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# INSIGHTS

A SERIES OF EVIDENCE SUMMARIES

38

# Good practice with fathers in children and family services

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**JUNE 2017**

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## Key points

- Society expects and gets more from fathers today
- The contribution that fathers can make to the lives of children and families is substantial
- Mothers continue to be the focus of children and family services
- Fathers' involvement could be better encouraged
- A growing body of practice offers many ways to encourage father involvement

## Introduction: changing fathers, changing expectations

How we think about and understand fathering has changed. Active ‘fathering’ is now an accepted role for men at home and fathers are visible outside the school gates, in parks and playgrounds and in the streets and shopping centres. Fathers’ involvement in child care increased from less than 15 minutes a day in the mid-1970s to three hours a day during the week by the late 1990s, with more at the weekend. This trend of increasing involvement has continued (O’Brien, 2016). Expectations have also shifted. In 2009, 29 per cent of parents believed that childcare was the primary responsibility of the mother (Ellison, Barker and Kulasuriya, 2009) and the belief that fathers are expected, and want, to do more has remained strong (Zvara, Schoppe-Sullivan and Dush, 2013). In Scotland, fathers’ involvement compares well with other countries of the UK. In their analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study information, Kelly and colleagues (2014) revealed that Scottish fathers are as likely to be at the birth of their babies as any other father in the UK. Jones and Smith (2008) also show that within the UK, more Scottish fathers wish to spend more time with their children. They

go on to show that Scottish fathers are more likely to read to their children and get them ready for bed ‘several times a week’; play outdoors and indoors with their children; and look after their children on their own. It should be noted, however, that while there has been a certain degree of convergence of childcare and domestic work – with men now doing more in the home and with their children – women still spend considerably more time on domestic work and childcare than men: 16 hours per week for men and 26 hours per week for women (ONS, 2016). This, of course, is one of the many reasons to encourage greater father involvement.

Changes in UK law, for example, parental responsibility for fathers named on their children’s birth certificates whether married or not, are another indicator of shifting expectations that reflect an emerging emphasis on the importance of children’s relationships with biological and social fathers (Trinder and Lamb, 2005). In 2014, an Inquiry by the Equal Opportunities Committee took extensive evidence, revealing the failure of services to keep pace with changing societal expectations of fathers. It called for the Scottish Government and all agencies to take greater steps to actively include fathers in their policies and practices,

recognising ‘that ‘parent’ is often taken to mean ‘mother’” (Scottish Parliament, 2014, p9).

Efforts to introduce shared parental leave also indicate greater expectations of fathers (Working Families, 2017) as do the various workplace initiatives springing up to help new fathers in the workplace such as Fathers Network Scotland.

## The benefits of positive father involvement

With few exceptions, father involvement is positive for child wellbeing and family functioning.

In terms of the positive impacts of fathers:

A considerable knowledge base has built up that reveals the overall protective and positive effect of father involvement on offspring social, educational, behavioral, and psychological outcomes – throughout infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. (Panter-Brick, 2014, p1188)

The following round-up is offered as just a flavour of the ‘dad effect’.

### THE PRE-SCHOOL AND SCHOOL YEARS

Young children whose fathers read to them come on in leaps and bounds in their early years (Duursma, 2014). ‘School readiness’ is associated with high levels of paternal sensitivity (Fatherhood Institute, 2010). Fathers’ involvement with their children is linked with their higher educational achievement (Jeynes, 2015) and higher mobility relative to their parents (Sarkadi and colleagues, 2008). Fathers’ (higher) commitment to their child’s education and their involvement with schools are also associated with children’s better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion (Goldman, 2005). Conversely, and controlling for other factors, absent fatherhood has been shown to negatively affect children, for example, by contributing to difficulties with peer relationships including bullying (Parke and colleagues, 2004). In discussing fathers whose circumstances prevent full involvement, Jethwani and colleagues (2014) conclude that regardless of residency, custodial status or socio-economic status, many fathers are ready, willing and able to make a positive impact in their children’s educational lives.

**TEENAGE YEARS**

Early childhood play with a father contributes to teenagers' sense of self-worth and there are links between a father's involvement at the age of seven and lower levels of later police contact as reported by the mothers and teachers (Lewis and Lamb, 2007). The converse has also been found to be true in that paternal psychopathology, evidenced in antisocial behaviour, substance misuse, and depression, has demonstrable negative impacts on child and adolescent functioning (Phares and colleagues, 2010). Teenagers who feel they matter to their father or stepfather typically have significantly better mental health (Suh and colleagues, 2016). Parental discord affects teenagers significantly and this means that a 'whole family' approach (i.e. get dad in) to any adolescent problems is essential, rather than a sole focus on the mother (Parkes and colleagues, 2017).

**LATER LIVES**

High levels of father involvement at ages 7 and 11 have been found to protect against experience of homelessness in the adult sons of manual workers (Flouri, 2005). Father and adolescent reports of their closeness at age 16 correlates with avoidance of depression and marital satisfaction at age 33 (Flouri

and Buchanan, 2002). Meanwhile, Blanden (2006) has found that low father involvement, for example, in education, reduces the child's chances of escaping poverty when they grow up.

**RISK**

Where risk from a father's behaviour is suggested or evidenced, this has to be acknowledged and assessed, and the safety of any arrangement for all ensured. Services have tended to consider him as 'beyond the pale' once contact has ceased (Maxwell and colleagues, 2012), however, such a father needs to be engaged with in the interests of the child who needs a thorough understanding of him, and any future children with whom he may be involved.

**FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT AND MOTHERS**

Neglect or abuse is still overwhelmingly regarded as a failure of mothering. Therefore, the mother bears the unfair burden of investigation and responsibility. In relation to youth offending, Page and colleagues (2008, p7) found that: '...parenting orders and parenting contracts tended to be applied to mothers much more frequently than fathers' and father attendance at court was not sought.

In their study of fathers and child protection, Ferguson and Hogan found that:

Involved fatherhood benefits mothers as well as children. In general, the mothers we interviewed wanted the men to be actively involved fathers and felt that intervention work had developed the men's capacities to nurture and take domestic responsibility. Mothers felt that intervention brought considerable benefits to themselves, by helping to produce men who shared parenting, and were physically and emotionally available to them. (2004, p153)

It is no coincidence then that higher father involvement is linked with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers (Fisher and colleagues, 2006).

### **FATHERS THEMSELVES**

In their study of young Scottish fathers, Ross and colleagues found that during the pregnancy, most men described feeling excited, proud and happy. Only a few expressed regret. For many of the young men in the study, the pregnancy was either planned or was readily accepted as cementing an already strong relationship with their partner (2010).

Beyond the early flush of paternity there can be many benefits to men when their identities are expanded to embrace fatherhood:

Positive changes from parent education have been recorded in fathers' (including young and imprisoned fathers) communication skills, sensitivity to babies' cues, parenting attitudes, knowledge of child development, acceptance of the child, confidence, satisfaction and self-efficacy as parents; self-perception and self-esteem; parenting stress; positive emotionality towards their children; and commitment to parenting. (Fatherhood Institute, 2009, p4)

Many men whose lives are bedevilled by drug or alcohol abuse, or for one reason or another see no future for themselves, can be given fresh hope when they are asked to step up to fatherhood.

Re-offending can be avoided (Meek, 2011).

Wordsworth's thoughts are to the point in his poem, Michael (1800): 'A child more than all other gifts that earth can offer to a declining man, brings hope with it and forward looking thoughts.' For all these reasons fathers should be included more than they are at present by family services.



## How and where are fathers overlooked?

Workers in children and family services have tended to view mothers as the ones with the responsibility for children.

### HEALTH

A South Lanarkshire survey quotes one man, who, on taking his child for immunisation, was asked 'Where is mum today?' (Community Learning and Development across South Lanarkshire, 2016, p21). Bunting (2005) found that while health visitors estimated the needs of both teenage mothers and their partners as high, they would generally expect the young mothers' parenting capacity to be average to good, and the young fathers' parenting capacity to be poor, and impute any decreases in couple/ paternal contact to negative characteristics in the fathers. These assumptions were made despite health visitors knowing very little about the young fathers. They were ill-equipped to offer them support and were not aware of any support they might be receiving, or of services that might be able to help them.

In a recent study of men's transition to parenthood, Kowlessar and colleagues conclude that 'Despite increasing public awareness and socio-political changes affecting paternal parenting culture, fathers still seem to feel undervalued and unsupported when it comes to antenatal support' (2015, p14). Elsewhere, Humphries and Nolan find that '...there is little evidence that the importance of engaging fathers is reflected in Health Visitor training or that primary care services are wholly embracing father-inclusive practice' (2015, p1). Fathers as 'bystanders' remains a recurrent theme.

### EDUCATION

Nurseries, playgroups and other pre-school facilities remain mother-facing. This is evident in publicity shots where there is an absence of men. It's also evident in reception areas that (inadvertently) give off the message that men are not expected, eg in choice of reading materials, colour schemes, adverts for cake-baking and other fundraising events such as slimming challenges (Clapton, 2016). Poor pay and cultural expectations that early childcare is not appropriate employment for men, ensures that male workers are rare and also mitigates against a more 'fathers welcome' ethos. Here the Scottish

Government's aspirations for a more gender-equal, early years workforce should be acknowledged (Scottish Government, 2017).

There have been varying levels of success in improving parental involvement in schools (Ofsted, 2010). Some useful work has been done in the south of Scotland involving parent support workers. Based in schools and active in the local community, these workers have shown that small steps such as organising day outings can bring in fathers (Cooper, 2011). School reading cafés where parents can meet informally and engage with school staff have also been shown to overcome obstacles to fathers' participation, although timing can often prevent fathers from coming to such events (Fatherhood Institute, 2010). Crozier and Davies (2007) suggest that the personality of primary school teachers can have a negative or positive impact on parental involvement; those who were 'outgoing and friendly' and seen to be reaching out, drew in the fathers (O'Keefe, 2014).

Given that fathers will often either cede responsibility to mothers or have been made to believe the parent-school contact equals mother-school contact,

involving fathers in schools can seem an uphill struggle. A starting point is the assumption that fathers will wish to contribute to their children's education (see Fatherhood Institute, 2010).

### **SOCIAL WORK**

Page and colleagues (2008, p89) in their review of UK services for fathers undertaken on behalf of the Department of Children, Schools and Families, found that:

...'traditional' views of fathers remained prevalent among the workforce. This was seen to have led some staff to hold negative attitudes towards males as less able or willing carers of young children (particularly in Sure Start Children's Centres and safeguarding and looked after children).

Roskill found that there was no information recorded about fathers in 20% of the cases in her study of child protection (2011). The figure was higher at 31% for the fathers of children who were in care. Dominelli and colleagues have researched the attitudes of child protection workers in Canada over a number of years and observe that while 'the child protection gaze remains firmly fixed on the mother' (Strega

and colleagues, 2008, p706), they have concluded that ‘social workers do not completely trust fathers to care for children’ (Dominelli and colleagues, 2011, p364). In the words of Brown and colleagues (2009, p29), child protection services remain ‘founded on the notion that it is the central task of social workers to break the cycle of child maltreatment by successfully teaching mothers how to do their job properly, or removing children from a home where that is impossible’. Clapton provides a detailed

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*There are categories of fathers that deserve greater attention and have specific needs if they are to play a positive part in the lives of their families*

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discussion of fathers and child protection and points to the consequences of overlooking fathers (2013). One of these consequences is costs. In an important contribution relating to care proceedings, Bellamy concludes his study of paternal involvement and public care: ‘The identified relationship between the involvement of a noncustodial parent, most often a

biological father, and a reduction in the likelihood that children are placed into out-of-home care is a unique finding’ (2009, p260). Billions of pounds are spent every year by local authority social services (Hirsch, 2006). It is likely that these costs could be substantially reduced if fathers and paternal relatives were more systematically involved in child care and protection cases.

The idea of fathers as a potential resource has been slow to catch on in social services yet ‘When fathers are located and identified as a resource, there are incremental increases over time in fathers’ involvement in case planning and the fathers’ extended family involvement in case planning’ (English and colleagues, 2009, p233). Alternative approaches to including parents in child protection processes have been effective in including fathers. In a Scottish survey of fathers’ involvement in Family Group Conferences (FGC), one father is quoted:

“At social work meetings, you feel that every move is being watched. It’s a waste of time speaking because nobody listens. In a meeting room with suits and ties, you feel undermined, people looking over their glasses at you. You do feel judged.”

Ross goes on to contrast this with the FGC: 'At the FGC we had more freedom to speak, we didn't feel the same stress.' He also remarks that 'one FGC could do more than 20 meetings in a clinical environment' (Ross, 2006, p18).

## Fathers: all shapes and sizes

Fathers come in all shapes and sizes, however, there are categories of fathers that deserve greater attention and have specific needs if they are to play a positive part in the lives of their families. These include *young fathers* who are often stereotyped as being especially irresponsible and uncaring (Lammy, 2013). *Non-resident fathers* are liable to be excluded during assessments for services and interventions. *Fathers in prison* are often young fathers. Research suggests that in Polmont Young Offenders Institution, one man in three is a father (Donnelly and colleagues, 2010). Around eight per cent of single parents are *lone fathers* (Gingerbread 2012). Other categories have their own set of special needs and challenges, such as *gay* or *minority ethnic* fathers. There are also fathers who hurt others, their children and the mothers of their children. Chapter five of *Assessing and working with risk with fathers*

(Clapton, 2013) offers a thorough discussion of fathers that maltreat their children and partners, and the other categories.

## What's worked to 'bring in' fathers

- Having high expectations. The earlier fathers can be engaged the better. Registration, enrolment or referral processes should record both parents' details. Whether a father is resident or not, services which insist on referrals with information about the father have higher levels of father engagement. Equally, efforts to ensure the father's name is on the birth certificate is a strong predictor of continuing future involvement in the child's life. This is especially important for young unmarried fathers who may feel excluded.
- Gender-differentiation is often necessary. If you want to involve all parents then fathers might need to be targeted specifically.
- Considering the timing of any meetings or other services to enable the attendance of fathers who are at work.
- Communicating with both parents as standard practice. As often as possible, letters and other

forms of communication should be addressed 'dear mother and father'. When fathers read the word 'parent' they regularly assume that the letter is intended for the mother. Bear in mind that fathers may be more likely to participate in events badged as briefings or updates, rather than 'support groups'.

- Inviting dads personally to specific hands-on activities. Schools that do this through breakfast clubs, for example, have found that fathers will come. Nurseries have successfully reached out by asking for help on specific projects such as building a Wendy House.
- Making it easier for men to come into the building. Receptions and waiting rooms and their respective reading materials and posters should avoid sending messages that men are not expected in these places.
- Understanding that fathers are the real experts on their own support needs; often advocacy work across a range of areas that benefits the whole man. For example, help with housing, finding employment, and debt, helps boost trust and reduces any feelings of suspicion he may have.
- Arguably 'men like facts.' Helping a father see the 'evidence' of a problem such as sharing

information and assessment results may encourage him to take part in services.

- For fathers of children involved in child protection processes, working with non-statutory agencies can provide alternative locations for provision and facilitate engagement with fathers who might be unwilling to engage with local authority services.
- Being prepared to hang in there with fathers; male ego and pride can get in the way of asking for help.
- Mothers' encouragement can be crucial. A children's needs approach rather than a fathers' rights one is more likely to be effective. Whether a father is absent, absents himself or is absented, a child will continue to have a mental space marked 'father' and will fill this with demonization or a fantasy. Workers should ask about the father, and wherever possible, include him in future plans, as well as understand that whoever he is, knowing and knowing of him, is a crucial part of a child's development.

In conclusion, it is worth reinforcing that what we know about fathers, and the benefits of involving them more systematically, is fast developing. I hope that this evidence summary helps practitioners contribute to this.

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