Fatherhood is at a turning point. Fifty years ago the common image of paternity was of a distant, disciplinarian father whose value to children lay squarely in the size of his pay packet. Today, 21st Century Dad wants a closer relationship with his children and is willing to re-order his priorities to achieve it.

Why fathers matter

The close involvement of fathers in looking after their children brings crucial benefits:

- **For children** – improves well-being and adjustment, education and behaviour, and reduces risk of involvement in crime
- **For women** – enables women to play a more equal part in the labour market, boosting earnings and career potential
- **For men** – contributes to men’s identity, integration and satisfaction
- **For business** – can boost productivity and improve staff recruitment and retention
- **For society** – makes it easier for men and women to be successful parents and will encourage others to have children – essential for a sustainable society.

5.4m fathers living with dependent children ¹

178,000 lone parent fathers up from around 60,000 in 1970 ½

A study from the mid-1990s estimated that there were around 2m non-resident fathers ³

4.2m male employees with dependent children ⁴ – over a third of all male employees

Fathers less likely to work part-time than men without children (4% compared to 14%) in contrast to women. ⁴
The emergence of 21st Century Dad

More men are taking on a caring role:

- 93% of dads take time off around the birth of their child
- 87% of fathers feel as confident when caring for their baby as their partner
- The average time spent by fathers with young children on childcare activities has increased eight-fold since the 1970s
- In 2005 31% of dads of babies worked flexitime compared to 11% in 2002
- Only 44% of mothers with babies believe women are naturally better than men at childcare.

But 21st Century Dad is being held back – barriers include:

- 7 out of 10 fathers said they would like to be more involved in childcare than they currently were
- The low level of paternity pay means that lower income men can often not afford to take their full two weeks of paternity leave
- Long working hours – a third of working fathers work 48 hours or more per week
- Services often designed on the assumption that mothers are the main care-givers – making it harder for fathers to take on caring roles.

Policy recommendations

- Higher paternity pay and rapid implementation of the new right to additional paternity leave for fathers
- Further improvements to the quality and accessibility of childcare, particularly at a price parents can afford
- Employers ensure that fathers are notified more consistently of their entitlements
- Extend the right to request flexible work to parents of older children and all employees
- Training and advice for managers in how to manage flexible employees with free or subsidised training for small businesses
- A financial incentive for small employers to open up flexible working for a trial period and to help meet initial costs
- Employers take positive measures to tackle the long hours culture, so more fathers are able to spend more time with their children
- Public service providers should use the Gender Equality Duty as a positive tool to help them fit services more flexibly to fathers’ diverse needs
- Government should use the Comprehensive Spending Review and its Public Sector Agreements (PSAs) to strategically target resources and drive forward change
- The Treasury’s cross-cutting review of support for children and young people, part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, should consider ways to encourage fathers’ involvement within the context of the changing nature of modern families.
I. The emergence of ‘21st Century Dad’

Dads are more involved

Dads are becoming more involved in their children’s lives from the very start, with just under half of fathers taking time off during their partners’ pregnancy, usually to attend scans and other hospital appointments. Record numbers of men are attending ante-natal classes and 93% of dads now take some time off around the birth of their child. The majority (56%) of today’s fathers with babies describe their role at home as being ‘hands on’ rather than supportive in relation to childcare. And, as a consequence, patterns of work and caring are changing: in 2005 seven in ten dads made some adjustment to their working pattern in response to their new role as parents and three in ten dads (31%) worked flexitime to help balance work and family commitments, nearly three times the proportion in 2002.

The pace of change is rapid. In just three years – between 2002 and 2005 – the proportion of dads taking more than two weeks leave around the time of their baby’s birth rose from 22% to 36%. Some of these changes are the result of new entitlements being granted to fathers, but there is also evidence of a generational shift. Younger men are more likely to take longer periods of time away from work when they become a dad. Successive generations of fathers are devoting increasing amounts of time to childcare activities.

The nature of fathers’ involvement still varies – from occasional access to full responsibility. With families taking many different forms in today’s society – including same sex, married and cohabiting couples, lone parents, step-parents and non-resident parents – there is no single pattern of parenting. Nor has the uninvolved father disappeared entirely. But the direction of travel is clear. 21st Century Dad is more closely involved in his children’s lives.

Dads want to be more involved

Involved fatherhood is looming large in the personal aspirations of fathers. 58% of fathers of babies do not see being the breadwinner as the most important aspect of being a father. 87% report feeling as confident when caring for their child as their partner. Most fathers of children under one say they do not want to leave childcare to their partner alone, while a majority – 70% – want to be more involved with their child.
Mothers value involved fatherhood

Women’s views on fatherhood have also changed. Given the dramatic rise in women’s employment – in 1971 only 45% of households with dependent children were dual-earner, but by 1999 this figure had risen to 66% – women are increasingly reliant on their partners to share caring responsibilities. Most mothers support fathers’ involvement in childcare. Seven out of ten mothers whose partners took time off around the birth said they would have preferred them to take more. The majority of those whose partners did not take time off say they would have liked them to. While the expansion of formal childcare has gone towards facilitating the increase in women’s employment, most parents still prefer the idea of a parent looking after their children themselves when their child is very young. In fact, informal care by partners or close relatives is the most commonly used form of childcare.

Employers enable involved fatherhood

Employers are making it easier for male employees to be involved in the lives of their children. Eight out of ten employers believe that family-friendly policies improve the recruitment and retention of staff. High profile, successful companies such as BT, MSN and PriceWaterhouse Coopers have taken well-publicised steps towards improving the work-life balance of their workforce. Employers have been supportive of the new right to request flexible working with the majority believing that it had no negative impact on their organisation, 25% believed it had a small positive effect and 11% believed it had a small negative effect. Over the last three years employers of fathers with babies have increased the availability of flexible working options substantially. In 2005:

- 47% of fathers report availability of part-time working, up from 22% in 2002
- 54% of fathers report availability of flexitime, compared to 22% in 2002
- 39% of fathers report home-working opportunities, compared to 20% in 2002.
A changing picture – diversity in fatherhood

At a time of considerable change, differences in attitudes towards fatherhood are becoming more visible. Fathers from groups less likely to be closely involved in looking after their babies are more likely to express a desire for greater involvement than other men. For example:

- 77% of those in manual jobs compared to 65% of managers and senior officials
- 77% of fathers on low incomes compared with 67% on higher incomes
- 80% of fathers from ethnic minority groups, compared with 68% of white fathers, want greater involvement with their babies.

Patterns of leave-taking vary between groups of fathers. While only around 6% of all fathers did not take any time off work in the first eight weeks following the birth of their baby, the proportion was higher among:

- fathers from ethnic minority groups (15%)
- fathers working in manual occupations (10%)
- fathers earning less than £20,000 per annum (9%).

A similar picture emerges in relation to roles in the home, with fathers from these groups being more likely to report being ‘supportive’ rather than ‘hands on’ in relation to childcare.

The main reason for the lower take up of leave and flexible working among lower income groups is the difficulty of bearing the economic costs of being away from work. Yet there is also evidence that differences in behaviour cannot be explained on economic grounds alone. One study found that fathers from lower socio-economic groups were doing more childcare than those from families with higher socio-economic status, despite expressing more traditional views about family roles. Many higher-earning fathers expressed more egalitarian views, but worked such long hours that this precluded them from living up to their expressed values in terms of the time they could spend with their families. Nor can simple assumptions be made about fathers’ involvement. Just because a father does not live with his children, does not mean he is uninvolved with them.

The interaction between fathers’ attitudes, their circumstances and their actions is clearly complex. But we should expect that, as fathers and families are offered more choice, the latent desire for more involvement will increase take-up of leave and flexibility of working among all fathers in the future.
Despite the enormous shifts in attitudes towards fatherhood, in practice some fathers find it difficult to reconcile their aspirations with the reality of their own lives. A recent analysis for the EOC, for example, found that one in five fathers expressed a desire to make changes to their working patterns in order to spend more time with their new baby, but were prevented from doing so for financial reasons or due to workplace obstacles.¹⁵

Financial barriers

Dads on low incomes are particularly disadvantaged – they take less time off around the birth of their child, are more likely than other fathers to take no paternity leave at all and are less likely to reduce their working hours on becoming a father.⁵ The main reason given for lower take-up by fathers is normally financial: fathers say they simply can’t afford to take leave or reduce their working hours when the recompense is low or non-existent. But while the limited financial support is a crucial barrier, there are also other factors at play.

Gender pay gap constrains choice

The gender pay gap continues to encourage families to prioritise the father’s job above the mother’s. Put simply, where the father earns more than the mother, it will always be economically rational for the woman to be the one to take time off work to look after the children. The converse can be seen among couples with similarly paid jobs or where the mother earns more, who are more likely to share childcare and housework than other couples.¹⁶ The gender pay gap is a vicious circle: it discourages more equal roles in the home between men and women which in turn impedes more equal sharing of rewards in the workplace.

Long hours inhibit involved caring

The intensification of work, among both men and women, has also mitigated against men taking a more active role at home. Fathers’ working hours are longer than men’s in general, with around one in eight fathers working 60 hours or more and two in five fathers working 48 hours or more per week.⁷ Nearly half (45%) of fathers report that it is harder for working men to balance their work and family lives today than it was 30 years ago.¹⁷ A recent Europe-wide survey found that intensification of work has risen sharply in the last ten years, with people working faster and for longer.¹² A further survey in the UK found that 70% of those
questioned believed juggling home and work demands was a major source of stress.\textsuperscript{12}
It is this intensification in men’s working hours, coupled with the increased labour market participation of women in recent years, which is creating the ‘time squeeze’ for parents.

**Employer practices**

Traditional views of men’s and women’s roles also affect the culture of the workplace. For example, mothers are far more likely than fathers to be offered flexible working opportunities and the proportion of employers providing part-time working, job sharing or school-term-time working is double for mothers compared with fathers.\textsuperscript{5} Even where flexible working options exist, informal pressure often prevents men from accessing them for fear that job security or prospects will be affected. While men have increased their use of flexitime substantially, only 10\% of men have made a formal request for flexible working hours, compared to 19\% of women – and when they do so, they are more likely to be refused (14\% compared to 10\%).\textsuperscript{18}

**Stereotyped services**

Public services for parents and children are frequently under-used by fathers, and guidance and information aimed at parents tends only to reach mothers, not fathers.\textsuperscript{19} For example, the One Parent Families Support and Information Network in York found that only 2\% of those using its services were fathers, even though 9\% of all registered lone parents in their area were fathers.\textsuperscript{20} Fathers may become more interested and involved in their children’s care where men as well as women are employed in childcare,\textsuperscript{21} where staff are trained on working with fathers and where fathers themselves are involved in service design.\textsuperscript{19} From April 2007, public services will be required to develop their services for fathers as well as mothers, as the Gender Equality Duty comes into effect.
Why fatherhood matters:

The potential gains from the greater involvement of fathers in children’s lives are enormous.

For children...
The contribution that fathers make to supporting children’s development has traditionally been overlooked – all the emphasis was placed on the mother’s role. But in recent years much closer attention has been given to dads:

- Having an involved father has been found to be associated with children having better peer relationships, fewer behavioural difficulties, and lower likelihood of criminality and drug use later in life.²²

- Good parenting at home and fathers’ involvement in schooling has been found to be important for children’s educational attainment, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.²³

- Children gain from the different qualities which mothers and fathers bring. This is particularly the case for boys: the absence of involved male carers is believed to contribute to levels of disaffection among some adolescent boys.²³

For gender equality...
Involved fatherhood is crucial in enabling more women to realise their economic potential if they wish to:

- Although narrowing, the difference between average earnings by men and women in full-time work remains stark. Women earn on average 17% less per hour, and for women in part-time work the gap is even greater, at 38%.²⁴

- This gender pay gap is sharper still for mothers who experience a ‘fertility penalty’. This works out at a loss of around £560,000 in lifetime earnings for a woman choosing to have a first child at 24, and around £165,000 if she waits until 28.²⁵

Unless women are able to share responsibility for looking after children and the home with men, their employment and pay prospects will remain restricted.
For men’s self-fulfilment…

Fatherhood is becoming more central to the identity of the modern man: 7

- Qualitative studies show that fatherhood can create meaning for men
- A survey of 500 men showed that for a majority of those with children, being a successful parent was their most important personal goal
- Men who are active in their children’s lives also tend to be more active in their communities and less affected by work-related stress.

For business…

Enabling fathers to play a fuller role in their children’s lives benefits business:

- If employees are allowed to work flexibly this can help with recruitment and retention, which in turn reduces staff turnover costs
- Many traditional jobs, designed largely for men whose children were looked after by ‘stay-at-home wives’, are increasingly unattractive to both men and women.9 Employers are therefore beginning to redesign jobs in a more flexible way in order to attract a wider pool of candidates
- Flexible working practices can have a positive impact on productivity. Companies report that employees believe that flexible working has improved their performance11 – but there is also research showing that, while all parents experience a ‘positive spill over’ from parenting to work (more energy, better mood, increased creativity etc.) the effects are much more pronounced for fathers.9

For society…

A further benefit of involved fatherhood is its potential impact on people’s attitudes towards having children. For the traditional father, rearing children was essentially women’s business. For women it could mean a life-long employment and pay penalty – or choosing to have children later or not at all.

- If the birth rate continues to remain low this could result in a demographic crisis, with profound implications for Britain’s welfare state and the health of the economy
- For countless individuals, this would mean frustration and regret: a recent report identified a 90,000 annual ‘baby gap’ between the numbers of children that people would ideally like to have and those born.25 The solution partly lies in improved family-friendly working practices and in more involved fatherhood to reduce the career/family trade-off for women and make having babies more attractive.
Public policy on fathers

After decades where fatherhood rarely featured in mainstream policy and political debate, the Government has initiated a step-change in public policy, designed to respond to the emergence of 21st Century Dad. Work-life balance measures have featured strongly in this agenda, as well as new approaches to childcare and public services as a whole:

- In April 2003 the Government introduced paid paternity leave for the first time. Fathers are now entitled to two weeks paid leave. Nearly 80 per cent of fathers who take time off are now taking paid paternity leave, sometimes in combination with other leave entitlements.

- Fathers and mothers have individual rights to take-up to 13 weeks unpaid parental leave during the first five years of their child’s life, or 18 weeks for parents of children with a disability. Take up is still very low – just 8 percent of fathers with babies in 2005.

- Parents also have the right to take time off work to deal with an emergency involving someone who depends on them. There is no statutory right for parents to be paid during such periods of leave, but 80 per cent of fathers with babies taking emergency leave were paid in full, compared to half of employers in 2002.

- In April 2003, parents of children under six, or with dependent children with a disability, were given a new right to request flexible working arrangements. Employers are now under an obligation to consider these requests and can only refuse for significant business reasons. Eight out of ten requests have been granted.

- The European Working Time Directive sets a 48-hour maximum working week, but there is an opt-out for British employees. Most employees who work long hours are legally required to consent to do so by signing an opt-out. However, in practice few workers are aware of this.

- The 2005 Work and Families Bill proposes to extend Maternity Leave to nine months from April 2007 towards a goal of one year’s paid leave by the end of this Parliament and a right for fathers to take up to 26 weeks Additional Paternity Leave (APL), some of which could be paid if the mother returns to work. One in three fathers with babies say they would have been interested in taking APL if it had been available.

- Substantial investment in ‘early years’ provision and childcare since 1997 has led to a free part-time nursery place for all 3 and 4 year olds, the creation of over 500,000 new childcare places, and increased financial support through tax credits. While the childcare gap has begun to close, many parents still report difficulties finding suitable, high-quality, affordable childcare. The Government’s 10 Year Childcare Strategy envisages the creation of Children’s Centres in every community, the extension of flexible free nursery provision for 3 and 4 year olds, more help with the cost of childcare, every parent with access to after-school childcare through Extended Schools and investment in the quality of the childcare workforce.

- There are increasing examples of initiatives aimed at engaging fathers in public services. Promoting the role of fathers has been a major objective of many SureStart Local Programmes, newly developing Children’s Centres and Extended Schools, for example. The new Equality Act (2006) offers a potential vehicle for change as it places a duty on public services to consider, among other things, the gender impact of policy and service delivery from April 2007.
4. Where Next?

We are in the midst of great change in how we organise our working and family lives, with profound implications for the role of fathers as well as mothers. In the future there will be increasing pressures to adapt working practices and the delivery of services to accommodate these changes:

- The family context will increasingly shape fathers’ decisions about work – women’s participation in the labour market is likely to continue to grow. By 2010 one in five UK workers will be mothers with a dependent child.27 More fathers will be sharing childcare responsibilities with a working partner.

- A higher proportion of women than men are now in higher education, which is likely to mean more women moving into higher paid jobs and with it more opportunities for men to take on caring responsibilities.

- Attitudes are also changing – the next generation of senior managers, today’s under-35s, are far more likely than older age groups to believe that the Government’s work-life balance policies have not gone far enough – over half do, compared to one in three of those aged over 45 who believe the Government has gone too far.28

- There is strong latent demand for more family friendly opportunities in particular from groups such as fathers, who so far have had less access to such opportunities. Nearly one in four (23%) dads with babies say their life would be improved if they were able to take a longer period of paid paternity leave.5 There is strong support for increasing the level of Statutory Paternity Pay, with four out of five mothers and fathers believing it to be too low.6/8 Around half of fathers think that the current two weeks’ statutory paternity leave entitlement is too short, with almost nine in ten (88%) of these wanting to see it extended to at least four weeks.6 One third of fathers say they would stay at home with their child while their partner went to work, paid at a rate of £100 per week, if this option were available.5

- The rapid advance of information technology is already facilitating a substantial increase in homeworking and this is likely to continue, particularly for managerial and professional workers. While there are some dangers in seeing this as a way to square work and family responsibilities, it is clear that IT developments are offering some types of employees greater flexibility to organise work more readily around family life.29

Over the last decade – and especially in recent years – there have been rapid changes to fathers’ living and working patterns. The proportion of fathers adjusting their working hours and taking leave in order to spend time with their new baby has risen dramatically. If such trends continue, 21st Century Dad will become commonplace over the next decade, bringing profound changes to the lives of children, women and fathers themselves and transforming the workplace and society at large.
Paternity and parental leave

Without an increase in paternity pay it will be difficult for a substantial minority of fathers, in particular the lower paid, to take enough time off to spend with their babies. The EOC recommends:

- The Government’s plans to introduce Additional Paternity Leave should be implemented as rapidly as possible so that parents can choose which of them takes leave to look after their baby.
- Higher paternity pay – up to £200 per week – be introduced to enable lower-paid dads in particular to take time off.

Childcare

The care of children involves a complicated patchwork of parental care and both informal and formal childcare. A greater supply of high quality, affordable, accessible childcare is vital if real choice is to be offered to parents, while giving children the best start in life. With the average cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two now £142 a week\(^3\) and many parents still unable, despite the good work of the SureStart programme, to access care when and where they need it, the challenge now is to drive up the quality and accessibility of childcare, whilst keeping costs to parents down. The EOC recommends:

- That Government seeks to lower the average percentage of the costs of childcare, currently the highest in Europe, that parents have to meet.

Employers leading the way

Family friendly practices, once the preserve of a select group of large companies and organisations, have become much more widespread. However, access to paid leave and flexible working tends to be less available in small and medium sized enterprises, in male-dominated and unskilled occupations and in non-unionised workplaces.\(^5\) Translating family friendly policies into higher take-up, in particular by fathers, is a
key task. Interestingly, only half of fathers’ employers had notified them about paternity pay entitlements and this figure was much lower for low earning fathers and in smaller workplaces. The EOC recommends:

» That employers ensure more consistently that fathers are notified of their entitlements.

Transformation of Work

The sharp division between full and part-time working is changing and increasingly both employers and parents will be looking at new models of work. The EOC’s General Formal Investigation (GFI) into Flexible Working in 2005 exposed the barriers to flexible working in employment and proposed some solutions. The EOC’s new Transformation of Work GFI aims to find original and creative solutions for increasing flexibility and choice for individuals and employers, so that both men and women have a realistic chance of getting flexible and part-time work options at all levels in employment. The EOC recommends that:

» Government progressively extends the existing right to request flexible working to parents of older children and then all employees

» Government enables training and advice for managers in how to manage flexible employees with free or subsidised training for small businesses

» Government provides a financial incentive for small employers to open up flexible working for a trial period and to help meet initial costs

» Employers take positive measures to tackle the long hours culture, so more fathers are able to spend more time with their children.

Public services

Services need to be more adaptable to the needs of different families. The rise in divorce and separation means that policy and practice need to take account of fathers who either have sole care for their children or are not living with their children but do want to be involved in their daily lives. Once the gender equality duty takes effect from April 2007, public services will be legally required to take account of the diverse needs of mothers and fathers. Public Service Agreements are likely to act as a catalyst for change, encouraging public service deliverers to reach a higher proportion of fathers.
In recognition of the changing lives of men and women, public services such as ante-natal services, children’s centres, schools, the health service and the tax and benefit system need to actively engage fathers. This is traditionally female territory. But services need to recognise that many men come from a different starting point and have different needs, yet have a crucial role in their children’s lives. This means involving fathers in designing services, and challenging outdated professional attitudes and expectations about fathers’ and mothers’ roles. The EOC recommends:

» That public service providers use the Gender Equality Duty as a positive tool to help them fit services more flexibly to father’s diverse needs

» Using the Comprehensive Spending Review and its Public Sector Agreements (PSAs) to strategically target resources and drive forward change.

Advice and information

Many parents still do not know what their rights are and what support is available to them. More effort is needed to ensure parents know what services support and childcare options are available to them.

» The EOC welcomes the Government’s commitment (as recommended by our Pregnancy GFI) to give all prospective fathers and mothers a written statement of their rights and responsibilities at work.

Driving policy change

Given the particular importance of fathers’ involvement to child outcomes, the EOC recommends that:

» The Treasury’s cross-cutting review of support for children and young people, part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, should consider ways to encourage fathers’ involvement within the context of the changing nature of modern families.

The EOC acknowledges the contribution of Lisa Harker, Carey Oppenheim, Natalie Acton and Graeme Cook to this text.
Notes

In this briefing references to babies means babies aged 18 months or less; young children means children aged under five; children means dependent children under 16 or 16 to 18 and in full-time education.

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