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Representative image: A still from 'Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl'

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**"When I attend my
daughter's school events,
I'm often the only dad
there"**

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We're used to dads who don't show up. But what about the ones who aren't let in?

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“I wanted to be there for everything, doctor’s appointments, lullabies, and even diaper changes. But after the first few weeks, I felt like I was an extra in a movie where my wife played the lead role.” That’s how 34-year-old Pune-based architect Aniruddh Patil, one of the many fathers who feel sidelined, describes his early days of fatherhood. He took two weeks off after his daughter was born in late 2024, proudly set alarms for night feeds, and even colour-coded baby clothes. But at the hospital, only his wife’s questions got answered. The paediatrician soothed only her concerns. Later, when friends and family came over, they checked in with her about the baby’s sleep, feeding, and burping schedule, even though he had all the answers. “At some point, I was actually relieved to go back to work, at least there I felt needed,” he adds.

Parenting in India has never been an equal-opportunity job. But while women have (rightly) fought to highlight the exhausting mental, emotional and physical labour of

motherhood, the conversation has barely
acknowledged the men who want to do more,
and aren't allowed to. From workplace policies

to hospital corridors, cultural mores to couple dynamics, they continue to find themselves gently, but firmly, pushed to the sidelines.

Let's start with the basics. India mandates 26 weeks of paid maternity leave. Paternity leave? If you're a central government employee, you're entitled to 15 days within six months of your child's birth or adoption. Most private companies offer either a token few days, or nothing at all. Even when companies do offer paternity leave, it's often left on the table. Not because men don't want to take it, but because they're afraid of how it'll look. "My boss laughed when I asked if I could take two weeks off after my twins were born," says Gaurav Shah, 36, a marketing executive in Delhi. "He said, 'What will you even do at home?'"

Visits to any school event, paediatrician's appointment, or parent-teacher meeting reveal a familiar pattern: the mother is addressed, the father is tolerated. When dads show up alone, they're treated like temporary stand-ins or

babysitters. “I went to pick up my daughter
from daycare and the teacher double-checked
with my wife on the phone before letting me
take her,” says Anand Singh, 41, a Mumbai-
based freelance photographer. “It was
humiliating. Like I was just the logistics guy.”



Image: Pexels.com

The weight of generational gender roles

None of this happens in a vacuum. From Amar Chitra Katha tales to Bollywood movies, Indian storytelling has long cast mothers as the all-knowing, all-sacrificing centre of the home. Fathers are either emotionally distant, comic

relief, or the ATM, and often, that's meant as a
complement. The dad who doesn't meddle, who
lets mom take the lead, who doesn't fuss, who

is easygoing. These stories seep quietly into
how families function, and what's expected of
each parent.

So, when today's fathers want to show up
differently, many lack precedent. "I had no
reference point," says 36-year-old Abhishek
Sharma, a lawyer from Indore. "My dad never
changed a single diaper or fed us. When my
son was born, I wanted to be involved, but I
didn't even know where to start." (If you're
looking for a role model, Chunky Panday is a
cool one.

(<https://tweakindia.com/culture/chunky-panday-is-the-ultimate-cool-desi-dad/>)

That absence of generational modelling can
leave well-meaning dads second-guessing
themselves. Do they step in or wait to be asked?
Will their efforts be seen as helpful or
intrusive? Do they risk being criticised for not
doing things "the right way"? Kanpur-based
child psychologist Dr Smriti Verma points out,
"We often expect fathers to just know how to

parent intuitively, forgetting that they may be
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(<https://tweakindia.com/>) learning on the job without the same social training that women have been receiving since childhood.”

Eventually, some new dads internalise that uncertainty and pull back, a retreat that can leave both partners feeling isolated. “Excluding fathers from early caregiving can lead to feelings of isolation and resentment in both parents, as mothers may feel they carry the entire burden,” says Dr Shorouq Motwani (<https://lilavatihospital.com/Doctorprofile/10560/0>), psychiatrist at Lilavati Hospital, Mumbai.

“Additionally, this dynamic can contribute to a lack of shared parenting responsibilities, affecting relationship satisfaction.”

Others lean in, ask questions, make mistakes, and keep showing up anyway. But it’s not easy. “We grew up watching our fathers on the sidelines, and somewhere we absorbed that it’s normal,” says Verma. “So, when a father tries to step in today, everyone, including the mother, subconsciously resists.”

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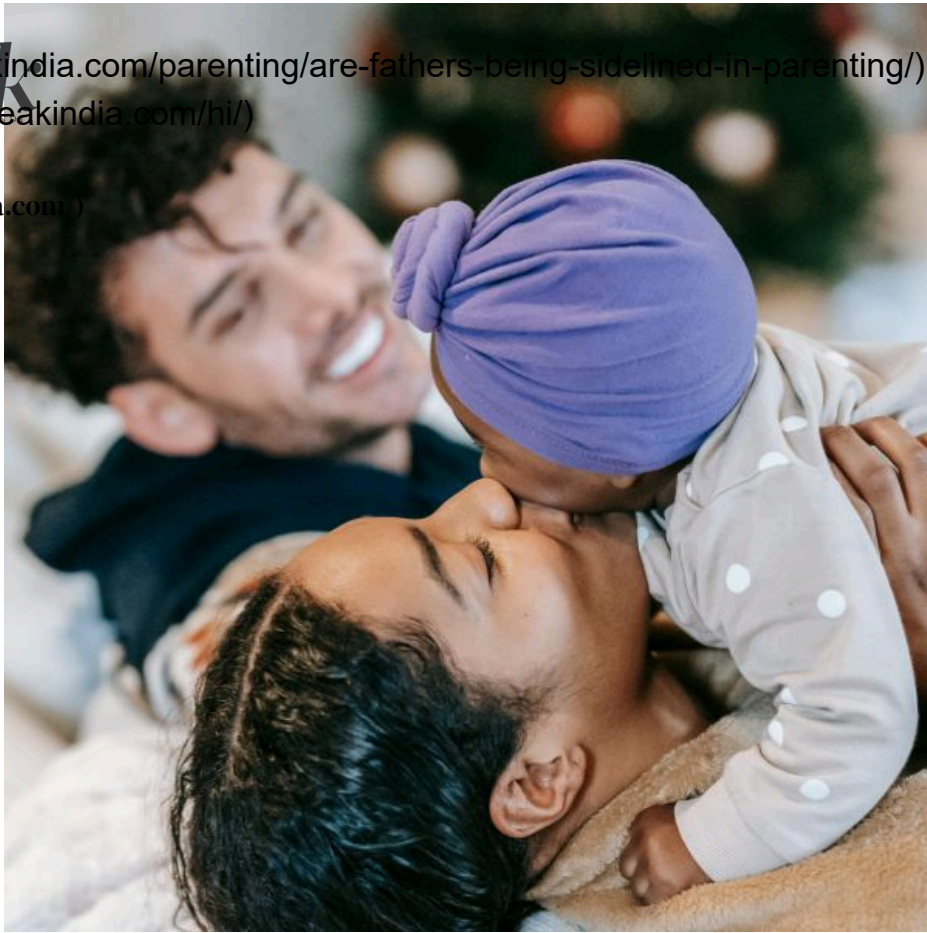


Image: Pexels.com

Mothers as (unintentional) gatekeepers

This is where things get complicated. Many mothers want more help. They're drowning in tasks, juggling careers and childcare, often on autopilot. But when help does show up, in the form of an eager father, it's often met with micromanagement, scepticism, or quiet withdrawal.

Take Mayola D'Souza, 36, a Bengaluru-based entrepreneur juggling meetings, meals, and bedtime with a year-old toddler. "When my husband tries to help, I end up correcting him,

how he handles the baby or sanitises the toys. I know he means well, but sometimes it feels easier to just do it myself,” she admits.

There’s also an emotional factor at play. Some mothers struggle to delegate because they’re conditioned to believe they must do it all, or else they’ve failed. Others feel judged by family and society if they ‘let the father handle it’.

“When my husband offered to take on night duties, I’d hover, correct him, even redo things. I had to recognise that this wasn’t just about parenting, it was about control and guilt,” says Simran Khaitan, 33, a Lucknow-based housewife.

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Image: Pexels.com

Impact on the child

There's also data

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01494920.2019.1644442>
journalCode=wmfr20) to back up why this good
fight is worth continuing. A meta-analysis in
the Marriage and Family Review, covering
37,000 participants, found that involved
fathering correlates with better psychological
well-being, emotional resilience, social skills
and academic performance. This was true for
both boys and girls of different ages.

En (https://tweakindia.com/parenting/are-fathers-being-sidelined-in-parenting/) / हिंदी (https://tweakindia.com/hi/) “Involved fathers provide emotional support, model positive behaviours, and enhance social development, leading to improved self-esteem and resilience in children,” says Dr Motwani.

“Their presence can reduce behavioural issues and promote better emotional regulation. On the other hand, when fathers are absent or sidelined, children may struggle to form secure attachments and may be more prone to anxiety, withdrawal, or aggression.”



Image: Pexels.com

The push back continues

The good news? More couples are becoming aware of this dynamic and working to avoid letting fathers get sidelined. Conversations

about emotional labour, dividing tasks, and shared decision-making are gaining traction, especially in urban nuclear families. For

Khaitan, change began with small shifts: trusting her partner's way of doing things and resisting the urge to micromanage. "I had to remind myself that different doesn't mean wrong. And when I stopped saying 'Can you handle this?' and started saying 'We've got this', it felt like we were finally parenting together," she says.

At the same time, more dads are stepping up and quietly rewriting the script. "When I attend my daughter's school events, I'm often the only dad there," says Aditya M, 35, a stay-at-home father from Hyderabad. "Teachers appreciate it, but other parents sometimes don't know how to include me." Yet he keeps showing up, setting an example.

Even online, where parenting groups have long been mother-centric, dads like Vishal Karnik, a 40-year-old teacher in Pune, are pushing boundaries. "It's not hostility, just assumptions. Most groups are built for and by mothers, with

language that leaves dads out,” he explains. “I started posting regularly in our building’s

WhatsApp group for parents, and asking

questions. It was awkward at first, but now I’m fully part of all conversations.”

Yet, there is a long way to go. “I’m often held up as an example to friends and younger cousins, but I don’t want applause for parenting,” says Nikhil Vaz, a Bengaluru-based entrepreneur who works from home to spend more time with his two young children. “I want it to be expected. That’s how we truly normalise equality.”

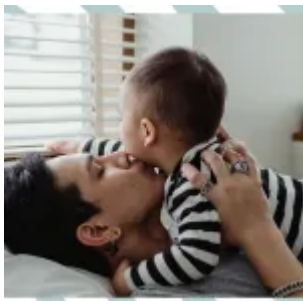


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Let them in
(<https://tweakindia.com/>) There's no question that motherhood is hard, often thankless and invisibly brutal. But we don't fix that by keeping fathers sidelined; we fix it by letting them in. Fully. Not just to "help out", but to lead, decide, comfort, clean, organise and nurture.

For every man who's yet to show up, there are many waiting to be allowed in. Then maybe the next generation won't say, "My dad never changed a diaper." They'll say, "My dad packs the best lunchboxes." And no one will bat an eyelid.

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