



## Conversation Stream Notes

### What do Fathers in Adversity Need?

Year of the Dad Conference - 12 February 2016

The 'What do fathers in adversity need?' conversation stream consisted of three presentations followed by a floor discussion.

#### How can non-resident dads stay connected?

*Sarah Rogers – Children in Scotland*

Sarah's presentation closely followed her slides. Her suggested points for discussion were the starting point for the general discussion as noted below.

#### Lone fathers

*Brock Lueck, Senior Children and Fathers Worker, One Parent Families Scotland*

Brock identified inequality as a key issue in the adversity faced by the single or contact fathers OFPS works with. They face a range of barriers in their efforts to have contact with and care for their children.

Barriers encountered by non-resident or single fathers are cultural. Brock noted the power of negative discourses to affect expectations of fathers and undermine fathers' own confidence. In addition, there is a lack of reflexivity in relation to gender.

Bureaucracy, particularly in relation to income support and housing, job centre sanctions, creates barriers for single or contact fathers in adversity. For example, if the parents are not married the mother is not required to name the father on the child's birth certificate and this can complicate fathers' claims if they are contested by mothers.

In discussing the work of the fathers' groups established by OFPS, Brock spoke about the power of meeting other men as potentially transformative.

Further important roles of OFPS is hearing fathers and advocacy (with social services or in court for example), as well as encouraging reflection, communication skills and literacy skills among the men they work with.

#### Mellow Dads

*Alan MacMaster, Mellow Dads Co-ordinator, Mellow Parenting*

Mellow Parenting uses research, develops programmes to address gaps, pilots and assesses them and then rolls out programmes through training practitioners to deliver them.

Mellow Dads is a group-based intervention working with dads and children. There are three sessions a day, one day a week, for 14 weeks. During the morning session, the children play together in another space. The session with fathers is therapeutic, looking at parenting heritage and its implications for each father's fatherhood and parenting. A lot of self-disclosure is required from facilitators, in the life history session, for example.

The second session, over lunch time, includes a fun, messy activity with children. The afternoon session deals with practical parenting based on development stages and with a focus on helping parents understand children's perspective in responding to children's behaviour.



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One measurement of the effectiveness of the Mellow programmes involves use of the Adult Well-being Scale, a Parental Hassle scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Participants' scores before and after the programme are compared. The comparison consistently shows the benefit to fathers of participation in the programme.

Mellow Parenting has also developed programmes such as Mellow Bumps and Dads-to-be, Mellow Mums.

Alan commented that the programmes for mothers and fathers are essentially the same, but targeted at specific groups. The focus is parenting and the aim is to promote an idea of parenting so that 'parents' means both mothers and fathers.

Alan also discussed work he had done with a group of fathers in a prison setting.

Discussion following Alan's talk:

In response to a comment from the room about engaging with young men even before they become fathers, Alan said that Mellow Parenting is working on a pre-conception programme. As for the relationship between mums and dads, there is scope for it to be addressed if it comes up in the sessions.

Someone asked about research following up with participants in the prison scheme once they had left prison. Alan replied that it was early in the life of the scheme but they had collected data on two guys who had left prison, and that Mellow Parenting were linked with the University of Edinburgh who were going to carry out an evaluation of the programme in due course.

Brock came back to the question of relationships to say that Relationship Scotland had developed Parenting Apart Together sessions. As for work with inmates, they were running a small-scale pilot in Polmont with Edinburgh dads due out next year. They visit and develop relationship so that the men are ready to join a group when they come out and more quickly find support from peers.

#### Chaired Discussion

*Paul Bradshaw – Head of Social Research, ScotCen*

Sarah Rogers noted the significance of the effect of parents never having lived together or never having been in a relationship together for low levels of non-resident father contact with their child recorded (from mothers) in the Growing up in Scotland (GUS) survey.

Paul Bradshaw suggested we pick up her suggested points for discussion in relation to how the inter-parental relationship might be supported during and following the transition to parenthood, particularly for fathers not resident with mothers in this period. He asked if there were enough of the right services and if service providers should perhaps be moving towards a universal ante-natal service? He pointed out that the NHS monitors social research about support of fathers and is open to insights from literature in the area.

Alan commented that frustration will result if you try to use one tool for all. He advised that if looking for the answer to the question of what is needed for dads, just ask.



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Someone who works in north-east Scotland said there had been a lack of success in interventions intended to support fathers in her area and wondered if that was, in part, due to lack of consultation.

Brock pointed out that what is needed is commitment from management to stick in there until you can generate a critical mass, because you don't get huge numbers all at once. Some guys find it easier to come with their children. You need to be realistic about the level of commitments people have. He has found one of the most effective things is to nurture relationships between fathers.

Being a man helps in working with men. If you can open yourself up, it can encourage other dads to open up too. Men are not very present in ante-natal care.

There was agreement that the labelling of events and services was important, as men tend to see 'parent/s' as referring to or directed at mothers. Until there is equality in expectations of fathers and mothers there won't be equality of parenthood.

Alan pointed out the breaking down of archaic views of gender was part of the Mellow Dads programme. He confirmed that relationships were important for attracting and inviting men to be involved in groups.

Someone who works with fathers in North Ayrshire commented that the gender of the workforce in early years care and education, the lack of male nursery teachers, for example, had an impact on fathers' engagement with services. In delivering the Mellow Dads programme, and also PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership), they had taken over a community space not associated with services and successfully attracted men of a range of ages and a mix of dads and grandads.

Brock confirmed that, given the makeup of the professions involved in children's lives from birth to school, men come into contact with a lot of women in this period. He also noted that, sometimes, single mothers seek to convey the idea that it is better to keep single dads at a distance and that professionals could do more to check this dynamic in engaging with mothers.

In north-east Glasgow, Fathers Network Scotland is involved in a gender-friendly programme at nursery level which involves encouraging interactions with fathers and policies around employment.

A delegate undertaking PhD research on non-resident fathers' involvement with social work commented that grief and loss had a negative impact on engagement as men struggled to deal with the loss of role. She asked if that was a focus for programmes such as Mellow Dads. Alan replied that it can't be ignored but it is not a specific focus in Mellow Dads. It depends on the make-up of the group what issues are explored in sessions. But for those who are referred to groups using the programme, the aim is to establish a platform for emotional openness.

Another delegate commented on the need for men to learn to talk about emotions, to learn the language for talking about emotions.

Someone asked Alan, in relation to his work with fathers in prison, how he managed the level of sharing among inmates. Alan responded that there were security issues, that the men had to manage their relationship back in the wings outside of sessions, but that the



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Scottish Prison Service were doing a lot of work in this area. Although he had felt overwhelmed, he applied the standard principles – that the group was a closed space, that what was said was voluntary and confidential – and worked on developing trust. But the dynamics were very different, for example some of the confidences or life histories referred to act liable for criminal conviction. So it was a matter of working through with the group, asking 'how's it going to feel back in the hall for this guy?'

Someone asked about numbers in the groups and Alan said that the maximum was eight. More was too demanding for the facilitator.



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