



# Working with fathers to improve children's well-being: Results of a survey exploring service provision and intervention approach in the UK <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Interventions for fathers are a recent growth area in family services. Although some specific approaches are beginning to be evaluated, there is little known about what kinds of interventions are more generally being used in practice. A web-based survey of practitioners was conducted in the UK, with contact being made via local authority service managers. Two hundred and twenty-one responses were received from 53% of local authorities. Both interventions specifically for fathers and services for both parents were targeted in the survey. Results are reported on organisational location; targeting of services; type of intervention; numbers and percentages of men attending services, recruitment of fathers; evaluation strategies; and ideological and theoretical approaches. Numbers of fathers engaged are relatively low – e.g. the median annual number of fathers attending structured parenting courses was eight and in courses for both parents, 21% of those attending were men. Responses on ideological and theoretical approaches suggest that overt gender politics play only a small part, but that the dominant views of practitioners are in line with mainstream approaches to parenting support. Cognitive and behavioral approaches were the most popular.

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## 1. Introduction and background

There is little doubt that fathers matter for the welfare of children and adults. Many studies show conduct problems in children to be associated with anti-social characteristics, substance misuse and depression in fathers (Phares, Rojas, Thurston, & Hankinson, 2010). More optimistically, father involvement may protect against adverse outcomes later in life. For example, Flouri and Buchanan's (2002a,b) analysis of data from the UK National Child Development Study found that father involvement when a child was aged 7 predicted lower levels of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescence and less involvement with the police for boys. Furthermore, father involvement at age 16 predicted diminished psychological distress at age 33 for women (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002c).

For child and family services to make a dedicated effort to work with fathers is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following criticism that

services have been too geared towards the assumption that mothers will be the main adult clients (e.g. Parton & Parton, 1989; Strega et al., 2008), in the last couple of decades there have been some moves towards greater inclusion of fathers in various different kinds of family services. In recognition that modern families include a range of different relationships beyond the biological link of father to child, here the term 'fathers' is used inclusively, to encompass step fathers, adoptive fathers and all kinds of social fathers in addition to biological parents.

The field of fathers' intervention research is under-developed, but some recent reviews indicate that there is a small emerging body of evidence about intervention effectiveness (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Magill-Evans, Harrison, Rempel, & Slater, 2006; McAllister, Burgess, Kato, & Barker, 2012; Philip & O'Brien, 2012; Smith, Duggan, Bair-Merritt, & Cox, 2012). Very little of this evidence derives from experimental or quasi-experimental studies and few randomised controlled trials are specifically powered for father-related outcomes. A rare example is the study by Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, and Wong (2009); a three-arm trial ( $n = 289$  couples) comparing a couples' group with a fathers group and a one-off information session as a control condition. Participation in either intervention group led to improvements in fathers' engagement with children, the quality of couples' relationships, and children's behavior problems. More long-term and positive effects were found in those who attended the couples' group.

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There is a larger body of evidence about the effectiveness of parenting interventions, many of which are open to fathers and mothers. Generally, attendance at parent training is much lower for men than for women. Lindsay et al.'s (2011) study of parents attending one of five evidence-based parenting programs in England found that only 15% of parents attending programs were male. There is a mixed picture in terms of father-related outcomes. Some studies paint an optimistic picture for father engagement. Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, and Lovejoy's (2008) meta-analysis found that programs involving fathers as well as mothers were more effective than those for mothers only. However, in contrast, there is also evidence that fathers gain less from these interventions than mothers. For example, Nowak and Heinrichs's (2008) meta-analysis of studies of Triple P, one of the programs with the strongest international evidence base, found fathers reporting lower levels of improvement than mothers or children's teachers for parenting, parental well-being and child problems. Wilson et al.'s (2012) systematic review of Triple P evaluations concluded that child outcomes reported by fathers were not significantly different in intervention and control groups.

Social interventions for fathers are contested territory and ideological debates can be fierce between feminist and men's rights perspectives. Fault lines are drawn between, for example, those who emphasise the on-going harm caused by violent fathers after separation from their partners (e.g. Harné, 2011) and those who instead emphasise the importance to children of on-going contact with both parents in almost all family circumstances (e.g. the UK organisation Families Need Fathers). The strongest gender politics positions in the field of work with fathers are the opposite poles of prioritising fathers' rights or focusing on men's abuse of women. Distinctions can also be made between rather weaker gender politics positions, however; for example where practitioners emphasise fathers' own needs or in contrast see the main reason for intervening with fathers as making life easier for mothers.

The fraught gender politics in this field are apparent from the authors' experience of attending practice-related conferences on the theme of work with fathers. Moreover it can be seen from overviews of the field such as that by McAllister et al. (2012) that there is a range of different approaches available for providing help and advice to men on their fathering. However, there is no evidence from research to date about what kinds of approaches are commonly used in practice or what kinds of services (e.g. fathers only or all parents, universal or targeted) and what kinds of organisations (e.g. public sector or voluntary sector) are more likely to use which kind of approach. Insight into what kinds of interventions practitioners are routinely using in their work with fathers is arguably necessary before any strategic discussion can be had about what developments are needed in future to improve practice.

In the light of this specific lack of evidence, the study reported in this paper attempted to establish what kinds of services were being provided in the UK that were consciously attempting to engage with fathers. The survey covered practical information such as how many men are being worked with and strategies for recruitment of fathers, in addition to ideological justifications and intervention theory. The approach was rather similar to that taken by Scourfield and Dobash (1999), who mapped interventions for the perpetrators of domestic abuse in the UK.

## 2. Method

A Web-based survey was set up via [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com) in October 2012. The survey included both fixed-response and open questions about services provided and their theoretical underpinning and evidence base (see Appendix A). An email requesting participation in the survey was sent to heads of children's social care services in the UK ( $n = 162$ ). More precisely, this included all local government administrative areas in England, Scotland and Wales and all of the

integrated health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. These organisations are the main commissioners of family welfare services. They have statutory responsibility for supporting children who are in need and protecting those at risk of significant harm, but commissioning of family support services can also include universal parenting help to prevent the development of family difficulties. The senior managers were asked to pass the email message on to 'a parenting co-ordinator or other relevant person' so that it would reach practitioners in their area. Eligible practitioners were those currently providing any service for fathers designed to improve the well-being of children. The first page of the questionnaire emphasised that this should include services which are used by fathers alongside mothers.

Further to sending the questionnaire to heads of children's social care services, two other email lists were used. Firstly, an email was sent to the mailing list of the Fatherhood Institute (<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>) inviting participation in the survey. This organisation describes itself as 'the UK's fatherhood think tank'. It has been the most prominent organisation in providing training and lobbying on the issue of father involvement in family services and has a mailing list of 7500, an unknown number of which are social welfare practitioners. This list was used because it was very likely to include practitioners with an interest in work with fathers. Secondly, the same message was sent to the email list of people attending a conference, attended by the first author, which presented a wide range of different parenting programmes. The advantage of this list is the breadth of different programmes represented. Most conference attendees were practitioners involved in running the majority of the most popular parenting interventions identified by Klett-Davies, Skaliotis, and Wollny's (2008) survey of English services. The sampling strategy was therefore a combination of probability sampling via children's social care services directors and non-probability sampling via the two e-mail lists. This combined strategy was used because there was some doubt as to how enthusiastically the children's social care services directors would distribute the questionnaires and the additional email lists were therefore used as back-up to increase reach and boost the sample size. The survey was open for just under a month and one reminder was sent to all Directors of Children's Services after three weeks.

It is, unfortunately, not possible to properly estimate response rate because the true populations of practitioners are unknown. Respondents were not asked how they had received the questionnaire, so it is not possible to determine the relative contributions of the three different recruitment routes to the sample achieved. It can however be reported that a total of 221 responses were received from 85 (53%) of the 162 local authorities. The median number of responses per authority was two. To establish whether there was any socio-economic difference between local authorities which responded and those which did not, an independent samples t-test was applied to data on the percentage of people of working age claiming Jobseekers' Allowance (because they are unemployed) in each authority. The test found no evidence of any association between response and claimant rate ( $t = .53$ , 160 d.f.,  $p = .60$ ), with a mean of 3.61% of claimants in authorities which responded to the survey, compared with 3.20% in authorities which did not respond.

The questionnaire covered types of services, numbers and proportions of fathers attending, organisational location, recruitment of fathers and evaluation. It was designed to take around 15 minutes to complete. There were also sections on rationale for working with fathers, referred to in this paper as intervention ideology, and the respondent's theoretical approach to intervention (i.e. their views on what kind of approach is most helpful). Seven options were given for intervention ideology. These were: improving fathers' attachment with children, improving the management of children's behavior, improving the wellbeing of fathers, taking pressure off mothers, preventing men's abuse of women and children and promotion of fathers' rights. This list of different motivations was

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