

Fathers Matter for **PEACE,** **EQUITY,** and **SOCIAL** **INCLUSION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Fathers are agents of change, influencing family dynamics, wellbeing, and collective social action across generations.
- Concrete examples of community-level interventions demonstrate that fathers matter for raising children with a disposition for peace and social inclusion.
- Engaging with men as fathers is important for sustaining initiatives that seek to build cultures of peace, equity, and social inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Engage with men and fathers in projects that link research to policy.
- Build capacity to promote equitable father engagement, through collaborative partnerships and multi-sectoral coordination.

OVERVIEW

How do we build strong foundations for peace, equity, and social inclusion? In settings of conflict and social adversity, we have seen calls for novel ways to support interventions that address the risks of violence, instability, and social exclusion, across sectors of health, economy, and education. This policy brief lays out the evidence showing that men as fathers can champion social change to raise children with a disposition toward peace, equity, and social inclusion. It explains the call for social transformation focusing on men as agents of change, offers concrete examples of initiatives to promote peace and inclusion, and suggests two recommendations for policy and practice.

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A CULTURE OF PEACE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

In 1999, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a landmark, norm-setting resolution, entitled the ‘Declaration and Program of Action on a Culture of Peace’ (UN Resolution A/RES/53/243). This Declaration intended to guide governments, international organizations, civil society, and individuals to promote a culture of peace in the new millennium. It posited that traditional ways of addressing conflict – via mediation, humanitarian intervention, or diplomacy – were insufficient to creating lasting peace, and rested on the premise that peace is based upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind. To achieve a culture of peace, however, requires widespread societal and structural change, including a shift of values and behaviors, the elimination of inequality, and the promotion of tolerance and solidarity.¹

Responding to this call to invest in cultures of peace, many scholars, practitioners, and social activists have sought to consolidate evidence that programs investing in early childhood development (ECD) are key to raising the next generation with a disposition toward peace, empathy, and global citizenship. Such evidence – from fields spanning biophysiology to peacebuilding – emphasizes the importance of working at the level of families and communities to build harmonious and equitable relations across generations.² Investing in ECD benefits not only children, by promoting their ability to interact in non-violent and prosocial ways, but also has cascading effects for the wider societies in which they live.^{1,3}

Thus, a critical strength of ECD programming is a transformative potential to build social cohesion across generations and within diverse communities.¹ Programs can be leveraged, for instance, to engage diverse sociocultural, ethnic, or religious identity groups in joint efforts to build social capital and social change.^{4,5} The call to invest in cultures of peace can therefore be extended to a call to invest in social inclusion, since addressing the root causes of violence and conflict – economic inequalities and social injustices rooted in gender, ethnic, or other forms of discrimination – can help promote peace, tolerance, and inclusivity for all.^{2,6}

Working with families to invest in the next generation, however, does not mean focusing exclusively on mothers and the mother-child dyadic relationship, since fathers have a very significant influence on the physical and social development of children and adolescents, while grandparents and other caregivers also provide substantial resources to help with raising children and promoting cognitive, social,

and other skills.^{7,8} Nor does it entail focusing exclusively on programs in the early years of life, since adolescent education, growth, and development are also critical to sustained social change.^{9–11} Finally, it does not entail a narrow understanding of what constitutes a family, as diversity in family structures is evident and becoming increasingly recognized.² Social transformations in the wake of new crises, policies, programs, or grassroots initiatives require innovation, leadership, and changes in structural, cultural, and/or behavioral practices. Relying on men as fathers, rather than exclusively targeting female caregivers to influence family dynamics, wellbeing, and collective social action, is a novel and effective strategy to work for peace, equity, and social inclusion, one that promises to have lasting and cross-generational impact.

Research in post-conflict Sierra Leone,¹² for example, found that many fathers were engaged in supportive and emotional relationships with their children, and working to instill values of peace, empathy, and respect for others. In contrast to the rhetoric that depicts such men as violent and oppressive, this work suggests that many men are leaning toward caring masculinities, working to promote gender equity even as they themselves contend with racial, economic, and cultural inequalities.¹³ The organization Promundo, in partnership with Sonke Gender Justice, has made great strides in promoting men’s involvement as equitable, non-violent caregivers through their global fatherhood campaign, MenCare.¹⁴ Other organizations, such as Fathers Incorporated,¹⁵ promote father engagement in the lives of children, with an explicit focus on social justice.

GLOBAL EXAMPLES: MEN AND FATHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Evidence suggests that fathers are important to a child’s social, behavioral, and moral development,¹⁶ by fulfilling positive roles pertaining to psychological health, cognitive functioning, and capacity for empathy,¹⁷ especially in contexts of violence and social adversity.^{18–20} There is also evidence that responsive caregiving, including that of fathers, is associated with physiological, epigenetic, and neuroplastic changes in the body and the brain.² Thus in the fields of education, health, and peacebuilding, studies have often found that programs are more impactful if they engage with fathers, as opposed to mothers exclusively, as shown in the following examples of intervention research.

Turkey

A well-known parenting intervention was implemented by the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) to demonstrate that parenting practices and early child development matter to peacebuilding; it is a well-evaluated program, with data on health, education, employment, and other development metrics over decades of a child's life.^{4,21}

Begun as a Mother Child Education Program, it soon expanded to include a Father Support Program, to bring together groups from Istanbul and rural regions of Turkey, in an effort to promote harmony and gender equity, and to reduce harsh parenting, violence, and abuse within families. In gathering groups of men, separately from their wives, the program asked fathers to acknowledge the importance they had in the lives of their children and encouraged them to take a more active role in fostering their children's development. The intervention was effective in promoting positive fathering practices, as well as lasting friendships across families of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Importantly, the sustainability of AÇEV's program was reliant on explicit backing from government Ministries, and the involvement of government officials at both local and national levels.



Lebanon

A randomized clinical trial of AÇEV's Mother Child Education Program was recently implemented with Syrian refugees and other vulnerable populations in Lebanon. It showed that paternal involvement in child-rearing and education was associated with a higher level of maternal wellbeing and lower distress, in addition to better synchrony between the mother and child.²² While relying on maternal reports of father involvement, rather than working directly with men, the study concluded that fathers can be an important source of support for mothers in low-resource settings and those affected by conflict, displacement, and marginalization, particularly by promoting a sense of self- and community- efficacy and connectedness.

Jordan

Locally designed in Amman, and diffused to over sixty countries of the world, We Love Reading is a program focused on education and social entrepreneurship, training adult volunteers to become Reading Ambassadors and read aloud to children from the local community. This program aims to foster a love of reading and empowers people from marginalized communities to become agents of change. This initiative has won multiple international awards for social innovation and refugee education, and its impacts on children's emotional competence, literacy, and attitudes towards reading are being rigorously evaluated.²³ One component of impact evaluation research is currently focusing on Syrian refugee fathers, complementing a randomized trial with mother-child dyads, to build evidence for how fathers engage with their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴



Rwanda

Other parenting initiatives have similarly found engaging fathers to be an effective entry point for transforming gender dynamics and reducing violence within families and communities. For example, a cluster-randomized trial of a home-visiting-based intervention in Rwanda, called Sugira Muryango (“Strengthen the Family”), found the program to be effective in promoting both early child development and preventing family-level violence.^{25,26} Designed to involve all family members, including fathers and other male caregivers in the household, the study found that families receiving the intervention experienced increased father engagement and showed a greater decrease in the use of harsh discipline.²⁶ Further, by linking the program to the Rwandan Government’s existing social protection system, Sugira Muryango was able to identify and reach the most vulnerable populations, and likely benefited from higher participation rates and stronger social buy-in.²⁶

Uganda

The evaluation of a program called the Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers Initiative in northern Uganda has shown similar results: this father mentoring program was designed to reduce child exposure to violence at home, with implications for breaking cycles of intergenerational violence in families.²⁷ An impact evaluation of the REAL Fathers Initiative in Uganda demonstrated positive long-lasting effects over the year-long period of observation; this was also the case for the Family Strengthening program in Rwanda.

United States

A randomized clinical trial of a coparenting focused, paternal engagement intervention known as The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) program has been implemented with success by the California Department of Social Services. Rigorous evaluation of the program has demonstrated reductions of risk factors for abuse and neglect and strengthened family relationships in a large number of diverse vulnerable families with infants and toddlers.^{28,29} Key to the success of the program is both its inclusion of fathers and its focus on the parents’ relationship as the locus in which to create change that directly benefits children. Beneficiaries of the intervention reported increased father involvement, reduced parenting stress, growth in family income, and a decrease in children’s aggressive behavior. SFI has since been brought to scale for populations in Canada³⁰ and the UK³¹ with similar success.

These examples illustrate a range of programs that engage with men in parenting or family-strengthening interventions. They also feature impact evaluations that help link research to policy more closely. Further work needs to be done to evaluate these programs rigorously, and to bring them to scale or encourage their diffusion, working with state and non-state actors to reach families throughout society.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have called for relational approaches grounded in children's social ecologies³² as well as the larger 'community of care,'⁷ to transcend some of the limitations of parenting intervention programs. Parenting programs that engage fathers effectively can help to foster not only healthy and more peaceful relationships within families, but also between diverse groups of men across society. Such programs can foster positive intergenerational effects by instilling in children the skills and impetus to engage in productive relationships across ethnic, religious, and cultural divides.

The premise that fathers matter for peace, equity, and social inclusion has implications for research, practice, and policy. As Promundo, the international organization working to engage men in promoting gender equality and preventing violence recently stated, the Covid-19 pandemic provides a

key moment for transforming gender norms and for encouraging fathers to become more engaged at home.³³ There is an urgent need for governments and policy makers to prioritize father-engaged interventions to promote child and youth wellbeing, including social, cognitive, and physical development, by strengthening support and integrating relevant services (e.g. child welfare, education, health). For example, Fathers Incorporated has recommended building up father support services, including peer-to-peer networks that allow for male mentorship, educational opportunities to strengthen fathers' life skills, and employment opportunities that allow men the space and time to engage in healthy relationships with their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage with men and fathers in projects that link research to policy.

Thus far, research demonstrates that interventions that engage fathers can have positive effects on family functioning, parental wellbeing, child development, peace, and community cohesion—and are particularly effective for families living in disadvantaged communities. Engaging and retaining the trust of men from underserved populations is thus particularly important to enlist their help in championing policies at the family and community-level. To best engage fathers, it is imperative that initiatives work inclusively with co-parents, at both cultural and structural levels, to ensure that initiatives are relevant to co-parenting concerns and to address issues of reach, cost, equity, trust, and sustainability.

2. Build capacity to promote equitable father engagement through collaborative partnerships and multi-sectoral coordination.

To be successful, inclusive, and sustainable, interventions are best implemented as multi-sectoral intervention packages; it is naïve to think that, without larger structural interventions, targeted parenting programs can create more peaceful, just, and equitable societies.² Successful community-level interventions have demonstrably fostered partnerships with state and civil society sectors; they tend to be most effective when partnerships are cultivated from the onset. One way to reach large numbers of families and children involves the development and diffusion of community-level agency, as shown in the example from Jordan. Another way is the formal integration of interventions into existing service platforms, such as poverty alleviation schemes, healthcare and nutrition services, and tuition-free education programs. Specific efforts are needed to remove structural barriers to father involvement in such initiatives.



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