

Gender Equality for a New Generation: Expect Male Involvement in ECE

by Donald E. Piburn

The world is in the midst of societal shifts in gender role expectations. In many societies, traditional norms of woman as nurturer/caregiver and man as provider/disciplinarian are yielding to new social practices where women and men are expected to fulfill a full range of adult roles and responsibilities. Perhaps the clearest evidence of global change lies less in evolving workforce statistics, and more in the numbers of men in public with infants strapped to their chests, pushing strollers on the street, and at the diaper changing tables inside men's restrooms at restaurants, malls, and airports.

Fathers and fathering figures involvement

In her book *Time to Care*, former United States of America Health and Human

Services Associate Commissioner of the Child Care Bureau, Joan Lombardi (2003), notes: "The influx of women into the workforce was one of the most significant societal changes in the twentieth century," (p. 2) and in a related trend that "Increasingly, fathers are joining in as full partners in the care of their children" (p. 19). Statistics do suggest that many men openly accept their role of "involved Dad."

A 2002 national workforce study by Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, and Prottas (2002) found that Generation X fathers — those men born between 1965 and 1979 — spent on average over an hour more per workday caring for and doing things with their children than the Baby-boom fathers — those men born between 1946 and 1964. Though the numbers of Generation Y fathers — typically defined as males born between 1980 and 1994 — in the study were limited, they appeared to be spending even more time with their children. Generation Y mothers were 73% more likely to disagree with the statement that it is better for all concerned if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children. Generation X and Baby Boomer mothers were equally, but less likely (62%) to disagree. A 2003 survey of 3,020 parents by Boston-based marketing firm Reach Advisors reports similar results, with roughly half of the

Generation X fathers devoting from three to six hours a day to domestic tasks, compared to only 39% of the Baby-boom Dads (as cited in "Gen-Xers as Parents," 2004).

Emerging models in the context of culture

Cultural context plays an essential role in determining appropriate gender roles for males and females. Rapidly changing gender role expectations have people in many cultures feeling confused, hurt, or angry. Though men's status as economic providers continues to be generally expected, when men choose or are unable to perform in these roles they may struggle to find other family roles to fill. Women may be torn between traditional roles as primary caregiver and changing economic and social realities that necessitate working apart from their children [United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1995; United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW), 2004].

The endorsement of non-traditional gender roles presumes gender equality will help children in the long run, but it may not be appropriate for all cultures and may even have distinct disadvantages for some children. Emerging

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public policies, institutional practices, and service delivery models must be evaluated from a culturally competent perspective, particularly from the point of view of the potential recipients (UNDAW, 2004).

There is longstanding international support for widening male responsibilities in family life and in children's education [UNICEF, 1995; United Nations Commission on the Status for Women (UNCSD), 1996; UNDAW, 2004]. National and international father involvement networks, programs, and initiatives are working to make involved fatherhood an increasingly significant measure of quality early childhood programming. While the implications of raising an entire generation of children to experience women and men sharing in their care and education are profound, perhaps most compelling is the growing body of evidence suggesting that men's commitment to nurturing and caring for young children is associated with reductions in domestic violence (UNICEF, 1995). UNDAW (2004) proposes special emphasis be placed on lessons for the prevention of violence against women and children, beginning for children "from the earliest ages" (p. 15). While international strategies to increase male nurturing and responsibility for children have typically focused on youth or adults, "a possibly more effective strategy is to intervene during the formation of gender roles" [UNICEF, 1995, p. 25].

Influences on gender role formation

Children's awareness of what it means to be a man or woman begins in early childhood. In her influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, cultural anthropologist and feminist theorist, Nancy Chodorow (1978), characterizes the nearly universal differences between the sexes, not as biological, but owing to

the fact that women have been largely responsible for caring for young children. Chodorow suggests that because early caregivers for both sexes are traditionally female, gender role formation is experienced differently for boys than for girls. Girls may experience themselves as "like" their early caregivers, and thus combine empathy with the course of their early identity formation. Nurturing others is integrated into their primary definition of who they are as females. In contrast, boys experience themselves as different than their early caregivers, and come to define their masculinity through separation, independence, and individuality.

In October of 2003 the UNDAW, in collaboration with the International Labor Organization, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS and the United Nations Development Program, assembled international authorities on the roles of men and boys in achieving gender equality. Their report defines the fact that girls and boys in most societies experience care giving and ECE as principally female obligations as a "key aspect of gender inequalities" (UNDAW, 2004, p. 15). Gender inequality in family life and ECE reinforce stereotypical notions of gender attributes and roles, which can be further legitimized by stereotypical content in educational curricula, books, stories, fairy tales, songs, activities, and classroom experiences. Though education is widely viewed as contributing to gender inequalities, it is also seen as the principal avenue for global change (UNCSD, 1996). Gender equitable educational curricula, performance standards, and classroom experiences have been linked to greater flexibility in the gender role expectations of both girls and boys (UNDAW, 2004).

Television and electronic games, toys, and other media devices have become central to the standard of living in many societies. When gender role models are

scarce or absent in children's daily lives, they may rely on the media to typify what it means to be a woman or a man. Diane Levin (2005) charges that electronic media sources are disseminating progressively narrower, ever more violent, and increasingly sexualized gender roles to children. Girls, many as young as three years old, are barraged with images emphasizing unrealistically narrow body ideals, object materialism, and sexualized imagery as symbolic of what it means to be female. The gender roles marketed to boys center on aggression, power, conflict, and most disturbingly, a direct association between male violence and sexuality. Electronic media sources rarely promote tender, nurturing, and equitable relationships between adults (Levin, 2005), and commonly portray men as bumbling or inadequate caregivers, often as violent and angry, and rarely show them capably nurturing children or managing home life situations (Horn, Weinert, Hawkins, and Sylvester, 2000).

Gender balance in ECE

Historically, and to this day in countries that limit women's rights and access to employment opportunities, the formal education of children has been principally a male discipline. As women gradually entered the male dominated workforce, their initial employment options were very limited. Because the demands of the profession necessitate nurturing qualities, and because women could be paid substantially less for doing the same work, society deemed teaching to be acceptable "women's work." This trend has deepened to the point that few early and elementary education programs now have male teachers (Nelson, 2002).

The pressures and assumptions of society can be tremendously socially isolating for all who assume non-traditional gender roles. The scarcity of male teachers speaks volumes about the

welcome many feel in their profession, yet the message often goes unheeded or can trigger chauvinistic beliefs that men don't care, are somehow intrinsically unable to nurture children, or the statistically unfounded myth that male teachers pose an inherent threat to the health and safety of young children (Sargent, 2001; Nelson, 2002). Stereotypes and myths discourage men from entering or remaining in careers working directly with young children (Nelson, 2004). Some male early childhood educators express an unwillingness to disclose bias concerns for fear it can contribute to the high levels of scrutiny they already perceive themselves to be under (Sargent, 2001; Nelson, 2002).

Supporting male involvement in ECE requires substantial changes in the established paradigm: Not only must men embrace their roles as nurturers, caregivers, and teachers of young children, women must examine their own attitudes and beliefs toward men in these roles (UNICEF, 1995; UNDAW, 2004; Neugebauer, 2005). Nondiscriminatory practices are at the heart of responsible behavior in ECE. When young children are used to seeing images of nurturing males on classroom walls and in their picture books, to hearing stories on the diverse roles of men, and to being cared for and nurtured by fathers, fathering figures, and male early childhood educators, they come to expect nurturing, caregiving, and teaching as typical male behaviors. When the field of ECE sets in earnest to eliminate the biases, scrutiny, and commonly held assumptions about men embedded in its workplace culture, then nurturing fathers, fathering figures, and men who teach will sense their school communities as places where their contributions are valued and the number of involved men will multiply.

As prominent features in communities world wide, early childhood programs present an opportune and principled focal point for social transformation toward gender equality in the youngest generation. Promoting gender balance in ECE makes sense because it supports "family-centered" practices notwithstanding qualities that differentiate gender, reflects the value the field places on diversity and anti-bias philosophies, fosters a more inclusive and diverse workforce, and most importantly, shapes who children will become as adults. ECE is being afforded a historically unique opportunity to revolutionize the value that the next generation places on male nurturing behavior, provided the field can recognize the opportunity, overcome any obstacles, and come to expect male involvement as a natural course toward gender equality for all the worlds' children.

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Men in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Working Forum Honolulu 2008

Be a part of the growing movement to create gender balance in education!

The ***Men in ECE Working Forum Honolulu 2008*** creates a global meeting place that capitalizes on the professional knowledge and personal experiences of individuals in unique positions to shed light on what men offer, what persuades them to stay, and what enhances their sense of belonging in the field of ECE.

Men and women able to speak to the implications of men in ECE in their culture, region, society, nation, or the world are encouraged to get involved. Individuals of indigenous cultures or those with experiences or expertise specific to men who work directly with young children are particularly welcome to participate.

Join us for a pre-conference ***Men in ECE "Planning Summit"*** at World Forum Kuala Lumpur, 2007. We need men and women from around the world who are committed to increasing the role of men in ECE and interested in shaping the nature of the Men in ECE Working Forum Honolulu 2008 event.
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