

National Academy for Parenting Research

Evaluating the evidence

Fathers, families and children

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Evaluating the evidence: Fathers, families and children

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Family life in modern Britain: Key facts and figures

- 68% of all mothers work in contrast to 43% in 1973. 27% of all mothers work fulltime (Ellison, Barker and Kulasuriya, 2009; IES, 1995; ONS, 2009).
- 91% of all fathers are employed, with 83% being employed fulltime. The average working week for fathers is 46.1 hours (ONS, 2009; O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003).
- In 1971, 92% of all UK children were raised by both of their parents living together in the same household (Kiernan, 2006a). This percentage has since dropped to 78% of all homes with dependent children (ONS, 2009).
- 22% of all UK households with dependent children are headed by single parents. This is triple what it was in 1971 (ONS, 2009).
- Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study suggest that 40% of all children are born outside of marriage, 15% of whom are born to single mothers who are neither cohabitating nor married (Kiernan, 2006b).

- It is estimated that within the UK, one in three children will experience at least one parental divorce during their childhood (Maclean, 2004).
- When families breakdown, fathers are much more likely than mothers to leave the family home (ONS, 2009).
- The majority of fathers stay in touch with their children after family breakdown, although it is estimated that up to 10% of children will lose touch with their father entirely (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003).

Clearly much has changed over the past forty years. Children are now more likely to have a mother who works and less likely to have a father that lives with them than they were in the early 1970's. These changes have caused some to worry that children are not getting enough attention, particularly from their fathers.

Research also suggests, however, that fathers are spending more time with their children than ever before. In the mid 1970's, fathers averaged about 15 minutes per day with their children. This figure has since increased to approximately two hours per day if the father lives with his children and they are aged five or younger (Fisher, McCulloch

and Gershuny, 1999). Interestingly, mothers are also spending more time with their children than they were 40 years ago, despite the fact that they are also much more likely to work (Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg, 2004; Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson, 2003). This is because mothers are doing less housework and are also better at matching their schedules to their children's schedules. Through the greater availability of part-time work, parents can now schedule their work time around the times when their children are at school (Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg, 2004; Gray, 2006).

Despite the significant rise in the amount of time fathers spend with their children, mothers nevertheless spend significantly more time in childcare (Baxter, 2002; Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Ehrenberg et al, 2001; Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2004). In particular, mothers are more likely to be involved in the primary care of their children, which includes activities such as feeding, bathing and dressing. In addition, mothers are much more likely than fathers to take responsibility for their children in terms of managing their activities and scheduling appointments. By contrast, a greater proportion of fathers' time with their children is spent in play and leisure activities (Craig, 2006; Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Gray, 2006).

Despite the discrepancy in fathers' and mothers' time with children, opinion surveys repeatedly suggest that both parents desire greater equality in the sharing of child care (Craig, 2006; Hatten, Vinter and Williams, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Lewis and Lamb, 2007). On the other hand, the majority of parents also feel these arrangements represent a fair balance between work and family life (Ehrenberg et al, 2001; Ellison, Barker and Kulasuriya, 2009; Thompson and Walker,

1989). Research additionally suggests that while fathers and mothers broadly endorse greater equality in the division of childcare duties, many parents tend to hold more traditional views when it comes to the division of the childcare vs. breadwinner responsibilities (Hauari and Hollingsworth, 2009). In particular, research repeatedly suggests that fathers, mothers and children have a 'baseline' expectation that fathers should be the primary source of income (Christiansen and Plakowitz, 2001; Salway, Chowbey and Clarke, 2009; Lewis, 2000).

Fathers and UK policy

UK policies aimed at fathers have evolved from three inter-related government agendas:

- The need to decrease father absence and increase paternal responsibility
- The need to promote greater equality between genders in the workforce
- The need to improve children's wellbeing through increased father involvement.

Policy documents that emphasise the importance of the father-child relationship, such as *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) and *Every Child Matters* (DCSF, 2003) have fuelled initiatives aimed at increasing fathers' opportunities to participate in their children's care. For example, the *National Childcare Strategy*, the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services* (DoH, 2004) *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) and the most recent green paper, *Support for All* (DCFS, 2010), all emphasise the importance of involving fathers in children's services.

Initiatives aimed at involving fathers in childcare services have not always been as successful as hoped, however. Evaluations

of fathers' participation in Sure Start (Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis, 2003) and family centres (Ghate, Shaw and Hazel, 2000) suggest that fathers remain reluctant to participate in services that emphasise childcare, generally because they feel excluded from what is on offer. Findings from these studies and others suggest that fathers are sometimes reluctant to attend children's services because of their overtly female focus, as well as practitioners' lack of sensitivity to many of their needs. In order to address these barriers, local authorities have been advised to develop strategies for engaging fathers, including the recruitment of more male workers.

Father involvement and child development

Father involvement is most often conceptualised in terms of fathers' *engagement* with, *accessibility* to and *responsibility* for their children (Lamb et al, 1985; 1987). *Engagement* refers to fathers' direct interaction with their children while caring for or playing with them. *Accessibility* refers to being available to one's child while engaging in something else. *Responsibility* involves activities such as managing and organising children's time and care. Father involvement most frequently involves engaging with or being accessible to their children. Mothers, on the other hand, are still more likely to take responsibility for managing their children's time (Gray, 2006; Pleck and Masciadrelli; 2004).

Research suggests that fathers' involvement in their children's care is related to a variety of contextual factors, including his satisfaction with his employment, his relationship with his own father, his mental wellbeing and his attitudes towards parenting

(Belsky, 1984; Pleck, 2007). The quality of a father's relationship with his children's mother is perhaps the strongest predictor of the quality and quantity of time he spends with his children, however (Belsky, 1981). Fathers who feel good about the couple relationship are more likely to treat their children in a warm and sensitive way (Belsky, Gilstrap and Rovine, 1984; Belsky et al, 1991; Volling and Belsky, 1991). The extent to which mothers perceive fathers as competent also predicts the amount of time fathers spend with their children (McBride et al, 2005).

When fathers are actively involved in their children's care, children are more likely to feel good about themselves, do well at school and stay out of trouble (Amato and Rivera, 1999; Flouri, 2005; NICHD, 2004; Sarkadi et al, 2008). 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 (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Dunn et al, 2004). Other fathering behaviours that contribute to positive child outcomes include the extent to which they adopt an authoritative or democratic parenting style and the extent to which he can form an effective co-parenting alliance with his children's mother (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Amato and Rivera, 1999; Davis and Cummings, 1998; Belsky, Putman and Crnic, 1996; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf and Frosch, 2001; Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2009; Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1999). Research also suggests that fathers can negatively contribute to their children's development when they persistently engage in antisocial behaviour. In these instances, more father involvement actually results in worse outcomes for children's behaviour

(DeGarmo, in press; Jaffee et al, 2003). Children also suffer when they live in homes characterised by high levels of inter-parental conflict, including domestic violence and child maltreatment (Margolin et al, 2003; Salzinger et al, 2002; Tyler, 2002).

The evidence underpinning father involvement in children's services

While most fathers do a good enough job in caring for their children, fathers sometimes benefit from extra parenting support. This *Evaluating the Evidence* briefing paper considers the extent to which fathers' participation in children's services is linked to improved father and child outcomes. In doing so, it considers research evidence in terms of its strength, based upon the Academy's *Evaluating the Evidence* scale.

As the scale suggests, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are widely considered to be the most robust way of determining whether an intervention is effective. While a single RCT provides some indication that a programme is effective, it is usually not sufficient, since a programme's effectiveness can vary across settings and populations. Impact is therefore best understood through multiple RCTs conducted across multiple settings. Other, less rigorous methods for establishing a robust evidence base include well-designed cross-sectional studies (where the treatment and control group are only measured at one point in time – not via pre and post treatment measures) and the use of norm referenced instruments, which compare observed pre and post intervention changes to 'normed' scores based upon population averages. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, should not be

used to determine a programme's impact, although they are useful for understanding why or how a programme works.

Box 1: Evaluating the evidence scale -- Ranking the quality of the evidence from highest to lowest

- Multiple RCTs, showing long-term outcomes across multiple, independent settings (effectiveness trials).
- A single or multiple RCTs demonstrating short-term effects only (efficacy trials).
- A carefully matched control trial
- Cross-sectional studies
- Studies using pre and post norm-referenced questionnaires
- Qualitative studies (not considered a measure of impact).

Understanding 'what works'

Using the *Evaluating the Evidence Scale*, a thorough literature search was conducted to identify interventions with a proven track record of improving outcomes for children and their fathers. Findings from this search suggest that programmes which promote an authoritative style of parenting and/or support the co-parenting alliance are particularly likely to improve outcomes for fathers and their children. Examples of such programmes include the *Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1997), *Triple P* (Sanders et al, 2000), the *Supporting Father Involvement Project* (Cowan et al, 2009) and the *Marriage and Parenting in Stepfamilies Intervention (MAPS)* (DeGarmo and Forgatch, 2007) which have all have undergone at least one randomised controlled trial and have demonstrated improvements in both fathers' and children's behaviour. All four of these programmes can be delivered to fathers and mothers individually or together as a couple and emphasise the importance of

authoritative parenting practices when raising children. *Triple P* and the *Incredible Years* are currently available through the Academy's training offer.

The literature review additionally identified two programmes which aim to improve child outcomes by improving the co-parenting relationship. The first of these, *Family Foundations* (Feinberg et al, 2009), is delivered to couples during the antenatal period and has been linked to improvements in fathers' sensitivity towards their children during their first year, as well as children's improved ability to self-soothe at 12 months. *Dads for Life* (Braver et al, 2005; Cookston et al, 2006) aims to improve the co-parenting alliance between divorced parents. It is delivered to fathers only, but has been linked to long term positive outcomes for divorcing mothers, as well as improved father and child wellbeing.

When it comes to engaging and recruiting fathers, research suggests that fathers are more likely to attend services when there is a clearly stated purpose that is linked to improved child outcomes. In other words, fathers benefit from knowing why it is important for them to attend (Schock and Gavazzi, 2004). There is little evidence to suggest that these services must be delivered by male practitioners, however. Instead, research suggests that men work well with male or female practitioners when they can develop a positive working alliance with them (Bowman, Scogin and Floyd, 2001). Research also suggests that fathers prefer mixed groups of mothers and fathers over services targeted at fathers only (Fagan, 1999). Finally, the evidence reviewed for this paper suggests that there are times when it would not be beneficial for fathers to be involved in family services (Scott and Crooks, 2004). For this reason, family provision

should have systems in place for understanding the quality of the relationship between the mother and father, so that practitioners can make good judgements as to when and how to include fathers.

Research also suggests that services are most successful when they have four elements in place to ensure their effectiveness: 1) a clearly specified target group, 2) a clearly specified theory of change based upon solid theories of child development and therapeutic support, 3) mechanisms for ensuring fidelity and 4) a proven track record for improving outcomes for fathers and children. Programmes that include these four elements, along with practices aimed at recruiting a specific target group, constitute what Bronte-Tinkew et al (2007) refer to as 'mature' fatherhood programmes.

Research suggests that within the UK, many of the services targeted at fathers aim to 'hook' them into other family services by involving activities that they may like, but are not linked to improved child outcomes (Potter and Carpenter, 2008). Such services include 'Bring Your Dad to School' schemes, fathers-only pub nights and martial arts programmes for fathers. While these programmes are all well-intended, they are unlikely to improve outcomes for children and fathers unless there are specific mechanisms for referring fathers onto other services. Research also suggests that the majority of the fathers who attend these services are already highly involved in their children's lives (Palm and Fagan, 2008). Hence, such services may be well-liked, but are unlikely to result in any enduring or necessary change.

Bringing it all together: Key messages for policy and practice

A primary goal of the 'Evaluating the Evidence' series is to provide those working with parents with a set of evidence based messages that have implications for policy and practice. While it may not be practical to implement all of them, we hope that they at least provide practitioners with something interesting to think about.

1. Two parents are better than one

Research consistently suggests that children do better when they receive consistent love and care from at least two responsible and committed adults. In most Western families, these adults will be the child's biological father and mother. However, children still do well in alternative family situations that may include other committed family members, such as grandparents, same-sex parents, step parents, uncles, aunts and friends. Research also suggests that there are times when living with one's biological mother and father is not possible or safe. When providing family support, service providers should remain respectful of the diversity that exists within family systems and provide support that reflects each family's individual needs.

2. The role of the father is ecologically adaptive and multiply determined

Research consistently suggests that fathering is uniquely sensitive to contextual influences in a way that mothering is not. This does not mean, however, that fathers are not as capable as mothers in meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children. Research suggests that fathers and mothers are equally good at engaging in

the caregiving and breadwinning roles. However, the best evidence suggests that the role of the father is more likely to be influenced by ecological and contextual factors. Factors which predict fathers' level of involvement in family life include his personality, his mental health, his work status and the quality of his relationship with his children's mother.

Research additionally suggests that it is the quality of fathers' engagement with their children that counts, not the amount of time they spend with them, or the number of childcare duties they perform. Policies and services aimed at fathers should therefore address a variety of factors that support fathers' involvement in family life rather than focus narrowly on their time in childcare or their participation in children's services. Services that target fathers' disciplinary practices and co-parenting skills are the most likely to result in benefits for children. Evidence also suggests that fathers do not need to reside with their children in order for these skills to be effective.

3. Fathers are part of families

Paternity is determined through a single act of insemination, whereas fathering, by definition, is determined through relational interactions between a father and his child, his partner, parents, employer, friends and extended family. All of these relationships influence fathering behaviours whether fathers live with their children or apart. The research presented in this paper consistently suggests that fathering behaviours are best understood within the context of the wider family system. Moreover, the most effective interventions are sensitive to the needs of the family, as well as the father. These

interventions include those which place an emphasis on the parents' shared interest in their children, whether they are living with or separated from their children's mother.

4. Mothers are likely to hold the key for engaging fathers

Research consistently suggests that the single most powerful predictor of a father's involvement with his children is the quality of his relationship with their mother, regardless of whether the couple is married, divorced, separated or never married. A father who gets along well with his children's mother is more likely to take an active interest in his children's upbringing. This finding, coupled with the fact that most mothers take the role of 'lead parent' in managing their children's time, suggests that mothers may be the best route for getting fathers involved in children's services.

5. The majority of UK families continue to value fathers as breadwinners

Rightly or wrongly, many parents opt for a traditional, gendered division of childcare and breadwinning. While this trend may be slowly changing, 91% of all fathers living within the UK are employed and 83% are employed full time. In addition, the average working week for fathers is 46.1 hours, suggesting that they have relatively little time to attend parenting services, even when they are held in the evening. While practitioners should make efforts to include fathers in parenting services whenever possible, they should also respect the fact that this may be difficult for some families.

6. The majority of UK families continue to value mothers as caregivers

Research also suggests that the majority of mothers see the role of caregiver as their primary role. Modern mothers are more actively involved in their children's care than they were 40 years ago, despite the fact that more of them are working. Evidence suggests that while 71% are in some kind of employment, only 27% are working full time so they can adopt the role of 'lead parent' within their family. By 'lead parent' we mean the parent who takes on the responsibility of organising the child's daily care, including arranging doctor's appointments, after-school activities, parent/teacher conferences, etc. When fathers engage with their children, they are more likely to take on the role of helper or playmate. While there may be benefits for rectifying this imbalance, there is evidence to suggest that this is the choice of most families and it does not contribute to worse outcomes for children.

7. Most fathers are 'good enough'. Some fathers may need more help.

The research reviewed in this paper suggests that a fair number of fathers are very involved in their children's lives and this involvement is related to high levels of couple satisfaction, low levels of family conflict and a sufficient level of family income. By comparison, fathers who experience low levels of couple satisfaction, high levels of family conflict, poor mental health, a low income or a long period of unemployment are less likely to be involved in their children's lives. In these cases, fathers are likely to benefit from parenting help, but are also the least likely to seek it. Service providers should therefore ensure that

effective services are available for vulnerable fathers and have appropriate referral systems (such as the CAF) in place to identify them. The services that are indicated for vulnerable fathers include programmes targeted at divorced fathers, young fathers, fathers who may be mentally ill or misuse substances and fathers who are antisocial. Although child contact may not always be warranted, local authorities and service providers should continue to explore ways in which to support the most vulnerable fathers in their communities, including those who are in prison.

8. Services aimed at engaging fathers must be underpinned by a solid theory of change that is empirically linked to improved child outcomes

Interventions with a proven track record in improving father and child outcomes are always underpinned by a sound theoretical framework that includes specific mechanisms for improving father and child behaviours. These interventions clearly specify: 1) their intended outcomes, 2) how these outcomes will be achieved, 3) who their target group is and 4) how fidelity will be maintained. Within the UK, most services targeted at fathers lack these elements with the primary aim of 'hooking' fathers into other services. Research suggests that this strategy is often unsuccessful in recruiting fathers to other services when these services do, in fact, exist. Moreover, 'hook' services are most often attended by the most able fathers. Local authorities should consider how they can replace these services with more substantive interventions which are targeted specifically at vulnerable fathers and their families. Local authorities should also have systems in place for

evaluating the effectiveness of father focussed services in comparison to other family based interventions.

9. Family based services, rather than father based services, are more likely to effectively engage fathers and improve fathering behaviours

While some fathers may prefer 'fathers' only' groups, evidence suggests that they are just as likely, if not more likely, to attend parenting groups that include fathers and mothers. When services have a clear purpose and outcome, fathers are more likely to appreciate why their attendance is necessary and be more motivated to participate in the programme. In addition, research suggests that fathering interventions are more likely to be effective if they contain an element that promotes authoritative parenting, good communication with the mother and efficacy within the co-parenting system.

10. The principles for recruiting and engaging fathers are the same as they are for any adult

The research reviewed in this paper suggests that while gender is not a necessary component for recruiting and engaging fathers, a positive working alliance with a practitioner is. A strong working alliance is best achieved when fathers understand the goals of the intervention, the tasks necessary to achieve these goals and the ability to form a bond with the practitioner as they carry out these tasks. A strong practitioner/parent bond has less to do with the colour of a service's carpeting than it does with fathers feeling respected and valued. If fathers do not feel as though their needs are respected or

understood by practitioners, they are unlikely to participate in children's services. On the other hand, if practitioners demonstrate that they can empathise with their needs and respect them as valid, fathers will be more willing to engage in parenting services and

adhere to the programme model. Research suggests that male and female practitioners can be equally successful in developing a good working alliance with fathers when they respect and empathise with their needs.

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