

Peer Review

Review of: "Effectiveness of a Father-Inclusive Parenting Intervention on a Child's Diet, Early Stimulation, and Father Involvement in Childcare in Rural Malawi: A Study Protocol for a Four-Arm, Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial"

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This study protocol addresses a critical gap in early childhood development and nutrition programming in low-resource settings by rigorously evaluating a father-inclusive parenting intervention in rural Malawi. The four-arm, cluster-randomized controlled design is a major strength, allowing comparison between mothers-only, fathers-only, couples, and control arms, thereby enabling assessment of both independent and synergistic parental effects. The integration of child nutrition, early stimulation, and co-parenting within a behavior change communication (BCC) framework reflects a theoretically grounded and contextually informed approach. The collaboration with local health systems and community structures enhances feasibility, cultural relevance, and scalability. Methodologically, the use of intention-to-treat analysis, mixed-effects modeling to account for clustering, multiplicity adjustments, and clear trial registration further strengthens the rigor and transparency of the protocol.

However, several limitations warrant consideration. Primary outcomes rely largely on self-reported measures, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly in culturally sensitive domains such as father involvement. The relatively short follow-up period (two months) limits the ability to assess the sustainability of behavioral changes and longer-term child developmental outcomes. Additionally, although cluster randomization reduces contamination, potential spillover effects between nearby communities cannot be entirely excluded. The protocol could also further elaborate on strategies for handling missing data and ensuring intervention fidelity across facilitators.

Overall, this is a well-designed and policy-relevant trial that has strong potential to contribute valuable evidence on father engagement and co-parenting strategies in early childhood development within sub-Saharan Africa. The findings are likely to inform scalable, gender-transformative parenting interventions in similar low-resource settings.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.