

Nordic Fathers on Paternity Leave | March 31, 2022 | Musiikkitalo, Helsinki

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE REPORT STATE OF NORDIC FATHERS

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Welcome to you all here in Helsinki, and you too, somewhere there online. It's great to have you with us from all over the world, including Africa, Asia and North and South America. I agree with you that there is something interesting about our Nordic welfare culture.

I'm here as the secretary general of the Central Association of Men's Organizations in Finland. Our aim is to promote well-being and gender equality from male perspective. However, my main job is to be the executive director of Miessakit organization. Miessakit is an NGO and expert organization that takes care of the well-being of Finnish men and trains professionals in the field. I have worked fulltime in Miessakit now for twenty-seven years.

In this speech, I will talk about some of the key findings made in the State of the Nordic Fathers report. The report was published in late 2019 and has been prepared in collaboration with Promundo, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the MÄN organization. In addition, I bring up observations through my own work and expertise.

The well-being of parenthood is the most important social pillar in Nordic society. The main thing the children need is that their parents are well. Parental well-being is stronger the more mothers and fathers can be close to the lives of their children - right from the first years. And parental well-being is stronger also, when parents are satisfied with the way childcare and other domestic responsibilities are shared. All in all, when it comes to parental leave, the most important thing to talk about is how the leave increases the well-being of families.

Today, we focus especially on fatherhood, the experiences and needs of fathers, and the positive effects that family leave has on fathers. More than 90% of Nordic fathers want to have a close relationship with their kids from birth. More than 90% of fathers also think that one of the important roles of a father is to be strongly involved in childcare.

Fathers in the Nordic countries are no different from fathers in most other countries; they all want to be with their kids. But in the Nordic countries we have more chances. The Nordic countries offer the most generous leave schemes for parents in the world, and they also take longer leave than parents in most other countries. And they want more. Both fathers and mothers in all of the Nordic countries say they want longer leave.

There are many benefits for fathers on taking family leave. Above all, family leave increases the possibility of creating an ever deeper and more lasting relationship with their own children. And the more a father is involved in the lives of his children from the beginning, the more he is involved as they grow. Taking family leave usually increases fathers' satisfaction with his fatherhood, relationship, and life in general. Those, who for one reason or another, do not have the chance to take family leave are more likely to express their dissatisfaction with the situation. It is also important to note that when fathers are older, and they are asked what they would change in their lives, most often they say that they would have spent more time with their kids.

The report on the state of the Nordic fathers does not deal with the most serious social problem in Nordic society, the large number of divorces. And the divorces mostly happen when the children are small. That phase can be quite stressful in northern countries. Babies need attention all the time and at the same time both mothers and fathers have their work careers to think about. Too many times the stress leads to problems in relationship and even to divorce. Nowadays both parents want equally to take care of the kids

also after divorce. And, although many can cope with the situation quite well, there can be hurtful fights about the custody matters and such. Especially fathers fear that the divorce is a threat to their parenthood. The more both parents take family leave, the better they can support each other and cope with the stressful phase together. This helps to make the relationship stronger to meet both crises and everyday life. And the more the fathers take family leave, the easier it is for them to make satisfying deals of shared parenthood after divorce.

Nordic fathers and employers think it is good for fathers to take family leave. But they may not share their thoughts enough with each other. So, some fathers imagine that other fathers or employers do not support fathers to take family leave. Therefore, it is important, that both fathers and employers speak out that they think it is a good thing to take family leave. Fathers who have taken family leave also say that taking the leave had a positive effect on their working life. And taking it has not made career development more difficult.

The more family leave is earmarked for fathers, the more they take it. And they take it even more if it's possible to take it in several parts until the children go to school – or even further. Nordic fathers take from 10–30% of the leave available. And it seems, that 30-35% is the level what the Nordic family leave model can achieve. Partly that has something to do with gender specific qualities, but I think it's mainly because of the wholeness of domestic responsibilities. Families know that sharing childcare is one part of the adult responsibilities within families. There is a significant amount of other things that are important to take care of and share as well. It is not necessary to divide all the tasks fifty-fifty, as long as the overall ratio is satisfactory. The main thing is that every family finds their own satisfying way of sharing domestic responsibilities and family leave. But even if the 30 percent used by fathers stays as the reachable level, only couple of the Nordic countries have made it, not to mention other countries.

The parenthood of a man is in most ways quite the same as that of a woman. Studies say that the presence of the father increases the well-being of the children in all levels – not only because it is good that there are more than one to take care of parenthood, but also because he is a man. By their father, children gain valuable experience of what manhood is. It's significant that a boy or girl can mirror him- or herself to a parent of the same and different sex. It's also often so that if a child has no or only vague contact with a male parent, it affects the child's attitude towards men. Unnecessary fear or uncertainty may arise. Many children miss a male parent if one does not exist in the family. That is why we have organization-based activities in Finland, where volunteer men act as a kind of father figure in families without a father.

Love, communication and mutual respect between mothers and fathers are the keys to good parenting. And that ground is well supported when men talk to each other about what it is like to be a father in general, how they have taken family leave and how it has affected family and working life. In this way, they can focus for a moment only on their own parenting, paternity. As fatherhood develops within the fathers themselves, it becomes more stable and supports better the relationship with the mother.

Finally, I would like to highlight the most important observation I have made in my career. In general, in their hearts and souls, people are good and want good for each other. Therefore, mothers and fathers are good and want good for each other. This goodness is the key to safety and trust. It is worth relying on this goodness and laying the foundation for all social work to support families on this goodness - including the development of a family leave system.