

# Fathers and families

A guide to assist parenting practitioners with including and working with fathers

## Introduction

Initiatives for working with fathers are often modelled on projects designed for mothers, advertised in places where fathers don't go, and held on 'social work' premises where men stand out like aliens. When the Pen Green Family Centre in Corby realised what a turn-off to men their premises were, they set out to make them father-friendly – among other things, putting up pictures of men with children. Most importantly, they started out not with the purpose of 'fixing fathers' but of 'reflecting fathers' importance' and involving them in the centre, and though this did lead to a successful fathers' group, it led also to other initiatives including specific staff training.

Though fathers' groups are enabling for some, research shows that most fathers are not keen to attend men-only activities (although they may enjoy them if they get there). Trying to set up a fathers' group may absorb a lot of staff time for very little reward, and can ghetto-ise fathers, so that the mainstream service doesn't need to change and become father-inclusive.

Devising strategies to engage fathers actually comes quite far down the line. There's a lot to get clear first, particularly in settings (such as some schools) where the value of engaging with parents of either sex isn't accepted by everyone. But even when engagement with mothers is high on the agenda and practitioners say they believe it's important to work with fathers too, research has found that they often fail to do so. This isn't surprising: a close father/child relationship is rarely regarded as central to children's well-being.

Throughout this paper, the term 'father' is used to mean birth fathers (whether resident with their child or not) and other men who play an important fatherly role in children's lives.

## Case study 1

'The Steering Committee wanted me to work with fathers, and a local father threatened me. He said he'd sue me for only working with mums. The problem is that this project is based on a US model where mothers meet in one group, and their teenagers in another. But I was willing to give dads a go, so I redrafted the flyer. I changed 'lone mother' to 'lone parent.' Not a single man called up! A Committee Member asked about the fathers of the teenagers we're already working with, but that wouldn't be possible. This project's for lone parents.'

Based on an interview with an Australian worker, December 2001

## Why work with fathers?

- policy and legislation now require practitioners who work with families to 'think fathers' (for a full list go to [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org))
- parent education is more likely to 'stick' when delivered to both parents
- programmes that only address mothers may upset the domestic balance, even sometimes putting women or children at risk
- if the relationship with a father is problematic, then working only with the mother or child fails the child because it does not address the real issue
- if a father is not problematic, then failing to work with him fails the child, by not drawing on a potential resource for that child.

## Step 1 – Get clear why fathers matter and what they already do

Fathers are creators, care-givers, comforters, companions, providers, partners, protectors, models, guides, teachers and playmates.

They contribute positively to their children's development through:

- their tendency to love them passionately, and remain loyal to them for life
- shared activities and communication with them
- the time, money and skills they contribute to the household
- the networks – family, friends, workmates – attached to them
- the support they provide to mothers
- representing, to their child, that powerful archetype 'my father'
- modeling masculinity within the household.

Fathers can also have a negative impact on children and mothers – and this is a really important reason for engaging with them. And fathers who do not see their children or provide support to mothers are also having an impact, which can often be challenged.

### Do ...

- set up systems to routinely gather the names and contact details of fathers, including non-resident fathers, when children are registered
- actively seek to meet both parents in home visits and other parent engagement
- make co-ordination of father-involvement a specific duty of one (well trained) member of staff – preferably a manager
- require all staff to be willing/able to engage with fathers: identify this in recruitment and supervision
- ensure all staff are trained to work with fathers and understand why this is important
- routinely explain to all fathers and mothers how the father's involvement (including non-resident fathers) with the service (and at home) will improve outcomes for his child

- assess fathers' needs and strengths (as you would mothers') particularly where there are indicators that father-involvement might be unsafe
- seek support for such men to challenge negative behaviour and encourage behaviour change
- in developing policy and practice, put the child 'at the centre' recognising that mothers' and children's needs/perspectives may not always be the same

## Step 2 – Unpack stereotypes and assumptions

...On a deep level, many of us feel fathers' love of their children is conditional, and mothers' is unconditional, when of course it's much more complex than that. But because of this belief, professionals who would recognise a mother's negativity towards her child as distress, frustration and guilt, and would work patiently through to the love and concern beneath, will accept a father's expressions of negativity as the 'truth', and stop there.

While motherhood is routinely seen as a motivator for women's attendance in detox programmes, further education and so on, fatherhood as a potential motivator for men's development is usually overlooked. One worker observed that all the men who successfully completed a domestic violence programme were fathers, although this had not been noticed or built on by the organisers.

### What are fathers capable of?

- most men report fatherhood as the most profound emotional experience of their lives
- mothers are not natural experts: left in charge of babies or children, men and women develop skills at the same rate
- men are as sensitive and responsive to infants as women are
- fathers and mothers give their babies the same amount of affection
- fathers often express intimacy through shared activities
- many non-resident fathers offer an alternative home when the need arises.

(From *What good are dads?*, 2001)

Before thinking about men as fathers, it's necessary to think about fathers as men. Dr Deborah Ghate found that projects that directed their efforts at 'parents' and denied gender issues had the least success in engaging fathers. Projects that focused consciously on the similar potentialities of women and men as intimate parents did better. But the best results were achieved by projects that recognised men's experiences, interests, attitudes and expectations as often being different, and devised special strategies for them (Ghate, 2000) – although this did not necessarily mean working with the fathers in separate services.

Any organisation that claims to work with fathers because their policies say 'we work with parents' but does not have conscious strategies, backed up by policy, to engage and interact with fathers, is not 'working with fathers'. At the same time, professionals need to be sure that what they perceive as men's 'different' needs or behaviour is not simply their reaction to being treated differently. The Pen Green Centre filmed staff greeting parents, and found they chatted longer and in more depth with mothers, gave a lot more eye contact and stood closer to them.

Changing staff behaviour changed the behaviour of the fathers, 87% of whom went on to be involved in Centre activities (Lloyd, 2001). Certainly some fathers distance themselves from family services, but practitioners as often collude with this, perhaps feeling more at ease working with mothers (Burgess, 2009).

### Do not ...

- think that by inviting 'parents', you will reach fathers: everyone tends to hear 'parent' as 'mother'. Invitations should be addressed individually to each parent or to 'mum and dad' to specify that fathers are included
- assume that when a father does not attend, he is not interested. Consider whether the course or event is being held at a time when he can get there and by a leader with whom he will feel comfortable. Is he staying home to babysit? Has the family discussed whether he should attend? Does he even know the event is happening?
- expect fathers to feel at home in premises designed to meet the needs of mothers or children; tackle the environment or think about other venues for some services
- assume that all fathers are the same: older/younger fathers will have different issues, as

will fathers/step-fathers, resident/nonresident fathers, lone fathers, employed/unemployed fathers, fathers in families contending with disability, and fathers from different social and cultural groups.

## Step 3 – Support the work

Since working with fathers will challenge the culture of most organisations, individual enthusiasm will not be enough. Engaging with fathers must be seen as everyone's business, with support for this work at all levels. If this is not in place few fathers will engage and 'fathers' workers' will burn out and leave. This will reinforce the notion that trying to engage fathers is a waste of time.

What does a father-supportive organisation look like? It has a documented mission inclusive of serving fathers. Board and managers are committed to this and engaged in ongoing reflection and self-reflection. Serious attempts are made to recruit and support male workers and volunteers. Fathers are regularly consulted and participate on parent and other advisory groups. Literature and publicity about the organisation reflect the commitment to serving fathers. Policies that make it harder for fathers to be involved are identified and changed. Fathers' participation is mainstreamed, not limited to separate services such as a fathers' group. A valuable self-assessment tool, the Dad Test, (see page 6) can help you achieve this.

Services need to be clearly tied to outcomes thoughtfully planned and implemented for fathers as well as mothers. Consider how the work described at the beginning of this paper was unthinkingly modelled on a project designed to help lone mothers with discipline issues, without asking whether this was also a primary need of lone fathers, or even whether there were substantial numbers of lone fathers nearby.

### Case Study 2

'I've been working with two fathers on parenting orders who indicated extreme resistance to participating, threatening to disrupt any group in which they were placed. However, with one-to-one support, both completed their twelve week courses, and then both indicated they'd be open to further contact'.

Steve Catchpole, Fathers Worker,  
Suffolk Community Education

If you deliver a mainstream parenting programme allegedly designed for ‘parents’, you cannot assume this will benefit fathers to the same extent as mothers. You will usually need to rethink content, style and goals – for example a goal of parent education for fathers is likely to include father and child spending more time together, whereas this may not be a goal for most mothers.

Fathers may need legal and child maintenance advice, and housing/benefits issues/solutions for fathers are likely to differ substantially from mothers’. Nor can you assume that services to which you refer mothers will be equipped to meet fathers’ needs, or that important services that men may need (for example perpetrator programmes for men who use violence) exist locally at all. Monitoring and evaluation will almost certainly also need to change, such as collection and analysis of parents’ attendance/satisfaction etc by gender.

## Step 4 – Finding the father(s)

Who is ‘the father’? The term tends to be used loosely, covering both birth fathers and father figures, who are often approached from an either/or perspective. Workers may not know if a co-resident male is the birth father, or if they do (and he isn’t) may believe that contacting the ‘real dad’ isn’t important.

Concerns about the alleged shortage of men in children’s lives usually arise from the idea that what is missing is a male influence – a ‘male role model’ rather than a specific person. In fact, birth fathers are far more than ‘role models’: they are always important to children even when the two have never met because they are ‘the other person who made me’. Step-fathers and other key father-figures are important in addition.

Seeking to engage with non-resident fathers poses special problems. Practitioners may fear alienating the mother. Research shows, however, that approached sensitively, most mothers have no problems talking about their children’s fathers, whether they live together or not. Practitioners may also make unfounded negative assumptions about the ‘absent’ father. One study found teenage pregnancy midwives assessing the parenting capacity of the young fathers as poor – even when they had not met them. Practitioners who do pursue missing dads are often pleasantly surprised. Fathers may also be being hidden from services for benefits and other reasons, and mothers may be

happy to reveal them when fears about possible consequences are allayed.

## Commitments to fathers (from those who work with families)

- We will ask the question ‘where are the fathers?’ when we see a room full of female parents.
- We will neither ignore you nor pounce on you and cry ‘how wonderful – a father!’ when you enter the room.
- We will learn your name, and use it.
- We will build a relationship with you as we would with your child’s mother, developing a gradual idea of your strengths, and the challenges you face.
- We will direct written and verbal communications to you, as well as to your child’s mother.
- We will look for your strengths as a father and as a partner and then identify how we can offer support.
- We will let you know that we feel positively about men and the contributions they make to their families and society.

### Do ...

- routinely collect information about father and/or father figures whether co-resident with the child or not
- ‘ask don’t assume’ about the roles the fathers and father-figures play in children’s lives
- establish the contact patterns and emotional, legal and financial involvement of non-resident fathers and father-figures in the child’s life
- involve these men in discussions about the child’s welfare, and in any therapeutic work (whilst ensuring the child’s and the mother’s safety)
- if direct work with fathers is planned, discuss the purpose of this work with family members.

## Step 5 – Sustaining engagement

To attract fathers consistently, the organisation will need to be transformed in the public eye –

recognised by community partners, by local media and by local fathers as a good resource for dads. Once this happens ‘everything snowballs’ says one worker ‘and the phone never stops ringing’.

#### Do ...

- have regular advertising/promotional articles in local media: fatherhood makes a ‘good story’ and they’ll be glad to hear from you
- ensure the father-inclusiveness of your organisation and its services are well known to local services which engage with men (for example, youth services, substance misuse, mental health, homelessness projects, employment and training) and encourage these organisations to identify the fathers among their clients
- ensure the father-inclusiveness of your organisation and its services are well known to organisations that work with women (including teenage pregnancy), mothers and children
- work in partnership with other local agencies to help them develop father-inclusive approaches
- recognise that some men will contact you when they are in crisis (so have appropriate support in place) and some feel more confident if they can ‘bring a friend along’
- monitor and evaluate your work so success in engaging fathers can be demonstrated – and then publicised

#### Do ...

- ensure phone calls are returned promptly
- tackle initial concerns or questions with a simple explanation of what your service provides, and what fathers can expect
- provide a variety of options
- mean what you say: it will reduce suspicion
- follow up when engagement falters (text, phone, email – whatever works)
- when you gather a father’s details, also gather the contact details of someone who will always know where he is – in case he moves, or his phone number changes.
- take the ‘Dad Test’ (see page 6)

The golden rule in recruiting fathers is to **go to where the fathers are**. Fathers are in local workplaces or attending employment, training and FE services. They’re at ante-natal classes and on labour wards, dropping their children off at nursery or school and collecting them from the childminder. They attend contact centres and probation services, engage with solicitors, citizens advice, child support and benefits services, access local sports, and live in hostels and local prisons.

Most importantly, they are almost always known to the children registered in your services – the simplest way of finding these fathers is to invite them in with a personal invitation. One health visiting team quadrupled the number of fathers attending the home visit by simply addressing the letter ‘Dear Mum and Dad’ instead of ‘Dear Parent’ and making the point that the service hoped to see both of them. Most mothers will happily give you fathers’ details so you can contact them – even when dad is living elsewhere.

The possibilities for recruiting dads are endless. Using the ‘detached social work’ model, some projects targeting young fathers have put key workers into housing in the community. Others work with health services to target expectant fathers, with ‘I’m a Dad’ gift bags or ante-natal courses such as Hit the Ground Crawling (see <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=2&cID=798>). A UK project identified men in a GP practice who made, and then failed to keep, appointments: many turned out to be separated dads, for whom separation from their children was a key issue.

#### Do ...

- use fathers who’ve completed your programme as recruiters
- ensure outreach workers make clear their wish to engage with both parents, and schedule visits to suit both
- distribute and carry great leaflets as back up, but don’t expect them to do the job for you
- ‘lean on’ partners and children to get dads involved (invitations from children to their fathers can be really successful)
- be patient – persevere
- consciously imagine a positive future for each father
- love him.

## Further help

### The 'Think Fathers' Network

[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=1006](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=1006)

This is a free network of agencies and individuals committed to bringing in cultural change to support father-child relationships. Fatherhood Champions can take the free Dad Test, a self-assessment tool developed by DCSF with the Fatherhood Institute, to help them consider how effective their engagement is; and to identify changes they can make to ensure it is systematic and effective. The key elements the Dad Test helps review are: leadership, team, environment, communication, recruiting fathers, father-child relationships. The Fatherhood Institute offers a range of services and publications to help agencies and individuals fulfil Dad Test requirements: [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)

### Training and consultancy

#### The Fatherhood Institute

[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)  
Tel: 0845 6341328 (free service-providers advice line)  
[mail@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:mail@fatherhoodinstitute.org)

#### Working with Men

[www.workingwithmen.org/](http://www.workingwithmen.org/)  
Tel: 020 7237 5353  
[info@workingwithmen.org](mailto:info@workingwithmen.org)

#### Working with Fathers @ Fathers Plus, Children North East

[www.workingwithfathers.com](http://www.workingwithfathers.com)  
Tel 0845 130 7225  
[ask@fathersplus.org](mailto:ask@fathersplus.org)

### Further reading/references

Toolkit for Father-Inclusive Practice  
[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=629](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=629)

Fathers and Parenting Interventions: what works?  
[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?prodID=47](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?prodID=47)

What Good are Dads? (2001): <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=740>

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Ferguson H & Hogan F (2004) *Strengthening Families through Fathers: developing policy and practice in relation to vulnerable fathers and their families*. Dublin: Department of Social and Family Affairs

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#### About the author



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This paper was written and revised by Adrienne Burgess, Director of Research at the Fatherhood Institute. Adrienne has written widely on fatherhood and couple relationships. One of the founders of the Fatherhood Institute, she has a thorough understanding of both research and practice. Her book *Fatherhood Reclaimed: the making of the modern father* (Vermilion, 1997) helped set a new agenda on fatherhood in the UK, and has been published throughout the world.

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