

# Helping fathers find their roles:

## an exercise from Southern Africa

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*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.

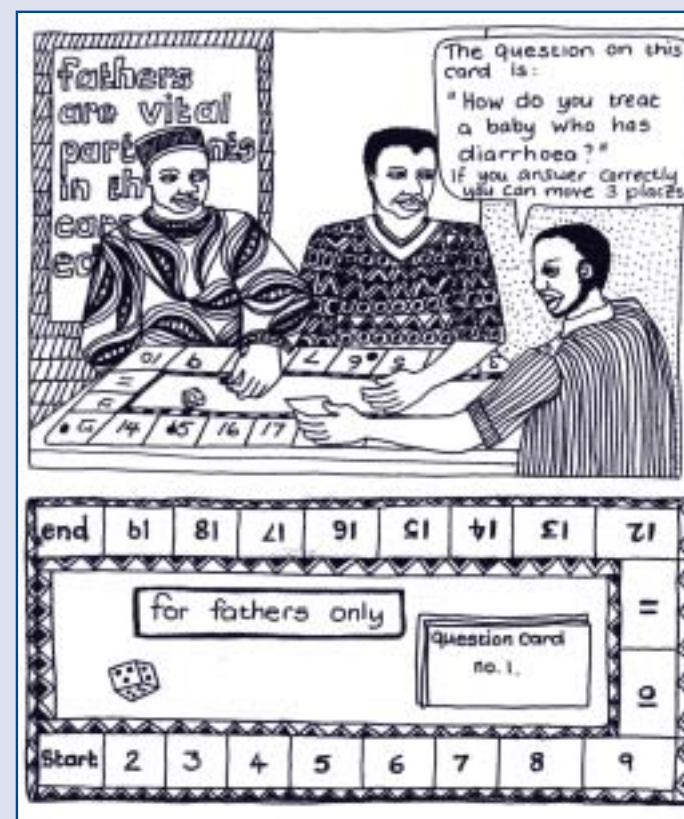
5. All the presentations are recorded by the groups and, after all presentations have been made, a general discussion is opened and a synthesis of the learning is made.

### 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. ○