

## A responsive parenting intervention in Istanbul

Gaye Uğurlu, Project Coordinator, Culture City Foundation, Istanbul, Turkey



Most of the fathers participating in the programme believed that they gained a better understanding of the importance of their role, with some speaking of creating 'memorable moments' with their children which they had not experienced in childhood with their own father.

Photo - Courtesy Culture City Foundation

**In the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul, the Bernard van Leer Foundation is funding the Informed Families – Healthy Generations project. While the project has yet to be formally evaluated for its effectiveness in reducing violence, this article describes its activities to promote responsive parenting and positive early anecdotal feedback.**

*I used to yell a lot at my children, even slapped them sometimes, but I stopped this behaviour after I attended the workshops. I mean when you yell and beat, the child begins to be worse. And the child doesn't do what you told anyway. But, when you talk, when you explain it well the child does both what you have told and you are happy and the child is happy. It is really nice. My relationships got better with my husband and child.*

These are the words of a woman who attended family seminars and group workshops to support responsive parenting, held by the Informed Families – Healthy Generations project in the Beyoğlu district<sup>1</sup> of Istanbul, Turkey. The project has been implemented since 2012, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, by the Culture City Foundation in cooperation with the Beyoğlu Municipality, Istanbul Bilgi University and the Beyoğlu Region Department of the Ministry of Education.

The project aims to reduce all forms of violence in the lives of young children, including neglect, psychological/verbal abuse, harsh physical punishment, and exposure to violence at home or in the community. It involves various activities to develop responsive parenting, such as mother support groups, father

support groups, therapeutic play groups with children, seminars about communication and childrearing, and psychological counselling. There were 158 participants in the group activities, while the seminars reached around 900 people – almost all women – and about 800 children, young people and adults consulted the psychological counselling centre.

At the end of their involvement in the mothers' groups, many participants reported that they saw themselves as better problem solvers, and noted improved capacity to cope with stress and anger and to evaluate their emotions when chastising their children. They felt more confident about differentiating between over-protective behaviour and good parenting, and realised that trying to understand how the child felt served as a big step in translating childrearing values into skills. The effect of the project was not so much to change their values about mothering, but to show them practical know-how, such as kneeling down to communicate at the child's level, or waiting until a child is developmentally ready before starting to toilet train. Many reported that they were now spending more quality time with their children rather than leaving them by themselves in front of the television.

The 8-week fatherhood programme focused on developing better communication skills and giving fathers an opportunity to practise the techniques they learned, for example in storytelling and toy-making activities. Most of the fathers participating in the programme believed that they gained a better understanding of the importance of their role, with some speaking of creating 'memorable moments' with their children which they had not experienced in childhood with their own fathers.

The counselling centre dealt with problems such as relationship difficulties, domestic violence, trauma, somatisation, attention deficit, learning disabilities, and regulation of emotions such as anxiety, worry, anger, shame and guilt. Generally, feedback from those who received counselling pointed to a significant change in communication with family members.

This qualitative feedback suggests that the project overall had a positive effect on participants – making them more confident and content, and improving family relationships and sharing of responsibilities. However, there is not yet enough data to pinpoint whether there was a decrease in violence against children. This impact is expected to become more visible in the longer term.

**Note**

- 1 Project activities targeted three neighbourhoods within the Beyoğlu Municipality: Yenışehir, Hacıahmet, and Okmeydanı.