logistic regressions estimated separately for men and women. Since beliefs about gendered caregiving competence proved to significantly affect the preference for fathers' involvement in daily childcare, Figure 2 also displays this relationship.

Full estimates from the multinomial logistic regressions, including odds ratios, are shown in the Supplementary File, Table S1. The regressions showed that beliefs about gendered caregiving competence are a strong predictor of the preferred division of daily childcare. Agreement that "a mother is better suited to childcare" reduces the preference for equal paternal involvement by about 0.23 ($p < 0.001$) for both genders. The effects of intensive parenting norms on attitudes towards the division of daily childcare vary by dimension and gender: among women, a stronger endorsement of stimulating child development increases support for maternal responsibility (AME = 0.07, $p < 0.10$), and a greater reliance on expert advice both increases support for maternal responsibility (AME = 0.07, $p < 0.05$) and decreases support for equal sharing (AME = -0.11, $p < 0.10$). In contrast, among men, the association between expert guidance and equal paternal involvement is positive but not significant (AME = 0.05), and the effect is even stronger among fathers (see Supplementary File, Table S3). For both women and men, endorsing child-centredness is not significantly related to the preferred division of childcare.

The regression results also revealed socio-demographic differences. Men and women with medium or high education are less likely than those with low education to prefer that only mothers should handle daily childcare. Childless women are less likely than mothers to support exclusive maternal care, while mothers with children up to age six are more likely to favour the "mostly the mother" option. In contrast, among men, we found no differences in views based on parental status (see Supplementary File, Table S1)

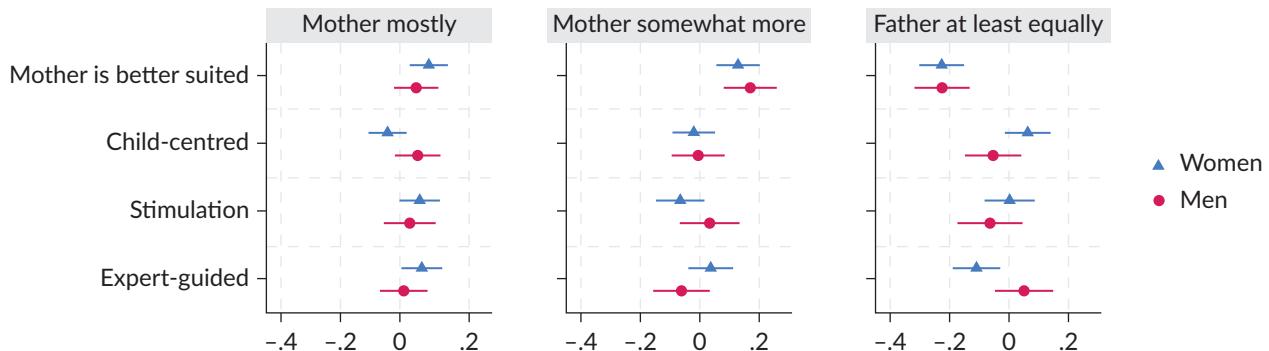


Figure 2. Effects of the endorsement of intensive parenting norms and of views on gendered competence in childcare on the preferred division of daily childcare. Notes: Average marginal effects of the preferred division of daily childcare, estimated from gender-specific multinomial logistic regression models (see Supplementary File, Table S2); controls include age, number and age of children, employment status, and partnership status; reference categories: disagreement with the statement that “a mother is better suited to childcare” and with the intensive parenting items.

In sum, Czech men and women endorse intensive parenting norms at similar levels, but this support does not lead to stronger expectations for fathers’ involvement in daily childcare. Instead, these norms often coexist with traditional beliefs about mothers’ primary responsibility for caregiving, suggesting that they may reinforce rather than challenge gendered divisions of childcare. However, the survey data only captures attitudes and does not reflect how these norms are enacted in everyday caregiving.

5.2. Intensive Parenting Norms in the Practices of Fathering: Qualitative Insights

The analysis of interviews with middle-class mothers and fathers in Czechia who endorse intensive parenting norms highlights four key themes that emerged from their narratives to explain how intensive parenting norms shape fathers’ involvement in childcare: (a) the internalisation of responsibility for children’s future success, (b) the pursuit of stimulation and expert-informed guidance, (c) the conditions that enable or constrain fathers’ daily involvement in care, and (d) the role of peer networks. The interviews revealed diverse patterns of fathers’ involvement in daily childcare, shaped by a combination of institutional constraints, personal values, and work conditions. Alongside maternal specialisation in childcare and a father’s supportive role, we identified egalitarian parenting arrangements with high paternal involvement in daily childcare, as well as stimulation-oriented fathering focused on educational, extracurricular, or structured activities.

5.2.1. Responsibility

Although responsibility for children is a general feature of parenthood, the belief that parental influence will have a decisive impact on children’s development is central to intensive parenting. All the interviewed parents felt a great responsibility for raising their children and believed that their actions would have a fundamental impact on how their children would turn out as adults and their children’s future success:

I believe that the time and energy I invest in children will have a significant positive impact on their functioning in society in the future. (Ladislav, father)

A child becomes well or poorly behaved based on their parents' influence 90% of the time. Genetics certainly plays a role, but it's mainly how their parents raised them. (Kryštof, father)

Moreover, the interviewed fathers emphasised not only guiding their children and cultivating their children's talents but also self-regulating their own behaviour to provide an example of desired traits. They self-reflectively evaluated their own characteristics they were trying to change to become better fathers for their children, driven by a belief in their decisive responsibility for shaping their children's future:

If I want to pass on a certain attitude towards life, it should be reflected in my behaviour as well. (Kryštof, father)

We are really connected with my wife, and I think we work very organically together and discuss things...that's what children perceive very sensitively...it's actually that raising children is also raising myself....I come from a family where my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father all had a bit of a problem with being hot-tempered and choleric. I struggled with it myself. And I have overcome this beast....I also see this kind of hot-headedness in my sons...so I also see a role in...showing them the way out of that. (Ladislav, father)

5.2.2. Stimulation and Expert Guidance

While fathers agreed with their responsibility for their children's development, they differed in how to achieve it. These differing opinions were often justified by citing the "expert knowledge" that dominated in their reference groups, online sources, or personal values. Some prioritised investing time, money, networks, and skills to secure their children's admission to elite kindergarten, school, and extracurricular programmes that would strengthen their children's social networks and future prospects:

At our school, many parents probably have ambitions that they pass on to their children, and then the children are like that....In the upper grades, I may need to study so that I can advise my daughter, but I don't mind. We knew it would be a more demanding school than average, but we chose it because it would give her a solid foundation for working life and probably also some connections, and it probably won't be a problem for her to get into university if she chooses one, which we both assume she will. There are children at that school who are more successful in their careers because it is difficult to get into that school, and it is a private school, and the children motivate each other a lot...to progress even faster in their knowledge and skills. By investing both time and money in her education, we are laying the foundations for her to obtain a university degree and find a career that she enjoys and that will also provide her with a reasonable living. (Pavel, father)

I basically take care of the boy's free time. In our village, the kids...just have one club once a week and that's it....I see his friends just hanging out...there is plenty of trouble he could get into...so it's better that he's training five days a week....I think that collective sports are great for him...so he knows how to be part of a group and how to achieve goals...the question is whether he will get into an academic high school...it depends on me, how much time I put into the preparation....The mock tests can be downloaded from the internet....I will do the preparation with him myself. (Oliver, father)

Others have invested considerable financial and time resources to ensure that their children attend forest kindergartens and small, alternative “niche” schools that better match their ideas about their children’s needs:

We obviously must pay more for a forest kindergarten than if our children went to a regular state kindergarten, but we still consider it the best investment in their lives and their future....The elementary school is a small community school where everyone knows each other. That alone solves a lot of problems that schools normally struggle with, such as bullying, or simply someone falling behind, or someone talented not having the space to develop. (Ladislav, father)

Yet other fathers rejected the need to make a big investment in selective or “niche” schools and clubs as unnecessary or even counterproductive for a good upbringing and emphasised the importance of consciously spending time with their children for their development. However, most of them still shared the idea that children should attend at least some clubs to stimulate their development. Their children attended clubs, but instead of driving the children to selective clubs and schools every day or paying for private lessons, they focused on those close to home or at school:

Those friends who would rather work four hours longer to earn money to pay for their sons’ soccer coaches—I think that’s stupid. I’d rather not work four hours and play soccer with my son myself. I probably won’t make him a professional soccer player, just because of the connections and the networking that happens in those clubs, but playing with a ball and learning some coordination, I think I can manage that....I think it’s good to have some kind of sport, some kind of artistic activity. (Radek, father)

Although fathers differed in how they wanted their children to develop, they shared a willingness to invest resources in cultivating their children in the chosen direction. Agreement on that direction with their partner was common, but the communication between partners on this ranged from just a basic agreement to having frequent discussions on the pros and cons of various parenting styles and strategies, and to seeking out expert knowledge on parenting:

Because we are both intellectually oriented...we are used to finding out information...it was natural for me to want to find out more...look on the internet, etc....I liked the book *Raising Boys*...so I told her [his wife] about it....We both read a lot and are interested. (Ladislav, father)

Parental disagreement on such long-term, identity-forming, time-consuming, or financially demanding investments, such as choosing a school or preparing for entrance exams to an academic high school, could lead to rifts between parents in a couple, even though they otherwise agreed on their parenting. In line with the norm of child-centredness, the child’s opinion was often interpreted as decisive:

My wife and I have completely different views on this...she wanted an international high school [for their daughter]...then she [their daughter] could study and work all over the world....I don’t like the concept of international schools....You don’t belong anywhere...no roots....We had a complete disconnect. My wife sees international universities as the meaning of life....At the academic secondary school she [their daughter] attends, the students are not stupid or unmotivated, but they like sports...normal...if she [their daughter] wants to pursue an extremely ambitious goal, I will

definitely support her, but I don't see that yet, and I don't see any reason to push her into it or stress her out, saying that she will have to study twice as hard to achieve this. (Kryštof, father)

5.2.3. Conditions for Genderising and De-Genderising Daily Care: Patterns of Fathers' Involvement

Child-centredness was a key theme in the parents' narratives about willingly changing their lives and decisions for the sake of their children. These adaptations were often gendered and varied, reflecting the age of the children, the values prioritised by the parents, and their conditions for parenting.

The institutional context—the limited availability of childcare services for children under the age of three and long parental leave without paid non-transferable months for both parents—leads most Czech families to a gendered arrangement, in which women across educational groups interrupt their professional careers for approximately three years for each child and men become the main breadwinners during this period (Kuchařová et al., 2020). For some fathers, this implies accepting the role of being just a woman's helper in daily childcare and parenting-related planning, eventually becoming more involved only when the child is older, mainly in playing and educating.

Intensive parenting norms often reinforce this gendered specialisation, when mothers' long parental leave translates into their reduced career ambitions and specialisation in raising their children, while their partner becomes the main breadwinner. In such families, the father's role is seen as supporting the mother's caregiving, and his breadwinning gains greater importance due to the mother's missing income. This division into separate gender roles is often rationalised as the most effective way to ensure a child's future success. The expansion of gender-essentialist middle-class intensive mothering in Czechia has been reinforced by the post-socialist gendered refamilialist policies that caused mothers to exit the labour market for long periods:

I discuss everything about the children with him, but he doesn't call anywhere, search for information, plan, or drive the children to clubs and school...he's working all the time, from morning to night...pays everything...not that he wouldn't like to spend more time with the children, but he has no time....I was normally employed before the children...when the first child was born, I was on parental leave for three years and then extended it because another child was born....Then I didn't have the drive to return to paid work anymore....I'm busy with the children....In the afternoon, I take the children to their activities. If I went back to work, they wouldn't have these activities, no elite school...just dump the kids in...the closest school around. (Petra, mother)

However, intensive parenting norms were enacted both in the families that maintained separate gender roles and in the families in which both partners were significantly involved in daily childcare, even of young children. An egalitarian division of childcare was mainly driven by egalitarian attitudes within the couple and enabled when both parents—or at least the father—had work conditions supportive of a work-life balance. The interviewed fathers involved in daily childcare had either flexible working hours or free afternoons and could flexibly choose their place of work. Thus, time availability seems to be a significant condition for involved fathering:

So that my wife and I could both work, after a few months after childbirth, we started taking turns every other day, so that one of us was working and the other was taking care of the baby. This was possible

because we both worked from home most of the time. I had to arrange my schedule so that I worked every other day, which wasn't a problem....The limitation was that I couldn't attend some meetings, which led to missed business opportunities, but that may have happened anyway. (Pavel, father)

In some cases, the fathers' involvement in daily care was driven by a strong desire to be highly involved in the daily upbringing of their children, leading them to adapt their paid work. This is the case of Ladislav, who intentionally starts work in the early morning to keep his afternoons free for time with his children:

As a man, I really see it as my privilege and, in a way, a luxury that men in other parts of the world or in other times don't have, either because they really need to work hard and earn every dollar, peso, or whatever, or they believe...that they have to work hard to support their families. And then they're not with their children. We have a few friends like that, who complain about how they want to be with their families, but they have one coach for this and another for that. (Ladislav, father)

Although Oliver did not share Pavel's gender-egalitarian ideas or Ladislav's desire to participate in the daily care of his children from an early age, he saw his primary role as stimulating his son's learning and leisure activities during school years. He also emphasised flexible working hours as essential for fulfilling this parental goal:

I'm basically my own boss....I can leave work, take him to training, go back to work, and pick him up again an hour later. (Oliver, father)

Even in families with involved fathers, however, daily caregiving often remained gendered to some extent, both practically and symbolically. Mostly mothers were described as the main childcare managers and emotional supporters, while men generally retained the role of primary earners in the family and highlighted their involvement in educational, leisure, and extra-curricular activities. This suggests that stimulation-focused parenting in particular appears less tied to beliefs about the mother's primary role in daily caregiving:

We are both very much involved and discuss things, but my wife is the one who initiates and manages the whole process. (Robert, father)

My wife knows all the appointments....I take care of education and after-school activities. (Oliver-he)

I am more for giving advice and helping with education; my wife discusses the feelings and emotions with our daughter. (Kryštof, father)

5.2.4. Fathers' Networks and Self-Affirmation

All the interviewed fathers dedicated a significant amount of their time to their children. Nevertheless, not all of them had been involved since early childhood, and their involvement varied—some focused on play, education, and development, while others participated independently in daily care. They declared there was no pressure from their peers to behave differently. According to them, in their reference groups, fathers' spending time with their children was either common or at least accepted. However, even in their networks, fathering itself was rarely a topic of discussion:

Mothers discuss parenting, but fathers do not; our topics are not particularly profound (laugh); we tend to mention that we went on a trip with the children somewhere, but we don't discuss school preparations, problems, or our children's friends. (Pavel, father)

Discussing parenting strategies is something that men aren't interested in. We talk about what school our children go to, how much it costs, whether the university is good, more technical things like that, but not sharing feelings, or how to deal with it when your daughter is crying. Instead, we tell funny stories about how your wife has gone crazy and wants to send the kids to this school that costs 2 million CZK a year, and "yeah, yeah, we went to that school too, but then we left," so we talk about it in the form of funny stories. (Kryštof, father)

I think we're so stubborn that we [fathers] find it difficult to connect with each other in this way, that maybe we'd want to start talking about raising boys, but somehow it just doesn't work, I don't know. The conversation is kind of humorous; our first topic is politics or something like that. And often there must be at least one or two beers, and then the friends start to relax, and it starts to be about the children, right, but that's never the first topic among men. Society is just set up that way; it's expected of men, I don't know, like they have to have a shell around their emotions....Even in our social bubble and generation, I have friends who do not understand how to be involved with their boys until they are 4 and able to play with a ball, right?...I kind of miss the presence of like-minded fathers around me. (Ladislav, father)

The fathers' reflections on how fathers do not discuss parenting suggest that acceptance of engaged fatherhood as part of a man's identity remains more an option than the norm in Czechia and is only cautiously expressed. It is accepted as an option, but it is not necessarily shared within social networks. Unlike mothers (Hašková & Dudová, 2025), fathers have limited opportunities for the self-affirmation of their parenting strategies through peer interaction. Fathers' communication about fathering tends to focus on sharing information rather than sharing feelings associated with various aspects of fathering and the self-affirmation of one's fathering.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' involvement in childcare in Czechia, combining population-level survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews. The Czech ISSP 2022 data show that men and women endorse intensive parenting norms at similar levels. However, this shared endorsement does not translate into stronger expectations for paternal involvement in daily childcare. Instead, these norms often tend to reinforce traditional beliefs, assigning primary caregiving responsibility to mothers. These findings align with prior studies indicating that intensive parenting can reinforce, rather than challenge, gendered divisions of labour (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Nešporová, 2019b; Shirani et al., 2012). This study also nuances prior Czech findings on the prevalence of intensive parenting norms (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b) by revealing that agreement with intensive parenting norms does not fully translate into egalitarian caregiving practices.

The qualitative evidence reveals the contexts in which intensive parenting norms can also encourage fathers' participation in daily childcare. Although fathers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for their children's

development and were willing to invest resources accordingly, they were engaged in caregiving in selective and often gendered ways. We identified three gendered patterns through which intensive fathering is enacted, each reflecting distinct relationships to the ideal of “involved fatherhood” (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000).

In the maternal-specialised model of childcare, fathers focus on financial provision and occasional help, while mothers are primarily responsible for time-intensive childcare and stimulating child development—aligning with the model of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996). Mothers in this arrangement typically reduce their participation in the labour market, either temporarily or long-term, to fulfil caregiving demands. This pattern is reinforced by the Czech institutional context, which offers extended parental leave, limited childcare services for children under the age of 3, and a lack of incentives for fathers to use parental leave.

In egalitarian arrangements, fathers are more involved in daily childcare. But even here, mothers often take on the logistical, emotional, and cognitive burdens of care. A father’s involvement often depends on having flexible, family-friendly working conditions and is driven by personal values. Moreover, it is often framed as a personal choice or privilege rather than a social norm. Although such involvement is accepted within fathers’ social networks, it is rarely discussed in depth, limiting their mutual support and self-affirmation on parenting—unlike among mothers, whose reference groups more commonly validate their parenting approaches (Hašková & Dudová, 2025).

Finally, our analysis reveals a distinct model of stimulation-oriented intensive fathering, where fathers focus on educational, extracurricular, and leisure activities, while leaving routine and emotional care to mothers. This pattern seldom reduces the expectations on mothers or challenges the norm of fathers as primary breadwinners.

Overall, this study demonstrates how intensive parenting norms are enacted in deeply gendered ways. These findings underscore the importance of disaggregating the dimensions of fathers’ involvement (Lamb, 2000) and of examining how they are differentially taken up in practice. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Measuring each dimension of intensive parenting norms with a single item limits the conceptual depth and the assessment of internal consistency. The statistical analysis here examined attitudes at the population level, capturing broader cultural orientations while lacking data on parenting practices among current parents. The qualitative sample was limited to upper- and middle-class parents and was gender-imbalanced, with fewer fathers. Future research should integrate attitudinal and behavioural data on parents with dependent children to better capture the mechanisms that link the intensive parenting norms and caregiving practices of mothers and fathers. It should also adopt a more systematic focus on fathers and include parents from diverse social backgrounds and family forms.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

ISSP 2022 data is available at: <https://doi.org/10.4232/5.ZA10000.1.0.0.o>. The Czech ISSP 2022 data is available at: <https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/OLHS8X>. Qualitative data is deposited in the CSDA depository (<https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/KUB84Q>), however, due to its sensitivity, access can be obtained only from the authors upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

We used Grammarly and ChatGPT for proofreading and language editing. These tools were employed solely to improve grammar, clarity, and readability.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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