

More Helpers Than Sharers? Barriers to Involved Fathering in Hungary

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Abstract

Fathers face conflicting expectations as both involved caregivers and traditional breadwinners. This study examines the tensions of this dual role using data from the Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary birth cohort study, analyzing responses from over 1,700 fathers of 18-month-old children collected between October 2019 and December 2020, using linear regression models. We assess how fathers' workloads, perceived work–family conflict, and fathering-role attitudes—their own and their partners'—relate to the division of caregiving tasks on weekdays and weekends. Results show that caregiving remains largely the mother's responsibility, with fathers reporting relatively low involvement. Moreover, longer working hours and higher work–family conflict are associated with reduced paternal involvement in childcare tasks. Egalitarian attitudes—particularly fathers'—are linked to greater paternal engagement, especially on weekdays, where a one-unit increase in the fathering index is associated with a 10.6% increase in task-sharing. This suggests that egalitarian attitudes may be most consequential during weekdays, when fathers face time constraints and competing priorities, compared to more flexible weekend periods.

Keywords

egalitarian attitudes; Hungary; parental tasks; paternal involvement; work–family conflict; workload

1. Introduction

The positive effect of fathers' growing involvement in early childcare on their children's development and on the wellbeing of family members is well-established (Cabrera et al., 2000). Behind this growing involvement lies a broader transformation in paternal roles, a recalibration of family dynamics, and a reconfiguration of

fathers' work–family balance. However, this restructuring is not always seamless, and workplace demands do not necessarily accommodate the new challenges associated with new fatherhood ideals. Men who become fathers may therefore find themselves caught in a conflict of expectations, as they strive to meet both the demands of the involved, nurturing father and those of the traditional male breadwinner model (Wall et al., 2007).

In what follows, we examine the tensions inherent in this dual role within the Hungarian context, where shifts in gender role attitudes toward more egalitarian values are observable among both women and men (Murinkó, 2014), yet where economic pressures on fathers remain considerable (Hobson et al., 2011).

Our treatment of the concept of fathering in this analysis examines the dynamic interplay between practical actions and value-based factors, in relation to broader aspects of family functioning. Specifically, we consider the interrelationship among a man's roles as father, partner, and breadwinner, which collectively shape diverse fathering patterns (Wall et al., 2007). In this regard, the concept of father involvement can be extended to include differences in time use between mothers and fathers (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Henz, 2022; McGinnity & Russell, 2008; Yeung et al., 2001) as well as variations in the nature of parental activities (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020)—for instance, the differentiation between play and caregiving as distinct maternal and paternal tasks (Lamb, 2000; Parke, 1996).

Previous research has extensively documented persistent gender differences in parental involvement, showing that mothers typically assume a greater share of childcare responsibilities than fathers (Bianchi et al., 2000). However, less attention has been paid to how fathers' participation relates simultaneously to their work demands and to their underlying attitudes toward gender roles. Moreover, earlier studies have rarely distinguished between fathers' involvement on weekdays and weekends, even though such temporal variation may shed light on how work constraints and preferences interact in shaping caregiving patterns.

The present study contributes to this literature by examining the associations between fathers' involvement in childcare, their attitudes, and the timing of their engagement across weekdays and weekends. While the analysis focuses on a single point in time and thus cannot capture trends or infer causal relationships, it provides valuable insights into how work-related pressures and attitudinal orientations are linked to fathers' everyday caregiving practices.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Concept of Involved Fathering

The theoretical framework of our study is based on the psychosocial model of father involvement developed by Cabrera and colleagues, which assumes reciprocal influences between fathers' individual characteristics—such as their social background, behaviours, and attitudes—those of other family members, and the surrounding structural factors, such as working, cultural, and economic conditions (Cabrera et al., 2014; Diniz et al., 2021). The examination of paternal involvement in this study is situated within the conceptual framework of "fathering." In line with Doucet's definition, we understand fathering as relational sets of practices and identities (Doucet, 2013). Accordingly, our analytical approach includes not only the practical dimension (i.e., the gendered division of caregiving tasks), but also fathers' gender role attitudes.

In conceptualizing fathering as a set of caregiving practices, we draw on parental investment theory as a source of theoretical grounding (Fox & Bruce, 2001).

In the context of domestic labor division, it is important to emphasize that fathers' emotional and caregiving involvement generates new forms of masculinities. However, these roles are not automatic; they are contingent upon normative expectations and structural conditions. The evolving concepts of fatherhood illustrate this shift. "Involved fatherhood" refers to a societal change whereby fathers participate actively in their children's lives not merely as financial providers ("breadwinners"), but through direct caregiving responsibilities. Involvement encompasses multiple dimensions: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility (Lamb, 2004). Building on this, "intimate fatherhood" (Dermott, 2014) highlights a paradigm shift emphasizing emotional closeness, nurturing, and intimacy in fathering, challenging conventional patriarchal masculinity and introducing new norms of masculinity (Hanlon, 2012).

Hence, the operationalization of paternal involvement in our study largely follows the quantifiable dimensions approach, focusing on the frequency of actual one-on-one interaction with the child—caregiving activities that require direct engagement. This is consistent with more recent empirical approaches in the study of modern fatherhood (Lamb, 2000). In addition to the behavioural dimension, we also distinguish between traditional and involved fatherhood (based on attitudinal measures) since paternal attitudinal factors play a significant role in father involvement (Parke, 1996).

The development of modern, involved fatherhood throughout the 20th century has been shaped by a range of social processes (Cabrerá et al., 2000). Among the most significant of these is the increasing rate of female labour-force participation (Lamb, 2000), which—alongside other macro-level factors such as economic growth, cultural context, and welfare systems—has shaped the division of domestic labour (Fuwa, 2004). The value and practice shifts associated with these societal transformations have not occurred uniformly; rather, they are closely linked to variations in socioeconomic background (Frank & Frenette, 2021).

2.2. Gender Role Attitudes and the Division of Childcare

International data indicate that although the gender gap in the division of labour between parents has significantly narrowed since the 1960s, the majority of household and childcare responsibilities continue to be carried out by women across all countries (Bianchi et al., 2000; Murinkó, 2014). Men's participation in domestic work may also be hindered by women's "gatekeeping role" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Trends in gender and family attitudes across Europe suggest a measurable correlation between the acceptance of gender inequalities and the distribution of childcare tasks (Murinkó, 2014). On the one hand, paternal value priorities towards traditional, conservative values are associated with less father involvement in childcare (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020). On the other hand, more egalitarian gender-role beliefs (Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Keizer, 2015) or a stronger identification with the father role (Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016) predict greater paternal involvement. However, discrepancy is also recognized between expressed values and actual practices (Forsberg, 2007). Alongside the concept of the "new father," the strengthening of "new man" or "new masculinity" values among men also points toward increasing emotional engagement and parental responsibility—but not necessarily in the domain of routine care (Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Although several sociodemographic variables mediate the relationship between value priorities and involvement in childcare (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Fuwa, 2004), recent data by Milkie and colleagues from the 2003–2023 American

Time Use Survey demonstrate that the gender gap has narrowed in both the area of housework and childcare (Milkie et al., 2025). The most pronounced decline was observed in core housework activities, where men's increased involvement appears to reflect behavioral and normative changes. In contrast, women's reduced engagement in both housework and childcare tasks mainly reflects changes in the population's composition (i.e., women's higher education, their increased working hours and earnings, and demographic ageing).

2.3. Work-Family Balance in Fathering

The work–family balance phenomenon (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) incorporates the idea that fathers' time spent in paid work interacts with a range of socio-demographic and economic factors—such as race, class, and income—but it is also closely associated with traditional versus modern gender role attitudes (Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011), which in turn are reflected in the amount of time fathers spend with their children (Bulanda, 2004). The effort to reconcile work and family expectations often leads to elevated stress levels among parents following the birth of a child (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Hobson and Fahlén (2009), using European Social Survey data, found that most fathers would prefer to reduce their workload—even at the cost of lower pay. Their findings also highlighted the relatively disadvantaged position of Central and Eastern European fathers in achieving work–family balance, due to both economic constraints and prevailing normative expectations. The actual reduction in working hours appears to be more likely the mother's response to work–family conflict (Reynolds, 2005). Workplace norms can also be understood as a meaningful factor in shaping or explaining fathers' involvement (Takács, 2020). According to Yeh et al. (2021), fathers show different involvement during weekdays and the weekend, which is shaped by their educational level, number of children, and the interaction between education and income. Based on data from the 2005 European Working Conditions Survey, Meil (2014) found, in addition, that men's involvement in childcare is negatively correlated with their working hours.

2.4. Socioeconomic Background Characteristics

Adverse economic conditions tend to reinforce more gender-traditional arrangements, both in the division of labor and in the distribution of parental leave (Plantin, 2007). Economic bargaining also influences how labor is divided between partners. Within this framework, the allocation of household tasks—often regarded as the least desirable activities—reflects greater gender inequality than the division of childcare responsibilities (Sullivan, 2021). Even within the domain of childcare, however, certain tasks are more strongly preferred by fathers, particularly those involving more interactive or enjoyable activities with children (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Socioeconomic background also plays a critical role in shaping levels of parental involvement. In particular, educational inequalities—most notably the mother's level of education—emerge as a key determinant (Gracia & Ghysels, 2017; Naujoks, 2024).

2.5. Child Characteristics and Paternal Involvement

The early postnatal period—infancy—requires parents to engage in distinct types of childcare activities that correspond to the child's developmental stages. During this period, caregiving tends to be more oriented toward basic, routine functions rather than interactive or playful tasks (Waldfogel, 2009). These latter activities tend to become more predominant at later ages (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010); consequently, for fathers,

time spent with infants is more likely to be experienced as stressful due to the predominance of physical care tasks (Roeters & Gracia, 2016). Barnett and Baruch (1987) found that, among several other determinants, the child's sex had a significant effect on paternal participation, both in terms of interaction time and engagement in childcare tasks, with a tendency toward greater involvement with sons. Using a Swiss sample of fathers with 18-month-old children, Rouyer et al. (2007) likewise found greater paternal involvement among fathers of boys in terms of childcare activities. Research suggests that the birth of a first child exerts a particularly strong influence on paternal involvement, on the restructuring of work-family balance, and on the formation of paternal identity (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019; Barclay & Lupton, 1999). Grunow et al. (2012) examined how the division of labor between partners shifted after the birth of the first child, showing that income differences increasingly drove couples toward a more traditional gendered arrangement. Veroszta (2023), comparing mothers' responses collected during pregnancy and when the child was six months old, found that in Hungary, having additional children increases women's household workload in general, but it is after the first birth that the balance of housework between partners tilts most strongly against women. Yeh et al. (2021) found higher levels of father involvement in smaller-sized families, particularly in the caring and nurturing dimensions. According to Kuo et al. (2018), after the birth of a second child, fathers tend to increase their involvement with the infant while decreasing their involvement with the firstborn.

2.6. Fatherhood in the Hungarian Context

According to the 2006 Eurobarometer survey comparing European countries, values regarding maternal employment versus childcare are more conservative in Hungary than the EU-25 average. For Hungarian respondents, the mother is perceived as the primary caregiver of children, often prioritizing childcare over paid work, and thus occupies a more dominant role within the family (Testa, 2006). At the same time, fathering roles are showing signs of change. Expectations traditionally associated with male roles—such as providing security—continue to exert influence, and these coexist with emerging, non-traditional norms and expectations (Spéder, 2011). As a result, men are increasingly subject to a dual set of expectations—a “double burden”—which places simultaneous demands on them to fulfil both traditional and modern fatherhood roles (Makay & Spéder, 2018). Moreover, efforts to achieve a work-family balance are hindered by labour market and economic constraints, which tend to push families with young children toward increased work intensity in order to ensure financial security (Hobson et al., 2011).

At the same time, Hungary's relatively generous parental leave policies have long encouraged mothers to remain at home for extended periods after childbirth (Makay, 2015). For nearly half a century, these policies have supported maternal childcare for at least two years per child, with potential career breaks extending to five or six years in the case of multiple births—effectively reinforcing a traditional male-breadwinner model during early childhood (Makay, 2023). Recent findings underscore this pattern: Only 10% of mothers were employed when their child was one year old, and 77% remained out of the labour force by the child's second birthday (Ökrös & Makay, 2024).

Women's rising levels of educational attainment, alongside their growing motivation for labour market participation and career development, may contribute to a rethinking and restructuring of the division of domestic and childcare responsibilities. This shift has the potential to foster greater paternal involvement in family life, including the emergence of involved fatherhood (Takács, 2020) and even stay-at-home fathering (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021).

However, data on the division of labour between partners in Hungary indicate that even when women's labour market participation is high, they continue to bear a significantly larger share of household responsibilities (Bukodi, 2005; Gregor & Kováts, 2019). This imbalance tends to intensify with the arrival of children, and is closely linked to the number and age of the children (Veroszta et al., 2022).

Based on Murinkó (2014), we can assess Hungary's situation regarding gender- and family-related attitudes in comparison with other European countries. The study examines six countries (Germany, France, Norway, Poland, Romania, and Hungary) and their association with the division of child-rearing and caregiving tasks between men and women, using data from the international Generations and Gender Survey. Hungary differs from the other countries in that childbearing and the ideal of a two-parent family are considered very important, the child's interests are prioritized over paid work, and gender inequalities between men and women are more readily accepted. Nevertheless, in all countries, the majority of childcare tasks are carried out by mothers, and in Hungary, women's workload can be considered average.

3. Research Question and Hypotheses

The overview of previous studies has shown that the relationship between fathers' involvement in child-related tasks, their working patterns, and fathering attitudes is not straightforward. Our aim is therefore to disentangle this relationship and to answer the following research question: How do egalitarian gender role attitudes and paternal workload influence fathers' involvement in early childcare?

We set three hypotheses:

H1: Fathers' workload significantly influences the number of child-related tasks they share with the mother. Both subjective work-family conflict and objectively measured long working hours are expected to reduce paternal task-sharing.

H2: More egalitarian views on fathering roles—held by either the father or the mother—are associated with increased paternal involvement in child-related tasks. However, higher workloads are expected to moderate this effect, limiting the extent of task-sharing even among fathers with modern attitudes.

H3: The associations of workload and gender-role attitudes with paternal involvement vary by time frame. Workload-related factors are expected to show a stronger relationship on weekdays, while attitudinal factors may be more salient on weekends, when fathers have greater flexibility to engage in caregiving.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Study Sample and Design

This study is based on data from the third wave of Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary data collection. Cohort '18 is a large-scale, longitudinal, nationwide, and multidisciplinary research program launched by the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute (Veroszta et al., 2020). Data collection began with

8,287 pregnant women at the second trimester of their pregnancy whose expected due dates fell between April 2018 and April 2019.

In the third wave of the study, a mixed-mode data collection strategy was employed, targeting two key respondent groups. Mothers were interviewed when their child was approximately 18 months old ($n = 4,941$), using either computer-assisted or paper-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI/PAPI), as well as self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Uniquely in this wave, the data collection was extended to include fathers. In defining “father,” the study applied the concept of the social father rather than the biological one—that is, the male partner cohabiting with the mother and actively raising the child. Fathers not living with the child were excluded from the study population. Interviews with fathers were conducted approximately one month after the maternal interviews, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) by trained professional interviewers. Thus, data collection was carried out between October 2019 and December 2020, and despite the panel nature of the design, the data on fathers permit to study the topic only in a cross-sectional way. The number of responding fathers was $n = 1,992$.

The analytical database used in this study is based on the individual-level linkage of fathers’ responses to those of their respective partners (i.e., the mothers). Matrix weighting was applied to the dataset, based on the educational attainment of both mothers and fathers as recorded in the prenatal wave of the study. After the treatment of missing values, our analysis includes the responses of 1,783 fathers. The questionnaire covered topics such as fathers’ employment circumstances and workload, and their views on fatherhood and parental roles. It also assessed their involvement in childcare activities. The questions asked of fathers were similar to those included in the parallel survey conducted with mothers, enabling a comparison of the two groups’ responses.

Although the father subsample used in this analysis was drawn from a longitudinal survey, the response rate among fathers was relatively low. Despite the application of statistical weighting, response bias thus remains a potential concern—specifically, that fathers who are more actively involved in childcare may have been more likely to participate in the study. The findings also reflect a single point in time. Consequently, the analysis does not capture longer-term developments or shifts in fathers’ involvement and attitudes that may have occurred since the data were collected.

4.2. Ethics

Participation in the study was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research methodology adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration and the Code of Ethics of the Hungarian Psychological Association. The study was reviewed and approved by an independent ethics committee established for the Cohort ‘18 study (reference number 2022/1), which included professionals external to the research group.

4.3. Measures

4.3.1. Dependent Variable

The outcome variable measures how many of 10 child-related tasks were either performed solely by the father or shared with the mother. Respondents were asked to indicate who usually carries out various childcare tasks with their 18-month-old child on an average weekday and weekend. This question aimed to capture the division of childcare responsibilities within the household. For each activity, participants selected one of four response options reflecting the main caregiver: "Mostly the respondent"; "Shared equally or done together with partner"; "Mostly the partner"; "Always or usually someone else."

The activities included the following tasks:

1. Feeding;
2. Bathing;
3. Dressing;
4. Changing diapers;
5. Putting the child to bed;
6. Reassuring the child at night;
7. Singing, storytelling, or reciting rhymes;
8. Playing with the child;
9. Going for walks or visiting the playground;
10. Taking or picking up the child from nursery or programs.

As a dependent variable, a task is coded as "shared" if the father reported either doing it mostly himself or performing it jointly with the mother. This categorization of fathers' involvement is not a strict definition, as it includes both tasks performed by the father alone and those carried out jointly with the mother.

4.3.2. Independent Variables

4.3.2.1. Work-Family Balance and Fathers' Workload

Two complementary approaches are used to assess the workload of fathers. First, we examine work-family balance by looking at levels of subjective work-family conflict, based on the extent to which work demands are perceived to interfere with family life. This is captured using two items commonly employed in cross-national surveys such as the Generations and Gender Survey (Gauthier et al., 2020; Szalma & Takács, 2017):

- "I have come home from work too tired to do the chores that need to be done."
- "It has been difficult for me to fulfil my family responsibilities because of the amount of time I spent on my job."

To measure work-family conflict, responses were categorized as follows:

- Very high conflict if the father responded "Several times a week" to either item;

- High conflict if the response to either item was “Several times a month”;
- Moderate conflict for responses of “Once or twice a month”;
- Low conflict if neither item had a valid response in the above categories, and the father answered “Never” to at least one item.

The distribution of work–family conflict levels across the sample is presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File. To validate the choice of our coding, we conducted robustness checks and ran the same models with a different (stricter) coding. The results confirm the consistency of our main finding and are shown in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File.

The second approach to measuring fathers’ workload relies on an objective indicator—the number of average weekly working hours—as self-reported by fathers in response to the question:

“How many hours do you work in an average week, including overtime?”

In Hungary, the standard full-time workweek is 40 hours, and thus responses exceeding this threshold are treated as indicative of high time demands. Unlike work–family conflict, which captures subjective perceptions, this variable reflects actual time spent in paid employment.

The mean number of weekly working hours in the sample is 46.65 hours ($SD = 10.03$). Given the theoretical relevance of standard workweek thresholds and the potential for non-linear effects (see Section 4.4), we treated working hours as a categorical variable. Categories were defined as ≤ 40 hours, 41–50 hours, and > 50 hours per week. The distribution of these categories is presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File.

4.3.2.2. Attitudes Related to Fathers’ Role

In addition to workload, we account for both fathers’ and mothers’ attitudes toward the paternal role within the family. These attitudes were operationalized using four survey items that capture distinct dimensions of paternal responsibility:

- “A father is just as capable of caring for a young child as a mother.”
- “For a man, it is much more important to spend time with his family than to increase the family income by working extra hours at all costs.”
- “The most important decisions in the family should be made by the man.”
- “Earning a lot of money is the most important goal in a man’s life.”

Because these items reflect multiple dimensions rather than a single latent construct, we constructed two formative indexes—one for the father and one for the mother—following the approach outlined by Edwards and Bagozzi (2000). Respondents rated each item on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*); agreement with the first two items and disagreement with the last two items are used as a proxy for modernity. All items were reverse-coded where necessary, so that higher scores consistently indicate more modern attitudes toward paternal involvement. Then, the fathering index and the mother’s view of the father’s role were calculated as the unweighted mean of the four items. If a respondent was missing one item, the index

was computed using the average of the available responses. Respondents missing more than one item were excluded from the index construction.

The mean value of this “fathering index” is 3.04 ($SD = 0.50$) among fathers, and 3.23 ($SD = 0.48$) among mothers, indicating that, on average, fathers tend to express slightly more traditional views than mothers. The greater standard deviation among fathers suggests greater variability in their attitudes. Nevertheless, the interquartile ranges and medians of the two groups largely overlap, indicating similar central tendencies and response distributions.

4.3.3. Control Variables

We control for several indicators of the father’s labor market position, including employment status and contract type, sector of employment, and whether he supervises subordinates. These variables allow us to take differences in occupational standing and workplace authority into account.

In addition, we include a set of demographic control variables: the father’s age, highest level of education, total number of children, and whether he has children living apart from him. We also control for characteristics of the sampled child, specifically birth order (from the father’s perspective) and the child’s sex.

Finally, we incorporate maternal characteristics, including the mother’s highest level of education and whether she is currently employed. Distributions for all variables are presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File.

4.4. Statistical Analysis

Given that the dependent variable (the number of child-related tasks shared) is continuous, we employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models in Stata with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors to account for potential violations of the homoskedasticity assumption (Mooi et al., 2018). The results are presented as unstandardized regression coefficients (β), which reflect the expected change in the number of shared tasks associated with a one-unit increase in continuous predictor variables and the difference in shared tasks relative to the reference category for categorical variables.

We estimated separate sets of models for two distinct time frames: weekdays and weekends, capturing variation in paternal involvement across the workweek. For each time frame, we estimate a sequence of models to progressively assess the effects of subjective workload, objective workload, and father-role attitudes as follows:

- Model 0 (model with no controls) assesses the unadjusted associations between our main predictors and the number of shared tasks. This model includes only work–family conflict, fathers’ weekly working hours, and fathers’ and mothers’ fathering index.
- Model 1 examines the association between shared task levels and subjective work–family conflict, controlling for all background covariates.
- Model 2 introduces in addition the father’s objective workload—measured by weekly working hours—while again controlling for covariates.

- Model 3 adds the two fathering indexes capturing attitudes toward paternal roles, based on responses from both the father and the mother.

This stepwise modelling strategy allows us to assess the independent and combined contributions of perceived conflict, actual time constraints, and father-role attitudes to paternal involvement in child-rearing.

We assessed potential multicollinearity among categorical predictors using chi-square tests and Cramér's V. All pairs of variables exhibited weak associations (Cramér's V < 0.3), suggesting that multicollinearity is unlikely to bias our regression results. For instance, while the association between fathers' work–family balance and working hours was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), the effect size was weak (Cramér's V = 0.135).

To further ensure robustness, we calculated variance inflation factors (VIF) for all predictors in the models, with all values below 2, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity. Additionally, likelihood-ratio tests demonstrated that excluding any variable significantly reduced model fit ($p < 0.05$), justifying the inclusion of all predictors.

We checked for nonlinearity for the three main predictors and the outcome variable. The relationship between work–family conflict and the number of shared tasks showed a linear but weak relationship, as well as that between fathering index and the number of shared tasks. Preliminary scatter plots suggested a weak and non-linear relationship between fathers' working hours and shared tasks. A likelihood-ratio test confirmed that the categorical specification improved model fit ($p < 0.05$).

We examined potential interaction effects between fathers' working hours and work–family balance and fathering index and working hours in Models 2 and 3. Neither of the interaction terms was significant, indicating that the effect of working hours on shared tasks does not depend on work–family balance, and the effect of the fathering index on shared tasks does not depend on the fathering index.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Results

The mean number of shared tasks as reported by the father is 6.2 on weekdays ($SD = 2.29$) and 7.8 on weekends ($SD = 1.76$), indicating a substantial increase in paternal involvement during the weekend. The higher standard deviation on weekdays suggests greater variability in fathers' involvement, potentially due to differing time constraints or workload demands during the week.

At both time frames, fathers' participation in caregiving is most pronounced in bathing their children, while their sole responsibility for other tasks remains limited (Figure 1).

Bathing is a well-defined task with a relatively fixed timing in families with young children, which may align with fathers' standard working hours ending at 5 or 6 p.m. This timing allows many fathers to return home in time to engage in this personal care task, making it a privileged moment for bonding with their infants.

Tasks involving leisure time, such as playing with the child, walking, and going to the playground, are predominantly shared on both weekdays and weekends, with shared involvement exceeding 94% for playing and 91% for walking or going to the playground on weekends. In contrast, routine tasks related to personal care—such as putting the child to sleep, feeding, and dressing—are predominantly carried out by mothers, particularly on weekdays. For example, mothers handle putting the child to sleep in 48% of cases on weekdays and feeding in 50% of cases. On weekends, some of these tasks, like bathing and putting the child to sleep, see a higher proportion of shared responsibility compared to weekdays. However, getting up at night to reassure the child remains primarily the mother's responsibility, especially on weekdays (60%).

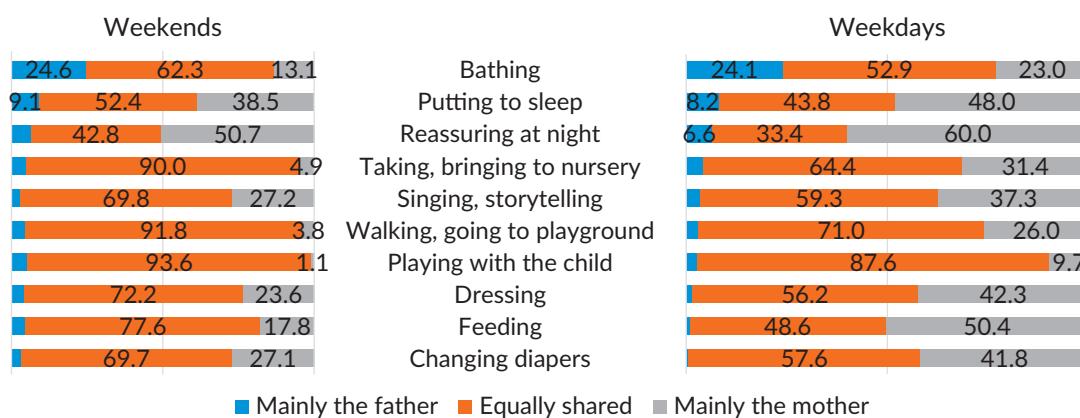


Figure 1. Distribution of child-related tasks on weekends and weekdays (%). Source: Own calculations based on data from Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary.

5.2. Results From the Regression Models

While we estimated an unadjusted model (Model 0, Table 1) to assess the raw associations between the main predictors and the number of shared tasks, we focus our interpretation on the models that include demographic and employment-related controls (Models 1–3). The coefficients in the adjusted models are more precise and substantively meaningful, as they account for potential confounding factors. Moreover, the stability, and, in some cases, the increased significance of the main predictors in the adjusted models underscores the robustness of our findings.

Model 1 (Table 1) thus presents the results of an OLS regression examining the influence of work–family conflict on the number of parenting tasks shared by fathers. Work–family conflict significantly affects the number of tasks fathers share, with notable differences between weekdays and weekends.

Results show that fathers experiencing very high work–family conflict share 0.77 fewer tasks on weekdays ($\beta = -0.767, p < 0.001$) compared to those with moderate conflict, representing a 12% reduction relative to the average number of shared tasks on weekdays (6.2 tasks). On weekends, they share 0.83 fewer tasks ($\beta = -0.832, p < 0.001$), corresponding to an 11% reduction relative to the average of 7.8 shared tasks on weekends. Fathers with high work–family conflict share 0.34 fewer tasks on weekdays ($\beta = -0.338, p < 0.05$; a 5% reduction) and 0.33 fewer tasks on weekends ($\beta = -0.330, p < 0.001$; a 4% reduction), compared to those with moderate conflict. Low work–family conflict is associated with an increase of 0.45 tasks on weekdays ($\beta = 0.447, p < 0.001$; a 7% increase), but this effect is not statistically significant on weekends.

These findings suggest that higher levels of work–family conflict are consistently associated with lower paternal involvement, both on weekdays and weekends (confirming H1), with somewhat more pronounced effects observed during the weekdays.

While the coefficients for weekend task sharing are slightly larger in magnitude compared to weekdays, the proportional changes relative to the average number of tasks are more substantial on weekdays. This suggests that work–family conflict is more strongly associated with fathers’ involvement during the weekdays, potentially due to the competing demands of work and family responsibilities during the workweek.

In Model 2 (Table 1), which includes fathers’ weekly working hours, the significant effects of work–family conflict on shared tasks persist. This indicates that subjective work–family conflict influences paternal involvement independently of objective workload. Additionally, fathers working more than 50 hours per week share significantly fewer tasks on both weekdays ($\beta = -0.631, p < 0.001$) and weekends ($\beta = -0.522, p < 0.001$), representing a 10% reduction on weekdays and a 7% reduction on weekends compared to the reference group (40 hours or less). In contrast, fathers working between 41 and 50 hours per week do not differ significantly from the reference group in their number of shared tasks. These findings suggest that—in line with H1—both subjective work–family conflict and extensive working hours (over 50 hours per week) are important barriers to paternal involvement in childcare.

In Model 3 (Table 1), which includes both fathers’ and mothers’ views on paternal roles, the effects of work–family conflict and working hours on shared tasks remain consistent with previous models. Moreover, each one-unit increase in the fathering index is associated with sharing 0.66 more tasks on weekdays ($\beta = 0.658, p < 0.001$), a 10.6% increase relative to the weekday mean of 6.2 tasks, and 0.39 more tasks on weekends ($\beta = 0.390, p < 0.001$), a 5% increase relative to the weekend mean of 7.8 tasks. Similarly, each one-unit increase in the mother’s fathering index is linked to sharing 0.31 more tasks on weekdays ($\beta = 0.307, p < 0.01$) and 0.23 more tasks on weekends ($\beta = 0.233, p < 0.01$), representing increases of 5% and 3%, respectively, thus confirming H2.

The negative effects of very high work–family conflict persist, with fathers sharing significantly fewer tasks on both weekdays ($\beta = -0.543, p < 0.001$) and weekends ($\beta = -0.643, p < 0.001$). However, the previously observed negative effect of high (but not very high) work–family conflict on weekdays is no longer statistically significant. Fathers working more than 50 hours per week continue to share fewer tasks on both weekdays ($\beta = -0.600, p < 0.001$) and weekends ($\beta = -0.505, p < 0.001$). Thus, while attitudes toward fatherhood are important, structural factors such as work–family conflict and long working hours continue to independently influence paternal involvement.

5.3. **Background Variables**

Several background variables are significantly associated with the number of shared tasks, revealing some interesting patterns (Model 3, Table 1). Fathers who supervise subordinates at work are more likely to share tasks on both weekdays ($\beta = 0.390, p < 0.001$) and weekends ($\beta = 0.263, p < 0.001$). However, fathers’ employment status and sector do not significantly influence task sharing. Therefore, demographic background variables seem to be more important than employment-related ones.

Table 1. OLS regression results: fathers' involvement in childcare tasks (weekdays and weekends, unstandardized β).

| | | Model 0 | | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends |
| Work–family conflict (ref. Moderate) | Very high | −0.576*** (0.184) | −0.696*** (0.148) | −0.767*** (0.180) | −0.832*** (0.149) | −0.638*** (0.184) | −0.702*** (0.152) | −0.543*** (0.184) | −0.643*** (0.149) |
| | High | −0.274* (0.163) | −0.246** (0.116) | −0.338** (0.165) | −0.330*** (0.115) | −0.289* (0.165) | −0.281** (0.113) | −0.241 (0.163) | −0.252** (0.114) |
| | Low | 0.423*** (0.163) | 0.00825 (0.122) | 0.447*** (0.164) | −0.00370 (0.120) | 0.444*** (0.162) | 0.0106 (0.119) | 0.367** (0.161) | −0.0366 (0.119) |
| Fathers' weekly working hours (ref. 40h or less) | 41–45 hours | −0.266 (0.175) | 0.0760 (0.121) | | | −0.166 (0.170) | 0.116 (0.120) | −0.240 (0.170) | 0.0701 (0.120) |
| | 46–50 hours | −0.0106 (0.153) | −0.0268 (0.114) | | | −0.116 (0.155) | −0.0850 (0.112) | −0.113 (0.152) | −0.0830 (0.112) |
| | 51+ hours | −0.494*** (0.172) | −0.431*** (0.140) | | | −0.631*** (0.179) | −0.522*** (0.144) | −0.600*** (0.173) | −0.505*** (0.141) |
| Fathers' fathering index | | 0.550*** (0.116) | 0.301*** (0.1000) | | | | | 0.658*** (0.116) | 0.390*** (0.0969) |
| Mothers' fathering index | | 0.198 (0.132) | 0.133 (0.0964) | | | | | 0.307** (0.131) | 0.233** (0.0952) |
| Fathers' employment status (ref. Employed) | Other | | | −0.347* (0.197) | −0.170 (0.153) | −0.307 (0.196) | −0.130 (0.151) | −0.246 (0.191) | −0.0872 (0.149) |
| Fathers' sector of employment (ref. Private) | Other | | | 0.117 (0.149) | −0.0332 (0.119) | 0.120 (0.146) | −0.0175 (0.117) | 0.0969 (0.143) | −0.0319 (0.116) |
| Father has subordinates (ref. No) | Yes | | | 0.320*** (0.119) | 0.217** (0.102) | 0.361*** (0.120) | 0.246** (0.102) | 0.390*** (0.119) | 0.263*** (0.100) |
| Fathers' age (ref. 30–39) | 18–29 | | | 0.387** (0.183) | 0.231* (0.140) | 0.376** (0.182) | 0.225 (0.138) | 0.447** (0.180) | 0.275** (0.137) |
| | 40+ | | | −0.205 (0.150) | −0.404*** (0.117) | −0.224 (0.148) | −0.419*** (0.116) | −0.226 (0.146) | −0.419*** (0.115) |

Table 1. (Cont.) OLS regression results: fathers' involvement in childcare tasks (weekdays and weekends, unstandardized β).

| | | Model 0 | | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|--|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends | Weekdays | Weekends |
| Fathers' education (ref. Medium) | Low | | | -0.0324 (0.149) | 0.217* (0.119) | 0.0227 (0.150) | 0.281** (0.118) | 0.0857 (0.151) | 0.318*** (0.118) |
| | High | | | -0.158 (0.143) | 0.336*** (0.106) | -0.188 (0.142) | 0.300*** (0.106) | -0.220 (0.140) | 0.280*** (0.104) |
| Child's birth order as for the father (ref. 1st child) | Higher-order birth | | | 0.277** (0.125) | 0.0624 (0.0984) | 0.281** (0.124) | 0.0665 (0.0978) | 0.275** (0.123) | 0.0635 (0.0973) |
| Sex of the child (ref. Boy) | Girl | | | -0.286** (0.119) | 0.0275 (0.0909) | -0.271** (0.118) | 0.0319 (0.0899) | -0.263** (0.116) | 0.0370 (0.0889) |
| Other children outside of the household (father) (ref. No) | Yes | | | -0.523* (0.270) | 0.0156 (0.188) | -0.511* (0.264) | 0.0249 (0.185) | -0.487* (0.249) | 0.0413 (0.179) |
| New childbirth since cohort child (ref. No) | Yes | | | -0.0269 (0.375) | 0.409* (0.209) | -0.0482 (0.369) | 0.387* (0.211) | -0.0236 (0.354) | 0.403* (0.212) |
| Mothers' education (ref. Medium) | Low | | | 0.195 (0.184) | -0.0487 (0.143) | 0.161 (0.183) | -0.0779 (0.142) | 0.302* (0.182) | 0.0136 (0.139) |
| | High | | | -0.0279 (0.139) | -0.143 (0.106) | -0.0797 (0.139) | -0.195* (0.107) | -0.131 (0.138) | -0.231** (0.106) |
| Mothers' activity (ref. Non-working) | Working | | | 0.345* (0.186) | -0.0857 (0.175) | 0.395** (0.186) | -0.0358 (0.174) | 0.343* (0.183) | -0.0750 (0.170) |
| Constant | | 4.165*** (-0.549) | 6.789*** (-0.43) | 6.277*** (0.190) | 7.950*** (0.138) | 6.418*** (0.200) | 8.009*** (0.150) | 3.401*** (0.577) | 6.055*** (0.428) |
| Observations | | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 | 1,783 |
| R-squared | | 0.059 | 0.052 | 0.059 | 0.058 | 0.069 | 0.072 | 0.094 | 0.089 |

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Source: Own calculations based on data from Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary.

Compared to fathers aged 30–39, younger fathers (aged 18–29) share around 7% more tasks than the average weekdays number on weekdays ($\beta = 0.447, p < 0.05$) and around 3.5% more tasks on weekends (compared to the weekend average; $\beta = 0.275, p < 0.05$) while in the case of fathers aged 40 and above a 5% decrease is visible relative to the weekend mean ($\beta = -0.419, p < 0.001$).

Indeed, demographic characteristics influence fathers' involvement on weekdays and on weekends differently. Fathers are more involved on weekdays if they have higher-order children and are not first-time fathers ($\beta = 0.275, p < 0.05$) but are less involved if the child is a girl ($\beta = -0.263, p < 0.05$). Fathers with children outside the household are less involved on weekdays ($\beta = -0.487, p < 0.1$). A new childbirth since the cohort child increases involvement on weekends ($\beta = 0.403, p < 0.1$). Fathers whose partners are employed instead of being out of the labour force share more tasks on weekdays ($\beta = 0.343, p < 0.1$) but not on weekends. On weekends, fathers with low ($\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001$) and high education ($\beta = 0.280, p < 0.001$) are more involved than those with a medium level, while those whose partners have high education are less involved ($\beta = -0.231, p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that both individual characteristics and family dynamics play significant roles in determining paternal involvement in childcare tasks.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Discussion

Among Hungarian families raising a one-and-a-half-year-old child, fathers show overall low levels of involvement in parenting tasks compared to mothers. Child-related tasks remain primarily the mother's responsibility, with fathers more often positioned as helpers rather than as equal partners sharing both tasks and responsibilities (Bukodi, 2005; Gregor & Kováts, 2019). This pattern is particularly evident in the domain of routine physical care (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Roeters & Gracia, 2016)—bathing being a partial exception. In accordance with previous findings (e.g., Waldfogel, 2009), we also found that the examined fathers' involvement was somewhat higher in interactive or more playful forms of care. Our results have confirmed these patterns by showing in addition that weekend periods lead to a modest shift toward more shared childcare activities (7.8 shared tasks on weekends vs. 6.2 during weekdays); however, this does not result in equal task division and does not substantially reduce the mother's caregiving load.

Descriptive data revealed that Hungarian fathers of young children carry a considerable workload, with 21% working more than 50 hours per week and only 38% working no more than the standard 40 hours. From a subjective perspective, 16% of fathers report experiencing very high levels of work–family conflict, and an additional 31% report high levels. The results of the explanatory models confirmed H1, demonstrating that both fathers' workloads and the degree of work–family conflict negatively affect their participation in and sharing of child-related tasks.

The mean value of the four-item index measuring fathers' and mothers' attitudes toward the paternal role—ranging from traditional to egalitarian, thus from 1 to 4—is 3.04 ($SD = 0.50$) among fathers and 3.23 ($SD = 0.48$) among mothers. This confirms, on the one hand, a shift in value orientations toward more modern conceptions of fatherhood in Hungary (Murinkó, 2014). On the other hand, it shows that fathers, on average, hold slightly more traditional views than mothers, and the higher standard deviation among fathers suggests greater variability in their attitudes.

In line with H2, our explanatory models showed that, as in other countries, more egalitarian gender-role attitudes are associated with increased paternal involvement (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Keizer, 2015). Moreover, the OLS regression results show that even a modest increase in egalitarian attitudes is associated with greater paternal involvement in daily caregiving tasks, particularly when fathers hold more modern views. The influence of maternal attitudes on fathering roles, though weaker, is also statistically significant. However, even when controlling for both fathers' and mothers' views on paternal roles, both objective and subjective working conditions continue to significantly influence paternal involvement. This suggests that these factors are independently linked to paternal involvement. On weekends, a similar pattern is observed, though the link with gender-role attitudes is less pronounced.

Several factors previously identified as predictors of paternal task sharing were also confirmed in the Hungarian sample. Fathers of daughters tend to participate less in child-related tasks (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Harris & Morgan, 1991; Rouyer et al., 2007), although this association is statistically significant only on weekdays. Fathers' education shows a polarized pattern: Higher levels of education are generally associated with greater involvement (Gracia & Ghysels, 2017; Naujoks, 2024), while lower-educated fathers also tend to participate more—but primarily on weekends, with no significant association observed on weekdays. Fathers' age also plays a significant role: Younger fathers and first-time fathers are more likely to engage in task sharing (Kuo et al., 2018; Yeh et al., 2021). They may be more egalitarian or have different expectations about parenting roles. Moreover, elder fathers' (aged above 40) participation is decreased during the weekend, suggesting that they might have less energy for childcare tasks on weekends.

In line with H3, our results indicate that the associations between workload and gender-role attitudes and paternal involvement vary across time frames (Yeh et al., 2021). While the coefficients from the OLS regression models indicate that previously significant predictors have relatively small magnitudes overall, they reveal consistent patterns. Most notably, the association between work–family conflict and paternal involvement appears more pronounced during weekdays, potentially due to the competing demands of work and family responsibilities during the workweek. Still, while long working hours (51+ hours per week) are associated with fewer shared tasks and with a slightly larger proportional reduction on weekdays (0.6 fewer tasks, or 10%), they also contribute to a reduction of involvement on weekends (0.5 fewer tasks, or 6%).

Contrary to expectations, the association between attitudes toward fathering roles and paternal involvement is stronger on weekdays than on weekends. While egalitarian attitudes (particularly those held by fathers) are associated with greater task sharing on weekdays (a 10.6% increase for each-unit increase in the father's index), the effect size is smaller on weekends (a 5% increase). For mothers' attitudes, the effect is even smaller, since each one-unit increase in the mother's index is associated with 0.31 more tasks on weekdays (5%) and 0.23 more tasks on weekends (3%). This suggests that egalitarian attitudes may be most consequential when fathers face time constraints and competing priorities, rather than during more flexible weekend periods. Weekdays may serve as a critical context where attitudes translate into behavior under pressure, while weekends—governed by stronger social norms of family time—may reduce the variability linked to individual attitudes.

6.2. Conclusion

The significance of the results of this study lies in its ability to disentangle the relative influence of gender-role attitudes and work-related constraints on paternal involvement in caregiving, considering that the caregiver and breadwinner role of the fathers collectively shape their paternal behaviour.

The analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which Hungarian fathers engage in early childcare. One of the most robust findings is that fathers' own attitudes toward their paternal role emerge as one of the strongest predictors of involvement in caregiving tasks. This underscores the importance of internalized norms in shaping caregiving behaviour, even when accounting for structural factors such as work–family conflict and working hours. Moreover, the study highlights the structural limits of these values: Even when egalitarian attitudes are present, high levels of work–family conflict and long working hours substantially hinder paternal engagement. Importantly, the results challenge the assumption that fathers can compensate for limited weekday involvement by increasing their participation on weekends, revealing instead that time constraints persist across the week.

The findings point to a broader conclusion: While the mindset of Hungarian families with very young children appears to be shifting toward more egalitarian values regarding the division of caregiving responsibilities, the heavy work-related burdens placed on fathers continue to reinforce traditional divisions of labor—ultimately keeping mothers disproportionately responsible for childcare within the household. Interventions that promote positive attitudes toward paternal involvement, reduce work–family conflict, and limit long working hours—particularly those exceeding 50 hours per week—could significantly enhance fathers' participation in childcare tasks. Policies supporting work–life balance, such as flexible working arrangements or reduced overtime, may be especially effective in achieving this goal.

6.3. Directions for Future Research

One promising avenue for future research lies in comparing maternal and paternal perceptions of father involvement. Such a comparison would allow for an assessment of whether fathers systematically overestimate their participation, a possibility that the current dataset is well positioned to examine. In addition, the data could be used to explore the potential gatekeeping role of mothers—i.e., the extent to which maternal behaviors and attitudes influence the degree of paternal task-sharing. This would allow for a clearer distinction between fathers acting as “helpers” versus true “sharers” in caregiving responsibilities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. Data can be requested at <https://www.demografia.hu/en> and may be analysed with the permission of the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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