



FACTSHEET

Resources for services

Foreword: why it's time for your service to engage more effectively with dads

Dads impact on their children in all sorts of ways – whether they are dead or alive; good, bad or indifferent as parents; and/or living with their children full-time, part time or not at all.

And, whether you work in health, education, social work or any other field, there's a host of evidence to suggest that you'll do the job of supporting children and families more effectively if you learn to appreciate fathers' significance, 'see' men as fathers, and offer services that support their involvement as hands-on parents.

Children with positively involved fathers do better in all sorts of ways: they get better exam results, form stronger relationships with better-adjusted children, and are less likely to get involved in anti-social behaviour and criminality, for example.

Health and educational benefits

In health, fathers' smoking can impact directly on children; fathers' attitudes and behaviour are also major influences on mothers' smoking. Breastfeeding is another key area where dads' beliefs and attitudes are hugely significant; others include alcohol and substance misuse, and childhood obesity.

In education, sensitive parenting by fathers from the earliest days in a child's life can impact positively on child development and school readiness; children whose fathers are interested in their education, read to them regularly and get involved in school events, perform better in IQ tests and exams right through the school system.

All this is true for girls as well as boys; there are various ways in which children of both genders benefit uniquely from having a close relationship with their father and/or father-figures. And the benefits of involved fatherhood last way longer than the early years, into the teenage years and beyond.

Negative attitudes

But there's a problem. Services routinely fail to engage with fathers, or engage with them in ways that are - consciously or otherwise - excluding, patronising and negative.

In many cases, staff members hold negative attitudes about men and their interest in, or capacity for, involved fatherhood; at the same time they make assumptions about mothers' greater commitment to and ability as parents. Often, fathers are ignored completely; services make no effort to collect or make use of contact details, let alone adapt services with dads in mind or think about how men might be targeted, welcomed and supported.

Evidence suggests that this institutionalised sexism contributes to men's marginalisation from families and holds mothers unfairly responsible for bringing up children; sometimes services' failure to engage with men around children (including biological dads and father-figures) and assess the potential risks and benefits they bring to the family, can be dangerous – as, for example, in the Baby P case.

Good news

The good news is, any service can become father-inclusive. It won't happen overnight –service providers need to change their mindset and start believing in dads, recognising their contributions to family life, and re-shaping their services so as to support them to positively connect with and develop positive relationships with their children.

Prepared by Jeremy Davies of the Fatherhood Institute

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

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