

# The Role of Male Caretakers and Pre-school Teachers for Father Involvement in ECEC

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## Abstract

The relevance of men in the lives of children is nowadays widely accepted. This overview paper discusses the links between debates on father involvement in the family and strategies for more male professionals in ECEC by focusing on what role male EC workers can have for the involvement of fathers in the work of ECEC centres and pre-schools. Based on a critical gender perspective, the paper gives a broad overview of international debates on the issue, presents empirical evidence, and connects these results to the realms of practice. Arguments for a specific role for male ECEC professionals in approaching and supporting fathers are presented and critically discussed. It is concluded that the inclusion of male professionals in the ECEC work force can contribute to building good relationships with parents and especially fathers. However, gender sensitivity is crucial to overcome gender stereotypes in ECEC as well as in the wider society.

## Keywords

Fathers, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Gender equality, Men, Male workers in ECEC

## Male Caretakers and Pre-school Teachers

„Children need men!“ This rallying cry is a common argument for father involvement in the family as well as in the context of strategies for more men in ECEC. In what way are these two issues linked? The connection between father involvement and men in ECEC was already present in European debates on men and childcare more than two decades ago. However, little is known about the role of male workers for cooperation with fathers. This paper intends to connect the debates on male involvement in the two fields of family and ECEC by focusing on relations of male EC professionals with fathers.

## Male Involvement in Early Childhood

The relevance of fathers for children’s development in the early years is widely accepted nowadays. There is growing consciousness in societies that fathers are important for their children’s development, and many fathers are present in the lives of their children from early on. However, recent cross-cultural research shows that enthusiasm for active fathering varies between societies,

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and fathers are highly diverse also within their societies (Shwalb, Shwalb & Lamb, 2013). On the other hand, Roopnarine (2013) highlights cross-cultural similarities and universal key principles of how fathers are relevant for children's development and family life. Shwalb and Shwalb (2014) summarize that the Western-style idea of active and involved fathers has reached global attention, "although the extent of this infiltration and men's responses to these influences varies" (p. 15), depending on contextual factors in different societies.

The situation in institutional day care and early education does not mirror these changes. While the importance of fathers' involvement for the development of children is widely accepted, institutional care for children remains a female-dominated field worldwide, with a proportion of less than 3% men in the ECEC work force in most countries. This has been debated for decades in at least some countries of the Western hemisphere, and recently there is growing interest in the issue across the world (Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). Although cultural factors affect attitudes towards men in childcare and experiences of male ECEC workers, research shows astonishing similarities between different cultural contexts (Rohrmann, 2015; Xu, 2018).

Connections between male involvement in the family and in educational contexts have been discussed for a while now. In 2008, a special issue of *Early Childhood Development and Care* focused on „Men in Caring, Parenting, and Teaching“ (Evans & Jones, 2008), including research on the situation of male workers in ECEC as well as programmes for the inclusion of fathers in early childhood institutions. Honig (2008) summarizes that „research on fathering and research on men employed in work with young children in centres and in elementary schools emphasises the importance of positive male engagement with young children for their optimal development“ (p. 665). However, she also points out that the relationship between male involvement and children's development is complex, and traditional views on the role of men

and women in family and society bar the way to more participation of men in childcare and early education. A closer look reveals that arguments for the inclusion of men are varied and sometimes contradictory.

The debate on men in education is based on two theoretical understandings of the role of men and women in the lives of children which can be seen as opposite or at least conflicting: the idea that men and women are fundamentally different, and the assumption that men and women are equally capable of caring for and educating children. This issue has been debated in research and in wider society for decades and it is not the aim of this paper to discuss this in depth. However, it must be kept in mind that attitudes towards men and women are deeply rooted in gendered cultural traditions. Even if there is research evidence showing that „it is quite clear that responsive sensitive parenting skills can be learned and that parenting is not an innate skill“, as Warin (2018, p. 63) summarizes, the idea that raising children is a „women's task“ persists in many countries worldwide, especially when it comes to very young children.

Enhancing the contribution of men in the lives of their children is seen as an important task by experts and policy makers around the world (Levtov et al., 2015). In this context, many approaches and tools have been developed to engage fathers and promote their involvement in the family. Working with fathers has become an important part of professional work with men in education and psychology. This paper focuses on the role of male professionals in ECEC for involving fathers. Beginning with an overview on policies for more male involvement, and on contradictory arguments for more men in ECEC, it presents research evidence on relations between male workers and fathers, and discusses the role of men as professionals in the context of diversity in ECEC.

It must be mentioned that, in this article, the term “fathers” comprises „social fathers“, including stepfathers and new partners of single mothers, grandfathers, godfathers or other men

who take responsibility for children in new types of families. Regarding the diversity of systems of EC provision in different countries, qualified caretakers and preschool teachers are subsumed under the term „EC professional“.

## **Policies and Strategies for Male Involvement in Family and ECEC**

In the 1990s of the past century, a working group of the European Commission started to debate the involvement of men in the care and education of infants, focusing on fathers as well as on male professionals in ECEC (European Commission network, 1993; Jensen, 1996). The working group put forward strategies for involving fathers and suggested increasing the proportion of male workers in ECEC to 20% (European Commission network, 1996). Since then, attitudes on the involvement of fathers in the lives of young children have changed substantially due to research results on the relevance of fathers for children's development (Aigner, 2001, Fatherhood Institute, 2000, Lamb, 2010, Walter, 2002), as well as to policy developments supporting fathers' rights and fathers' involvement in the family in many countries worldwide. Nowadays the popular statement „children need men“ (Aigner & Pöscheschnik, 2015) is applied to the role of the father in the family as well as to the inclusion of men in educational institutions. The importance of male „father-figures“ is emphasized especially with regard to the increasing number of children growing up in single-mother homes, be they boys or girls; although research results on a presumed dysfunctionality of single-mother families are controversial (Golombok, 2000). At the same time, there have been public debates about the need for more men in educational institutions, especially in the context of a perceived „boys' crisis“ in schools (Foster et al., 2001, Hurrelmann, 2012, Skelton, 2001).

Even if there is little evidence for the assumption that more male teachers lead to better results of children in school, many researchers and policy makers are in favour of more men in

EC (albeit for different reasons). However, this did not lead to a substantial rise in the proportion of male workers and teachers. Although European institutions repeatedly stated a need for more men in the field of ECEC (OECD, 2006; European commission, 2011), the number of male workers remained low in most countries. This situation began to change in the past decade, as the issue of men in ECEC is discussed worldwide, and campaigns for a better gender balance show some results, at least in some countries (Peeters, Emilsen & Rohrmann, 2015, Rohrmann, 2019).

To understand the success of campaigns for more men in ECEC in the Nordic countries and in Germany, it is necessary to assess attitudes and legal frameworks regarding male involvement in childhood in these countries. In the Nordic countries especially, there is a broad consensus in society about the importance of men taking part in children's lives. Gender equality is enshrined in laws, regulations and curricula, and ECEC provision is seen as an important contribution to the goal of a gender equal society (Peeters et al., 2015). As a part of this, legislation about parental leave supports fathers' involvement in family life. Sweden and Norway introduced a period of fathers' leave not transferable to mothers more than a decade ago, resulting in a much higher share of parental leave taken by fathers.

Similar strategies were adopted in Germany in 2006, when new legislation introduced two „fathers' months“ within the parental leave. Since then, the proportion of men taking at least a short period of parental leave has increased significantly, from less than 2% before the reform to more than 35% in 2015 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009-2017). A recent report states that 80% of the population support state-funded strategies for father involvement, and research provides significant results for even a short period of fathers' leave on the quality of father-child-relations (BMFSFJ, 2017). One of the effects of active engagement of fathers is that they are more often present in kindergarten. This is

especially relevant in the transition of very young children to ECEC provision when fathers take parental leave while mothers return to work.

Strategies for more father involvement and for men in ECEC are often brought forward by responsible ministries and national agencies in the context of gender equality. Partly due to large state-funded campaigns there are now 9.1% male workers in ECEC in Norway and 6.2% in Germany. Denmark has also been successful in promoting a better gender balance in ECEC institutions, although in all mentioned countries the proportion of male workers is still below 10% (Peeters et al., 2015; Rohrmann, 2019; Wohlgemuth, 2016). In other countries, the proportion of male EC workers remains low, but, in the past few years, there has been a growing interest in the issue, and several countries have started public campaigns and projects for a better gender balance. In Turkey, interestingly, the number of male pre-school teachers increased substantially to 5.8% in the context of the expansion of the whole system of pre-school over the last decade (Sak, 2018). This unexpected fact leads to the conclusion that the involvement of men in ECEC education might be part of a transformation process in modern societies, which can either be restrained or supported by national and local stakeholders, but it must be understood in the context of a change of attitudes towards gender roles in the wider society.

## **Why More Men? Expectations and Contradictions**

There are many and diverse arguments for inclusion of men in the EC work force (Rohrmann 2016a, 2019). One of the most common arguments is that men should serve as role models for boys (Brownhill, 2014, 2015; Wright & Brownhill, 2019). Another widespread assumption is that men can bring in something „new“ to ECEC, for example by introducing more „masculine“ activities like playing football or using the work-bench with children (Wohlgemuth, 2016). On the other hand, it is expected that men will perform

the same tasks and duties as their female counterparts, maybe even focus on activities traditionally perceived as „female“, to show that caring for children is not just a „female“ role (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012). Clearly such diverse projections are based on different understandings of gender, ranging from a bipolar concept of masculinity and femininity to concepts of gender equality, or even deconstructive approaches to gender.

In practice, it is a difficult task for male EC professionals to balance contradictory expectations. Some men tend to find a „male niche“ to assert themselves as men in a field dominated by women, while others resist and openly confront stereotyped attributions (Tennhoff et al., 2015, Warin, 2015). It might not be surprising, therefore, that some studies show that in gender-mixed teams, traditional gendered assignments of tasks and activities can be reinforced even if this is not intended at all (Cremers, Krabel & Calmbach, 2012; Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012).

However, according to recent studies, male and female EC professionals do not differ significantly regarding interactional quality and professional behaviour towards children (Brandes et al., 2015, van Polanen et al., 2017). At the same time, research indicates that gender differences can be relevant in specific aspects of ECEC. Brandes et al. (2015) show that men and women react differently in the way they perceive and react to children's play interests. Sandseter (2014) reports that men are more relaxed regarding wild and risky play of children. Clearly men are generally more willing to engage in rough and tumble play with children, especially boys; this is true for fathers as well as for male EC workers (Flanders et al., 2009; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Richartz, 2015; Storli & Sandseter, 2017).

Against this backdrop it could be assumed that male EC professionals might be relevant for fathers as well. Do fathers need male counterparts in ECEC institutions? The growing participation of fathers in family life, and their presence in kindergartens, is indeed one the arguments mentioned in discourses about a demand for more men in ECEC (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012;

Rohrmann, 2016a, 2016b; Warin, 2018). Reports from the field confirm that male workers can be important contact persons for fathers in everyday interactions, and even more for specific activities for fathers (Rohrmann, 2013). Some men place a main focus of their professional work on collaboration with fathers, e.g. organize evening talks with fathers or activities for fathers and children. On the other hand, there are male workers who do not engage with fathers, and not every father feels a bond with a male worker just because he is a man. What do we know about relations between fathers and male EC professionals?

## **Research Results on Fathers and Male Workers in ECEC**

Several studies verify that male EC workers are appreciated by most parents (Cremers et al., 2012; Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012; Rolfe, 2005; Lyons, Quinn and Sumsion, 2004; Sak et al., 2019). Even in countries where traditional gender roles are prevalent in society and male workers are rare in ECEC, positive reactions of parents are documented (Akman et al., 2014; Ho & Lam, 2014; Rentzou, 2011; Toth, 2009; Tsigra, 2016). However, these studies usually do not differentiate mothers' and fathers' attitudes towards male workers, and the role of male professionals specifically for fathers is rarely discussed. While there are several studies examining fathers' attitudes towards ECEC and their involvement in EC centres (Anderson et al., 2015; Palm & Fagan, 2008), only a few studies focus on the relevance of male workers for collaboration with fathers.

In the UK, an exploratory study of Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis (2003) in the context of the „Sure Start“ programme revealed that only few programmes focused on the involvement of fathers and, as one of their recommendations, the authors stated a need for male workers. A US survey on fathers' involvement in Early Childhood programs (MFFN, 2011) built on the recognition of increasing participation of fathers in all areas of their children's upbringing, including early childhood education and care. Despite this

interest, several barriers and obstacles remain for better participation of fathers in everyday life in kindergarten. The report states that a vast majority of EC professionals (91.6%) agreed that participation of fathers is „very important“, and fathers were invited to many meetings and activities in kindergarten. However, the actual participation of fathers was much lower, compared to the interest expressed in the survey. As the main reason, professionals (83.7%) and fathers (84.0%) mentioned a lack of time and conflicting meeting dates. However, 43.2% of professionals and 37.9% fathers agreed that a lack of male staff is a reason for the poor involvement of men. Interestingly, 26.4% of teachers stated that „reluctance by mothers to get fathers more involved“ (p. 10) limits the work of EC programs to involve fathers. The authors conclude that a lack of male staff is an important reason for the poor involvement of fathers in EC, besides the fundamental problem of the limited time resources of fathers. More male staff, and males qualifying on programs specifically for fathers, are seen as key factors for better involvement: „The presence of male staff members and volunteers provides a cue that this is a male friendly environment where other males are welcome and expected“ (MFFN, 2011, p. 16).

Research from Germany, Austria and New Zealand confirms that many fathers react positively towards male staff (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012; Cremers et al., 2012). As a male worker in Austria put it: „Fathers appreciate that there is also a man present – that it's not only a women's club, if I'm allowed to say so. 'Cause that's where men are very, very sceptical“ (Schauer, 2012, p. 324). Both sides appreciate being able to speak to a person of the same sex, and both EC professionals and fathers feel respected as a man and as carers for children. In Germany, 56% of provider managers agreed that male EC professionals are important for collaboration with fathers, while agreement was less among centre leaders (40%) and parents (31%). In a New Zealand survey among EC services and teacher educators,

85% believed that involvement of fathers and other men would increase with more male professionals in the centres (Farquhar, 2012). An interviewee stated: „When the Dads see him, they go straight to him. They stay longer and chat, and they watch him with the kids and just get involved a whole lot more. Before we had a male teacher they used to drop their kids off and run“ (Farquhar, 2012, p. 9).

Successful involvement of fathers sometimes appears to be related to specific characteristics of individual male workers. Warin (2007) reports an example of a centre that involved men by engaging a local musician to set up a fathers' band recording nursery rhymes, and songs. Similarly, Potter and Carpenter (2008) mention that the success of a local Sure Start programme for engaging fathers in ECEC was partly due to „the high level of skill and persistence demonstrated by a dedicated Fathers Worker“ (p. 761). On the other hand, there are fathers who are reluctant to accept men working in ECEC, especially when it comes to the care of very young children. This is especially true for fathers who are used to letting their wives do the caring in the family. They may feel confused by a man who naturally does things they themselves would never do at home.

Research on relations between *mothers* and male EC professionals provides diverse results. Sak et al. (2015) found that Turkish female pre-school teachers had better relations with parents than their male colleagues and argue that this is related to cultural factors: „In Turkey, it is mostly mothers who become involved in school activities, and they may prefer to interact with female teachers“ (p. 336f.). On the contrary, studies from Germany and Austria show that male EC professionals can be important for mothers, especially single mothers, as they appreciate having a male person to talk to (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012; BVZ 2006). Aigner and Rohrmann (2012) note that male workers report very good relationships with mothers, who like to stay and talk with them, speaking openly about their thoughts and feelings. Some mothers seem to find it easier to talk to a male professional rather than a female. This might be connected to the idea that men

working in EC institutions could serve as „father substitutes“ for children of single mothers. The authors found that most male professionals as well as mothers criticized such notions and pointed out the professional character of the relationship between parents and EC professionals. However, some young men welcomed the idea: „Those who live with [single] mothers, they need male role models, and this is something we as male workers can fulfil well“ (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012, p. 427). Statements like these clearly show that male workers need to reflect on their role towards children as well as towards mothers and fathers.

## **Collaboration with Fathers from Migrant Backgrounds in Western Societies**

Although there is limited research evidence available on this issue, some authors from European countries highlight the relevance of male EC professionals for fathers from migrant backgrounds. Some practitioners' experience is that these fathers are more open towards male colleagues, and that better contact with them can ease the work of their female colleagues as well. An Austrian centre manager summarized her experiences with fathers from Turkish migrant background: „Yes, I really recognize that they prefer to go to him [the male colleague], they like to talk to him, whereas I had problems because in Turkish families, it's the men who do the talking, and then they have problems with women, and it's easier [since we have a male colleague]. And it's more men who come to parent's meetings“ (Aigner & Rohrmann, 2012, p. 324). Other practitioners report that it is difficult for some men to accept female EC professionals as having authority.

Active interactions with a male co-worker can ease the situation, with the aim of explaining a gender-equal understanding of professionalism in ECEC to these fathers, thus strengthening the position of their female co-workers as well. A German centre leader summarized experiences with a male colleague who himself had a Turkish

background: „Naturally this really was an opportunity for many Turkish fathers to come here and get something off their chest or say something or get into a discussion with him. They knew there was someone who understood their language, and so on. And what's more he was also a man. They were sometimes surprised. Because, in practice, he was on our side (...) But this built already some bridges“ (Cremers et al., 2012, p. 52).

Such statements mirror practical experiences, but also assumptions that in migrant families, traditional notions of gender are widespread and dominant. This is partly true, although in modern societies, families from migrant backgrounds are much more diverse (Jantz, 2013). There are „new“ fathers with migrant background, as well as German fathers with very traditional attitudes towards fathers' roles (Tunç, 2013). Moreover, the understanding of the role and relevance of ECEC varies from community to community. However, in many cultures worldwide, roles and tasks of men and women in family and society tend to be much more separated when compared to the model of shared responsibility dominant in some Western countries. This means that some parents with a migrant background might feel uncomfortable discussing private issues in „public“ with a member of the opposite sex, while others might find it strange to talk about intimate details of childcare with a man at all. In addition, the cultural background of EC professionals is relevant for their ability to understand and to transform cultural attitudes towards gender issues.

The results reported above match with research on parents' attitudes from Turkey. Sak et al. (2015) note that it is mostly mothers who are involved in pre-school activities, and they therefore prefer to talk to female counterparts in the centre, while male pre-school teachers are perceived as authority figures, similar to the role of the father in the family. Different perceptions of the roles of men and women in the family, as well as in ECEC, might cause misunderstandings and

conflicting expectations between parents and professionals.

Finally, men working in ECEC can be role models for fathers seeking new vocational orientations. It is a common phenomenon that women reconsider their vocational choice when they have children, and start a new career in ECEC after a period of parental leave. The above-mentioned New Zealand report states that more involvement of men in everyday life in kindergarten can inspire fathers as well to consider ECEC as a possible career choice (Farquhar, 2012). Based on similar experiences in the UK, Warin (2018) pleads for recruitment strategies targeted at men who are fathers.

## **Working with Fathers as a Task for Male EC Professionals**

As mentioned above, men working in ECEC are often struggling to find their role in a female-dominated environment. Working with fathers is an important task in the context of collaboration with parents, and engaging in this field can provide male workers with a positive role in the centre's work. This includes activities for fathers and children, such as outdoor trips or play afternoons, but as well meetings with groups of fathers where they can exchange experiences and discuss educational topics and their role as fathers, including personal reflection. In this context, some projects for more men in ECEC in Germany have focused on qualifying male practitioners for working with fathers (Haas & Rams, 2016; Marquardt & Hessel, 2013). Surveys from Germany show that in support groups for male EC professionals (which play an important role in retaining and qualifying men in the field of ECEC), working with fathers is a regular topic (Rohrmann, 2013).

However, male practitioners do not agree on the relevance of their gender for working with fathers, as the following quotations illustrate. One male EC professional stated: „In my view, practitioners' gender is very important. (...) Of

course, men are diverse – but gender as a category dominates perceptions“ (Koordinationsstelle, 2013, p. 58, translation T.R.). The interviewee viewed male practitioners as „door openers“ for fathers, and pointed to their „double role“ as competitors and role models in relation to fathers. Another interviewee stated the opposite: „Our experience is that gender is less relevant (...) First of all, the professionalism of practitioners has to be taken into consideration. Practitioners need to be able to meet fathers (and, of course, mothers) on an equal level, and with empathy“ (Koordinationsstelle, 2013, p. 60, translation T.R.). These examples show the broad range of attitudes towards the role of men working in ECEC, which are connected closely to different understandings of gender, as well as the individual self-concepts of men who chose caring for and educating children as profession.

## Discussion

Male EC professionals are at the crossroads of two debates regarding their relationship to fatherhood. Firstly, the relevance of men in ECEC is debated against the backdrop of a lack of fathers in families. Secondly, working with fathers is seen as an important task for male EC professionals based on the idea that being the same sex makes it easier to connect. Although these two expectations are contrary, both share an underlying assumption of a biological polarity between men and women, which is a simplification and not in line with a current understanding of gender. Although there are similarities between male workers and fathers, it is necessary to reflect on gender-specific assumptions, to respect individual differences, and to develop an approach of learning experiences that resists the idea of „in-nate“ personality traits of men and women. Warin (2018) insists that responsivity and sensitive parenting skills can be learned and are not based on sex differences. This is true for fathers as well as for EC professionals, and is an important argument for the involvement of men, both in the family and in ECEC. On the other hand, existing differences between men and

women, including the body and its physical presence, should not be underestimated, especially when seen as a starting point for gender reflexivity and the development of a gender equal society (Peeters et al., 2015). Accepting differences opens up for new perspectives, and is fundamental for an inclusive conceptualization of ECEC.

## Conclusions

It can be summarized that gender-reflexive male professionals can play an important role for involving fathers in ECEC institutions. This does *not* mean that men absolutely need male counterparts in ECEC staff. All-female teams can do excellent work in involving fathers, while men on the staff are by no means a guarantee of better collaboration with fathers. However, research evidence, as well as practical experience, shows that men can enrich cooperation with fathers (including „social fathers“) in ECEC institutions in many ways.

*The first impression.* Having men in the team counteracts the impression of kindergarten as a „feminine“ place, and can indicate that men and women are equally commonplace and welcome.

*Male contact persons for fathers.* Male practitioners can play an important role as same-sex counterparts for fathers. At least for some fathers, this may facilitate conversations and professional communication. Mixed teams also allow for consultation with parents in „mixed double“ conversations; this is especially important when parenting conflicts between mothers and fathers are tackled.

*Male role models with regard to interactions with children.* Male practitioners can serve as role model for fathers, showing them how to care for and interact with young children. Many fathers wish to build better relations with their children when compared to their experience with their own fathers. Especially in the early years they often feel insecure on how to realize this, and are open to suggestions and new ideas.

*Contacts for migrant fathers.* In some migrant families it is not common for men and

women to discuss educational issues together. For these fathers, it might be easier to have a male professional in ECEC centres as a contact person. Cultural-sensitive and gender-sensitive approaches need to be combined in order to bridge cultural differences.

*Contacts for separated fathers.* In debates on single parents, there is little attention paid to the situation of fathers who do not have custody and do not live with their children but would, nevertheless, like to take part in their children's lives. This may cause uncertainty in ECEC staff, especially when the relationship between the parents is conflicted along gendered boundaries. Despite this, ECEC institutions can be a place where both parents are welcome, with a male worker being the father's contact person.

*Team leader for activities for fathers.* While activities for and with fathers and children can easily be initiated and conducted by female colleagues, meetings and discussion groups for fathers might benefit from being led by man. A male professional can offer a „secure space“ for men, and he himself can participate in such activities as a person who has reflected on his own masculine identity. This might be relevant for discussions on parenting styles, about specific problems of men regarding work-family-balance, or an exchange about experiences with their own fathers.

*Role model for new vocational orientations.* Finally, male EC professionals can inspire fathers who are in search for new vocational orientations and might be interested in working with children. Fathers interested in such a prospect could participate in everyday life in the centre, in voluntary work around the centre's activities, or even, as a first step into a new vocational career, as assistants or freelance staff for specific activities.

## **Limitations and Implications for Future Research and Policy Development**

Although this paper clearly shows that cultural factors play an important role in gender relations

in families, as well as in relationships between fathers and EC professionals, it must be kept in mind that the presented evidence derives from a few projects in a few countries. Further research is needed to identify specific cultural factors that are relevant for attitudes towards the involvement of men in the lives of children. To avoid simplifying generalizations, it is necessary to focus the cultural diversity of fathers between, as well as within, societies. Measures for a better gender balance must take into account that attitudes towards men in ECEC vary due to the diverse cultural backgrounds of families.

Another limitation of the study is the relatively broad use of the term „involvement of fathers in ECEC“. As Janssen & Vandenbroeck (2018, p. 813) show, there are “subtle yet meaningful differences” in concepts of educational partnering across countries. Research on fathers' involvement in ECEC must be contextualized with regard to different orientations towards parental involvement. On the other hand, concepts of working with families in ECEC institutions need to include perspectives of men – in the family as well as in gender-mixed teams.

To conclude with, working with fathers needs a cultural-sensitive approach combined with gender sensitivity, and this is true as well for research on this issue. Keeping this in mind, the inclusion of gender-sensitive male professionals in the ECEC work force is a tool for promoting change in gender relations in the wider society, not least by building good relationships with parents and especially fathers. To conclude, gender-mixed teams are an opportunity for more diversity, and more diversity is a good starting point for good collaboration with both fathers and mothers alike.

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