

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"

Hany Akeel Al-hussaniy¹

1. University of Baghdad, Iraq

This study protocol presents a well-structured and policy-relevant cluster-randomized controlled trial designed to evaluate a father-inclusive parenting intervention in rural Malawi. The manuscript addresses a significant gap in early childhood development and nutrition interventions in low- and middle-income countries by explicitly incorporating fathers and couples into behavioral change communication programs. The four-arm design is a notable strength, as it allows comparison of maternal-only, paternal-only, and couple-based interventions, offering valuable insights into the incremental contribution of father engagement. The protocol demonstrates strong methodological transparency through adherence to SPIRIT guidelines, clear eligibility criteria, predefined outcome measures, and appropriate statistical analysis plans, including intention-to-treat analysis and mixed-effects modeling to account for clustering. The integration of formative research and collaboration with local organizations further enhances cultural appropriateness, feasibility, and potential scalability of the intervention.

The protocol also shows careful ethical planning, appropriate sample size calculation, and detailed intervention delivery procedures. The inclusion of multiple primary outcomes addressing nutrition, early stimulation, and paternal involvement reflects a comprehensive approach to nurturing care frameworks and aligns with global child development strategies. Additionally, the use of behavior change communication grounded in social and cultural context strengthens the theoretical and practical relevance of the intervention.

Despite these strengths, several limitations reduce methodological rigor and may affect the interpretability of future findings. First, reliance on self-reported behavioral outcomes introduces the possibility of social desirability and recall bias, particularly when measuring sensitive topics such as father involvement in childcare. The relatively short follow-up period may also limit the ability to evaluate the sustainability of behavior changes and longer-term child developmental outcomes. Furthermore, although participant and enumerator blinding procedures are described, the nature of behavioral interventions inherently limits complete blinding and may introduce performance bias. Another potential limitation is the restriction of eligibility to two-parent households, which may reduce generalizability in settings where single-parent or extended family caregiving structures are common.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.