

The fathers' role in child nutrition in Ethiopia

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Valorisation

Valorisation: Practical implication of the finding

The findings of the research presented in this thesis could have important implications for child feeding, fathers' and mothers' involvement in raising children, and the child health care system. Specific implications of the findings of each study are discussed in the respective chapters. Here we summarized the overall implications of the major findings in this thesis.

Implications for infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practice

IYCF practice is one of the health activities that could contribute towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals of halving hunger and reducing child mortality by two-thirds in 2015. IYCF practice gives primary focus to children below the age of two years and is usually targeted through mothers. Despite the fact that fathers are also primary caregivers, like mothers, and are also very important in improving child health, most child health services do not involve fathers. The fathers' role is especially relevant in developing countries, where household income generation and decision-making are mainly controlled by fathers. Our findings show the importance of involving the fathers in child care services, and confirmed that fathers' knowledge and practice towards childcare and feeding can have a direct impact on child feeding and thus child health. This indicates the strong influence of the father on child nutrition. Therefore, involving fathers in child health program is very likely to succeed quickly than programs that only targeted through mothers.

Implications for improving fathers' involvement in child care practices

Our study showed that improving fathers' knowledge and practice could be a prerequisite to meet children's appropriate feeding. However, wrong perceptions, traditional beliefs, being busy with other activities and financial reasons were commonly mentioned reasons why fathers are not participating in child feeding. Therefore, our finding added new insight to the current literature by developing a model to approach fathers in different modalities in relation to designing and planning of child care and feeding interventions. In order to engage fathers in child feeding, their perceptions, practices and challenges, should be known and the way fathers are approached should be customized to the ways fathers think and act. Additionally, bringing the education programs to their house and involving both parents (fathers and mother) could be a more practical and effective way to reach fathers.

Implications for mothers

We found that many fathers consider child care as being only the mothers' responsibility, which places a lot of pressure on the mothers' shoulder. This attitude is

embedded in strong cultural and traditional beliefs in Ethiopia. Traditionally, the fathers are considered to be the only decision makers in the house, and the fathers should not be challenged by the mothers. Our findings suggest that health education should be delivered house to house involving both parents, but achieving this might be a significant challenge in the light of these deep-rooted gender specific cultural beliefs. These gender specific beliefs should have constant attention in order to bring both the father and the mother to the same level of understanding of proper child care and child feeding. We expect however, that the fathers' involvement will improve if there are corresponding improvements in the Ethiopian economy, work opportunities for mothers and increased exposure to foreign cultures, for example, through the media.

Implications on child health care services

Our findings suggest that involving the fathers in child health education is a worthwhile approach, but the attitude of health workers themselves seems a huge challenge. Especially, the health care professionals' low awareness, recognition and appreciation of the positive influence of fathers on child health outcomes are important obstacles. Therefore, health workers should be closely involved in developing new strategies to improve fathers' participation in health education programs. Additional training packages should be developed for health workers in order to succeed in improving the fathers' role in child care services.

Implications on literature

Considering the small number of studies on the fathers' role in young child feeding in developing countries, our findings contributed in filling a still existing gap in the scientific literature. Therefore, we believe our studies will give valuable input for the community by providing insight on the fathers' role in child feeding, which can help researchers, programmers, policy makers and health workers in their efforts to design health education programs.