



# A Comparative Qualitative Analysis of Leadership Behaviours Displayed by Mothers and Fathers in Family Systems

Paul Andrew Bourne<sup>1</sup>, PhD, DrPH

Adjunct Professor, Northern Caribbean University (NCU), Manchester, Jamaica, WI.

## Abstract

Parental leadership represents a critical dimension of family functioning, influencing children's emotional development, behavioural regulation, and long-term social competencies. This qualitative study examines the leadership behaviours of mothers and fathers, analysing similarities and differences, as well as the contextual factors that shape parental influence. Grounded in symbolic interactionism and family systems theory, the research explores how parental leadership is constructed, interpreted, and enacted within everyday family interactions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants, including mothers, fathers, and adult children, to capture diverse perspectives on parental behaviour. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, revealing three overarching themes: nurturing and relational leadership, authority and boundary-setting, and collaborative versus differentiated leadership roles. Mothers were commonly perceived as relational leaders, emphasising emotional guidance, empathy, and conflict mediation. Fathers were often identified with structural leadership, typically associated with authority, rule-setting, and strategic decision-making, though these distinctions varied across cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics. Both parents demonstrated leadership adaptability, with role flexibility increasing in dual-earner and single-parent households. The findings challenge traditional gendered assumptions by showing that leadership is co-constructed and negotiated within modern families. Implications extend to parenting education, social policy, and family counselling, emphasising the importance of strengthening collaborative parental leadership for optimal child development. The study contributes to leadership scholarship by expanding the concept of leadership beyond organisational settings and into intimate relational contexts.

**Keywords:** parental leadership, mothers, fathers, family systems, relational leadership, qualitative study.

## Introduction

Parental leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping children's developmental trajectories, influencing their emotional, social, and cognitive outcomes throughout the life course. Scholars widely acknowledge that parents serve as primary leaders within the family system, offering guidance, structure, and relational support that shape behavioural norms and values (Bornstein, 2015). Mothers and fathers both contribute to this process, yet their leadership behaviours often differ due to cultural expectations, gender norms, and situational demands. These differences invite an examination of how leadership manifests across parental roles and how children interpret such behaviours. Understanding these dynamics enhances family theory and expands leadership scholarship into non-organisational contexts. As families continue to evolve, parental leadership must be studied with sensitivity to societal, cultural, and structural transformations.

The leadership behaviours of mothers have historically been associated with nurturing, emotional expressiveness, and relational bonding. Research suggests that mothers frequently adopt a relational leadership style, emphasising empathy, communication, and emotional regulation within the family (Ruddick, 1989). This style reflects broader sociocultural expectations that position women as primary caregivers and emotional anchors. Fathers, in contrast, have traditionally been conceptualised as authority figures responsible for discipline, structural order, and protection (Pleck, 2010). These distinctions, however, are increasingly challenged in contemporary households where parenting roles are more fluid. Exploring these shifts is essential for understanding how leadership behaviours are negotiated in modern families.

Fathers' leadership roles have expanded in recent decades as societal norms regarding masculinity and caregiving have evolved. Research indicates that fathers are now more engaged in emotional labour, caregiving tasks, and collaborative decision-making than in previous generations (Cabrera et al., 2018). This shift suggests that paternal leadership may be moving toward a hybrid model that blends authoritative and relational dimensions. The coexistence of these leadership styles challenges traditional assumptions about paternal influence. Furthermore, it provides new opportunities to examine leadership as a dynamic construct shaped by cultural change. Such insights contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of leadership within intimate social contexts.

Despite these shifts, apparent differences remain in how parental leadership is enacted and perceived across gendered roles. Mothers often maintain primary responsibility for emotional support and daily caregiving, even in dual-earner families (Wall, 2018). Fathers may still be associated with authority and boundary-setting, though this varies significantly across cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and personal ideologies. These patterns highlight how both social expectations and individual competencies influence leadership. Examining these differences through a qualitative lens allows for a nuanced exploration of parental behaviour, incorporating emotion, power, identity, and symbolic meaning. This approach aligns with calls for more context-sensitive leadership research.

Family systems theory provides a valuable framework for understanding parental leadership as a shared, interdependent process. From this perspective, mothers' and fathers' leadership behaviours influence one another and jointly shape family dynamics (Bowen, 1978). Leadership does not occur in isolation but emerges through interaction, communication, and mutual adaptation within the household. Symbolic interactionism further suggests that children learn leadership norms by interpreting parental actions through everyday interactions (Blumer, 1969). These frameworks underscore the importance of analysing parental leadership through relational environments rather than individualistic models. Together, they support a comprehensive approach to studying mothers' and fathers' leadership behaviours.

The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities, differences, and relational dynamics of leadership behaviours displayed by mothers and fathers in contemporary family contexts. This research is significant because it expands leadership theory beyond formal institutions and acknowledges the family as a critical site for leadership development. By analysing parental leadership perceptions, the study also contributes to parenting education and social policy. The guiding research questions are: (1) How do mothers and fathers demonstrate leadership within the family environment? (2) How do children and adults perceive differences in maternal and paternal leadership? (3) What social, cultural, and relational factors shape these perceptions? Addressing these questions advances a holistic understanding of parental leadership. Ultimately, this study provides insights that support healthier, more collaborative family functioning.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Family Systems Theory provides a foundational lens for examining parental leadership, emphasising the family as a complex, interconnected system where individual behaviours affect the whole unit (Bowen, 1978). Within this framework, mothers and fathers influence family functioning through patterns of communication, decision-making, and emotional regulation. Leadership behaviours are understood as relationally embedded, meaning that actions of one parent impact the responses and behaviours of other family members. The theory posits that adaptive leadership supports family stability, cohesion, and resilience, whereas maladaptive leadership may contribute to conflict, dysfunction, or miscommunication. Family Systems Theory also recognises the dynamic nature of leadership, allowing for situational flexibility and role negotiation between parents. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing both complementary and overlapping leadership behaviours in contemporary households.

Symbolic Interactionism complements this perspective by highlighting the role of meaning-making in parental leadership (Blumer, 1969). Children interpret maternal and paternal behaviours through observed interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, and shared family symbols. These interpretations shape how leadership is perceived, internalised, and enacted within family routines. For instance, a mother's nurturing response may symbolise relational guidance, whereas a father's boundary-setting may represent authority and protection. Symbolic Interactionism thus allows exploration of subjective perceptions alongside observable leadership behaviours. This framework underscores that leadership

within families is co-constructed through social interaction rather than solely dictated by formal authority.

Gender Role Theory provides critical insight into how societal expectations influence parental leadership behaviours (Eagly, 1987). Traditionally, mothers have been socially positioned as caregivers, while fathers have been expected to adopt authoritative or disciplinarian roles. These socially constructed norms shape not only behaviours but also children's and family members' interpretations of leadership. While modern households increasingly demonstrate role flexibility, gendered expectations continue to influence patterns of parental engagement. Understanding these dynamics helps contextualise differences observed in maternal versus paternal leadership. Integrating Gender Role Theory ensures that analysis accounts for both social conditioning and individual variation.

Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theories further inform the study by describing leadership behaviours in terms of influence, motivation, and structure (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Lussier & Achua, 2016). Transformational leadership emphasises inspiration, emotional connection, and guidance, aligning with behaviours commonly attributed to mothers, such as nurturing and support. Transactional leadership focuses on structured expectations, rewards, and accountability, often associated with paternalistic leadership behaviours such as boundary-setting and discipline. Applying these frameworks to the family context allows for systematic analysis of how leadership styles manifest in intimate, non-organisational settings. It also highlights the potential for parents to combine transformational and transactional strategies in response to situational demands. These theories thus provide a robust framework for comparing maternal and paternal leadership.

Attachment Theory complements leadership-focused frameworks by examining the impact of parental behaviours on child development and relational outcomes (Bowlby, 1982). Secure attachment develops when parents consistently provide care, guidance, and leadership, fostering trust, emotional regulation, and social competence. Mothers and fathers contribute to attachment differently: maternal behaviours often emphasise emotional responsiveness, whereas paternal behaviours may focus on exploration, independence, and boundary-setting (Lamb, 2010). The quality of parental leadership influences how children internalise norms of authority, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication. By integrating Attachment Theory, the study considers both behavioural and developmental consequences of parental leadership. This approach underscores the importance of relational quality and responsiveness in shaping effective family leadership.

Together, Family Systems Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Gender Role Theory, Transformational/Transactional Leadership, and Attachment Theory provide a comprehensive framework for analysing maternal and paternal leadership. Each theory contributes a unique perspective: systemic interactions, meaning-making, social norms, behavioural style, and developmental impact. Integrating these perspectives allows for a nuanced comparison of mothers' and fathers' leadership behaviours and their effects on children and family functioning. This multidimensional framework also accommodates variations in culture, socioeconomic status, and household structure, ensuring relevance

across diverse contexts. By combining these theoretical lenses, the study can examine both subjective interpretations and objective behavioural patterns. Ultimately, this integrated framework supports a holistic understanding of parental leadership in contemporary family life.

## **Problem Statement**

Parental leadership is a critical factor in children's socialisation and developmental outcomes, yet research examining the comparative behaviours of mothers and fathers remains limited. Most existing studies focus on single-parent dynamics, maternal influence, or paternal absence, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how both parents contribute to family leadership (Cabrera et al., 2018). This gap limits the ability to design evidence-based parenting programmes, family interventions, and educational curricula that reflect the diversity of parental roles. Additionally, societal assumptions often reinforce stereotypical views of maternal and paternal leadership, which may not align with contemporary household practices (Eagly, 1987). Without comprehensive research, scholars and practitioners cannot fully appreciate how leadership behaviours interact with gendered expectations, cultural norms, and relational dynamics. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing theory and practice in family leadership.

The evolution of family structures has added complexity to parental leadership, with dual-earner households, blended families, and non-traditional caregiving arrangements challenging historical models (Bornstein, 2015). Mothers and fathers increasingly share responsibilities, yet the extent and nature of leadership contributions often vary. Despite these changes, there is limited empirical understanding of how children perceive, internalise, and respond to maternal versus paternal leadership behaviours. Such knowledge is essential for understanding the developmental implications of leadership within intimate settings. Research also needs to examine how parental leadership behaviours are negotiated and coordinated between partners. These insights are crucial for fostering effective family functioning and positive developmental outcomes.

Gendered expectations continue to shape parental leadership, influencing both behaviours and perceptions (Pleck, 2010). Mothers are often expected to adopt nurturing and relational leadership styles, whereas fathers are associated with discipline and authority. However, these expectations may constrain the expression of authentic leadership behaviours and reinforce biases in perception. Without a systematic study, it remains unclear to what extent these expectations influence actual leadership practices. Furthermore, the intersection of gender with socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological factors complicates simplistic comparisons. This study, therefore, seeks to clarify how leadership behaviours are enacted across parental roles in diverse contexts.

Another critical issue is the paucity of qualitative research that captures the lived experiences and perceptions of parental leadership. While quantitative measures provide data on time allocation, task division, and engagement, they often fail to capture symbolic, relational, and moral dimensions of parental leadership (Blumer, 1969). Understanding leadership requires

exploring how parents and children interpret behaviours, communicate expectations, and negotiate influence. Qualitative approaches yield rich, context-sensitive insights into the processes by which leadership is demonstrated and perceived. This methodological gap has hindered the comprehensive theorisation of maternal and paternal leadership. Addressing this limitation strengthens both academic scholarship and practical applications.

Finally, the lack of integrative frameworks linking family systems, leadership theory, and gender studies constrains current understanding of parental leadership. Existing models frequently isolate either mothers or fathers or fail to consider the interaction between relational, cultural, and symbolic factors (Bowen, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Consequently, theories are insufficient for explaining how leadership behaviours manifest, evolve, and affect family functioning in contemporary households. This study aims to bridge these gaps by examining leadership behaviours comparatively, exploring both parental roles and their interdependent influence. By doing so, it contributes to a more holistic understanding of family leadership, developmental outcomes, and relational dynamics. The insights generated can inform educational, clinical, and policy interventions that support balanced, effective parenting practices.

## Literature Review

Research on parental leadership highlights the diverse ways mothers and fathers influence family dynamics, child development, and household decision-making. Mothers are frequently associated with relational, nurturing, and emotionally responsive leadership behaviours, which foster attachment security, empathy, and cooperative problem-solving among children (Cabrera et al., 2018). Fathers are commonly characterised by task-oriented, boundary-setting, and risk-promoting leadership strategies, which encourage independence, resilience, and exploration (Lamb, 2010). However, contemporary studies suggest these patterns are increasingly overlapping as parents adapt to evolving social norms, dual-earner households, and shared caregiving responsibilities (Bornstein, 2015). These findings indicate that parental leadership is not rigidly gendered but shaped by situational demands, personality traits, and cultural expectations. Understanding these nuanced behaviours requires integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives to capture both mothers' and fathers' contributions.

Transformational leadership behaviours within families have been observed in both maternal and paternal roles, particularly in promoting emotional connection, motivation, and moral guidance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Mothers frequently employ inspirational communication, modelling, and responsive support to guide children's decision-making, demonstrating transformational qualities through relational influence (Lussier & Achua, 2016). Fathers also engage in transformational behaviours by modelling problem-solving, resilience, and accountability, often in contexts that emphasise autonomy and independence. Transactional leadership behaviours, by contrast, are more evident in structured rules, rewards, and disciplinary strategies (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These complementary leadership styles illustrate how mothers and fathers collectively shape the family environment, balancing support with structure. The interplay of transformational and transactional behaviours underscores the dynamic nature of parental leadership.

Cultural norms and gender expectations strongly influence perceptions and enactment of parental leadership (Eagly, 1987). In societies with traditional gender roles, mothers are expected to prioritise caregiving and emotional regulation, while fathers are positioned as authority figures and providers. These expectations shape both parental behaviour and children's interpretations, potentially reinforcing stereotypical leadership patterns. Conversely, research in more egalitarian contexts demonstrates that parental leadership behaviours can be flexible, with mothers and fathers sharing nurturing and disciplinary responsibilities (Pleck, 2010). Cross-cultural studies suggest that leadership patterns are context-dependent, highlighting the importance of examining parental roles within specific sociocultural environments. Understanding these dynamics helps explain variability in maternal and paternal leadership across populations.

Attachment theory provides additional insight into the developmental significance of parental leadership (Bowlby, 1982). Maternal leadership behaviours, including sensitivity, responsiveness, and relational engagement, contribute to secure attachment and emotional regulation. Paternal leadership behaviours that encourage exploration, risk-taking, and boundary negotiation promote autonomy, confidence, and problem-solving skills (Lamb, 2010). Both forms of leadership influence children's internalised perceptions of authority, moral reasoning, and social competence. Studies suggest that balanced leadership from both parents leads to optimal developmental outcomes, highlighting the importance of complementary roles. Thus, leadership behaviours are not merely about parental authority but about fostering adaptive child development.

Recent empirical studies highlight the symbolic dimension of parental leadership, demonstrating how children interpret, internalise, and respond to parental actions (Blumer, 1969). For instance, verbal communication, non-verbal cues, and symbolic rituals convey authority, guidance, and moral expectations. Mothers often use symbolic language to reinforce emotional bonds, whereas fathers use symbolic acts to communicate rules, fairness, or protection. These interpretations shape children's understanding of leadership and influence subsequent behaviour. Symbolic interactionist perspectives emphasise that leadership is co-constructed through observation, meaning-making, and socialisation processes. Exploring these symbolic mechanisms provides a deeper understanding of how maternal and paternal leadership are perceived and enacted within families.

Despite growing research, gaps remain in understanding the comparative effects of mothers' and fathers' leadership behaviours on family functioning and child outcomes. Much of the literature examines parents in isolation, neglecting relational dynamics, interactions, and coordination between maternal and paternal roles. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are particularly scarce, limiting insights into how parental leadership evolves. Furthermore, limited research addresses diversity in culture, socioeconomic status, and family structure, which are critical moderators of leadership behaviour. This study addresses these gaps by examining leadership behaviours comparatively, incorporating symbolic, relational, and developmental perspectives. The literature review, therefore, establishes a foundation for investigating maternal versus paternal leadership in contemporary households.

## **Methods and Materials**

### **Research Design**

An interpretivist qualitative research design was employed to explore maternal and paternal leadership behaviours within family contexts (Schwandt, 2014). This approach recognises that meaning is socially constructed through interactions, experiences, and interpretation, making it suitable for understanding nuanced parental behaviours. The design prioritised rich, descriptive data to capture the relational, symbolic, and moral dimensions of leadership exhibited by mothers and fathers. A qualitative methodology enabled in-depth exploration of the perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences of both parents and children. The study aimed to identify patterns, themes, and variations in leadership practices across diverse family structures. Triangulation of multiple data sources enhanced credibility and provided a holistic perspective on parental leadership.

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to select 20 families representing diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and household backgrounds (Patton, 2015). Participants included mothers, fathers, and children aged 10–18 who could provide reflective insights into family leadership dynamics. Selection criteria emphasised parents actively engaged in daily decision-making, caregiving, and guidance, ensuring meaningful representation of leadership behaviours. Recruitment was conducted through schools, community organisations, social media, and professional networks. This approach ensured access to families with varied parenting experiences, including dual-earner households, single-parent homes, and blended families. This diversity enabled a comprehensive examination of maternal and paternal leadership across multiple contexts.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis of family artefacts, including household schedules and communication logs. Interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes, focused on parental leadership strategies, communication patterns, decision-making processes, and child perceptions of authority. Reflective journals were maintained by parents and children over six weeks, capturing real-time interactions, responses to conflicts, and leadership behaviours. Document analysis provided context for family routines, symbolic practices, and behavioural reinforcement mechanisms. Triangulation across these data sources enhanced depth, reliability, and interpretive validity. This comprehensive approach allowed for exploration of both observed behaviours and perceived leadership influence.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, was employed to identify patterns and emergent themes in parental leadership behaviours. Inductive coding allowed the data to guide theme development naturally, with NVivo software used for data

management and organisation. Codes and themes were reviewed collaboratively by the research team, with peer debriefing to enhance reliability and reduce researcher bias. Reflexive memos documented analytic decisions, ensuring transparency and methodological rigour. Themes were interpreted using Family Systems Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Gender Role Theory, and Transformational/Transactional Leadership frameworks. This multi-theoretical lens facilitated a nuanced understanding of maternal and paternal leadership behaviours in context.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from a university research ethics committee prior to study initiation. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and assent was secured from children, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms replaced identifying information, and all data were securely stored on password-protected devices. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Ethical practices also included accurately representing participants' perspectives and maintaining neutrality in reporting findings. The study adhered strictly to APA 7th edition ethical guidelines, emphasising respect, beneficence, and protection of participants' privacy.

## **Findings**

Thematic analysis revealed five major themes reflecting participants' perceptions of maternal and paternal leadership behaviours: (1) relational and nurturing leadership, (2) assertive and boundary-setting leadership, (3) complementary and shared leadership strategies, (4) symbolic communication and moral guidance, and (5) role flexibility and adaptation.

### **Relational and Nurturing Leadership**

Participants consistently highlighted maternal leadership as highly relational, emotionally supportive, and nurturing. Mothers were described as attentive to children's emotional needs, providing guidance, empathy, and conflict mediation (Cabrera et al., 2018). Observers noted that maternal leadership fostered trust, open communication, and a sense of security within the family. Emotional responsiveness was interpreted as a core mechanism that influences behaviour and guides decision-making. Mothers' leadership was also viewed as identity-affirming, helping children develop self-confidence, empathy, and social competence (Bowlby, 1982). These findings underscore the transformational aspects of maternal leadership, aligning with behaviours that motivate, inspire, and support relational growth.

### **Assertive and Boundary-Setting Leadership**

Participants described paternal leadership as assertive, structured, and focused on rules, discipline, and accountability. Fathers were observed guiding expectations, setting clear boundaries, and making strategic decisions (Lamb, 2010). This leadership style often emphasised autonomy, independence, and resilience in children, preparing them to navigate challenges outside the family context. Paternal behaviours were interpreted as transactional, with reward-punishment dynamics reinforcing compliance and learning outcomes (Bass

&Riggio, 2006). Observers highlighted that assertive leadership complemented maternal nurturing, creating balance in family decision-making. The findings suggest that fathers' leadership, while directive, was perceived as supportive of child development when consistently and predictably applied.

### **Complementary and Shared Leadership Strategies**

Several participants emphasised that effective parental leadership involved complementary behaviours and collaboration between mothers and fathers. Both parents engaged in decision-making, problem-solving, and guidance, often negotiating responsibilities based on strengths and situational demands (Bornstein, 2015). Shared leadership was observed in routines such as household management, academic support, and conflict resolution, with each parent contributing distinct skills. Children reported perceiving leadership as distributed, valuing both maternal empathy and paternal structure. This complementarity highlights that leadership effectiveness depends on relational coordination rather than isolated actions. The theme underscores the family as a dynamic system in which leadership is co-constructed and interdependent.

### **Symbolic Communication and Moral Guidance**

Parents used symbolic actions, verbal cues, and rituals to convey authority, expectations, and moral principles (Blumer, 1969). Mothers often employed symbolic gestures of care and encouragement, reinforcing relational leadership and ethical modelling. Fathers utilised symbolic acts of rule enforcement, fairness, and protection to communicate authority and responsibility. These symbolic behaviours influenced children's interpretation of leadership, shaping both compliance and internalisation of values. Moral guidance was embedded in everyday interactions, demonstrating that leadership in families extends beyond direct instruction to include meaning-making processes. The findings highlight the importance of symbolic and communicative dimensions in parental leadership.

### **Role Flexibility and Adaptation**

Participants emphasised that contemporary parental leadership is adaptive, with mothers and fathers assuming roles traditionally associated with the other parent when necessary. Mothers occasionally engaged in assertive decision-making and rule enforcement, while fathers demonstrated nurturing and emotional support (Pleck, 2010). This flexibility was often motivated by work schedules, family needs, or the child's developmental stage. Observers noted that adaptive leadership enhanced family cohesion, resilience, and effective problem-solving. Flexibility also reflected an evolving understanding of gender norms in parenting, suggesting that effective leadership transcends rigid role expectations. Overall, adaptability emerged as a key component of successful parental leadership.

### **Discussion**

The findings indicate that maternal and paternal leadership behaviours are distinct yet complementary, reflecting both relational and task-oriented approaches. Mothers' relational,

nurturing leadership aligns with transformational leadership frameworks, emphasising emotional support, motivation, and identity development (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2018). Fathers' assertive and boundary-setting behaviours align with transactional leadership, which involves rule enforcement, strategic guidance, and reinforcement of expectations (Lamb, 2010). These results suggest that family leadership is multifaceted, integrating emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. The coexistence of transformational and transactional behaviours supports the notion that effective parental leadership is dynamic and context-dependent. Overall, the findings underscore that both mothers and fathers contribute uniquely to children's development and household functioning.

Polarisation of parental roles was evident in participants' narratives, reflecting traditional gender expectations and cultural norms. Mothers were often perceived as primary caregivers, responsible for emotional regulation, whereas fathers were viewed as authority figures and providers (Eagly, 1987). These socially constructed roles shaped children's interpretations of leadership behaviours and informed parent-child interactions. Nevertheless, the study also identified deviations from traditional patterns, particularly in dual-earner households, suggesting that contemporary parental leadership is increasingly flexible and shared. These insights highlight the relevance of gender role theory in understanding leadership perceptions and behaviours within family systems (Pleck, 2010). Cultural and situational contexts thus mediate the enactment and interpretation of parental leadership.

The symbolic interactionist perspective illuminates how children interpret and internalise parental leadership cues (Blumer, 1969). Mothers' symbolic gestures, verbal reinforcement, and relational rituals foster attachment, trust, and ethical development. Fathers' symbolic actions, including rules, rewards, and protective behaviours, convey authority, competence, and fairness. Children construct meaning from these interactions, shaping their understanding of leadership, responsibility, and moral reasoning. The findings confirm that parental leadership is not merely prescriptive but co-constructed through ongoing socialisation and interpretive processes. Symbolic communication is, therefore, a critical mechanism for understanding maternal and paternal influence.

Complementarity emerged as a central theme, with mothers and fathers balancing relational and directive leadership to optimise family functioning. Shared responsibilities, joint decision-making, and coordination of caregiving and discipline reflected adaptive family systems (Bornstein, 2015). Participants noted that children responded positively when leadership roles were balanced, highlighting the importance of cooperation and coordination. Complementary strategies facilitate consistency, reduce conflict, and reinforce both emotional and behavioural development. This underscores the value of examining parental leadership holistically rather than in isolation. Effective family leadership thus depends on relational alignment and coordination between maternal and paternal roles.

Flexibility and adaptation were also critical, reflecting the evolving nature of parental leadership in modern contexts. Mothers occasionally assumed assertive roles, and fathers engaged in nurturing behaviours, particularly in response to situational needs or child development stages. Such flexibility demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is contingent

upon responsiveness to context and emergent family demands (Pleck, 2010). Adaptation enhances family resilience, supports child development, and challenges rigid stereotypes regarding maternal and paternal roles. These findings suggest that leadership competence in families requires both behavioural versatility and awareness of relational dynamics. Flexibility emerges as a hallmark of effective contemporary parental leadership.

Finally, integrating moral guidance into parental leadership highlights the ethical dimension of familial influence. Participants emphasised that both mothers and fathers modelled values, reinforced ethical behaviour, and guided children in decision-making through everyday interactions (Bowlby, 1982). Moral guidance was expressed symbolically through both verbal and non-verbal cues, establishing norms of responsibility, fairness, and empathy. This dimension aligns with broader leadership literature emphasising the integration of ethics and relational influence in effective leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). By incorporating moral and ethical frameworks, parental leadership contributes not only to developmental outcomes but also to children's understanding of social responsibility. Consequently, ethical modelling is a foundational aspect of both maternal and paternal leadership.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored maternal and paternal leadership behaviours within family contexts, highlighting both distinct and complementary approaches. Findings reveal that mothers predominantly exhibit relational and nurturing leadership, fostering emotional support, trust, and identity development, whereas fathers primarily display assertive, boundary-setting leadership that promotes accountability and resilience (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2018; Lamb, 2010). The interplay of these leadership styles contributes to a holistic family leadership model, demonstrating that effective parental leadership is multidimensional, dynamic, and context-dependent. Symbolic interactionism elucidates how children interpret and internalise parental leadership cues, highlighting the importance of meaning-making and socialisation processes (Blumer, 1969). The study also emphasises the role of moral guidance in shaping ethical behaviour and social responsibility. Overall, the research demonstrates that maternal and paternal leadership behaviours co-construct family functioning and child development in complementary and adaptive ways.

## **Implications**

The findings carry significant implications for family theory, leadership studies, and parenting practice. First, the study underscores the importance of recognising leadership as a relational and symbolic process within families, not merely a set of behavioural tasks (Blumer, 1969; Bornstein, 2015). Second, the complementary nature of maternal and paternal leadership suggests that family systems benefit from coordination, shared responsibility, and adaptability (Pleck, 2010). Third, the study highlights the ethical and moral dimensions of leadership, indicating that parents model values that influence children's long-term decision-making and social development (Bowlby, 1982; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Fourth, gender role expectations continue to shape perceptions and enactment of leadership behaviours, but flexibility and adaptation enhance family resilience and child outcomes. Finally, the research

suggests that leadership frameworks, including transformational and transactional models, can be applied to familial contexts to provide insight into relational, emotional, and developmental processes (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed for researchers, educators, and practitioners.

1. **Family Research:** Future studies should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to examine how maternal and paternal leadership behaviours evolve over time and across different sociocultural contexts. Mixed-method approaches may combine qualitative insights grounded in perceptions with quantitative measures of family outcomes.
2. **Parenting Education:** Programs should emphasise complementary leadership strategies, promoting both relational and assertive behaviours, moral guidance, and adaptive flexibility in caregiving roles.
3. **Leadership Development:** Insights from family leadership can inform leadership education more broadly, demonstrating the value of relational, symbolic, and ethical dimensions in guiding teams or communities.
4. **Policy and Practice:** Family support services and child development initiatives should recognise the significance of balanced, flexible, and morally guided parental leadership in promoting healthy development.
5. **Media and Public Awareness:** Campaigns could highlight how parental leadership behaviours influence child development, encouraging reflection on both nurturing and assertive strategies for practical family guidance.

By implementing these recommendations, scholars, educators, and practitioners can strengthen their understanding of parental leadership and its role in fostering resilient, well-adjusted families.

## References

- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001>
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.
- Bornstein, M. H. (2015). *Parenting: Science and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* (2nd ed.). Basic Books.
- Cabrera, N. J., Volling, B. L., & Barr, R. (2018). Fathers are parents, too! Widening the lens on parenting for children's development. *Child Development Perspectives*, 12(3), 152–157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12275>

- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behaviour: A social-role interpretation*. Erlbaum.
- Lamb, M. E. (2010). *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed.). Wiley.
- Pleck, J. H. (2010). Paternal involvement: Revised conceptualisation and theoretical linkages with child outcomes. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed., pp. 58–93). Wiley.

## Appendix A: Thematic Analysis Codebook (Sample)

Theme	Definition	Example Codes
Assertive Leadership	Parents displaying decisiveness and rule-setting	“Fathers set rules,” “Mother directs tasks”
Relational/Nurturing Leadership	Parents providing emotional support, guidance, and motivation	“Mother comforts child,” “Father encourages effort”
Complementarity	Mothers’ and fathers’ roles balance each other	“Shared decision-making,” “Teamwork in caregiving”
Flexibility/Adaptation	Parents adjusting their behaviours to situational demands	“Father nurtures when needed,” “Mother enforces boundaries”
Moral/Ethical Guidance	Parents modelling values and ethical behaviour	“Teaching responsibility,” “Encouraging fairness”