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# SITE VISIT: Men in the Lives of Children—A Case Study of the Father Enrichment Program in Turkey

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By the Mother Child Education Foundation.

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It is well known that mothers as the primary caregivers have a significant impact on children's development. However, contrary to this somewhat traditional view, it is also now accepted that fathers, like mothers, have a significant impact on children's development and that they therefore need to take an active role in their children's life. Although in recent years fathers have become the popular subject of many research studies, as areas of inquiry and intervention it is still a relatively new area. This paper describes the case of the Father Enrichment Program in Turkey which has been developed by the Mother Child Education Foundation (MOCEF) and is now being implemented in collaboration with trade unions in Turkey.

Research studies show that fathers can positively affect their children's development if they take an active role in their lives and are involved in contributing to their development. If a father is both present and highly available in family life, studies have noted the positive impact on the child's cognitive development, including his or her analytical skills, IQ levels, skills mastery, verbal intelligence, and academic achievement (Hoffman 1989; Ishii-Kuntz 1995; Rossi 1984; Russell 1983). In terms of social and emotional development, effects are seen on internal locus of control, psychosocial adjustment, levels of independence, and maturity (Green 1976; McBride 1989; McBride 1993; Russell 1983) and gender role development and identification (McBride 1993) which are all seen to benefit from the presence and behavior of the father.

Also the studies related to the involvement of the father in the child's life show that when fathers are a significant part of children's life from birth, the children score higher on intelligence tests than children whose fathers are less involved (Engle and Breaux 1994). Similarly, children who have a good relationship with their fathers do better at school and have fewer behavioral problems (Russell-Brown, Engle, Townsend 1994). It is important to note that it is the level and type of involvement that benefits the child, not merely the time the father spends interacting with him. Fathers all over the world are not taking an active role in their children's lives. The father is one part of a parenting partnership, and issues regarding agreement between parents and consistency in child-rearing values and practices deserve attention. Especially in the early years, agreement between parents on parenting values, child-rearing practices, and discipline methods all have a positive effect on children's socio-emotional development and on their relationships with their peers and peer status (Russell 1983; Radin and Sagi 1982). Furthermore, the quality of marital relationships is also seen to affect father child interaction where it has been found that the more positive the marital relationship the more involved the father will be in child care (Engle and Breaux 1994)

## *Studies of Parent Education Programs*

There are few parent education support programs specifically designed for fathers and consequently very few studies have been conducted on the impacts of these programs (Dembo et al. 1985; Lamb 1986; Levant 1988). However, Russell's study of "shared-care-giving" fathers—that is the men who share care-giving tasks equally with their wives, who take on the main load of child care (1983), and men who had been highly participant in the care of their young children—has shown that the children of these fathers felt a greater self confidence, a greater sense of achievement, and higher self-esteem. Fathers felt they had more realistic and less superficial attitudes to their children, closer and more affectionate relationships with them, and that they understood the demanding nature of child care better. This led to a change in their values and beliefs on child care and some felt that "staying at home" to look after children deserved higher status. Similarly, McBride (1991) found that parent education for fathers led to an increased sense of parenting competence, better communication skills with children, and subsequent decreases in parental stress levels. Fathers are expected to benefit from education on child development by increasing their sensitivity to children's needs and fostering developmentally appropriate parenting skills. Mothers are also expected to benefit as fathers become more involved in parenting tasks. Intervention studies focusing on father education emphasise the special importance of increasing feelings of competence and confidence in fathering (Evans 1995; McBride 1991; McBride 1989). A lack of culturally-scripted father roles and of social support for fathering means that many fathers need help in learning to father.

Still, many parenting programs are only implemented with mothers because they are easier to reach and are seen as the primary caregivers, and because mothers are more motivated to learn and receive social support for this role (Evans 1995).

The Mother Child Education Program designed for mothers of 5-year-old children from socio-economically disadvantaged environments who are in need of early education can be used as an example of parent education programs in Turkey. This program is implemented in fifty-two provinces of Turkey by the Mother Child Education Foundation with the collaboration of the Ministry of National Education. The aim of this program is to support the 5-year-old child's overall development in the year before they begin formal schooling through sensitizing the mothers on the child's development. The mothers who attended this program expressed the need for their husband's behavior to change in order for there to be harmony and consistency in the family, especially in regard to the discipline of their children. However, there was not any program designed specifically for fathers in Turkey that husbands could participate in.

## *Father Enrichment Program*

In the light of this information and the view that the family is a unit which involves both parents and children, the Father Enrichment Program has been developed by the Mother Child Education Foundation to support fathers in the development of their children 3-9 years of age.

The main goals of the program are to help the fathers realize that they are very important in their children's lives, to increase fathers' awareness of their children's needs, and to increase fathers' participation in their children's development.

The program begins by discussing the role of the father, what society expects from fathers, and includes discussion of how participants view their own fathers and their own fatherhood. Through group discussions, the initial sessions aim to impart the importance of fathers in the child's life and development so that he or she may develop into a healthy adult.

As most of the fathers work outside the home for long hours, they often complain about not seeing their children much and that they therefore cannot be active or effective enough in their children's lives. Thus the program aims to make fathers aware of the *quality* of time they spend with their children, not the quantity. If the child only sees his father for one hour a day, he will base his relationship on that one hour. If the child sees his father watching TV in that one hour, and the child and father do not interact with each other or share, the *quality* of time he or she spends with his or her father will be poor. Yet it may actually be that the father doesn't know how to effectively use the time he has with his child. Therefore, the program aims to impart several practical ideas to the father in how he can support the child's development during limited time periods. In this way the program is designed to increase the fathers' participation in their children's development.

In child-rearing attitudes, knowledge of child development makes a difference, especially in terms of parents' inappropriate expectations and abusive behaviors. In order to prevent this kind of behavior, information is given about the physical, cognitive, and personality development of children to make the father aware of his own child's needs in response to these areas, so that he can see what he can do to meet these needs.

The program also aims to support fathers in their relationships with their children by teaching them positive disciplinary methods, such as offering explanations, instead of negative ones, such as punishment, beating, etc. The program incorporates communication skills that can be practiced for all the men's relationships, including those with their children, wives, mother-in-laws, friends, and colleagues.

### ***Development of the Father Enrichment Program***

The Father Enrichment Program was developed in 1996, with a pilot implementation that was carried out as the first phase with eleven fathers in Istanbul for five weeks. Fathers in the sample were selected from the husbands of the women who had participated in the Mother Child Education Program, thus all had five-year-old children. The fathers attended the program for two hours every Sunday for five weeks.

At the end of the first pilot study, according to the feedback from fathers, the program was revised in three main areas. First, the content of the program was revised and extended to twelve sessions as opposed to the initial five in order to incorporate topics on child development, reading to the child, and positive and negative discipline methods. Second, the target group of fathers was altered, rather than focusing only on fathers with children aged five, the revision enabled

participants with children between the ages of 3-9 to become involved. Third, it was suggested that it would be more effective to implement the program in places where fathers spent most of their time, such as in the workplace and in trade unions, instead of designating a separate site that the fathers had to come to. According to July 1995 statistical reports of the Ministry of Labour, 92% of trade-union members are male. Based on this information, unions were seen as an important target site in the implementation of the Father Enrichment Program. Thus it was decided to collaborate with trade unions, and a second pilot study was conducted with Kristal-Ýþ trade union under TÜRK-Ýþ (the biggest confederation of trade-unions in Turkey), and participants of the program were fathers from Papabahçe Glass Factory. The second pilot implementation was conducted with fifteen fathers during the spring of 1997.

Interviews conducted with both participants and trade union administrators have shown that they are pleased with the outcomes of the program with many fathers stating that their relationships with their children have improved and that they are less prone to use physical punishment as a method of discipline. Furthermore, many fathers have expressed the view that they are more likely to share decision-making on family matters with their wives and children. In the patriarchal society of Turkey, this is a very important outcome of the program. Administrators of Kristal-Ýþ trade union have decided to continue implementation of the program within their organisation as they have observed that the relations of participants with their colleagues has improved, and the participants themselves have expressed the need for others within the union to benefit from the program.

Following the second pilot phase, the Father Enrichment Program has undergone further revision and now includes various topics about child development which are implemented in the form of group discussions, games, and role-playing. In these sessions, discussions are based around the role and importance of fathers for child development, children's physical, cognitive, and personality development, the importance of preschool ages, the importance of play and reading with the child, the effective use of time spent with children, and discipline methods and communication skills. All fathers participating in the program have the opportunity to share their experiences with the group and to arrive at solutions together. It is expected that not only will the father-child relationship improve positively but all familial relationships as well, as a result of the Father Enrichment Program.

The program consists of twelve sessions with approximately fifteen fathers. Each session lasts around two hours. The topics are discussed with a participatory approach by a trained group facilitator. Group facilitators attend an intensive four-step training programme. The first step is an interview conducted by an administrator and program specialist. The criteria for facilitators includes the attitudes of the candidates towards participatory education programs and also their professional backgrounds (psychologist, psychological administrators, social workers and educators are preferred). The chosen candidates attend twelve training sessions as trainees. In each session, trainees role-play the role of fathers and discuss and evaluate each session. Trainees also observe Father Enrichment Program groups on site during implementation, and finally, the trainees have to conduct at least three group discussions as group facilitators with the training group. Only the candidates who complete all these four steps successfully become qualified group facilitators of the Father Enrichment Program.

## *Future Plans*

There have been negotiations with TURK-İP and DISK (the biggest confederations of trade unions in Turkey), and it is planned to conduct twenty groups during October 1997–June 1998.

However, a longer term plan is to train education personnel of the trade union confederations as group facilitators. This is in order to ensure the sustainability and wide-scale expansion of the program. Trade union personnel will thus be able to implement the program themselves with guidance and supervision provided by MOCEF and this will not only render the program more cost-effective to trade unions, but also enable them to assume ownership of the program.

In terms of expansion of the Father Enrichment Program to different target groups, discussions have focused on implementation in the Turkish Army (a minimum of 8 months military service is compulsory for males in Turkey), Police Departments, and prisons.

The collaboration with trade unions has brought up other needs, such as sexual health, AIDS, and human rights education among workers. Thus, studies for a new program which includes sexual health, community health, AIDS and human rights began in May 1997. These sections, which may be called the Male Empowerment Program, can be conducted independently or as additional components of the Father Enrichment Program according to the needs of target groups.

The Father Enrichment Program is attempting to fulfil a need in Turkey for parent education programmes focusing on fathers which will not only benefit children but also other members in the family. It is hoped that MOCEF has paved the way for other organisations to focus on the need for fathers to be involved in child care and child development.

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