

# Why Russian attitudes to fatherhood are taking so long to change

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While middle-class men are increasingly adopting new attitudes to fatherhood and often share parenting responsibilities with their wives, the situation has hardly changed at all for working-class families in which conservative stereotypes about men as breadwinners and defenders and women bearing the entire responsibility for homemaking and childcare still hold strong.

Fathers in such families tend to be emotionally distant and rarely involved in their children's day-to-day lives, according to Alexandra Lipasova's paper, "Fatherhood in the Russian provinces: A theoretical and empirical analysis." As part of her research into contemporary understanding of fatherhood in different social strata, she conducted in-depth interviews with men in worker occupations and their wives in Moscow and a few small towns in Vladimir and Vologda Regions (interviews with [fathers](#), mothers and married couples, average age around 30). Based on her findings, Lipasova identifies three fatherhood models in working-class families: absent/infantilised father, situational father/good provider, involved father. She says the last two models are far more common.

International academic literature often correlates parenting practices with parents' socioeconomic status reflected in education, income, occupation, and other factors. "Concerted cultivation" is marked by parents' active involvement in their children's lives by engaging them in activities ranging from art to sports, attempting to foster their talents, and creating opportunities. Both mothers and fathers focus on spending

time with children, getting involved in their education and maintaining contacts with their teachers.

In contrast, "accomplishment of natural growth" means that children are often left to their own devices and spend more time in the street rather than attending after-school clubs and studios. For various reasons, such as lack of money and time, or the stereotype that talented children should be able to make it on their own, etc., parents tend to focus less on their child's development and more on their physical well-being, such as having enough food and clothes. Such families are also less likely to be interested in the child's school life, leaving their children's education entirely to teachers. Parental practices can be even more varied, but the following is usually true:

The outcomes of childrearing are not always predictable. While some children make good use of their acquired knowledge and skills, some others have trouble doing so. All parenting strategies have their pros and cons. It is commonly assumed that children from low-income families, having accomplished "natural growth," can be better prepared for adult life and more flexible; however, in terms of starting opportunities, they are usually at a disadvantage compared to their peers from better-educated and well-off families. Those who perform better academically tend to be more confident among adults and have more opportunities for development.

Russian working-class families often adhere to the "accomplishment of natural growth" parenting style. Lipasova's findings reveal that male respondents living in small towns view themselves primarily as breadwinners and have limited involvement with their children. Her earlier study found the "concerted cultivation" approach and involved parenting style to be more characteristic of middle-class families in big cities.

The involved fatherhood model means that both parents contribute equally to their child's upbringing. Involved fathers usually monitor the child's development, spend a lot of time with them and do not shy away from showing warm feelings towards their daughters and sons.

In the 20th century, men had little involvement with child rearing; revolutions, wars, reprisals and hard day-to-day work frequently separated them from their [family](#). Many teenagers grew up without their fathers' support or emotional warmth. Today's young fathers are trying to fill this emotional gap. "My father never hugged or kissed me, although I really needed it," says one respondent (worker, aged 32). "I always hug and kiss my sons. I find it truly important."

However, this type of attitude is often frowned upon as too sentimental in a working-class environment. According to this respondent, friends have warned him that his sons "may not grow up to be real men." By a popular stereotype, fathers are expected to be emotionally detached and show little feeling towards their sons.

Involved fathers make it a point to talk to their children often. "The more you talk with them, the more you know [about your children]," says one respondent (driving instructor, aged 34). "You should ask them and answer their questions. Now is the time when my children really need me."

Involved fathers tend to plan for their children's future. "I want my daughters to have an education and an occupation allowing them to be independent," says a respondent (loader, aged 38). Most respondents emphasise that they always fulfil their children's requests for toys, gadgets, etc., so "they have everything they need."

However, involved fatherhood is not common in small towns. A sign of change, it has not yet become actual change. Most respondents dismiss

the idea of women's self-actualisation through a career. "After all, homemaking and childrearing are a woman's [responsibilities]", a respondent summarised (driving instructor, aged 34).

Ironically, the same is true of the middle class, and involved fathers do not necessarily share 'egalitarian ideas about women's roles in the family and society,' according to the researcher. New fatherhood practices and attitudes towards mothers' employment can be fairly independent from the rest of these men's worldview, the researcher notes.

In general, patriarchal views on the family prevail. "Men rarely help with childcare," says a worker's wife (aged 30). A male respondent (security staff, aged 30) recalls, "In earlier days, men in rural communities did nothing at all [around the house]."

The reason may be that smaller towns still pursue a community way of living, with close-knit social networks and collective thinking. "Many small city residents are descendants of village dwellers, and their views on family roles are consistent with the traditional gender contract observed in rural Soviet Russia," according to Lipasova. It assumes that the wife takes care of the children, while the husband, "although formally responsible for his family, serves collective rather than private interests."

Interestingly, women's childcare responsibilities also bear certain traits characteristic of a community lifestyle. According to the researcher, one or two women may be supervising twenty or so children in the neighbourhood playground while the rest of mothers are busy with household chores. The model of absent/infantilised father fits well with this way of living.

Absent/infantilised fathers play a passive role in the family; often unaware of the value of children and parenthood, they tend to underrate

their own responsibility. Here is how a worker's wife (aged 30) describes her husband's (lack of) involvement in family life: "He ate, slept, played, and went to work."

Sometimes, mothers unconsciously support fathers' lack of involvement in childcare. "In the traditional gender ideology shared by such families, fatherhood is optional while motherhood is required," according to Lipasova. "Men are just like kids," says a respondent (aged 28). "I've got two kids: a three-year-old and a thirty-year-old."

Such families often believe in being "just like other people." "One lives by the principle: if other men have wives, I also need a wife; if others have children, I also need children," a worker's wife (aged 30) comments. Another respondent (aged 27) says, "Most families here stay together only for the sake of their children. They say, we are a family, the child needs a father."

Such families tend to practice archaic methods of childrearing, and men are likely to relieve stress by being aggressive towards their children and wife. "Our child is restless," a respondent (aged 30) complains. "And then Dad takes up the belt. He says, 'As I was brought up, so I will bring him up'".

The situational father/good provider model is typical of men who believe that their main function is to provide for their children financially. They tend to work hard, often far from home, and spend leisure time with friends (e.g. fishing). They also do what is considered 'man's work' at home, such as major repairs or construction. "Dads [in our community] are usually too busy [to attend family events]", a worker's wife (aged 30) says. "They say they must do something around the house instead."

In this scenario, the father's ability to provide for the family is extremely important and indirectly influences the children's academic success,

behaviour and self-esteem. The father's skills around the house also have a positive effect on children who can learn by observation. "Mother asked me to build something," a respondent (security staff, aged 30) says. "My elder [son] also grabbed a saw, then a screwdriver; I did not stop him, although he was more of a hindrance—because that's how they learn to love work... You cannot force them, but you can set an example."

Such families tend to hold stereotypes about "not being worse off than others" financially. They do not necessarily have the resources to satisfy this ambition, though.

Many respondents do not expect the social elevator to work for their children ("I must admit, my son is not very good academically...") and encourage them to pursue athletic goals. This is a version of the 'natural growth' strategy. "He [the son] will surely make it in due time," many parents believe. Compared to middle-class fathers, gender stereotypes are more characteristic of working-class respondents. However, their ideas about male and female roles in the family are often different from the actual state of things.

Many respondents describe a good father as a protector and breadwinner. Yet in practice, men can be lazy, irresponsible and immature, with their wives having to 'work double shifts' to make ends meet. "I provided for the entire family, including my mother and [children](#)... I'd be digging potatoes while he was off [recreational] fishing," a respondent summed up.

**More information:** Alexandra Lipasova, Fatherhood in the Russian Provinces: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, *The Journal of Social Policy Studies* (2018). [DOI: 10.17323/727-0634-2017-15-4-629-642](https://doi.org/10.17323/727-0634-2017-15-4-629-642)

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