

Fathers' participation:

observations and reflections

from a programme with Ethiopian immigrants in Israel

These observations and reflections were collected by the Association for the Advancement of the Ethiopian Child and Family in Israel (ALMAYA), as part of its work within the Effectiveness Initiative. More information about ALMAYA can be found at <http://www.almaya.org.il/content/about/almaya.htm>. More information about the Effectiveness Initiative can be found in Early Childhood Matters 96, October 2000. Single copies are available free on request from the Foundation at the addresses shown on the back cover.

These are some of the points that emerged from a focus group interview with mothers who participated in the programme.

The mothers stressed the need to find a framework to incorporate the men, arguing that, as long as the men are not in the picture and do not participate in the programme, the programme will be incomplete.

Sometimes the men are destructive towards the Home Visiting Programme if they are not partners and aware of its importance. The mothers reported an example that occurred of a child who asked his father to explain to him some games or some other learning activity. It was difficult for the father to explain to his child. In many cases the father told his child to ask the mother and not him.

The mothers described this as an unhealthy situation. In their opinion, this type of situation pushes away the connection between the father and child and only strengthens the connection between mothers and children. The mothers are worried (not for themselves particularly, but in general) that a situation will develop where the father will feel himself 'an outsider' and the respect that the child has for the father, will diminish. Violence between father and child may result.

Conflicts between the husband and wife may also develop about the type of education that is right for their children. The man may feel that the child and the mother are united against him. In addition, as long as there is no specific aspect of the programme that deals with the men's needs, the men

will remain unaware of the importance of education in Israel. In Ethiopia the men were responsible for the children's education.

These are some of the direct reflections of mothers.

Develop an appropriate programme for the men if you wish the Home Visiting Programme to be complete.

The Home Visiting Programme is a good example of how to strengthen the children in their studies and the connection between the children and their mothers.

If fathers participate, the connection between the children and their parents would be complete.

A paraprofessional home visitor also reflected on the non-participation of fathers:

It's a pity that fathers didn't participate in the programme; the fathers needed the programme, in order that the child should feel supported by both parents and in order for him to establish better relations with both parents. Furthermore, if the father is not in the picture, the child treats him with less respect. The father is unable to appreciate the importance of schooling in the way the mother is. There is a very positive relationship between the mother and the child, and this can lead to conflict between wife and husband for they will have different views on how the child should be raised. ○

relationships. Parents' own success in these terms provides role models and examples for their children, and can therefore be an important success factor for their children. This may be critically important in areas such as the economic and social well-being of children, but has nothing to do with the quality of parental involvement in the development of children. Yet, if both are important, then the question is not whether involvement with children is better than the success of the family and its members as measured by the above indicators, but how the two can best be balanced.

Available evidence suggests that the more men and women cooperate economically, the more equally they tend to divide childcare responsibilities. Whether or not the father lives with his children, the quality of his relationship with their mother is also influential. In many cases, rewarding and sustained contact between fathers and their children diminishes dramatically soon after a break up when mothers have custody, although very few fathers lose touch with their children altogether. Fathers who were never married to the mother, generally have even fewer

opportunities to provide sustained and effective parenting.

The significance of culture

Whereas economic and other factors influence the amount of time fathers spend with their children, cultural factors may have the biggest impact. For example, in many societies, limited participation in childcare of fathers is linked very strongly to beliefs that close father-child relations are not appropriate. This conflicts with widely expressed views from other cultures and societies that fathers should be encouraged to become significantly involved in the lives of their children. What then is known about cross-cultural differences, the impact of different religious beliefs, and differences across cultures in paternal behaviour?

Most gripping among modern studies is one that was carried out during the 1980's of the Aka Pygmies in Congo's tropical rainforest.³ The fathers of this tribe proved to be the 'stars' of paternal involvement, doing more infant caregiving than fathers in any other known society. Forty seven percent of

their time they are within arm's reach of their infants, they may hold the child close to their bodies for up to two (daylight) hours and often comfort the baby at night, singing softly. They clean the babies, wipe their bottoms, even offer their own nipples for a soothing temporary suck, if the mothers are not around. Aka babies seek out their fathers, while the women prepare the evening meal or sit idle, chatting; and, more like a Western mother, the father takes his cues from his baby. Aka fathers respond, no less than Western fathers do, to the culture and environment in which they find themselves. The difference is that the Aka culture and environment produce fathers who are heavily involved in the care of their children; Western cultures and environments commonly produce the opposite.

Clearly there is not one 'right way' to father. But there is a variety of cultural dimensions that determine the effectiveness of the roles that fathers play in relation to their children. A cross-cultural study by the High/Scope Foundation in the USA (1995), examined four year olds in 11 countries

“ *My father fed me my first mango.
He taught me to play games.
He carried me out often^(b)
(Dhira-Mae)* ”

(Belgium, China, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Nigeria, Poland, Spain, Thailand, and the USA). It concluded that, on average, even children in two parent families spent about 11 waking hours a day in their mothers' care, one hour with both parents, and just 42 minutes in their fathers' care.⁴

Studies from India, Barbados and the Caribbean add to the picture

- India: 'The Girl Child and the Family' study⁵ (1994) concluded that the role of the father in sharing activities with his daughter is so marginal that it reflects one of the great tragedies of Indian family life. In various enclaves around India where gender discrimination is pronounced, one finds it echoed in local phrases such as 'bringing up a

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*My father works.
He helps me with my school work,
my maths and reading.
I ask him plenty questions.
My dad always answers questions.
My dad teaches me how to behave^(b)
(Dhana, aged 5)*

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girl child is like watering a neighbour's plant'. However, a father may take a special interest in the upbringing of sons. The tasks of providing for food, education and marriage are in a sense the economic duties of the father, but beyond what is the basic minimum, the father steps out of the scene, surrendering his socialisation role and losing the opportunity to develop emotional closeness with his girl children.

- Barbados: A 1994 study⁶ showed that eight year old children of adolescent mothers with good or on-going relationships with their fathers, appear more likely to do better at school and to have fewer behavioural problems. Factors emerging as significant were the level and the type of the father's involvement with his child, rather than the amount of time he spends interacting with the child.

- Caribbean: Research in 1992⁷ on rural and urban low-income working class men, in relation to their mating and family life patterns, brought out different definitions of a man's family at different points in his life. These included family responsibilities to parents, his siblings and their children, his baby's mother, his 'outside' children (children from previous relationships), and children he may now reside with. While both men and women stated that a good father should provide financially for the family, both expressed very low expectations in terms of fathers playing an active role in raising the children. Even so, men and women experienced widespread confusion and contradictions as they tried to live out these expectations in a very difficult socio-economic climate. A tentative conclusion stressed the need to encourage the trends towards defining manhood and fatherhood (and motherhood) in broader terms that include nurturing, the sharing of domestic tasks and the father's part in providing financially for the family.

Conclusions

In summary, it is clear that the roles of fathers are changing, and changing in different ways, in different contexts, for different reasons. Unhappily, some of these changes are detrimental to the well-being of their children – and indeed, to the fathers' own well-being. In response, successful policies, programmes and services have been acknowledging the complexities and contextual realities of change: they recognise that generalised policies and programmes are unlikely to succeed. Instead, contextually appropriate, multi-dimensional approaches are needed that encompass cultural norms; the rights of all those involved; economic factors; social and family issues and factors; and the question of quality versus quantity in time spent with children. They also acknowledge and respond to men's potential for development across their life cycles; and to their internal desire to care for the next generation; and they build around the fact that actively caring for one's children is not only developmentally important to the child, but also central to the father's growth and well-being. In addition, the work to foster better

fathering is long term, and starts early – for example, with young boys and girls, to counter sexual stereotyping.

In the development and support of these approaches, sophisticated qualitative and ethnographic research is needed. This must focus on the internal dynamics of families, and especially on parental relationships that relate to how decisions about childrearing are made. There is a need too, for data in areas such as the aspirations of fathers and the barriers to these.

Underpinning this work in a strategic way, the international donor community has strongly supported efforts to promote gender equality. For example, UNIFEM⁽ⁱ⁾ and the UNFPA⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ jointly support gender project training activities around the world, and ILO,⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ UNICEF,^(iv) UNDP,^(v) WHO,^(vi) and WFP^(vii) have prepared guidelines and manuals on gender equality and sensitivity. For its part, the World Bank^(viii) is developing strategies and reviews of gender concerns in sectoral programmes. Private foundations are playing an increasingly important role in supporting national programmes to promote reproductive health and



Netherlands: A visit to the children's farm
photo: Ufuk Koba; *Dit ben ik* workbook; Anne Frank Stichting

gender equality. The next logical step for these organisations seems clear: a focus on the role of men as fathers building on such initiatives as reproductive health programmes. As recent UNFPA projects in Mali, Nicaragua and India on gender sensitivity and reproductive health demonstrate, men's behaviour can be altered, provided they themselves are strongly involved.

Some foundations have taken the lead in advancing the cause of positive fatherhood, others have joined efforts as donors to achieve maximum impact. For example, in the USA, the USD 20m 'Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative' of the Ford Foundation^(ix) has paid off both domestically and internationally. One key factor here was its long term and multi-dimensional approach: seven years of forceful work,

balancing investments in a highly strategic manner between piloting, evaluation, research, institutional and network building, and advocacy for policy change.

But clearly nothing like enough is being done: huge numbers of fathers, in a very considerable range of settings, are not as central as they should be in the development environments of their

children. If we believe that good fathering is as important to the growing and developing child as is good mothering, then a great deal more effort has to be invested in helping fathers to naturally fulfil their fathering roles. The United Nations International Year of the Family is in 2004. What better opportunity for advancing the cause of good fatherhood? ○



Sri Lanka: Father playing with children and their play shop
photo: Sarath Perera for UNICEF

verbatim quotes

(a) *Fitting fathers into families: men and fatherhood in contemporary Australia*, a report published in 1999 by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, Australia

(b) *Child in Focus Newsletter 94*; UNICEF Caribbean

(c) *Kinderhulp* number 18, February 2001; published by National Fonds Kinderhulp; The Netherlands

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- ii. United Nations Population Fund: <http://www.unfpa.org>
- iii. International Labour Organization: <http://www.ilo.org>
- iv. UNICEF: <http://www.unicef.org>
- v. United Nations Development Programme: <http://www.undp.or.kr>
- vi. World Health Organisation: <http://www.who.int>
- vii. World Food Programme: <http://www.wfp.org>
- viii. World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org>
- ix. Ford Foundation: <http://www.fordfound.org>



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