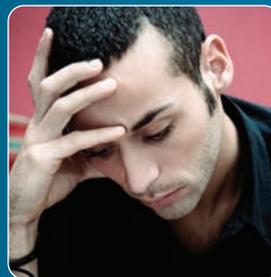
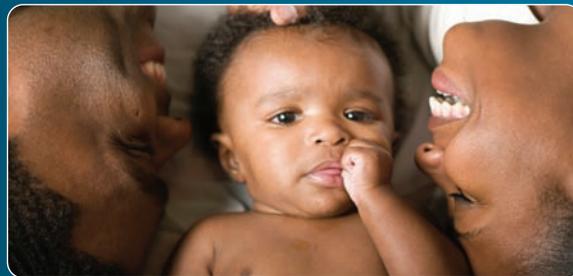


fatherhood  
INSTITUTE

# The difference a Dad makes

December 2007





## The difference a Dad makes

The positive role a father plays in the lives of his children is significantly underestimated. It goes largely unrecognised and unseen. But we know that some fathers can have a negative impact on their children and that is also largely understated.

The fact is that the impact of fathers on their children – for good or bad – is real; it's significant and it's long-lasting, even when interaction is small. A recent poll<sup>1</sup> shows that behavioural problems, a child's self-esteem and how well a child does at school are perceived by the general public to be the top 3 things on which dads can have the greatest impact. And this is also borne out by academic research which shows low interest by a father in his child's education has a stronger negative impact on that child's achievement than contact with the police, poverty, family type, social class, housing tenure and the child's own personality.<sup>2</sup>

For most fathers however, that impact is a positive one. This research summary largely focuses on the benefits that dads can bring to their children's and their partner's lives, as well as to the wider economy.

## Changing family life

We know that family life has been changing dramatically in recent years. In 21st century Britain the era of the breadwinner dad and stay at home mum has long gone. There has been a quiet revolution taking place behind closed doors and public policy still hasn't caught up with this new reality. But now, that private struggle has become a public one; families need greater support and dads need greater recognition from service providers:

- Almost half (49%) of all mums with children under one year old now work<sup>3</sup>
- Between 1975 - 1997 dads' care of infants and young children increased 800%<sup>4</sup>
- Dads now take on a quarter (25%) of the family's childcare-related activities during the working week<sup>5</sup>
- 8 out of 10 working fathers work atypical hours and as a result they lose more than 15 hours per week with their children.<sup>6</sup> That's more than one month (32.5 days) each year.

Public opinion is running ahead of Government policy in support for families and the role of fathers. A recent Fatherhood Institute ICM survey<sup>7</sup> found that:

- 7 out of 10 (68%) mums believe their partner is as good a parent as they are
- two thirds of dads (66%) regret not having more time to spend with their children
- more than 7 out of 10 (73%) mums and dads said they would work flexibly if it were available to them
- 8 out of 10 people (80%) think fathers should feel as able as mothers to ask for flexible working
- 8 out of 10 women (80%) and more than 6 out of 10 men (62%) agree that fathers are as good as mothers at caring for children
- 7 out of 10 (70%) agree, 42% strongly, that society values a child's relationship with its mother more than it values a child's relationship with its father



- Almost 6 out of 10 (59%) agree with the statement that society assumes mothers are good for children, fathers have to prove it
- 7 out of 10 (70%) agree, 50% strongly, that there should be a zero tolerance approach if fathers do not take on their parenting responsibilities
- Almost 7 out of 10 (67%) agree that dads should be encouraged to spend time in school reading with their child
- 7 out of 10 (70%) agree, 50% strongly, that dads should be able to stay overnight with their partner in hospital when their baby is born.

Recent evidence suggests that more than 4 out of 10 fathers (42%) have changed their jobs in order to work fewer hours and make time for their childcare responsibilities, even if this means taking a cut in salary, while one third of dads say their bosses are unsupportive of their childcare needs.<sup>8</sup> Dads are providing more childcare but they want to be able to do more. Latest Labour Force Survey evidence suggests that working hours are rising again, after years of decline. More than 1 in 8 of the British workforce now work 48 hours each week or more.<sup>9</sup>

## Support for families - a stark choice

So we face a stark choice. We can either give both fathers as well as mothers the support and time they need to be active and involved parents, or we can continue to put families under pressure - risking children's welfare and damaging our social and economic wellbeing in both the short and long-term.

In *The Costs and Benefits of Active Fatherhood*, the Fatherhood Institute has gathered a substantial weight of evidence drawn both from the UK and internationally. Published alongside this research summary, it provides the most comprehensive analysis yet of the difference dads can make. And it challenges the all too familiar negative stereotypes of absent or "deadbeat" dads. It's time to promote and celebrate active fatherhood and to challenge policy makers to do the same.



## For the child

Children with highly involved fathers tend to have:

- Better friendships with better-adjusted children
- Fewer behavioural problems
- Lower criminality and substance abuse
- Higher educational achievement
- Greater capacity for empathy
- Less stereotypical attitudes to earning and childcare
- More satisfying adult sexual partnerships
- Higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>

## For the mother

Mothers who have supportive fathers for their children from birth are:

- More in control during labour and tend to experience less distress and a shorter labour<sup>11</sup>
- More closely bonded with their children and more responsive and sensitive to their needs<sup>12</sup>
- More likely to continue to share care for their child in the months and years that follow<sup>13</sup>
- Less likely to experience stress and depression<sup>14</sup>
- More likely to continue breastfeeding for longer.<sup>15</sup>

If they can continue to share care as their child gets older they are more likely to:

- Be able to return to work, so be less likely to drop out of the labour market and work below their potential<sup>16</sup>
- Sustain their income and, over time, their pension entitlement.

## For mums, dads and their babies

### Antenatal period is key

Dads who are involved with their babies from the start are more likely to remain involved for life.<sup>17</sup> Educating fathers as well as mothers on how to achieve a healthy pregnancy is likely to achieve the greatest positive impact on family health.<sup>18</sup>

Maternity services do not systematically engage with fathers. And any services aimed at dads are discretionary. But we know that dads can have a positive impact on the mother's birth experience. For example, when fathers are involved in fathering and breastfeeding antenatal classes, they are better able to support their partners with breastfeeding. One study found that where their partners had been involved in this way, almost 7 out of 10 mothers (69%) were still breastfeeding at 6 months compared to a national average of 1 in 5 (21%).<sup>19</sup> Steps to involve dads more from the ante-natal period onwards are therefore in a family's interests. This is why the Fatherhood Institute is calling for dads to be able to stay overnight with their partners in hospital when their babies are born, something that 70% of people in a recent poll agree with, 50% strongly.<sup>20</sup>



### Dads more involved than ever - a changing picture

And dads are more ready than ever to play an active role in caring for their newborn children:

- 4 out of 5 new dads say they would be happy to stay at home and look after their baby<sup>21</sup>
- Half of dads of children under 3 read to them daily and more than three quarters play with them daily.<sup>22</sup> Almost 7 out of 10 (67%) agree that dads should be encouraged to spend time in school reading with their child<sup>23</sup>
- 94% of dads take time off around the birth of their child<sup>24</sup> but many prefer to take paid holiday because paternity leave is still paid at too low a rate.
- Low income dads have less access to flexible working and paid paternity leave but where they do have access to it, are more likely to use it. They are also more likely to express a desire to want greater involvement with their babies.<sup>25</sup>

### We want to see:

- A shake up of the parental leave system so that fathers can spend more time with their babies and children under 2
- 25,000 more dads per year signing their child's birth certificate
- Dads being able to stay overnight with their partner when their baby is born
- Modern, relevant antenatal education for both parents
- Dads reading with their children in all primary schools
- Family professionals – eg midwives, teachers, health visitors, social workers – confidently dealing with dads as well as mums, supporting all family types.

### What the law says

A statutory duty (the gender duty) on public bodies to promote equality between women and men in their services and policies came into force in April 2007. It should mean that dads get a better deal from hospitals, schools and other service providers.

## For the economy

### Opening up career choices

Research has shown that careers advice channels boys and girls into traditional careers rather than encouraging them to explore non-traditional options. This is damaging to the economy and means that the individual child is not fulfilling his or her full potential.<sup>26</sup> 1 in 4 boys express an interest in childcare yet few of them are given the opportunity to try work experience in that field.<sup>27</sup>



### Promoting equality, transforming work, increasing GDP

Achieving greater equality between the sexes would actually boost the economy. New evidence has confirmed that closing the pay gap would increase GDP by 13%.<sup>28</sup> Fundamental to achieving this is sharing care between women and men, as the unequal impact of caring responsibilities is its biggest cause.<sup>29</sup>

An Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) investigation into the Transformation of Work<sup>30</sup> found that new models of flexible working can bring significant business benefits. Half the population wants to work more flexibly yet a culture of presenteeism exists. Flexible working is still not the norm and fathers of young children can still be reluctant to ask for it (14% of men request flexible working compared to 20% of women<sup>31</sup>). When they do, they are also more likely to have their request turned down. A Trades Union Congress survey found that 14% of men compared to 10% of women have their requests turned down by their employer. In the private sector, 24% of requests from men are refused compared to 17% of requests coming from women.<sup>32</sup>

### Dads unequally protected under the law

But while mums can challenge this using the Sex Discrimination Act, dads often can't. It is harder for them to claim sex discrimination because as women still tend to do the lion's share of caring, sex equality law presumes the caring role is associated with being a woman. So dads don't get equal protection.

Fathers who work flexibly so they can spend more time with their children, tend to still work full-time – so employers don't lose out. In fact, employers with flexible working practices find that they make significant savings because their recruitment and retention costs are lower. EOC research<sup>33</sup> shows that "virtual" organisations with no office space at all can also avoid accommodation costs. Staff are also more motivated and satisfied at work.

In Sweden, where fathers' uptake of paternity and parental leave is relatively high, it has not had a negative impact on fathers' work prospects.



## For the economy - continued

### Tackling child poverty

But work does not necessarily mean escaping poverty. 40% of children living in poverty are living in coupled families where someone is working.<sup>34</sup> Parents do not have identical needs but a New Deal for Parents would address the needs of both mothers and fathers as they move from welfare to work, lifting more families out of poverty and helping the Government to meet its own target, to halve child poverty by 2010.

### We want to see:

- The 25% of boys interested in working in childcare given the chance to try it out in work experience
- The right to request flexible working extended to all. This would achieve the culture change in the workplace that is needed so that everyone, including fathers, can benefit from flexible working
- A New Deal for Parents that really responds to the different needs of mothers and fathers
- Discrimination law modernised to include grounds of caring status – to protect dads and mums equally.

## For vulnerable fathers and their families

### Young fathers

The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe. While it is true that only 2%<sup>35</sup> of lone mums are teenagers, children born to teen mums are among the most vulnerable of all children. Research looking at young fathers in America and Britain found their circumstances and backgrounds strikingly similar to those of teenage mothers.<sup>36</sup>

Young fathers are generally unprepared for fatherhood, are more likely to face family rejection and experience barriers to contact with their child and its mother.<sup>37</sup>

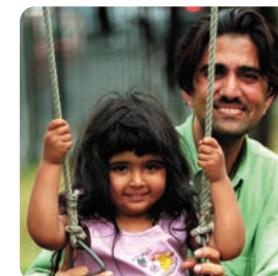
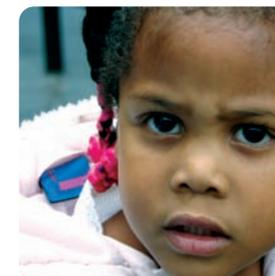
They are also more likely to experience depression and other mental health problems, more prone to aggression and violence but also less likely to seek help. Instead, their most frequently requested service needs are related to work, vocational education and training.<sup>38</sup>

They may be more likely than older fathers to be violent towards their partners and also their children - yet they are no more likely to be targeted by service providers.<sup>39</sup>

Most of the issues affecting young fathers are also identified for young mothers but while service providers make a point of engaging young mothers, they tend to ignore young fathers. Research shows that young fathers report limited or no contact with midwives, health visitors or social workers.<sup>40</sup>

Lack of involvement from young fathers adds to young mothers' stress, can adversely affect the child's wellbeing and enhances the risk of child abuse.<sup>41</sup> Yet service providers all too easily let dads "off the hook". When they fail to be involved with their children this is accepted as the "norm" rather than challenged.

The degree of disadvantage experienced by young fathers is graphically illustrated by the strong correlation between being a young father and a young offender. Among offenders aged 15-17 12% have children of their own (Prisons Inspectorate estimate). More than half have been in care, many may have been exposed to violence or sexual abuse and few have models of good fathering.<sup>42</sup>



### Young offender dads

But young offenders often see fatherhood as an important motivator for change. A study of 18-20 year old male offenders – 30% of whom were fathers, or about to become a father – identified fatherhood as one of the top six factors they believed would help them resettle.<sup>43</sup>

This is particularly an issue for young black men who are significantly over represented in the prison population. There are twice as many black men in prison as in higher education.<sup>44</sup>

The children of imprisoned fathers experience poorer general and emotional health and wellbeing, with immediate behavioural problems including pre-occupation with loss of the father, depression and anxiety.<sup>45</sup> They also experience longer-term poor academic performance, emotional suffering, alcohol and drug abuse and an increased likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system themselves.<sup>46</sup>

## For vulnerable fathers and their families - continued

### Disabled dads

While there is a considerable body of evidence on young and imprisoned fathers, little is known about the experiences and needs of disabled dads. New research<sup>47</sup> highlights that disabled dads are largely invisible to service providers. For example, most of the focus within children's services is on the role and responsibility of (disabled) mothers but not fathers.

The combined impact of the duty on public bodies to promote equality for women and men, the race duty and the disability duty could begin to address some of the needs of vulnerable fathers. But lack of awareness amongst service providers makes this unlikely.

#### We want to see:

- More outreach to fathers, particularly young and BME fathers, through children's centres
- Services holding dads to account: expectations on dads to care for and support their children should be as high as the expectations on mums
- A home contact officer in every prison and every prison providing child-friendly environments for family visits
- Services recognising and responding to the needs of disabled dads.



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## What is 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.

Through a separate partly-owned company, DAD, the Institute provides information directly to fathers and their families, while raising funds to ensure appropriate information is delivered to fathers in the most excluded groups.

Produced in association with  
DHA Communications



Design by Boilerhouse:

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