

To set up a whole series of services from scratch, targeted at fathers-only, would of course be costly and time-consuming. And in any case that should not be necessary - what's better and more inclusive is for you to adapt existing provision in such a way that you actively market services to fathers, welcome them in and provide them with information, advice alongside mothers.

Types of services dads need

It can be helpful to build services that support fathers at key transition points, including pregnancy and birth; children starting or changing school; parental separation; becoming a stepfather; children becoming teenagers; changing jobs or becoming unemployed; resettling into the community after an absence (in prison or away in the armed forces, for example).

- Dads need access to a broad scope of services:
- Child-related services - because many dads need and want opportunities and encouragement to care directly for their children.
- Therapeutic services - because some fathers (and mothers) need help around relationships and parenting
- Socially-focused services - because relatively few dads have personal support networks as parents
- Recreational services - because some fathers feel isolated, stressed or depressed
- Educational services - because many dads lack basic information about children and parenting.

There's no single 'off the shelf' model of father-inclusiveness that will work for any service. But research shows that fathers are almost three times more likely to engage with parenting support or courses when the service is 'mature' in terms of engaging with men, for example.

What key elements are needed for supporting dads?

Services around pregnancy and birth

- Maternity services which engage with dads to-be throughout, and act as a crucial link to postnatal services
- Targeted information for fathers, designed with their role in mind, about the health needs of baby, mother and father (e.g. smoking, breastfeeding, postnatal depression, events/ leaflets aimed at fathers/couples, men's health)
- Routine assessment of fathers' social and emotional needs (e.g. risks of depression, relationship issues), and group-based and individual/couple support to increase fathers' competence and confidence as parents and partners
- Child-health services delivered at times working dads (and mums) can manage

- Informal groups for new dads and/or couples to provide social activities, develop their confidence and parenting skills and provide opportunities for assessment (don't assume that men and women need (only) single-sex services).

Father-child activities

Regular opportunities for fathers and children of young children (with or without mothers) to play and take part in activities together.

- Well-equipped, 'neutral' spaces for dads who don't live with their children full-time, can be especially valuable. These can really help dads spend time with their children; they can be linked to parenting skills training and support.

Bear in mind that some dads will prefer services to be as free-and-easy, and with as little support from 'experts' or play-workers as possible; others may feel less confident playing with their child, and may really value some support from a professional.

Information, advice and advocacy

- Printed or online resources sensitive to male experiences, identities, communication styles and information needs
- Advice and advocacy on issues that have an impact on fathers' parenting capacity, including:
 - money management
 - their own health and wellbeing (physical and mental, substance use)
 - post-separation support (child support, legal issues, parenting)
 - childcare/early years provision
 - employment (rights, opportunities, training)
 - benefits, including housing
- Advice that can link dads to parenting support.

Training in parenting skills

- Information and 'training' on child development, learning and play, developing trust, expressing attachment
- Support to emphasise (for mothers and fathers) the value and roles of fathers, their experiences and expectations
- Support to help mothers and fathers develop co-operative parenting

- Male-only, female-only and mixed session and courses - with separated dads and father-figures actively encouraged to attend (if necessary at different times from mothers)
- Family therapy and behaviour-change interventions which are intolerant of lack of participation by fathers (regardless of whether or not he lives full-time with the mother of his children).

Learning opportunities

- Courses that are available and marketed to men and women, and cover subjects men find appealing and useful
- Courses in basic skills, computer skills, training for work, and English as an Additional Language where relevant
- Courses in family learning (e.g. dads learning to read, and also reading with their children).

Informal support networks

- Recreational activities for men as men (not as dads) e.g. fishing
- Encouragement for fathers to form and make use of their own support or recreation networks

Personal and therapeutic support

- Counselling, stress/anger management, mediation
- Telephone or email services e.g. a postnatal depression helpline, linked to a face-to-face support option

Working with couples

If you're serious about including fathers in what you do, it's important to be prepared to work with couples as well as mothers presenting on their own.

The arrival of a baby can have a significant impact on a couple's relationship. Although between 18% and 33% of couples report an improved relationship when they become parents, the rest experience relationship satisfaction decline.

The arrival of a baby can lead to depression, stress, marital conflict and loss of sexual intimacy and affection. Couples with a new baby argue eight times more often and once relationship troubles begin, they frequently continue to spiral down. There is an increased likelihood that the couple will separate in the two years after the birth of their baby.

Couples with a new baby are highly interdependent. In the UK 96.4% of new parents are married, live together or live apart but say they are a couple or good friends. Seventy-eight percent of teenage mothers register the baby's birth jointly with the father. Seventy per cent of today's new mothers turn to their partner for emotional support, compared with only 47% in the 1960s.

Effective interventions with couples

Couple relationship interventions are highly effective with expectant parents, and have been shown to have a positive impact on the quality, satisfaction and stability of a relationship over a considerable period. This is a particularly successful time to offer an intervention because expectant fathers are keen to review their own health behaviours and want to learn about pregnancy, birth, parenting - and the couple relationship.

Research has also shown that delivering a parent education programme to both parents is significantly more effective than delivering it to just one - especially if the relationship is not close or supportive. Working with only one parent (father or mother) can bring about positive changes, especially when that parent is powerful within the family. But among the indicators that predict failure for parenting interventions, 'lack of a supportive partner' is highly significant.

Parents who cannot be engaged together (e.g. where there are very high levels of conflict) can still be usefully engaged with separately (where it is safe to do so).

Higher quality interactions

When fathers are included in parenting support delivery, mothers tend to be more satisfied with their parenting and to experience higher quality interactions with, and compliance from, their children. Failure to engage appropriately with fathers makes many mothers unfairly responsible for implementing and maintaining change in families, and can compromise their safety.

Parenting interventions with fathers can lead to:

- improved parenting style
- increased knowledge and understanding of child development
- increased sensitivity to the cues of their babies
- increased confidence in their parenting skills
- more sensitive and positive parenting
- increased acceptance of their children
- greater involvement in child care
- greater interaction with children
- greater commitment to parenting.

Proven benefits

Check out the Fatherhood Institute report *Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?*, which examines the evidence base about engaging with fathers in parent education and training, the benefits this can bring, and ways to be most effective.

And if you're commissioning antenatal or parenting programmes, look critically at both the content, and the evidence that underpins them: how much (if any) of a focus did the programme designers put on supporting actively involved fathers as well as mothers; and when it was evaluated, to what extent were fathers engaged with, and were results disaggregated by gender?

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More resources for employers, service providers and families are available at: www.yearofthedad.org

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