

Including Fathers in Early Years Services:

Positive Practice for Professionals



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INTRODUCTION

The value of early intervention programmes has been well established now for a number of years. It is particularly true when working with fathers. The peri-natal period provides a “golden opportunity moment” for interventions with fathers.

Although traditionally men are reluctant to engage with services generally, around the time of the birth they are virtually all in contact with services.

A recent Children in Wales survey revealed that 89% of fathers in Wales today are present at the birth of their child, and around 65% attended ante-natal classes.

Positive father involvement contributes to, and provides for, a whole range of better outcomes for children and young people.

These include:

- Higher educational attainment
- Fewer behavioural problems
- Better peer relations
- Less likelihood of engaging in offending behaviour

- Reduced levels of substance abuse
- Higher self-esteem
- Increased occupational mobility

The father-child relationship has wide ranging implications and these are even more marked in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

There are also strong policy drivers for engaging with fathers.

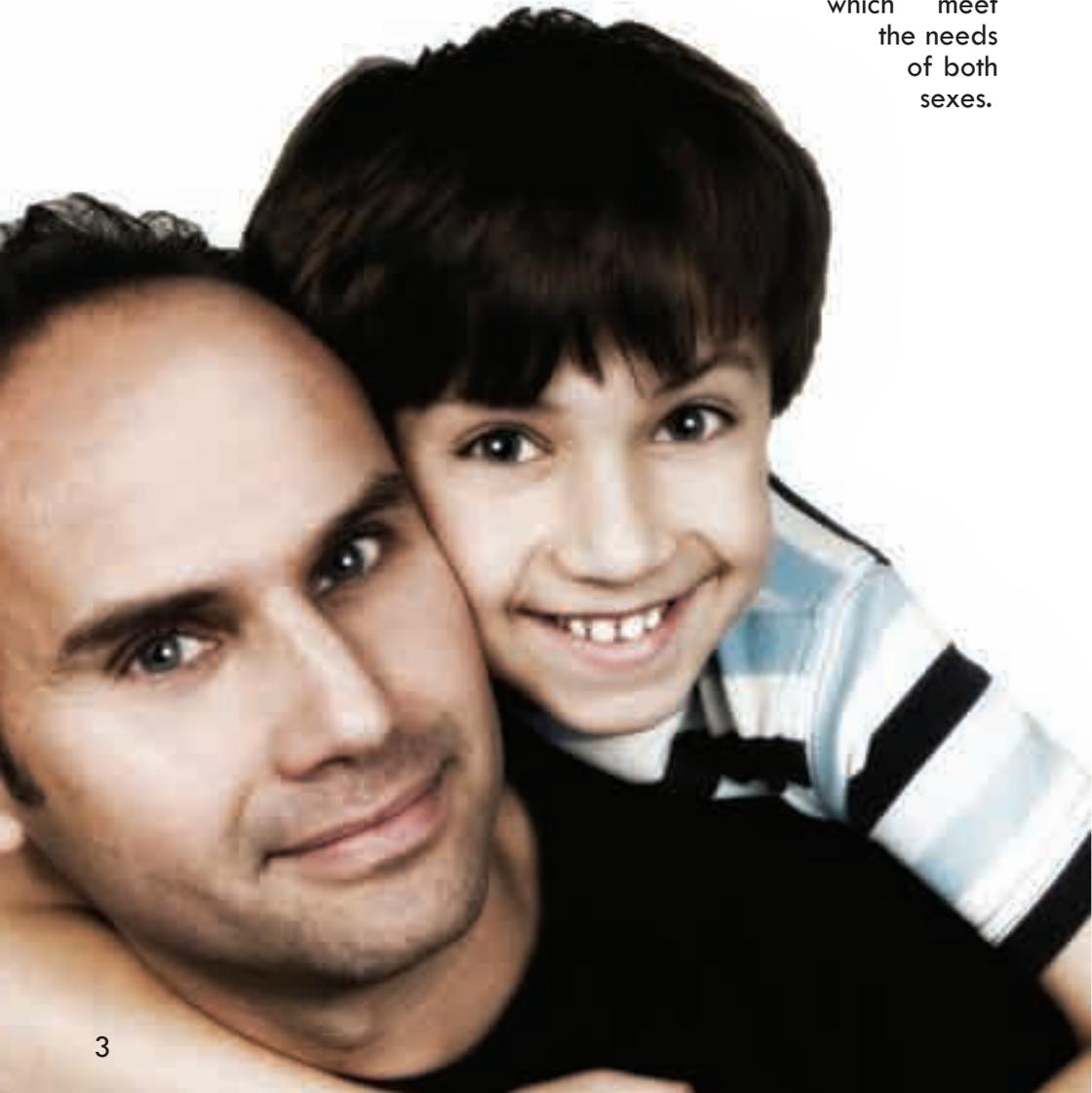
Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

The first of the Assembly Government's seven core aims for children and young people, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a commitment to ensure that all children have a flying start in life. International research demonstrates the potential short and long term economic paybacks

for early years investment.

The Equality Act of 2007 includes a Duty to Gender Equality which applies to all service providers funded by the public sector. It requires them to ensure that their service users are not disadvantaged on the grounds of gender, and that services are offered which meet the needs of both sexes.



FATHER FIGURES

As well as biological fathers, a wide range of individuals may act as a father figure to a child. They can include: stepfathers, grandfathers, elder brothers, uncles, cousins, a mother's new partner etc. The key factor is that they are acting as a positive male role model to a child.

FAMILY LIFE

Families in Wales today come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and

our services need to reflect this fact. They should also take account of cultural differences and linguistic diversity.

As we have seen, fathers matter to children. However their role is also important in respect of their relationship with their partner or ex-partner. Involving fathers in their role as a parent will benefit the whole family. Grandfathers, uncles, cousins and other potential male role models are also important.

CASE STUDY

The Rhondda Cynon Taff Dad Matters project has been running now for over five years. The project is funded as part of the Sure Start programme. It works predominantly on a one-to-one basis with fathers and families where there are child protection concerns with a view to increasing safety so that the children of those families can be removed from the Child Protection Register.

The intervention consists of a flexible but time limited piece of work that aims to identify and address exactly what may be holding fathers back from fulfilling their role as parents. Building on the existing strengths of the individuals and relationships involved, the project adopts a collaborative approach to discussing parenting, and is clear about the benefits to Mum and the children as well as those to the father himself.

The projects success lies in enabling engagement where little engagement has existed previously, and in this way has been able to help hundreds of fathers in the Rhondda Cynon Taff area.

For more information about the project, please contact: Mark.Hendy@rhondda-cynon-taff.gov.uk

Supporting families to reach their full potential becomes much easier when we utilise ALL the resources within that family, rather than simply overburden the mother.

PARENTS

Very often the language we use when talking about services can itself impact on their outcome. Just as the traditional role of primary care giver has been seen as belonging to the mother, so has the word 'parent' become similarly attributed.

The UK Government report, *Aiming High for Children: supporting families* (2007) says:

The very word "parent" in relation to services can have the effect of excluding fathers – both because fathers often perceive the term to mean "mothers", and because this can be reinforced by the approach of practitioners whose habits of working mainly with mothers are deeply ingrained. This impacts on the ability of both parents to fulfill their rights and responsibilities towards their children and, particularly after separation, can lead to fathers drifting out of the lives of their children. This can have wider negative emotional, financial and educational consequences for the child.

CASE STUDY

In 2006 Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council took the step of setting up a Dad's Advisory programme as part of the Community Pathways Programme, with the aim of supporting fathers and other male carers to gain access to education, training and employment opportunities. One of the first groups set up was a Dad's Forum, and out of this was born the idea of producing a book. With help from the University of Wales, the result is the interactive children's book entitled "Merthyr Dads". As well as providing a joint activity for dads and their children, the book also contains a comprehensive directory of services for parents in the Merthyr Tydfil area. During the two years of its existence, the programme has supported over 200 fathers, helping them realise their potential and reach their goals.

For more information contact: peter.davies@merthyr.gov.uk



WHO DO THESE GUIDELINES APPLY TO

The guidelines are intended for all those professionals in contact

with children between the ages 0 – 4 years. These could include: Health, Education (including the new Foundation Phase), Flying Start, Sure Start, voluntary sector projects, local volunteers, etc.

CASE STUDY

The Neath Port Talbot Parenting Forums have developed, in conjunction with the Parent Network, a Fatherhood Forum for service providers within the Neath Port Talbot area. The initiative is designed to promote the important role of fathers, father figures and grandfathers in the family. This is in response to the identified need for information and involvement. The forum formed around a group of father figures and representatives of local organisations, and meets on a regular basis to help decide the kinds of activities for which there has been an identified need. Workshops and courses are offered to both parents and professionals, to heighten awareness of the importance of the male role, which is often different to the mothers, and to increase participation within the family.

The forum's aim is to increase awareness of these differing needs, and provide suggestions on how to increase the involvement of fathers through local services.

For further information, please contact: gareth.jones@barnardos.org.uk

MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

Although all services need to be father inclusive, it is not always practical, or indeed appropriate, for them to bring men together in Fathers Groups.

However, where service providers are able to work together in an area they will be able to signpost fathers to whatever is currently available in that area.

Family Information Services and

the Children and Young People's Framework Partnerships have a key role to play in this regard.

Strategies for engaging fathers should be routinely included in, and set within the context of, Local Authority Parenting Strategies.

CHALLENGING THE BARRIERS

Although an ever-increasing number of projects are now employing a Dads worker in one form or another, this in itself is not sufficient. Father inclusion is something that

all workers should routinely see as part of their practice. It is not an 'optional extra' or a piece of 'added value'!

We can only fully support families when the inclusion of fathers (and grandfathers) is embedded in each and every one of our services. Managers need to make clear to all staff that this means THEM, and that where necessary staff are offered appropriate training to take on this role. As well as the cultural barriers to fathers taking on a greater involvement in family life, there are also those we create ourselves.

To quote from *Aiming High for Children* again,

- *Services that are insensitive to fathers needs; that do not adequately connect with the context of fathers lives or motivations*
- *An overtly female focus amongst staff and service users, and a lack of confidence to explain to female service users why it is important to engage with fathers*
- *Staff underestimating the significance of a father's involvement if he is not visible to the service, or not living with the child*

POSITIVE FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Although many projects strive to persuade fathers to become more involved in the lives of their children, it is important to understand what is meant by involvement. There are a number of academic models of this currently available; the most prominent suggests three areas for this involvement:

- **ACCESSIBILITY** - a father's presence and availability. Both on a physical and emotional level
- **ENGAGEMENT** - direct contact such as care giving, reading, playing, family outings etc
- **RESPONSIBILITY** - fully participating in decisions regarding childcare, health visits, practical issues such as buying clothes etc. and sleeping arrangements. Also included under this heading is knowing where his child/ren are at any given time.

As with all our work with parents, we should be promoting the use of Positive Parenting techniques in raising our children and young people.



YOUNG FATHERS

Young fathers are probably the most invisible group in terms of service provision. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that they themselves tend to believe they are unwelcome and inadequate as parents.

Researchers have found young fathers “mostly ignored, marginalised or made uncomfortable by services, despite their desire for information advice and inclusion”.

Many young fathers report limited or no contact with midwives, health

visitors and social workers.

Identifying these young fathers should not prove difficult where community and health services work together. Over 87% of teenage mothers reported still being involved in a continuing relationship with the young father by the 16th week of pregnancy in one recent study.

However health professionals often report they feel they lack the skills to successfully engage with these young men.

The message would appear to be services need to go the extra mile to engage with these fathers.

PARTICIPATION

The ultimate aim of involving parents in general, and fathers in particular, is to improve the quality of life of children and their families. Services which are developed in this way have the potential to be more relevant, better used and more responsive to changing needs. The Welsh Assembly Government's

guidelines on parent participation include fathers and other male carers amongst the categories requiring additional support to participate. Where services have been successful in engaging with fathers it is generally because they have taken the trouble to find out exactly what it is that those fathers want or need from a particular service.

CASE STUDY

The Carmarthen Dad's group first started running in the summer of 2003, and fourteen fathers attended in that first year. Today, some five years, and one move to Ty Hapus Family Centre later, the group is still going strong.

Many of the fathers have issues such as serious criminal records, alcohol and drug misuse, child protection issues, aggression and domestic violence issues, serious health and basic skills needs. All are unemployed. Funded by ELWA as a Basic Skills project and then by Carmarthen Learning Network, the group has attended three sets of 10 week Healthy Living courses. Three of the dads now sit on the East Carmarthen Community Association and are involved in setting up the new Community centre. Members of the group have also completed the OCN accredited course entitled 'Cooking for Blokes', whilst others have qualified for their Group Leader Award.

As well as these more structured groupwork activities, the centre has also been able to offer one to one support for dads, grand dads and step dads in helping them deal with general family issues and parenting problems through a weekly drop-in session especially for men. The result of all this is that men are now involved in other activities at the centre, and the monthly attendance figures now show that the number of men who come to the Family Centre is often equal to the number of women attending.

For more information please contact Nicola Russell-Brooks, nicolarussell-brooks.parkhallfc08@tiscali.co.uk



SPEAKING & LISTENING

Good communication is vital to all relationships. This applies as much to the father-child relationship as much as it does to that between the father and his partner. This is particularly important in separated families. As professionals we also

have a responsibility in how we speak and listen to service users in our professional relationships.

LEAFLETS & INFORMATION

Traditionally services have engaged with mothers, and leaflets and other means of disseminating information

CASE STUDY

The Bro Morgannwg “Who’s a Daddy” leaflet is unique in that it looks to take information about being a father away from the social care setting and into the workplace. Originally conceived in 2006, the project has been endorsed by three of Wales “sporting greats”, Martyn Williams, Robert Croft and Ryan Day. The leaflet provides basic information on being a father during each of the four main developmental stages. It has gone out, via the paypackets, to all prospective fathers working for major employers in the Bridgend County area. Currently over 25,000 leaflets have been distributed this way. In 2007 the project received a ‘Highly Commended’ in the Sternberg Awards for clinical innovation by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

To obtain copies of the leaflet, or for more information, contact: Rebecca.jones@bromor-tr.wales.nhs.uk

have been designed with them in mind. There is clear evidence that men respond more positively when it is made clear that the information is meant for them. This may be as simple as including images of men with their children in the literature. The choice of language needs to be jargon free, and can make the difference between success and failure. Literacy levels can vary enormously and it is not safe to assume that written information is appropriate in all circumstances.

ASSESSMENT & DATA COLLECTION

All services need to ensure that their systems for recording information about families include dedicated

space for information about fathers. This applies equally to initial contact as well as the ongoing work.

Fathers should be specifically invited to attend meetings, as we have seen earlier it is not enough to assume that inviting ‘parents’ will mean that fathers think this means them. Not only must we ensure that fathers have an opportunity to be present during assessments, but that they are offered every encouragement to fully engage in all and any discussions. Even when fathers are non-resident they are still important to their children. One of the best predictors of a father making regular payments to the CSA is when he is able to maintain regular contact and remain part of his children’s life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

The following is offered as an easy-to-use tool for projects, to establish whether they are meeting the basic requirements for offering a Father Friendly service.

- Does your service meet it's Duty to Gender Equality as laid out in the Equality Act 2007?
- Do you stress to fathers the importance of their role in relation to better outcomes for their child/ren?
- Do you always engage with the "Father Figure" within a given family, as well as the child's biological parent?
- Do you make it explicit to all service users that the word parent does not simply mean mothers?
- Is work with fathers embedded in your Local Parenting Strategy?
- Have all staff had the opportunity to access appropriate training for working with fathers?
- Are you aware of what services for fathers are currently available in your area?
- Are you clear about what is meant by a positively involved father, and is this reflected in the measured outcomes for the family?
- Young fathers are often particularly hard to reach, do you have a specific strategy for achieving your targets within this area?
- Are fathers routinely included in consultations and the design of service provision?
- Do you always explore the options for communicating with separated fathers?
- Do you produce leaflets and posters specifically designed with fathers in mind rather than the traditional generic leaflet?
- Does your assessment and data collection routinely ensure that details of the father are included?

CONCLUSION

Father-child relationships, whether they are positive or not, have an enormous impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship than children from better off families, and suffer more when this is lacking.

Despite the fact that fathers are often invisible to service providers, they play a vital role, with benefits extending across the whole family.

Work with fathers therefore is not simply about added value, but needs to be seen as a core component in providing a flying start for our children and young people.

