

Dad Matters

Why Fathers Should Figure In Your Work

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Changing fathers

Fathers¹ now play a more active role in childcare and domestic life in general. While fathers still do less of the parenting than mothers, their involvement has grown and continues to grow. Fathers' involvement in childcare has increased from less than fifteen minutes a day in the mid-1970s to three hours a day during the week by the late 1990s, with more at the weekend. Fathers now do a third of parental childcare, which is an eightfold increase in a generation for fathers of preschool children (O'Brien, 2005).

Overall, there have been major shifts in the manner in which fatherhood is thought of and a growing emphasis on what might be described as the 'new father' who actively participates in the care of his child, values girls as of equal worth to boys and



engages with the child as an infant rather than remaining on the sidelines until the child is older (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003).

In the twenty-first century, fathers come in all shapes, sizes and colours. While some biological fathers do not 'do' fathering, other non-biological fathers can and do: for example, grandfathers/uncles, foster fathers, adoptive fathers and stepfathers (the last in increasing numbers – Sullivan and Dex, 2009). Today's father is no longer always the traditional (perhaps stereotyped) married breadwinner and disciplinarian in the family. He can be single or married; externally employed or a stay-at home father; gay or straight; an adoptive or step-parent; and a more than capable caregiver to children as they face the various challenges that come with growing up.

¹ There are various types of 'fathers', including biological, adoptive, foster, step, father-figure, see Clapton, 2013 pps 1-6 for a discussion of the many variations that exist, some alongside each other. Here father is used as a means of encompassing all these.

Changing expectations

Changes in the law (in 2003) have given parental responsibility to fathers named on their children's birth certificates, whether or not they are married to the mothers. This reflects an emerging emphasis on the preservation of children's relationships with biological and social fathers (Trinder and Lamb, 2005). The extension of paternal leave is also an indicator of growing acknowledgement – and expectation – at governmental level of the importance of fathers in the lives of their children. The issue of fathers has risen on the agenda of politicians and policymakers in recent years. In 1998 the then UK Government's Supporting Families initiative made it clear that: *'fathers have a crucial role to play in their children's upbringing.'* This momentum has continued with leading government ministers emphasising the importance of fathers: I want to see a revolution in how teachers, midwives, doctors, early years and all children's services staff routinely talk to and provide opportunities for the involvement, not only of mothers but also fathers, from pregnancy and right through childhood and adolescence (Hughes, 2008). In a speech to the Fatherhood Institute in 2010, the minister in charge of UK children and families services said:

It seems to me that there is still a real risk here that dads will continue to be passively discriminated against by public services unless we take action. We already know, for instance, that many men are left feeling somewhat disenfranchised by child health and family services. But I'd suggest that it goes a little deeper than that – to the point where we very often forget fathers altogether when we are dealing with family issues (Loughton, 2010).

At a government level in Scotland, something of this concern and interest has also emerged with the involvement of fathers and fathers' groups in the shaping of a national parenting strategy and is also betokened in the remarks of the Scottish government's minister for children and young people on Fathers Day 2012:

Dads being fully involved in their children's lives has all sorts of positive benefits for the wider family and community. However, we need to go further to ensure that as a society we truly value and support dads in the role that they play. As we celebrate Father's Day, it's a good time to reflect on what all this means for dads,

because sometimes when we talk about parents, we tend to mean mums, and cut dads out of the picture (Campbell, 2012).

At the level of family, expectations have also shifted, with the division between work and childcare no longer conceived along traditional lines by the majority of modern parents. Now only 29% of parents believe that childcare is the primary responsibility of the mother (Ellison et al., 2009).

Changing images: Sensitive dad/brute

Examples of men demonstrating 'softer' emotions have become widespread and feed into the dynamic of changing expectations of fathers. From Paul Gascoigne's tears during the 1990 World Cup to Ken Livingstone's weeping at the launch of his 2012 campaign to become London mayor, we are accepting men's public displays of vulnerability and expressing and talking about themselves in relatively new, at least in public, terms:

I had been talking to him, and I had built up a wee bit of a rapport, so I just went up to him and I put my arm round him. And he was kind of stamping his feet but he went to his bed without any problem (former Paisley construction worker in training to become a residential childcare worker, quoted in Smith et al., 2011, p. 28).



Yet, alongside the discovery of the New Man Dad, there have been other more negative discourses, such as that of the father who won't lift a finger (or lifts his hand too often), the feckless men who father children then abandon them and their mothers, teenage fathers (see, for example, Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 Fathers Day remark: 'It's high time runaway dads were stigmatised and the full force of shame was heaped upon them') and 'absent'/'non-resident' fathers in general. And there is no end of depictions of brutal Scottish fathers:

Those Scottish fathers. Not for nothing their wives cried, not for nothing their kids. Cities of night above those five o'clock shadows. Men gone way too sick for the talking. And now they lived in the dark for us now. Or lived in our faces, long denied (O'Hagan, 1999, p. 53).

In John Burnside's 2006 memoir of his life at home, *A Lie About My Father*, his father is mean, a drunk, taciturn, unpredictable, physically ruthless and casually cruel (a favourite teddy is thrown on the fire to teach a lesson about not leaving toys lying around); see also Peter Mullen's brutalising and brutalised father in his film *Neds* (2010). Though these stereotypical fathers undoubtedly existed, they are perhaps notable for being the exception and not the rule. Now it seems fair to say without fear of contradiction that widespread notions of fathers as distant or bullies, the men who administer punishment ('wait 'til your father gets home') or as incompetent, no longer hold sway. This is not to say that depending on political and social circumstances unfair stereotypes do not emerge, it is just that on a big level we now know more about what good fathering can be and expect more.



What exactly do we know?

The Value of Positive Father Involvement

Current service provision in the UK for vulnerable families is generally based on an assumption at *odds with the evidence* and with the child's perspective – that fatherhood is an optional and marginally significant “add-on” for children, unlike motherhood, which is an essential (Fathers Direct, 2008, p. 79).

Research on fathers and fatherhood gained momentum in the UK throughout the 1990s and has built up a substantial body of knowledge on which some broad and convincing statements can be made. Research often tells us what we instinctively know, and this is the case with fathers. Encouraging the active engagement of fathers in families is good practice. The positive involvement of fathers is of benefit to children, women and fathers themselves. Research has also conclusively rejected any notion that fathers are inessential in the lives of families and children. What follows is a review of this evidence as to why involving fathers should be taken seriously.

The benefits and impact

Education, schooling and teenage years

Dennis and Erdos found unemployed fathers' support for their children's education strongly connected with those children's escape from disadvantage (Dennis and Erdos, 1992). Since then, major studies across the world which follow families over time have found fathers' involvement with their children linked with their higher educational achievement and higher educational/occupational mobility relative to their parents (Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004; Flouri, 2005; Sarkadi *et al.*, 2008). For example, in the UK, fathers' involvement with their seven- and eleven-year-old children is linked with



their better educational attainment at age twenty (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002). This is as true for daughters as for sons, across all social classes – and whether the mother is highly involved too, or not. More recently, a father's interest in his child's education, particularly at age eleven, has been found to have more influence on education success than family background, the child's personality or poverty (Hango, 2007). Blanden (2006) found the opposite also the case, i.e. that low fatherly interest was

similarly predictive – a father's low interest in his son's education reduces his boy's chances of escaping poverty by 25% (research such as this tells us the detrimental

outcomes of poor or negative father involvement and is equally powerful in the case for why social workers should not ignore fathers).

Fathers' (higher) commitment to their child's education and their involvement with the school are also associated with children's better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion (Goldman, 2005). Children's school behaviour is strongly linked with their educational attainment; and fathers' influence on that behaviour is not only significant (Lloyd *et al.*, 2003; Velleman, 2004) but may also at times be more significant than mothers': for example, fathers' harsh parenting is more strongly linked to children's (especially boys') aggression than is mothers' harsh parenting (Chang *et al.*, 2003). It has been indicated that a teenager's sense of self-worth is predicted by the quality of their early childhood play with their father, and there are links between a father's involvement at the age of seven and lower levels of later police contact as reported by mothers and teachers (Lewis and Lamb, 2007).

Father involvement and the effects on children's later lives

In the UK, high levels of father involvement at ages seven and eleven were found to protect against experience of homelessness in the adult sons of manual workers (Flouri, 2005). Flouri and Buchanan earlier discovered that father and adolescent reports of their closeness at age sixteen correlated with measures of the child's depression and marital satisfaction at age thirty-three (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002). Harris *et al.* (1998) found that both low father involvement and decreasing closeness in adolescence predicted delinquency in adult life, and Blanden (2006) discovered that low father involvement (e.g. in his son's education) reduces the child's chances of escaping poverty. Other research has shown that the benefits of father involvement can remain in cases where the father is not resident with the child. In separated families, high levels of non-resident father involvement protect against later mental health problems in children (Flouri, 2005). On the other hand, controlling for other factors, absent fatherhood has been shown negatively to affect children directly: for example, by contributing to their difficulties with peer relationships, including bullying (Parke *et al.*, 2004); and, indirectly, via increased maternal stress and reduced income (McLanahan and Teitler, 1999). Research involving particular categories of fathers seems to be equally clear about the importance of their involvement: for example, Zelenko *et al.* (2001) found that ignoring young fathers may compromise children's well-being, because, among

expectant teenage mothers, lack of perceived support by fathers correlated with high scores on a Child Abuse Potential Inventory. Kalil *et al.* (2005) report that a decreased involvement by young fathers is significantly associated with young mothers' increased parenting stress. Regarding fathers not resident with their children, research indicates that:

the amount of time fathers spend with their children is not as important as the quality of this time, however. A child who has a close and supportive relationship with his or her father is more likely to do well in adulthood regardless of whether or not he or she lives with him when they are growing up (Asmussen and Weizel, 2010, p. 5).

As the Fatherhood Institute notes, the benefits of father involvement are not just true for middle-class families but rather that 'whatever the father's education level, his interest and participation pay off for his children' (Fatherhood Institute, 2010a, p. 2). The benefits of involved fathering extend beyond those that accrue to the child. Mothers and fathers themselves have been found to gain when fathers are included.

Father involvement and mothers

Neglect or abuse is still overwhelmingly regarded as a failure of mothering. Therefore, a failure to include fathers means that one parent – the mother – bears the unfair burden of investigation, and of responsibility. In relation to youth offending, for example, Page



et al. found that: 'the courts were seen as not adequately ensuring that fathers were present whenever possible with the result that parenting orders and parenting contracts tended to be applied to mothers much more frequently than fathers' (Page *et al.*, 2008, p. 7). The same consequences

of omission apply to other services, such the Scottish Children's Hearings system, in which a similar lack of involvement of fathers has placed an unfair burden on mothers (Gillies, 2004). In respect of this particular service, until recently unmarried fathers who

were not resident with their child were not automatically included in those invited to a Hearing (Plumtree, 2011).

Pleck (2007) points out that father involvement can influence child development in a number of ways: for example, in addition to direct effects, indirect effects on children may be brought about through father involvement influencing mothering practice. 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 (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p. 153).

It is no coincidence then that higher father involvement is linked with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers (Fisher *et al.*, 2006) and, ultimately, failure to engage with fathers makes mothers unfairly responsible for change in families, and can compromise their welfare and safety.

Father involvement and fathers

The Fatherhood Institute has summarised some of the benefits to fathers of greater involvement. These include:

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. Some fathers have used parenting support as a route into education, training and employment (Fatherhood Institute, 2009b, p. 4).

There are many other benefits that speak even more directly to men's self-improvement: for example, more involved fatherhood has been shown to turn men away from crime and self-harm and to be effective in preventing recidivism among men in prison.

Social work: child protection

In child protection, as in other circumstances, most children want contact with most fathers (Scourfield, 2006); and the strength and complexity of these children's attachments to significant adults, including fathers and father-figures, should not be underestimated (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). In the UK, £3 billion a year is currently spent on children by local authority social services, of which more than £1 billion goes to residential provision (Hirsch, 2006). It is likely that these costs could be substantially reduced were fathers and paternal relatives systematically involved in care proceedings. In an important contribution relating to care proceedings Bellamy concludes that:

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 (Bellamy, 2009, p. 260).

Vulnerable children seem to be in the greatest need of ongoing positive relationships with their fathers. They tend to do worse than better supported children when father-child relationships are poor or non-existent; and they seem to experience greater benefits when a relationship with a biological father and/or father-figure is positive (Dunn *et al.*, 2004).



Fathers Network Scotland is a source of further support and advice regarding local initiatives and general Scottish-based support and advice <http://www.fathersnetworkscotland.org.uk>

The Fatherhood Institute has a wealth of additional information and publications about the positive contribution fathers make. www.fatherhoodinstitute.org



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