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Paternal parenting attitudes and social competence in preschool children: A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between paternal parenting attitudes and the social competence and behaviors of preschool-aged children. The research utilizes a descriptive and cross-sectional survey design. The data were collected during the spring semester of 2024 across various preschool institutions in Istanbul, Turkey. The study group consists of 252 children (129 boys, 123 girls) aged 36 to 72 months and their fathers, selected via convenience sampling. Data were gathered using the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation-30 Scale and the Parenting Attitude Scale. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings indicated that paternal attitudes did not differ significantly based on the child's gender. Similarly, children's social competence scores showed no significant variation between boys and girls. However, paternal education level was found to be a significant determinant; fathers with higher education levels exhibited significantly lower authoritarian and overprotective attitudes. Correlation analysis revealed that permissive paternal attitudes are positively associated with children's social competence, whereas authoritarian and overprotective styles did not demonstrate a statistically significant direct relationship with children's anger-aggression or anxiety-withdrawal sub-dimensions. These results suggest that fathers' parenting approaches are becoming more egalitarian regarding the child's gender, yet the father's educational background remains a critical factor in the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Keywords: Father-child relationship; Parenting styles; Paternal attitudes; Preschool children; Social competence

1. Introduction

The family constitutes a central developmental context in which children's early socialization and socio-emotional development unfold through interactions among parent–child relationships, other family subsystems, and the broader ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Cabrera et al., 2014; Parke, 2004). Within this context, parenting style is better understood as a relational climate that shapes how specific parenting practices are experienced, rather than as a simple mechanism that directly determines child outcomes (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Dimensions of parenting such as warmth, behavioral control, autonomy granting, and harsh or psychological control show systematic, although generally modest, associations with children's behavioral adjustment (Pinquart, 2017). Contemporary evidence similarly indicates that different configurations of parenting styles are associated with internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial outcomes, highlighting the importance of considering parenting as multidimensional and context dependent (Vasiou et al., 2023). Parents also identify communication as an important means of supporting children's social-emotional needs, while recent early-childhood research emphasizes communication, empathy, emotion regulation, and social relationships as interconnected dimensions of socio-emotional development (Isik & Sahin Taskin, 2024; Özdemir Beceren et al., 2025). Early childhood is a period of rapid behavioral, social, emotional, and neurodevelopmental change in which relationships and environmental experiences can meaningfully influence developmental trajectories (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Historically, developmental research and parenting interventions have often centered on mothers and the mother–child dyad, leaving fathers comparatively underrepresented in both research and family-focused practice (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). This imbalance has contributed to growing interest in examining fathers' contributions within the broader family system rather than

assuming that paternal involvement is interchangeable with maternal involvement. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that father involvement during early childhood is associated with children's social and cognitive learning, while more recent evidence shows small but consistent associations between positive paternal engagement, warmth, responsiveness, and young children's social-emotional competence (McWayne et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2026). Social competence and emotion regulation are themselves central dimensions of preschool development (Dereli İman et al., 2019), and parents commonly identify communication as an important means of supporting children's social-emotional needs (Isik & Sahin Taskin, 2024). Father-specific research further suggests that paternal play, interaction quality, and warmth are related to children's social skills and behavioral adjustment, although these associations may depend on relational conditions such as supportive coparenting and child gender (Jia et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2013). Caregiving routines such as feeding also provide contexts in which father–child interaction quality can be supported; an intervention targeting these interactions was associated with improvements in interaction quality and reductions in children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Cimino et al., 2024). Recent research has additionally linked father involvement with preschoolers' resilience and executive functioning, while showing that these relationships may vary according to individual characteristics (Cui et al., 2026). Despite this growing evidence base, fathers remain less consistently represented in parenting interventions, and mother-centered patterns are still evident in some early-childhood professional contexts, underscoring the need for more systematic father inclusion in developmental research and family-focused practice (Levy & Peleg, 2022; Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

Despite the growing literature on father involvement and children's early social-emotional development, important questions remain regarding how specific paternal parenting attitudes relate to distinct dimensions of preschool adjustment. Existing research has frequently conceptualized fathering in terms of broad involvement, positive engagement, or parenting quality, with these dimensions showing small but meaningful associations with children's social and cognitive outcomes (McWayne et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2026). More recent father-specific research has begun to differentiate particular parenting behaviors and has demonstrated that paternal psychological control may relate differently to preschool children's social competence, anger-aggression, and anxiety-withdrawal (Guldeste et al., 2024). These three dimensions are well-established indicators of social-behavioral adjustment in preschool children and have also been used in research conducted with Turkish preschool samples (Dereli İman et al., 2019). Nevertheless, comparatively limited attention has been given to examining multiple paternal parenting attitudes, such as authoritarian, overprotective, and permissive tendencies, simultaneously in relation to these distinct socio-emotional outcomes while also considering paternal and family sociodemographic characteristics. This narrower gap is particularly relevant in culturally underexamined contexts, where the meaning and correlates of parenting practices may differ across family and social conditions (Guldeste et al., 2024). The continuing need to strengthen fathers' representation in early-childhood family research and practice further supports more differentiated investigation of paternal roles rather than treating parental influences as interchangeable (Levy & Peleg, 2022).

To address this conspicuous gap in the literature, the aim of the current study is to systematically investigate the relationship between paternal parenting attitudes and preschool children's social competence and behavior evaluations. By exploring these intricate relational dynamics through a structured, multi-variable approach, this study seeks to provide precise empirical evidence that can inform targeted, inclusive family education programs, empowering fathers as core architects of their children's social success. Ultimately, uncovering these specific dynamics will contribute substantially to the international literature by offering culturally contextualized yet universally applicable insights into paternal pedagogy.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The present study utilized a quantitative research paradigm, specifically adopting a descriptive and cross-sectional survey design (Mertens, 2014). This methodology was selected to effectively identify, describe, and examine the existing patterns between paternal parenting styles and the social competence levels of preschool-aged children in their natural settings without any external manipulation (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). By employing a cross-sectional approach, the research captures a comprehensive "snapshot" of family dynamics and child development indicators during a critical period of early childhood socialization, providing a robust basis for relational analysis (Mertens, 2014).

2.2. Study Group

The initial study group comprises 252 children (129 boys, 51.2%; 123 girls, 48.8%) aged between 36 and 72 months, along with their fathers. This specific age range was purposively chosen because it represents a critical developmental milestone where children engage in their first intensive social interactions outside the home, rapidly acquiring emotional self-regulation and peer socialization skills (Cui et al., 2026). Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method from various independent and school-based preschool education institutions in Istanbul during the spring semester of 2024. This non-probability sampling method was employed due to the practical constraints of reaching fathers who were willing to actively participate and complete comprehensive self-report surveys during standard school hours. Regarding the demographic profile of the participants, the majority of the fathers belonged to middle-income, nuclear families. Paternal educational backgrounds were highly diverse, spanning from primary school graduates to those with postgraduate degrees, thereby ensuring a representative cross-section of socio-economic statuses. Eligibility criteria for participation included: (1) children currently enrolled in formal preschool institutions, and (2) children residing with their biological fathers. To ensure standardized behavioral evaluations, children with formally diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders or severe cognitive delays were excluded from the study. *Ethical Considerations:* Adhering strictly to the ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, without prejudice, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Istanbul Gelisim University Ethics Committee (Date: 09.02.2024; Meeting No: 2024-02; Decision No: 2024-02-105). Written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of all participants prior to data collection. *Sample Size Clarification:* While all 252 fathers completed the Parenting Attitude Scale [PAS], only 164 participants fully completed the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation-30 [SCBE-30] scale due to the extensive nature of the behavioral observation required. To maintain data integrity and avoid statistical contradictions, listwise deletion was applied for missing data; therefore, all subsequent inferential analyses involving child behavioral outcomes were conducted strictly on this valid sub-sample (N = 164). Additionally, a small control group of mothers (n = 37) was included in the initial comparative analyses to serve as a baseline reference, strictly to evaluate the distinctiveness and pedagogical variance of paternal attitudes against traditional maternal norms.

Table 1 presents the detailed demographic characteristics of the participating children and their fathers to provide a comprehensive overview of the sampled population.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Data collection was facilitated through a structured questionnaire package consisting of a demographic information form and two primary standardized instruments.

2.3.1. Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation-30

Originally developed by LaFreniere and Dumas (1996) and adapted into Turkish by Çorapçı et al. (2010), this 30-item scale assesses the social-emotional adjustment of children across three distinct sub-dimensions: *Social Competence, Anger-Aggression,* and *Anxiety-Withdrawal*. Each sub-dimension

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 252)

Variable and group	*n*	*%*
Child gender		
Boy	129	51.2
Girl	123	48.8
Father's Educational Level		
Primary and Secondary School	34	13.5
High School	73	29.0
University	112	44.4
Postgraduate	31	12.3
Family Economic Level		
Poor/Medium	192	76.2
Good	60	23.8

Note. Demographic frequencies are based on the initial recruitment pool (N = 252). Subsequent correlational and comparative analyses regarding social competence are restricted to the valid completed sample (N = 164).

consists of exactly 10 items. Responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Higher scores in a specific sub-dimension unequivocally indicate a higher prevalence of those respective behaviors in the child's daily repertoire.

2.3.2. Parenting Attitude Scale

Developed by Demir (2007), this instrument was employed to measure paternal attitudes across four key pedagogical dimensions: *Democratic, Authoritarian, Overprotective,* and *Permissive* styles. Responses are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The scale facilitates the calculation of independent scores for each attitude dimension, revealing the dominant parenting profile of the father.

The internal consistency and structural validity of both scales were re-confirmed for the current sample through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ensuring that the instruments provided reliable data for the Turkish cultural context. Specifically, reliability analyses conducted prior to the main hypothesis testing demonstrated robust internal consistency. According to Taber (2018), Cronbach's alpha values above .70 are considered highly acceptable. The alpha coefficients for the current study ranged from .72 to .92 across all sub-dimensions, thereby satisfying the reliability criteria within the methodological framework without generating an independent tabular representation here.

2.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis using SPSS 22.0 software (George & Mallery, 2010). Before proceeding with hypothesis testing, the data distribution was screened for normality using Skewness-Kurtosis values and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests to justify the use of parametric procedures (George & Mallery, 2010; Mertens, 2014). In instances where the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded significant results, Skewness and Kurtosis values were evaluated. As the Skewness and Kurtosis values for all sub-dimensions strictly fell within the acceptable plus-minus 2.0 range (George & Mallery, 2010), the assumption of normality was thoroughly satisfied.

Consequently, the descriptive statistics for the final analytical sample (N = 164) revealed the following mean scores and standard deviations for the sub-dimensions: Democratic (M = 69.35, SD = 6.44), Authoritarian (M = 17.38, SD = 3.94), Overprotective (M = 32.86, SD = 5.65), Permissive (M = 19.99, SD = 4.65), Social Competence (M = 42.65, SD = 11.70), Anger-Aggression (M = 22.19, SD = 10.39), and Anxiety-Withdrawal (M = 20.90, SD = 9.21). To examine differences based on categorical demographic variables, Independent Groups t-tests and One-way Analysis of Variance [ANOVA] were performed. Post-hoc comparisons utilizing the Bonferroni correction were utilized where significant F-values were observed to accurately determine the source of variance. Finally, Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the

relationship between paternal parenting attitudes and children's social competence scores.

3. Result

The statistical analyses conducted in this study are organized to systematically evaluate the intricate dynamics between paternal attitudes and the socio-emotional development of preschool-aged children. Recognizing that early childhood socialization is deeply embedded within the family framework—where emotional warmth and systemic family logic actively shape behavioral trajectories—the following findings detail both comparative and correlational assessments. This section first outlines the comparative variations in parenting styles, particularly highlighting the role of educational attainment, which serves as a crucial mediator for positive parenting practices. Subsequently, the analysis explores how these specific attitudes intersect with children's social competence and behavioral evaluations. Table 2 presents the independent samples t-test results comparing the Parental Attitude Scale scores between mothers and fathers to determine the alignment or divergence between maternal and paternal figures.

Table 2
Findings Regarding the Comparison of Parental Attitude Scale Scores by Mother and Father

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Democratic dimension					
Father	213	69.15 ± 6.56	−1.19	248	.24
Mother	37	70.51 ± 5.64			
Authoritarian					
Father	213	17.33 ± 3.79	−0.46	248	.65
Mother	37	17.65 ± 4.75			
Overprotective					
Father	213	33.10 ± 5.56	1.58	248	.12
Mother	37	31.51 ± 6.09			
Permissive					
Father	213	20.26 ± 4.79	2.26	248	.02
Mother	37	18.41 ± 3.37			

As previously detailed in Table 1 (see Section 2.3), the independent samples t-test results comparing the Parental Attitude Scale scores between mothers and fathers indicate an overarching alignment between maternal and paternal figures across the democratic, authoritarian, and overprotective dimensions ($p > .05$). The sole statistical divergence emerged within the permissive domain, where fathers registered significantly higher tendencies compared to mothers ($t(248) = 2.26$, $p = .02$).This finding indicates that fathers in the current sample tend to adopt a slightly more lenient approach in rule-setting than mothers. Table 3 presents the descriptive frequencies and percentage distributions of parental attitude dimensions and children's social competence and behavior evaluation levels within the study group.

Table 3
Findings Regarding Parental Attitude and Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Levels

Variable and level	*n*	*%*
Democratic dimension		
Moderate	129	51.60
Low	74	29.60
High	47	18.80
Authoritarian		
Moderate	106	42.40
Low	91	36.40
High	53	21.20

Table 3 continued

Variable and level	*n*	*%*
Overprotective		
Moderate	117	46.80
Low	70	28.00
High	63	25.20
Permissive		
Moderate	118	47.20
Low	79	31.60
High	53	21.20
Social Competence		
Moderate	77	46.95
Low	47	28.66
High	40	24.39
Anger/Aggression		
Moderate	85	51.83
Low	41	25.00
High	38	23.17
Anxiety-Withdrawal		
Moderate	77	46.95
Low	46	28.05
High	41	25.00

A holistic evaluation of the distributional frequencies reveals a predominantly moderate clustering across all measured psychological and behavioral parameters. Notably, approximately half of the sample fell within the moderate range for democratic attitudes (51.60%) and anger-aggression behaviors (51.83%), reflecting a normative, bell-shaped distribution of familial interactions and childhood behavioral responses within the study group.

Table 4 presents the comparison of parental attitudes based on the family's economic level.

Table 4

Comparison of Parental Attitudes by Family Economic Level

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Democratic dimension					
Poor/medium	191	68.95 ± 6.34	−1.80	248	.07
Good	59	70.66 ± 6.63			
Authoritarian					
Poor/medium	191	17.34 ± 3.82	−0.26	248	.80
Good	59	17.49 ± 4.35			
Overprotective					
Poor/medium	191	32.82 ± 5.52	−0.24	248	.81
Good	59	33.02 ± 6.13			
Permissive					
Poor/medium	191	19.85 ± 4.66	−0.86	248	.39
Good	59	20.44 ± 4.61			

The independent samples *t*-test results indicate no statistically significant differences in any of the parental attitude dimensions (Democratic, Authoritarian, Overprotective, and Permissive) according to the family's income status ($p > .05$). This homogeneity implies that paternal attitudes regarding discipline, protection, and emotional warmth are driven by factors independent of the family's immediate financial stratification. Table 5 presents the independent samples t-test results comparing parental attitudes based on the child's gender.

Table 5
Independent Samples t-Test Results Comparing Parental Attitudes by Child Gender

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Democratic dimension					
Boy	129	69.11 ± 6.72	−0.58	250	.57
Girl	123	69.58 ± 6.17			
Authoritarian					
Boy	129	17.16 ± 3.77	−0.84	250	.40
Girl	123	17.58 ± 4.10			
Overprotective					
Boy	129	32.76 ± 5.94	−0.30	250	.77
Girl	123	32.97 ± 5.38			
Permissive					
Boy	129	19.80 ± 4.38	−0.64	250	.52
Girl	123	20.17 ± 4.90			

In a finding that strongly underscores the modernization of family roles, paternal attitudes do not differ significantly depending on whether the child is a boy or a girl across all measured dimensions ($p > .05$). This implies a highly egalitarian approach by parents regardless of the child's gender, remaining completely free from traditional gender-based pedagogical biases.

Table 6 presents the One-Way ANOVA results comparing parental attitudes according to educational level.

Table 6
One-Way ANOVA Results Comparing Parental Attitudes by Educational Level

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*F*	*p*	*Difference (Bonferroni)*
Democratic dimension					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	34	69.56 ± 6.81	0.48	.69	
High School (2)	73	69.21 ± 6.90			
University (3)	112	69.04 ± 6.18			
Postgraduate (4)	31	70.58 ± 5.95			
Authoritarian					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	34	15.71 ± 3.31	4.25	.01	1 < 3, 4
High School (2)	73	16.93 ± 3.95			
University (3)	112	17.78 ± 4.01			
Postgraduate (4)	31	18.81 ± 3.69			
Overprotective					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	34	36.74 ± 5.70	9.09	< .001	1 > 2, 3, 4
High School (2)	73	33.27 ± 5.11			
University (3)	112	32.15 ± 5.75			
Postgraduate (4)	31	30.23 ± 4.27			
Permissive					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	34	17.97 ± 4.27	2.69	.05	1 < 3
High School (2)	73	20.15 ± 5.20			
University (3)	112	20.51 ± 4.37			
Postgraduate (4)	31	19.94 ± 4.23			

According to the analysis, educational level significantly impacts authoritarian ($F(3, 246) = 4.25$, $p = .01$), overprotective ($F(3, 246) = 9.09$, $p < .001$), and permissive ($F(3, 246) = 2.69$, $p = .05$) parenting attitudes. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests demonstrated that individuals with primary and secondary school education exhibited significantly lower authoritarian and permissive scores, but significantly higher overprotective scores compared to those with university and postgraduate degrees. This indicates that formal higher education significantly recalibrates a father's approach, effectively reducing anxiety-driven overprotection while restructuring authority and leniency

dynamics. Democratic attitudes did not significantly differ by educational background ($F(3, 246) = 0.48$, $p = .69$). Table 7 presents the comparison of children's social competence and behavior evaluation scores based on the respondent parent.

Table 7
Comparison of Child Behavioral Evaluations by Respondent Parent

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Social competence					
Father	127	41.51 ± 11.72	−2.34	162	.02
Mother	37	46.57 ± 10.90			
Anger/Aggression					
Father	127	22.42 ± 10.47	0.52	162	.60
Mother	37	21.41 ± 10.20			
Anxiety-Withdrawal					
Father	127	21.00 ± 9.43	0.25	162	.80
Mother	37	20.57 ± 8.56			

The analysis revealed a statistically significant perceptual divergence in Social Competence scores ($t(162) = −2.34$, $p = .02$), indicating that mothers reported significantly higher social competence scores for their children compared to fathers. Conversely, evaluations of negative behavioral traits, such as Anger-Aggression or Anxiety-Withdrawal scores, remained consistent and yielded no significant differences between both parents ($p > .05$).

Table 8 presents the comparison of children's social competence and behavior evaluation scores by economic level.

Table 8
Comparison of Child Behavioral Evaluations by Family Economic Level

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Social competence					
Poor/medium	128	42.97 ± 12.03	0.65	162	.52
Good	36	41.53 ± 10.55			
Anger/Aggression					
Poor/medium	128	22.38 ± 10.64	0.45	162	.65
Good	36	21.50 ± 9.55			
Anxiety-Withdrawal					
Poor/medium	128	20.57 ± 8.64	-0.87	162	.39
Good	36	22.08 ± 11.06			

Mirroring the findings on parental attitudes, no statistically significant differences were observed in social competence, anger-aggression, or anxiety-withdrawal scores based on the family's economic level ($p > .05$). Table 9 presents the comparison of children's social competence and behavior evaluation scores by child gender.

Table 9
Comparison of Child Behavioral Evaluations by Child Gender

Variable and group	*n*	*M ± SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Social competence					
Boy	77	42.75 ± 12.23	0.10	162	.92
Girl	87	42.56 ± 11.28			
Anger/Aggression					
Boy	77	21.83 ± 10.93	−0.41	162	.68
Girl	87	22.51 ± 9.94			
Anxiety-Withdrawal					
Boy	77	21.65 ± 9.59	0.98	162	.33
Girl	87	20.24 ± 8.87			

Further confirming the egalitarian developmental environment revealed in Table 5, the independent samples t-test revealed no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of social competence (t = 0.10, p > .05), anger-aggression (t = −0.41, p > .05), and anxiety-withdrawal (t = 0.98, p > .05) scores. Table 10 presents the comparison of children's social competence and behavior evaluation scores by parental educational level.

Table 10
One-Way ANOVA Results for Child Behavioral Evaluations by Educational Level

Variable and group	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Social competence					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	21	40.00	11.03	0.53	.53
High School (2)	55	42.53	11.61		
University (3)	67	43.67	12.01		
Postgraduate (4)	21	42.38	12.01		
Anger/Aggression					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	21	22.10	7.98	0.37	.37
High School (2)	55	23.16	10.66		
University (3)	67	21.97	10.79		
Postgraduate (4)	21	20.43	10.91		
Anxiety-Withdrawal					
Primary and Secondary School (1)	21	20.52	8.16	0.35	.35
High School (2)	55	20.00	7.71		
University (3)	67	21.69	10.14		
Postgraduate (4)	21	21.14	11.00		

The ANOVA results indicated no statistically significant differences in the children's social competence (F(3, 160) = 0.53, p = .53), anger-aggression (F(3, 160) = 0.37, p = .37), or anxiety-withdrawal (F(3, 160) = 0.35, p = .35) scores based on parental educational level. Interestingly, while paternal education heavily influences parenting styles, it did not produce a statistically direct variance in the children's immediate behavior scores, suggesting that the impact of education is likely mediated through the parenting style itself rather than acting as an independent predictor. Table 11 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients determining the relationship between parental attitudes and children's social competence and behavior evaluation scores.

Table 11
Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Parental Attitudes and Child Behavioral Outcomes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Democratic	−						
2. Authoritarian	.386**	−					
3. Overprotective	.379**	.416**	−				
4. Permissive	.435**	.393**	.322**	−			
5. Social competence	.04	.13	−.02	.203*	−		
6. Anger/Aggression	.09	.15	.18	−.02	−.380**	−	
7. Anxiety-Withdrawal	.05	.01	.01	−.10	−.402**	.07	−

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Correlation analysis revealed a low-level, positive, and statistically significant relationship strictly between the Permissive parenting dimension and children's Social Competence scores (r = .203, p = .03). Notably, no other statistically significant relationships were identified between the remaining parental attitude dimensions (Democratic, Authoritarian, Overprotective) and the children's Social Competence, Anger-Aggression, or Anxiety-Withdrawal scores (p > .05).

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between paternal parenting attitudes and the social competence of preschool-aged children. The findings drawn from the

current sample offer critical insights into modern family dynamics and early childhood socialization, highlighting how paternal inputs operate as unique, qualitatively distinct forces that actively shape childhood psychological adaptation (Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

Initial analyses regarding the gender of the child and family economic level revealed no statistically significant differences in parental attitudes. This finding indicates a promising shift toward a more egalitarian parenting approach, where modern parents do not alter their pedagogical stance based on the child's gender or socio-economic status. This structural gender invariance suggests that the modern paternal climate increasingly acts as a universal predictor of interpersonal competence, facilitating positive peer social skills and cooperative capacities regardless of whether the child is a boy or a girl (Webster et al., 2013). Interestingly, while mothers and fathers exhibited similar levels of democratic, authoritarian, and overprotective attitudes, fathers reported significantly higher permissive attitudes. This suggests that fathers in the current sample may adopt a slightly more lenient and accommodating approach in rule-setting compared to mothers, potentially introducing a more flexible, play-oriented relational dynamic into the immediate home micro-system.

A profound and highly significant finding of the current research is the impact of paternal educational attainment on parenting styles. Fathers with primary and secondary school education exhibited significantly higher authoritarian and overprotective attitudes compared to those with university and postgraduate degrees. This demonstrates that advanced education equips fathers with heightened pedagogical awareness, enabling them to break away from restrictive patriarchal norms and better support the child's developmental need for autonomy. The global literature strongly corroborates this, emphasizing that parental education and active, supportive involvement serve as powerful, long-term mediators for a child's socio-emotional and academic outcomes, fundamentally shifting family interactions away from harsh control toward cognitive and emotional engagement (Dubow et al., 2009; Kantova, 2024). When fathers possess higher educational capital, they are significantly more equipped to enrich the cognitive and emotional foundations of early caregiving, leading to superior developmental outcomes for young children (Cimino et al., 2024).

Regarding children's behavioral evaluations, mothers reported significantly higher social competence scores for their children than fathers, pointing to potential differences in observational contexts or maternal sensitivity to peer interactions. Furthermore, correlation analyses identified a positive relationship between permissive paternal attitudes and children's social competence. While traditional developmental theories often advocate strictly for authoritative (democratic) parenting, recent evidence highlights that in rapidly changing cultural contexts, a degree of parental permissiveness combined with emotional warmth might temporarily buffer children against anxiety, allowing for more flexible peer interactions and play behaviors (Uygun & Kozikoğlu, 2019; Vasiou et al., 2023). This unique positive association demonstrates that active and emotionally flexible paternal involvement can operate as a powerful protective mechanism, enhancing preschool-aged children’s resilience and safeguarding them against both internalizing and externalizing behavioral risks (Cui et al., 2026).

Conversely, restrictive and rejecting family climates are robustly known to exacerbate aggressive behaviors, whereas emotionally supportive environments act as a protective factor, facilitating overall social adaptation (Li et al., 2024). The lack of strong correlations between authoritarian/overprotective attitudes and children's anger-aggression in the current sample may be attributed to the predominantly "moderate" levels of negative parenting attitudes reported (as seen in Table 2), which likely prevented extreme behavioral variations in the children. This normative distribution suggests that because highly coercive practices were limited within this group, the children were insulated from severe behavioral disruptions, further reinforcing the notion that consistent, low-coercion fathering climates protect preschool children from externalizing problems (Cui et al., 2026). Overall, these findings underscore the necessity of empowering fathers through targeted educational programs to foster optimal socio-emotional environments for preschool children.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the findings of the present study indicate predominantly moderate levels of both paternal parenting styles and children's socio-emotional competencies. These competencies represent important dimensions of early childhood development, encompassing such interrelated capacities as emotion regulation, communication, empathy, and social relationships (Dereli İman et al., 2019; Özdemir Beceren et al., 2025). The broader literature also supports the relevance of parental and, more specifically, paternal interactions for children's emotional and behavioral development. Parents commonly identify communication as an important means of supporting children's social-emotional needs, while intervention research with fathers suggests that improvements in the quality of father-child interactions can coincide with reductions in children's emotional and behavioral difficulties (Cimino et al., 2024; Isik & Sahin Taskin, 2024). In the present study, children's gender and family economic status were not associated with significant differences in the examined outcomes, whereas paternal educational attainment was associated with differences in paternal parenting styles. In particular, higher paternal education was associated with lower authoritarian and overprotective tendencies. This pattern is consistent with evidence suggesting that fathers' educational attainment may be related to parenting practices, including overparenting, although these associations can vary according to child and contextual characteristics (Ruiz-Ortiz et al., 2024). Paternal education should therefore be interpreted as one contextual factor associated with parenting practices rather than as a direct or deterministic cause of more supportive parenting. Taken together, the findings underscore the potential importance of the quality of father-child interactions for children's socio-emotional development without implying that paternal education alone determines long-term behavioral or social outcomes (Cimino et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the positive association observed in this study between permissive paternal attitudes and children's social competence should be interpreted cautiously. Rather than indicating that permissive parenting is broadly beneficial, this finding may reflect a context-specific pattern in which some behaviors captured by the permissiveness dimension overlap with lower coercive control or greater relational flexibility. Importantly, permissiveness should not be equated with paternal warmth or responsiveness, which constitute conceptually distinct dimensions of parenting. Recent evidence consistently links fathers' positive engagement, warmth, and responsiveness with stronger social-emotional competence, whereas permissive parenting itself has shown negative or nonlinear associations with preschool children's social-emotional development in other samples (Lee et al., 2025; Webster et al., 2013; Wen et al., 2026; Zheng et al., 2026). The present result should therefore be understood as a sample- and context-specific association that warrants further examination of how permissiveness, warmth, responsiveness, and behavioral control interact within particular cultural settings.

More broadly, the findings support the inclusion of fathers as active participants in early childhood and family-focused interventions. Systematic evidence indicates that fathers have historically been underrepresented in parenting programs despite their meaningful contribution to children's development, and father-inclusive interventions benefit from explicitly considering fathers' participation and impact rather than treating caregiving as primarily maternal (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Contemporary meta-analytic evidence further shows that paternal involvement is significantly associated with young children's social-emotional competence, with positive engagement and warmth-responsiveness emerging as particularly relevant dimensions (Zheng et al., 2026). This interpretation is also compatible with recent work emphasizing the role of parent-child communication in supporting children's social-emotional needs (Isik & Sahin Taskin, 2024). In this sense, the present findings support father-inclusive approaches that strengthen warm, responsive, and developmentally appropriate involvement rather than framing fathers as secondary caregivers or assuming that any single parenting style independently determines children's outcomes. Social competence and emotion regulation are themselves developmentally responsive capacities that can be strengthened through structured early-childhood experiences, further underscoring the value of coordinated family and educational support (Dereli İman et al.,

2019).

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Data availability: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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