



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN  
IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA • UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

FINAL REPORT:

## WHERE ARE THE FATHERS?

A REVIEW OF IDEAS ON HOW TO INVOLVE FATHERS  
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

July 2015

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UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project with **Sakha Isizwe**.

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## **Introduction**

Sakha Isizwe Development Organisation in Mitchell's Plain was established in 2012. In collaboration with The Western Cape Foundation for Community Work it imparts early childhood development (ECD) skills through a home based learning program for children and caregivers in Delft who have no access to pre-school education. The parent workshops, facilitated twice a month, aim to equip those looking after the children with the skills to facilitate learning in the home environment. It also offers other programmes, including support to pre-natal women.

Sakha Isizwe requested information that might assist them to address a problem they experience with their ECD workshops, i.e. the fact that fathers do not attend these workshops even though they do get involved with ECD activities at home. This report places the problem within the bigger issue of the role of fathers in the process of bringing up their children and collected some practical ideas used by other organisations to attract fathers into their ECD activities.

## **Fathers involvement in ECD**

Early childhood development is a critical period of development in a child's life. The literature surrounding early childhood development shows that an appropriate investment in programs that encourage development can positively impact on national, educational, health and socio-economic outcomes (Harris, 2015; Ilifa Labantwana, 2015; Richter et al, 2012: 1-2). Such developments can have significant benefits for society as a whole. A strong foundation in early childhood development can lay the groundwork for responsible citizenship, economic prosperity, healthy communities and successful parenting for future generations. Early childhood development is a potential game-changer and one of the ways that parents can play an influential part in the lives of their children (Ilifa labantwana, 2015).

The appropriate forms of early childhood development can have a significant impact on children's academic performance. Extensive international research has shown that children who participate in programmes at an early age are more prepared to learn when they begin their schooling careers. Consequently these children are less likely to drop out of school (Harris, 2015). The learning difficulties that children who do not engage in some form of early childhood development acquire are not

remedied by schooling. Rather, these difficulties will continue to grow over time and may reach a stage where it is almost impossible to correct them (Harris, 2015).

Although South Africa has one of the highest rates of father absence in the world, many fathers support and remain in contact with their children. For many children maternal uncles, grandfathers and older brothers assume the role of father and provide for a child's livelihood, his education and paternal love and guidance. There is thus an important role for fathers and male figures in the lives of children (Richter et al., 2012: 3).

Fathers have also been found to play an important role in developing the emotional intelligence of their children during their formative years. Fathers, indirectly help their children increase their emotional intelligence through their continued interaction with their children (Harris, 2015). Gaining and developing these abilities plays a pivotal role in a child's ability to succeed in kindergarten and primary school. Children need to learn how to interact and co-operate with their peers and such skills can be imparted by various early childhood development programs supported by the children's parents (Richter et al., 2012: 19).

The Shine Trust (2015), an NGO based in Wynberg, suggests a seven strategy approach for hosting successful parent workshops. Some of the strategies are particularly relevant for encouraging fathers to attend workshops. Other authors and organisations offer further practical suggestions. Adapted from this literature, we suggest possible strategies that may help to attract fathers to education workshops.

### **The workshops:**

1. **The design/content of the workshop:** Workshops should be designed to be interactive and dynamic in the hopes of attracting fathers. Fathers need to feel like they are learning valuable skills and in addition should leave with a sense of hope and a broader perspective on how their newly learnt skills can help better their children. Fathers will not attend workshops if they feel that they are not learning anything valuable (The Shine Trust, 2015).

Another interesting approach in the context of a low-income, ethnically diverse community, suggested a program that teaches the men principles and skills in communication, parenting, coping and handling conflict. This was found to improve the involvement of both parents in the educational workshops (Richter et al, 2012:16).

2. **Creating a father-friendly environment:** Many men feel uncomfortable and have pre-conceived ideas about their roles at workshops of this nature. Many may feel that early childhood development is better left to mothers. It is in this instance that it is important to make fathers feel welcome (Ilifa Labantwana, 2015). Father's opinions and ideas and their presence at workshops need to be positively reinforced. Each father needs to be assured that their time and ideas are valued. They need to feel engaged in the workshops in order to solicit their support for the continuation of such programmes. Not all fathers are the same, thus consulting with fathers individually and asking for their advice on issues such as content and themes will strengthen the value of their contributions increase their willingness to participate (The Shine Trust, 2015).
  
3. **Use dad-friendly "hooks":** Certain workshops could be themed around things that fathers could identify with and would subsequently encourage their attendance such as sports. Incorporating such themes into workshops can make it easier for fathers to identify with attending workshops (Reading Rockets, 2015).
  
4. **Timing of workshops:** Workshops should be scheduled at times that are convenient for fathers. This is a crucial factor, e.g. not during working hours when the majority of fathers/male figures are employed full-time; and otherwise not at the same time as social or sporting events that are important to men. Workshops should also be sensitive to financial constraints that many

families face and take this into consideration when organized. Factors such as the duration and timing of workshops, in terms of what day of the month, all have an impact on the number of fathers that attend (Richter et al., 2012: 18).

5. **Ongoing communication**: It is important to maintain communication with parents. Sending reminders to fathers and mothers separately about upcoming workshops could be a useful way to maintain this. Texts could also include a re-cap of lessons learnt and thank fathers explicitly for their contribution (The Shine Trust, 2015).
  
6. **Incentives**: Offering incentives for attending the workshops and keep them coming back is also possible. Thembalitsha Foundation uses the concept of support groups and cyclical gift bags; or a bi-monthly small event celebrating their attendance, for just being there (Thembalitsha Foundation, 2015).

### **Promote fatherhood in the community**

7. **“Ambassador Dads”**: Reading Rocket’s “Top Tips for Engaging Dads” (2015) suggests that having one or two enthusiastic dads as ambassadors for workshops could encourage the attendance of more fathers. These fathers would try and reach out to other dads in the community. The aim is for these fathers to serve as inspiration for other fathers to get involved in the workshops. The recruitment of male staff and volunteers could also aid in encouraging their attendance. Fathers will feel a bit more at ease in workshops if they know that other men, especially ones they look up to, are involved in the workshops.

8. **Profile caring fathers**: Sonke Gender Justice runs an initiative called 'My Dad Can' that celebrates 'caring' fathers by profiling them in the local media. They identify positive local role models and have their stories circulated as examples of involved fathers, changing the community perception of fatherhood in a positive way – going beyond the figure of fathers as just being strong people, but also as supportive caregivers (Sonke Gender Justice).
  
9. **A buddy system** is suggested by FRIENDS National Resource Center. This involves pairing experienced fathers as mentors with newer fathers to support them and draw them into events and make them aware of the value of community resources such as the ECD workshops. It may further be helpful to offer spaces and opportunities for small group discussions between experienced and relatively new fathers (FRIENDS NRC, 2006:2-3).
  
10. The UK based *The Fatherhood Institute*, an NGO program that fosters fatherhood, tries to solve the absence problem by increasing the chances of interaction between the child and the father. This is done by providing **father-inclusive training** aimed at staff at early childhood development centres, crèches and nurseries. The institute has various programs such as 'the Dads Test', which is an online assessment tool aimed at helping workers or volunteers find ways to make their services more inclusive for fathers (Fatherhood Institute, 2009).
  
11. **Start early**: The strategies and solutions to father absence should begin at the root, which would then require interventions especially targeting young fathers (Richter et al, 2012). The point of early involvement is a widely supported strategy, especially in the sense of starting even prior to birth. It builds rapport and creates a stronger sense of responsibility. For an example, since Sakha Isizwe has a prenatal care initiative, why not include fathers in this initiative?

12. **Build strong couples**: Allen and Daly (2007:14-15) emphasise the mother's role in father involvement in ECD generally. They suggest offering support to couples in order to help develop positive co-parental relationships.

Any policies and programmes designed to increase the involvement of fathers/male figures in the lives of their children need to be informed and critically aware of the local social, cultural and structural dynamics of the society and communities in which they find themselves. The promotion of father-friendly services at community level programs needs to be tailored so that it is convenient to men in specific communities (Richter et al, 2012: 28).

This report offers practical ideas drawing on knowledge from the world over, while specifically looking for African solutions. We trust that some of them will be helpful in the very specific context where Sakha Isizwe is doing its valuable work.

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