

‘BOTH PARENTS MATTER’ - (Father in a focus group)

Agencies think: “You’re a man, deal with it.” - (Father in focus group)

“The whole system sees fathers as an appendix – not essential but nice if you have one.”
(Father in focus group)

Parentline Plus research on fathers using Parentline and web based services.

There is increasing policy interest in ensuring that services should specifically recognise and work with fathers, and a growing literature that explores the barriers to such work, as well as exploring the differences between the ways that men and women seek help. In response to this interest, and to the ‘Think Fathers’ campaign announced by the DCSF in November 2008 (see Appendix 1), Parentline Plus analysed 25,467 long calls to Parentline from parents and carers during the period April – November 2008.

We also undertook a web survey, analysed the use of our website Q&A section by men, analysed the use of our extended telephone support service by men, and commissioned Families Need Fathers (FNF) and Working with Men (WWM) to conduct focus groups to deepen our understanding of fathers’ needs, aspirations and perspectives.

We compared our findings with our previous research on fathers (Parentline Plus 2004), and undertook a review of recent literature.

During the period April – November 2008, Parentline received 25,467 long calls of which 4092 or 16% were from men. In the same period Parentline received a further 14,370 short calls of which 3187 or 22.2% were from men. Our long calls are completed calls when parents are seeking our help whereas our short calls are calls which are curtailed by the caller or ones when the caller is seeking information only. (1)

We looked at 509 ‘Q and As’ on our website received in the period January to December 2008, of which 50 were from men. We also looked a small sample of eleven case studies from men who had received our extended telephone support service.

Six focus groups were undertaken with a total of 48 men during February 2009. Three of these groups, with a total of 28 men and 3 women were run by Families Need Fathers, so concentrated on fathers affected by divorce and separation, because we wanted to gain more insight to fathers’ experiences given the volume of calls on the issue to the helpline. Three further groups of 20 men in total were run by Working with Men in different locations in London, and concentrated on reaching young fathers, because we wanted to gain a better understanding of the issues for young men, in the light of research that suggests they are even less likely than all men to seek help.

A web survey was posted on the main Parentline Plus website for four weeks during January – February 2009. 139 people responded to this survey, 88% of whom were men. In response to this research, Parentline Plus is:

- Strengthening the Dad's sections of our websites.
- Reviewing our promotional materials to ensure that they are relevant to and appropriate to fathers.
- Establishing workshops and support groups specifically for fathers from our area offices.
- Discussing further collaboration with other helplines and other organisations as part of the Kids in the Middle campaign, to ensure that fathers have somewhere known and well publicised to turn to at the time of separation or divorce.

Recommendations

Reach out to fathers at the time of divorce and separation

Children need their fathers as well as their mothers. And they need them to be in good emotional health. At the time of divorce or separation fathers and mothers struggle with their emotions. Our research shows that men are much more likely to seek help at this time, but find it extraordinarily difficult to get the help that they need, because most services fail to meet their needs, albeit unintentionally.

Although this research was not specifically about divorce and separation, it is clear that fathers desperately need to have one place to turn that is obviously there for them and obviously willing and able to engage with them about how to cope with separation and divorce.

Require services to work with fathers

The Children Act 1989 requires that fathers as well as mothers should be provided with a support service to ensure that they can fulfil a positive parenting role when children are vulnerable at times of stress. This includes children who are distressed when their parents are in conflict following divorce or separation. However this requirement is treated in most areas as low priority and fathers in particular do not generally find or get support at the time of divorce and separation, making it more likely that they will experience the process of divorce or separation as extremely difficult, and this in turn impacts negatively on their children.

Accountability and inspection systems such as Ofsted need to set targets and monitor work with fathers so as to reinforce the importance of working with and engaging fathers, so that agencies have an incentive to do this more effectively.

Remove the stigma of asking for help

Mothers and fathers find it very hard to ask for help – there is still a stigma associated with this, and it is still seen as a sign of failure. This stigma affects men more than women, because men are supposed to ‘deal with things’ themselves. This attitude that ‘men should cope’ is prevalent in men, but also in women and often in the people working in helping agencies. As with our other reports, we continue to call for wider societal changes to demonstrate to parents that seeking help is a sign of strength and not weakness. Some of these societal changes need to focus specifically on the prejudices and stigma faced by men in seeking help.

Similarly, promotional materials for all agencies and all services need to ensure that they use images of fathers as well as of mothers so that it is really clear to men that the service wishes to engage with them.

Self help: enable fathers to reach and support other fathers

It is essential that men, and in particular young men, trust the organisation offering support. They need to know that they will be understood, that the service is confidential, that they will not be judged. Organisations working within a self help or a parent partnership model are very well placed to offer this support. But for as long as services remain gender neutral, they are seen and often experienced by fathers as being for mothers.

When the men we spoke with received appropriate services, they felt empowered and better able to manage their emotions and their lives. This makes them powerful advocates for the services they have found helpful, and therefore a good resource to reach out and engage with other fathers.

Our research also demonstrates that parent to parent services (such as Parentline Plus or Families need Fathers) are an essential part of the range of services that fathers need, as they offer reassurance that the person has been there too, and will understand.

Build trust with fathers

Fathers have little experience of using services that meet their needs and that engage with them successfully and productively. So services need to work hard to build relationships and trust with fathers.

Fathers are wary of being told what to do by services, or of information being used against them by services. This means that services need to be really clear about the boundaries of confidentiality and about what they do and how, so as to build fathers’ trust in them, and enable fathers to feel they can use them.

Develop services specifically for fathers

There is a need for some services targeted exclusively to fathers, such as local workshops, websites, etc. – such services are in development locally and nationally but the development is patchy and most fathers do not know what is available to them.

Face to face services to fathers need to be provided at evenings and weekends so that fathers can access them and meet their employment obligations. In addition, face to face services need to be as localised as possible, and promoted in ways that make it clear that fathers are welcome and that the service has been developed and designed to meet fathers' needs as well as mothers.

Train and support agencies and practitioners in working with fathers

Support and training for practitioners in reaching out to and working with fathers is needed across schools, children's services, health and relevant voluntary sector organisations. Most services are currently 'gender neutral' which in effect means that they do not work effectively with men.

Key findings

"I'm now virtually a daily regular on the Message Boards so I think I probably use your services quite enough! However, I think I now have more confidence to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone on the helpline if I reach the bottom of the pit again."

Calls to Parentline

In calls to Parentline, and in website 'Q and As', men are far more likely to seek help about divorce and separation and the impact on their children and on the adults involved; and they are also more likely to seek support on couple disagreements than are women. 20% of long calls from men concerned the impact of divorce and separation on children, compared with 11% of long calls from women. 25% of calls from men concerned the impact of divorce and separation on the adults, compared with 9% of calls on the same topic from women. And 16% of calls from men concerned the impact of couple conflict on adults, compared with 9% of calls from women.

This suggests a real focus for issues on which to engage men, and a time at which men want support. The focus group research revealed that men do want emotional support at this time, and are desperate to know where to turn. Services need to grasp this opportunity and be prepared and trained to work with men to offer support at the time they are experiencing divorce and separation.

More men rang about their emotional and mental health than about any other issue, though fewer than women (29% of calls from men compared to 37% of calls from women between April and November 2008). This indicates men's real need for support, and suggests the importance of making further efforts to reach out to men.

The income levels of male callers show that men of all incomes have difficulties, which is an important point for a universal service like Parentline Plus. However it may also indicate that lower income men may find it even harder to access support, suggesting that extra efforts need to be made to reach out to them. 25% of male callers had annual household incomes of over £30,000 compared to 6% of all callers. Only 4% of men had a household income of under £5000 a year compared to 10% of all callers.

Web survey

The web survey was posted for a month on our website, and was completed by 139 people, 122 of whom were men. The majority of respondents lived in the same household as their children (68%), and were married (32%) or in a relationship (22%) but 17% were divorced and 17% separated. The web survey asked people to identify their number one concern if they had to find help today and the responses mirror calls to Parentline: the majority (24%) would ring about disruption caused by divorce and separation.

Focus Groups

Most fathers unaffected by divorce and separation would seek help from family and friends before an agency, and most said they would only use an agency if they needed it.

However, for those who had experienced divorce and separation, they did feel they needed support from an organisation, because there was a limit to how much their friends and families could take from them, and also they were often expected to be able to deal with their emotions. These fathers in the focus groups wanted a place that they could go that was clearly available to men. Good promotion and publicity were key because most men did not know what services were available to them, or how the service worked.

I would use a service if there is a need as well as understanding more what it stands for and what it can do for me (WWM focus group member)

Most fathers in the focus groups liked internet based services, and suggested better promotion of services and improved search facilities for relevant services via the internet.

Most fathers in the focus groups thought that services could be for men and women, and could be staffed by men or women, but they wanted to see men attending/using the service, and they wanted to know that the service really could work with fathers. They also wanted reassurance about the confidentiality of what they shared, and to know that they would be understood: for many, parent to parent services such as offered by Parentline Plus and FNF were ideal.

Research evidence

Changes to family life

A comprehensive review of the literature and statistics by the Cabinet Office (2008) provides a wealth of data on the changes to family and social structure over the past thirty or so years, and the impact of these on children. This report makes it quite clear that family forms and structures have changed and are continuing to change.

For example:

- In the 2000s 40% of births are outside marriage – a dramatic increase from 10% in the 1970s. Most of this change is in births to cohabitating couples. Divorce rates in the UK are high, but peaked in the 1980s.
- Relationship breakdown is often accompanied by conflict, financial and emotional loss; the many negative effects of separation result from conflict and from financial consequences.
- Lone parent families experience more problems than two parent families, and this is mainly driven by problems around relationship breakdown and the financial consequences. In 2007 12% of households were lone parents, compared with 4% in 1971.
- The challenges for stepfamilies are much greater and this can reduce their potential to maximise outcomes for children. Stepfamilies are one of the fastest growing family forms in the UK. About 10% of all families with dependent children are stepfamilies, and the numbers of children in stepfamilies increased from 1 in 15 to 1 in 10 between 1990 and 2001. 30% of all mothers will spend some time in a stepfamily during their adulthood and before the age of 45.

The report comments that:

“Parental separation is a life event that negatively affects families. However it is not separation itself that has a negative effect but the way it affects family processes and circumstances. Parental separation is a change in family composition. But it is the resultant drop in income for a single parent and in some cases the upheaval of changing home or school together with conflict and poorer parenting and sometimes the loss of contact with one parent which accounts for most of children’s adverse outcomes.” (p95)

The importance of family relationships rather than family structure for good child outcomes is demonstrated by research. However, these relationships are affected by the previous

experiences and the qualities of mothers and fathers (Dunn, 2008). Therefore, if men are struggling with their emotional health, this impacts directly on their relationships with their children and with their partner or ex partner.

Fathers matter

“Always remember that your children are a mirror of your own image and are worth the patience the determination the hardships the sadness the pain the stress and the sense of loss that I believe must be endured by most. They rely and depend on you and in doing the right things, by never giving up on them and accepting that sometimes things just happen, you are showing them what love really is, so be strong, be patient, never give up, learn to forgive for their sakes and above all, my biggest frailty, be able to accept help if and when offered, like me stubborn pride can and will get in the way of an easy transition, I’m still learning that part, the thing is I am willing to learn and not for myself. Thank you for the opportunity to remove some of the thought process from my head, to the screen it is a release, ain’t that something, I do feel enlightened, amazingly.” (Web survey respondent).

The importance of fathers to their children and to family life is becoming better understood. At the same time, there is increased recognition that real barriers exist which prevent men from accessing services, and that the risks to men’s health, in particular their emotional health are significantly higher than for women because of these barriers. (Men’s Health Forum, 2006).

Government commissioned research shows the importance of fathers for outcomes for children. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) found that what parents do with their children, and how they are as parents is the most important factor in children’s achievement and adjustment, and that fathers are vitally important in this. Goldman (2005) found that fathers’ involvement with their children’s school is strongly correlated with better educational outcomes, but that mothers, children and practitioners may all act as gatekeepers to prevent or inhibit fathers’ involvement at school.

This situation is often most apparent if parents are not resident with each other. Goldman found that some practitioners were ambivalent to involving fathers *“considering greater father involvement as unlikely and even as a ‘risk’* (p272). Flouri (2005) found that high levels of father involvement are associated with positive outcomes for children including higher self esteem, better peer relationships and lower criminality and substance abuse.

Men seek help differently from women, and are less likely to seek help

“I have never known where to look or to ask for advice, my situations in life have never been asked about or in my mind noticed by anybody. I’ve always dealt with any situation that arose be it regards myself or my children without even contemplating involving anyone other than immediate family or friends. I know that that is probably wrong, but I’ve only ever known it that way since my own loss as a child, back in the day, from what I knew, each person had their own issues and dealt with them with chin up and chest out.

I wouldn't know how to start to ask, where to go who to help or what assistance I could be afforded, I've always taught myself and tried to do what I thought right....answer is no I have never used any support services of any kind but I am open to invitation.” (Web survey respondent).

Research shows that men do differ from women in help-seeking behaviour (White, 2006), with sporadic and infrequent use of services, lack of engagement with information and a tendency to delay when faced with health problems. These problems are most pronounced in younger men.

The reluctance of men to seek help with emotional problems has been known for some time, (e.g. Padesky & Hammen, 1981). This does not mean that men do not benefit from mental health services, but it does mean that not only is it harder for men to recognise symptoms that require health advice and support. This, combines with men's fear of the possible consequences of seeking help, such as loss of status, loss of control, dependence and potential damage to their identify. (White, 2006).

Services are not father friendly

There is clear evidence that family services cater more effectively for mothers than for fathers. Burgess (2007) found that until recently in public services the term parent has often been synonymous with mother. Ghate et al (2000) found a combination of social, cultural and individual barriers and a feminised culture of service provision that prevented fathers from engaging more fully.

“It's good to talk to someone who has been in the same situation as you; it doesn't have to be a man but someone who understands where you are at.” (FNF focus group member).

“I'm put off services because of not knowing who I am talking to, or if they understand what my problem is.” (WWM focus group member)

Page, Whitting and Maclean (2008) found that father inclusive practice was not routine or mainstream in family services, and at best most services were 'gender neutral' while expressing that they valued fathers. With the exception of Sure Start Children's Services there was also very little monitoring of engagement with fathers. Their research shows that being gender neutral results in unequal levels of access to services by mothers and fathers.

All this indicates that services must go to where men are found, and not expect men to go to the service. Services must be sensitive to men's ways of thinking about and describing their problems, so that gender specific questions and problem-defining and emotional handling skills can be useful. Yet the review for the DCSF (Page, Whitting and Maclean, 2008) found that inspections of local authorities and of schools and children's centres do not require any evidence of support for fathers, which is a potentially important lever to insist on active strategies to engage fathers.

The fact that it is not a legally or administratively specified requirement to engage fathers in services means they do not generally find or get support at the time of divorce and

separation, making it more likely that they will experience the process of divorce or separation as extremely difficult, and this in turn impacts negatively on their children. (Welsh, et al, 2004)

Our findings

Why men seek help from Parentline Plus

Calls to Parentline

“No-one plans to separate or divorce. So when it happens you have no idea what will happen next. It’s not like other aspects of life where you pick things up as you go along. You haven’t anticipated it and you have no idea what to do or who to turn to.” (FNF focus group member)

In our current research we found that: men were far more likely than women to ring Parentline about the impact of divorce and separation and couple disagreements.

During the period 1 April – 30 November 2008, a total of 25,467 long calls were made to Parentline; of these 4092 or 16% were from men. Twenty per cent of these long calls from men concerned the impact of divorce and separation on children, compared with 11% of calls from women.

- 25% of these calls from men concerned the impact of divorce and separation on the adults, compared with 9% of calls from women.
- A further 16% of calls from men concerned the impact of couple conflict on adults, compared with 9% of calls from women.
- Men also called in significant numbers about their mental health, but were less likely to do so than women (29% compared to 37%).

Our data was collected differently when we wrote the report in 2004, but at that time over 60% of fathers were calling about issues concerning separation and divorce and 37% called about couple conflict and disagreements; 63% of male callers in 2004 expressed anxiety about their situations (Parentline Plus 2004).

Table 1: The primary reasons for calling Parentline 1 April – 30 November 2008 (Please note that the % do not add up to 100% because callers may be calling about more than one concern and there is also a modest variation due to rounding)

ISSUE CAUSING CONCERN	% OF LONG CALLS FROM MEN (n=4092)	Rank order of calls from men	% OF LONG CALLS FROM WOMEN (n=21375)	Rank order of calls from women	% OF ALL LONG CALLS (n=25467)	Rank order of all calls
CHILDREN ISSUES						
Behaviour	22	3rd	30	2 nd	28	2nd
Emotional health	17	5th	21	3 rd	19	3rd
Conflict	12	7th	16	4 th	15	4th
Divorce/Separation	20	4th	11	5 th	12	=5th
School/Education	5	8th	5	9 th	6	=8th
Mental Health	4	=9th	7	8 th	6	=8th
Bullying	3	=10th	4	=10th	4	=9th
Abuse	4	=9th	3	11 th	4	=9th
Developmental issues	2	=11th	4	=10th	4	=9th
Sexual behaviour	4	=9th	4	=10th	4	=9th
Physical health	1	=12th	1	=13th	1	=12th
Disability	1	=12th	1	=13th	1	=12th
ADULT ISSUES						
Mental Health	29	1st	37	1st	35	1st
Divorce/Separation	25	2nd	9	=6th	12	=5th
Couple disagreements	16	6th	9	=6th	10	6th
Isolation and loneliness	4	=9th	8	7th	7	7th
Abuse	2	=11th	4	=10th	3	10th
Finances	3	=10th	2	12th	2	11th
Physical health	1	=12th	1	=13th	1	=12th
Disability	<1	13th	<1	14th	<1	13th

The columns indicating the rank order of the issues clearly show that men are more concerned than women about the impact that divorce and separation.

We also analysed the gender of those that men were calling about. 12% of men were ringing about adult women, while just under 7% of women rang about men. 48.6% of men rang about their female children compared to 52% of women and 51% of men rang about their male children compared to 47% of women. There were no significant differences by age of the child; the stereotype that men were more likely than mothers to ring about teenage daughters was not found. Of the 155 grandparents who rang, seventeen were

men and 71% of these grandfathers rang about their grandsons whereas grandmothers were almost equally likely to call about their granddaughters as their grandsons.

At the same time a total 14,370 short calls were made to Parentline of which 3187 or 22.2% were from men. (2) The nature of these calls make it difficult to obtain a lot of information on the exact reason for the call but the statistic does suggest that men are more likely to seek information rather than support, at least initially.

We looked at the demographic information collected about male callers. The men who called were:

Fathers	67%
Stepfathers	5%
Non resident fathers	15%
Male family relatives	3%
Grandfathers	0.4%

10% of Male callers said they had a disability, compared to 9% of women; 78% of male callers were white, compared with 76% of female callers.

Household income information shows that higher numbers of male callers had larger incomes than most callers and that fewer were asked this question. This suggests that talking about income to men remains difficult, perhaps because of the perceived role of men as the family breadwinner. Interestingly fewer men than women were unsure about their household income, which seems to reflect this male role. The income levels of male callers show that men of all incomes have difficulties, an important point for a universal service. However it also shows that lower income men may find it even harder to access support, suggesting that extra efforts need to be made to reach out to them. 25% of male callers had annual household incomes of over £30,000 compared to 6% of all callers. Only 4% of men had a household income of under £5000 a year compared to 10% of all callers.

Table 2 Household income of callers to Parentline 1 April – 30 November 2008

£ INCOME BRACKET	MALE CALLERS (%) (n=4082)	FEMALE CALLERS (%) (n= 21375)	ALL CALLERS (%) (n=25467)
0 - 5000	4	11	10
5 - 10000	6	11	10
10 – 15000	9	10	9
15-20000	10	11	11
20-30000	16	18	18
30000+	25	7	6
NO ANSWER	6	5	5
NOT SURE	6	11	9
NOT ASKED	18	17	22

Website use

The same pattern emerged from our analysis of the Q and A section of our website. Of a total of 509 Q and A's during the year 2008, 50 or almost 10% were from men, and 32 of these concerned divorce/separation and couple conflict (6.2% of all Q&A in 2008 but 64% of 2008's Q&A requests from men).

Web survey

The web survey was posted for a month on our website, and was completed by 139 people, 122 of whom were men. Most (81%) had not used Parentline Plus services before. The majority of respondents lived in the same household as their children (68%). The majority were married (32%) or in a relationship (22%) but 17% were divorced and 17% separated. The ages of those responding ranged from 16-24 (5%) to 56 and over (5%) with the majority (43%) aged between 36-45. The majority had 2 children (44%). The ages of their children ranged from under 3 to over 26.

The web survey asked people to identify their number one concern if they had to find help today and the responses mirror calls to Parentline: the majority (24%) would seek help about disruption caused by divorce and separation. This is a clear indicator of an issue to be used for the promotion of Parentline for fathers, and indeed of other services to fathers.

Table 3 Web survey: The issues you might want some help with as a dad, and your number one concern if you had to find help today

ISSUE	YOU MIGHT WANT HELP WITH (%)	RANK	YOUR NUMBER ONE CONCERN (%)	RANK
Your children's behaviour	11		15	
Your children's physical health	3		3	
Your own physical health	3		1	
Your children's emotional and mental health	13		12	
Your own emotional and mental health	9		8	
Your children's development	6		4	
Your children's risky behaviour (Sex, drugs, alcohol, bad crowd, etc)	5		6	

Your child's disability	2		0	
Your own disability	1		0	
Disruption caused by divorce and separation	9		24	
Conflict in the home	7		7	
Feeling isolated	7		5	
Bullying	3		2	
School and education worries	6		4	
Concern that your child is being abused	3		5	
Concerns about domestic violence	3		0	
Financial worries	7		5	
Problems at work	2		1	

We asked survey respondents if they would prefer workshops and materials that are developed especially for dads and male carers and 60% wanted this. Only 34% had considered attending workshops and face to face support, but when asked where they wanted such provision there was a clear demand for face to face support to be as localised as possible. Respondents wanted face to face provision to be available at weekends and evenings so that they could fit it in to existing work commitments. Respondents also pointed out that they liked on line provision and that this was more flexible for them to use.

Respondents were asked what would encourage them to use Parentline Plus services more. Some were already making use of the services and valued them. Others suggested men only message boards, the option of speaking to a man on the phone, and the option of having specific groups and workshops for fathers dealing with divorce and separation. However, it is important to balance this with comments such as:

"I have a daughter aged 1, the relationship ended with the mother when my daughter was 6 weeks old I ring Parentline nearly every day and have so much respect for the service."

When asked if they had used other services, 55 respondents responded negatively; the others had used a variety of services, and the most frequently mentioned was 'Families need Fathers'. As there was a link from their website to this survey, this result indicates

that fathers followed that link. Fathers who used FNF were extremely positive about the help they got from the organisation.

We asked fathers to share their family stories for others to benefit from as part of the web survey; some did, but many wrote that it was *“too painful”* or *“I have many horror stories, not good reading”*. Some wrote very long pieces about their experiences and difficulties around divorce and separation, while others said *“wait for the novel”* or *“sorry, I would love to write it down but it would take a long time to do so”*. Many suggested joining FNF for support. Their comments and suggestions demonstrated how important fatherhood is to their identity:

“I’ve a gorgeous daughter, and I love her to pieces. While the legal matters have been a nightmare, being her dad is the most wonderful thing in the world.”

“Keep talking, keep in touch and let them see that you are still their dad and you’re still you.”

“I created a parenting plan which agreed the direction we would both go in for our daughter’s sake. This I feel was the turning point, something that showed my ex that I would not give up and was here for the long haul.”

Focus Groups¹

We spoke with a total of 48 men in the focus groups. They ranged in ages, and their children were aged between 1 and 43. All but one were White British, and 4 of their children were of mixed heritage. Seven of the men we spoke to had a disability, and two children of the 48 had disabilities. Their income ranged from under £5000 a year to over £30,000 a year and they lived in small town, villages, suburbs and inner cities. We held focus groups in London, Birkenhead and Exeter.

The focus groups were helpful in illuminating the issues behind our quantitative research. They demonstrated the difficulty that fathers had in finding and accessing services, their lack of trust in services, and the value they placed on talking with people who they could be sure had similar experiences to their own.

The focus groups indicated that fathers only seek support when they feel they cannot handle a problem any longer alone, or with the support of friends and family. At this time, they are often overwhelmed and very unsure of where to turn. The need for support is acute at the point of separation, but as separation and divorce is a lengthy process, the support needs continue.

¹ Note that we received a lot of information, feedback and suggestions specifically on fathers experiences of divorce from the FNF focus groups, but that is not the focus of this briefing, which is exploring why, when and how men seek support, rather than making specific comments about men’s experiences and needs at and after separation and divorce.

Some of the men in focus groups had talked to friends and family but there was a strong feeling that there is only so much of it that people can take, so they felt very isolated and alone. They looked for support because they were desperate:

“To get up in the morning, look in the mirror and not be disgusted by what you see.”
(FNF focus group member).

Almost all the men felt that they got no support from obvious points of contact – schools and doctors. For those who had experienced separation, they felt that even if they had previously been in touch with these agencies, they did not get support now, and instead

“You have to prove yourself a good father over and over again.” (FNF focus group member)

Most of the fathers used internet searches to find out about organisations, and their searches produced a bewildering array of organisations, so they did not know where to start. Once they do start, the experience of seeking help can be extremely off putting, because so few services are prepared to help them, or geared up to meet their needs. Many of the fathers in the focus groups had been told that they were not eligible for a service because the service was only for women, or that their needs were too complex for the service to cope with.

“Services laugh at me.” (FNF focus group member)

“Services know nothing about fathers.” (FNF focus group member)

And yet they were desperate. One man, with a disabled child and a disability himself, had periods of homelessness. He resorted to reading the Children Act in his local library as every agency he turned to would not or could not help.

“If it hadn’t been for FNF I’d be dead or in prison now. I was so angry I might have killed someone, and so depressed I was suicidal. In the end my mother found the FNF number in the phone book.” (FNF focus group member)

Another said - *“I worry that I just won’t be able to get to the other side before my children grow up.”* (FNF focus group member).

Fathers want a place that they could go that was clearly available to men. Most fathers in the focus groups thought that services could be for men and women, and could be staffed by men and women, but they wanted to see men attending/using the service, and they wanted to know that the service really could work with fathers.

“As most services are female biased, it doesn’t have to be only for fathers, but it has to show that it will be for fathers.” (FNF focus group member).

But some men were also fearful of services. When asked what might put them off a service they said:

“Fear of going to seek help from a counsellor, for fear that it could be unpicked by the court.” (FNF focus group member)

“The way my personal information would be used there after (puts me off).” (WWM focus group member)

“Someone telling me how to bring up my son and telling me what to do and what not to do.”(WWM focus group member)

There were also practical reasons: the timing and location of services could make them very difficult to use for fathers.

Conclusions

When the men we spoke with received appropriate services, they felt empowered and better able to manage their emotions and their lives. This makes them powerful advocates for the services they have found helpful, and therefore a good resource to reach out and engage with other fathers.

Divorce and separation is a key transition point for children and a point at which men are much more likely to seek help and support. Services could and should make much more of this because it offers a real opportunity to engage and support men, and in so doing, to mitigate the potential harm to their children.

Campaigns to engage fathers and help them to find support at this time are crucial. Parentline Plus is one of a group of organisations supporting the Kids in the Middle campaign. This is a campaign to mobilize more support for mothers and fathers to parent together harmoniously and to avoid conflict, and for children whose parents are in conflict. ‘Kids in the Middle’ is calling on Government, all political parties and all family services to put children’s interests at the top of the agenda and make more resources available in five areas:

- For parents when they are going through separation – support to avoid the escalation of conflict and the speedy agreement of new and safe parenting arrangements.
- For parents living together – support to achieve harmonious co-parenting and to avoid conflict.
- For parents when a baby is born – support to mothers and fathers to reflect on the challenges of harmonious co-parenting.

- For young people – support for those affected by parental separation, and relationship education – reflection in the school curriculum on the roles played by their own parents in their care and on managing personal conflict.

In addition, Parentline Plus is also involved in 'Mum, Dad, Baby', a campaign that is providing a 'Dad Card' to over 60% of UK maternity units providing practical support for mum re: the birth and also tips for the Dad. The assumption is that as 96% of parents are present together at the birth, then this is an opportunity to support fathers where traditionally there is little information. It also recognises that the first 24 months of a new baby see a considerable number of relationships separate and if there is support from the outset then fathers may not feel so isolated and unable to seek support.

It is essential that men, and in particular young men, trust the organisation offering support. They need to know that they will be understood, that the service is confidential, that they will not be judged. Organisations working within a self help or a parent partnership model are very well placed to offer this support. But for as long as services remain gender neutral, they are seen and often experienced by fathers as being for mothers.

NOTES

(1) It should be noted that call takers collect as many details as possible but it is not always appropriate to ask for demographic information so we have a number of long calls and short calls where we do not know the gender of the caller. Over the course of a long call, the call takers collect as many details as possible on the following:

- Relationship of caller to person causing concern
- Family make up of the family causing concern
- The subject of concern, including their age and gender
- Any child issues (the main reason for the call or any supplementary issues)
- Any adult issues (the main reason for the call or any supplementary issues)
- Referrals to other PL+ services or other organisations, if relevant
- Demographic information
- How did they find out about PL+
- A free text box to record any other feedback

(2) Parentline Plus' definition of short calls refers to the extent of the support that the caller is requesting. Some short calls are curtailed by the caller, perhaps because they have been interrupted by someone or change their mind about talking to Parentline. We hope that these callers call back and receive the support they need. Other short calls are simply requesting leaflets and other information materials or are wanting information about another organisation which can offer specialist support. Calltakers are able to collect a lot of information on a long call but short call data collection is kept to an absolute minimum which is gender of the caller, whether or not the call was curtailed, what information was given and whether or not the caller had used the service before.

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Appendix 1

Extract from Think Fathers Press Release:

CHILDREN'S MINISTER: CALL ON SERVICES TO BETTER SUPPORT DADS

13 November 2008

Children's Minister Beverley Hughes today announced a 'Think Fathers' campaign to dispel the myth that dads are the 'invisible parent'. Research the Government is publishing today shows that public, health and family services across the board need to go much further in recognising and working with fathers.

Kick-starting a debate at the Family and Parenting Institute, Beverley Hughes wants to build up the expectation of fathers' involvement within public services - from birth, through children's centres in the early years and in schools - and within society more generally. With research showing that children who grow up with strong father figures are less likely to get into crime, take drugs; grow up with mental health problems or struggle to form relationships, the Children's Minister announced that the Government will be working with the Fatherhood Institute to look at how to better support dads and encourage them to play an active role in their families.

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0254