Constructing Fatherhood in Indonesian Children's Picturebooks: A Case Study of the National Literacy Movement's BUDI Collection

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Abstract

Representations of fathers in children's picturebooks are never neutral: they carry the values, norms, and expectations that societies attach to family roles. This study examines how fatherhood is constructed through visual and verbal narratives in Indonesian picturebooks from the Buku Digital (BUDI) collection of the National Literacy Movement.

Adopting a qualitative case-study design, we analysed 102 father-featuring books published between 2017 and 2025. Analysis was organised around five dimensions of paternal behaviour (nurturing, care-giving, companion, disciplining, and provider) and attended closely to the interplay between text and illustration.

Fathers emerge as multidimensional figures who show affection and provide care, share everyday adventures, guide children's conduct, and sustain the household. By foregrounding Indonesian children's literature, the study extends international scholarship on fatherhood beyond its predominantly Western orientation.

Keywords: Fatherhood; Indonesian Children's Picturebooks; Multimodal Narratives; National Literacy Movement.

Introduction

Picturebooks do more than narrate childhood; they offer children a first lens on family life and on what it means to be a parent. As multimodal narratives, they generate meaning through the interdependence of word and image (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Serafini & Reid, 2024).

Within this interplay, the father takes shape through how he appears, acts, speaks, and relates to his child: through dialogue and deeds on the verbal plane, and through expression, gesture, gaze, and bodily closeness on the visual (Tong & Guo, 2025; Rahma & Hanif, 2025).

The BUDI GLN collection (Badan Bahasa, 2025) supplies a national corpus of literacy materials spanning children's everyday lives, cultures, and communities, making it a fertile site for tracing how paternal involvement is imagined.

Yet research integrating verbal and visual evidence to explain how the dimensions of fatherhood are constructed in Indonesian picturebooks remains scarce. This study addresses that gap.

Research Method

The study employs a qualitative case-study design (Yin, 2018) within a multimodal framework, since picturebook meaning cannot be recovered from words or images alone.

Corpus. 102 picturebooks from the BUDI collection (2017–2025), purposively selected for the presence of a father character or paternal representation.

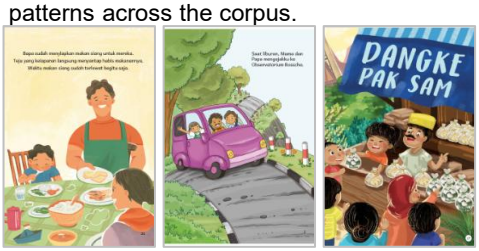


Picture 1. Nurturing (left) and disciplining (right) behaviours of fathers in the BUDI corpus.

Unit of analysis. Verbal and visual narratives concerning the father and the father–child relationship. Verbal data comprise dialogue, narration, and descriptions of action, thought, and feeling; visual data comprise facial expression, gesture, posture, gaze, proximity, shared activity, setting, and composition.

Data collection. Close reading of the entire corpus, with bibliographic details recorded for every book and each father-related scene logged by page and narrative context.

Analysis in four stages. (1) Identification of paternal actions, interactions, and communication; (2) categorisation into five behavioural dimensions (Charlesworth, 2023; DeWitt, 2005); (3) interpretation of word–image relations; (4) synthesis of patterns across the corpus.



Picture 2. Care-giving (left), companion (centre), and provider (right) behaviours.

Trustworthiness. Repeated readings, cross-checking of verbal and visual evidence, and cross-book comparison using consistent analytic categories.

Discussion & Result

Five dimensions of paternal involvement emerged from the corpus:

1. Affection & Emotional Support (*nurturing*).

Embraces that soothe and embolden; encouragement voiced in words such as "jump on your own, or Dad will push"; and a readiness to honour the child's ideas, interests, and wishes.

2. Guidance & Discipline (*disciplining*). Rules and limits, from outdoor play to rationed syrup, accompanied by explanation, advice, and praise. Discipline is framed as teaching rather than mere prohibition.

3. Care & Daily Support (*care-giving*). Preparing meals, reading bedtime stories, worshipping together, carrying a child through heavy rain, teaching cycling, and performing physical domestic labour such as mending a roof or building a chicken coop.

4. Companionship & Shared Activities (*companion*). Journeys by car, MRT, train, and plane; encounters with knowledge and heritage in libraries and Sumba's traditional houses; harvesting maize and fishing; and making stilts or painting a house together.

5. Provision & Family Support (*provider*). Fathers work and bring home income across diverse livelihoods (fisher, motorcycle-taxi driver, tailor), and children join in: tapping rubber, selling dangke, striking gongs, crafting wayang.

Word and image work in concert: text supplies dialogue and action, while illustration deepens them through emotion, physical closeness, and shared situations.

Conclusion

Analysing 102 BUDI GLN picturebooks (2017–2025), this study shows that Indonesian fatherhood on the page extends well beyond the breadwinner. It encompasses emotional intimacy, daily care, guidance, companionship, and support for children's development.

These paternal portraits are woven from the interplay of action, dialogue, expression, gesture, and shared activity, so text and illustration must be read together.

By bringing an Indonesian corpus into the conversation, the study widens the geographic horizon of fatherhood research. Future work could compare picturebooks across nations, explore how children themselves interpret fathers, and examine how sociocultural contexts shape parental roles in children's literature.