

The changing roles of fathers

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Fathers are a vitally important resource to children and families on a huge number of levels. When that resource is missing or is underused, children and families are greatly disadvantaged'. This article is drawn from an in-house discussion paper of the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It is exploratory: designed to identify the issues that will help us to determine the Foundation's approaches to fathering and fatherhood.

The history of fatherhood cautions us to expect change in the roles men play in relation to their children. More and newer models – even ideals – of fatherhood, will emerge as economies and cultures, and the nature, structure, dynamics and environments of families, all continue to evolve and shift. For example, there is an accumulation of evidence in the Western world that indicates that paternal involvement in the lives of children has increased over the last three decades, both in proportional and in absolute terms. There is also substantial evidence that, for a variety of reasons, change is not

always for the better: that fatherhood falls short of what young children need if they are to thrive, and often falls short of what fathers themselves would like it to be.

Why is there an interest in these issues now? One starting point was the Women and Development movement that, in the 1980s, highlighted the ways in which women supported families. This evolved and, in the 1990s, began to focus on the ways in which an understanding of gender issues in development brought men into the picture as well. There was an attempt

to understand the complementarity of roles within the family. In order to develop an understanding of that complementarity, however, it is important to take a closer look at men's roles. From the Foundation's perspective, there is an even more specific focus: men as fathers, and their roles in supporting young children's development.

But roles have to be considered in context and part of this context is set by the economic factors that, worldwide, threaten the ability of families to survive. There have been enormous

changes in the labour market that have placed increased stress on families; and this has impacted on men's and women's roles within the family, a cornerstone of which is childcare. Thus it is now critical to find ways to support men taking on expanded roles in relation to children. It is also important to reinforce roles that men already play. In many traditional cultures, men have always been essential partners in childcare, and often have very clearly defined roles, based on the age of the child. The Foundation's idea in supporting project partners around issues of fatherhood, is to find ways to



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reinforce rather than undermine these roles – perhaps especially as cultures are undergoing change.

Furthermore, with men now acknowledged in gender, population and reproductive health studies – and following the World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) – there has been an increased interest in defining men's roles in sexuality, reproductive behaviour and family dynamics. One issue that has emerged is that reproductive health – everything related to contraception, pregnancy, childbirth and sexually

transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS – is considered to be a woman's concern. 'Real men' do not concern themselves with this, although their gender has given them more opportunities to inform themselves – for example, by giving them more chances to become literate.

An historical perspective on fatherhood

It is clear that no father creates his fatherhood in isolation: whatever he does is measured against images which simultaneously amplify and dwarf the

process of human fathering. This means that, when relating to a given father, we relate to our expectations of him. These can be strong or weak, 'castrating' or facilitating, depending on how he does or does not fit in with these expectations.

A most striking fact to be gleaned from the study of fathers and fatherhood is the centrality of the image of the authoritarian father to moral and political debate in the West over many centuries. While the behaviour of fathers is and has always been immensely varied, paternal imagery has been selective and limited; a main effect of this has been to veil other kinds of interaction between men and their children.

A review of father's images in art and text illustrates an ongoing campaign over the last 400 years of promoting an extremely limited range of fathering behaviours, that does not include involvement or empathy with infants. It is as if men have been urged to keep at an emotional and physical distance from infants so that they will be cut off from their most tender feelings – and thus alienated from themselves.

To compound this, industrialisation meant that the home became more mother-centred, and the division of labour between women and men more clear cut. Modernisation has taken this further: fathers and other earners may be away from home for the whole of the working day whereas the world of the family was once also the father's world of work. This separation of the worker from his family has been widely regarded as a calamity.

“ *I'm very protective of him because he's so vulnerable^(a)* ”

Understanding fatherhood

Fathers today are by no means a homogenous group: they range from those who produce sperm but have no contact with their offspring, through to those who take sole charge of their children. One current problem in understanding fatherhood is that research suggests that much of contemporary scholarship on fathers – notably in the USA – comes from a

deficit model that focuses on men's inadequacies as parents. They are labelled as having failed historically to adapt to changing social circumstances and realities, as not being involved in caring for children, and as having little or no interest in changing.

This image is reinforced in the media of Western countries, and appears to be unrelentingly negative, which presumably undermines fathers' confidence. For instance in the case of Australia, a national audit on fatherhood found, most strikingly, that fathers felt they had limited competence in their role as dads, whereas their partners rated them pretty highly. One of the conclusions was that fathers are doing better than they think or are led to believe.

Fortunately this negative 'deficit' approach is currently being criticised because it is not very useful as a starting point for helping fathers to improve their fathering. What is needed is an

“*When she smiles, I just melt* ^(a)”

understanding of fatherhood that is centred on who men really are, what aspirations they have as fathers, and their own potential to change themselves. It must also acknowledge and respond to realities such as socio-economic factors, the balance between home-life and work, and cultural norms, all of which impact on men as they strive to be good fathers.

Women's lives are usually described in terms of motherhood, while men are usually characterised as heads of their household or wage earners: men's value as intimate fathers tends to be passed over. Yet, men's commitment to their children is key to the quality of family life and the prospects of the next generation.

The family structure of mothers as caregivers and fathers as income earners has become, to a large extent, a myth, although still upheld by many aspects of social and economic policy. On the domestic front, while women have taken on an increasing role in providing income to their families, men have not taken up their share of responsibility in family life: responsibility for children, in particular,



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is still seen as belonging to the mother. This can be linked to the reality that, in many parts of the world, fathers are not living full time with their children. Some examples of female-headed households in a variety of countries are: Botswana 45 percent, Malawi 29 percent, Jamaica 42 percent, Peru 23 percent, Thailand 22 percent.² However, the lack of a resident partner is a much more significant variable if the potential for fathers' involvement in their children's lives is considered.

One key reason for this separation is the need to move away to earn money. But

the labour market is more subtle than that and is also shifting: currently there are many examples of increased levels of unemployment for men and increased levels of maternal employment. In addition, the absence of the father needs to be looked at in terms of cultural as well as economic factors. (see 'Redefining manhood' on page 25)

Three indicators which are consistently used to measure people's 'success' in later life are: moving up in society; fulfilment of potential; and capacity to form and maintain rewarding