

MJKL-Commentary speech – Eppu Saarela

"When I think of fatherhood, I tend to think like a sociologist. I confuse my self with the term itself and then I start to babble about a phenomenon of social, biological and psychological aspects. So my first instinct is to distance my self from the subject of fatherhood when in fact it should be something intimate and relatable.

As a possible future father, my thoughts dwell on the things that would make me a better father. That is simply: how can I spend as much time as possible with my child and create a lasting emotional bond. As priorities go, nothing else compares to the time spent together.

Finnish paternal leave reform offers a step in the right direction. It creates more time and more opportunities to bond emotionally between father and the child. That means more hours changing diapers, playing games, reading, singing and just being there. According to statistics, the infant years are crucial for future bonding between father and the child. The meaning of the father to a child and vice versa needs to be learnt during the first years to have a lasting effect, even if the parents are separated.

The presence of a father in the family has positive influence on children in many fields. These include better school achievement, better reading, writing and mathematical skills, less unemployment, lower risk of suicide, less drug use, less homelessness, less victimization by child abuse, sexual abuse or domestic violence, less violent crime, less poverty, more trust towards other people and a better developed capability for empathy.

The reform also offers opportunities for the parents to bond together and organize parenting more equally and divide responsibilities and resources according to the needs of the whole family. Families can share the parental leave internally in new ways and use other benefits and flexibilities with the parental leave. It will be easier to have the parental leave in various time periods and multiple sections.

Finnish families are diverse and all good models of parental leave system has to take into account the varying financial opportunities and working life dynamics of parents. It has to make it economically, if not beneficial, then sufficient, for the family to use the parental leave opportunities for their full length. Time spent between father and the child usually increases when the child grows older. It would be helpful to prolong the parental leave option until the child turn seven.

Every parental leave system has its drawbacks and with an universal model, it's always a balance between freedom and desired outcomes. Legal opportunities are never adequate for a change in constructs like fatherhood. We need the culture and the individual to adapt in order to make progress. Statistically, finnish fathers are spending time with their children more than ever in finnish history and I believe that is a sign of on-going cultural change in fatherhood.

There must be a cultural space for many ways of being a father and a parent but we also have to adapt desired values and practices in order to create better fatherhood. At some point, we have to move past the popular term in Finland, “involved fatherhood”, and just talk about fathers doing their thing, that is, committing to parenting and emotional bonding, just as parents do.

In the future, that helps parent to divide roles or tasks more freely, articulates the core values of good parenting and helps fathers to move on to the practice of being a father.