

# Early Childhood Matters

the bulletin of the Bernard van Leer Foundation

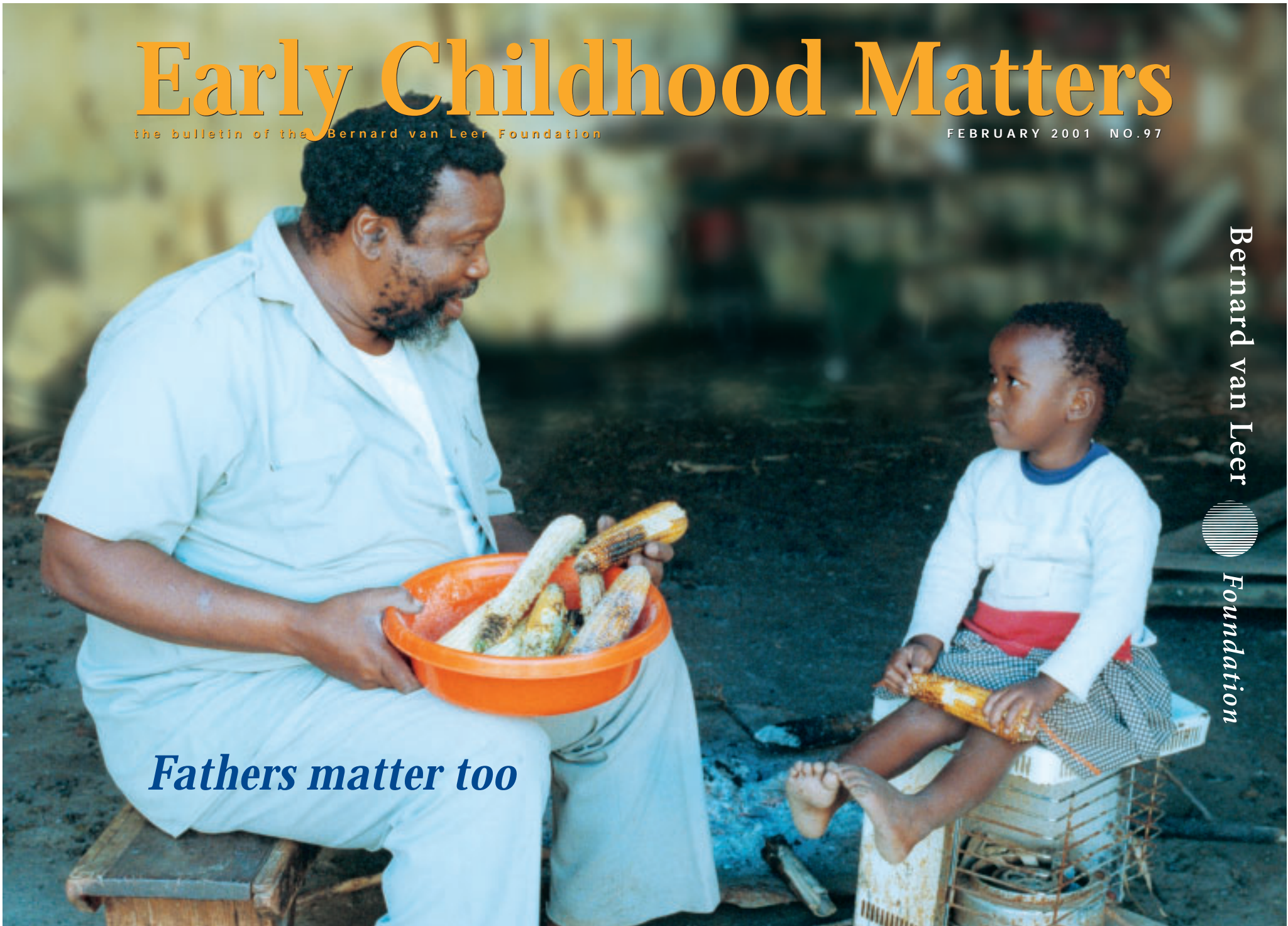
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Foundation

*Fathers matter too*



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Cover: South Africa: *Eating mielies*

photo: Rob Pollock, Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU)

Inside front cover: Belgium: *Maman, papa - making words on the felt board*

photo: Mons project

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As well as *Early Childhood Matters* the Foundation produces a wide range of publications about early childhood development. All are available – free of charge for single copies – to organisations or individuals interested in this field. A publications list is also available: please contact the Foundation at the addresses above and on the back cover.



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# 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 survey<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

#### 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

# The changing roles of fathers

Wim Monasso, Programme Specialist, Bernard van Leer Foundation

*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



Australia: How children see their fathers  
 From *Fitting fathers into families: men and fatherhood in contemporary Australia*; CDFCS

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<sup>(a)</sup>* ”

#### 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* <sup>(a)</sup> ”

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,



Australia: How children see their fathers  
From *Fitting fathers into families: men and fatherhood in contemporary Australia*; CDFCS

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

# 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.<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>(b)</sup>  
(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.<sup>4</sup>

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

- India: 'The Girl Child and the Family' study<sup>5</sup> (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<sup>(b)</sup>  
(Dhana, aged 5)*

”

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 study<sup>6</sup> 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 1992<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>(i)</sup> and the UNFPA<sup>(ii)</sup> jointly support gender project training activities around the world, and ILO,<sup>(iii)</sup> UNICEF,<sup>(iv)</sup> UNDP,<sup>(v)</sup> WHO,<sup>(vi)</sup> and WFP<sup>(vii)</sup> have prepared guidelines and manuals on gender equality and sensitivity. For its part, the World Bank<sup>(viii)</sup> 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 <sup>(ix)</sup> 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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4. Olmsted PP and Weikart DP (1995) *Families speak. Early childhood care and education in 11 countries*; High/Scope Press; Ypsilanti, USA

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

# Father's money, mother's money, and parental commitment

Patrice L Engle

*This article results from the author's work in reviewing a number of studies, carried out in a wide range of countries, that examined factors determining fathers' commitment to their children, and theories which could explain patterns of commitment. It is extracted from Patrice Engle's contribution to *Wealth and Well-being* by R Blumberg and others, and concentrates on 'non-western' countries and/or cultures. The original article also contains a highly detailed summary of two studies, one in Nicaragua, the other in Guatemala. *Wealth and Well-being* was published by the Westview Press in 1994. Further details about the book and other Westview Press publications can be obtained from Westview Press Inc, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, CO 80301, USA; and <http://www.westviewpress.com>*

Studies identify the following major factors that determine fathers' commitment to their children:

- cultural norms in the society toward the fathering role; economic ability of the father to support a family;
- the nature or warmth of the father/mother relationship; and individual psychological factors of the men – the notion that only mothers are biologically programmed to attend to their children has not received support;
- a substantial body of literature suggests that although fathers in most cultures do not perform much child care, they can attend as warmly and responsively to their children as mothers.<sup>1</sup>

Cultural factors are important; for example, in patrilineal ethnic groups of Cameroon, it is acknowledged that the father's role is one of providing his children with lineage connections; the mother's responsibility is to provide food and economic support for both father and children.<sup>2</sup> He has little contact with young children. However, the cultural ideal of non-involved fathers is in rapid flux. Many countries report emerging beliefs that fathers should be involved much more in child care and nurturing than previously, although actual change is slow.

Other economic and cultural changes have resulted in less father responsibility. For example, in Chile a decline in the authority of the Church

and in male privilege and an increase in television viewing and a demand for purchased goods, combined with rising women's labour force participation, have resulted in a rapid and dramatic alteration in the traditional authoritarian male role in urban, lower-class families.<sup>3</sup> The result has been men's flight from their responsibilities for child and family support.

Lack of father responsibility has been associated with poor income-earning power in the United States, and in the rapidly urbanising areas of developing countries. Father commitment has also been found to be associated with the quality of the husband-wife relationship; for some men, the responsibility to children and the

relationship with the children's mother is a 'package deal'.<sup>4</sup> Rising rates of divorce and children born out of wedlock are increasing dramatically the number of children raised by single mothers. The culture with the highest rate of father/infant interaction ever reported (the Aka pygmies) appears to be based on a subsistence system which requires husband and wife to cooperate and communicate in order to obtain by hunting needed food.<sup>5</sup>

A few programmes have attempted to increase father responsibility, both among intact families and with non-resident families. Whereas the majority have been in developed countries, efforts are beginning in Jamaica, Lesotho, Bangladesh, Colombia, and



elsewhere. The more successful efforts have increased the amount of father/child contact and father's child support payments. These strategies have included:

- support groups in which fathers share their experiences with other men, and learn how to parent;
- economic programmes to provide men with improved skills for earning a living;
- skill training, particularly prenatally, which helps fathers to know how and when to nurture their children;
- education in schools for future parents;
- mass media presentations of new models for fathers;
- extensive opportunities to take responsibility for the care of children.

Fathers who have had the experience of extended infant caretaking tend to become more aware of the child's needs, even if the reason for their extended caretaking may have been economic rather than a desire to expand their caretaking roles. Often mothers play a large role in helping fathers to be more involved. Becoming 'attached' to a child, which occurs during early care giving, appears to be a significant factor in long-term father/child bonds.<sup>6</sup>

We still know very little about factors that influence father commitment to children. Despite the messages of the 'new fatherhood', and images which present a committed and involved parent, the reality is that fewer fathers are taking responsibility for the economic support of their children than have in the past. Social

movements are demanding more of men at the same time that their status in the home is being undermined. Programmes to increase father commitment are in their infancy. Many programmes directed toward children, such as breastfeeding promotion, have not involved fathers. In development efforts, we must be wary of focusing on income generation for a mother without considering the increase in her workload, or the possibility that she could be supported by someone else while children are young. This calls for a development strategy to improve child welfare that not only provides opportunities for women's employment but also encourages father's commitments to their children. ○

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Honduras: Father and child in La Cebadilla community  
photo: Elaine Menotti, Hart Fellow with CCF Honduras

# *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.



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#### 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. ○

# Men in Families: exploring the impact of men and reproductive health and choices in Mexico

“ *Fostering greater involvement by men in reproductive health and decision making is one of the key objectives of grantmaking related to population issues.* ”

When a Chinantec woman gives birth in this mountainside village in Oaxaca, Mexico, the man in her life often actively participates in the process. In traditional home births, he may deliver the baby himself or act as an assistant to the midwife. ‘I held her during labour, massaged her with hot oil to warm her, and collected firewood for her tea,’ said one father in San Francisco, an indigenous village of 1,500. Said another: ‘I gave her the birthing herb, attended to the baby, cut the umbilical cord, and did the chores before and after delivery.’

Men in San Francisco ‘are intimately involved in the health of their partners,’ says Kathryn Tolbert of the Population Council in Mexico. ‘They are the preferred birth attendants and are rich repositories of information about herbal remedies related to childbirth. Men have extensive knowledge – down to the

details of their partners’ menstrual cycles – about pregnancy and reproduction.’

In addition to serving as labour coaches and herbal remedy specialists, men in the village are the gatekeepers – and often the barriers – to women’s reproductive health services. Historically, ‘men considered it their right to regulate women’s health and fertility.’ Says Ana Cortés, an anthropologist who lived in the community while conducting research for the council. ‘Women were under great pressure to bear as many children as possible.’

With a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, the Population Council is examining the ways that men in this Chinantec town, and in several other sites in Mexico, influence the health and well-being of their families and communities. As with a similar project in India, the Population Council seeks to

understand the impact of gender relationships on reproductive health and choices, to promote healthy reproductive behaviour, and to generate men’s support for women’s reproductive health and rights.

## Men as gatekeepers to health

The role of men in shaping family choices is largely unexplored territory. For the past four decades, research and family planning programmes around the world have focused almost exclusively on women. This strategy leaves many needs unmet, according to Judith Bruce of the Population Council in New York. ‘The inescapable fact is that women are often not carrying out their own wishes when it comes to their health, fertility, or many other parts of their lives,’ she says. ‘A primary reason women can’t achieve their objectives is that they are not free to discuss with their partners their right

to say no, to avoid disease, to determine the number and the spacing of their children, and to receive support during pregnancy, delivery, and childrearing.’

Today, the town council, a group of 30 men who wield the authority in San Francisco, prohibits the local government-run health clinic from giving talks about or promoting family planning. Women who seek help in planning their families often do so secretly and at risk of reprisal from their partners. According to an article by anthropologist Carole Browner, who worked in the village in 1981, local men once destroyed a tree because its bark, when prepared as tea, was used by women as contraceptive.

Ask Judith Bruce: ‘What do women want men to know? And what information would men like to have to better support women? These are the



Mexico: Culturally Peripheral Communities Programme

questions we are answering with this research. We're searching for information that will help men and women form a better partnership in making decisions that have a profound effect on women's health and lives and on the well-being of their families and the whole community.'

#### Procreation and destiny

In San Francisco, as in most communities, attitudes toward childbearing have deep cultural and historical roots, says Ana Cortés. 'The community has a great fear about losing their population' she says. 'They survived epidemics that were rampant in colonial times. In the 1960s, a measles

outbreak killed many children. They've also survived attacks from a neighbouring town over land disputes. More recently, emigration has greatly reduced their population and, especially, that of the neighbouring town.

'There's a sense that many children, especially sons, are needed to sustain the town's administrative, political, and religious functions' she says, 'Procreation is seen as intimately linked to the town's history and destiny.'

Until recently, very large families were considered the ideal in San Francisco. The community places a great value on education and takes pride in its burgeoning schools. 'Children are

considered almost sacred,' says Karen Morris, who coordinated a survey of 240 Chinantec men and women. Men who were surveyed expressed their commitment to building up the town. 'We have children so the town will have enough people and so we won't be without human resources in the future,' said one man. 'Children will lend us a hand tomorrow, so that our homes won't be abandoned when we pass on,' said another.

#### A community in transition

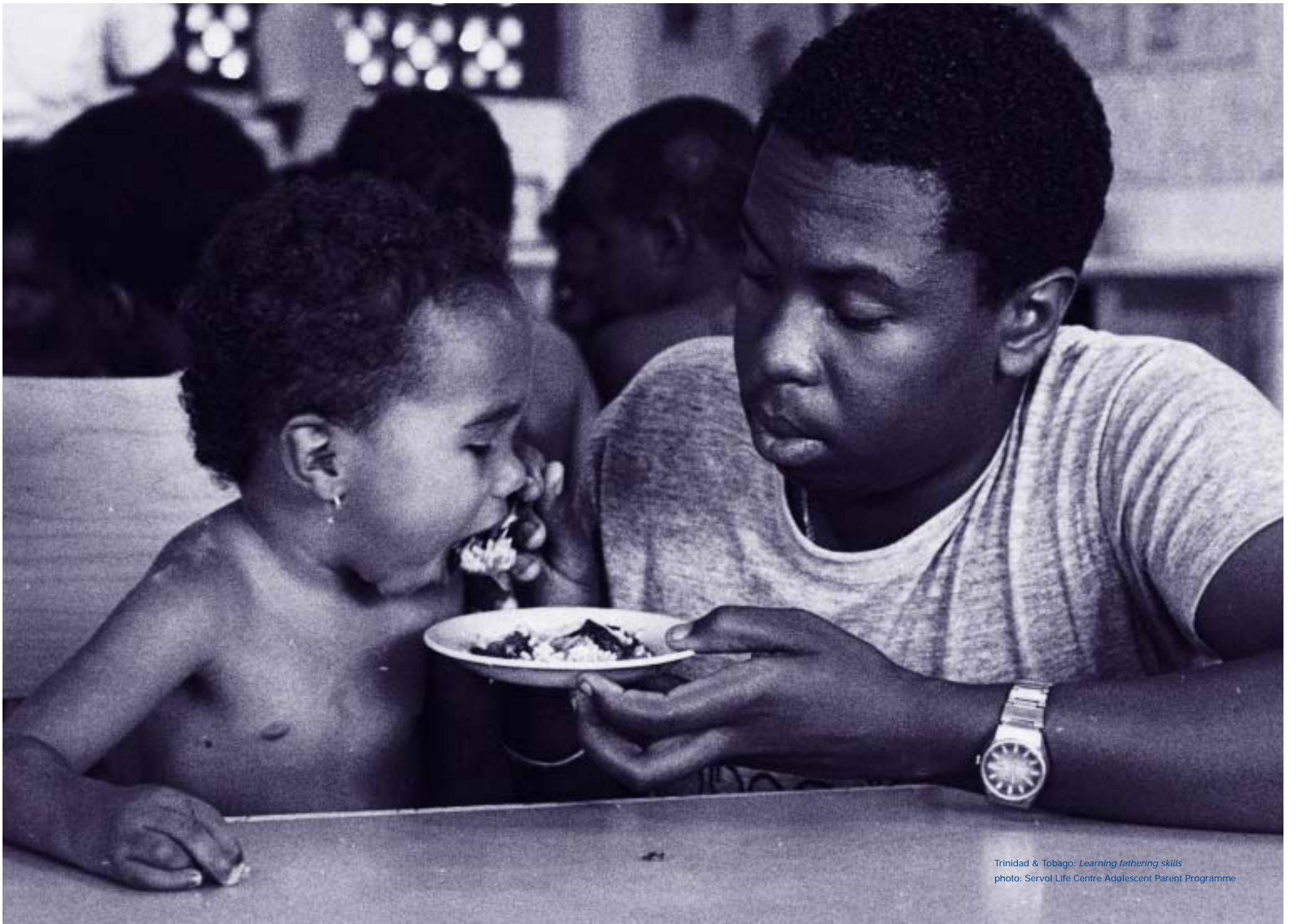
Even in remote San Francisco, attitudes about families are in transition. In recent interviews, many men said they thought two or three children was the ideal family size, though many had far more. One man with ten children said, 'Although I would have liked to have fewer, God sent me all of these.' Another reflected: 'When you're young, you don't think about the consequences of having so many children until it's too late. You become aware after having had some schooling that it is better to have a small family.'

Understanding men's perceptions about their sexuality, their partners, and their children is critical to designing effective reproductive health programmes, says Kathryn Tolbert. Although men are often reluctant to discuss their private lives, she says, they open up when they understand the project will benefit the community. 'We're finding that men in Mexico are very interested in reproductive health. They feel left out of programmes directed toward women alone. They are waiting to be included.'

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Trinidad & Tobago: *Learning fathering skills*  
photo: Servol Life Centre Adolescent Parent Programme



# *Redefining fatherhood: a report from the Caribbean*

Janet Brown and Barry Chevannes

*Janet Brown is Tutor/Coordinator of the Caribbean Child Development Centre, School of Continuing Studies, University of the West Indies. Barry Chevannes is Dean and Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the West Indies. In this article, they review the systematic focus of the University over 13 years on the differences between what mothers contribute to childrearing and the contributions of fathers. To do that, they discuss what has been discovered across Caribbean countries through a regional survey (1987); a pilot study called 'The Contribution of Caribbean Men to the Family' (1991-92)<sup>1</sup>; and a participatory research project called 'The Gender Socialisation Project' (1993-1995)<sup>2</sup>. They then reflect on some of the outcomes of this continuing work, showing the breadth and depth of the approaches that are necessary if there is to be effective change<sup>3</sup>.*

## **'The Contribution of Caribbean Men to the Family' A pilot study in Jamaica**

A survey of early childhood programmes conducted in eleven Caribbean countries by the Caribbean Child Development Centre (CCDC)<sup>4</sup> in 1987 determined that, despite growing recognition of and support for organised child care programmes around the Caribbean, on average 85 percent of children below the age of four remained at home, in the care of parents or other family caregivers. It also showed that parenting education efforts in the region were primarily directed toward women and teenage

girls. Further, a search of materials on the Caribbean family produced considerable literature on women and mothers, but almost nothing on men and the family. Instead, stereotypes about men's attitudes and behaviours in relation to their families – mostly negative – were substitutes for informed data.

As a result, CCDC set out in 1990 to examine men's contributions to the family in Jamaica, undertaking to:

- provide a socio-historical perspective on the roles men in the Caribbean have played within and

- on behalf of the family;
- survey and describe the current attitudes and behaviours of a cross-section of men in Jamaica;
- use ethnographic/participatory methods to generate data and local analysis and problem solving related to the topics of the study;
- make research findings available in formats that would serve not only professional research/teaching interests but also the concerns of public educators, family life workers, and gender studies groups; and
- design formats and materials to be used in conducting similar

investigations in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries that could provide data to complement the Jamaican study.

This initial study probed a range of issues related to men's attitudes and behaviours about family life and childrearing, through a questionnaire administered to 700 Jamaican men from two urban and two rural communities. Complementary series of discussion groups with men and women were conducted in the same communities as those surveyed or in adjoining ones.

It was soon apparent that this study needed to be concerned with *man and his families* because a Jamaican man's family is defined differently at different points in his life. There are life long family responsibilities to parents (especially the mother); to his siblings and their children; to the women who bear his children; and to his 'outside' children (children from earlier unions that he is not living with). In addition, there may be responsibilities to children of his common law or married life, with whom he now resides.

Traditionally, in Jamaican/Caribbean culture it has been clear that a man's primary obligation to his family(ies), his role as a family man and father, is that of **providing for the family**. It also showed that there were very low expectations of fathers playing an active role in raising their children beyond financial provision. Mothers carry the major burdens of childcare, and many are also breadwinners. If a father is able to provide regular financial support, he is deemed the 'rightful' head of the family, even when non-resident, and is expected to be the ultimate disciplinarian and a guide for his children. However, if unable or

unwilling to provide sufficient financial support, he often remains peripheral to the family, literally or figuratively, fuelling the stereotype of the 'absent' and 'irresponsible' father.

#### Socio-economic realities and definitions of manhood

Two factors emerged that are significant in understanding the reality of how men actually fulfil the expected roles of fatherhood – or do not. The first relates to **contradictions** that men experience as they try to live out these expectations in a socio-economic climate which makes fulfilling them very nearly impossible. High unemployment and underemployment, migration to earn, women's increasing entrance into the formal labour market (away from home), the erosion of the extended family's resources to assist with child care: all present barriers for men and women as they attempt to fill their understood roles.

The second factor concerns the meanings fatherhood has for Jamaican men. Initially, 'getting' a child testifies manhood. Sexual prowess with females – preferably in multiples – is a strong

cultural value, important to prove long before any consideration is given to settling into a stable union. Men in this initial study distinguished 'getting' children (being named as father, accepting paternity) from 'having' them, which implied maintenance and care, and was most often used for the children of a more mature man, or one able to provide and be a real father. While men derived self-definitions from paternity – believing that without children they would be incomplete, lonely, empty, less mature – for many, 'getting' children was sufficient for this end. Ability to provide for them bears little weight, particularly for younger men, in accepting paternity.

In this first study, **nurturing** children was rarely described as a man's function. While the majority of men in both the survey and discussion groups described their active, often daily, participation in tidying, playing and reasoning with their children, and in helping regularly with homework, these tasks are perceived by most men and women as primarily women's work. Men themselves do not yet value them, particularly if the man is not seen as the breadwinner and thus family head, roles

that imply authority and decision-making status.

The study in fact indicated that men are far more involved in positively contributing to family life than popular stereotypes suggest. They have clear ideas about what good fathers should be, agreeing that they should counsel and communicate with their children, be responsible with the mother for inculcating moral values and social skills in their children, be the financial providers, and act as role models. On the other hand, many admit they cannot or do not always fulfil their responsibilities to the extent they feel they should. Irrespective of some men's efforts to redefine manhood in more fatherly ways, economic deprivation can serve to retard the development of more positive mating and childrearing behaviour. Attitudinal change and structural changes are clearly interrelated.

#### Other emergent issues from the Jamaican study

The interviews and group discussions pointed to a number of other lessons learned.

- Men welcome the opportunity to talk about their family relationships, particularly in groups of men only, where they felt less need to be defensive.
- Many feel great pain at their own shortcomings as fathers, whether they blame themselves, their partners, or the wider society for these deficits.
- The frequency and quality of the man's relationship with his children was highly dependent on his relationship with the child's mother.
- Outside children are often sacrificed to the welfare of those children within current unions.
- Little is known about the quality and impact of stepfathering by women's new partners.
- Conditions of poverty and underemployment, and the growing economic independence of women, leave both men and women calling for changes in division of labour and responsibility in matters of childrearing, but as yet there are no real challenges to the traditional gender roles that constrain these changes.

**'The Gender Socialisation Project'**  
A participatory research project in Jamaica, Guyana and Dominica

In 1993, the University of the West Indies, at the invitation of the Caribbean office of UNICEF, began a two year participatory research project to redress the shortage of research literature on men's family roles and to provide material which would further understanding of how gender roles are played out within families. Six communities, three in Jamaica, two in Guyana and one in Dominica were chosen as study sites, representing a range of urban to rural, and no-income to low-income, Indo- and Afro-Caribbean populations. The project's rationale was similar to that of the pilot study in Jamaica discussed earlier, but was also cognisant of such factors as:

- male under-achievement in schools relative to the performance of girls;
- the 'feminisation' of the education system;
- obvious early gender differentiations, and the implications of these for children's identity, relationship formation and social roles;



Dominican Republic  
photo: Esperanza Luengo



Trinidad & Tobago: Father and child in preschool  
photo: Servol

- high and rising crime rates, particularly for young males;
- the number of male street children;
- and the disproportionate number of males in penal institutions and children's homes.

In many ways, the research project can be seen as a conceptual extension of the Jamaican study. It started from the view that the male's role in family and community decision making, in influencing the nutritional and

psychological development of children, and in sharing financial responsibility for family welfare, has not been well understood. It then went on to consider how cultural and economic factors at both local and regional levels – which

determine how gender roles are defined – vary greatly and should therefore be considered in the design of development programmes.

Common themes emerged from the findings of the ethnographic teams who spent approximately six months visiting the communities. These themes are summarised below.

#### Caribbean manhood

As in the Jamaican pilot study, discussions of the concept of manhood concentrated almost exclusively on three elements: sexuality/sexual identity; man's primary role as provider and protector; and scriptural authority for man as family head.

#### Sexuality/sexual identity

This was usually measured by the number of serial or concurrent female sexual partners; and by the resultant number of children. Fear and disgust of homosexuality were commonly expressed, with many parents believing that certain childrearing practices or child behaviours could lead to this 'deviance'. Demonstrating manhood enhanced the self-image of young males

and alleviated the worry of parents about homosexuality. Sexual activity for boys therefore begins early, often with the discreet knowledge of parents, and the encouragement of fathers.

#### *Man's primary role as provider and protector*

A man who cannot provide for his family is not a man. Even when a female partner is working, providing for the family is never seen as her major responsibility. Related to this role, man also is to be the 'protector' of his family, implying not only literal defence of his children against adversity, but ensuring their financial security. Domestic tasks are still seen as predominantly women's work and do not enhance a man's self-image. Nurturing and homemaking skills, when acquired by men, are not generally seen as options that broaden the definition of manhood, or as substitute contributions when financial provision is lacking.

#### *Scriptural authority for man as family head*

Manhood implies authority, particularly over women and offspring. This authority is seen as natural, being part of 'God's plan'.

Almost equally with men across the six communities, women subscribed to these elements of manhood. But, as the Jamaican study also concluded, an inherent dilemma lies in this pattern. Scoring high 'manhood' points as a young man by early sexual activity and secured paternity with multiple partners sows the seeds of later difficulty, even impossibility, in achieving success at later stages of manhood. As some respondents expressed it, some men never become real men who can meet the later criteria for manhood, beyond the exercise of their sexuality.

#### *Man/woman relationships*

Man/woman relations are characterised by high degrees of distrust and disillusionment. The following themes which emerged repeatedly in all community discussions, evidenced this overall characterisation.

#### *Male-female fidelity*

Men generally defended their right to and need for multiple partners although some stipulated that this should not interfere with the maintenance of their children. Women saw their own

concurrent or serial partnerships as economic necessity, while men saw female infidelity as unacceptable for any reason, and punishable.

#### *Men's ultimate power and authority*

The assertion that man is the head of the house remains the point at which almost any discussion of male-female partnerships begins and ends – if not in fact, at least in spirit. It is defended by Christians, Hindus and Moslems as religious tradition, ordained by God, and as historical and cultural inheritance. More recent forces – such as harsh global economic realities, the international women's liberation movement, and foreign media intrusions – are credited by both men and women with challenging history and tradition, upsetting 'natural order' and contributing to the erosion of man's authority in the home and to power struggles between men and women. These struggles often seemed related to the growing economic independence of women, and affected all areas of family life.

#### *Expectations of men as primary source of family finances*

It was always understood that men are

responsible for giving their partners money to run the household and to support the family's needs. Women generally see any money they earn as their own, to spend on the household and on themselves, as 'insurance' against any future desertion by their partner, or for any outside children they may have. There were wide-ranging opinions on whether, and how much, earnings affect power relationships between men and women. Better education for females, women working outside the home, and male migration were often discussed as threatening male headship and upsetting relationships.

This study reinforces previous research findings which suggest that the partnership with the children's mother becomes vulnerable and the man's authority tenuous when he cannot provide sufficiently for his children. Other women, and long hours in the rum bar or at the domino table with male friends, are common male recourses to the resulting financial pressures and demands, reinforcing his marginal status to his family(ies).

### *Division of domestic labour across traditional gender lines*

Men and women see division of labour differently: the male is prescribed the roles of breadwinner, provider and protector, and the woman assumes the roles of homemaker and nurturer; this division largely determines how men and women see domestic duties within the home. However, the discussions revealed that men often do a considerable amount of work within the domestic sphere, especially when children are young and can't share in the labour. But there were many contradictory and ambivalent messages about whether such tasks really belong to men or are only required when a woman can't manage all of the work. Such participation is rarely celebrated by men and not always by women, some of whom see a very domesticated man as 'soft' or as someone who watches and criticises everything the woman does in the home, thus intruding on her domain.

### *Domestic violence as a result of broken relationship 'contracts'*

Not all groups discussed this topic freely, but some had candid and heated debates about the levels of acceptability

of physical violence against one's partner – usually men beating women. A rough thread that ran through the accounts of partners resorting to violence was the notion of broken contracts, contracts that were often based on unstated or misunderstood expectations. For example, a man was defended in a group for beating his wife when she didn't prepare dinner for him on a Friday night. Why? Because he was away from home all week doing farm work to support his family. He kept his side of the bargain, but she didn't.

Whether the woman feels she is entitled to challenge the man's authority often relates to the woman's level of education and/or financial independence. When a woman feels she can survive without depending on a man's labour, that she has options by way of her education or with other available men, she is less inclined to accept physical abuse, and may in fact prefer to live without a man at all.

### *Give and take*

Distrust, disillusionment, broken contracts, domestic violence ... these certainly did not characterise all the man-woman relationships in all six

communities. There were many men and women who still spoke of love, of sharing and equity, and of give and take, and humour and mutual respect redeemed many a potentially inflammatory discussion of sensitive topics. However, the degree to which more negative sentiments dominated many conversations represents a significant outcome of the socialisation patterns common in raising the children who become men and women.

### *Parent/child relations and practice*

The research suggests that traditional childrearing strategies are becoming less and less effective. At the core of traditional strategies is the concept described in Guyana as 'Tie the heifer, loose the bull', implying the protection and monitoring of daughters while sons are allowed, even encouraged, to have more freedom and independence. For a girl, the point is to avoid early pregnancy while equipping her for economic independence and/or (usually and) partnership with a man. In contrast, sons are encouraged to develop independence and assumption of responsibility by seeking earnings;

and early sexual encounters are considered normal.

The ultimate goal for both boys and girls is that of gaining economic independence and readiness to take up the responsibilities of providing for and protecting a family. But gender distinctions and assumptions are central to most childrearing practices. These include a preference for boys because of their economic potential and because they carry on the family name; and the prevalence of homophobic myths about the development of male sexuality.

In addition, parents feel increasingly helpless against external factors that influence their children. The survival strategies traditionally employed in raising boys seem no longer realistic. Education and skill acquisition for a livelihood by traditional routes – school achievement and apprenticeship – are often blocked or severely hampered by economic deficiencies at home and in the school system. If boys do not drop out of school to earn for themselves or their families, they often leave school with few skills that can be turned to ready profit. 'By any means necessary'

for some becomes an alternate strategy, as more and more young men end up in illicit activities to achieve their material goals; on the street instruction in these skills is readily available, particularly in poorer urban settings. In such settings, apprenticeship opportunities to learn useful skills are less available and less attractive.

Protection strategies for girls are also increasingly difficult to enforce. The need for mothers to work outside the home reduces opportunities to supervise and instruct. Liberating options for girls and women have expanded their choices outside home and family, and the growth of consumerism has fuelled a range of economic activities among girls and young women, including bartering with sex to meet their material needs. Urban environments, in particular, also offer ready exposure to alternate lifestyles to girls as well as boys. Such lifestyles often appear to work against the values and goals of parents.

#### External factors in socialisation

In addition to the many economic factors that impact on families, on

definitions of manhood and on fathering, other external factors were also investigated by the research teams, including the influences of peer groups, social class and ethnicity, community role models, organised religion, education, and other cultural and subcultural institutions.

The influence of the peer group is perceived as being dominant, particularly as children reach puberty and beyond. Many parents feel that they have little countervailing influence against peer pressure as the teen years approach. There is considerable evidence that peers and peer groups (such as sports clubs, school cliques, street gangs) more strongly influence male socialisation than female.

There were numerous references to the influence of the media, particularly television, in conveying and strengthening non-traditional images and ideas that are perceived by many informants as having a negative impact on cultural values and practices – including traditional gender roles – that they would wish to preserve. The influence on children was decried most



Caribbean: Men generally defended their right to and need for multiple partners  
From: *Why Men Stay So - Tie the Heifer, Loose the Bull*; University of West Indies

often, but some men also declared that their wives spent too much time watching soap operas and neglected their duties in the home.

Organised religion, on the other hand, whether Christian, Hindu or Moslem, is seen as both generating

and supporting traditional roles and values. But church/temple attendance and religious practices have a stronger hold on girls than boys, largely through differential parental enforcement and/or the perception that boys are under less parental influence at earlier ages and can

therefore stop attending on their own. Interfaith friendships are less often opposed on religious grounds as on the fear that strong cultural/ethnic traditions will be eroded and contribute to family conflict.

If social class differences were examined more thoroughly than was possible in this study, many differences would be found in the areas described above. In one community, teachers agreed that upper classes in the present day Caribbean are more susceptible to cross-cultural (including cross-ethnic) influences on gender roles, while the lower classes tend to cling to traditional male/female roles. These effects on the upper class are not always seen as positive, as this same group of teachers felt that street gangs are primarily the work of children of wealthy parents who are so busy accumulating wealth that their children are left unattended and unguided, and are thus easy prey for the Western youth cultures through films, television and other media.

Much more investigation of persons' understandings of cultural/racial/class differences is clearly needed, as these

attitudes to history, community and self have obvious implications for the socialisation of male and female children. Discussions within this project barely scratched the surface of these issues.

#### **Acting on the research: 1995 to the present**

Overall, the research findings suggested the need for a range of interventions to target the key socialisers of the young: parents, educators, church leaders, sports coaches, musicians, and community leaders, as well as the young themselves. Such interventions should facilitate exploring, without defensiveness or fear, the ways in which cultural/social constructions of gender roles can erect barriers to selfrealisation and familial role satisfaction for both men and women. Bob Marley's plea to 'emancipate yourself from mental slavery' speaks evocatively to both men and women about many of the unchallenged structures that constrain them. It was felt important to encourage the trends, however tentative, in the direction of defining manhood and fatherhood more widely to include nurturing, and the sharing of domestic tasks. It was also felt that a man's

broadened investment in family roles would not only be of greater benefit to his children, but that he, too, would benefit from being a better father, and from improved relationships with his children and their mother(s).

A number of initiatives followed directly from the research, supported by UNICEF:

- participants from five of the six communities in the research shared with their communities in skits, songs, school poster contests, discussions and other activities, their perceptions of the research and its implications for them.
- Three symposia were held between June and October 1995 in the three countries studied, to present the findings of the research to a total of 185 programme and policy level colleagues. The symposia each addressed:
  - implications for policy, education, employment, health, community organisation and development, and family life; and the roles of the media, churches and other mentoring organisations in acting on the implications.

- Specific programmes and strategies for following up these issues, particularly for developing a deeper understanding of the Caribbean male in family, community and national life.
- The implications for further research.
- In May 1996, a new Caribbean radio drama series was completed and made available to radio stations within the English-speaking Caribbean and to stations serving West Indian communities abroad. The series presented many of the common and often contradictory attitudes and perceptions of Caribbean men about themselves within their various worlds – in relation to women, their children, friends, and the wider society. The primary objective of these programmes was to foster more discussion and debate, and more personal reflection about the important ways in which men and women live out their social roles day to day, how they pass these roles on to their children, and how they see these roles changing. Although these programmes were aired in many countries and – reportedly – were repeated in some, no systematic feedback on impact was obtained<sup>5</sup>.



- In 1996 Participatory Learning for Action (PLA) methods were used to examine gender-related issues at community level in St. Lucia, Grenada and Jamaica, confirming many of the findings of the earlier studies.
- In Jamaica the focus of this activity more specifically addressed how very young children are socialised into gender roles. Funds from the international Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development made this possible as part of a multi-country study<sup>6</sup>.
- Materials based on the research have been developed for use in multipurpose workshops on gender equity and gender role confusions/contradictions. Two short summaries of the two research projects have been published in user friendly formats, one a workbook of participatory sessions to explore the common issues of the research in community groups, the other used by University of the West Indies students in several courses as well as available to the general public.
- A full monograph by Chevannes will be available in the first quarter of 2001.<sup>7</sup>

Without the benefit of specific impact studies, it can only be hoped that these project output activities have compounded and perhaps accelerated the growing awareness of and pressures for change in Caribbean definitions of manhood and fatherhood. While the numbers of children born to teenage mothers is still rising slightly, change is reflected in a dropping overall fertility rate and shrinking family size. The costs for caring and educating each child at least through secondary school are steadily rising in a no-growth economy, and government is not yet able to provide a social safety net that ensures a minimal level of living standard for all.

In this climate, gender issue debates flourish on the plethora of daily radio and TV talk shows, in theatre offerings, youth group meetings, parent-teacher meetings, etc. Several organisations have sought to channel these airings of often contentious and contradictory topics from simple ventilation to a more structured focus on personal reflection and change, and on collective problem solving, aided by skilful facilitators.

Since the 'men only' sessions kickstarted by the Caribbean Child Development Centre in 1991 (see box on 'Fathers, Incorporated' on page 37), several groups have used this approach to try and develop men's agendas for change. Religious groups have been in the forefront, organising several men's conferences with calls for more responsible fatherhood and a 'return to family values'. Jamaica's inordinate number of churches, large and small, are made up of predominantly female members, even though the pulpits remain a largely male domain. The church community as a whole feels it has a strong mandate to help restore men to their Biblical/traditional role within the family, and as responsible providers for their children.

Some church groups take this outreach role to men well beyond the pulpit; there are many church-sponsored sports clubs and church men's groups who work with young boys, particularly in activities designed to reduce their risk of antisocial or illegal behaviours. One such new group formed in 1999 calls itself The Gappists, taking its name from the Biblical reference to God's search 'for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap

on behalf of the land, so I would not have to destroy it'. Founded by a group of mostly young university students, the Gappists have organised a summer camp for low-income boys in a nearby high school, and have held a series of seminars aimed at aiding men and women to better understand issues of male identity, male sexuality and fatherhood. They have also recently established a Gappist chapter in a prominent all boys high school, targeting future leaders.

The discourse on these issues has qualitatively deepened over these past years, and has become more than just defensive retorts to feminist challenges for change. The discourse continues across the Caribbean. We note a men's group in Trinidad formed against domestic violence;<sup>8</sup> university-level seminars on issues of manhood;<sup>9</sup> male parent groups meeting regularly in Dominica;<sup>10</sup> a fatherhood conference scheduled for Belize in 2001;<sup>11</sup> and a male adolescent programme for teen fathers that extended into a parish-wide men's movement in Jamaica.<sup>12</sup> A report on men's workshops in the Eastern Caribbean highlighted how in the dark most men are about how their bodies function, and how male-unfriendly most of the health care systems in the region



Caribbean: Overflow families prefer to have the male child first  
 From: *Why Man Stay So - Tie the Helper, Loose the Bull*: University of West Indies

are in specifically addressing men's ignorance and fears.<sup>13</sup>

More recent research has served the dual purposes of keeping manhood and fatherhood issues on the public agenda as well as supplying policy and public debates on these issues with harder

data. This is illustrated in the following four studies.

- 1 A uwi three-country examination of youth attitudes to family and gender relations<sup>14</sup> showed that for children and teens, money is 'critical in the very definition of the role of the
- 2 The uwi's Fertility Management Unit has just completed a major study of male reproductive behaviours.<sup>15</sup> One section of the report examines men's

male in relationships', and that 'the family was a contingent, negotiated accomplishment' that took into account property ownership and control of resources as much as fulfilment of gender role expectations. The greatest bitterness expressed by these young persons towards their fathers related to non-performance in their role of economic provider; they did not expect much else from them. However, it was reported that lifelong respect was gained by mothers who juggled roles of both mother and father. Violence in man-woman relationships was seen as inevitable by these children, not much more than an extension of the often harsh disciplinary practices they have grown up with. Young boys complain that they cannot get the attention of their female classmates, who look for older males with earnings.

attitudes to unwanted and ill-timed pregnancies; it was significant that the pregnancy of a man's 'bona fide' partner (primary among multiples) could be considered mistimed, but rarely unwanted. The children which resulted from unprotected, casual sex, were most often unwanted. A second section of the research describes men's concepts of fatherhood, strongly underscoring the findings described in the two studies herein reported. Throughout the study poverty intervened to largely determine a father's 'fate':

*In denying men the opportunity to perform the function that is central to their concept of fatherhood, poverty robs them of their self-esteem. One of the most poignant and instructive remarks made in the focus group discussion suggests that a mask of indifference often hides a mountain of despair: 'Sometimes a man want to do something but he can't. So him just pretend like him nuh want fi do nutten.' [Sometimes a man wants to do something but he can't. So he just pretends that he doesn't want to do it.]*

3. A major longitudinal study of almost 2000 Jamaican children<sup>16</sup> who were assessed on a wide range of variables at birth and again at age 11, provided some sobering data in relation to fathers.

- Half of the mother-father unions at birth had ended over this period, most in the first three years of the child's life.
- One third of fathers did not continue their parenting roles; a high percentage of these maintained no contact with the child.
- In examining school performance and behaviour, the father's presence in the home, a stable parent relationship, and higher level of parental education were associated with positive child outcomes in the study group.
- Conditions of poverty were demonstrably evident in these findings.

4. Data compiled by Chevannes<sup>17</sup> has provided further insights into the phenomenon of male under-achievement at all levels of formal

schooling. Chevannes' review of Ministry of Education records clearly documents high male drop out rates, poor male school attendance, male avoidance of 'female' subjects (such as English!), and differential treatment of boys and girls throughout the school system. (See also Evans<sup>18</sup>).

How do these latest research activities bear on redefining maleness and fatherhood?

- They have raised serious alarm bells among educators, policy makers, service organisations, and the business sector, as to the implications of growing numbers of under-educated males fuelling unemployment lines and the nation's jails; some even worry about the implications for educated women seeking 'suitable' male partners.
- The 'marginalisation' of the man to the family is now seen as a wider 'under-participation' of men in the broader social goals and values of the society – thus no longer only a complaint from women about inequitable domestic loads, but a

more broadly expressed fear for the fabric of the whole society.

- The reports draw attention to the strains on men unable to support their families without migrating, or resorting to illicit activities.
- More and more women will be carrying the double parenting roles, and the numbers of children without adequate care and supervision will continue to grow as a result.

#### The way forward

The decade of raised awareness of fatherhood issues that began in the arena of gender role disparities and contradictions is moving into a new period of broader debates, engaging men in examining issues of identity formation, in challenging traditional cultural values, and, for some, in reasserting their right to greater access to their children.

These new debates have forced many men and women to ask deeper questions about the kind of society they really want (in the face of perceived erosion of traditional family roles and values), and about the roles

men are to play in economic climates analogous to quicksand for many. Add in an educational system that appears to be programming male failure, and issues of redefining manhood and the roles of fathers move to the front burner.

The challenge for those who are concerned about children's rights and welfare within these debates is to ensure that the importance of men as fathers, as nurturing, supportive and protective influences in their children's lives, becomes central. This is nascent but happening. The emergence of child rights issues over the past decade, originally almost a foreign concept to the culture, has aided in reminding the society of a child's right to the care and attention of both parents, and has brought the broad needs of children beyond just financial support to greater public notice. Preschool and primary school practitioners have begun to focus more deliberately on parent involvement and education, joining churches and community groups in this endeavour. A National Coalition on Better Parenting has emerged to share strategies and



Dominican Republic: *Boys preparing a meal*  
photo: Esperanza Luengo

materials among scarce professionals and local community-based organisations, in order to strengthen the engagement of fathers and mothers in understanding the critical importance of their roles. There is visible evidence on the streets of men caring for their children, taking them to clinic, even fighting for their custody in court.

But there is much more work still to be done with and by men, before they can more publicly begin to celebrate these aspects of their manhood; before they can understand their direct opportunities to affect positively their children's performance and behaviour; and before they can see that their investments of time and caring have to go beyond financial support. The Father of the Year Awards (see box on next page) have provided one such public celebration in Jamaica. Its impact on real behaviours is not known, but it is a move in the direction of enhancing men's self-concepts with the nurturing aspects of fathering. This direction is slowly gaining momentum.

### Conclusion

Ten years of research and experimental interventions still add up to only the start of greater understanding of gender socialisation issues in the Caribbean, and of removing some of the obstacles that define male-female relationships and gender role conflicts. Education, in all its broad definitions, is critical in challenging many of the constraining attitudes and values transmitted daily from adults to children. Education planners and policy makers, in tandem with community leaders and NGOs, must continue to provoke personal and collective reflection and problem-solving, while at the same time seeking deeper understanding of the underlying cultural, economic and psychological causes for some of the society's most harmful inequities. In all of this, the welfare of children, particularly in the earliest formative stages of their development, must come to the foreground of this agenda, so that men and women work together at gender role resolutions, with their children at the centre of their exchanges. ○

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# Fathers, Incorporated

A workshop in 1991 for fathers only was attended by 17 men, participants at the Caribbean Child Development Centre's (CCDC) first parenting symposium. A common denominator among these men was the belief that women stereotype them unfairly as irresponsible fathers. Under the leadership of facilitator Dr. Barry Chevannes, the group was eager to meet again, and a core group of approximately ten men began meeting weekly, calling themselves Fathers Only.

When CCDC held a second parenting symposium a year later, this time for men only, the Fathers Only group assisted during the day of workshops. As the culminating activity of that day, they officially launched their group with the new name Fathers, Incorporated and began a recruitment drive.

The group became involved in a range of activities – volunteer work in a government children's home, peer counselling training, a workshop on Violence, Self and the Young Male (1993), and provocative radio spots, defending against the blanket negative images of Jamaican fathers that prevailed. Twice, with external funding, they sponsored exchange visits: one with representatives from St. Lucia's longstanding Mothers and Fathers organisations; the second a seminar tour featuring two African ethnographers from Cameroon and Kenya, talking about fatherhood in those countries. One year they sponsored a major musical concert to mark Father's Day.

Despite keen loyalty from a core group that remains strong, Fathers, Incorporated has remained a volunteer group of primarily blue collar workers for whom earning a living has to take priority over their volunteer activities. The University's outreach arm of the Department of Sociology and Social Work has lent research assistant and student time to aid their activities, but extending the organisation nationwide has so far been beyond their energies and scope.

However, four years ago Fathers, Incorporated launched what perhaps has provided the greatest impact of the group to date: they sponsored an essay contest among schools, asking applicants to state why their fathers should be named 'Father of the Year'. Considerable media attention is given to this contest which culminates on Father's Day each year. The profiles of the responsible and caring fathers who have won each year have provided public models for the kind of fathers that young persons would desire to have, and the kind of celebration of nurturing fatherhood that helps advance these qualities as self-enhancing for men. They are optimistic that in the year of their 10th anniversary, they will find some longer-term solutions to their organisational weaknesses, so that they can continue calling for and celebrating responsible, caring fatherhood.

# *The father in San culture: oral histories from Botswana and Namibia*

Willemien le Roux



*For 12 years, the author worked in different positions with the Kuru Development Trust, the last eight years as Training Coordinator. Kuru is a community-owned development organisation for mostly San people<sup>1</sup>. Towards the end of her time with Kuru, she undertook a study on the educational situation of San children in Southern Africa, interviewing many community members in Botswana and Namibia. San people from each of the various language groups worked closely with her on the interviews, and also on formulating the conclusions. Among these collaborators was Kamana Phetso, one of the most prominent young leaders of the San in Botswana. He had been with Kuru since 1992, and was Secretary of the Kuru Board for the past six years. Tragically, he was killed in a car crash in January 2001, on the eve of his departure to Australia to work with an aboriginal programme for a year.*

*This article shows the real challenges that face parents and children in environments that constrain and devalue them, and that also weaken ancient practices and beliefs that have traditionally provided positive support for the healthy development of their children. A number of clear themes run through the article. These include: the interface of San children with the education system and the clashes that result; and the differences between San and non-San with respect to discipline.*

*Willemien le Roux is currently coordinating an oral testimony programme with the San people for WIMSA<sup>2</sup>, assisting community members to use tape recorders to record their own and their families' experiences and thoughts about a range of topics, many of which they suggest themselves. For her, an important aspect of the collecting is to take this information back to the communities. The programme therefore includes workshops and other devices to allow people to reflect on who they are so they can inform their own decisions.*

Botswana: San children dancing

photo: Willemien Le Roux, Kuru Development Trust

The people were sitting in a circle outside their hut, a small fire burning in the centre. At a quick glance they looked no different from the people in the other huts in the small village around them, homes we had been visiting all morning. But my colleague Kamana Phetso's eyes met mine and we smiled.

We had found them. We had been looking for the past few days for the remaining San people in this area, the Eastern side of Botswana, as part of a research project funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, in collaboration with Kuru Development Trust and the regional San organisation, WIMSA.

In the other parts of southern Africa it had not been as difficult to interview and meet San people as here, for their languages and culture are quite distinct and they live in either government determined resettlement areas, or in conservation or nature areas. But here in the east, the San have mostly lost their languages and have almost completely integrated with the Tswana and Kgalagadi groups around them, so the distinction was not that easy to make.

The five children in this family, ranging from six months to fifteen years approximately, were sitting among the adults as we were going through our questions. A toddler of about four years was putting more wood on the fire to help his father, who was cooking in a three legged pot. The pot was obviously too small for the whole group. The man was stirring the soft porridge with a wooden three-pronged fork. While he was doing this, the four year old leaned against his father watching their meal cook, his arm around the man's neck. The baby was suckling her mother's breast, while an aunt and possibly a grandmother were watching. We were all sitting on the ground, the women squatting in that remarkably lithe pose typical to San women everywhere, knees bent outwards alongside their bodies with skirts tucked in between their legs.

We asked: 'You and the other people here say you are the Basarwa<sup>3</sup>. But why is that, since you speak the same language as the other people?'

'We are Basarwa because we are poor'. The younger woman answered. 'We have long lost our language and our culture,

but we know we are Basarwa since all other people progress, but not us'.

Kamana and I looked at each other again. Sad as her words were, showing such utter desperation, it was clear that they had not completely lost their culture. One of the features of the San culture we had come across all over the trips to several San groups, had been the distinct role of the father in the upbringing and care of the children. Another has been the equality of men and women – a consequence of women's historical importance as food gatherers in the days when the San people roamed free. Although there were specific tasks in food gathering assigned to men and women, things like daily chores and raising children were shared more equally. Many things are changing in the San's lives and these special features are under threat in most areas, due to the influence of stronger and more powerful groups who have moved into their areas. Yet, even in areas where men had started to play a bigger political role than women, we still observed the free interaction of children and fathers, and the ease with which fathers do certain tasks in caring for young children – things which, in

most of the male dominated cultures around them, would have been passed on to the women with condescending grunts.

In certain areas we asked about the role of the father in the upbringing of the child. Mostly regret accompanied the stories that followed. 'This is how it was in the old days, but we do not manage it any more'. The !Xõo and Naro people in the Aminuis reserve in Omaheke district, Namibia, gave long accounts of the importance of their fathers' teaching, especially for young boys.

*There was a time when the fathers taught their sons about living in the bush. It was almost like giving a course to a young man ... The young people stopped wanting these courses. Today that time is over. Now we realise the importance of traditional knowledge, and 'though we should make an effort to retain as much as we can for our children, some of the power of that knowledge is lost. (!Xõo man, Aminuis Corridor, Namibia)*

In D'Kar in Botswana as well as in the Rietfontein area in Omaheke, Namibia, we were told about the important role



Botswana: San parent and child at a traditional dance festival in D'Kar  
(Bokamoso promotes traditional dancing in all preschools that take part in its training programme)  
photo: Mattias Hofer

of the father with regard to discipline or behavioural instruction. There were exceptions, especially in more integrated societies, but the majority of the San people interviewed still vowed that corporal punishment was undesirable. They said that disciplinary methods were based on community approval of good behaviour, and group

disapproval which could result in ostracism.

*Discipline had to do with the laws of nature. Some children were not allowed to eat certain berries and roots, so that nature would keep on providing. If these laws were broken, the rains would not come as they*

*normally do. If you did not listen to these taboos, you were responsible for the downfall of everybody, and everyone cared for the well-being of the whole group. (Naro San man, Aminuis Corridor, Namibia)*

The cornerstones of San traditional education were experiential learning and observation, integrating the child in every aspect of life. The San child, even as young as two years old, would be allowed to experiment with what many other cultures view as dangerous objects, such as fire, knives, and needles. The adults would always be close by, however, and would either be busy with the same activity alongside the child, demonstrating care, or would be encouraging the child verbally on how to handle such items without endangering themselves. The father's craft making (bows and arrows, axes, leather work, wooden tools or crafts) would be copied by the boys, while the mother's beadwork, preparation of wild food, thatching or clay building would be copied by girls of all ages.

The child's 'lessons' consisted of discussions with adults on equal grounds, analysing a practical situation

in order to draw a hypothesis on the basis of which further action could be judged. 'Look at this spoor. Can you guess how old it is? How far would the animal be ahead of us?' The consequent finding and killing of the animal tracked, would prove the hypothesis or qualify it, making an indelible impression on the participating child's mind. Little boys were allowed to experiment with hunting by setting snares, using tiny bows and arrows to kill mice, birds, and so on. When they were old enough, they would use arrows with poison, an act that would also announce the advent of manhood and be celebrated by all, by praising the young hunter's skill with song and dance.

Although a distinction was made between the father's and the mother's teaching roles where boys and girls were concerned, in the past this distinction only concerned the food-gathering activities. It was based on the division of skills needed for survival in an often hostile and harsh environment: the most effective use of energy and human resources was an issue of life and death. Today, many San people emphasise the importance of story telling, dance and



games as part of their education, and the important role of the father in these activities for both boys and girls. Traditionally, San culture generally did not even have the same taboos following child birth, found in many other African cultures. For example, a San man had immediate access to the new-born infant and bonding took place from an early stage. This kind of flexibility and interchangeability of roles was necessary in a hunting and gathering culture, since mobility was of utmost importance. Everyone needed to help carry (goods, children) and everyone needed to help find food when on the move (see Draper and Harpending, 1987 and Biesele, 1993). Another reason for this more flexible environment in childrearing had to do with the fact that homes were never permanent structures, and in a mobile lifestyle there were also no doors to exclude children from adult talk or activities.

However, since they were treated in such a free and equal way since early childhood, San children in today's mixed societies are often perceived to be unruly and undisciplined by teachers and caregivers of other groups. The

“  
*... the best caregiver is the natural caregiver – what is the role of parents and caregivers in supporting development of learning in children? We should not forget that*<sup>4</sup>  
 ”

different disciplinary systems of the cultures they are moving into cause conflict and confusion, and many cases of the drop-out reported to the research team were related to that issue. In other cultures the father especially is seen as the one to instil fear and obedience in such 'problem' children using corporal punishment. That means that there are expectations in these other cultures for the San father to play such a role and pressure is put on them to develop this responsibility in forums such as parent-teacher associations. But this fails to take into account the role of the wider San society.

To test these perceptions and to measure the changes in today's San societies with regard to the father's role in disciplining his children, we spent much time on these issues during our interviews.

'What then would San parents do if a child misbehaves, or refuses to adhere to the norms of society?' We asked in various interviews.

*We know this can happen. And sometimes the mother of such a child does not find it easy to teach the child how to be a good member of our society. Often the mother as well as the father of such a difficult child protect the child. Then they need other people in their group to help them. (Ju'/hoan San elder, Mogotho, Botswana)*

*I was very naughty when I was small. Then I was assigned to my grandfather. He kept me next to him all the time. He kept me from doing wrong things, all the time until I became like a human being. I did not change immediately, but he made sure that he knew what I was doing.*

*always. (Naro San man, Donkerbos, Namibia)*

We were informed that the father's role in many San cultures can also be extended to the oldest uncle on the mother's side.

*The child knows that the mother and father do not even have the last word and that the uncle is there. He is not only the child's protector, but if the child has problems, he knows that the uncle will be the final one to discipline him. (San woman, D'Kar, Botswana)*

The purpose of the above mentioned research was to compare progress in formal education among all of the more than ten San groups in the whole region of southern Africa. Children dropping out of school at various stages, but especially in the early years (between four and eight) as well as the puberty years (11-14) still remains one of the most disturbing phenomena of modern San society. It reflects how the deterioration of their social structures and the alienating systems of education (their only option by which to join the changing economy around them) affect the general progress of San children.

The report of the research, called *Torn Apart – San children as change agents in a process of acculturation*<sup>5</sup> shows that San parents generally supported the idea of formal education for their children as a means of assisting their people to bridge the gap between their old lifestyle and the modern world they were entering into. However, they were torn between this need and the fact that this same education that they needed for survival was alienating children from their parents and their culture.

In addition, educators and extension workers who wanted to facilitate change for the San people, saw children as an entry point into San culture. Many children dealt with the pressure from both sides by dropping out, thereby showing their resistance to both the foreign and often hostile environment they were forced to enter, as well as to their parents' expectations of them as change agents.

One of the main reasons for the lack of control parents seemed to have over their children dropping out of school, was the diminishing role of the father as educator. In many cases fathers have been forced to accept jobs away from

their families (construction, cattle herding, road labour) because unskilled labour needs in the remote areas where most San live still favour men above women.

This changing economic situation of San people all over southern African has brought about the unfortunate separation of children from their parents, but more especially their fathers. In addition, the nature of the manual labour that many San men revert to for an income is such that the children can no longer share these tasks. The nature of paid employment also clashes with leisure time and the ability of fathers to decide how to fill their time, and this also makes it more difficult for them to adapt their tasks to their children's needs.

The new economic situation and structural changes in the San's environment, have also severed the extended family groups of the past. These fast changes are due to the new sedentary life caused by loss of land, border construction and resettlement schemes. These have divided families and forced people to abandon their hunting and gathering ways of the past.

In a large number of cases, women have become single parents due to casual relationships with men from other groups who are either passing by or have come to do temporary work in the areas where the San live, but who have no intention of marrying a San woman or of taking responsibility for children born from such relationships. This is due to the low economic and social status of the San everywhere, which not only relates to their present poverty situation, but also to their hunter-gatherer past, a profession which has always been scorned by pastoralists or agriculturalists. This attitude towards the San has contributed greatly to their present economic disadvantage: they lost their land, since they were not seen to be 'using' the land in a legitimate way.

San mothers find themselves unprepared for the responsibilities of single parenthood, and for raising children without the support of a man or even the wider family group. Many of their previous educational practices were not identified as education per se, but accepted as part of the act of growing up, and were not necessarily the mother's task. Learning new skills and adapting to behavioural

expectations were so much part of ordinary living, integrated in the total society, that San mothers as well as the extended family members now find it hard to identify the specific areas where the father's absence leaves a gap to be filled by others.

In the few cases where San children were found to have succeeded in modern education, it was striking how the father's influence was mentioned as playing a role in the child's success. The following two examples show this.

1. Masego Nkelekang comes from the village of Mancotae, in the Nata area in Northern Botswana. She speaks Chire-Chire, a dialect of the Shua people. Until the end of 2000 she worked as a fieldwork-coordinator for Kuru Development Trust in D'Kar, Ghanzi. She finished her first degree at the University of Botswana and is currently studying for her Masters degree in Britain.

In her primary school years, most other children were also San. She started experiencing discrimination against her only when she had to leave her village to go to Junior

Secondary School, where she found that everyone despised the San children and therefore some children preferred not to disclose their origin. Some of the San children performed better than the oppressors, however, and that helped build their self-esteem and gave them endurance.

In her early school years, her parents had to pay for most of her expenses. Masego ascribes her success in school to the support she received from her parents, in particular her father. He is not a literate man, but has always been very persistent that they should finish school. He checked her progress with the school authorities and every term he studied their school reports carefully, asking someone who could read to tell him about every subject, and wanting to know if they did not do well. He is presently Vice-Chair of the Parent-Teacher Association and serves on the School Committee. (from the book *Torn Apart – San children as change agents in a process of acculturation* – see note 1)

2. Tienie Mushavanga is a 22-year old Kxoe student at the Caprivi College

of Education. He graduated from Max Mukushi School, but his family originated from the village of Buada in West Caprivi.

After the first school break, Tienie and some other boys ran away from school. He stayed away for a year. Even though his father, the Headman of Omega, asked him to return, he did not force him, but continued with his traditional education, such as telling the children parables with animal characters and taking the boys along when he hunted with spear and dogs. There were other children who stayed with Tienie's parents for the sake of school because their homes were too far. This made him go back to school again.

His father's desire that he should go to school and his support from home, as well as role models – a student from the polytechnic and the San headmaster at Omega who has since passed away – inspired him to continue in spite of hardships. His devout Christian belief also gave him courage. The San learners at Senior Secondary, who were a minority and

were seriously harassed by the Mbukushu learners, stood together and organised themselves. They did performances from their own tradition in the hostel and when volleyball teams were introduced they worked hard at being better than the others. Other problems were caused by teachers who were not serious about their work. He said some were only interested in status and money and instead of trying to encourage the learners or gain their respect, they become over-friendly and in some cases even use older boys as mediators to get them girls.

His biggest concern is that Kxoe culture is not passed on enough by the school system. The youth are angry with their parents for not having enough money and they feel a sense of loss for the things in their culture that are vanishing. (from an interview conducted by Steve Felton, as part of the research for the WIMSA/UNICEF film *Torn Apart*)

But despite these examples, the responsibilities of educating San children in these transitional societies are most often met with bewilderment

by many San parents. Outsiders who work with San people believe that they have 'lost all control over their children'. Indeed many San parents have reported that they had started to revert to corporal punishment, or worse, that they condone separation from their children by sending them to hostels at a very tender age; or that they even allow their children to be 'adopted' by wealthier and more progressive people as the best way to educate them for the new world they are entering. The increase of alcohol and drug abuse among both San men and women – one of the evils of transition and resettlement in all San societies – has also taken its toll on the education and care of children. This is used to strengthen the case of those who see separation of San children from their parents as the best solution for the acquisition of modern education. It is disturbing that these practices have such profound echoes of the history of Aboriginal and Native American children. Although it is now widely acknowledged how detrimental the separation of these children from their cultures has been, it seems to be repeating itself in Africa without too much resistance.

To try to address these realities among at least some of the San people, the Kuru Development Trust was established in the early 1980s with support from outside donors, including the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Bram le Roux 1998). The Trust is a community-owned development organisation with a holistic approach to development and a range of interlinked and interdependent activities. These include: income generating projects; a savings and loan scheme; cultural activities; and a training programme. A preschool project – the Bokamoso Preschool Programme – has been established through the training programme. This includes mother-tongue community members being trained as preschool teachers; and communities being supported in establishing and running their own preschools. The point is to restore respect for age-old San childrearing values and methods to children's lives. But this is not by slavish adherence to traditional beliefs and practices but by adaptation to current realities, values and methods that modern education theories are rediscovering. One of the most challenging areas of this programme is, however, to make San

people realise the value of what they have always had. Many choose modern education as the preferable option for their children and are suspicious that efforts to re-introduce traditional knowledge, or even mother-tongue education, are ways to 'keep us behind'.

There is a long way to go and the situation of the San people is indeed sad, if one considers their progressive educational practices of the past (Heckler, 1999). However, there is no turning back for the San people. The pre-conditions for the ideal principles of San education do not exist anymore; and modern life has taken its toll on the once important role of the father in childrearing. It has also become crucial for San people to acquire literacy and other gifts of modern education, and they have no choice but to adapt to the demands of modern economy and political conditions.

One cannot help but regret how much richer the world would have been if the San had been allowed to educate us all on how to integrate the principles of acquiring knowledge into the wider realms of our daily lives, instead of separating education from daily life.

May the practitioners and policy makers in education of the future allow us to learn from the San, and better still, allow and assist the San to integrate their old customs with modern education, and show us how the task can be divided among all members of our society, including the fathers, grandfathers and uncles! ○

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- An extensive bibliography that is also relevant to the subject matter of this article is included in *Torn apart: San children as change agents in a process of*

*acculturation*, by Willemien le Roux (see note 4 below).

More information about the Kuru Development Trust is available from <http://kalaharipeoples.org/documents/Kuru-san>

#### notes

1. The word 'San' is used as an interim term to describe all the groups. It was accepted by the WIMSA Annual General Assembly in 1997
2. WIMSA stands for the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa, a regionally represented networking organisation with its head office in Windhoek, Namibia. More information is available from <http://www.san.org.za/wimsa>
3. 'Basarwa' (in Botswana) or 'Bushman' are examples of some of the names used for these people. They actually prefer to call themselves by the name of their own language groups – for example: Ju'/hoansi, !Xõo or Naro
4. Le Roux W (1999) *Torn apart: San children as change agents in a process of acculturation*; WIMSA, Namibia
5. Le Roux W (1999) *op cit*

Botswana: At a traditional dance  
photo: Willemien Le Roux, Kuru Development Trust



# Helping fathers find their roles:

*an exercise from Southern Africa*

Margaret Irvine

*This contribution has been reprinted from Early childhood education: a training manual by Margaret Irvine, published in 1999 by the Bernard van Leer Foundation/UNESCO (<http://www.unesco.org/general/eng/publish>). The manual grew out of training events conducted within the 'Early childhood joint training initiative' in Africa, conducted by the Foundation, UNICEF, UNESCO and Save the Children USA. The initiative aimed to train cadres of trainers who, in their turn, would train early childhood practitioners.*

*All the activities described in Early childhood education: a training manual were tested over a period of three years at international level within the Joint Training Initiative, at country level with national early childhood trainers, and with early childhood practitioners at family and programme level. This extract covers an exercise with fathers to help them to understand and develop their childrearing roles. It was adapted from an original training session with participants from Namibia.*

## Objective

To identify effective ways to encourage fathers to be more involved in early childhood development.

## Materials needed

Group 1: paper and crayons;  
Group 2: case study written on paper;  
Group 3: case study written on paper;  
Group 4: written instructions for a drama to act out;  
Group 5: board game (see instructions for making and playing); flip-chart, paper and pens.

## Methods used

- group work of different kinds;
- plenary discussion.

## Steps

1. The facilitator introduces the topic and asks the participants to state briefly how they see fathers behaving towards their young children. Responses are written quickly on flip-chart paper.
2. Groups synthesise these comments into a statement of their experience of the opportunities and challenges facing them.
3. Participants form five groups and the facilitator gives each group an activity to do (see following five group activities).
4. Each group is asked to report back on the findings of their group, except for Group 4, which presents the drama to the group and the questions for discussion after all the other reports back have been made.

5. All the presentations are recorded by the groups and, after all presentations have been made, a general discussion is opened and a synthesis of the learning is made.

## Watch points

1. This activity is especially designed for groups of fathers, but can be adapted for use with trainers.
2. Be aware of participants' cultural beliefs and customs and ensure that this sensitive subject is handled in a way that will lead to honest and supportive discussion.
3. Positive perceptions about behaviour can be used to discuss and possibly change negative perceptions about fathers' behaviour.

## Key learning points on the role of fathers in early childhood development

1. The father is a very important figure in the life of the baby and young child, and there is a need for strong ties to be developed between them from an early



age, together with the mother who is usually the central figure in the baby's early months.

2. Some interactions that do take place between fathers and young children include (in Africa for instance) the following:
  - fathers and other male relatives assist in socialising male children;



- grandfathers and older males transmit values and social mores;
  - men teach young children relevant life skills such as the identification of cattle patterns, plants, landmarks, weather, etc;
  - fathers and male relatives collect and relate folk tales, proverbs, family history, kinship and extended community relationships;
  - men help to construct buildings and equipment, and help to produce learning materials.
3. Perceptions and beliefs about the role of the man and the father in the family and society can often prevent him taking a full and natural role in the upbringing of his young children: he may not only believe that young children are not his primary responsibility, but be supported in this belief by the women and mothers themselves.
  4. Since babies and toddlers are seen as 'belonging to' their mothers and other women, fathers are perceived as distant figures even when living in the same home. Their task is to punish wrongdoing.
  5. Some strategies that would recognise and reinforce the traditional role of the father while at the same time identifying and encouraging new mutually acceptable behaviour include:
    - enabling both men and women to be self-confident and assertive as

individuals and as groups;

- assisting in the formation of support groups;
- appealing to men's self-concept as an integral part of the family unit;
- actively involving parents and grandparents of both sexes in learning, teaching and ensuring that both sexes take on positions of responsibility;
- encouraging men who are caring fathers and participants in family life to act as role models;
- emphasising equality, cooperation and respect in the curriculum.

(Source: Bernard van Leer Newsletter, No. 65, January 1992)

**Group activities**

**Group 1: A Poster**

What is the most important message you as a father can give to another father? Make a poster to illustrate the message in a way most likely to attract fathers.

**Group 2: Women's work!**

If tomorrow all the women in your community disappeared, how would you, as a man, run your household and look after the children? What would you do? Make a list of the activities you would need to do from the morning to the evening.

**Group 3: Problem-solving**

If you were a pregnant woman, what do you think your needs would be? Make a list

of the things you would need to do to ensure a healthy pregnancy and baby.

**Group 4: A drama: 'The pregnant mother'**

The group prepares to act out the following script for the participants:  
 'A pregnant mother is working non-stop, fetching water, cooking, taking care of the other small children, cleaning. The father is sitting chatting with some other men, reading and drinking (at one point he takes a nap). When he needs anything, he asks the pregnant mother. She brings everything to him, and continues with her work. As soon as she wants to rest, someone calls and demands something from her. The father calls for his dinner. The woman looks extremely tired.'

Questions to ask the participants are:

- What do you see happening here?
- Why do you think it is happening?
- What are the effects when this happens in your environment?
- What can we do about it?

**Group 5: A board game 'For fathers only'**

Make a board with twenty blocks marked 1 to 20.

Block 1 is also marked 'Start' and block 20 is marked 'Finish'.

Each block can be decorated with a picture of fathers and children.

Make twenty cards with a question about childrearing practice on each, for example:

- If you had a choice of giving any of the three following foods to your child, which would you choose and why? Chips, eggs, fizzy drink, meat, sweets, bread, milk, porridge.
- Name one thing you can do to protect your child from disease.
- What is the most important thing to give your child if he or she has diarrhoea?
- At what age do you think that children start to learn and to use their brains?
- Can you think of another way other than beating to discipline your child?
- What do you think children gain from playing?
- In what ways can you assist your pregnant wife?
- As a father, what are some ways in which you can support your child's growth and development?

**Rules for playing the game**

Each person takes a turn to roll the dice and pick up a card.

If the answer is correct according to the members of the group, you can move forward according to the number on the dice.

If, according to the group, your answer is wrong, you remain where you are. The first person to reach the 'finish block' wins. ○