

The First-Time Fathers' Experiences in Early Fatherhood: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Becoming a father is a stressful transition period for men, presenting numerous challenges from caring for their newborns to navigating changes in family dynamics. Recently, cultural expectations have shifted, transforming the role of the father from primarily being a breadwinner to being more actively involved in parenting. There is growing evidence that first-time fathers encounter various obstacles and have unmet needs during the parenting period. Thus, before encouraging fathers in society to take on more active parental roles, it is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of their support needs, experiences, and challenges. This study aimed to explore the experiences of the first-time fathers in the early parenthood.

Methods: A semi-structured interview was conducted with ten participants residing in the community of Kuantan, Pahang. The data was analyzed using a content analysis approach to emerge the themes.

Results: Four themes and 18 sub themes emerged from this study, elucidating the experiences of first-time fathers in parenthood. These themes are: Adaptation and changes, Paternal involvement, Challenges and coping mechanisms, and Support and needs of first-time fathers. This study reveals that entering parenthood as a first-time father can be highly challenging. Despite a clear lack of preparation for their roles, the participants demonstrated good coping mechanisms and generally regarded the experience positively.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the necessity for targeted support systems and resources tailored to first-time fathers to help them navigate the transition into parenthood more smoothly. It is recommended that healthcare providers, policymakers, and community organizations develop programs and interventions that address the specific needs of new fathers, including education on newborn care, emotional support, and strategies for balancing work and family responsibilities. By doing so, society can better support first-time fathers in their evolving roles, ultimately benefiting the entire family unit.

Keywords: First-time fathers; Experience; Paternity; Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Becoming a father is a stressful transition for men, presenting numerous challenges and a lack of father-specific support throughout their journey to fatherhood, from caring for newborns to navigating changes in family dynamics (1). Nowadays, cultural expectations have shifted, transforming the role of the father from primarily being a breadwinner to being more actively involved in parenting (2). This concept of "new fatherhood" expects men to be providers, guides, household helpers, and nurturers simultaneously (3).

This cultural shift has been driven by several factors, including reductions in health and social care, decreased availability of help from extended families, economic circumstances requiring both parents to work, and a growing recognition of fathers' key and independent role in their children's development (2). Despite the struggles they face during the transition to fatherhood, first-time fathers are increasingly expected to take on paternal roles. Challenges such as lack of support, information, and preparation are common (4). Additionally, there is growing evidence of fathers experiencing postnatal anxiety and depression, which can negatively affect the individual, his family, and society (1,4).

Understanding how fatherhood affects men psychologically, behaviourally, and physiologically is crucial before shifting cultural norms to be more father-friendly in parenting (3).

Studies have shown that the father's involvement in childrearing can positively influence health outcomes for the entire family (5,6). Active paternal participation promotes better mental and physical health for fathers by fostering a sense of purpose and emotional fulfilment (5). For their partners, an involved father can provide crucial support, alleviating stress and reducing the risk of postpartum depression (7). Children benefit significantly from the presence of an engaged father, as it enhances their emotional security, cognitive development, and social skills (6). Overall, a father's active role in parenting fosters a healthier, more supportive family environment, contributing to the well-being of all members in his family (5,7).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of first-time fathers, focusing on their transition to fatherhood in the local setting. To our knowledge, no study has yet examined paternal

involvement and first-time fathers' experiences in Malaysia. Thus, through these findings, we aim to understand the roles and challenges of first-time fathers in Malaysia, providing essential data to support men and their families during early parenthood.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an in-depth interview method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of first-time fathers, with a focus on their transition to fatherhood. The inclusion criteria targeted first-time fathers residing in the community, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, a diverse ethnic group of participants was approached using purposive sampling.

The following are some of the example questions that have asked during in-depth interview sessions; *"Tell us about your experience for the past months of your parenting?" "Did you and your wife discuss about each other's involvement in baby care?" "What were the challenges faced? What did you do to deal with them?" "What were your specific needs for your involvement in your baby's care?"*.

A total of 10 participants were involved in the study. The sample size was determined by data saturation, which was reached when no new themes emerged after interviewing 10 participants.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained by Kulliyyah of Nursing Postgraduate and Research Committee (KNPGRC), followed by International Islamic University Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (IREC) and Clinical Research Centre (CRC) at the Sultan Ahmad Shah Medical Centre (SASMEC), Kuantan.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Paediatric Clinic at Sultan Ahmad Shah Medical Centre @IIUM (SASMEC@IIUM) in Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia. Semi-structured questions were used, and the sessions were recorded by using a recorder with the participants' approval and consent. Each interview lasted between 35-45 minutes. The data was transcribed after each interview to gain new insights and ideas.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using a content analysis approach based on a previous study (8). After each recorded interview was transcribed, the transcripts were read multiple times to obtain a comprehensive view. The units of analysis, consisting of the entire body of the interviews, were divided into condensed meaning units, such as words, sentences, or paragraphs containing related aspects. Each condensed unit was then abstracted and labelled with a code. These codes were compared based on their underlying meanings, and similar meanings were grouped to form subcategories. The subcategories were combined to create categories and emerging themes based on the participants' views and the qualitative content of their responses. The main themes were developed to align with the study objectives and answer the research questions. Ultimately, four themes were formed with unanimous agreement from the researcher and the research team.

The trustworthiness of the data in this study was ensured by adhering to the principles of qualitative rigor (9). To enhance credibility, the dataset was read and re-read, and findings were cross-checked among team members. Transferability was achieved by providing rich descriptions of the research setting, methodology, and participants' demographics and experiences. Confirmability and dependability were ensured by maintaining an audit trail of all analytical decisions made throughout the study.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

In this study, although participants from various ethnic groups were invited, nine of the ten participants were Malay, and one was Chinese. The participants, all first-time fathers, were recruited from the Paediatric Clinic. Seven participants were aged 31 to 40, two were aged 21 to 30, and one was aged 41 to 50. Eight participants had children older than six months, while two had children under six months. In terms of income, five participants earned between RM 2500 and RM 4000 per month, two earned less than RM 2500, and three earned more than RM 4000. **Table 1** presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic data of participants (N= 10)

Characteristic	Variables	(n)
Age	21-30	2
	31-40	7
	41-50	1
Race	Malay	9
	Chinese	1
	India	0
Child's age	Below 6 months	2
	6 months - 1 year	4
	1 year and above	4
Income	<RM 2500	2
	RM2500-RM 4000	5
	> RM 4000	3

Themes and Subthemes

There are four themes with 18 sub-themes emerged from the study which eventually answered the research questions of this study. The themes illustrated the experience of first-time fathers in parenthood. They are adaptation and changes, paternal involvement, challenges and coping mechanisms, and the support and needs of the first-time fathers as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes

No	Themes	Subthemes
1.	Adaptations and Changes	Responsibilities and Priorities
		Impact on Social Life and Relationships
		Emotional turbulence
		Evolving Marital Dynamics
		Lifestyle Adjustments to Parenthood
2.	Paternal Involvement	Direct Involvement
		Coparenting
3.	Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	Sleep
		Financial
		Emotional responses
		Time
		Health
4.	Supports and Needs	Family and Friends
		Information
		Healthcare worker
		Preparations
		Advice
		Babysitter

Theme 1: Adaptations and Changes

Five sub-themes emerged under the adaptations and changes theme, and these reflect the experience of changes and their adaptations as a first-time father.

Subtheme 1: Responsibilities and Priorities

Most of the participants expressed that they feel the sense of responsibility as a father and the need to fulfil their roles in taking care of the child. Moreover, some of them described the responsibility as shifting the priority on the child and prioritising the child's needs over anything else. The following quotes reflect on this.

"Feels like this is a trust, a new responsibility.....when there is a child, I feel like it is not the time for me to enjoy, we have other responsibilities."

(P1)

"When there is a child, that means we have another task, our responsibility is focused more on the child. I have a lot of free time before becoming a father. When I have become a dad, the focus is on my son. In terms of my needs, it is not a priority anymore. It should be our son's needs."

(P8)

"At the beginning, it was quite tiring because our life has totally changed in terms of time and social time. Need to sacrifice that to focus on our child."

(P10)

Subtheme 2: Impact on Social Life and Relationships

Becoming a father also impacted participants' social lives and relationships. They discussed changes such as reduced social time and the need to balance friendships with family commitments, highlighting the evolving dynamics in their social circles. This was reflected by:

"We have expectations from the beginning. Maybe we are like 'oh, taking care of a baby is kind of easy', but it turned out to be wrong."

(P1, P3)

"I have a sister and a brother that have children. So, I already have expectations on how to handle this."

(P2)

"I have change towards my friends due to having new baby. I cannot go out with them like before. Sometime, I missed to attend my friend's invitations."

(P5, P6, P8)

Subtheme 3: Emotional Turbulence

Participants highlighted the emotional changes they faced in adapting to fatherhood, including stress, happiness and difficulties in emotional regulation. They described moments of feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, particularly when balancing work pressures with parenting responsibilities. Coping strategies such as taking breaks or isolating themselves from intense situations emerged as ways to manage these emotions and maintain composure when interacting with their children. These were reflected by:

"We have been waiting and looking forward for him since our marriage. When he was finally delivered, the feeling of happiness was overwhelmed. At the same time, I was very stress to take care of my baby as a 1st time parent."

(P1, P2, P10)

"I was very excited because I was waiting for 9 years to have him. This is the 10th year of our marriage and we gave full effort for 9 years."

(P9)

"I am happy, but I am also worried. Worried about his weight, not eating enough, not enough sleep. A father is akin to worry about his child. Worried about my work because now I have a baby and how to balance my work and take care of my baby."

(P2, P8)

"Once in a while, I took day off or leave from my job because I was worried about my baby especially when my baby is ill."

(P5, P6)

Subtheme 4: Evolving Marital Dynamics

Within the overarching theme of Adaptation and Changes, the participants described positive developments in their marital relationships following the birth of their child. None perceived their relationship with their partner as deteriorating; instead, they highlighted increased closeness and affection. This was reflected by:

"Getting closer, more affectionate. It became different after we had a child, the house is not silent as it used to be."

(P4)

"It is getting better and we are happier these days. No more arguments etc. Before this, I always spend my time outside compared to right now."

(P9)

However, intimate relationships became a topic of discussion among the participants. Some acknowledged that having a child had disrupted their intimate time together as a couple. Few of the participants verbalized that having a child disturbed their intimate time together as a partner while few of them mentioned that it was not a disturbance at all. These can be seen as:

".....having a child disturbed our intimate time a little bit because we have little time to spend on ourselves and she is always awake at night."

(P3)

"I don't think our intimate time is disturbed. After all, both of us are working and I work in shifts. Sometimes, when I am at home, my wife is working and when I am at home, she is working."

(P6)

Subtheme 5: Lifestyle Adjustments to Parenthood

Within the overarching theme of Adaptations and Changes, participants described significant changes in their lifestyles and daily routines following the arrival of their child. They highlighted the necessity to adapt to these new circumstances.

Participant 5 reflected on his lifestyle changes, stating,

"I think my lifestyle has changed since I have him. I do not know if it is caused by PKP or not but now I spend less outdoor time with my friends and stay at home most of the time because of the commitment for him"

Participant 7 also acknowledged the adjustments required, noting

"I need to adapt to his situation a lot. It was different when we were single, it was quite relaxing and there was no rushing."

Theme 2: Paternal Involvement

There are two sub themes have emerged that show how the first-time fathers involved in the care of their child.

Subtheme 1: Direct Involvement

Few of the first-time fathers are directly involved in taking care of the child after the childbirth to make sure their partner can get enough rest.

"My wife during this period of confinement fully focused on resting so she is less involved in the childcare except for breastfeeding."

(P1)

"For my wife, she just focuses on breastfeeding because after breastfeeding, my wife becomes really tired. So, the rest of the childcare like changing diaper, giving bath, and play with the children, I will be actively involved."

(P7)

The first-time fathers were asked regarding their confidence in handling their baby and few of them are confident while some of them are not confident without their spouse's help.

"When I am taking care of the baby, I feel like reviewing what I did before because I am the eldest child. I have 5 more younger siblings, so I have done these things before."

(P9)

"No, not confident. if I am alone, I am not confident. but because I live with my family, I am more confident because there is help. if I am alone, I definitely cannot do it."

(P1)

Subtheme 2: Coparenting

Half of the participants described their involvement in childcare as working together with their spouse. They feel that it is an equal responsibility that needs to be shared with each other.

"It's all divided equally. We do it together. I will handle everything too. Working together, equally, fair and square."

(P2, P5)

"Yes, equally because I cannot expect my wife to do it all. I Have to be fair."

(P3, P10)

"We share our duties, and we divide between each other. There is a time for my wife to take care of him, there is a time for me to pick up where she left."
(P8)

Theme 3: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

The participants were asked regarding their challenges as a first-time father and their coping methods to face it. There are 5 sub themes emerged under this theme. These sub-themes underscore the diverse challenges fathers face in adapting to parenthood and highlight the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate these challenges effectively:

Subtheme 1: Sleep

Participants expressed their challenges related to sleep deprivation as a significant aspect of fatherhood. They described difficulties in adjusting to disrupted sleep patterns due to newborn care responsibilities and shared coping strategies they employed to manage fatigue and maintain their well-being. These can be seen as:

"Yes, for the first 2,3 weeks I did not have enough night sleep at all.... We must follow the baby's sleep cycle. If he is asleep, we need to sleep as well. Do not do anything else such as playing with a smartphone etc".
(P1)

"Sleep is a challenge as well."
(P2)

"I will take turns with my wife in taking care of her every hour when she is awake at night....just sleep early, I cannot have entertainment before sleep time".
(P2)

Subtheme 2: Financial

Financial challenges were highlighted as participants navigated the increased expenses associated with raising a child. They shared concerns about budgeting, providing for their family's needs, and adapting their financial planning strategies to accommodate new responsibilities. These was reflected by:

"I think financial will be a problem in the long term. Right now, it is manageable, but we do not know how it is going to be in the future."
(P1)

"I need to work extra such as doing online business etc."
(P1)

"Erm maybe there is a little financial struggle because we have added a new expense. I just need to work a little harder."
(P2)

Subtheme 3: Emotional responses

Participants expressed a range of emotional responses, including stress, anxiety, and joy, related to their roles as fathers. They discussed the emotional impact of parenthood on their mental well-being and shared strategies for coping with these feelings, such as seeking social support or engaging in self-care activities.

"It depends on the situation. There are times when I feel tired, I do not really want to play with him. "There are times when he has tantrums, I accidentally unable to control my emotions."
(P3)

"Sometimes when I get angry, I isolate myself from that situation. I stay away from him because I do not want anything to be out of control. I am afraid that I cannot control it."
(P3)

"Ermm I am quite hot-tempered but usually when I get angry, my wife can understand me, and I will not sit close to my child."
(P5)

"Usually, I will go out to anywhere to cool myself down. Such as to have a drink or sleeping for 2 or 3 hours and I will be okay."
(P5)

Subtheme 4: Time

Managing time effectively emerged as a significant challenge for participants balancing work, parenting duties, and personal time. They discussed the juggling act required to meet various demands and shared approaches they used to prioritize tasks and create meaningful family moments. The following quotes reflect on this:

"So far, it is more to the time. When we become a father, we have to spend more time with the children, like waking up in the morning to bathe him."
(P3)

"Ohh, so far for me it isn't that much of a problem. we just need to be good at managing the time."

(P3)

"The experience is quite challenging because the nature of my work and the pressure is also high. So, it is quite hard at the beginning to separate the work and at home."

(P5)

"It is more about managing the work. Before this, I can relax and do my work slowly. However, I do not have time for it now. Every morning, I need to set all the work to be done by the evening, so I don't have to waste my time that I supposedly spend on my family at home."

(P5)

Subtheme 5: Health

Participants reflected on the impact of fatherhood on their physical health, noting changes in lifestyle habits and the need to maintain their well-being amidst the demands of parenting. They discussed strategies for staying healthy, including exercise, nutrition, and seeking medical support when needed:

"In the beginning, maybe in terms of his health because my son has a lot of food allergies....but for now, thank God, he is a little okay. We need to control his food and diet and record what he can and cannot eat."

(P3)

"Then came the challenge when he was sick. When he cried but we do not know the reasons. It is quite tiring because we did not have much experience dealing with an unwell child."

(P10)

Theme 4: Supports and Needs

Overarching of this last theme, 6 sub-themes arose and those sub themes highlight the various supports and needs that are crucial for first-time fathers as they navigate the challenges and responsibilities of parenthood. They underscore the importance of social support, access to information, healthcare guidance, adequate preparations, valuable advice, and childcare assistance in facilitating a positive fatherhood experience. The following session explain each of the sub themes under this last theme.

Subtheme 1: Family and Friends

Participants discussed the importance of support from family and friends in their journey as first-time fathers. They highlighted the emotional and practical assistance received, such as childcare help, advice, and emotional encouragement, which played a crucial role in their adaptation to fatherhood. This was reflected by:

"My sister/brother-in-law helped to take care of my son/daughter. To be honest, I sent my kid to my in-laws' and my parents' house. My parents helped a lot in times of abstinence and taking care of my baby."

(P1)

"If you are asking who, then it would probably be my father and my friends. I also refer to my colleagues that have first-hand experience with kids."

(P3)

"I will ask those older than me, those with more experience....I also would ask guidance from my parents and friends. Sometimes, even from my neighbours."

(P6)

Subtheme 2: Information

Access to relevant information emerged as a significant need for participants. They expressed the importance of reliable resources and guidance on parenting topics such as child development, health, and behavioural issues, to support their confidence and decision-making as fathers. This sub theme echo by:

"During the wife's pregnancy, to be a father, I googled, studied, and even joined parenting class."

(P7)

"Usually, I would google. I would also read blogs. I would only read parts of books that are relevant to me."

(P8)

The participants were asked regarding their opinion on the need for gender specific class and whether they will attend the class.

"There are many things that I do not know how to handle. I want to learn. I lack so much experience. I want a childcare course. I do not think I found the right guideline yet."

(P1)

"If there are any classes, I will attend. I was also looking for a class before this. if there was a special class for fathers I would attend."

(P9)

Subtheme 3: Healthcare worker

Participants valued interactions with healthcare professionals, such as pediatricians or nurses, who provided expert advice and reassurance regarding their child's health and development. They highlighted the importance of healthcare support in addressing parental concerns and ensuring their child's well-being.

"The community nurse would come every day to help and support us. Her name was Kak Ti. Then, there was Klinik Kesihatan, they were also helpful."

(P1)

"...the nurse helped us a lot in terms of what he needs to eat. So, I think this health clinic helps us a lot in guiding us as a first-time parent."

(P3)

Subtheme 4: Preparations

Participants expressed the importance of preparation in anticipation of becoming a father. They highlighted the need for practical preparations such as setting up the nursery, financial planning, and acquiring necessary baby supplies to facilitate a smoother transition into parenthood. This can be seen as:

"We have already prepared a room for our baby, a place for him to bathe, where he is going to eat and even a storage for baby stuff. We also looked for a good hospital."

(P1)

"What do I provide? Necessities like a place to live amongst other things. Besides, my wife buys baby stuff even from earlier in marriage because every marriage hopes to have children in the future, right?"

(P9)

Few participants stated that they prepared themselves through mental, spiritual and knowledge before entering parenthood.

"Then, in terms of reading because I do not have the knowledge to take care of the children. I had to read a little about what can and cannot be done."

(P3)

"We must prepare mentally physically and spiritually. If we adequately prepared, then Insha'Allah everything will be easy."

(P4)

Subtheme 5: Advice

Participants sought and valued advice from experienced parents, mentors, or parenting resources. They emphasized the significance of receiving practical tips, strategies, and perspectives from others who had navigated similar challenges in parenthood. The participants expressed their perception as:

"Have a lot of patience, learn and study. Do not be ashamed to ask friends and parents. Do a lot of research. Do a little preparation."

(P1)

"My advice is to have more patience because raising children has a lot of challenges."

(P3)

"We must understand our wife, if she is tired, she would need help and support. It is not easy to take care of her."

(P5)

"Spend more time with family. Once married, our family is the priority."

(P9)

Subtheme 6: Babysitter

The availability of reliable babysitting services was identified as a critical support for participants. The participants described the importance of having trustworthy caregivers who could provide temporary childcare assistance, allowing them opportunities for personal time or attending to other responsibilities. This can be seen as:

"Nanny ahh, the caretaker, babysitter. I think it is going to be helpful because my wife and I are working so it can reduce the load."

(P2, P7)

"I think it would be nice if we can hire a babysitter so my wife can rest a bit."

(P5)

In this study, the identified four main themes reflecting the experiences of first-time fathers. The participants also highlighted the critical support received from family, friends, healthcare workers,

and reliable information sources, emphasizing the necessity of preparation and advice. Additionally, evolving marital dynamics were noted, with strengthened emotional bonds but challenges in maintaining intimacy. Overall, these themes illustrate the multifaceted journey of first-time fathers as they navigate the complexities of parenthood.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the multifaceted experiences of first-time fathers, revealing significant insights into their adaptation and challenges. The following session will discuss about each theme that found in this study.

Theme 1: Adaptations and Changes

The studied participants undergo considerable lifestyle adjustments, shifting their priorities to focus on the responsibilities and needs of their child. This shift often impacts their social life and relationships, as fathers reported spending less time with friends and more time at home. Emotional turbulence is a common experience, with participants noting the challenges of managing stress and maintaining emotional regulation. The evolving marital dynamics generally showed increased closeness and affection, though intimate relationships sometimes faced strain. Fathers highlighted the necessity of lifestyle adjustments to integrate their new role, reflecting a broad range of adaptive strategies to meet the demands of parenthood.

The results align with a previous study who noted that most first-time fathers positively managed the changes and adaptations involved in becoming a father (10). Similarly, a study also found that many participants felt a strong sense of responsibility toward their children and their roles as both fathers and husbands (11).

Many participants described a shift in focus and priorities toward meeting their child's needs. They reported sacrificing time, social engagements, and leisure activities to fulfil their responsibilities as fathers and husbands. This finding is consistent with a study where they observed that first-time fathers often felt the need to change their behavior and attitude by dedicating less time to themselves and more to their families (12).

Regarding expectations, some first-time fathers noted a significant disparity between their expectations and the reality of fatherhood, which

led to feelings of anxiety (3). Despite these mismatched expectations, most fathers adapted to their roles, with one participant mentioning that the difficulties did not deter him from being involved in managing his child. Some fathers had fewer expectations due to prior experience with younger siblings, which boosted their confidence in their roles. Participants expressed a range of emotions, including excitement, meaning, and being overwhelmed. However, some also reported negative emotions, such as worries about their child's health and pressure before becoming a father.

The study also revealed that marital relationships among first-time fathers improved, with participants describing their relationships as closer and happier due to their child's presence. This finding contrasts with a study, a first-time fathers often felt disconnected and distant from their spouses (13). Participants in this study also noted a decrease in intimate time with their partners, as they focused more on their child. Despite this reduction in personal time, first-time fathers adapted to the changes in their marital relationships.

In terms of adaptations, most participants indicated that changes stemmed from their new roles and responsibilities as fathers. There were no complaints about these responsibilities, and most described the struggle as significant only in the early stages. According to a previous study, fathers adapted to these changes, and their sense of fatherhood strengthened as their children grew (10).

Theme 2: Paternal Involvement

Paternal involvement among first-time fathers revealed that they are directly engaged in childcare and actively support their wives. Several participants noted that they took a leading role in caring for their newborns during the initial months post-delivery. Some mentioned that during the confinement period, they allowed their spouses to rest and focus on breastfeeding while they handled tasks such as bathing, changing diapers, and other primary care responsibilities for their children, echoing findings by a previous study (2).

Half of the participants described their involvement as co-parenting, where they and their partners supported each other in their parenting duties, similar to the findings of a previous study. (14). One participant highlighted the importance

of shared parental responsibilities, stating that both he and his partner participated equally in caring for their child. A few others mentioned that their involvement was crucial for them to become proficient in handling their baby, especially when their spouse was unavailable.

Some first-time fathers initially lacked confidence in taking care of their child during the early months. Research indicates that first-time fathers often view their baby as fragile, leading to feelings of anxiety, fear, and hesitation in direct involvement in care (2). However, in this study, fathers reported that these negative feelings diminished as their children grew and they adapted to their new roles.

Theme 3: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Several participants identified late nights and insufficient rest as significant challenges, which aligns with findings by a previous study where emphasized the physical and emotional exhaustion due to sleepless nights during a child's first year (12). Despite these challenges, the participants managed to adapt to their baby's sleep rhythm. Financial struggles were also common among first-time fathers. In this study, some participants noted that having a baby added new expenses and posed a financial burden. One participant expressed concern about future expenses for his child, a sentiment reflected in a previous study where fathers became more conscious of their financial situation, leading to increased stress (15).

In addition to financial challenges, most participants highlighted the difficulty of finding time to care for their child. Balancing work and home life was a significant challenge for some, with one participant specifically mentioning the difficulty of managing time between job responsibilities and home duties. This difficulty in balancing job and career demands with parenting responsibilities was also noted by a previous study (12). While participants in this study acknowledged that work could hinder their role as fathers, they also found ways to manage their workloads to reduce the burden on their daily lives.

Health concerns for their children were another challenge mentioned by a few participants. One participant described the constant worry and management required when his child experienced allergies or illnesses. Managing a child's diet and

health added an extra layer of responsibility and concern.

Emotional pressures and instability were significant issues in the study by a previous study (15). In this study, some participants reported anger issues stemming from tiredness and fatigue after becoming parents. Tiredness often triggered their anger, especially when dealing with their child's tantrums after a long workday. However, most participants demonstrated effective coping mechanisms, such as isolating themselves from the family, exercising, or resting until they calmed down. This indicates a high level of self-awareness, good emotional control, and effective self-coping strategies among the participants.

Contrary to the findings by a previous study, which showed that some first-time fathers experienced depression and recognized their symptoms, none of the participants in this study reported deteriorating mental health (16). Most were able to manage the challenges they faced effectively.

Theme 4: Support and Need

First-time fathers typically receive support through both formal and informal means, as noted by a previous study (17). In this study, fathers expressed the various sources of support they relied on. Most participants mentioned depending on family and friends to help fulfil their roles as fathers. They often sought guidance and knowledge about childcare and managing marital issues from their family and colleagues, a trend also observed in a previous study (18). Some participants additionally relied on healthcare workers, such as community nurses and doctors, and found their support to be beneficial.

Many participants acknowledged a lack of knowledge and proactively sought information online and through books on childcare. This behavior aligns with findings by previous studies, where first-time fathers preferred accessing online information as a reference (15,19). However, a few participants expressed doubts about the credibility of online sources. Similarly, in this study, one participant highlighted the need for expert guidelines after accidentally feeding fish to a month-old baby.

When asked about the need for parenting classes specifically for fathers, most participants agreed that such classes would be helpful, particularly for first-time fathers with no prior experience or fewer

resources. However, one participant felt that parenting classes were unnecessary, believing that advice from older family members should suffice. This sentiment is also reflected in a study, where some fathers preferred relying on informal support, such as parental advice and guidance (15).

The preparations undertaken by the first-time fathers in this study focused on both physical materials and mental readiness. They emphasized the importance of preparation before becoming a father to perform their roles effectively. The participants believed that readiness for parenthood involves developing perceptions and habits that ensure quality in their future roles as fathers, as also suggested by previous studies (12,20).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted journey of first-time fathers as they adapt to their new roles. The themes of Adaptations and Changes, Paternal Involvement, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms, and Supports and Needs highlight the various dimensions of fatherhood, from lifestyle adjustments and evolving marital dynamics to the importance of direct involvement and coparenting. The challenges faced by fathers, including sleep deprivation, financial pressures, and emotional responses, necessitate effective coping strategies and support systems. The critical role of family, friends, healthcare workers, and access to reliable information underscores the need for a supportive environment that facilitates a positive fatherhood experience. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-time fathers and highlight the importance of addressing their needs to promote their well-being and the overall family dynamic.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small, with only ten participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study was conducted in a specific geographic location, Kuantan, Pahang, which may not fully represent the experiences of first-time fathers in other regions of Malaysia or in different cultural contexts. Lastly, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of first-time fathers from various regions and cultural backgrounds within Malaysia to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, studies could focus on specific stages of early parenthood, such as the postpartum period or the first six months of the child's life, to provide more detailed insights into the challenges and adaptations experienced by new fathers. It is also recommended to utilize a mixed-methods approach to capture both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of first-time fathers' experiences. Finally, healthcare providers, policymakers, and community organizations should develop targeted support programs that address the specific needs of new fathers, including educational workshops on newborn care, access to mental health resources, and strategies for achieving work-life balance. These initiatives can help first-time fathers navigate the transition into parenthood more effectively, benefiting both the fathers and their families.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MSN: contribute to the concept development of the manuscript through data analysis and data interpretation for the article.

MAR: contribute to literature review, data collection and draft the manuscript.

TS@SJ: revised the manuscript critically with intellectual content and approved the final version of the article.

SS: contribute to the content of interview guide used for this study.

WN: contribute for discussion literature content.

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