



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.



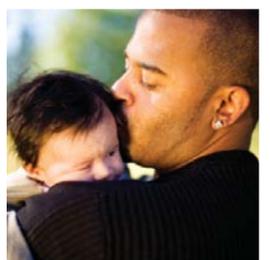
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Commissioning Father-Inclusive Parenting Programmes: A Guide

This FREE 8-page Guide summarises the evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programmes in supporting father-child relationships, and offers guidance on developing strategies and commissioning services which are father-inclusive.



Introduction

In England, Wales and Scotland, government policy and legislation require providers of family services to engage with both fathers and mothers. Commissioners and strategic managers working in children's trusts, local authorities and primary care trusts are responsible for improving children's wellbeing and safety by creating the environment in which effective and appropriate engagement with fathers can occur.

The *Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?* research briefing - available to download from www.fatherhoodinstitute.org for £10 - is designed to help commissioners and managers fulfil this responsibility to strengthen parenting programmes' effectiveness at engaging with and supporting fathers.

It will also be an essential tool for researchers and policymakers concerned with understanding how and why to engage with fathers in parenting programmes. The briefing:

- examines what research tells us about fathers' experiences, circumstances, aspirations and behaviour - and their impact on children
- addresses the importance of gender-differentiated approaches in parenting support
- considers who benefits from the inclusion of fathers in parenting support
- assesses the evidence on the design and content of parenting programmes
- explores what the research tells us about strategies for recruiting and retaining fathers, and
- highlights directions for future research.

In this guide....

In this short guide we reproduce the Executive Summary of *Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?* To buy a download of the full research briefing, visit the Fatherhood Institute website shop via www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.

Our ten-point **Commissioning Checklist** (see page 7) makes clear recommendations informed by research as well as by many years' observation of and support for the commissioning and delivery of parenting programmes by Fatherhood Institute consultants and trainers. The checklist is designed to help commissioners and strategic managers improve children's wellbeing and safety by ensuring they have the capability to buy and develop programmes as part of an overall, father-inclusive strategy.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise stated, we define fathers inclusively to mean both birth fathers and other men who play a significant fatherly role in children's lives.

Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works? 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.

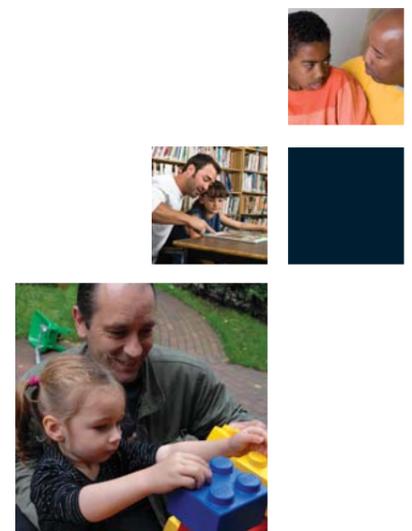
As a result of these differences, fathers tend to feel less confident than mothers as carers, to have had less experience with children, to be less knowledgeable about child development and sources of parenting support, and to be less likely to believe that parenting skills can be usefully taught. Most 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.



Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works? Executive Summary continued

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.

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.

Programme design and content

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).



Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works? Executive Summary continued

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.

[Executive Summary ends](#)

[We thank the Parenting Academy and the Department for Children, Schools and Families for providing funding to develop, write and print this report. The analysis and recommendations in the report are the responsibility of the Fatherhood Institute alone.](#)



Commissioning Checklist

1. All your local strategies and planning processes (e.g. Children and Young People's Plan; Parenting Strategy) should embody an explicit commitment to supporting father-child, mother-child and parental relationships in all your services, and include clear, practical strategies for how that will be achieved.
2. These strategies should include explicit objectives for systematically and appropriately engaging with fathers and supporting father-child and parental relationships across all your services. These strategies and objectives should emphasise the need to engage with and support fathers in a wide range of different circumstances (including those least likely to be using your services).
3. All strategies should be informed by regular consultation with a wide range of local fathers and mothers (including both service users and non-service users, and those least likely to be using your services) about local fathers' needs, experiences and aspirations, and their views of the father inclusiveness of your services.
4. You should have a strategic planning group with specific responsibility for father inclusiveness in your agency. Your agency's strategy should also be informed by active participation in a local multi-agency strategic support network whose purpose is to share information, and develop ideas and partnerships to improve the father inclusiveness of local services.
5. You need a strategy to develop effective leadership, including training and consultancy/mentoring for senior managers to develop the knowledge and skills required to embed these new father-inclusive approaches. Your senior management team will need a solid understanding of why and how to support father-child relationships, including that this can help staff meet Every Child Matters objectives and their responsibilities under the Equalities Act. They will need to cascade this knowledge and understanding across and within individual services.
6. You will need to ensure there are mechanisms in place for the systematic identification of fathers and assessment of their needs, including referral and registration systems; outreach and home visiting, letters and publicity materials, and signposting.
7. You will need to commission parent education programmes with curricula that address 'fathers' issues' such as gender roles, masculinity and caring, fathers' roles in child development, parenting across households, stepfathering, the couple relationship and the parenting alliance, and so on. In the absence of such programmes, you will need to develop and incorporate appropriate sessions/exercises/goals to address these issues.
8. Father-inclusive recruitment, training, staff support and supervisory systems need to be in place, to ensure that your children's workforce is equipped to engage systematically and appropriately with fathers, and support father-child and parental relationships. This will include equipping your children's workforce to understand and manage difficult issues e.g. couple relationship issues, couple conflict and domestic violence; loss (of children by fathers, and of fathers by children); gendered power in relationships, and so on.
9. You will need specific strategies to increase the proportion of male staff delivering parenting services.
10. In relation to monitoring and evaluation, you will need to make decisions about what to measure in terms of process and outcomes and how to achieve this (e.g. Randomised Controlled Trials); run initial audits to obtain baseline data; and use the findings to inform future strategies.