The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private foundation that makes grants, shares knowledge and conducts advocacy to improve the situation of young children (age 0–8) who are growing up in socially and economically disadvantaged circumstances.

Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, established the Foundation with broad humanitarian goals in 1949. After Bernard’s death in 1958, his son Oscar focused the Foundation’s activities on giving children a fair start in life – not only for the sake of the children themselves, but also because it is crucial to building societies that are more peaceful, prosperous, cohesive and creative.

We made our first early childhood development grant in 1966, in Jamaica. Since then we have invested over half a billion dollars in more than 50 countries. Our legacy includes helping to start and grow some of the world’s leading early childhood organisations and contributing to the development of public policies and models of service delivery that have reached national scale in countries as diverse as Jamaica, Colombia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Initially, our income came from the profits of the global packaging company built by Bernard van Leer, and we worked in countries where the company had factories. The company was sold in 1999, and an endowment was set up which now provides us with an annual operating budget of around 19 million euros.

Currently, the Foundation funds innovative projects in eight countries – Brazil, India, Israel, the Netherlands, Peru, Tanzania, Turkey and Uganda – chosen for their economic, geographical and cultural diversity. Our work in those countries informs our growing global programme of advocacy and knowledge development, through which we aim to increase interest and investment in young children and families around the world.
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Innovations and initiatives

We now have increasing evidence that investing in young children and families can lead to better outcomes for the current and future generations. Photo • Courtesy Asociación Red Innova
After years of focusing overwhelmingly on the mother–child dyad, child development as a field has ‘discovered’ fathers. Gary Barker explains how the MenCare campaign is leading research into why and how to engage fathers, and advocating for changes in public policy and practice in the early childhood arena.

What role do fathers play in child development? Do children need them? Do fathers play a unique role in generating the conditions children need to grow and thrive? In recent years a number of major and longitudinal studies have been conducted on the role of fathers, and they reached the overwhelming conclusion that fathers matter greatly for children, and that children matter greatly for fathers.

Specifically, research affirms that:
1. fathers matter for child development in more ways than we have historically considered, meaning they matter for diverse areas of a child’s life, from emotional to intellectual
2. fathers matter over the life cycle of the child and adolescent, and not just in the early years of life
3 fathers matter differently for boys and girls in some settings
4 fathers hold an important caregiving and developmental role, both directly for their children and indirectly as part of a caregiving ‘team’
5 men themselves change in diverse ways, biologically and psychologically, when they take on caregiving roles.

In short, fathers influence child development, and children influence fathers’ development and life trajectory.

In spite of this spurt in research, the early child development field has been slow to turn these findings into programmes and policies, with some notable exceptions. A few important pioneer parent training programmes began to reach out to fathers, and a few countries – notably in Scandinavia – began to take fathers seriously in parental leave policies. But fathers were still usually an afterthought in the field of early child development.

Inspired by conclusions from a 2005 global summit on fatherhood, organised by the Fatherhood Institute and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Promundo and partner organisations launched the MenCare campaign in 2011. Its goal was to create a global advocacy platform and provide a resource base of evidence-based programming – programming that can and should be taken to scale.

Indeed, rather than a one-off intervention or pilot impact evaluation, the campaign set off with the goal of engaging the public sector. A cornerstone of the campaign has been carrying out targeted advocacy with ministries of health, ministries of education and ministries of child development on the need to involve fathers, and providing ready-to-implement programme tools to do so. These tools are collected in Program P (‘P’ for paternidade, paternidad and paternité), now used in more than ten countries and officially adopted by ministries of health or governments in Indonesia, Rwanda, Brazil, South Africa and elsewhere. The programme includes activities and recommendations for training public sector staff who interact with families, recommendations for targeted policy advocacy, and parent and father training activities drawn from the ‘best of’ evidence-based parent training.

**Lessons learned**

One of the key lessons learned in the process has been the need to do the hands-on training and awareness building within the public sector. A study carried out by our partner NGO in Chile (CulturaSalud) found that healthcare and childcare sector workers who hold traditional views about gender (that women do the care work and men get in the way), are less likely to talk to men and include them, even when the father is there. Similarly, in Brazil, where the Ministry of Health created a ‘prenatal men’s health protocol’ urging health workers across the country to include fathers in prenatal visits, we have supported the large-scale training of health workers. And the results are paying off: more men are coming to prenatal visits and are learning hands-on fathering skills. In short, one of our conclusions is that it matters both that we get the policies on the books but also that those individuals who implement the policies are taking seriously the need to engage fathers.

The other major and perhaps obvious conclusion is that we need not simply to train the public sector but also to change the structural conditions in men’s and women’s lives so that men do more of the hands-on caregiving.

To give an example of these household dynamics and the structural factors behind them, research finds that both mothers and fathers use corporal punishment against children, but data from multiple settings finds that mothers are more likely to use it. Part of this has to do with the fact that women do more of the care work – and thus are more likely to be in daily and constant contact with children. An impact evaluation of a parent training programme carried out by Promundo in Brazil found that while attitudes related to corporal punishment among mothers changed as a result of the intervention, mothers’ rates of use of corporal punishment did not
decline. In qualitative interviews with the mothers, many noted that the lack of support in daily care work by male partners was a factor in their use of corporal punishment. In Brazil and many other settings, mothers, particularly in single-parent households, carry out the majority of caregiving and face economic hardship.

Other studies have found that mothers who have a good relationship with and receive support from biological fathers or other male caregivers, as well as other social networks, have less parental stress and are less likely to use corporal punishment. If we want to reduce household stress, reduce corporal punishment and promote men’s involvement as caregivers, we must address the structural factors that too often disengage men from the care of children.

In sum, our evaluation of MenCare training to date confirms that:

1. we need to promote men’s greater involvement as fathers to reduce the stress on mothers and female caregivers, and
2. that it matters how men act as fathers – and it particularly matters if they use violence against their children’s mother and against children.

Our work is also informed by our household-level sample survey, research that has found clearly how men’s involvement in positive ways as fathers is transmitted from one generation to the next. Boys who see their fathers or other men in the household carry out care work and domestic work, and interact with female partners in equitable ways, are more likely to do a greater share of the care work when they become adults and to be men who believe in and live gender equality. They are also more likely to have happy, fulfilled lives – as are their partners.

The way forward
It is with these findings that we are embarking on the next generation of MenCare advocacy, focusing on promoting equal, non-transferable and paid parental leave. Partners from nearly 30 countries where MenCare activities are being carried out are jointly advocating for such leave. We argue that we need governments, employers and workplace policies to support the caregiving of both mothers and fathers, and that we need universal policies to do so.

In short, men’s caregiving pays off. It creates equality and well-being in the short-term and it plants the seeds for equality in future generations of boys and girls. And promoting involved fatherhood isn’t simply an issue of individual men doing more. Employment and livelihood policies, early childhood development programmes and social services have not caught up with the changes taking place in families around the world, thus making it difficult for men who do want to share caregiving more equally with their partners. The limited evidence suggests, nevertheless, that men may increasingly be realising the importance of their roles in their children’s and partner’s lives and taking on more caregiving activities. The change is happening. The MenCare partners seek to speed it up.

“In short, fathers influence child development, and children influence fathers’ development and life trajectory.”