

# Father groups for equal parenting

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This publication was funded by  
the European Union's Rights,  
Equality and Citizenship  
Programme (2014-2020)



**MÄN**  
FÖR JÄMSTÄLLDHET. MOT VÅLD.  
REDEFINING MASCULINITY.



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## About MÄN

MÄN is a non-profit, feminist organisation founded in 1993 as a platform for men to take action against men’s violence towards women. We work to change destructive masculinity norms and reduce male violence. Our vision is an equal world free from violence.

## This report

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This publication was funded by the European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)



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# Did you know that in families with young children, mothers are off sick twice as much as fathers?

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And that it stays that way until the children turn 18? It is just one of the many effects of living with inequality, in a society where often most of the care and household chores are optional for men and the main responsibility for women. We also know the vast majority of domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women, both in and outside the home.

At MÄN we want to change this. One part of that change is the LifeCycle Project. With support of the EU, we have initiated a project to scale up the work of violence prevention in Sweden. It is called the LifeCycle Project because violence prevention should continue throughout life. We know there are stages when men are more receptive to changing their behaviour and attitudes. One such point is becoming a parent. A key part of the project is thus working towards equal parenting by focusing on fatherhood.

In this report we explain how we have rapidly scaled up our work with father groups and put in place the structures needed to run them across Sweden.



## About the LifeCycle Project

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This report is a part of the project the LifeCycle, run by the Swedish organisation MÄN, in partnership with Unizon. The project is funded by EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014–2020). In the LifeCycle Project, we work with systematic and sustainable violence prevention with a lifelong perspective. Activities include violence preventive programs for elementary and secondary schools and engaging fathers for equal parenting.

The Life Cycle project is based on previous experiences, where we have supported and implemented longterm and systematic violence prevention work. Over the years, we have cooperated with municipalities, districts and regions across Sweden, and have been able to harvest good experiences and examples of how programs can be designed and developed. The LifeCycle project has enabled us to scale up this work, to get closer to our vision: an equal world without violence.

Read more about the project and MÄN's work at [www.mfj.se/en](http://www.mfj.se/en).

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# Equal parenting

## – The path to an equal society

Sharing parenthood equally is not only important individual families, it is crucial to increasing gender equality and reducing violence in society. Under the aegis of the EU, we have worked strategically with equal parenting within the LifeCycle Project, by training facilitators for father groups across Sweden. Our long-term goal? An equal world, free from violence.



Jens' son Malte is going swimming with friends. He loves online gaming, though, so before heading out he plays a quick game while Jens watches, fascinated. Even a few minutes with a child is important.

**W**hen Jens Karberg was training to be a dad group leader, his three sons used to ask him where he was going. It opened up warm conversations about what it is like to be a parent and a father.

– There are so many things you wonder about. How to be a good dad? It was good to start that conversation with my sons.

Today, Jens is project manager for the LifeCycle Project at MÄN. For two years he has worked to scale up dad group operations, develop a new toolkit for group discussions, and train dad group leaders across Sweden. MÄN's dad group activities fall under the EU LifeCycle Project, which places the role of fathers in the wider context of preventing and combating violence. Parenthood is an important window of opportunity when working with men for change. Having children is a unique situation which presents us with the chance to support men in caring, listening, and thinking equality.

– For many men, it's the first time they look outside themselves and realise what they do affects someone else's life. If we are able to reach fathers then and talk about important issues, we can change things. It can be questions like 'What kind of parent am I? How am I in the relationship with my partner? Am I pulling my weight as a parent?'

### Sweden is not equal

By international standards, Sweden and the other Nordic countries have come a long way in equal parenting and fathers' involvement.

– Norms have changed in Sweden, and the decisive factor has been legislation. Before 1974, there were hardly any stay-at-home dads. But that year we got paid parental leave for all hetero parents. With every law increasing the non-transferable days of parental leave, fathers have used more, and today fathers use 30 per cent of parental leave.

In Sweden, fathers take, and want to take, parental leave. The problem is that men tend to do it on their own terms. For the first two years, 80 per cent of leave is still taken by women and 20 per cent by men.

– There are exceptions, and there are couples who split it equally. But it's still largely women who have the main childcare and household responsibilities.

How we as a society share out parental responsibility has a huge impact on gender equality and violence prevention.

– It affects how much we're paid, what jobs we can get, and how much we can work. In other words, how large our income will be for much of our lives, and ultimately how large our pensions will be.

Inequality affects family relationships when women are forced to shoulder more of the burden, and has a knock-on effect on women's health.



Jens and Julian, the youngest of his three sons, at home in Gröndal in Stockholm.

– We can see women's health is as good as men's until the first child comes along, but after that women's sick leave doubles. It stays like that for the first 18 years.

For every month of parental leave the father takes, the mother's future income rises by 7 per cent.

– It makes an appreciable difference in all areas. We know that half of all women today will have pensions below the EU poverty line. That's why our work is so important.

### Part of a broader effort

Equal parenting is evidently an important part of working towards an equal society. Not that each dad group is an immediate answer; rather, father groups are one piece in a much larger puzzle, as Jens Karberg points out.

– The groups are good at focusing on individual parenting. What's tough? What's fun? How do I deal with the difficult stuff? It's encouraging to talk to other parents about things I can cope with and things I can't.

# Participants rate the courses highly

**4,7 out of 5: that is the average for MÄN's dad group courses, rated by participants in written evaluations. Almost all participants give the father groups the highest or the second highest rating. The evaluations are an indication of our success in rapidly scaling up numbers, while maintaining a high standard and a high level of participant satisfaction.**

In the groups, the conversation is in focus. The participants feel that the content discussed and the conversations in the group are important. The fathers feel safe sharing their own experiences and

listening to others. This shows that MÄN's method the Small Room is an effective tool for deepening conversations.

The group leaders are important - it requires them to be able to facilitate the conversation rather than acting as experts. At the same time, the leaders need to be rooted in MÄN's core values of gender equality and feminism. In recent years, MÄN has succeeded in educating more group leaders while maintaining the quality and high appreciation of the training. 4.6 out of 5 possible is the overall rating for the group leader course.

## WHAT IS A FATHER GROUP?

- In a father group, 5–10 participants meet four or five times with a group leader. Meetings are held in real life or online
- Each meeting focuses on a predetermined theme, such as fatherhood, relationships with children and partners, or work–life balance as a parent
- The themes reflect the latest research and MÄN's experience of running father groups, and cover topics we consider important and interesting for parents to discuss
- The themes are important, but meetings are not structured and always centre on the discussion and parents' own experiences
- As discussion leader, the group leader's role is to invite participants to speak and keep the discussion flowing

### Keeping up the good work

It is important that the conversations started in the father groups can continue afterwards. For that reason, participants are given homework, for example looking with one's partner at how one

might share responsibility for childcare and the household differently. In the last meeting, the group leader makes arrangements so participants if they wish can continue to meet without the group leader present.

### The Small room

The Small Room is a method MÄN uses in father groups and other discussion groups. It creates a safe space for engaged listening and the sharing of difficult experiences and feelings.

The method is based on a few simple principles:

- Talk from your own experience about what matters to you
- Listen actively without commenting on others' stories
- Share the floor fairly
- Do not discuss others' experiences outside the group

You can find out more about the Small Room method and our other methods at [www.män.se](http://www.män.se).

250

OVER 250 PEOPLE ATTENDED A MÄN FATHER GROUP BETWEEN JANUARY 2018 AND JUNE 2020.

8

THERE WERE EIGHT GROUP LEADER COURSES IN 2018–2020, OF WHICH ONE WAS ONLINE ONLY.

40

THERE WERE 40 FATHER GROUPS LED BY VOLUNTARY GROUP LEADERS IN 2018–2020.

86

A TOTAL OF 86 PEOPLE (78 MEN AND 8 WOMEN) FROM ALL OVER SWEDEN HAVE ATTENDED MÄN'S GROUP LEADER COURSES, OF WHICH 53 WERE VOLUNTEERS AND THE REST WERE LOCAL AUTHORITY STAFF.

FATHERS WHO HAVE ATTENDED A FATHER GROUP RATED IT AS 4.7 ON A SCALE FROM 1 TO 5.





# Father group leaders all over the country

Before the LifeCycle Project started, there were very few open-to-all dad groups in Sweden and even fewer groups run by municipalities. Thanks to the EU funded LifeCycle Project, MÄN has been able to scale up its dad group activities. In the space of two years we have gone from only one active father group in 2018 to seventy father group leaders across the country. We have put in place the foundations for even greater numbers. We have started online courses and groups because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This allows us to reach out to fathers all over Sweden to an extent never seen before.







“I want to be better  
for my child”

Being a dad can be demanding. But it is always worthwhile, and the solution is to get more involved with your children, not less, says Shahab Ahmadian, father and educator at MÄN.



Shahab Ahmadian is the father of 4-year-old Nilah. His work involves including more men and more perspectives in MÄN's campaigning issues. He often uses parenting as a conversation opener with other men.

– Otherwise it can be hard to get a conversation going between blokes. 'Now let's talk about our feelings' can scare men off. But talk about their kids and it's different. It's a way of tapping into that vulnerability.

Shahab became a parent four years ago. He has found working with an organisation like MÄN has had real meaning.

– It's meant something, working somewhere where it's not the norm not to care about your child. It's so easy for us blokes to just leave. I can leave without being an arsehole; I can move to South America for 10, 20 years. I know deep down it's still an option.

#### Affirmation

He finds it affirming to work somewhere where fathers' parenting is valued, and where everyone is expected to take responsibility and engage with their children. Yet, as he says, there is always a risk of glamourising fatherhood.

– It's okay to think it's hard being a dad. I don't feel I have to paint myself as the perfect parent. I'm

rubbish at some things, and I'm honest about it. And sometimes I hate it.

He believes you can discuss all the difficult things about parenting and still make the point it is always worthwhile—and that the solution is to get more involved with your children, not less.

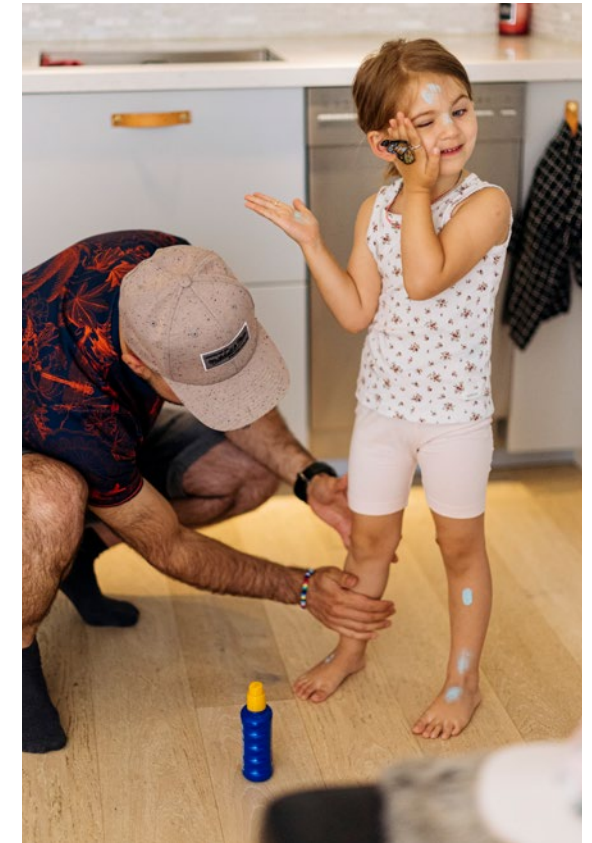
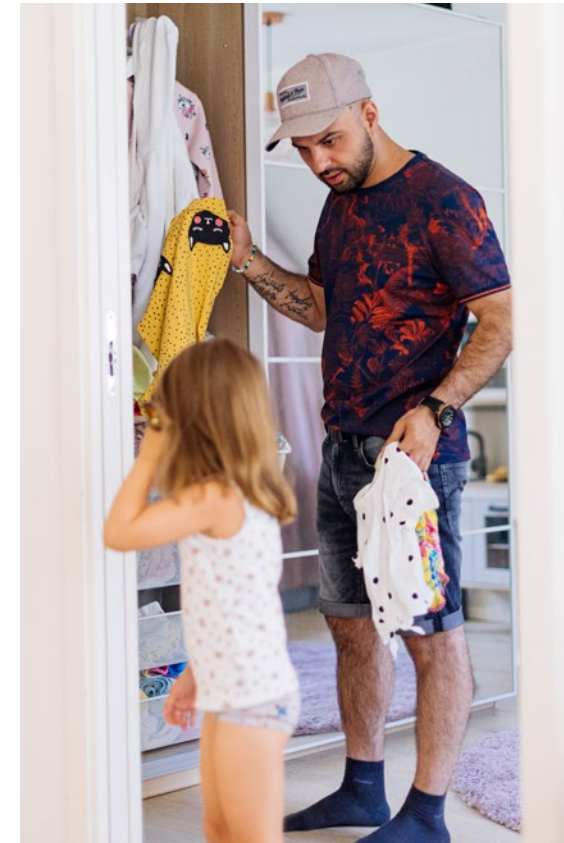
– All that hard work with a child really is rewarding. I like to say you get everything back 'with VAT added'. When I'm with my child it's all more fun. It all ties together. I try to be a good dad, and it can be an uphill fight, but you have a little person in your life who loves you for who you are. It doesn't matter to her what I look like, what my job is, or if I have a lot of money—that's real love.

#### Through a child's eyes

Parenthood encourages many men to do some soul-searching. As Shahab puts it, it is as if you acquire the ability to see yourself through your child's eyes.

– You think, 'What is this kid seeing?' Before I had a kid, it was more 'One of these days I'll get round to it'. I'll stop watching porn, I'll eat more healthily, I'll be a better person in this and this situation. But when I became a parent it was right here, right now: 'Who do I want to be for my kid?' It can be a motivator; you want to be better. There I think is an important way in. •

Shahab and his daughter Nilah are good at chilling. They are getting ready for a picnic in the sunshine, and doing it together, from washing their hands and deciding what sandwiches to make to choosing what to wear and putting on sunscreen.





# Promising findings from MÄN's father groups

**Feeling less lonely and better relationships with partners and children: these are two things mentioned by participants in recent studies of MÄN's father groups.**

Two research studies have been published in 2020, both about MÄN father groups. One of the studies has found that father groups are an opportunity for creating social networks, and the group conversations can also give rise to challenging questions about relationship difficulties or equal parenting. It confirms that the group leader has a key role to play in sustaining an open and honest discussion in any father group.

Another team of researchers have published a quantitative study of men's understanding and experience of father groups. They find that their respondents felt that by attending a father group their relationship with their partner and children improved. Respondents also spoke of being more self-confident as parents and their parenting being more equal. The study also shows there is a reduction in feelings of loneliness among fathers.

On the other hand, fathers suffering from depression were less satisfied with the father groups. The conclusion is that some fathers may need a variety of forms of support during their transition into fatherhood. Both studies underline that the research about such groups is relatively new, and how important continued research efforts will be.

Jens Karberg, project manager of MÄN's LifeCycle Project, notes that fathers with mental health issues seem more likely to attend father groups, which will colour their experience.

– It's very important we know about this as we go forward. The study shows that fathers with mental health issues found the groups less useful. Exactly what this might mean is unclear, but it is significant, and might be because they are less equipped to accept what is being discussed.

MÄN is discussing how best to improve the discussion toolkit to accommodate those whose mental health issues might otherwise prevent them from benefiting from a father group.

– At the moment, for example, we're looking at the possibility of working with fathers going through a separation, as plainly it's an area where we need to do more work.

## Participants' comments about the father groups

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The father group has got me thinking about different things about my parenting: what I'm like now, but also what I want to be like in the future.

”

I think more actively about how parenting should be equal, not only the practical stuff but also emotionally.

”

I've developed a far better understanding of why lots of dads have similar difficulties to me.

”

I'm thinking more about my role as a father, and I've started a dialogue with my partner about our parenting.

”

Alongside other fathers, I've been able to identify questions and find new perspectives on things I've been wondering about as a father.

”

The father group has given me different perspectives on how I can look at parenting that I'd not thought about before.



The qualitative study was by Mia Barimani, Anita Berlin, Karin F. Frykedal, Michael Rosander and Lena Törnkvist, and the quantitative study was by Michael Wells, Birgitta Kerstis, and Ewa Andersson.





# “Being a father is a universal experience”

**Anders Johnsson is a father of two and so far has led three father groups. In the autumn of 2019 and spring of 2020 he participated in a pilot project to reach out to foreign-born fathers in Sweden: a MÄN collaboration with a drop-in preschool in Enskede-Årsta-Vantör and a family centre in Högdalen.**

**T**he first father group Anders led had seven participants from five continents, several religions, and children ranging in age from a fortnight to 29 years old. One participant had one child, another had nine children.

– Despite our different backgrounds and situations it felt natural to meet, because we had something in common: we were all fathers. My sense was there’s a real determination to be a responsible parent in the country they’ve escaped to or moved to.

Despite his positive and rewarding experience of leading the father group, Anders admits there were also challenges.

– What was hard in the beginning was that I had two roles: I was the group leader, but I was also the only Swedish-born person and ended up sort-of representing Swedish society. But other than that it was enjoyable and inspiring to lead that father group. Especially using the ‘Small Room’ method

so everyone could speak without being interrupted. The method creates a safe space where no one has to prepare what to say in advance.

– Often a very caring, intimate atmosphere comes over the group, says Anders.

In his experience, each father group was an important space for participants, and after the meetings one or more fathers stayed behind to continue the conversation.

– I think it comes down to us creating a warm, loving environment where people want to be. Of the three father groups I’ve led, I’ve seen several participants have aha moments, and I think they’ve dared to share more than they first thought they would. It’s also clear how much we recognise ourselves in one another’s stories, despite the differences in age, background, and experience, and we all can learn by listening to one another. •



# “Before I joined the father group I felt overlooked as a parent”

Felix Pecarski is 31 years old and the father of a 2-year-old girl called Karla. In 2019 he participated in a father group which was part of the MÅN pilot project with a drop-in preschool in Enskede-Årsta-Vantör and a family centre in Högdalen.







– I would have liked to be a stay-at-home dad full-time if it'd been possible, says Felix, who was on parental leave for eight months with his daughter Karla.

Felix saw a notice about a father group at the drop-in preschool, and after talking it over with his partner he signed up. He found it a new experience, meeting other fathers and discussing parenting, relationships, gender equality, and child-rearing.

– I'd never been to anything like it before, so to be honest I didn't know what to expect. It was an extremely interesting experience, talking to other dads from different backgrounds, and it gave me lots of new insights about fatherhood because our perspectives and experiences varied so much.

Felix also says participating in the father group affected him as a husband, partner, and father.

– I'm more self-confident and feel more secure in my role as a dad. Before I joined the father group I felt overlooked as a parent. My wife got invitations to different groups for mums and even counselling, but not me as a dad. That's why it felt good to meet up with other dads and talk about stereotypical roles, and how to share the household chores.

He thinks it was interesting to hear how other fathers had shared the housework and childcare with their partners.

– It confirmed the choices my wife and I had made, that we aren't particularly traditional when it comes to gender roles. It feels right for us, but that isn't the case for everyone in the group. But it was nice we could still listen to one another and respect one another's choices. •





# “Leading a father group helped make me a better parent”

– What makes it easy to lead father groups is all the energy you get in return. It doesn't matter how tired I am before a meeting, I always go home afterwards full of energy, says Robert Sihvonen from Hallstahammar, who is one of MÄN's voluntary group leaders.

**B**oth he and Robert Bhatt from Umeå have done MÄN's group leader course, since when they have run several father groups. They describe the role of being a father group leader as both challenging and satisfying.

– The methods we use instil a strong sense of community, and many say they've talked about things at the meetings they've never shared with anyone else. Sometimes, though, it's difficult to make sure everyone is equally involved in the group discussion, says Robert Sihvonen, who did the group leader course in 2018 and led two father groups in 2019.

Robert Bhatt, who also did the group leader course in 2018, says he noticed a considerable difference between two father groups he has led.

– In my first father group there were eight of us. Since it was my first time and everything was new, I stuck closely to the material. I was more focused on making sure we had time to go through all the questions than on staying with a subject that came up spontaneously in discussion. By my second father group, I realised I could use what I'd learnt from the first one. I had a better grasp of the material and format, which meant I could be more

flexible and improvise more than I had with the first group.

Robert Bhatt singles out the Small Room method as the most effective way of working with a father group: every participant can share their personal experiences while the rest of the group listens.

– The Small Room is a feel-good story. Participants are quick to grasp why it's so useful, and how it helps create solidarity and trust within the group. But people can find the strict Small Room rules constraining: no comments, interruptions, or follow-up questions for the person who has the floor. In my second group there was some awkwardness at first, but everyone came to realise how valuable it was, everyone having time in the Small Room.

## **The Small Room method creates communities**

Robert Sihvonen also thinks the Small Room method is one of the key elements in the father groups.

– The Small Room method is amazing, and such an important part of MÄN's work, not just with the father groups. It's a great basis for finding one another and building a sense of community. I've felt such a strong affinity with the group even though I'm there as the leader, as I've shared my







Robert Sihvonen, a father group leader, with his daughters Ebba and Linnea.

experiences too, just like the other participants.

As Robert Sihvonen found with one of his father groups, though, not everyone is as willing to share their experiences: one of the few downsides to being a father group leader in his experience.

– We're all individuals, and sometimes it's a challenge to maintain a tight group. Take the participant in one group who said several times he didn't want to talk about his experiences because it was too much. The whole idea is that everyone shares that sort of experience so things stay open and vulnerable. At the same time, I know it can be hard. As men we haven't practised talking about difficult emotions or being openly vulnerable.

Robert Bhatt also emphasises how important it is to dare to share one's emotions and experiences in the father groups.

– A lot of it is about being in a setting where you can share your experiences. When others share their experiences with me it encourages me to reflect on my own behaviour as a father and as a partner. I'm quicker to notice when I'm sliding into behaviour we've agreed in the father group we should avoid, such as raising my voice or physically hurrying the kids along, simply because I'm feeling stressed. I have to say, leading a father group has helped me be a better parent.

#### Relationships and sex—The attention-grabbers

One of the father group sessions is about sex and relationships; a theme that holds people's attention and results in in-depth discussions, says Robert Bhatt.

– Most people have a lot of feelings about sex and relationships, but don't always know how to

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**The Small Room is a feel-good story. Participants are quick to grasp why it's so useful and how it creates solidarity and trust in the group.**

— Robert Bhatt

talk about them. In my father groups, we talked, for example, about what it's like when you as a father want to have sex more often than your partner. You don't want to pressure your partner and you know you can't demand sex, but there might be an underlying frustration. It's easy to end up avoiding the subject altogether because you find it too complicated to talk about. There is a time and place to sort out those issues, and father groups can be just the right opportunity.

Both Robert Sihvonen and Robert Bhatt say the father groups provide support, and are sometimes the only place where participants dare to open up and talk about how they feel as fathers.

Robert Sihvonen remembers one specific moment that moved him deeply.

– Once, one dad told us his son had problems with his hearing and would need an operation. You could see he found it hard to talk about, and he hadn't really processed it himself. It felt as if there was a surge of emotional support for him from all of us in the room; a presence, an interest. That is what's so special about the father groups: people listen and are there for one another, even though we start barely knowing one another. I haven't had a father group in a while, and I miss it. I'd like to start a new group soon. After every meeting I feel teary and overwhelmed by love and gratitude. Almost everyone wants to carry on meeting after the final session, which I take as a sign it's important and needed. •



Robert Bhatt is a father of two who lives in Umeå. He has been the group leader for two father groups and is looking forward to doing it again.



A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a teal and grey jacket over a dark blue t-shirt, is smiling warmly. He is standing outdoors in a sunlit area with lush green trees in the background. In the foreground, the out-of-focus faces of two children, a girl on the left and a boy on the right, are visible, looking towards the man.

**“The caring ethos does  
something to you”**

Luis Lineo trains group leaders for MÄN's LifeCycle Project. He has a long-term involvement in MÄN and says his work with father groups has given him important insights for his own parenting.





Luis Lineo prepares a picnic, gets the cargo bike out of the garage, and cycles off with the two children to Nour's last basketball session of the season. While Nour hangs out with her teammates he plays football with his son Ilya. Then they all grill sausages.

Luis is an engaged parent in a pleasant Stockholm suburb. He is interested in gender equality and has been a member of MÄN for many years. Feminism has not always had a place in his life, though. Like many fathers, he has difficult personal experiences in his past, which he starting thinking about in earnest when he was going to be a parent.

– I grew up in Ukraine with a single mum. There was a lot of violence around when I was growing up. Hitting your children was fine. I had this fear before I became a parent: 'Shit, am I somehow going to repeat all that?'

These days Luis Lineo works for MÄN, training group leaders for the LifeCycle Project and arranging study visits to Sweden from other EU countries. Luis says the father groups are a mine of information, and he wishes he had been able to join a father group when he had his first child.

– Father groups have been invaluable in helping me see myself what to do and how to react when things get tough.

Luis has arranged two group leaders courses for the LifeCycle Project, one in real life and one online. The online format has worked unexpectedly well, he says. The courses concentrate on participants honing their skills as listeners and discussion leaders.

– It's not really about having all the answers; it's about drawing out other people's thoughts.

That's the point of the course: self-examination and dialogue with others.

As part of the course, group leaders run through the agenda for father group meetings. It includes life as a new father, relationships with children, approaches to parenting, and striking an effective work-life balance.

– We want participants to reflect on their own roles, both as group leaders and as parents or fathers. And they get to try out asking open questions and things like that to get other people to talk openly.

Aren't dads already doing this? Talking to other dads?

– I reckon it's like this. There are gender norms. And those norms don't prioritise men being caring, nurturing people. Now obviously we have it in us, but the father groups mean we can bring it to the surface far more. Participants have to take on the caring role, and that does something to you. You shift focus from being sensible and mentally remote to being more emotionally present. Being present, seeing things from the child's perspective.

Luis finds it impressive to see just how much the fathers find they have in common at the father groups.

– What we all share is that caring ethos. Even if you're counting on being a father but you're not a father yet, that caring ethos is still there, waiting to be brought to the surface. It's so strong. It's one of the most important things we do in the father groups: instilling self-esteem and ensuring they're confident of being caring people. •

It's the end of the basketball season for Nour, and she and Luis play in the break between the picnic and the games.







# Nisse Edwall's paternity leave didn't turn out the way he had expected

The experience of parental leave can differ quite a lot, but all parents still have the responsibility to take care of their children. With support from others, it is easier to tackle difficult periods and the challenges of parenting. This also makes it easier to enjoy the good moments and to stay close to our children throughout life.

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I don't think of soft play or sandpits, of tiny hands or baby's first steps. I think of a rug with bits of dried-on food; I think of a door closing. Looking back, I'm certain I became depressed by being on paternity leave. I got stuck in a rut where everything felt impossibly difficult. The days just slipped away. My wife Li went to work in the mornings, and I was left with a filthy kitchen floor, dirty nappies, and way too much time to kill before she got home. Everyone else seemed to have a brilliant time when they were at home with their kids. It's like they were energised by it. Me, I just felt anxious because I didn't think everything was all that wonderful.





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It all seemed so straightforward for my wife. When she went on maternity leave she was given a place in a parents’ group where she could meet other new parents and build a context. But when I went on paternity leave nine months later the group hadn’t met in ages, and I was left to myself. I often wonder what it would’ve been like to meet other people going through the same thing as me. To break the loneliness, to get it out of my system, to share with other dads slogging through days filled with grubby kitchens, dirty nappies, and illusions about how nice it was meant to be. I think I might have enjoyed that short period in life when it was just me and my son more.

↓  
Actor and broadcaster Nisse Edwall has done MÄN’s group leader course and led one of MÄN’s father groups. Together with the author Manne Forssberg, also a father group leader, he hosts Pappapodden, a podcast for dads.



# “I’d tell anyone to join a father group”

**Bubacary Konta is 60 years old and father of nine children aged between 6 and 21. Like Felix Pecarski, in 2019 he attended a father group run by MÄN’s pilot project with a drop-in preschool in Enskede-Årsta-Vantör and a family centre in Högdalen.**

**F**or Bubacary, the great merit of the father group was being listened to and learning to listen to others.  
– I thought it was excellent. I looked forward to each meeting because I would hear the other dads’ stories. All of us in the group had one thing in common: we were not born in Sweden. Me, I come from Gambia. We were all ages and so were our children, and we got to know one another by listening to one another in the Small Room. I really enjoyed that, finishing without being interrupted.

The fact that the fathers in the group came from so many countries and religions was a big plus according to Bubacary.

– It was so interesting because of all our different cultural backgrounds. Some of us did not want to talk about our childhoods—that was pretty much taboo—and some were very religious while others were atheists. It was such an interesting mix of people.

Bubacary thinks the group’s sense of community was key, and thanks to the group leader he was introduced to the core values of parenting and fatherhood usual in Sweden.

– To listen to the others and form a group identity was so rewarding. Also thanks to Anders, the group leader, I learnt a lot about Swedish values when it comes to fatherhood and parenting. I’d tell anyone to join a father group, and it’d be a good thing to mix Swedish-born and non-Swedish fathers in the same group. I know most of us fathers who

immigrated here do want to know more about how Swedish culture and society work, what people make of parenthood, children, and housework. I can see myself being a group leader for a father group, he says with a smile. •

**Bubacary Konta in the kitchen with his daughter Fatoumamta, the second youngest of his nine children.**





# Lessons learnt from father groups

In the course of MÄN's LifeCycle Project we have encountered both unexpected difficulties and unexpected opportunities. What follows are lessons learnt from the work of scaling up the LifeCycle Project's father group activities.

1

## Father groups create change

From the surveys of father group participants, the men experience positive change thanks to the groups. Over half felt more engaged and more present as fathers. Three-quarters said they talked more with their partner, and 57 per cent said that they talked far more with other fathers about parenting.

2

## Those who start will finish

Most who attend the first meeting of a father group enjoy it and stay the course. Participants feel affirmed as parents, and satisfaction is high among those who stay with the group. Our evaluations show that the father groups are rated at an average of 4.7 out of 5 by participants, and the same was true of the group leaders, who received the same high marks.

3

## They will want more

In 2020, 83 per cent of participants when surveyed said they had either continued to meet when the father groups had ended or they hoped to do so. This was an increase from 75 per cent in 2019. We believe this is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer have been able to meet, but the wish and need to do so is far greater.

4

## Recruitment is where the effort is needed

It is difficult to convince fathers to come to the first meeting. Surveys show that men find it more difficult to ask for support. Almost 30 per cent of participants went to the first father group meeting because their partners told them to. It has become more expensive to share information about the groups using online marketing, and new search algorithms mean we reach fewer people than before. MÄN has therefore concentrated on identifying new channels, such as local Facebook groups.

5

## Group leaders are essential

Discussion is central to the father groups' work. And for that, group leaders have to be discussion leaders, capable of guiding the conversation rather than laying down the law as experts. At the same time, they need a solid grounding in MÄN's core values: gender equality and feminism.

6

## A Small Room for safe discussions

Our evaluations show the Small Room method to be a fast and effective way to make space for the discussions central to all father groups. It meets the requirements of most participants for a safe space where they can discuss parenting. Very few participants have used a method like this before.

7

## The pandemic requires a new approach

The COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to most meetings in real life. The transition to online meetings took time and resources, but has opened up opportunities for fathers across Sweden to participate as never before. We see a great potential in continuing to train group leaders online.

8

## High levels of satisfaction despite larger groups

We have been able to train more group leaders by going online and using new methods of managing larger groups. Despite this, MÄN has maintained its standards, and most group leaders are satisfied with the course, with the vast majority giving it the highest or second highest rating.

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