

# Father-child play in a public playground: Roles exhibited by fathers during their play with children

Şenil Ünlü-Çetin

Faculty of Education, Kırıkkale University, Kırıkkale, Turkey.

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## ABSTRACT

Presently, fathers spend more time with their children when compared with the fathers of previous ages and play compromises the majority of the father-child shared time. Few researches that investigated the roles of fathers during their play with children made use of (1) home-based or laboratory-based observations with pre-determined play materials and (2) conducted Western cultures. These two characteristics of previous studies have led to this study, which is conducted in Turkey, a country that is relatively collectivistic and based on observations of father-child play in a public playground which is a natural play-setting. Nine (9) different father-child dads were observed in a public playground for approximately 30 min. The researcher was the main observer during this process. The findings revealed seven different role categories, three of which were newly found in the current study. These seven categories were merged under two different themes. The discussion of findings which centered on the ideas of father-child play were influenced by the culture and the context that it occurs.

**Keywords:** Father involvement, play, father-child play, father roles.

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E-mail: senilunlucetin@gmail.com. Tel: 90-530-324-06-75.

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## INTRODUCTION

Play is one of the most beneficial activities that children engage in especially during early childhood years. It is also widely known that play benefits the development of young children. For instance, Roggman et al. (2004) claimed that during play, children have a chance to use and improve their communication, negotiation and turn-taking abilities which supports children's language, cognitive, and social-emotional development. During play with adults or peers, children face their fears, exercise adult roles, and explore the world around them (Hurwitz, 2002; Tsao, 2002).

According to Erickson (1985) and Hurwitz (2002), play helps children to improve new competencies that allow them to improve their confidence and resiliency that will be used in solving problems in their future life. When children engage in self-driven play, they practice their decision-making skills and understand their own interests; when they play with others they learn to work in a group, to share, they learn problem solving, negotiating and advocating for themselves (Hurwitz, 2002; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). Play is also found as one of the

activities that help children adapt to the school, learning readiness, learning behaviours and problem solving abilities (Coolahan et al., 2000; Fisher, 1992).

Most of the time, children's play includes adults, and in early years, these adults are mainly parents (MacDonald, 1993). Therefore, play is an area that improves parent-child communication and relationship quality. The reason for this is bilateral. Initially, playing with a parent teaches children that his / her parents pay attention to and give priority to spending time with them (Cohn, 1990; Henry, 1990, Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Secondly, playing with the child gives a great deal of information about child's development, interest areas, and skills to his/her parents (Ginsburg, 2007). For this reason, parent-child play is one of the topics that should be given importance in early childhood literature.

Interestingly, in the literature that studies parent-child play, there is three times more study of mother-child play than father-child play (Cabrera and Roggman, 2017). However, since 1970s, based on the empirical research, fathers are widely accepted as important individuals in

the lives of children. Fathers' presence and their positive and high involvement are found to be connected with numerous positive developmental outcomes for children. In other words, there is a consensus on the fact that fathers are important as much as mothers for their children's development. However, there are differences between how mothers and fathers contribute to their children's development. The reason for this is that fathers and mothers vary in terms of the ways they involve in their children's lives.

According to Lamb (1997), mothers are the source of security, while fathers are the source of enjoyment and they are preferred as the playmate, particularly by their male children. Similarly, previous studies comparing father and mother involvement have found some differences among mothers' and fathers' way of involvement; majority of mother-child time comprise physical care, while majority of father-shared time with the child comprise playing (Craig, 2006; Lindsey et al., 1997; Russell and Russell, 1987; Silver, 2000; Yeung et al., 2001). For instance, Yeung et al. (2001) indicated that 39% of direct engagement time of fathers and children constitutes playing. Similarly, McBride and Mills (1993) concluded that if fathers get involved with their child's life, this involvement occurs through play. Therefore, it can still be claimed that although fathers of today have been found to spend more time with their children when compared with fathers of previous ages (Lamb et al., 1985; Pleck, 1987), they still involve less in "all aspects of parenting with the exception of physical play" (Paquette et al., 2003: 173). This does not mean that mothers do not play with their children, but play is mostly engaged by fathers and children.

Studies that compared father-child and mother-child play indicated that father-child and mother-child play have different characteristics; father-child play is more physical than mother child play (Carson et al., 1993; Labrell, 1996; MacDonald and Parke, 1986; Paquette et al., 2003). During their play with fathers, children are stimulated cognitively, physically and emotionally and they are encouraged to take risks to reach their limits (Paquette, 2004). Fathers have also been found to be more likely to tease their children (Labrell, 1996) and to engage in rough and tumble play with their children (Hossain and Roopnarine, 1994). However, very little is known about the roles exhibited by fathers in their plays with children.

Recently, John et al. (2013) observed father-child and mother-child plays and found that father-child play includes physical play, child-led interactions, fathers' effort to scaffolding child's development and fathers' engagement as play mate. Zaouche-Gaudron et al. (1998) observed father-infant play and found that fathers have different playing styles, such as helping, focusing on object, active participation or make-believe play. Similarly, Fagan and Palm (2004) identified four different roles that fathers exhibit during their play with the

children. These are the role of playmate, observer, teacher, guider and follower. During their play with the child, some fathers take the lead and make suggestions and at other times serve as cooperative play partner for their children. Fagan and Palm (2004) called this role as being a "playmate". Some fathers try to understand their children's interest, behaviours, and cues, and then respond in sensitive ways. Fagan and Palm (2004) called the fathers who engage in such kinds of behaviours as "followers". That is, if a father is a follower, he allows the child to be a leader in the play and shapes the play process instead of interrupting and leading the process. The "observer role" is one in which fathers are more detached to the process, which means that they are only watching how their children interact with objects, peers, or other adults and do not actively participate in the process. Lastly, some fathers are teachers or guiders during their play sessions with the child. The role of these fathers in a play session includes giving specific directions, asking questions, or modelling the correct way to do something.

In spite of their invaluable contribution to our knowledge regarding the context of father-child play, our knowledge about father-child play is still limited because majority of previous studies observed father child play in a (1) structured environment and (2) in individualistic Western cultures.

Some of those previous researches depended on observation of father-child play in a pre-determined environment with predetermined materials and activities, generally at home, kindergartens or research laboratories in the presence of researchers (Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2004; Zaouche-Gaudron et al., 1998; John et al., 2013). For instance, in their study, Tamis-Lemonda et al. (2004) provided three different sets of toys (a book, a pizza set, telephone and a farm with farm animals: 1809) to fathers and children and asked them to choose one and play with these toys. Similarly, in their study John et al. (2013) provided different sets of toys such as "play dough and molds, building blocks, colouring book and marker and a story book" and asked fathers and children to choose one of them and play with these materials either on the dining table or play table (p. 486). Father-child interaction may be affected by the characteristics of previous research design as follows: (1) fathers and children might not involve in the play as they involve naturally in the presence of the researcher and the video recorder, (2) pre-determined play materials might limit and not reflect natural play sessions of the father-child dyad. Because of these limitations in the previous studies, in this study father-child play was observed in a public playground which is a natural play area. Also in this study, participants were informed that they were observed in their playground time, while leaving the park, that is, at the end of the observation, therefore father-child play observed in this study reflects very clear nature of their play in a playground.

According to Roopnarine and Davidson (2015), parents' play behaviors' are under the influence of culture, and in the current study it is claimed that fathers' play does so. Most of the previous studies were conducted in individualistic Western cultures which have many different characteristics from collectivistic non-Western cultures, like Turkey. Collectivism and individualism are two important characteristics which shape many relations in a culture, like father-child relations. "Typically, individualistic cultures emphasize independence, individual freedoms, self-determination, uniqueness, and self-control, while collectivistic cultures stress interpersonal harmony, group loyalty, and interdependence" (Oyserman et al., 2002; as cited in Roopnarine and Davidson, 2015: 240).

Roopnarine (2010) suggested that in traditional non-Western cultures, cultural characteristics such as filial piety, authoritarian parenting and hierarchical social status of parents and children, resulted in not valuing rough activities as much as egalitarian Euro-American cultures. This claim was supported by previous studies that compared mother-child and father-child play and found no difference in the amount of fathers' and mothers' engagement in physical play, which means father do not engage in physical play as well (Roopnarine et al., 1990; Sun and Roopnarine, 1996; Tulananda and Roopnarine, 2001). Two studies clearly indicate this difference in non-Western cultures. The first one was conducted by İvrendi and Işıkoğlu-Erdoğan (2010) with Turkish fathers, while the second was recently conducted by Lin et al. (2018) with Chinese fathers.

In their study, İvrendi and Işıkoğlu-Erdoğan (2010) found that fathers mainly prefer to encourage their children to play without actively participating in their play. When they play, they prefer academic play most while socio-dramatic and physical play is least preferred by fathers. Additionally, fathers mostly see play as a way for learning while very few fathers have unconstructed views on play. Similarly, a very recent study conducted in collectivistic Chinese culture, indicated that both mothers and fathers engage more in educational play than other types of play (Lin et al., 2018). Although these two studies indicated that father-child play has different characteristics in non-Western cultures, both of them were based on quantitative and self-reported data which still limits our knowledge on whether the roles displayed by fathers during their play with children are different in different cultures or they share some common features.

Cebrera and Roggman (2017) suggested that there is a need for more research on father-child play in different cultures. This study conducted in Turkey, which is relatively collectivistic, is expected to enlarge our knowledge on the roles displayed by fathers in relatively collectivistic Turkish culture. Based on these arguments, the following research questions were elicited:

- What kinds of roles do fathers display in a public

playground with their young children?

- To what extent do fathers display the playmate role, follower role, observer role, and the teacher and guider role in a public playground with their young children?

- Do fathers display any new roles in a natural play setting and in relatively collectivistic Turkish culture?

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and sample selection

For the current study, data was gathered through observations conducted in a public playground. Data was gathered for a period of four weeks at weekends. Because the observation area was a public area and the main aim of this study was to understand the nature of father-child relation in an outdoor environment, fathers and their children were not informed about the process. Therefore, researchers of this study had the responsibility of being "complete observers". According to Merriam (2002: 13) "a complete observer is unknown to those being observed, such as from behind a one-way mirror in an open, public place".

Totally, 27 fathers were observed in the park from their entrance to the park area and to their leaving the park. Since it was not ethical to use a data which the participants did not give consent, after the observation of each father-child dyad, the researcher communicated and explained the aim of the study and asked fathers and children for their consent and assent. If fathers did not give consent, then the observation notes were given to them and not used in the current study. At the end nine father-child dyads gave consent. Therefore, the latest data included the observation of nine father-child dyads that played in a public playground. Four of these fathers were with their daughters in the park, 3 of them were with their sons and 2 of them were with their sons and daughters at the same time. All children were between the ages of one and seven. All but three of them were with their wives during the observation, as well.

### Observation setting

Observations were done in a playground area in Altınpark, in Ankara. Altınpark, located in Altındağ which has low or middle socioeconomic-status, is a big recreational area that includes different kinds of parts such as an area for horse riding, a pool, and picnic areas. This place was chosen because especially at weekends a lot of people visit this playground to engage in leisure time activities. Also, the playground area is near the picnic area and at weekends many families come for picnic in this area. Especially families with young children choose this part of the Altınpark and it was easy to find a lot of father-child dyads in the park at weekends. Another

reason for choosing this playground is related with its convenience to the researcher. It is in the center of Ankara and transportation is very easy.

The playground is a very big area and it includes different kinds of slides in different size, three sets of swings in different sizes and some horizontal bars. Because it is near the picnic area, there is a quick human circulation in the park. Some families come around, allow their children to slide one or two times, and then go back home. Often father and child dyads were not clear to the researchers for this study due to the wide area the park has. Hence some data were missed during observation.

### Data gathering process

During the observations, there was no interaction between the researcher and participants. The researcher sat around the playground and took notes about the fathers' behaviours as a complete observer.

For the current study, the main aim was to see to what extent fathers display roles of playmates, followers, observers and teachers or guides when they are in the playground with their young children and to understand whether new roles are seen when the observation was conducted in a natural setting without any intervention. Therefore, instead of fathers' verbal interactions with their children, only the ways that they engaged in their children's play in the playground were emphasized for the current study. After observations were completed, two researchers coded the data according to Fagan and Palm's (2004) categories. Later, the results were compared and it was found that the inter coder reliability was 0.80 for the current data.

### Data analysis

Open coding method was used to analyze the gathered observation data. Before the analysis, all observation notes were rewritten in the computer. After each code was identified, these codes were examined to understand whether these codes were appropriate for Fagan and Palm's (2004) role categories. After categorizing those codes, the remaining codes were examined and grouped under three new role categories. Later, 25% of the data was openly coded by another researcher who is blind to the research but familiar with the early childhood education and playfulness. To understand interrater reliability, Cohen's Kappa value was calculated and found to be 0.85, which indicates strong agreement between coders (McHugh, 2012).

## RESULTS

The data of the current study supported Fagan and

Palm's (2004) four categories of roles displayed by fathers while interacting with their children. In the playground, fathers displayed the roles of follower, observer, playmate and teacher or guider. Except for these four role categories, the data yielded three additional father role categories which are (1) assisting and protecting, (2) caregiving and (3) physical affection.

### New roles yielded from the data

At the beginning of the study, it was claimed that in a natural setting fathers' role might vary. The findings of the study supported this claim since the data had a great deal of codes which did not belong to the previously determined fathers' roles by Fagan and Palm (2004). These codes constituted three new father role categories; (1) assisting and protecting, (2) caregiving, and (3) physical affection. In the following, the definition of these roles and belonging codes were explained in detail.

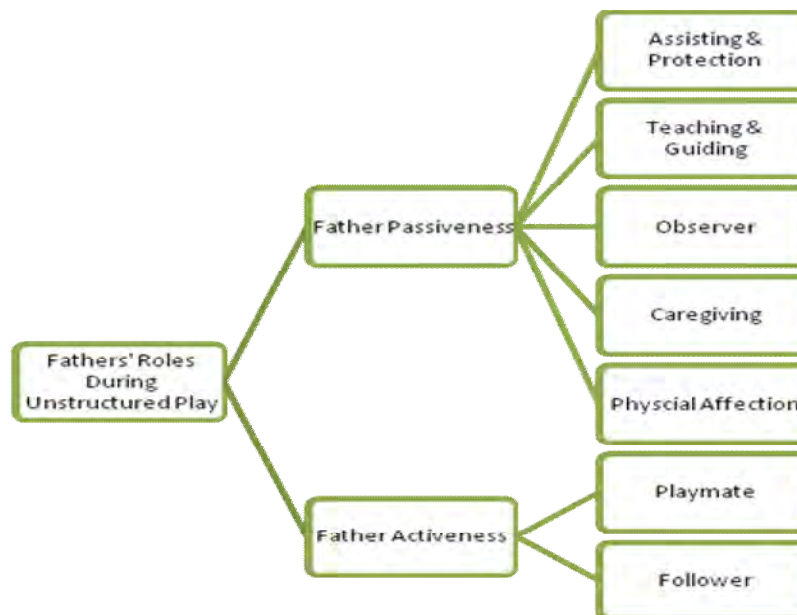
**Assisting and protecting:** Fathers' attempts to help their children to complete the activities in a safe way are defined as assisting. Fathers in the current study helped their children to complete the initiated activity, such as climbing the slide by supporting them from their back. These kinds of behaviors of fathers also have the purpose of protecting children from possible dangers. Therefore, this category is called assisting and protecting role, and includes codes such as "helping the child to sit on the swing, standing arms behind the back of the child, helping child to climb on the steps of slide, helping the child to sit on the swing and put on the seat belt, holding child's arm while climbing the slide to protect him/her from falling etc."

**Caregiving:** Fathers' attempts to meet the physical needs of children are categorized as caregiving role for the current data. This category includes fathers' behaviours such as "soothing the child, bringing the child to toilet, holding the child, dressing up the child's coat and clothes."

**Physical affection:** Fathers' attempts to indicate their love to their children is categorized as the physical affection and includes behaviours such as "holding the child, kissing the child, touching the child, smiling to the child, taking photos of the child etc."

### Thematic analysis of the father role categories

The yielded seven father role categories came under two themes; (1) Father activeness theme (FAT) and Father passiveness theme (FPT) based on the power relations between the children and the fathers during play. Figure 1 briefly indicates themes and categories.



**Figure 1.** Themes and categories yielded from observation data.

Father activeness (FA) is characterized by equal power relations between fathers and children. In other words, active roles is defined as fathers and children's shared and equal participation in the activities and includes roles of playmate, follower and caregiving.

Father passiveness (FP) includes hierarchical relations between fathers and children in which fathers displayed roles as competent adults. In other words, fathers' passive roles is defined as fathers distant involvement in the child's activity and includes categories of teaching and guiding, assisting and protecting, observing, caregiving and physical affection (Figure 1).

### Frequency analysis

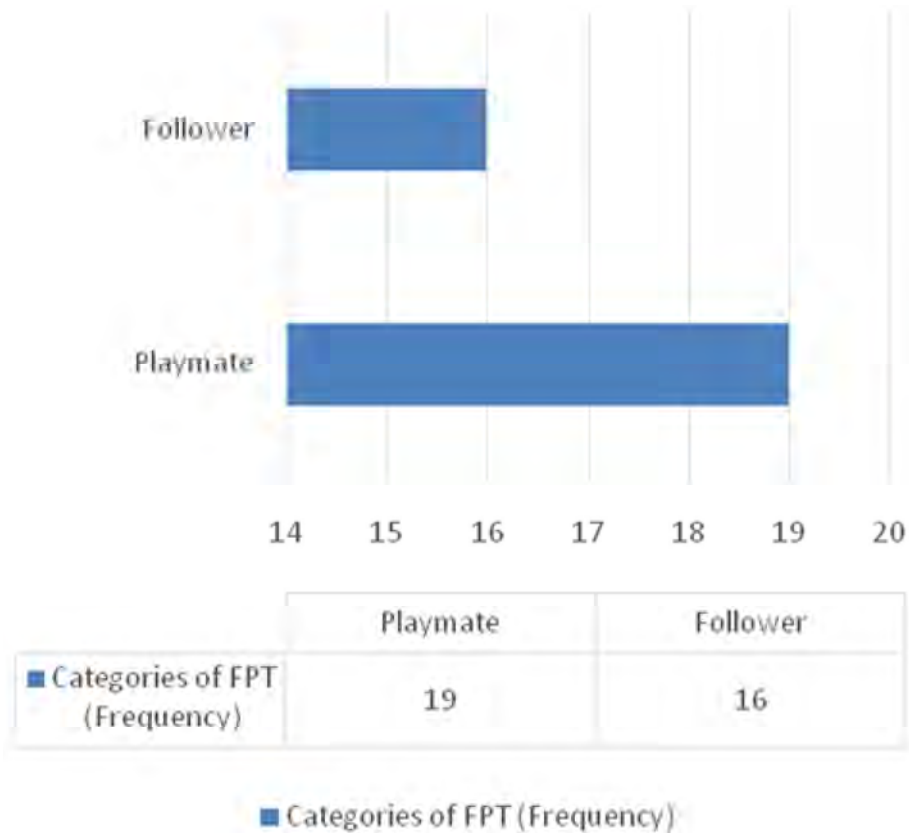
After thematic coding was conducted, based on the yielded themes, categories and codes, a frequency analysis was conducted. In the following part, detailed information on the codes and frequencies were provided. Father activeness theme (FAT) includes two categories (1) playmate, and (2) follower roles (Figure 2). The second most observed category of FAT was playmate role and it was observed for 19 times. This category consist of codes such as offering for help (n=1); talking with the child (1); climbing or going down the stairs with the child (n=7); being part of the sliding (n=4); sharing photo with child (n=3); sliding with child (n=1); and looking on the other side of tube (n=3). The third most observed category of FAT was follower role and it was seen for 16 times. Related codes were smiling with the child (n=6); following child while waiting for their turn to

swing (n=1); child initiates the activity, father respond sensitively (n=1); followed by the child (n=1); father and mother are smiling with each other while following (n=1); soothing the child (n=1); collaborating with mother (n=1); using verbal interaction in trying to satisfy child (n=1); amusing the child (n=1); encouraging (n=1).

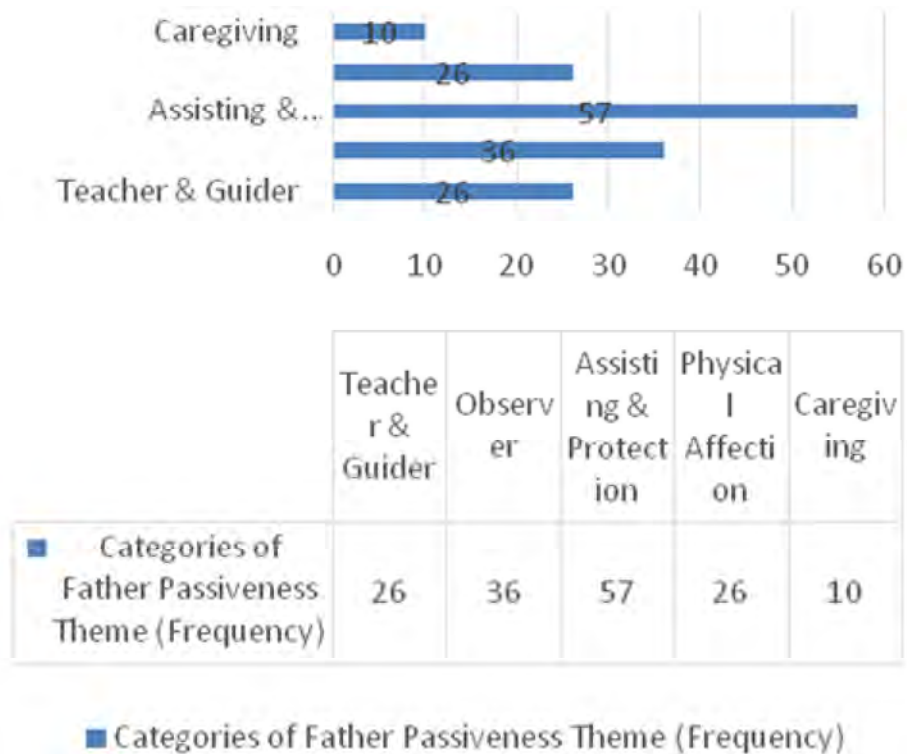
Second theme is father passiveness (Fp), which includes caregiving, physical affection, observer, teacher and guiding and assistant and protective categories (Figure 3). The most observed passive role was assisting and protecting role and it was observed for 57 times. It consist of codes such as, helping child to climb to slide and swinging the child (n=32); asking, offering to help (n=2); helping child to find friends, bringing the child to her friends (n=1); repairing the swing (n=1); protection from other children (n=4); holding child's arm in order to protect from falling down (n=1); helping child to go down the stairs (n=1); helping child to walk, to complete the task (n=1); holding the baby to walk (n=14).

The second most observed passive role was the observer role and it was coded for 36 times. Its codes includes behaviors such as talking with another person while child is doing an activity (6); communicating with mother (n=3); interacting with others (n=6); watching others (n=3); sitting on the bench (n=1); looking at the phone while observing the child (n=15); waiting for the child (n=3).

The roles of physical affection and teaching and guiding were observed in same amount (n=26). The codes of physical affection role include holding hand (physical contact, n=5); holding child (n=5); smiling to child (n=1); hugging (n=8); holding baby in his arms



**Figure 2.** Father activeness theme and its categories.



**Figure 3.** Father passiveness theme and its categories.

(n=1); touching child's leg (n=1); taking photo of child (n=5).

Codes of teaching and guiding role includes giving suggestions (n=1); positively responding to children's wishes (n=1); warning the child (n=1); suggesting new activity, place, way (n=12); directing child's activity (n=1); blocking child's misbehavior (n=1); being sensitive to child's wish (n=1); encouraging the child by clapping (n=1); stopping the activity (n=1); verbal interaction (n=5).

Caregiver category was the least observed category of FPT and it was coded for 10 times. Its codes are, suggesting to put on coat (n=1); to wear hat (n=1) and safety belt (n=6); adjusting child's clothes (n=1); putting on safety belt of baby car (n=1).

To sum it up, the findings indicated that although similar roles were displayed by fathers in the current study with that of Fagan and Palm (1994), based on the context there are some different roles displayed by fathers. Moreover, fathers in the current sample displayed very few amount of active roles and high amount of passive roles.

## DISCUSSION

This research intended to understand the roles that fathers display while they are playing with their young children in a natural play setting in relatively collectivistic Turkish culture. In this study, the researcher was a complete observer who did not disturb or interfere with the natural interactions of fathers and children who were playing in the playground. Because fathers and children were not informed about the observation, all kinds of behaviours observed during the study can be seen as the nature of father-child interaction.

However, the data yielded three new categories – caregiving, assisting and protecting and physical affection roles- and two broader themes –father activeness and father passiveness. These findings are important since they support the idea that father-child play is both context and culture dependent, while at the same time it shares some common characteristics across cultures.

In their study, Fagan and Plam (2004) identified four different roles displayed by fathers in their play with children. This framework was used in the current study to analyze the observation data which was gathered in a natural play setting, public playground. The data of the current study yielded three new role categories; caregiving, assisting and protecting and physical affection. After considering all yielded roles, it was observed that the categories were grouped under two themes; Father activeness theme (FAT) and Father passiveness theme (FPT). Inconsistent with previous studies that indicated fathers engage in more physical play with their children (Hossain et al., 2007; Lindsey and Mize, 2001; Parke, 1996).

This study indicated that fathers preferred to display

more passive roles in their play with children even in a natural play setting. That is, actively engaging in child's play through an equal power relation is not popular in relatively collectivistic Turkish culture. Instead, fathers prefer to involve in their children's play through assisting and protecting the child, through observing the child, and through teaching and guiding. These roles are very consistent with the characteristics of collectivistic and patriarchal Turkish culture in which fathers are mainly perceived as the protector of the family, they have higher hierarchical status in the family, they are disciplinarians to their children and authority figure of the family (Ivrendi and Isikoğlu-Erdoğan, 2010). These findings are also consistent with a very recent study conducted in collectivistic Chinese culture. Lin et al. (2018) found that fathers mainly prefer to engage in educational play with their children.

Another important point which indicates cultural differences is the content of displayed roles. For instance, assisting and protecting role yielded from the current data indicated that fathers directly interfered with their children's activities. For instance, rather than allowing the child to try to sit on the swing independently, some fathers held the kids and made their children sit on the swing directly. In another example, one child was trying to climb on the slide but he failed and his father assisted him to the last step without allowing the child to try more times. This behaviour pattern is typical for collectivistic culture in which interdependence is encouraged instead of independence; relatedness is preferred compared to autonomous (Oyserman et al., 2002; as cited in Roopnarine and Davidson, 2015: 240).

Although this study reflects strong cultural characteristics in father-child play even in a natural play setting, there are some interesting findings. For instance, as mentioned before, in Turkey fathers are perceived as protectors, disciplinarians and the authority figure of the family (Ivrendi and Isikoğlu, 2010), therefore it is not surprising to observe a distant relationship between fathers and children. However, in the current study it was observed that fathers indicate physical affection without hesitation towards their children and display caregiving role.

In traditional Turkish culture, indicating affection and providing care for young children is not commonly exhibited by fathers, especially in open public places, it is perceived as shameful. The findings of the current study promisingly indicate that these kinds of traditions have begun to change in Turkish culture. According to LaRossa (1988), the culture of fatherhood and beliefs regarding the role of father, changes before reaching fatherhood. Altinpark, the recreational area where the observations were done, is located in the Altındağ, which is known as the low or middle SES district of Ankara. Even in this place, fathers displayed their affection towards their children and engaged in caregiving activities which can be seen as an important change in



the culture and the conduct of fatherhood.

In spite of the new roles yielded from the data, Turkish fathers also displayed roles defined by Fagan and Palm (2004) as (1) playmate, (2) follower, (3) observer and (4) teacher and guider. This is another important finding of the current study since it indicates that fathers' roles in the play have some universal aspects. Based on this finding, it can be claimed that roles of fathers in the play is under the influence of cultural, contextual and individual characteristics. Although this study did not gather data about participated fathers' perceptions of fathering, father involvement, father-child play, this might be the first step for future studies that would investigate differentiated influences of fathers' individual characteristics and cultural characteristics on the roles they display during the play. Future studies might include data about individual, cultural and contextual characteristics in order to understand their differentiated influence on the roles of fathers in the play.

Fathers' engagement in all roles during their play time in the playground is one of the conspicuous findings of the study. This is claimed as important since it indicates that there could be a chance to increase fathers' disposition to be more active in the play with their children. In other words, this finding can be interpreted as the fact that fathers' have some dispositions to display active roles during their play, even though the dominant role they displayed is different. According to Villegas (2007: 373), disposition means "tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances based on their beliefs." Fathering disposition was defined as the "general attitudes and approaches that guide their (fathers') fathering. These (dispositions) are orientations that inform their (fathers) interaction with children and the decisions they make" (Sanchez, 2017: 113). Dispositions are the results of beliefs and attitudes shaped by past experiences; they influence individuals' experiences and are mutually influenced by experiences (Renzaglia et al., 1997). Although most of the studies investigated dispositions based on teachers, they indicated that personal experiences on teaching change teacher candidates' dispositions in a positive manner (Buldu, 2016; Lambert et al., 2005; Waddell and Griffin, 2007).

Combining the findings of the current study which reveals the fact that fathers have dispositions to engage in all kind of roles in their play with the child and the previous findings on disposition which indicated that dispositions can be improved through intervention or experiences, it can be claimed that it is possible to increase the level of fathers' engagement in active roles in their play with their children through interventions, increasing fathers' knowledge on the importance of their active involvement to the play and providing opportunities for fathers to display more active roles in the play through public playground which has materials that are open-ended, encourage active involvement of adults/fathers etc.

Although this study revealed important findings, it has some limitations. One of them is related to the context of the observations setting. Although it is one of the biggest public playground in Ankara, the central city of the Turkey, the playground has some close-ended materials such as plastic slides, child-size classical swings which might inhibit fathers' more active involvement in children's play in the park. Therefore, future studies can be conducted in different settings such as forests, museums or play areas in shopping centres to understand how the environment shape fathers' role during their play with children.

To recruit more fathers, observations were done at weekends. Since there is a picnic area near the public playground that the observations were done, circulation in the playground was rapid. Some of the father-child dyads did not spend much time in the playground which might result to less engagement in different roles. In future studies, longer observations can be done to understand the extent to which fathers engage in each role in a play session.

As earlier mentioned, a total of 27 father-child were observed, however, consent of the participants were gathered at the end of the observations. Only nine fathers gave consent to participate in the study when the researcher introduced herself, explained what she did and asked for their consent. However, the observation notes gathered by the researcher were given to those fathers who did not wanted to participate in the research. Therefore, the findings of the study are based on 9 father and child dyads in a public playground. Future studies might include more father-child dyads to understand to what extent newly found roles are observed in natural settings.

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