

Fathers matter too

“*Parents have joint primary responsibility for raising the child, and the State shall support them in this. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern*”

(The Convention on the Rights of the Child)

Over the years, the Foundation has chosen to support work with families as one of the main strategies for enhancing young children's development. However, in the majority of the approaches being developed, 'families' stands for 'mothers'. This is despite an increasing recognition, worldwide, of the need to support the role of fathers within the family, and in particular in relation to children's development. And it is despite clear evidence that men want to be engaged with their children – and indeed, as a recent survey¹ confirmed, often are engaged:

- fathers have always been involved with their children. An overview of the research shows us that at any time over the past 40 years when fathers' activities have been measured, some men have always been reported as highly involved.
- They are sensitive and responsive to their young children.
- Most fathers say they enjoy having close relationships with their children.
- They provide vital practical support around the time of birth, and many state that they feel deeply moved by the experience of childbirth.
- They are often the main carers for children while mothers are working. In 36 percent of dual earner families it is the father, more than any other individual, who cares for children.
- Many fathers assume the major parenting role when the need arises.

The same survey also confirmed that it is beneficial to the young child to be raised by more than one carer; and went on to point out that babies usually

bond as easily with their fathers as with their mothers. A parent's gender is far less important in affecting child development than broader qualities as a parent, such as warmth and kindness. Fathers themselves also reported that 'being with their children is the most fulfilling part of their lives'.

This survey may have been conducted in the United Kingdom, but its findings reflect what is widely accepted elsewhere: that when men fail to engage with their children, it is not something that is inherent in the fact of being male – although, as some of the articles in this edition show – it may well be something that is inherent in perceptions and understandings of manhood.

Against this background, this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* serves three purposes. First, it offers an overview of the state of play on work with fathers, tracing how and why fathering has emerged as a key focus for effective work with young children. Second, it

draws out the key issues in fathering and discusses how these are understood and acted on. Third it offers a survey of what is being done, strategically and via direct work, to support fathers as they move towards the parenting roles that they, and their families, cultures and societies determine that they should have.

Building on what has been achieved

Although the need for work with fathers is coming more sharply into focus now, considerable efforts have already been made. Some of these are outlined in the first article 'The changing roles of fathers' (page 7) of this edition, and some – along with others – are discussed in more detail in the remaining articles. The Foundation itself has supported a range of initiatives with fathers since the mid nineteen eighties. These include work in: Zimbabwe; the Caribbean (see page 25); the Middle East/North Africa region; South Africa; the USA; Ireland; the United Kingdom; East Jerusalem,



Namibia: *Father and child*
photo: Erongo Pro Child project

Israel and the Palestinian Autonomous Region (see page 18); Peru; Australia; Venezuela; The Netherlands and India.

Surveying these programmes in conjunction with the articles in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* reveals some clear lines of development or evolution in the ways in which fatherhood is understood. A number of issues that frequently arise in work on fathering stand out; and shifts in the ways in which work with fathers is understood and practised are obvious. For example, a deficit model of

fatherhood was sometimes used: ideals were set up, fathers were measured against these, and work centred on bringing them into line. Now there is acceptance that fatherhood can properly have a range of expressions, any of which can be right for children, the fathers themselves and their families, in their own contexts.

On the other hand, some issues that can be found in many settings have remained constant. One such is that the

concept of manhood as established and lived by the men, and as generally accepted in their cultures, is at odds with men's roles as fathers. A response to this that evolved during the 1990s involves working towards a redefinition of manhood that includes fathering – and specifically loving and caring (see page 25). Linked to this is the more general need to acknowledge cultural norms and practices. Programmes have moved away from challenging cultural patterns to taking them as starting points to be considered and reflected on. The point is to ensure that fathers

develop their own understandings about what is best for their children – and for the fathers themselves.

A second recurring issue is in some senses linked to the first: the difficulty of engaging men – young children are often seen as the responsibility of women, not men. One root cause of this may be gender stereotyping that children become aware of early in their lives, perhaps because of the ways in which gender roles are modelled for them. If that is the case, then one response is to counter it early. An example of how to approach this is provided by *What is a girl? What is a boy?*, a practical booklet that includes examples of gender stereotyping that children may already know. Using pointed and attractive illustrations, children are encouraged to discuss the examples and link them to their own experiences. As they do so, they recognise them as false.²

Western and non-Western perspectives

Two parallel lines of work around fatherhood can also be seen. One follows certain 'Western' social and economic patterns of change, and their

implications for families and the roles and functions of fathers. Typical issues for Western fathers and families have included: work time versus parenting time; changing patterns of work for men and women and their impact on parenting roles; and the rights of fathers, particularly after family break-up. These issues are not exclusive to the rich societies in which they arise, but the approaches to work around them certainly reflect the vastly greater resources that can be brought to bear in resource-rich countries. Work has therefore included the development of substantial national organisations for fathers such as 'Fathers Plus' in the United Kingdom. These organisations also network internationally with their brother organisations and they are able to support major international conferences around fathering themes. Smaller scale initiatives have included: an informal meeting space for fathers to exchange parenting experiences with peers; groups of first-time fathers exchanging their experiences over coffee on their daily early morning commuter train; playgroups run by fathers; and antenatal classes for expectant fathers and their pregnant partners.

The second line of work runs through 'non-Western' ethnic or cultural groups. The issues that have arisen include sustaining examples of good traditional fathering practices in the face of factors such as encroaching economic and social pressures; and what to do about examples of bad practice. The work of projects supported by the Foundation ranges from helping migrant fathers to define their parenting roles in their new settings in The Netherlands, to exploring the practical implications of perceptions of fatherhood among rural Quechua-speaking families in Peru. In the latter, fathering is taken to include males loving and caring, and fostering, nurturing and teaching. In some senses, the work of the Karnataka-based reproductive health project 'A Sense of Rhythm' parallels this. The project is being implemented by the Family Planning Association of India in conjunction with the University of Groningen, The Netherlands; and is undertaking action research cum programme planning on men's perceptions of fatherhood.

However, none of this should imply that enough is being done. Even taking into account the strategic work that

underpins and reinforces direct work (see page 12) a lot more needs to be done: too many fathers, across many different settings, are clearly not fulfilling their fathering roles as well as their children – and indeed they themselves – need.

Work in progress

Work with fathers is itself a work in progress: there is a very long way to go. And this collection of materials on fathering is also a work in progress – as has often been the case for *Early Childhood Matters*. We have gathered information and surveyed relevant literature from a wide variety of sources. But a major limitation we have faced is that the available information is dominated by the perspectives of industrialised nations – largely 'Western'. This reflects a continuing concern: that indigenous knowledge and experiences are not sufficiently available; and that, when they are, they are often filtered and interpreted by non-indigenous researchers. A much better balance is needed, not least because – as some of the articles demonstrate – there is a wealth of good attitudes and practices among



Caribbean: Boys greet each other with clenched fists and back slaps
From: *Why Man Stay So - Tie the Helper, Loose the Bull*; University of West Indies

indigenous fathers that is being inadvertently lost, often through 'Westernisation'.

The next edition of *Early Childhood Matters* will consider the impact of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on programming in early childhood development. It is being prepared for the United Nations Special Session on Children that will be held in September of this year. Topics to be addressed include: how much notice have ECD programmers taken of the Convention? How has programming changed as a result? What are the outcomes of these

changes? If you would like to contribute your experiences I very much look forward to reading them.

Jim Smale
Editor

notes

1. Lewis C (in press) *What good are dads?*
2. More details about *What is a girl? What is a boy?* by Kamla Bhasin are available from: Jagori, C-54 South Extension, Phase 11, New Delhi 110 049, India; <http://web.tiscalinet.it/WIN/039b.html>



USA: Father and child
photo: HighScope home visiting project