



Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?

Preliminary research findings
and their application

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I Executive Summary

Why fathers now?

The purpose of *Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?* is to examine the evidence base relating to the engagement of fathers in parent education and training, in order to establish whether and when such engagement produces benefits; and to suggest approaches likely to enhance effectiveness.

Like mothers, expectant and new fathers are particularly open to parenting support. But they are also more interested at other stages in the parenting cycle than professionals, or mothers, may realise. Low attendance by fathers is often ascribed to lack of interest; in fact, it springs from a range of factors, of which a father's reluctance, where it exists, may only be one.

Across the UK, Government policy and legislation require providers to engage with fathers. This framework arises from evidence that today's fathers are much more involved in their children's lives than in previous recent generations, need to be more involved due to mothers' higher levels of employment, and impact substantially (for good and for bad) on children and mothers. There is also evidence that failure to engage with fathers compromises service delivery to mothers and children, at times putting them at risk.

Father/mother differences and parenting support

Fathers

Since fathers' circumstances and experiences tend to differ substantially from mothers', gender-differentiated approaches in parenting support are needed. Fathers usually work longer hours than mothers; experience greater cultural pressure to be successful breadwinners; are more likely to share their parenting with other men; and may live separately from some or all of their children. Both co-resident and separated fathers vary enormously in the level and quality of their involvement with their children.

Another mother/fatherhood difference is the greater value placed on motherhood, compared with the prevailing 'deficit perspective' on men and fathers, which often portrays them as dangerous or superfluous.

As a result of these differences, fathers tend to feel less confident than mothers as carers, to have had less experience with children, to be less knowledgeable about child development and sources of parenting support, and to be less likely to believe that parenting skills can be usefully taught. Most experience isolation in parenting, with some (e.g. young fathers) particularly excluded – and some deliberately avoid services.

Mothers

Mothers often control or mediate fathers' relationships with their children and with service providers, sometimes facilitating and sometimes impeding their engagement. Parent education that aims to engage fathers must also help mothers reflect on gender roles and on fatherhood.

Practitioners

The deficit perspective can also impact on professionals' willingness to engage with dads. Some practitioners may actively or passively exclude them, for example by according mothers the status of primary parent and aiming interventions only at them; communicating to fathers that they are not important; assuming fathers' parenting capacity to be low; failing to refer fathers to services; and so on.

Including fathers: who benefits?

Mothers

Some mothers can learn from information/strategies passed on by fathers, just as some fathers can learn from information/strategies passed on by mothers. When fathers are included, mothers tend to be more satisfied with their parenting and to experience higher quality interactions with, and compliance from, their children. Failure to engage appropriately with fathers makes many mothers unfairly responsible for implementing and maintaining change in families, and can compromise their safety.

Children

Parent-education directed at fathers (in schools, prisons, family centres, home visiting, etc.) can improve father-child relationship quality and quantity, including with disabled children, with less intrusiveness from the father, and a reduced likelihood of his inflicting physical punishment. Children of participating fathers have exhibited healthier behaviour, better school-readiness and improved self-perception, particularly where fathers' participation in the programme was substantial.

Programme design and content

Fathers

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.

Couples

Engaging fathers in certain parenting interventions may help to halt the decline in couple relationship satisfaction that is widely recorded after becoming parents.

The evidence base for the efficacy of mainstream parenting programmes (such as Triple P, Strengthening Families/Strengthening Communities or Incredible Years) is fraught with problems. Most evaluations have failed to collect or present findings by gender. Too few fathers may have attended for viable conclusions to be drawn; their attendance may have been relatively sporadic; facilitators may have engaged more substantially with mothers.

Both parents – or one?

Working with only one parent (father or mother) can bring about positive changes, especially when that parent is powerful within the family. However, among the indicators that predict failure for parenting interventions 'lack of a supportive partner' is highly significant. The (limited) evidence base suggests that engaging with both parents is more effective than engaging with just one, particularly where the relationship between them is not close or supportive. Parents who cannot be engaged together (e.g. where there are very high levels of conflict) may usefully be engaged with separately where it is safe to do so.

Mainstream parenting programmes and fathers

Fathers may find participation in these unsatisfactory because: some of the content may not be of primary interest to them; commitment may seem too long-term; the course may be experienced as too unstructured, and initial topics covered too threatening (e.g. focusing on own childhood). Exercises, examples and handouts are often explicitly mother-directed.

Group leaders have rarely been trained to engage with men, facilitate discussion of gender as it affects men or address men's discomfort in female-dominated groups. Content, style, methods, goals and facilitator training may need to be modified for fathers to be optimally engaged.

Fathers groups/mixed sex groups/one-on-one interventions

Fathers tend to prefer one-on-one interventions to groups, and may be more willing to attend mixed-sex-groups than 'fathers' groups', although attendees at male-only groups often value the single-sex environment. In some settings (e.g. ante-natal), mixed-sex groups may usefully divide into single-sex groups for individual sessions. Fathers' groups should always be regarded as only one among a range of ways for engaging with fathers.

Practitioners

Women can work very successfully with fathers, although male professionals are more likely to include them, and may be particularly valued by them when their attitudes and approaches are positive. More important than the sex of the worker are his or her attitudes, skills, confidence, understanding of gender issues/fatherhood, and capacity to address the parenting alliance. Professionals of either sex need to want to work with men, and without high quality training/supervision, their personal prejudices are likely to guide the interaction.

Research-into-practice: tips and strategies

Recruiting fathers

Fathers are often labelled 'hard to reach', with primary responsibility for low engagement laid at their door. However, agency systems and providers' attitudes and behaviour are probably more significant. Fathers' engagement in parenting interventions is likely to be greater when:

- the father's engagement is presented from the start as expected and important;
- fathers are signed up systematically at the outset when the child is registered and pro-actively included in home visiting;
- staff engage informally with individual fathers before seeking commitment to a parenting course;
- sessions are provided at flexible times and in appropriate environments;
- fathers who don't attend are followed up;
- the benefit of fathers' attendance to their child, is repeatedly emphasised;
- fathers' needs, including their mental health, are routinely assessed;
- the whole team seeks to (and is trained to) engage with fathers and build relationships with them (as they should do with mothers)
- the team regards the programme as being as much for dads as for mums;
- non-resident fathers are engaged with whenever possible;
- mothers (and other fathers) are encouraged to think about fathers' importance and help to recruit them;
- mothers' ambivalence or resistance are taken seriously.

Retaining fathers

Fathers are likely to find parenting interventions more rewarding when facilitators

- set out the goals/content/expectations of any parenting course clearly;
- consult with fathers about their goals for participation in the intervention, and tailor the curriculum accordingly;
- adopt a strengths-based approach which supports the father's capabilities rather than treating him as an object of concern;
- help fathers create a baseline checklist of their involvement activities with their children, so they can see how they are progressing;
- remind fathers of upcoming sessions (e.g. by text) and follow up non-attenders;
- introduce 'active' course elements (e.g. video playback, father-child activities);
- create changes of mood/pace within the intervention (e.g. formal/informal; structured/unstructured; discussion/activity);
- include information on fathers' roles in child development and child development in general;
- create opportunities for fathers (and mothers) to reflect on their understandings of gender, masculinity and care, in relation to their own fathers and other influences;
- address couple-relationship issues and gender roles;
- address stepfathering, grandfathering etc;
- identify and provide 'space' to address loss (e.g. of children/step-children/miscarriage).

Directions for future research

Virtually all the findings reported in this document would benefit from replication or extension, including with disadvantaged samples. Evaluations should look at both process and outcomes, for example how fathers are recruited; facilitator training (e.g. in gender issues/father engagement); design, content, style and delivery of the programme (e.g. whether father-only or couples groups); dose/timing effects; the impact of fathers' participation on fathers, mothers and children.

Detailed examination of settings which have substantial success in engaging fathers or maintaining high levels of attendance are needed, particularly where fathers participate in a wide range of core programmes. Randomised controlled trials of programme effects and processes (e.g. father-inclusive 'welcome' letters v. standard letters) are in short supply; and evaluations of the major mainstream parenting programmes' efficacy with fathers are long overdue. We also need to record and understand more about fathers', mothers' and professionals' attitudes towards fathers' participation in parenting support; and to understand the influence of non-participating partners (often fathers) as well as participating fathers, on attendance by, and outcomes for, mothers and children.

Conclusion

The available evidence suggests that, for many types of fathers, participation in parenting interventions can change behaviour and beliefs and increase knowledge, skills and understanding; and that children and mothers can benefit. Despite methodological problems in the research, the value of engaging both parents is emerging, particularly where the relationship between them is poor. Serious attempts to include fathers are indicated by evidence that many wish to participate once the importance of their engagement and its value to their children are underlined; and steps are taken to facilitate their participation.

Those who commission, design and deliver parenting interventions must develop appropriate strategies to recruit fathers; become equipped to work appropriately with them once they are in the room; and engage with both mothers and fathers on the parenting alliance, and on fathers' and gender roles – whether parenting takes place within or across households.

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FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Parenting Implementation Project resources for father-inclusive services
www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/parents/pip/PIPrkfatherinclusiveservices/PIPfaterinclusiveservices/

A self-assessment tool ('the Dad Test') through which agencies and projects can assess the extent of their maturity in engaging with fathers
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=3&cID=922

Information including case studies of good practice via the 'Think Fathers' Champions network
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&catID=41

Written guides including a Toolkit for Father-Inclusive Practice which helps agencies, step by step, develop father-inclusive services
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?prodID=23

Training and mentoring for commissioning, developing and delivering father-inclusive services and programmes, including 'Delivering a Father-inclusive Parenting Programme' (a training course for practitioners) and 'Planning Father-Inclusive Parenting Services' (a seminar for commissioners/managers)
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&catID=7

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2 Introduction

The purpose of this short paper is to examine the evidence for the possibilities and usefulness of engaging with fathers¹ (alongside mothers or in separate services) in parent education and training, and to identify and suggest approaches likely to enhance the effectiveness of such engagement.

It is important to recognise that the evidence base in this area could not be described as robust: as this is an emerging field, and as, for example, none of the main “evidence based” parenting programmes currently being promoted in the UK² have been systematically and substantially evaluated in relation to their success in engaging with and supporting fathers, the findings offered here are *preliminary*³. But they are the best information we have at the moment about “what works” (and what doesn’t work), and we believe they offer very valuable insights to support both policy and practice development.⁴

Are fathers interested in parenting interventions?

Like mothers, fathers seem to be particularly open to participating in parent education, training and support at certain stages in the parenting cycle, notably in the perinatal period (Sherr et al, 2006; Cowan, 1988). But fathers at other stages – or in other contexts - also exhibit interest and enthusiasm: fathers who are addressed in workplace settings⁵; imprisoned fathers (Meek, 2007); fathers of children with disabilities (Towers & Swift, 2007; Hadadian & Merbler, 1995); young fathers (Sherriff, 2007);⁶ and fathers of young children (Fagan & Palm, 2004). In one study, such fathers expressed more interest in parent education and training than either their partners, or the professionals who served their families, believed they would. Further, these men saw their involvement in this aspect of parenting as extremely important to themselves and their children, and looked to engage in ways that would support their children’s positive learning and development (Fagan & Palm 2004).

But voluntary father-participation in Behavioural Parent Training (BPT)⁷ is relatively rare; and few fathers attend group sessions without their partners, even when the programme is addressing a topic with which fathers are very concerned – e.g. teenage behaviour (Ralph & Sanders, 2003). When engagement with fathers is not successful, a common assumption is that the fathers do not wish to engage. In fact, fathers’ use or non-use of parenting support seems to result from the interaction of many factors (Doherty et al, 1998) which are likely to include:

- **Father-factors:** his role identification, knowledge, commitment, relationship with own father/mother, mental/physical health, involvement in criminality/drugs/alcohol etc;
- **Couple-relationship factors:** relationship commitment, cooperation, mutual support (and residence/contact arrangements, where parents live apart)
- **Mother-factors:** her employment, attitude towards father, expectations of father, and support provided to father;
- **Child-factors:** attitude towards father; behavioural difficulties; temperament, age, gender, developmental status;
- **Broader contextual factors:** institutional practices (e.g. service opening hours, working practices), employment opportunities (including whether long absences from home are required), economic factors, race/ethnicity resources and challenges, cultural expectations and social support.

We do not yet know the relative importance of all these influences on fathers’ acceptance of support from services, or whether there are other issues not yet identified, although social support theory suggests that access and utilization will be highly dependent on family culture, community norms and influences from the informal support network (Summers et al, 2004).

Why fathers now?

In England, interest in engaging fathers in parent education and training is being stimulated by Government support for engaging *parents* in parenting programmes, and concern that service providers are not engaging with fathers in substantial numbers (Page et al, 2008) – either to support positive fathering, or to challenge negative. The concern here is not for “fathers’ rights” but arises from conclusive evidence of the impact of fathers on outcomes for children (page 10), and increasingly convincing research evidence that poor *engagement* with fathers not only fails men but compromises the quality of service delivery to mothers and children, at times putting them at risk (e.g. Brandon et al, 2009; Daniel & Taylor, 2001; Ryan, 2000).

Theoretically, of course, any legislation or policy that requires practitioners to engage with ‘parents’ should mean fathers as well as mothers. Moreover, the evidence base about the impact of father-child relationships on outcomes for children means that engaging effectively with fathers can make a vital contribution to fulfilling Public Service Agreements and National Indicators focussed on improving outcomes for children.⁸

However, since this ‘gender-neutral’ framework usually fails to translate into systematic engagement with fathers, a range of policies and legislation are now explicitly mentioning “fathers” and “mothers”, so that practitioners and managers in England (and now also in Wales and Scotland)⁹ understand the requirement to engage with both parents:¹⁰

Although partial and uneven, explicit recognition of the need to engage with fathers is found increasingly in top level policy including *The Childcare Strategy (2009)*; *Healthy lives, brighter futures: the strategy for children and young people’s health (2009)*; *The Child Health Promotion Programme Update (2008)*; *The Children’s Plan: Building Brighter Futures (2007)*; *Teenage Parents Next Steps: Guidance for Local Authorities and Primary Care Trusts (2007 and continuing)*; *Every Parent Matters (2007)*; *Aiming High for Children: Supporting Families (2007)*; *Sure Start Children’s Centres: Practice Guidance and Planning and Performance Management Guidance (2006 and continuing)*; *Engaging Fathers: Involving Parents, Raising Achievement (2004)*; and the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services: Core Standards (2004)*.

In terms of legislation, *The Children Act (1989, 2004)* specifies engagement with fathers, including fathers without Parental Responsibility; the *Childcare Act (2006)* specifies engagement with fathers, particularly in excluded groups; and the Gender Equality Duty in the *Equality Act (2006)* requires¹¹ public bodies including health, education and those that commission children’s services to publish an action plan for promoting gender equality; carry out (at the point of commissioning) an impact assessment to calculate the differential impact of the service on women and men; gather information on how their services actually do impact on men and women respectively; and consult with male and female service users in ways they find accessible.

To support this new emphasis on fathers, in November 2008, the then Children’s Minister Beverley Hughes (Hughes, 2008) announced a ‘Think Fathers’ campaign supported by DCSF, the Fatherhood Institute, Parenting Academy, Children’s Society and others, to build up the expectation of fathers’ involvement within public services – from birth, the early years, in schools, in social care – and within society more generally. In June 2009, the campaign held a high level summit and published a Guide for children’s services. More information is available at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/thinkfathers

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, in this paper ‘fathers’ covers birth fathers, whether resident with their children or not, as well as adoptive, foster and stepfathers, and other men who play a significant fatherly role in the life of a child
2. e.g. Triple P, Webster-Stratton, Strengthening Families
3. In this paper, we mainly report on studies that have used robust methodologies. Where we refer to only one study, this is generally because we are only aware of one study that has investigated the matter in question.
4. We conclude this paper with a list of specific issues that need investigation through research. However, most of the other findings presented in this paper would also benefit from further investigation.
5. The “Family Matters” programme which runs seminars in workplaces in the City of London reports substantial attendance by men at parenting seminars; and a session on fatherhood presented in 2008 at UBS bank by the Fatherhood Institute attracted more than 100 fathers (and about 5 women) – most of them fathers of young children. Such sessions are well established in Australia (Russell, 2009, personal communication)
6. See also www.youngfathers.net/
7. Formalised curricula to bring about changes in child behaviour
8. See, for example, PSA 10 (raising the educational achievement of all children and young people), PSA 11 (narrowing the gap in educational achievement between children from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers), PSA 12 (improving the health and well-being of children and young people), NI 53 (prevalence of breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks from birth) and NI 55 (obesity among primary school age children in reception year).
9. The Welsh Assembly Government funds a fatherhood development officer; in Scotland, fathers’ importance is highlighted in the Early Years Framework.
10. The Fatherhood Institute maintains a regularly updated list at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cID=711
11. *The Gender Equality Duty and Local Government: Guidance for Public Authorities in England (EOC, 2007)* is explicit that the word “gender” means both sexes – the Duty is not just about the needs of women.

3 An overview of fathers as parents

Fathers' experiences and circumstances

Fathers are not an homogenous group. Their circumstances differ enormously and are often very different from mothers'. This can not only represent a substantial challenge to the delivery of parenting support to them, but also require differentiated approaches. For example:

- Fathers are much more likely to work full-time than mothers (Dex & Ward, 2007), to work longer hours (Lee, McCann & Messenger, 2007) and to have longer commutes (Nomaguchi et al, 2005; Hill et al, 2003).
- Father-child relationships tend to be more distant (Hagall, 2009) and less satisfying to children than mother-child relationships (Emery, 1999).
- Fathers tend to be less confident in their role than mothers¹²
- Fathers' ages may vary more widely than mothers': while the average age at first fatherhood in England and Wales is 32, one in ten babies is born to a father over 40; and probably one in ten to a young father (i.e. under 25 years old).¹³
- Fathers are more likely to share fatherhood with other men than women are to share motherhood with other women, since 90% of children stay with their mothers when parents separate. Most of these mothers re-partner, and more than 1:6 men born in the 1970s were stepfathers 30 years later.¹⁴
- Fathers also differ from mothers in their greater likelihood of living separately from their children, whether due to imprisonment¹⁵, service in the armed forces, long-distance employment or family breakdown (Peacey & Hunt, 2008).
- Separated dads' situations vary widely. Some (around 25%) are 'absent' fathers in that they rarely or never see their children – although this can change: one study found 1:3 fathers originally identified as 'uninvolved' described as "involved" three years later (Dex & Ward, 2007). Far more separated dads see a lot of their children - 34-49% at least weekly.¹⁶ Where fathers rarely see their children, this is likely to be connected with being young, poor, unemployed, having never lived with the mother, and so on. Many of these fathers may live nearby.¹⁷ Such fathers tend to need more, not less, support from professionals.
- Even though parents' separation is more likely where children exhibit behaviour problems or suffer from disabilities (e.g. Towers & Swift, 2007), a US study found that 42.4% of the children and adolescents referred due to psychological problems (and 67.8% of those referred due to learning difficulties) were living with both their biological parents. Among the rest, 40.0% and 56.0% respectively had regular face-to-face contact with both their birth father and mother (Phares & Lum, 1997).
- Fathers who are co-resident with their children may also vary enormously in the amount of involvement they have with them. Risk factors for low involvement include low paid work, which tends to be inflexible (Yeung & Glauber, 2007) and involve long working hours (Smith, 2007; Smith & Williams, 2007); and unstable employment involving "hustling" for work (Cina, 2005).

Service providers often underestimate the amount of contact non-resident fathers have with their children, either because they do not see those fathers, or because some are not mentioned to them by mothers, sometimes deliberately (for review, see Scott & Crooks, 2004).

Fathers' aspirations and behaviour

Following the broadening of women's roles in society over the past 100 years, cultural understandings of fatherhood are beginning to change. For example:

- Between 1989 and 2008, the percentage of men¹⁸ who believe that it is the "man's role to earn the money" while the woman stays at home dropped from 32% to an historic low – 17% (Duncan & Phillips, 2008)¹⁹
- A range of studies of fathers in a range of cultural groups in different parts of the world have found fathers declaring that want to be closer to their children than they feel their fathers were to them (e.g. Salway et al, 2008; Hatter et al., 2002).

Behaviour is following aspiration. For example:

- British fathers' direct engagement with infants and young children rose 800% between 1975 and 1997 (from 15 minutes to two hours, on average, on a working day) – at double the rate of mothers' (Fisher et al, 1999).

- British fathers in two-parent families now carry out an average of 25% of the family's childcare related activities during the week, and one-third at weekends, with higher levels (one third during the week as well) where both parents work full-time (EOC, 2003).
- The number of lone fathers rose from 60,000 in 1970 to 178,000 in 2005 although the percentage of lone fathers v. lone mothers has not changed over time (EOC, 2006)
- The percentage of new fathers in the UK working flexitime to spend more time with their infants rose from 11% to 31% between 2002 and 2005 (Smeaton & Marsh, 2006).

Fathers are needed at home. Between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of mothers of babies under one year old who had returned to work rose from 36% to 49% (ONS 2000, cited by Dunn et al, 2006). And as women's participation and success in tertiary education and in the job market increase, fathers may more often become the 'natural choice' within families to work shorter hours or part time or not at all, to care for children: 20% of UK males now earn less than their female partners – a percentage that recently doubled over five years (Vorster, 2007).

For both parents, satisfaction tends to be greater when work and caring roles are more equally shared and to be lower when roles within families are more traditionally observed – whatever the parents' original aspirations (Thompson et al, 2005).

Educated fathers spend on average more time interacting with their children (Flouri, 2005) relative to other fathers. However, some studies have found working class fathers actually undertaking more childcare (Warin et al, 1999), and unemployed fathers can be highly involved (Kenney & Bogle, 2008). There is some evidence from Scandinavia that parents who share care more equally may enjoy more stable relationships (Olah, 2001), although we do not yet know whether sharing the care causes relationships to be more stable.

Fathers' impact on children

Since 1975, an increasingly sophisticated body of research has been charting the pathways through which fathers influence their children's development.

- A recent systematic review of studies which controlled for maternal involvement and gathered data from different independent sources, found high father involvement associated with a range of desirable outcomes for children and young people (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Other longitudinal, studies have found similar correlations (e.g. Sarkadi et al, 2008; Flouri, 2005).
- Positive outcomes for children correlated with higher father involvement have been found to include: better peer relationships; fewer behaviour problems; lower criminality and substance abuse; higher educational / occupational mobility relative to parents'; capacity for empathy; non-traditional attitudes to earning and childcare; more satisfying adult sexual partnerships; and higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction (Flouri, 2005; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).
- Similarly, low levels of involvement have been found to be associated with a range of negative outcomes (for review, see Flouri, 2005).

However, the pathway into higher paternal involvement is crucial.

- Forced high paternal involvement, as through forced unemployment, does not usually bring with it the same benefits as greater paternal involvement through choice (O'Brien, 2004a).
- Agreement between parents as to the desirability of the involvement is also key (Ashley et al, 2006).

Studies have also shown a range of negative developmental outcomes in children associated with, for example:

- Fathers' (and father-figures') poor parenting or psychopathology (for reviews, see Lloyd et al, 2003; Phares, 1999).
- Substance misuse (Velleman, 2004)
- Abusive behaviour towards mothers (Jaffee et al, 1990).
- A 'dose effect' has been found: worse behaviour by fathers is linked to worse outcomes for children, as is more extensive contact with a father who is 'behaving badly' (Jaffee et al, 2003).
- Another kind of dose effect – the 'double dose' effect (Dunn et al, 2000) - is found where both parents' life histories / behaviour are negative (O'Brien, 2004b).

It has, however, been pointed out that singling out fathers in this way should not distract attention from the important body of evidence that shows that negative behaviour by mothers also damages children (Leinonen et al, 2003).

The most common response by professionals to abusive parenting by fathers has been to try to reduce fathers' contact with children and/or their mother, rather than to challenge fathers' negative behaviour (Ryan, 2000).²⁰ However, simply excluding a father who is perceived to be a bad influence is unlikely to be a simple solution – not least because such fathers often remain in contact or go on to connect with, or give birth to, other children. And when children rarely or never see their fathers, they tend to:

- Demonise or idealise their missing father (Kraemer, 2005; Gorrell Barnes et al, 1998).
- Blame themselves for his absence (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).
- Develop difficulties with peer relationships including bullying (Parke et al, 2004; Berdondini & Smith, 1996).
- Suffer from increased maternal stress and/or reduced income (McLanahan, 1997; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).
- Experience substantial levels of distress, anger and self-doubt right through to early adulthood, even in relatively privileged and well-educated samples (Fortin et al, 2006; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 1998).

Thus, given changing social attitudes towards fathers and changes in their own aspirations and behaviour, and given the impact they have within families, the value of engaging fathers as well as mothers in appropriate parenting interventions is clear. Our challenge is to understand how to engage them effectively, and what sort of interventions work.

Notes

12. <http://www.think-fathers.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/dad-job-description-final.pdf>
13. In England and Wales, one in ten babies is born to a teenage mother – 92% of whom (US data suggests) are no more than 5 years younger than their baby's father (Duberstein et al, 1997). Data on the numbers of teenage and young fathers with older female partners is not gathered.
14. See <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2004/june/stepfamilies.aspx>
15. Around 160,000 children per year – 7% of the school population – have a parent (mainly their father) in prison. This is more than six times the number on the child protection register. See <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/temp/Factfiles/PROOFspJUNE08small.pdf>
16. For detailed discussion see <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=4&clD=760>. Separated fathers also move in and out of contact: a father who is absent or uninvolved one year, may be back in the picture a short time later (Dex & Ward, 2007; Maclean & Eekelaar, 1997)
17. In 1998 a worker in Nottingham, Bill Badham, set out to find the five different fathers of children born to a local mother, only one of whom was known to services. All five were found living in Nottingham.
18. Many of these will be older men
19. The men's views were generally more conservative than women's: for example, 41% (compared with 29% of women) agreed with the statement that 'a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works'
20. This response is far less likely to be in evidence for similarly negative behaviour by mothers. – see Ryan (2000).

4 Father- / male- specific issues for parent education and support

Is a gender-neutral approach possible?

The parenting literature has identified key indicators of good outcomes for children in terms of their 'parents' behaviour: being sensitive to their child's needs and capabilities, listening carefully, being led by the child in play, behaving consistently, setting boundaries in a calm and authoritative manner, and so on. It is therefore tempting to believe that one can approach fathers as if they are simply 'parents' – i.e. in a gender-neutral way.

This is not the case. Most of the above research findings have been derived from studies of mothers, and there is emerging evidence that the impact of fathers' behaviour may sometimes be different (Grossman et al, 2002). Furthermore, as outlined in chapter 3 above fathers' socialisation and circumstances tend to differ from mothers'; and other people's attitudes towards them tend to be different. Gender neutrality is therefore not possible. For example, many fathers may need to be reassured that they matter to their children, and that men are capable of interacting sensitively and productively with them while most women do not need to be told this. While some mothers certainly doubt their own individual capacity as parents, women are likely to believe (along with the rest of the population) that 'mums matter' and that most women are 'naturally good with children'.

- Men, masculinity, fathers and fatherhood are not highly regarded in contemporary Western culture. The media, family professionals and family members tend to operate from a 'deficit perspective' on males and fathers (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). This is underpinned by such beliefs as:
 - A man cannot cope with children without a woman to help him
 - Fathers are "optional extras" – largely irrelevant to their children's development
 - Fathers don't love their children as much as mothers do
 - Most men are a risk to children
 - Men can't change / men are unwilling to change
 - Men can't multi-task²¹...and so on...²²

Conversely, the polarisation that often accompanies unbalanced views may encourage professionals to overvalue positive behaviour by a father, and underestimate risk (Brandon et al, 2009)

- In contrast to mothers, who are culturally pressured to be primarily nurturers even when that is not their main role (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004), fathers tend to be burdened by cultural pressure to be successful breadwinners which, if fulfilled, may limit the time available to them to spend on parent training. Conversely, fathers who feel they fail as breadwinners can experience shame and distress which may translate into unwillingness to engage in parenting interventions (for evidence and discussion, see McAllister et al, 2004).

Family service providers

In individuals, any 'blue print (such as the deficit perspective) can be modified by circumstances and action (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004). Positive experiences or information can enable us to perceive men as capable and nurturing. Negative experiences are likely to reinforce negative beliefs.²³

Past negative experiences of men or fathers may be especially common among family professionals. For example, social work training attracts a significant proportion of students with personal experience of psychosocial trauma and oppression, including various forms of abuse (Barter, 1997). Among workers seeking to engage with fathers, males often struggle with their experiences with their own fathers; while females are more often troubled by relationships with former partners (McAllister et al, 2004).

In family services, the deficit perspective can be institutionalized (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004) and can result in professionals

- According mothers the status of primary parent (Dermott, 2008) even when this is not the reality (Daniel & Taylor, 2001).
- Holding mothers responsible for children's problems (e.g. mental health problems) and therefore seeking to engage only with them (Phares, 1999)
- Communicating to fathers, explicitly or implicitly, that their involvement in caring for their children is not important (Walker, 2001) and that their participation in parenting interventions is optional or even undesirable²⁴ (Ashley et al, 2006; McAllister et al, 2004; Fagan & Palm, 2004).

- Assuming that the father's commitment, parenting capacity etc. are low, even when knowing little or nothing about him (Bunting, 2005) and readily perceiving him as problematic: 'irresponsible' when absent, 'demanding' when present (Edwards, 1998)
- Missing opportunities to engage with fathers, even while professing that such engagement is important (Lloyd et al, 2003; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Edwards, 1998)
- Openly aiming parenting interventions at mothers only (Higginbottom et al, 2006) and/or delivering these at times that are inconvenient to many fathers and in locations in which they do not feel comfortable (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- In social care, failing to record fathers' details, failing to invite them (or paternal relatives) to meetings, and so on (Roskill et al, 2008)
- Failing to refer fathers to parenting initiatives or support. This has been found to be an important reason for fathers' low attendance in some settings (Roskill et al, 2008; Staines & Walters, 2007)

Once such factors are understood, it becomes less surprising that men are so rarely engaged in parent education/support; or that, when engaged, they may drift away: the problem of fathers' low attendance cannot possibly lie only in the men themselves.

Mothers

Mothers, too, can influence whether or not fathers engage in parenting education and support.

Fathers' relationships with their children are commonly 'mediated' by the mother (Doherty, 1997) who is usually their main source of information and support for their parenting (Dermott, 2008). Fathers mostly rate mothers as very important to children and to their own parenting. Mothers, by contrast, often perceive the father as relatively inconsequential (for review and discussion, see Dermott, 2008).

Working with fathers therefore requires engagement with, and careful thinking about, the mothers of their children – both by the men themselves, and by parent educators and support workers. Mothers, too, may need to reflect on their own socialisation and on fathers' roles and importance, if their partners are to be engaged with effectively.

- Mothers' attitudes and beliefs can impact powerfully on the extent to which fathers play an active role in childrearing. In households where parenting is genuinely collaborative, mothers are comfortable letting fathers parent without monitoring or intruding (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005). Mothers' reasons for seeking to restrict fathers' involvement include pressure from own family (young mothers in particular), fears for their own or the child's safety/wellbeing; and perceived threat to their own status as primary parent (Maushart, 2002)

- Similar maternal attitudes and beliefs can also impact powerfully on the extent to which fathers participate in childcare settings and/or parenting interventions. Mothers' influence on fathers' attendance can be substantial and positive. Conversely, one study found that when mothers believed in biologically-based sex differences in parenting capacity, or did not communicate well with the father or value his input, they often failed to inform him about parenting support, or communicate the importance of his participating (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- Some mothers, including some very vulnerable women, have been found actively resisting fathers' participation in family service provision (McAllister et al, 2004) with some expressing satisfaction when men's involvement levels are low (Fagan et al, 2000)

Fathers' own experiences

Many fathers, of course, also play a role in their own alienation from service provision.

Some of this may lie in their beliefs about their own lack of importance or capacity to be good parents.

- Fathers are less likely than mothers, to have had a positive relationship with their same-sex parent (Emery, 1999) and are therefore less likely to be able to rely on that parent as a good role-model for parenting. They are also less likely than mothers to have been socialized to perceive themselves as nurturing individuals (Berman & Pedersen, 1987). This does not mean that they are less nurturing – simply that they do not so easily believe themselves to be.
 - The deficit perspective when internalised by fathers, can be a powerful disincentive to their greater participation in childrearing (Beitel & Parke, 1998) and in parenting interventions (Fagan & Palm, 2004;²⁵ Walters et al, 2003²⁶).
 - Fathers may doubt their own value in the therapeutic process and feel they have little to contribute (Foote et al, 1998).
 - Fathers are less likely than mothers to feel they are personally responsible for their child's problems – and highly likely to see this as the “fault” of the mother (for review, see Phares, 1999).
- Another “starting point” for fathers that is generally quite different from mothers’ (and which may mean their requirements from parent education/support may be different), is the degree to which they have already gathered knowledge and information about parenting, or experienced support.
- Men, relative to women of the same social/educational level, tend to lack information about sex and relationships (Blenkinsop et al, 2004)²⁷ and about parenting, including child development, sick children and discipline (Summers et al, 2004).
 - Fathers generally have less experience than mothers of taking care of young children before becoming parents; and are less likely to have been employed in occupations that have brought them close to children. For these and other reasons, they tend to be less prepared for parenthood (Guterman & Lee, 2005); and their requirements of parent education and support can differ significantly from mothers’ (Lero, 2008).
 - Fathers are less likely than mothers to be aware of the existence of parenting education/support on offer (Lloyd et al, 2003; Johnson & Palm 1992)²⁸ and more likely to be suspicious of it.²⁹
 - Fathers are less likely than mothers to believe that knowledge and skills are required to be an effective and involved parent (Johnson & Palm, 1992).³⁰
 - Fathers are usually less willing than mothers to access formal services, including parent education, even if known about (Meek, 2007;³¹ Summers et al, 2004).³²
 - For a range of reasons, not least that ‘good masculinity’ is identified with being capable and in control, men may experience a strong resistance to being offered anything that can be construed as “support” (Fagan & Palm, 2004). While some mothers, particularly those who are unconfident in their role, may also resist offers of support from outside the family (Barlow et al, 2005), fathers’ resistance may be more likely to have a cultural than a personal base.³³
 - Fathers are likely to experience substantial isolation in parenting (Hopkins, 2007) with many having no formal or informal support systems to draw on as, for example, they make the transition to parenthood (McBride, 1991)³⁴
 - Some fathers are particularly likely to be isolated: for example, young fathers usually have very low contact with services (Bunting & McAuley, 2004) and low likelihood of being asked about their support needs (e.g. Quinton et al, 2002); and are highly likely to ask for the wrong services even when they can identify their own needs (Weinman et al, 2005).³⁵ Young black fathers have also been found to experience particular isolation (Pollock et al, 2006; Higginbottom et al, 2006). Similar patterns may be found among other high-need fathers, such as fathers of children with disabilities (Towers, 2009; Towers & Swift, 2007).

Given that fathers tend to rely on their partners for emotional support, whereas women tend engage with female friends (as well as with their partners) and are far more likely than men to receive support from family professionals, fathers generally have had fewer opportunities than mothers to reflect on themselves as parents, and on their own experiences of being parented (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992).

- Since fathers are far less likely than mothers to be living with all of their children, and are more likely to be parenting other men's children, many will have information needs specific to those situations - e.g. about legal rights, including Parental Responsibility, housing, step-parenting, and so on (Russell, 2005).

To conclude, the very different expectations and perceptions of fathers and of different groupings of fathers (internalised by men themselves, by their partners, by family professionals and by society at large) and the very many ways in which fathers' past experiences and present situations are likely to differ from mothers', mean that to adopt a gender neutral approach in the design or delivery of parenting interventions to men and women may not result in the best outcomes. This does not mean, however, that engaging with fathers in these contexts is unimportant.

Notes

21. There are, in fact, no gender-differences in multi-tasking capacity. When men or women do not multi-task, it is often because they do not feel confident in the tasks, or do not perceive themselves as responsible for the "bigger picture"
22. Russell et al (1999) found providers unsure about fathers' capacity to understand children's changing needs or provide them with care and emotional support – with a substantial minority holding wildly exaggerated notions of fathers' sexual abuse of children
23. For example, because of the idea that "all men are violent", intimidation by a male family member in a home they are visiting (McAllister et al, 2004) may be more readily generalised by a worker into to a fear of engaging with fathers than intimidation or violence by a woman, which may be perceived as exceptional
24. For example, when teachers were asked about men volunteering in the classroom, many said they did not think fathers would be interested. And when a father was in the classroom, teachers reported watching him very carefully as they felt he might use inappropriate disciplinary strategies with the children (Fagan, 1994).
25. "My wife knows this stuff and she can tell me"... "My wife takes care of this because she doesn't work"... "I thought only mothers were allowed" (Johnson & Palm, 1992)
26. "Men are lazy and ignorant and can't discuss their feelings" (said by a father)
27. In this sample, it was found that although young males were less knowledgeable about sex and relationships than young females, they valued the information more highly when it was provided to them (Blenkinsop et al, 2004).
28. Both Lloyd et al (in the UK) and Johnson & Palm (in the US) found that the most frequent reason for fathers' non-participation in a parenting programme was that they did not know it existed
29. "I thought it was only for mothers" (Lloyd et al, 2003); "I didn't want to go until another father recommended it" (Johnson & Palm, 1992)
30. This does not mean fathers are uninterested in these topics. On the contrary, even among very young (teenage) fathers most are very interested in child rearing; and expressions of ambivalence or lack of interest are mainly associated with financial insecurity or confusion about how to take care of babies and young children (Rhein et al, 1997).
31. In this study, a majority of young offenders who had very much appreciated a parenting course delivered in prison expressed reluctance about accessing parenting and other formal provision post-release.
32. "There's something about my personality that I'm not inclined to seek things like that out"... "I'd rather do it on my own instead of letting them people tell me what to do with my child"... "The parent role should come from what you believe and what you've been taught It shouldn't come out of some manual"... (Summers, 2004); "Don't need it, parenting comes naturally"... "Not a priority"... "Experience is the best teacher"... "Don't need it, children always glad to see me" (Johnson & Palm, 2002).
33. In fact, many fathers, when questioned about their support needs, interpret this as being about the support they can provide to themselves from their own internal resources (Summers et al, 2004)
34. Mothers, by comparison, tend to have an elaborate support structure comprised of both formal and informal supports (McBride, 1991)
35. In this study, young fathers identified themselves as feeling states of anger, sadness/depression, nervousness/tension, helplessness and aggression; however, few requested services to address these issues; rather, their most frequently requested service needs were related to jobs and vocational training. Furthermore, the likelihood of the young fathers being referred to appropriate services is not high: while a wide range of services are in place to help teenage mothers, services not only tend to ignore young fathers but are overwhelmingly averse to them.

5 Including fathers: who benefits?

Mothers

Interventions with fathers can increase the support the fathers provide to mothers (Diemer, 1997) and an early study found that women who enjoyed the full support of their partners were more closely bonded to their children, and more responsive and sensitive to their needs (Feiring, 1976). This has also been found more recently in a study of teenage mothers, in which a young mother's perception of support from her baby's father was found to correlate with a range of attachment behaviours by her – i.e. when she felt her partner to be supportive, her behaviour towards her baby was generally more positive (Bloom, 1998).

Other individual studies have found positive spin-offs for mothers, when fathers were included in the intervention. For example:

- One study found that working with the father as well as the mother seemed to improve the quality of the mother's engagement with her child: "each individual parent's sensitivity towards their child (and their child's attachment to them) is enhanced when both parents are included in the intervention" (Bakernans-Kranenburg et al, 2003).
- Webster-Stratton (1985) found that where fathers had been included in the intervention, children were more compliant with their mothers one year on; and the mothers were also less critical of their children. This effect was not found where fathers had not been engaged with.

Mothers can learn through information on parenting passed on from a father who has attended a parenting course.³⁶ This has been recorded among prison populations, where a few fathers who have been on parenting courses have been found to have communicated their new learning to their partners, and used it to advise them about child-rearing practices and to enter into discussion about child-related issues, such as the value of nursery education (Pugh, 2008; Boswell & Wedge, 2002).

When practitioners do not engage fathers in parenting interventions and see women as ultimately responsible for children, this tends to mean that only women are expected to make change: too much responsibility is therefore often placed upon mothers (Scourfield, 2003).

Working with two parents rather than one may need special skills or awareness. Including fathers in parenting interventions may not always be positive for mothers: some mothers may receive less attention from insensitive practitioners and/or underestimate their own parenting skills. Research on the role of the therapist in conjoint therapy has found, among other things, that in general therapists interrupt women clients more than men and address fathers more than mothers (for review and discussion, see Featherstone et al, 2007).

Conversely, fathers may lose out if facilitators consciously or unconsciously 'side with the mother' as has been documented in unpublished Triple P evaluations (Dadds, 2008, personal communication). Such pitfalls have also been identified (and negotiated) in family therapy, and it is not unreasonable to anticipate that the same maturation process can take place in parent education and training so that neither parent loses out and both benefit, once fathers are routinely included (O'Brien, 2004b).

Children

In general

US children whose fathers were engaged in an early years programme performed better in the programme, exhibited healthier behaviour, and were developmentally better ready for school. There was also a 'dose effect' the more engagement there was with the father, the better his child seemed to do (McBride & Rane, 2001).

The benefits (in terms of children's achievement) of engaging fathers of all social classes in schools are also well documented (for review, see Goldman, 2005); and studies in prison populations have identified improvements in children's self perception, after their fathers had taken part in an intervention (for review, see Meek, 2007).

While only a few studies have measured children's outcomes, others have looked at improvements in fathers' skills or father-and-child interactions as 'proxies' for benefits to children. These include:

- **increased interaction and involvement** (McBride, 1990), including in prison populations where positive changes in fathers' behaviour during children's visits were recorded by prison staff after the men had finishing a fathering course, including significantly greater interaction with children (Pugh, 2008)

- **sensitivity and skills:** communication skills (Levant & Doyle, 1983); greater sensitivity to babies' cues (Pfannensteil & Honig, 1988); more complex toy play with toddlers (Roggman et al, 2004); less use of spanking and less intrusiveness with infants (McAllister et al, 2004); increased acceptance of the child (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998); positive changes in Adult Adolescent Parenting Index (Harrison, 1997).
- **improved attitudes and knowledge** - for example, of child development (Pfannensteil & Honig, 1988) including in prison populations (for review, see Meek, 2007; also Dennison & Lyon, 2003)

Specifics from particularly high quality (if often small scale) research include:

Infants

- In a well designed randomized controlled trial, fathers who observed the Brazelton neonatal behavioral assessment scale performed on their 2- to 3-day-old infants showed significantly higher quality interactions with those infants four weeks later (Beal, 1989)
- A randomized controlled trial of a prenatal intervention with low-income fathers (two sessions of factual information, practical skills training and bonding exercises) found substantially greater information-retention and parental sensitivity one month postpartum among the intervention compared with the control group (Pfannensteil & Honig, 1995).
- A randomized experimental design was also used to evaluate an 8-session program with 165 couples who were first time parents, beginning during the second trimester of pregnancy and ending at 5 months postpartum. Outcomes were assessed via time diaries, coded observations of parent-child play, and self reports of fathers and mothers. The intervention had positive effects on fathers' skills in interacting with their babies and on the amount of their involvement on work days but not home days. (Doherty et al, 2006).
- A study of 162 first time fathers engaged in two visits with a home visitor showed increased competence in parenting at 8-month follow up. One group (81 fathers) in this randomized controlled study, who had been given a more intensive intervention involving video-playback self-modelling, were found to be significantly more skilled than the control group in fostering their infants' cognitive growth; and, unlike the control group, had maintained their sensitivity to infant cues (Magill-Evans et al, 2007).

Children with behavioural difficulties / special needs

- A small scale study of an intervention with three fathers and their young, developmentally disabled children, found that training the fathers resulted in desirable changes in a range of target behaviours in children, including child compliance and inappropriate behaviours (Russell & Matson, 1998).
- Fathers of children with autism who were trained at home using videotapes of themselves playing with child, significantly increased their positive responses in interactions with them (Elder et al, 2005).
- For older children with autism, a parenting intervention using video-taped self-modelling and delivered one-on-one in the home setting with the father, produced the best results (increasing fathers' communicative behaviour in interactions with their child) when 2-4 sessions were delivered consecutively, followed by a "booster" session (Elder et al, 2005)

Involving fathers in treatment programmes that address serious issues personal to themselves can also be beneficial to children. For example, one study found that when alcoholic fathers entered a treatment programme, the simple fact of their receiving treatment was associated with better adjustment in their children; and if the fathers stopped drinking entirely, a clinically significant reduction in child problems was found (Andreas et al, 2006).

As with mothers, where fathers' behaviour is seriously problematic, it is likely that multiple interventions will be needed, addressing not only the father's substance misuse/violence/offending behaviour, but also couple relationship issues and parent skills training for both mother and father (Lam et al, 2008).

Fathers

Just as children and mothers can benefit from fathers' participation in parent education/support, so can fathers – and not only through improvements in their own parenting capacity, as outlined above.

Fathers in early years

Evaluations of generally small-scale parenting interventions with fathers in early years settings in the US have identified positive changes in fathers' confidence and satisfaction, including increase in sense of parental confidence (McBride, 1989); positive change in view of self (Bayse et al, 1991); and greater satisfaction in parental performance (Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999).

Qualitative research has found fathers expressing satisfaction with their participation in such programmes as "being able to spend quality time with my child" . . . "Improved relationship with my child" . . . "Helping my child achieve" . . . "Being helped to see how my child is developing" . . . "Learning things about my children that I didn't know before" . . . "Learning new skills to help my child" . . . This research found that the more involved with the programme the fathers were, the greater the perceived rewards.

Fathers of children with special needs

A programme comprising eight sessions with fathers of premature infants shortly before discharge from hospital, plus four home visits afterwards, found the fathers suffering significantly lower child-related, parent-related and total stress, twelve months on than a control group of fathers who had not received this intervention (Kaaresen et al, 2006).³⁷

A well-designed Swedish study (Dellve et al, 2006) with 12 month follow up, found a high level of parenting stress experienced at baseline by fathers of children suffering from rare disabilities. For the fathers, this type of distress reduced after the intervention, as did other strains; and perceived knowledge and active coping levels increased – to such an extent that the researchers concluded that fathers, particularly those who work full-time, were major beneficiaries of this intensive family competence programme.

Imprisoned fathers

Parent education for incarcerated fathers has a long established history and has relevance beyond prison settings. Evaluations have revealed:

- positive results in self-esteem (for review, see Meek, 2007; also Dennison & Lyon, 2003)
- key pieces of learning from these courses retained by ex-inmates (Dennison & Lyon, 2003; Boswell & Wedge, 2002)
- strengthened motivation to reduce offending behaviour among fathers³⁸ (Pugh, 2008)

Young fathers

One small US study of just six fathers (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006) found the young men's involvement with their children and their commitment as fathers substantially increased after participation in a therapeutic/ psycho-educational fatherhood programme.

Saleh et al (2005) found programme participation by 38 young fathers correlated with one third moving from 'positive emotionality' to substantial 'engagement' with their child. In this last study, 'accessibility' (i.e. the amount of time the father spent with the child) showed the smallest shift – not due to unwillingness by the young father, but because his access to the child was powerfully controlled by others (usually the young mother and/or her parents).

Separated fathers

There is now ample evidence that separated fathers, even some in very high conflict families, can absorb information about, and change their behaviour towards, their children and their children's mothers through a range of interventions during and post separation. These include multi-method interventions, educational programmes, therapeutic mediation, post-order support, and amplified contact supervision.

For example:, a university-based programme working with separated fathers ("Dads for Life") with a curriculum focused heavily on a cognitive-behavioral approach to managing anger and reducing conflict between the parents, and which was evaluated through a high-quality randomized control study and reports from mothers in matched pairs, found positive effects on fathers' relationships with their children and former partners; and on mothers' perceptions of support. The latter improved in the treatment group and declined in the control group, who had been given only written materials on conflict management, but no face-to-face intervention (Cookston et al, 2006).

Outcomes of interventions with separated mothers and fathers include (among the fathers) increased understanding about the impact of parental conflict on children; more positive parenting behaviours; better communication with mothers; higher levels of engagement with children, and so on.

Satisfaction levels with the interventions are generally high, and have not been found to be negatively affected by being mandated to attend. For a full discussion, see Hunt (2008); and for further information about specific programmes go to:

www.relationships.com.au/what-we-do/services/contact-parenting-orders-program-1/parenting-orders-program-qld;

www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=1484

www.gov.mb.ca/fs/childfam/for_sake_of_children.html

www.ninja9.org/courtadmin/familyintake/CourtCareCenter.htm

High-need fathers

- In an intervention with 24 highly vulnerable families, only one father was unable to reflect usefully on his identity as a man, a father and a partner (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004).
- In East Lothian, four exceptionally high need fathers (one was schizophrenic) completed a Mellow Dads course (Rogers & Johnstone, 2007): of these, only one (not the schizophrenic) did not seem to be positively affected (Rogers, 2008, personal communication).
- Qualitative analysis of low-income US fathers involved in Early Head Start, suggests that those lacking a high-school education may sometimes use involvement in the programme to engage in educational activities to improve their own language, literacy or numeracy. Very often, the fathers accept support in these areas because they perceive this as benefiting their children,³⁹ enabling them to help with homework, for example (Raikes et al, 2005)
- Case study evidence suggests that engaging with problematic men's fatherhood (for example, helping fathers towards a realization of the negative impact their behaviour is having on their children; or initially limiting contact with a child while providing support for the father to help him tackle seriously negative behaviours) can stimulate positive change (Sheehan, 2006; Hall, 2004; McLean et al, 2004).

Couples

The benefits to the couple relationship of including fathers in parenting interventions, should not be overlooked. In the US, the Boot Camp for New Dads initiative⁴⁰ which prepares new fathers for the transition to parenthood, is correlated with maintenance of the father's satisfaction with the couple relationship after the birth (Bishop, 2008), as is the long-established Becoming a Family programme in California (Cowan & Cowan, 2008; 2006). This is important, since couple satisfaction normally deteriorates year on year. Recent evidence from Cowan & Cowan (2008) suggests that couple-focused interventions on parenting issues at other important transition points in the parenting cycle, may also slow or halt the usual decline in couple relationship satisfaction.

Notes

36. As we see later, fathers can also learn from information and training received by mothers – the “cascade” effect
37. The long-term outcomes of this intervention are currently being investigated.
38. Though whether the men actually reduce offending behaviour is not known
39. A motivator also identified earlier in this document, and discussed later
40. See page 26 of this document for more about this programme, which is delivered to professionals in the UK by the Fatherhood Institute, under the title Hit the Ground Crawling

6 Programme design: what works?

Methodological problems

Tiano & McNeil (2005), trying to establish whether or not fathers or their families benefit from fathers' inclusion in Behavioural Parenting Training (e.g. Triple P, Webster-Stratton), comment that methodological limitations in this body of research have made it hard to be sure. For example, where fathers drop out or fail to attend very many sessions (Russell & Matson, 1998), or facilitators direct part of the intervention at mothers-only (Connell et al, 1997), the programme may be engaging with fathers substantially less than with mothers – and so comparing the impact of the programme on fathers and mothers is not comparing like with like. Conversely, when fathers show smaller increases in satisfaction with their own parenting than mothers after an intervention, this may not be because the intervention is less effective, but only because they were less dissatisfied to start with (Connell et al, 1997)⁴¹

Unfortunately, solid evidence is scarce. Even when substantial numbers of fathers participate, reports and evaluations commonly fail to report or analyse outcomes by gender. For example, West of Berkshire CAMHS have very high attendance by fathers but its report on its work to the Department of Health (Rivers & Wise, 2007) did not break down attendance or outcomes by gender.

Is a gender-neutral approach possible?

No substantial evaluations of the major behavioural parent training programmes currently being promoted in the UK have looked at their efficacy specifically with fathers. Neither of the evidence bases for Triple P or Incredible Years addresses this effectively. Nor does either organisation mention this issue on their website, although both are at pains to demonstrate the transferability of their models to different cultural groups. Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities, also strong on cultural transferability, is similarly weak on evidence based practice with fathers.⁴²

Quite extensive investigation was required to uncover an evaluation of a Triple P intervention which did differentiate findings by gender (Connell et al, 1997). This study (of rural families in Australia, where the intervention was delivered long-distance) found many more positive effects for mothers than for fathers. However, the intervention was not delivered in the same way with mothers as with fathers: while fathers were "encouraged" (by the mother) to read the written material, this was not required of them; and whether or not they had done so, or been asked to do so, was not assessed. Furthermore, crucial weekly telephone counselling sessions were carried out with mothers only (other than on two occasions when a father made the telephone call). Astonishingly, in discussion of the fewer positive results with fathers than mothers, the researchers do not mention these differences in delivery.

A more recent trial of a group-based Triple P programme (this time in Switzerland) also showed significant positive results for mothers, but not for fathers. Again, the authors (Bodenmann et al, 2008) puzzled over this finding, rationalising it in various ways and noting its congruence with previous Triple P research (Sanders et al, 2000) which had also found fewer positive father-effects. However, one suspects that in the Swiss study, as in the Australian study, the intervention was not delivered in the same way to mothers and fathers. While, in Switzerland, both parents were to attend group sessions, the degree to which this was achieved or fathers completed between-session homework sheets, was not reported. Nor is there mention of fathers' participation in the between-session "individual (our italics) telephone consultations."

A recent meta-analysis of 28 studies of father-engagement in behavioural parent training including Triple P (Lundahl et al, 2008) confirmed the finding of fewer positive outcomes for fathers. Immediately after training, fathers reported fewer positive changes in their children's behaviour, their own parenting behaviour and their perceptions of parenting. At follow-up fathers continued to have benefited less than mothers, although by that stage they were no less likely than mothers to report positively on child behaviour and perceptions of parenting.

Both parents – or one?

The authors, however, warn against excluding fathers from parent training or limiting their involvement as a result of these findings, pointing to the frequently differential engagement with mothers and fathers in these programmes, and also to programme design, which may have been substantially less appealing to men than to women. This view is shared by Palm (1997) who suggests that to deliver good outcomes for fathers conventional programmes will need to adapt content, methods and goals.

Other researchers (Featherstone et al, 2007) identify failings in facilitators' interactions with fathers, which may be central to the relatively low satisfaction/change reported by some fathers who participate in mainstream parenting programmes. Conversely, positive learning/satisfaction reports in small interventions may be skewed by inspirational delivery by highly skilled and sensitive facilitators. "The experience levels and backgrounds of the practitioners who deliver the (fatherhood) programme are never studied systematically so that the success of an intervention can be attributed to a curriculum when this may not be the primary factor that leads to the documented success" (Palm, 2008, personal communication).

Bodernmann et al (2008) responded to their finding that fathers were not benefiting as much as mothers from conventional parent training by suggesting that as long as fathers do not undermine the changes mothers attempt to make then their participation in the parent-training may not be necessary. If this is true – when is it true?

Clearly, working with only one parent can bring about positive changes in some families, although this are far from universal (Kazdin, 2003) and maintaining gains over time can be challenging especially in lone mother households (Webster-Stratton, 2006; Bagner & Eyberg, 2002).

Sometimes it is not possible to engage with more than one parent, although Webster-Stratton guidelines make clear that if a parent is single "partners and supportive friends" are to be "encouraged to attend" (North Essex Partnership, date unknown).

Engaging a parent alone may also be essential when practical considerations, such as babysitting, prevent both attending together; or when working with both together would be unsafe, or where power dynamics would impact on the effectiveness of the intervention. In such cases, engaging the parents in separate sessions of the same programme is a way forward, and this is often achieved with separating couples (e.g. Dickinson et al, 2003) – although Berkshire CAMHS report successful sessions which include, for instance, mother, father and stepfather.

Abse & Hertzmann (2008) report excellent results working with very high conflict, parents together, following assessment of any violence to ensure women are not put at risk; and Relate has developed guidelines on this issue for its practitioners. However, even if a mother needs to be seen alone because her children's father has been violent, this does not mean the father should not be worked with. . . Positive behaviour and attitude change has been accomplished in some fathers who have used serious violence by engaging with them in specially designed parenting programme (e.g. Scott & Crooks, 2007). It is essential that such interventions are accompanied by the men's engagement in programmes to address their use of violence, past or current, with their children's mothers.

If only one parent can be engaged with, this may not have to be the mother. A substantial study of a parenting intervention (Adesso & Lipson, 1981) which randomly allocated parents into mother only, father only, mother-and-father and control groups found child behaviour improving in all the three intervention groups - with the father-only-intervention-children improving just as greatly as the mother-only-intervention children. More research is needed to validate or challenge this finding, and to study stability of positive change over time.

Family systems theory has identified the ways in which behaviour by one family member impacts on the others. From this perspective it would seem that engaging with both parents is likely to be more productive than engaging with just one; and that, if only one is to be engaged with, better outcomes may be achieved by engaging with the most powerful family member (Furrow, 2001). However, even in "family" therapy, practitioners have been tolerant of fathers' low/non engagement (Phares, 1999; 1996); and we are not aware of any randomised controlled trial that has compared the efficacy of family therapy with two parents v. one.

Where the efficacy of engaging with two parents v. one has been formally assessed, or practitioners have reflected on outcomes in their clinical practice, fathers' attendance and positivity towards the intervention have been identified as important:

- A high quality international meta-analysis of interventions aiming to enhance positive parental behaviours in children younger than 54 months, found delivering an intervention to both parents to be "significantly more effective" than delivering it to just one" (Bakernans-Kranenburg et al, 2003).
- When both parents are engaged with, gains tend to be maintained for longer (Lee & Hunsley, 2006; Bagner & Eyberg, 2003; Webster-Stratton, 1985).
- The father's presence "clearly improves the odds of good outcomes" (Gurman & Kniskern, 1978).

- Families have been found to be less likely to drop out of treatment when both fathers and mothers participate (Foote et al, 1998); when fathers are supportive of the therapy (Shapiro & Budman, 1973); and when the father is the more enthusiastic participant (Littlejohn & Bruggen, 1994). Where the father is the least enthusiastic participant, families are most likely to drop out of treatment (Littlejohn & Bruggen, 1994).
- Symonds & Horvath (2004) studied the outcomes for 47 heterosexual couples and, like some other researchers (for review, see Featherstone et al, 2007) found the success of the treatment related to the quality of the facilitator's alliance with the man, not the woman. Positive outcomes are more likely when the father perceives the therapist as competent and the therapy as more directive (Bennun, 1989). Men are less tolerant of a poor therapeutic alliance than women, who are more likely to stay in counselling despite it (Cauce et al, 2002).

It is probable that engaging both parents will contribute to inter-parental consistency in parenting. Among the indicators that predict failure for parenting interventions "lack of a supportive partner" is highly significant (Forgatch, 1989; Forehand, Furey & McMahon, 1984). It therefore seems probable that engagement with both parents is most important where the couple relationship, or couple communication, is poor – which is often the case where children exhibit difficulties (Harrist & Ainslie, 1998).

It makes intuitive sense that where a couple do not communicate well or are oppositional, one partner's attempt to introduce changes may be blocked, undermined or unsupported by the other.

- A qualitative study of the impact of a Webster Stratton programme found some mothers taking the view that the programme would have been more effective if their partners had attended (Patterson et al, 2005); and, anecdotally, professionals attending Fatherhood Institute training courses⁴³ often remark how much easier it is to "make parenting interventions stick" when fathers are included.
- Another (small scale) evaluation (again of Webster Stratton - Swain, 2007) found one mother declaring that "the major obstacle she has found is that her partner has different ideas; therefore the rules given to the children (by her, as a result of her Webster Stratton training) are not always consistent" (with his).
- Qualitative data gathered during an evaluation of a third Webster Stratton programme (the Parent-Child Videotape Series) indicated that partners' views were a significant variable impacting on mothers' improved scores (Manby, 2005).

Programme content and style

A randomised Triple P study found that among maritally-distressed couples, a simple parenting intervention was not as effective as an intervention that included training in couple-communication (Dadds et al, 1987),

- Three randomised controlled trials of maritally-focused v. parenting-focused interventions found more positive outcomes (in parents' behaviour, the couple relationship, children's behaviour and even – in one of the studies – children's academic achievement scores and aggression-levels) where couple issues, rather than parenting-issues had been the starting point for the intervention (Cowan & Cowan, 2008, 2000).
- However a randomised control trial of a Triple P intervention with couples did not find that two additional 90-minute sessions focused on helping the couple communicate more effectively etc.⁴⁴ resulted in better outcomes (Ireland et al, 2003). This suggests that it may not be couple skills training that is of value, but approaching the parenting issues through the lens of the couple relationship – an approach that absolutely requires both parents to be present throughout.

When fathers drop out of parent education or fail to show benefits, such as reduced parenting stress or increases in feelings of competency, could it be – as suggested by Lundahl et al (2008) - that the content or style of the programme is sometimes at fault?

It seems that some men can find the format of standard parenting education programmes alienating, and this may be linked with drop-out (or, possibly, other forms of resistance). The curriculum may be experienced as unsatisfactory because:

- It is based on format originally designed for mothers (Doherty et al, 2006)
- Initial topics are perceived as too threatening - e.g. focusing on own-childhood reflections (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- Commitment may seem too long-term (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- The course may be experienced as too unstructured (Vetere, 1992; Blackie & Clarke, 1987)⁴⁵ although fathers may respond very well to being able to influence the course content
- The course may fail to address issues relating to step or non-resident parenting (Sanders et al, 1997).

Fagan & Palm (2004) report other reasons for drop-out by fathers from mainstream parenting interventions:

- Since men are almost always in the minority, they feel detached and out of place
- Some of the topics covered are not of primary interest to them

- Discussion, when involving intense feelings (as it often does) makes some feel uncomfortable.

In other settings, too, fathers can express great dissatisfaction with curricula – for example, in preparation for parenthood delivered in ante-natal settings (McElligott, 2001). In one study, one man in three wanted more information on nineteen subjects after antenatal classes were over (Singh & Newburn, 2000). Modifying the curriculum to take account of men's concerns and information needs can result in greater satisfaction and more positive behaviour change. For example, when a couples ante-natal intervention that had shown some success with fathers was re-designed to address issues identified as being central to them, the men's satisfaction was greater and behaviour change more positive (Diemer, 1997).

As we gathered material for this paper, we collected information from facilitators trained in delivering some of the mainstream evidence-based programmes (Triple P, Incredible Years, Mellow Parenting, Family Links) who were using the curricula with men as well as women – either in mixed-gender or men-only groups.

Although our findings are only anecdotal, it was interesting to note that none had received training in gender-issues. Some felt the lack of this, although others were unaware of this as a concern. Some reported adapting the curriculum "as I go along" to include examples / approaches that were father-inclusive; or to exclude examples / exercises that clearly "don't work with the dads".⁴⁶

A few provided the fathers with handouts they had developed themselves – for example, on Parental Responsibility. One of the Mellow Parenting programme devisers had developed a version of the programme for fathers specifically (“Mellow Dads”), as has MELD (Minnesota Early Learning Design) which re-designed its programme for young mothers to meet the needs for fathers (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

How can content and style be more sympathetic to fathers’ needs and experiences? Fagan & Palm (2004) suggest open acknowledgement of particular issues. These include:

- That there are joys and challenges associated with the changing roles of fathers
- That fathers care deeply about their children.⁴⁷
- That fathers’ impact on their children is substantial – which needs to be clearly described as well as stated
- Why it is important for non-resident fathers to stay involved with their children.
- How step-fathers and other father-figures impact on children’s development and wellbeing.
- How couple relationships and the quality of co-parenting impact on children
- That fathers are by nature no less talented than mothers at caring for and interacting with children: parenting develops through practice – and mothers normally get more practice.

Fagan & Palm point to masculine stereotypes as providing useful ways-in to address some subjects with fathers.⁴⁸ For example, fathers’ value / roles within the family may be addressed through “Lessons that fathers teach””; Discipline through “Creating a discipline toolbox” or “Father as moral guide”. Similarly, Featherstone et al (2007), in a brilliant practice example on page 35, suggest how to reframe issues so that they have a better chance of appealing to men. For example:

- **Courage** is a stereotypical masculine quality: “it is courageous to take a psychological risk by expressing your feelings”;
- **Leadership** is masculine: “Men can be leaders by showing other men healthier visions of masculinity”, and so on.

Fatherhood Institute trainers report that talking about father-involvement in terms of resourcefulness may also be useful: this can provide a reframing of how men tend to want to cope alone, and indeed how they often lack adequate networks of support.

To make sense to some fathers, apparently “generic” issues like discipline may benefit from gender-differentiated thinking:

- Men may not struggle with disciplining their children as much as mothers;
- Men may not want to be seen as too soft, out of control or manipulated by their offspring. By contrast, mothers may be more concerned about the risks to the mother-child relationship of responding forcefully to misbehaviour (Thevenin, 1993).

- A logical approach to discipline may be more appealing to fathers than to mothers: what are they trying to teach their child? What is the best way to teach this value or behaviour? (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

Fathers can also benefit enormously from understanding that when they experience anger with a child (when attempting to discipline them, and at other times), this may be covering up other feelings (Fagan & Palm, 2004). Featherstone et al (2007) report some practitioners believing that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy may be an ideal way of engaging with many fathers. Others, however, see the necessity to challenge instrumental approaches and develop fathers’ “emotional intelligence”, albeit in sensitive and cautious ways

Featherstone et al (2007) give many excellent practice examples of how fathers need to be helped to reflect on definitions of masculinity and their relation to the ways they parent, or would wish to parent. This is an important topic, underlined by almost all writers on practical interventions with men and fathers.

Similarly, Dienhart & Avis (1994) suggest that among the skills needed to engage men in therapy with their families is the ability to talk with men about gender socialization and to construct a broad definition of the problem that includes patterns of gender division over the whole spectrum of the family.

Clearly, very few staff are trained to do this, within specific parenting programmes or in other professional training.

We would contend that discussions about women's gender socialization are also crucial in work with fathers, as fathers need to understand "where mothers are coming from" if they are to engage constructively with them. Similarly, we suggest that in all parenting interventions with mothers, the gender roles and gender socialization processes for both sexes must be brought into the frame via facilitators who have a sophisticated understanding of these issues.

Programme elements

Most mothers have ample opportunity to develop skills in looking after babies, simply because they do so much of it. This cannot be taken-for-granted with fathers. Even when they are hands-on, their partner will often be nearby, ready to take over at the first sign of distress. It is also the case that the extent of fathers' preparedness and confidence is often not assessed, with lack of engagement often seen as 'normal' male behaviour – rather than being explored and responded to.

For some fathers, an effective intervention may simply be for professionals to facilitate the opportunity to spend time with his child and, particularly, time in charge of his child. This simple strategy may lead to more confidence and greater time spent with children. Fathers of caesarean babies usually undertake relatively high levels of infant care due to mothers' incapacity – and Pederson et al (1980) found them still engaged in higher levels of care five months on.

Enhancing fathers' experience of competence is usually key:

- Myers (1982) found fathers who had been shown how to conduct standardized assessments of their newborns (the Brazelton method) becoming more knowledgeable and more involved.
- Early studies found that fathers taught the skills of caring for a newborn tend to be closer to their babies at the time and also later (Nickel & Kocker, 1987; McHale & Huston, 1984).
- When fathers of four-week-old infants were given a brief training in baby massage and the Burleigh Relaxation Bath technique with a particular emphasis on the father-infant relationship they were more involved with their infants (than a comparison group of fathers) two months on. Also, their infants greeted their fathers with more eye contact, smiling, vocalising, reaching and orienting responses, and showed less avoidance behaviours (Scholz & Samuels, 1992).
- *Hit the Ground Crawling* – peer-led hands-on baby-care-skills training for expectant fathers delivered to professionals in the UK by the Fatherhood Institute⁴⁹ - has been found to lead to 'significant increases in confidence and preparedness' (Fraser, 2008); and in the US, under the name *Boot Camp for New Dads*, to increased participation by fathers in infant care, parenting classes and doctor visits; knowledge of infant development, care, child abuse prevention, strategies for crying, etc., and supportive behaviour towards the mother.⁵⁰

- One study found 4 out of 5 fathers of six-month-olds saying they would probably have attended a 'how to care for your baby' session, if it had been offered in the first few weeks after the birth and as a continuation of the pre-birth training. Although when new fathers were actually offered such a session only 1 in 6 attended, the researchers felt this was a very positive result, since in that district nothing of that kind had ever been offered before (Matthey & Barnett, 1999).

Fathers may be more interested in programmes that include active participation (e.g. baby-care skills training, video self-modelling, father-child activities), rather than those that rely only or mainly on discussion (for review, see Magill-Evans et al, 2007). And where information is to be received passively, films and tapes have been found to rank highly, followed by a newsletter (Hadadian & Merbler, 2005). A father-child activity component is strongly recommended in Early Years settings (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

- Fathers who observed themselves interacting (on video) with their 5 and 6 month old infants had increased scores on the Nursing Child Assessment Teaching Scale (NCATS) ⁵¹ two months later, compared with a control group of fathers who showed a decrease in NCATS scores over the same period (Magill—Evans, 2007). There was no significant difference between intervention and control groups in fathers' reports of self-efficacy and satisfaction.⁵²

“Taster” events or outings

A trip to a local attraction . . . a “fathers’ breakfast” at school . . . a Family Day . . . these are common ways in which services try to engage with fathers with a view to promoting their engagement with their children and/or with the service (the two objectives are not, of course, the same, although practitioners often confound them).

When such events are held, it is rare (in our experience, from discussions held regularly with practitioners at our training events) for data to be collected or well-organised signposting incorporated, or for there to be systematic follow-up, for example to seek to involve fathers who attend in other initiatives, including parent education. Client satisfaction surveys may be gathered; but funding and staffing constraints may mean that even this data is not collated or reviewed.

However, if data is collected, and learning outcomes or other clear objectives for the session are established (this may be no more than “father and child spending time together” which can be truly significant in some families), there is no reason why these events should not be considered part of a parenting-intervention strategy for fathers. They can also be helpful fore-runners to fathers’ engagement in other parts of the service and in more substantial parenting interventions (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

Groups or one-on-one?

In one study, fathers engaged one-on-one in their home by home visitors indicated that they liked this style of intervention and did not recommend it be implemented in a group setting with other fathers (Magill-Evans et al, 2007). Mordaunt (2005), in her study of a number of interventions with young fathers in the UK, found several practitioners reporting that for young fathers with complex needs, a group intervention was not indicated; and that if the young fathers did eventually attend a group, substantial work one-to-one would usually have to be done with them first.

Fagan & Palm (2004) suggest that since many fathers may hesitate to become deeply involved in ongoing parent-training, the definition of parent education for fathers should be extended to include meaningful conversations with a father that can occur one-on-one at any time when professional and father interact – whether watching children play, or talking at a parent-teacher’s evening. Such “turning point” moment conversations are also valued by Marsiglio & Hutchinson (2004), who believe that creating such opportunities for boys and men to reflect on “sex, men and babies” is an important element in engaging productively with them.

Father-only activities?

Many professionals are very keen to draw men in to fathers’ groups (Russell et al, 1999) and it is our impression (again, from discussions in our training sessions) that they are by far the main vehicle by which UK practitioners have been attempting to engage fathers in recent years.

Occasionally a practitioner will report very high attendance by fathers at, for instance, a father-child activity group on a Saturday.⁵³ It is our impression that when this happens excellent groundwork has first been undertaken in terms of identifying and encouraging fathers to attend. This is perfectly possible, but few practitioners, however, do this – which may be one reason for the findings (set out below) that men-only activities have mainly attracted very few participants:

- Fathers groups in the UK have often been poorly attended (Mordaunt, 2005; Lloyd et al, 2003)
- Research in the US and Australia found few men willing to engage in men-only activities especially when a “group” format was proposed (Johnson & Palm, 1992; Russell et al, 1999).
- In the US, Early Head Start fathers were found to be far more likely to engage in a centre-based parenting activity (17%), a home visit (32%) and even policy/committee meetings (9%) than in activities just for fathers-and-children (6%). Even when one-off sporting activities and fathers’ groups were included, fewer than 10% of fathers were found to participate in such single-sex interventions (Raikes et al, 2005).

- A US study which identified fathers' goals for parent-education found "Develop skills to communicate with child" and "Build close relationship with child" at the top of the men's list. To "build a support system with other men" was rated lowest (Johnson & Palm, 1992).
- Anecdotally, Fatherhood Institute trainees sometimes comment that (for example) a Saturday morning father-child-activity session attracts more fathers if it is not advertised as being for dads only BUT has themes such as rocket making that are likely to appeal to fathers. Such practitioners contend that advertising needs to make clear that fathers (and father-figures) are invited, while at the same time not limiting attendance to fathers.
- If groups are on-going, there is always a danger that they will become inward-focused and exclude men who are "not like us". Both Children North-East and the Vadercentrum in the Hague, which host men-only groups with specific functions (e.g. martial arts, tailoring, cooking), the aim is to "move the men on" out of the group and into other activities at an appropriate time (Olley, 2008, personal communication; Bours, 2007).

The fact that a minority of fathers are likely ever to attend men-only activities does not mean these are without value, or that they are not useful as one among a range of ways in which dads can find their way to the service (McAllister et al, 2004).

The fathers who participate in men-only groups often value them highly (Johnson & Palm, 1992)⁵⁴ and although most such groups have received no systematic evaluation beyond documentation of the number and characteristics of clients served and surveys of consumer satisfaction (Cowan et al, 2009) effective learning can certainly take place within this context: most of the evidence of fathers' potential to learn from parenting interventions cited earlier in this paper is derived from such initiatives.

And while a survey of Australian fathers found dads un-enthusiastic about the idea of attending a fathers' group, the same men did say that they would value the opportunity to "talk things over" with other fathers (Russell et al, 1999). Father-only services can also offer creative opportunities to draw some fathers in to wider programme activities and support (Raikes et al, 2005); and may provide a useful source of "champion dads" who can then go on to volunteer within a service, and attract other men to it. Fatherhood Institute trainees often mention this.

In some settings, such as ante-natal, providing opportunities for the men and women to meet separately for part or some of the sessions, may offer opportunities for each sex to consider issues specific to their own aspirations, experience and knowledge level – issues which can then be productively brought back to the mixed-sex sessions. The Fatherhood Institute is promoting this through its Hit the Ground Crawling programme of short men-only sessions within these settings.

Mixed-sex groups

While fathers may be less likely to resist mixed-sex groups than men-only groups, there is evidence that some find such groups daunting and may be less likely to participate in discussion once they are present.⁵⁵ Others may respond to discomfort by attempting to control the situation or behaving in other unhelpful ways (Fagan & Palm, 2004; Campbell & Palm, 2004). Mothers, however, can also disrupt groups – and with skilled facilitation and gender awareness disruption by men or women can usually be handled. The issue, then, may not be that mixed-sex groups are innately problematic for fathers, but that they are problematic when facilitation is poor or facilitators have not been trained in gender issues.

In some situations, mixed-sex groups may be very much preferred, for example in separation and divorce, where facilitators report on the value of individuals "hearing" from group members of the opposite sex, things they would never have accepted from their partners (Murphy, 2006).

In ante-natal there is disagreement between those who feel that same-sex groups enable individuals to explore their situation without fear or defensiveness; and those who perceive the transition to parenthood as overwhelmingly a couple-experience, with a key function of the intervention being to develop the parenting alliance and to help partners understand each others' experience.

Certainly, fathers can learn well alongside their partners: a randomized experimental design was used to evaluate an 8-session program with 165 couples who were first-time parents, beginning during the second trimester of pregnancy and ending at 5 months postpartum. The intervention had positive effects on fathers' skills in interacting with their babies and on their amount of involvement on work days (Doherty et al, 2006).

In group work, are better outcomes for fathers achieved via single-sex or mixed-sex formats? We found only one study that has so far tested this. In the randomized controlled Californian study "Supporting Father Involvement" fathers were assigned to fathers-only or to a couples-group sixteen week programme, with a control group receiving only a one-session intervention. Fathers in the long-term fathers group were slightly less likely to stick with the course than those in the couples-group. Unlike in the control group, parenting stress declined significantly and father-involvement increased, where fathers had attended either the long-term fathers-group or the couples-group. An additional benefit from the couples-group was that satisfaction with the couple relationship did not decline over time as is normative.⁵⁶ It did decline where fathers had attended the fathers-only group, or had experienced only the minimum one-session intervention. Furthermore, positive changes at home were seen more quickly among the couples-group attendees (Cowan et al, 2009).

Facilitators/workers

In group work, and in one-on-one work with fathers, do workers have to be male? There is clearly a different dynamic when facilitators are female (Konen, 1992); however, this is not necessarily a worse dynamic.

Women have run very successful men's groups and have also worked very successfully one-on-one with men (Konen, 1992) Nevertheless, the value of male-on-male communication from male facilitators who have a positive attitude towards their own sex and who fully understand issues of masculinity, should not be under-estimated.⁵⁷ There is also the issue of "modelling": for fathers, observing other males interacting confidently with infants and children can be very powerful (Bishop, unpublished evaluation). There is some evidence to suggest that while men (85%, in one study of males seeing psychiatrists) say they are equally happy with a female therapist and others (15% in that same study) say they actually prefer a female (Quinton & Rutter, 1988) these researchers found 100% attendance by men to be more likely when the psychiatrist was male. This might not reflect engagement-preference, but easier acceptance of authority from a man.

The modelling of inter-sex cooperation by male and female facilitators or team-members can be very positive for some fathers (and mothers). The presence of a female facilitator or co-facilitator in men's group work may also be helpful in monitoring / challenging sexist collusion between a male facilitator and male participants. Similarly, in female-only groups, the presence of a male co-facilitator may help challenge collusion between a female facilitator and an all-female group.

More important than the sex of any worker are his or her attitudes, skills, confidence and understanding of gender issues and fatherhood, and capacity and willingness to address the parenting alliance, whether or not parents are living together (Abse & Hertzmann, 2008).

One study which compared therapists' involving of men in therapy, found that male therapists were more likely to include men, as were therapists who were newer to the profession, educated in family therapy techniques and who believed family responsibilities should be equally shared (for review, see Phares, 1999). All this points to the importance of facilitators' attitudes, and their training and preparation to engage with male parents and with couples.

It's not what you do – it's the way that you do it . . .

Few parent educators or parenting programme designers are equipped to handle the issue of fathers. This is because engaging with men is not taught in most pre-qualification training; the discourse around males in textbooks is almost wholly negative, or entirely missing (Clapton, 2009); few have had access to information on fathers' impact on children and mothers, or on masculinity and gender stereotyping (in relation to men) and gender conflicts (Johnson & Palm, 1992)

Consider, for example, the negative impact on engagement with fathers (or on engagement with mothers or children about fathers or fatherhood), of a facilitator (male or female) who:

- has a negative attitude towards men
- does not believe that fathers have a significant role to play in the lives of children or much impact on their development
- believes that to engage with mothers is far more productive and/or that mothers have "innate" childcare talents that men lack
- has unresolved issues relating to men in their own lives
- has not had the opportunity to reflect critically on their own behaviour, attitudes and experience in engaging with men - and is not invited to reflect on these issues in supervision;
- is not specifically trained in working with couples or in working with couples in gender-sensitive ways
- has not reflected on possible gender differences in learning styles (or the learning styles of different types of fathers - e.g. young fathers);

- is unable or unwilling to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of fathers⁵⁸
- is unable or unwilling to think about the different experiences and goals that parents of different sexes are likely to have
- and so on . . .

Featherstone et al (2007) are clear that practitioners have to want to work with men for the process to be helpful; and believe this should be monitored before and during engagement. Practitioners also need to be specifically trained with methods that include reflection on own experience/attitudes, since when issues relating to men and fathers emerge during practice, the personal prejudices of the facilitator tend to guide the discussion; and the need for differential treatment of women/men is usually denied (Featherstone et al, 2007)..

Research on the role of the therapist in conjoint therapy has found, among other things, that therapists deal with defensive men and women differently, respond in gendered ways to comments by clients⁵⁹ and, when asked to explain their gender perspective, almost always reveal stereotypical biases while, at the same time, denying differential treatment (for a superb review and discussion, see Featherstone et al, 2007).

It seems likely that gender-differentiated thinking and appropriate training, together with willingness to work with fathers, will be needed if fathers are to be successfully engaged in parent training and other parenting interventions.

Notes

41. Fathers may perceive the “problem” to be in the mother-child relationship, and therefore be less dissatisfied than mothers with their own parenting to start with. In fact, the fathers’ withdrawal may be part of the problem (Lupton & Barclay, 1997), as may be their inability or unwillingness to acknowledge their role in any conflict.
42. In Britain, the Race Equality Foundation, for example, delivers this programme. However, their engagement rate with fathers is low (in 71% of their programmes no fathers, or only one, take part). And in their evaluations of the few courses which had a better gender-balance among the participants, findings are not reported by gender, so differential impact, if any, is not measured. See: <http://www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/sfsc/files/sfsc-evalssummary.pdf>
43. Delegates attending Children North-East’s Fathers Plus trainings also report this (Olley, 2008, personal communication)
44. These additional sessions included information and active skills training in communication skills; giving and receiving constructive feedback; holding casual conversations; supporting each other when problems occur; holding problem solving discussions; and improving relationship happiness.
45. . . . “programme length/commitment too long” . . . “men stand out because mostly women would be there” . . . “don’t like debate in public, should be done at home” (Johnson & Palm, 1992).
46. One course curriculum required the ‘parents’ to be sent home with scented candles; and gave a case example of a ‘parent’ in the kitchen ironing when the child came in from school. The facilitator changed both of these.
47. This is taken-for-granted with motherhood, although of course individual mothers may struggle.
48. Their experience is in men-only interventions in the US, and these are not empirical findings of the “best” way to approach men. They rank more as “practitioner wisdom” from this context.
49. <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=2&cID=798>
50. For evidence base see <http://www.bootcampfornewdads.org/validating-research.php>
51. NCATS differentiates between maternal and paternal interactions. Paternal NCATS scores with 3-month-olds predict reception language development at 18 months (Magill-Evans & Harrison, 1999, cited by Magill-Evans, 2007)
52. Both control and intervention groups reported increased satisfaction and self-efficacy. This may be because both groups were already quite satisfied with fathering; or because the home-visitor’s interest in fathering and provision of age-appropriate toys to the control group fathers might have been as effective as videotaped self-modeling in increasing their perceptions of self-efficacy and satisfaction with parenting – although not their behaviour.
53. e.g. “Who Let the Dads Out?” in Chester. See <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=3&cID=659>
54. Comments by men who have participated in single-sex groups include: “Dads are much more open when women are not present” . . . “Other fathers understand me in ways that women don’t” . . . “Men have the same sense of humour”. Negative comments are more common when men have attended mixed-gender groups; however, these may reflect lack of skill in the facilitator, more
55. “I always felt like I’d be attacked if I disagreed with the women” . . . “It is safer not to participate” . . . “None of the men ever said anything” . . . “If women are part of the group, men look to them for answers and help instead of to the other men” (Johnson & Palm, 1992).
56. There are well-established normative downward trends in satisfaction for parents with children from birth through adolescence (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003)
57. Age, too, can be central: we have observed older male workers effectively “re-fathering” young men who have not had positive male role models in their lives.
58. To incorporate, for example, substantial opportunities for activity-based involvement, which should almost certainly include a father-child activity component (see the PRACTICAL INFORMATION AND ACTIVITIES section of this paper)
59. For example, the assumption that men do not want to talk about emotional difficulties may motivate a worker to avoid these difficulties

7 Recruiting fathers: tips and strategies

There are, of course, significant differences among fathers (as there are among mothers) in their willingness to engage in interventions. In the 1990s, this was researched in family therapy, where the fathers most likely to engage were found (unsurprisingly) to have received therapy in the past, be non-traditional in their approach to gender-roles and perceive their family problems to be very serious. It was, however, very much a two-way street with the service provider: whatever the father's own attitudes, his involvement in therapy was higher if the clinic offered evening/weekend appointments, and if the therapist explained to him and his children's mother that father-involvement in therapy was necessary (for review, see Phares, 1999).

The simplest change can bring in substantial numbers of fathers. In Australia, Fletcher (1997) reports fathers almost flooding into schools when specifically invited; and in Grantham (Lincolnshire), two health visitors conducted a comparative study in which one continued to use the standard letter about the primary birth visit ("Dear parents"), while the other used a new father-inclusive version ("Dear new mum and dad"). With the standard letter 3 out of 15 dads attended, while with the father-inclusive letter 11/16 dads attended.⁶⁰

Raikes et al (2005) found fathers almost three times as likely to engage with parenting support/education when the service was "mature" (see below) in terms of engaging with men. And in these "mature" programmes, even fathers who did not get involved were more aware of the potential benefits of the programme to their children; and therefore more likely to support their partner's and children's participation.

How does a service become mature in its engagement with dads? This involves not only changes in practice but also paradigmatic shifts in thinking by the whole team (Raikes et al, 2005; McAllister et al, 2004)

Stage 1: Nearly exclusive focus on the mother-child dyad. Staff engage with a few fathers and only talk about the father if the mother raises the topic.

Stage 2: Importance of fathers' impact on children begins to be recognised. Father-involvement occurs primarily through male-only activities

Stage 3: Conscious policy to include the whole family is developed: father is enrolled at same time as mother/child, if at all possible; attempts are made to inform fathers about the service and encourage their involvement. Men's activities continue with a clearer focus on support for fathering

Stage 4: Attempts are made to engage fathers in child-focused home visits – timing them so dad will be there; "getting him down on the floor". Fathers are encouraged to articulate their own goals and develop family goal plans with mothers. Staff attempt to meet with fathers more regularly and fathers are more consistently involved in parent-leadership activities.

Stage 5: Fathers are consistently viewed as co-parents and staff help mothers and fathers to reflect, on how each father contributes to his child's health and development. There is an agency-wide commitment to attract and involve fathers; the programmes are perceived as being as much for fathers as for mothers; and fathers are regularly discussed in case conferencing and included in conferences. Activities often allow for fathers and children to do things together, and are linked to other programme components, such as home visits / child socialisations. Special father / male activities might still exist, but are no longer regarded as the vehicle for father-involvement. Instead, there is a wide array of programme efforts to include fathers; and adjustments in service delivery have been made to meet the needs of working fathers and mothers. A father-involvement co-ordinator is employed and trained. The programme is seen as a leader in its community, in terms of father-involvement. And there is a commitment by programme leadership to engage in ongoing critical and reflective thinking and regular self-evaluations.

If parenting programmes are to recruit fathers effectively, they need to adopt an approach to recruitment that is systematic and committed – as in the ‘mature’ model outlined above:

- Be clear, from the outset, to both mothers and fathers, that fathers’ involvement is expected, and normalise any lack of enthusiasm for participation in the treatment programme (Hecker, 1991)
- Target information specifically for fathers: e.g. the North Dakota State University Extension Service developed and evaluated the impact on fathers of kindergarten children, of a parenting newsletter for fathers of young children: Father Times. Results showed that fathers: (1) appreciated the layout, readability, and usefulness of the newsletter; (2) valued the newsletter more highly than other formal sources of information; and (3) indicated the features and topics most valuable to them. The researchers concluded that “a newsletter for fathers can be a unique resource for reaching fathers in parent education” (Brotherson & Bouwhuis, 2007)
- Sign the father up right at the beginning, when you register the child (McAllister et al, 2004)⁶¹
- Make meeting the father a target in home visiting (McAllister et al, 2004)
- Always enquire about, and seek to meet, non-resident fathers, and think about the services they will need from you (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- Extend a specific invitation to each father to attend (Bruggen, 1994)
- Use mothers to recruit fathers, and fathers to recruit other fathers (McAllister et al, 2004)
- Make plain to the father that his engagement with the programme will benefit his child’s development (Fagan & Palm, 2004).
- Ensure you have a staff member with special responsibility for father-involvement BUT also ensure, alongside this, that engaging with fathers is everybody’s business (McAllister et al, 2004).
- Talk about fathers with mothers (about their importance in children’s lives) and talk about fathers with fathers (about the importance of “being there” for their children). Give serious and empathic attention to any mothers’ ambivalent feelings about father-involvement (McAllister et al, 2004).
- Assess the father’s needs, including his mental health: mental health issues, which are often discussed in relation to mothers, may not be explicitly recognised as influencing fathers’ involvement with their children or a programme (McAllister et al, 2004).
- Build relationships with fathers, as you do with mothers (McAllister et al, 2004).
- Change the times of interventions to accommodate the schedules of both working fathers AND working mothers (Raikes et al, 2005).⁶²
- Train your entire team. Carr (2006) found that father-engagement was far higher where a whole team was trained, than in a setting where no training in engaging with fathers had been delivered.

It is likely that the single most important recruitment strategy is, right from the start, to present the father’s engagement as expected and important – and to mean it. Phares (1999), summarising the research, found that if the father’s participation in therapy was presented as “automatic” during the first phone call contact, then the fathers almost always became involved in the therapy.

As mentioned earlier, West of Berkshire CAMHS report that 32 of the 71 parents currently attending their five parenting groups are fathers; and that 50/50 fathers/mothers attendance is common (Rivers, 2008, personal communication). Furthermore, both birth parents and a stepfather are often included in the same group; single dads attend on their own; and fathers come alone when mothers are unavailable. The agency believes its success is due to: an expectation from the outset that parenting is a joint venture; always timing home visits when both parents are available; and offering groups at varying times. Some fathers have experienced such big changes that they are now working as volunteers supporting other parents.

Notes

60. For the full case study see Guide to Developing a Father-Inclusive Workforce at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/p_parents/pip/PIPrkfatherinclusiveservices/PIPrkfatherinclusiveservices/

61. If he is not in the room at this point, obtain his name and contact details from whoever is registering the child, and ask them to tell the father that they have passed his details to you. You can then contact him directly. This meets data protection requirements.

62. Bagner & Eyberg (2003) found this highly significant, with over half the fathers then attending 100% of treatment sessions, and only 5% attending less than 60%.

8 Engaging with fathers: tips and strategies

Attracting fathers into a parenting intervention is, of course, the first stage. The second is to think about how to engage productively with them, once they attend. Some suggestions, which can impact both on the design of services and on their delivery, and which are based on research and on the reflections of experienced practitioners include:

- Rethink your goals for the child: e.g. for example, the child's independence is promoted in most activities for young children; however, where father-child activities are concerned the primary goal may often be to create or support a bond of interdependence between father and child (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- Think about goals for the father: in contrast to mothers, the main goal for most fathers is usually to develop or strengthen their sense of closeness with their children. Other goals for intervening in fathers' parenting may include creating a general feeling of comfort with, for instance, an early childhood environment (Fagan & Palm, 2004).
- Focus on the father's and family's strengths: in fact, to focus on a father's strengths may, in itself, represent an aspect of successful engagement with fathers (McAlister et al, 2004).
- Support the father's agency, rather than making him an object of concern – e.g. seek the father's perspective on his child's problem(s), reinforce his concern, and underscore the importance of his participation in the programme (Foote et al, 1998); extol his expertise in regard to his children (Hecker, 1991).
- Enable mothers to express and explore reservations or fears about including fathers. These may include anxiety about their children's attachment to themselves, loss of power in the domestic domain, different "standards" for performance, and so on (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992); and, of course, serious and legitimate concerns about safety or their own or children's wellbeing.
- Do not expect fathers to sign up for a long-term commitment at first contact. Involvement in a sustained parenting intervention, particularly a group model, is more likely to follow shorter spells of engagement. Share the schedule up front so they know what to expect (Palm, 2002).
- Look for opportunities to engage informally with individual fathers, and learn their stories and those of their families. That makes it easier to make comments or explore issues that may lead to "turning point moments" for the father, as he reflects on and perhaps reframes his experience (Marsiglio, 2004).
- Provide clear explanations of the value and importance of the specific skills to be addressed in a parent-education programme (Johnson & Palm, 1992). Stress always the benefit to the child of the father's participation (Fagan & Palm, 2004)
- Include information from the research literature (see www.fatherhoodinstitute.org) of fathers' impact on child development since many men (and women) will be unaware of this. Then provide opportunity for personal reflection, participatory exercises and discussion so mothers and fathers can apply this general information to their unique circumstances (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992).⁶³
- Provide opportunities to both fathers and mothers to think about gender socialisation and gender roles; and consider every component of a parenting programme in terms of gender. For example: discussions of "parenting" styles should allow for the fact that some fathers and mothers may initially see an authoritarian approach as more appropriate for men (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992); "time with children" is likely to be more of an issue for fathers than mothers (Fagan & Palm, 2004); expectations placed on fathers by mothers and children (as well as by themselves) to be breadwinners may be substantial (Warin et al, 1999); and so on.
- Be alive to the possibility that any father you meet may have children in other households, or be/have been a stepfather. Loss of some or all of these children may be an important theme (Staines & Walters, 2007)

- Allow considerable space for issues raised by the fathers themselves. A narrative approach may emerge, which – as any skilled professional will recognise - may be facilitated through curiosity about connections; or by underlining the similarities or differences between apparently disparate stories (Staines & Walters, 2007). You may be the first person to provide many fathers with an opportunity to make such connections.
- Since the amount of engagement they have with their children is likely to be an issue for many fathers, use a brief “baseline” check-list of involvement activities (see Fagan & Palm, 2004, p.180) so fathers can clearly see how much, or how little, time they are spending with their children, and can measure change. This can include such items as “play” “read” “listen” “go to playground” “talk about school” “talk about friends” “wash clothes” “shop for clothes” “express love” “care for when sick” and so on. Fathers may wish to create such a check-list themselves.
- In developing parenting strategies, many fathers will need space to talk about their children’s mothers – those they live with, and former partners (Staines & Walters, 2007).
- Include opportunities for fathers (and mothers) to examine and reflect on their relationships with their own fathers/father figures (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992). However, some practitioners have found discussion relating to “own father” to be less salient to men than professionals believe it is (Staines & Walters, 2007). The fact that men obtain their notions of parenting/fathering from a range of sources, including cultural influences, their mothers and their partners, should be explored.
- Include active components in the parenting intervention, e.g.
 - “video self-modelling” i.e. videoing the father’s interaction with his child, and then discussing it (Magill-Evans et al, 2007). In West Lothian, Mellow Parenting has been adapted and run with fathers in an intensive 14-whole-day fathers-only intervention (“Mellow Dads” www.wlcsurestart.org.uk/DADS%20CLUB%20-%20article.pdf) which presented too much commitment for some fathers – so the video self-modelling element has been extracted and used in father-child activity sessions.⁶⁴
- “Nobody’s Perfect” developed in Saskatchewan’s Prevention Institute (Canada) (www.preventioninstitute.sk.ca/home/Program_Areas/Parenting_Education/Nobodys_Perfect_Parenting_Program/) has been drawn to our attention by several practitioners as a programme with active components that appeal to fathers
- In the US, the NPCL “Fatherhood Development Curriculum” www.npclstrongfamilies.com/files/35349283.pdf contains a wide range of very physical and interactive exercises which introduce to fathers a range of topics including discipline methods, child development, sexual health, parenting strategies and so on
- “Hit the Ground Crawling” <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=2&clD=585> utilises a peer-mentoring approach, in which more experienced fathers work with expectant fathers in a one-off session, to help them develop skills and self-confidence in handling babies. This is very powerful both for the expectant fathers and the experienced dads: it produces a shared sense of men as capable and in charge, and of baby care as a male activity.

- Father-child activities (Palm, 2002).

These

- _ can begin with sex-role stereotyped activities (e.g. nature events, setting up camp rocket building)
- _ should avoid early sing-songs (especially with "actions"), holding hands in a circle etc
- _ should contain structured interaction, particularly at the outset
- _ should tap into humour, silliness & playfulness
- _ should allow for experimentation – fathers are likely to resist detailed directions
- _ should include activities that culminate in something built or learned together – e.g. cooking together; a card for mother for Mothers' Day)
- _ should offer variety in activity (e.g. quiet v. active, structured v. open-ended).

Since this is an emerging field, it is important to monitor and evaluate the popularity and effectiveness of different types of engagement, including individual elements of conventional parenting curricula. Consulting with fathers and mothers should be a key element in this.

Notes

63 This information should also be included in parenting courses directed only or mainly at mothers

64 Some fathers from these "taster" sessions will take the full "Mellow Dads" in 2009

9 Directions for future research

While the evidence presented in this paper is sufficient for commissioners and practitioners to make informed choices about programmes and strategies, it is also clear that this is an area ripe for further research. Virtually all the findings reported here would benefit from replicate or extension studies. Systematic evaluations are rare; and randomized clinical trials scarce, especially with fathers in low-income and non-white populations. UK studies of any kind are almost non-existent. Comparison between a fathers-only v. couple group intervention was found in only one study; as was evaluation of intervening with fathers alone v. mothers alone v. fathers and mothers together. Few evaluations have examined the impact of fathers' engagement in parenting interventions children; even fewer, on mothers....

We also believe it to be very important to document and understand the attitudes and beliefs of UK professionals towards engaging fathers; the attitudes and beliefs of mothers towards greater participation by fathers in parenting interventions, particularly where parents do not live together; and the attitudes and beliefs of men themselves (in a range of cultural groups, and of different ages) towards such engagement. This should include careful examination of the men's reactions to being offered "help" or "support"; and it would be good to know if and how this could be made palatable to fathers, particularly high need fathers.

In evaluating the effectiveness of formalised parenting interventions with fathers, evaluators should look, among other things, at:

- How fathers are recruited to attend
- The training of the facilitators in gender issues and father engagement
- The design, content and style and delivery of the programme
- The impact on fathers, mothers and children.

Research and evaluation also need to look at:

- Additional close-up examinations of individual programmes' efforts to engage fathers – what works and why (McAllister, 2004).
- Additional close-up examinations of individual programmes' success in maintaining high levels of attendance by fathers – what works and why (McAllister, 2004).

We need a deeper understanding of gender and parenting. Do strategies such as 'active listening' 'play-led-interactions' the effect of parenting behaviour by gender Close-up examinations of older children's responses (8-16 year olds) to changes in parenting by fathers (learned through parent education) are almost non-existent (Goeke-Morey et al, 2003). This could be a useful line of enquiry, given that adolescents are very sensitive to the quality of their relationships with their fathers.⁶⁵ Useful comparisons could be made with mothers.

It is necessary to develop a fuller understanding of how services that are "mature" in their engagement with fathers (i.e. involve fathers in a wide range of core programmes, as well as in father-specific interventions) affect the quality of fathers' engagement with their children; and impact on the children themselves (McAllister, 2004).

Behavioral parent training (BPT) is one of the most commonly utilized research treatments for young children with externalizing behaviours, and has mainly been conducted and evaluated with mothers. Future research should be conducted with methodologically-sound designs to examine treatment outcome with fathers (Tiano & McNeil, 2005).

Future research needs to build on current understanding of how gender, work, care-giving and poverty intersect to work in the lives of women, by re-examining these issues in light of their impact on the lives of men (McAllister, 2004)

Further research is needed about the influence of non-participating partners (often fathers) on outcomes for parents who take part in parenting programmes (e.g. Webster Stratton); and on non-completers (often fathers – including minority ethnic fathers) (Manby, 2005). When does their participation matter, and when is it less or un-important? How can partners be encouraged to participate – and when is this appropriate or inappropriate? In what ways can effective support be given to these partners, without their participation the programme? In which kinds of families will such support be most valuable.

The appropriate dose and timing of parenting interventions with mothers has been explored in research. These have not generally been examined with fathers. Future research should explore this.

Notes

58. Fluctuations in an adolescent's satisfaction with their relationship with their father are significantly correlated with fluctuations in their psychological wellbeing (Videon, 2005). And changes in father-child involvement over time predict changes in the probability of teenagers' regular smoking, suggesting a direct relationship between these two factors (Menning, 2006).

10 Conclusion

In summary, although research on father involvement in parent support, education and training is limited, the evidence is consistent in suggesting that for many types of fathers - from middle class dads to fathers in high-need families; from young fathers to fathers of special needs children - participation in programmes designed or delivered with them in mind can change their behaviour and beliefs and increase their attitudes, knowledge, skills and understanding; and that children and mothers can benefit. There is also consistency in the evidence to suggest that even when fathers have taken part in programmes that have not been designed to meet their needs, they may play a significant role in the maintenance of treatment gains, at least for young children with conduct problems.

As yet there is no significant data to support the widely held belief that it is important to involve both parents in treatment when children are identified with conduct and other problems. This lack, however, is due mainly to methodological problems in the evaluations; and to the fact that programmes which allege engagement with both parents often engage more substantially, and in additional ways, with mothers.

Even so, some studies, as well as quite powerful anecdotal evidence, suggest that engaging with both parents is important and valuable, particularly where the parents' relationship is less than optimal; and that addressing parenting challenges through the "lens" of the couple relationship (which of course necessitates engagement with both parents) may be especially beneficial. This will require additional training for most professionals (Sanders et al, 1997).

Furthermore, the fact that so many fathers are willing to participate in interventions concerning their child, once the importance of their engagement is underlined and steps are taken to facilitate their participation, suggests that they should be proactively included until conclusive data indicate otherwise (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003).

To make the most of fathers, those who commission, design and deliver parenting interventions must, firstly, get fathers through the door; secondly, work appropriately with them once they are in the room; and thirdly, engage with both mothers and fathers on the parenting alliance, and on the roles contemporary parents play within families - whether parenting takes place within or across households.

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The Fatherhood Institute

The Fatherhood Institute is the UK's fatherhood think tank.

The Institute (charity reg. no. 1075104):

- collates and publishes international research on fathers, fatherhood and different approaches to engaging with fathers
- helps shape national and local policies to ensure a father-inclusive approach to family policy
- injects research evidence on fathers and fatherhood into national debates about parenting and parental roles
- lobbies for changes in law, policy and practice to dismantle barriers to fathers' care of infants and children
- is the UK's leading provider of training, consultancy and publications on father-inclusive practice, for public and third sector agencies and employers

The Institute's vision is for a society that gives all children a strong and positive relationship with their father and any father-figures; supports both mothers and fathers as earners and carers; and prepares boys and girls for a future shared role in caring for children.

Think Fathers

Think Fathers is a campaign with three aims:

- To promote public understanding and debate about fatherhood and how we can all support fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives
- To develop father-inclusive approaches at work – for example, flexible working and leave arrangements for men and women which take account of fathers' roles in bringing up children
- To transform children's, family and health services, including maternity services, pre-schools/nurseries and schools into services which systematically engage with fathers and support father-child and parental relationships.

Please join us!

We need your help to improve children's lives – now. Sign up as a Think Fathers Champion, and work with us to strengthen fathers' relationships with their children via www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/thinkfathers.



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