

Involving fathers in community-based early childhood programmes:

a report from Israel and the Palestinian Autonomous Region

Farid Abu Gosh

The author is Director of The Trust of Programmes for Early Childhood, Family and Community Education. Following a pilot project in East Jerusalem, The Trust has accumulated 16 years of experience in development work in Arab Israeli communities, and in Palestinian communities in the Palestinian Autonomous Region. Throughout that time, it has included a focus on early childhood education. Generating and sustaining the involvement of parents – including fathers – has been central to the work from the beginning and, in this article, the author discusses the approaches that have proved successful.

In 1984, when the Trust of Programmes for Early Childhood, Family and Community Education began operations, there were almost no early childhood educational programmes for the Arab population in the Old City of Jerusalem except the very basic health education. The school system expected children to be enrolled at school with basic educational background experiences, and to follow the school curriculum: 'We have a book that should be finished by the end of the semester' summed up the teachers' attitudes.

We were dealing with 10,000 community members of whom a high percentage were unemployed and living

on social security. The houses were very poor, and the neighbourhoods were all poverty-stricken. Predictably, children couldn't meet the expectations of the schools. In addition, relations between the schools and the parents were non-existent: there was a sort of hostile dependency of the parents on the schools, and the schools often blamed the parents for the poor achievements of children. Recognising this reality provided us with our point of departure and enabled us to discover our role: to not only prove that parents should not be ignored, but to demonstrate that parents are the school's major partners in their children's education.

Activities and achievements

The project began with a pilot phase that included: training para-professional workers; family daycare; home visiting; and leadership courses. At the same time, the project sought to influence policy makers and professionals. In 1988, the scope and institutional base of the Trust's work was extended and new components were added to the programme. These included: the creation of a strategically placed resource centre in the North of Israel; health and nutrition education; and a component for slow learners. A postgraduate course was also developed for community workers who, after

graduation, were instrumental in building the Trust's network.

Over the years, and with continued support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Trust has expanded its programme with Palestinian Israeli communities. It has also gained support from other funders to disseminate its pilot programme in Palestinian communities across the Palestinian Autonomous Region (West Bank and Gaza).

The actual work targets disadvantaged families and children and is tailor made to the local situation. Incorporated are early childhood education and

community development activities. These may include the training and supervision of preschool teachers in centres; a component for youths who drop out of school; and a women's empowerment component focusing on training and counselling. The work with women has enabled them to participate in community development, including in the functioning of various committees, and the operation of preschools and educational libraries.

How we took action

In contrast to the usual top down government approach, our programme has always worked from the bottom to the top: both the planning and the execution of the programme was done in full partnership with community members, parents and members of the extended family. The programme had the following two central elements.

1. Orientation work for the preschool teachers who were to work with the children and the families. This element of the programme took the form of a course and subsequent supervision. It was critical to the educators who had to add a new

dimension to their teaching role, and see the parents as partners.

2. Work with the families. The value of involving parents was a strong explicit element of our programme. It was quite easy to involve the mothers and older sisters both in the planning and the implementation of the programme. Mothers were both partners in the steering committee and at the core of the Mother-to-Mother component in which they were trained to guide other mothers from the community. These mothers were our key to entering the community and to the process of changing family attitudes towards children's education. Among areas that we focused on were: the importance of talking with children at an early age; the impact of communication with children; and the dysfunctionality of the physical punishment of children.

Within the early childhood component, the programme has also developed work with fathers. This is in line with the evaluation of the pilot phase that identified the need to concentrate more on bringing fathers

into early childhood work; and was in response to the perception that fathers were not easy to engage, and to the fact that they seemed to like participating but weren't always able to. The evaluation also recommended continuing two effective approaches that had been tried out in the pilot phase: home visits to fathers; and Fathers' Clubs.

Visiting fathers

To make its work effective, the Trust has always believed that it is important to meet fathers in their social settings, and to work with them there to build a suitable intervention plan that meets their expectations and needs. This also helps them to be involved in the project and to begin to participate in the various activities of the Fathers' Clubs. But the project workers have to maintain, and sometimes intensify, the home visits in order to really understand exactly what prevents the fathers from participating. This helps them overcome the barriers to participation.

These home visits have a number of other vital functions.

- Furnishing knowledge about the father in the family context. This complements what the project already knows about mothers.
- Providing a more realistic view of the realities of family life. This includes dynamic interactions in the family and between the spouses.
- Building stronger relationships between the family and the project.
- Offering greater insights into the family settings.
- Allowing more private discussions with fathers to explore in more detail their problems and needs, and their expectations of the Fathers' Clubs.
- Allowing fathers to express the nature of their readiness to participate in voluntary public activities and to share in building up local leadership, by representing the community in the project.
- Allowing the project to intervene in families, in the sense of helping them to develop awareness of their needs, and of methods of fulfilling them.

To reinforce the home visits, fathers are also given guided tours of the programme and its various sections, and services and activities are explained

to them – especially the kindergarten, the Sisters Club (for girls) and the work with mothers (their wives). We emphasise the Fathers' Club during this visit, and explain its objectives and its services. We also introduce the fathers to existing members, and we introduce them to the three members of the Fathers' Committee who are elected in each centre. The members explain their duties, tell the fathers how to approach the Committee, and stress the importance of their participation.

The Fathers' Clubs

Fathers' Clubs are often launched with a meeting at which a proposed programme of activities is presented, discussed and modified, and then agreed and implemented. This process has often produced substantial changes in the proposed programme of activities. For example, the subject matter could be amplified from a focus solely on early childhood to include all child development stages, the characteristics of each, and the needs that children have. In addition, fathers have asked for lectures and discussions on family life and its characteristics and dynamics, interactions between parents, and family management.

Within these themes, specific topics to emerge have typically included:

- communications within the family;
- the influences of parents on their children, especially in the sense of role modelling;
- the influence of children suffering from specific conditions, on family life generally and on individuals within the family;
- the roles and distribution of labour in the family, especially cooperation between woman and man;
- identifying the roles and duties that fathers have in rearing young children; and
- the importance of play, and the roles and responsibilities of fathers.

The outcomes of this kind of work are brought together with the outcomes of similar work with women. Appropriate activities are then planned to meet the needs and to resolve the problems identified.

Such activities have to be planned in a participative way with the fathers, and in line with Arab values and customs: without that, the proposals for action would be met with disgust and rejection.

One typical activity is a social party for parents, which allows them to get to know and build social relationships with other families in the area. Such activities had previously been rejected by families. They accept them now, and we link this to a change in their attitudes about participation by younger family members in other joint activities – for example the Sisters' Clubs for girls mentioned earlier.

A second typical activity is a workshop for fathers on making toys. This may need a great deal of discussion and a great deal of planning to overcome problems in getting the fathers to attend. One major difficulty can be their perception that such an activity is work for women or children. Sometimes it has been necessary to ensure that early work is clearly in the male domain – that they learn and use carpentry or blacksmithing skills, for example. But it is only when the link is made to their children's need for such toys, and to their ability to meet this need, that they become enthusiastic.

A third typical activity is a study day for couples. This will have been developed around one of the concerns expressed by the fathers and mothers, and

approved and planned by the Fathers' Committee. It could include a lecture, a film and a discussion about the lecture and the film.

Other approaches and experiences

We have found that the involvement of their wives stimulates men to take an interest in their children's education: they start to enquire about what their wives are doing in general, and then become interested in what their wives are doing specifically – for example, during the home visits. Later the wives may become encouraged and share with their husbands the printed materials that they take on their home visits. After this stage the fathers may start going to duty days at schools – peeling potatoes for example – and may take on roles in classes according to their capabilities. For example, they may explain to the children about their occupation and duties, and the children may be able to visit the fathers' work.

Working with Fathers' Committees has also proved to be a valuable way forward. Each of the three members are known to all and are regarded as

representative of the community. The functions of the Fathers' Committee are:

- to work in cooperation with the programme;
- to research the needs of the fathers in the communities;
- to suggest specific activities;
- to help plan them and ensure they are viable; and
- to encourage other fathers to fully participate in the activities of each centre.

One obstacle to progress was that childrearing in Arab society was considered to be for mothers only so it was considered an offence to fathers' male egos to be involved. However, the fathers were interested in working on influencing policy.

To move things forward, the mothers and the staff agreed to work with the Fathers' Committees on this basis, as a starting point. In cooperation with a team of teachers and social workers, a male supervisor was therefore appointed to work with the Fathers' Committees on ways in which they could engage more directly with their children's development and education.

Under the supervision of counsellors, Fathers' Committees learned to be active in local policy issues that affected the community. After seeing the success of our efforts, we started changing and developing the programme to meet the increasing needs of the community. This was a real empowerment process in which the fathers learned how to present their needs, and work effectively. They were ready to try to influence other organisations in the neighbourhood including schools and city departments. The Fathers' Committees, together with the fathers (husbands of the mothers who were involved in the programme as para-professionals), acted as ambassadors for the programme to other fathers who were reluctant to participate in the programme. The negative, authoritarian image of the father was thereby changed into that of a positive partner.

The Fathers' Committees and other active fathers, took full responsibility for the programme of activities; and were also actively supporting the organisation of sessions; study days; and group discussions with professionals such as physicians, psychologists, and so on.



Israel and the Palestinian Autonomous Region: The Trust of Programmes for Early Childhood, Family and Community Education

Working with fathers: the lessons we have learned

Over the past 17 years we have gained a great deal of experience in working with fathers. The major lessons we have learned from this programme include:

- make partnership with parents into something valuable.
- Include the involvement of fathers in a holistic approach.
- Develop a system of respectful listening and start from where the family is.
- Be ready for a long process, and understand that we are dealing with social changes, which have to go hand in hand with local social values.
- Understand that this is a process of empowerment that will challenge the organisation's staff and programmes.
- In order to get involved, the fathers have to acknowledge their success and recognise their abilities.
- Finally, the programme should always be followed up by a professional team, in addition to continuous evaluation. ○