

What Good Are Dads?

This summary of the literature on fathers takes an unashamedly positive look at the contributions that men make to families. It is the first in a series of briefing papers, entitled *FatherFacts*, which will be published regularly by Fathers Direct. This particular paper is jointly published by Fathers Direct, the National Family and Parenting Institute, NEWPIN Fathers Support Centre and Working With Men. It explores the light that academic research throws on today's controversies about fatherhood. Charlie Lewis, Professor of Psychology and Dr Jo Warin, Lecturer in Educational Studies at the University of Lancaster, explore the vast number of papers (more than 700 annually over the past 20 years) on the subject in order to extract consistent trends. Each point is supported by a reference to a more detailed analysis or to the original study which is the source of the observation.

Fathers' contributions to the family

- ⇒ Fathers have always been involved with their children. An overview of the research shows us that at any time over the past 40 years when fathers' activities have been measured, some men have always been reported as highly involved¹.
- ⇒ Fathers, on average, earn two-thirds of family incomes. Fathers in Britain work the longest hours in the European Union (an average of 48 hours a week for those with children under 11). Other parenting activities often have to fit in with that central task².
- ⇒ Fathers are the main carers for children while mothers are working. In 36 per cent of dual earner families it is the father, more than any other individual, who cares for children³.
- ⇒ Most men are neither "superdads" nor "absentee fathers". When men and women are interviewed about men's experiences of fathering they do not fit the "Superdad" stereotype who can change a nappy whilst discussing high finance on a mobile. Nor do they fit the stereotype of the absent father who shirks his responsibilities for his children. There have always been great variations in what dads do in families, which are largely influenced by their own and their partner's employment patterns⁴.
- ⇒ Most men say they enjoy having close relationships with their children. Indeed fathers from a diversity of social and ethnic backgrounds usually say that fathering is the most important part of their lives⁵.
- ⇒ A parent's gender is far less important in affecting child development than broader qualities such as warmth and kindness².
- ⇒ It is beneficial to the young child to be raised by more than one carer as the child is more likely to develop a varied range of interactive skills and the ability to adapt to others. This does not necessarily have to be two people of opposite gender. Studies of children raised in households with two parents of the same gender show that they do not suffer any adverse effects in their development⁶.

Ending the Fathers versus Mothers gender battle

Mary MacLeod, Chief Executive, NFPI

We seem to be in the middle of a steady process of rediscovering and renaming what fathers are all about within families. So this paper, which summarises what we know about the importance of fathers and father figures to children, is very timely.

But it does seem strange to decide to "make the case" for dads. First, surely it should be self-evident that dads are a good thing - it certainly is to children. Secondly it is not that long ago that a father was seen as unquestionably important and powerful in family life - as the breadwinner and head of the family. Many older people will remember father being served food first and only when his food was assured did the children get fed and mother often stood throughout the meal, serving.

The trouble is that whenever you talk about the value of a good mother, you may be felt to be denying the value of a good father, and vice versa. The simple but true answer to this reaction is that both parents are important to children. But to argue this runs the risk of a second reaction. Many families who are going it alone (often feeling betrayed, grieved or disappointed) feel that in "making the case" for what they have not got - a good and present father - you are denying what they have got, a good family. Whereas the truth

is that both mothers and fathers going it alone, like two parents, can succeed triumphantly, even though it is a hard road to journey.

The heart of the problem is that families feel judged and people feel judged in their role as fathers and mothers, as parents. We need to stop the "fathers versus mothers"

You can't be a real man if you don't spend time with your family.

Marlon Brando in "The Godfather"

gender battle - a battle that was probably inevitable as women and girls struggled to overcome centuries of restriction - "cribb'd, cabined and confined". Now we are in a changing family landscape, with different ideas of what it is to father, mother and parent. One aspect has been the invention of the word parenting to deal with the problem that fathering has meant "begetting" a child, whilst mothering still carries strong associations of caring for a child.

In this period when family life is undergoing such fundamental and complex changes, it is important to stand back a bit from the feelings and to look at what good fathering gives to children, for two reasons. Though fathers have long provided rich and diverse love and care to children, their role has been limited in the way it has been described - particularly in popular discourse. And since the field is so contested, it is important that the redefinition of fathers should be gleaned from the evidence, not the stereotypes or the feelings.

Perhaps more importantly, young boys get very troubling and confusing messages about masculinity. This is summed up with masterly irony in the film *The Godfather*, when the godfather (Marlon Brando) questions Sonny (James Caan) about whether he is being a good father, "You can't be a real man if you don't spend time with your family". Boys are expected to be tough and to be "family" men. These conflicting expectations present boys with cruel dilemmas, and they need an escape route into other kinds of truth. The positive message here for boys is that being a good father is natural and manly, though not always easy, that it covers many feelings and activities, not only earning money and "being in charge", and that little else they do can match it for enjoyment, achievement and satisfaction.

What Good Are Dads?

Involvement around the time of birth

- ☰ Fathers provide vital practical support at this time. Many are motivated to "nest build". They redecorate the home and often take on major DIY tasks in order to accommodate the new arrival, even though overtime at work may have increased⁷.
- ☰ Fathers usually fit their contributions in the home to their own work schedules and the needs of the new mother and baby. For example, many get up in the night to feed the baby or become involved at weekends so that their partners can get some rest⁷.
- ☰ Fathers who have participated in baby-care courses take on more care of their babies than fathers who have not. Such fathers keep closer to their babies, engage in more face to face interaction with them, smile at, look at, and talk to them more⁸.
- ☰ Men feel deeply moved by the experience of childbirth. Nine out of ten fathers attend the delivery of their babies these days. Not only is this a miraculous event, it also is remembered by many dads as a time when they feel an intense commitment which becomes lasting. Attending a birth can be a distressing and anxious time, particularly if there are complications or if dads do not understand some events. However, dads usually feel that it brings them closer to their partner and also to the child⁹.
- ☰ Mothers report that fathers are their main source of emotional support after the birth. Mothers state that their ability to cope with a new baby is related to their partner's ability to do likewise. For example, one of the best predictors of a mother's success at breast-feeding has been her perception of her partner's support¹⁰.

When I was younger I lived for a while with a woman who had children and I used to say, it's great I've got an instant family I haven't got to go through nappies and babies and childbirth or anything. Actually, it was complete crap and I realised later when I had children of my own, that this had been part of the problem. It's not so much to do with biology in the strict sense, but the birth and the nappies and that whole thing was an absolutely crucial part of developing a proper and sound relationship.

Kenneth, aged 43, father of three.

When you actually see this physical child being born, it's just an amazing experience, and it changes your life forever. I remember seeing a tuft of his hair, the first thing I ever saw of him and then quickly he followed out. And afterwards, going back on the ward, I remember pushing him along - he was on one of these trolleys with a little fish tank and I remember thinking, Why, surely all these people will be looking in and marvelling at this baby! But they were just carrying on with their work, and I was just another father, pushing his child.

Alan, 34, father of two.

If you exclude yourself from the process, or if you are excluded from the process, I think that's terrible. It's a gap in the child's life which is very difficult to fill later on. I went to everything, all the ultrasound scans. I thought "to hell with it the rest of my life has to be chucked out." I was going to have these nine months, it was going to be my time, as well as hers.

Steven, 44, father of one

Dads' involvement with their babies and pre-school children

- ⇒ Fathers' support and care for older children is often crucial at this time when the mother is getting used to the new baby¹¹.
- ⇒ Some men find that they become the main carer of the baby. This is especially so in cases where the mother is unwell after the birth, for example recovering from a Caesarian section, or experiencing postnatal depression⁷.

My wife had been in hospital for three months before the baby was born, and our two-year old had missed her so much that on her first night home the two of them went to bed together and he was in heaven. That left the baby with me. He cried every time I put him down, so I walked up and down with him all that first night and I always felt in those weeks and months, because my wife and the older lad were making up for lost time, I was really needed. I have always been especially close to this child.

Scott, 46, father of two

- ⇒ The ability to cope with the demands of a new baby depends on the quality of the relationship between mother and father. This is so for both men and women¹².
- ⇒ Men who feel positive about their work are especially able to cope with the demands of a new baby. In contrast men's experiences of work-related stress are magnified by a new addition to the family¹³.

- ⇒ There is no difference between men's and women's patterns of arousal in response to their newborn babies. Researchers have compared such things as increase of heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance when men and women are confronted with a crying or smiling baby¹⁴.
- ⇒ When babies are born prematurely or require special attention, many fathers develop the same skills caring for them as mothers do¹⁵.
- ⇒ Fathers are as sensitive and responsive to their young children as mothers are. For example, when fathers feed their young babies they respond appropriately when the baby wants to pause or needs to splutter after taking too much milk. They also manage to get as much milk into the baby as mothers do¹⁶.
- ⇒ Babies become attached to those who respond sensitively to them and who can provide fun and playful stimulation. Under the right circumstances, fathers hold their babies a great deal and talk to them for a similar amount of time as mothers. Fathers are more inclined to hold their babies when mothers are not present. The factors which most influence involvement are the dad's work hours and work preoccupations, his relationship with his partner and his preparation for involved parenting¹⁷.

When Sue and I were discussing having a child I said, I am happy to have this child but I will be its father and not its mother. I know this is a sexist thing to say, but I was very involved in my career. And then, when Sue killed herself and Peter became more mine, then it felt very different. Now, there's no way I would give him up. I have been determined to be there after school and after nursery. I wouldn't like to change that now. I wouldn't like to disappear and not be the one looking after him.

Bob, 46, father of two (two families)

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- How fathers spend time with their young children is more important to the father-child relationship than how often they are with them. The amount of time that fathers are available to their children has not changed very much during the previous four decades but what has changed is men's use of such time to get actively involved in such things as playing with their young children, bathing, changing nappies and putting them to bed¹⁸.
- Many fathers assume the major parenting role when the need arises. In one large scale survey three quarters of the fathers had undertaken one of the following tasks in the preceding week: putting the child to bed, taking child to nursery, reading to him/her, looking after child without mother¹⁹.
- Dads also become more involved in child-care when a child goes into hospital. They alter their work schedules, often unofficially, to spend more time with the sick child or to care for other children²⁰.
- Fathers and mothers give their babies the same amount of affection. Studies have also found that there is very little difference between mothers and fathers with respect to the amount of affection and responsiveness they show to their young children²¹.
- Babies usually "bond" as easily with their fathers as with their mothers. Many studies have compared the ways in which 1-2 year olds relate to their "attachment" figures and have found that the closeness of father and baby is almost identical to that of mother and baby. This happens even when fathers have only a little contact with their babies each day due to long working hours²².
- Men who have a good understanding of their own needs and feelings during their partner's pregnancy have been shown to form especially close attachments with their infants. By the first anniversary of the birth the attachment is strong in such fathers and babies²³.

When our daughter Matilda was born, I asked to reduce my hours at work so that I could spend time with her. My wife and I took it for granted that, in the 21st Century, I would have the same right as my female colleagues - to work part-time so I could take responsibility for part of the childcare. I especially wanted to be able to share in my child's upbringing so that I would not just be there for half an hour in the morning and at night, then snatching time with her at weekends when there are always so many other things to be done.

I proposed this to my employers who rejected my proposal as I was not the pregnant party. We pursued this further with the assistance of the Equal Opportunities Commission as there were several female employees of a similar grade who worked part-time for exactly the same reasons. After 16 months of legal wrangling and on the verge of an Employment Tribunal, my request was granted.

I have now worked part-time for nearly six months and have enjoyed some of the most fantastic moments of Matilda's life so far. I have seen her first steps, been able to take her on outings to the local nature centre, local swimming pool and enjoy real quality time with her. What I suppose is most surprising is all the fuss. After all I'm only doing what comes naturally to me - being a father.

Rob Jones from Birmingham, who won a landmark legal judgement in 2000, entitling him to work part-time after the birth of his daughter, Matilda.

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Dads' relationships with their young children

- ⇒ In many homes fathers play a central role as playmates for younger children. Fathers tend to interact with their young children in a more physical and active way than mothers²⁴.
- ⇒ Many a father takes on a particular role as the person who organises family trips and activities such as visits to the park. Fathers who are more involved with their young children are likely to play out of doors with them²⁵.
- ⇒ Some studies suggest that fathers help particularly in preparing the child for the outside world and developing "social skills". In one major study, preschoolers who had spent more time playing with their dads were found to be more sociable when they entered nursery school²⁶.

*R*icky and I are closer than anybody. Not in a mushy way. It works well on a child level. I suppose we are on the same wavelength, but also it works – well, we play golf together, things like that, and Arsenal is very important to us. All those sporty levels. It's a bit unfair, perhaps, being able to give him a lot more time and love and proximity than the others ever had.

Alec, 50, father of three (two families)

*Y*our children love you. They want to play with you. How long do you think that will last? ... We have a few short years with our children when they're the ones that want us around. After that, you'll be running after them for a bit of attention. It's so fast, Peter, just a few years and it's over ... and you are missing it.

Wendy speaking to Peter, in "Hook"

*H*ush thee, my babby,
Lie still with thy daddy,
Thy mammy has gone to the mill,
To grind thee some wheat
To make thee some meat,
Oh, my dear babby, lie still.

Anon. Songs for the Nursery, 1805

- ⇒ Studies of fathers' speech with their children have found that fathers use language that is as sensitive to their children's level of understanding as mothers' language. However dads are also likely to use terms that are inappropriate to the child's understanding (such as "aggravating" and "brontosaurus"). Such complex language is thought to stretch children's language development, making the father act as a "bridge" to the outside world²⁷.
- ⇒ Fathers often respond differently to their sons and their daughters. Researchers find that fathers engage in physical play more with sons than daughters, especially when there are other people around²⁸.
- ⇒ Fathers' and mothers' roles may have an influence on their children's gender identity. However, it is also important to remember that a child's ideas about gender are absorbed through the wider culture not just through the everyday relationships within the family. For example, young children have extremely conservative views about adult gender roles and this is so even in families where the parents have reversed traditional gender roles²⁹.

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Fathers and older children

- There are many benefits for children when their fathers make extra efforts to guide and inform them. In these families children are more likely to think of themselves as productive, industrious and caring members of society. Adults with a strong commitment to others often report that their fathers have been particularly influential on them³⁰.
- In families where fathers offer kindness, care and warmth during the primary school years, their children are likely to do well at secondary school. The involvement of the father with the child at the age of 7 and 11 has been shown to predict the number of national examination passes at age 16³¹.
- When dads are particularly keen on computers their kids want to and do learn, even when they are before school age ³².
- When fathers are involved with their children before the age of 11, the children are more likely to escape having a criminal record by the age of 21³¹.
- Fathers and their 13 year old sons often share their interests in such things as computing and football by exchanging magazines⁵.
- Fathers express "intimacy" through shared activities. For example, they may watch TV and engage in shared sporting or leisure activities with their children. These provide an excellent opportunity for general conversation⁵.
- Fathers provide care and protection for their teenagers by undertaking many low key activities, such as ferrying them from place to place. These fathering activities tend to happen in a rather incidental way with men chatting to their children intermittently during the hustle and bustle of family life rather than as a deliberate activity. Such activities can be a good way of keeping in touch with teenagers when they start to seek greater distance from their parents³³.

- Fathers, mothers and children report that fathers' involvement is particularly beneficial for boys. However, researchers have not yet been able to produce clear evidence of the benefits of this relationship²⁷.
- During adolescence the father's role as provider takes on a new significance as children's demands for material goods increase. Fathers of teenagers are especially aware of their children's expectations of them as providers. Fathers who are unemployed or on low incomes may feel a sense of failure when they are unable to "come up with the goods"⁵.
- The provider of "fun". Fathers of teenagers take on a more age-appropriate role as the person who shares humour and can "have a laugh" with their children. This is particularly the case in fathers' relationships with teenage sons. The fathers' contribution to "fun" in the family occurs particularly during family outings and holidays⁵.

help Sam with his homework, talk about what's bothering him, teach him carpentry, fix his bike. He helps me cook, or does the dishes. As my role of important parent develops, it's interesting to observe changes in myself. I'm more genuinely affectionate with the children in myself. I'm more genuinely affectionate with the children when they've been injured. Before, I'd cuddle them, but in a dispassionate frame of mind. And now, when they are happy and excited, I sometimes find I get excited too.

Rick, 35, father of two.

- Many fathers enjoy helping with homework. This is especially so when the school subject in question is traditionally "masculine" like science and maths⁵.
- Fathers often offer careers advice, continuing their activity as a "bridge to the outside world"³⁴.

Non-resident fathers

- Non-resident fathers often have a strong presence in their children's lives. Just because a father does not live with his children it does not mean he is uninvolved with them. The research finds that 7 in 10 non-resident fathers have contact with their children³⁵.
- Many non-resident fathers feel they provide the important function of "being there" for their children. Many do this by helping with homework, attending parents' evenings at school, and taking children to and from school².
- Many non-resident fathers offer an alternative home when the need arises. They usually provide an important base for their children. Many dads relish taking responsibility for their children, which they may not have had until they have sole care of them³⁶.
- The more contact with the father the better adjusted their children tend to be. Most studies have shown that the children who fare best after divorce are those who see their fathers most often. However, a good father-child relationship usually reflects a harmonious relationship between the parents³⁷.

I signed over my share of the business when I left. It was a kind of clean break, if you like, and afterwards I always paid if my ex-wife asked - school fees and so on. But then, when my younger girl went to university, she came to live with me. I found I spent more on her and gave her more money in that first year than I normally did in two. And it wasn't just my gratitude at having her here. It was that, day to day, I could see what she needed and when I saw what she needed, I made sure she had it

Colin, 49, father of four (two families).

Step-fathers

- Step-fathers often become more involved in domestic life than biological fathers. This may be because parents in blended families realise the mistakes that were made first time round or it may be because they are older and have more time³⁸.

Fathers as primary carers and sole carers.

- Some fathers become "primary carers" i.e. they do more child-care than anyone else. Two groups of men have been identified as primary carers in a minority of households throughout the second half of the twentieth century:
 - In 10 per cent of families affected by divorce the father is the parent with whom the children live for most or all of the time³⁹.
 - A small minority of fathers have the care of their children while their partners are at work³.
- These fathers report that being with their children is the most fulfilling part of their lives. However these groups of fathers also find themselves a bit isolated from other parents (who are mostly mums)⁴⁰.

We gratefully acknowledge permission from Vermillion to reprint in *FatherFacts* several quotes from fathers published originally in *Fatherhood Reclaimed* by Adrienne Burgess.

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Notes

- ¹ At any time over the past 40 years when fathers' activities have been measured, some men have been reported as highly involved. For example, in one study conducted 40 years ago half of the fathers in the study were found to be "highly participant". (Newson, J. and Newson, E. (1963) *Infant care in an urban community*. London. Allen and Unwin). A comparison between 1960 and 1980 revealed few changes in paternal involvement and great variability at both times (Lewis, C. (1986) *Becoming a father*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press).
- ² For a review see Burgess, L., Clarke, L. and Cronin, N. (1997) *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain*, London: Family Policy Study Centre.
- ³ Ferri, E. & Smith, K. (1995) *Parenting in the 1990s*. London: Family Policy Study Centre.
- ⁴ Studies as far back as the 1930s show great variations in fathers' involvement in households, even when only resident men are studied (Gardner, L. P. (1943) *A survey of the attitudes and activities of fathers*. Journal of Genetic Psychology, 63, 15-53). An interesting historical analysis of the relationship between work and parenting is presented by Lummis (1982), who provided evidence from detailed oral histories of fathering in East Anglia in the early 1900s. This suggested that our understanding of men's involvement in child-care is influenced by our stereotypes of parenting in the past. (Lummis T. (1982) The historical dimension of fatherhood: a case study 1890-1914. In Mckee L. and O' Brien, M. *The father figure*. London. Tavistock Publications).
- ⁵ See, for example, Warin, J., Solomon, Y., Lewis, C. and Langford, W., (1999) *Fathers, Work and Family Life*, London: Family Policy Study Centre. This compares White British and British Asian families. For a multi-ethnic perspective see Williams, R. (1999) *Going the distance: Fathers, health and health visiting*. Reading University: Professional Education in Community Studies.
- ⁶ A number of recent studies have suggested that children brought up in lesbian households are not different in their developmental outcomes from children raised by heterosexual couples (see, for example, Tasker, F & Golombok, S. (1997) *Growing up in a lesbian family*. New York: Guilford).
- ⁷ Lewis (1986 – see 1 above) includes many examples of men who rebuild the house before or after the baby's arrival even though their overtime at work invariably increases and who do tasks like getting up in the night to feed the baby so that their wives can get some rest. For a recent account of men and pregnancy see Smith, D. & Newburn, M. (2000) *Becoming a father: Men's access to information and support about pregnancy, birth and life with a new baby*. London: National Childbirth Trust and Fathers Direct.
- ⁸ There are cultural variations but programmes for fathers suggest that attendance at special classes does promote paternal involvement. For example, Nickel and Kocher (1987) consider the impact of fathers' involvement in baby-care courses in Germany. Fathers who had participated in baby-care courses undertook more care of their babies than fathers who had not, and they also kept closer to them and engaged in more face-to-face interaction with them. At nine months the babies of these fathers were said to be "happier". (Nickel H and Kocher EMT (1987) 'West Germany and the German Speaking Countries' in Lamb M.E. (Ed) *The Father's Role. Cross Cultural Perspectives*. Lawrence Erlbaum: New Jersey). Similar results have been obtained in the U.S.A. (McBride, B. (1990) The effects of parent education/play group program on father involvement in child rearing. *Family Relations*, 39, 250-256) For example, in a Californian study it was reported that fathers who had been assigned to a course on "Becoming a Parent" showed more involvement with their children than fathers who had not attended such a course. They showed a greater propensity to "juggle" the conflicting demands of work and family. (Cowan C.P. (1988) "Working with Men becoming Fathers: the impact of a couples group intervention" in Bronstein P. and Cowan C.P. *Fatherhood Today: Men's Changing Role in the family*. New York: Plenum) However they also have been criticised for teaching dads the "fun" things to do with babies, leaving mum to get on with the chores/dirty jobs, (see Hawkins, A & Roberts, T-A. (1992) Designing a primary intervention to help dual-earner couples share house work, *Family Relations*, 41, 169-177).
- ⁹ Men's psychological involvement at the birth of their child has been less well studied than the experiences of mothers. The studies by Lewis (1986 – see footnote 1) and Jackson (*Fatherhood*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1984) show that men feel deeply moved by the experience of childbirth and this is a golden opportunity for services to harness the fathers' engagement. Research studies show that there is at least some short-term increase in fathers' involvement with their new-born babies if they have been present at the birth. (White, D.G. and Woollett, E. A. (1991) The father's role in the neo-natal period. In M. Woodhead, R. Carr and P. Light *Becoming A Person*. Open University Reader. Routledge.) It is not the presence of the father that is important so much as the experiences and feelings he has towards the new baby which influence their subsequent relationship.

The support that fathers can offer their partners is different to the type of practical support offered by female friends and relatives. Fathers can provide somebody with whom the new mother can "talk things through". Lewis (C. [1986] *Becoming a Father*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press) reports how many men feel they provide a vital emotional support for their partners at this time as a "sturdy oak". Mothers state that their ability to cope with a new baby is related to their partner's ability to do

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likewise. Burgess and Ruxton suggest that "emphasising fathers' support function - rather than their potential as participants in their own right - leads to the depersonalisation of fathers". The father often gets pushed into becoming the support - right from when he acts as chauffeur for various family members to and from the maternity hospital- and mothers are a reason for this. As one father put it, "I learned by getting my hands burnt a little" that he was the secondary parent when it came to doing child care. (Burgess, A. and Ruxton, S.(1996) *Men and their Children*. Institute for Public Policy Research.)

- ¹⁰ A significant correlation is often found between a mother's sensitivity in feeding her baby or her ability to adapt successfully to a regime of breastfeeding on the one hand and the father's attitude towards the baby and support for his partner on the other (Parke, R.D. (1981) *Fathering*. London: Collins; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) For example, one of the best predictors of a mothers' success at breast feeding has been her perceptions of her partner's support, see Whelan & Lupton. (Whelan, A & Lupton, P (1998) *Promoting successful breast feeding among women with a low income*. Midwifery, 14, 94-100.). However, there are good reasons to suggest that this correlation is not causal - that paternal support is just one of many factors that influence successful breastfeeding (Royal College of Midwives (2000) *Barriers to Breastfeeding*, London: Royal College of Midwives.)
- ¹¹ See for example, the review by White, D.G. and Woollett, E. A. (1991) The father's role in the neo-natal period. In M. Woodhead, R. Carr and P. Light *Becoming A Person*. Open University Reader. Routledge.
- ¹² See for example, P. Berman & F Pedersen (Eds.) (1987) *Men's Transition to Parenthood*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- ¹³ See for example, the chapter by Feldman in the Berman and Pedersen book cited in 12.
- ¹⁴ Two independent teams explored the physiological reactions of men and women to babies' cries in the 1970s. Berman (1980) studied the arousal patterns in men and women when they were confronted with a crying or smiling baby measuring such things as increase of heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance. Men and women showed similar responses. Similar data were obtained in a joint Swedish-USA project by Michael Lamb and Anne Frodi. This work was reviewed in M.E. Lamb (Ed) (1997) *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (3rd Edition) New York: Wiley.
- ¹⁵ When a baby arrives prematurely and requires special care, mothers and fathers adopt similar interaction styles. Levy-Shiff, Sharrir and Mogilner's (1989) research is reviewed in Lamb - see footnote 14.
- ¹⁶ Parke, R.D. (1981) *Fathering*. London: Collins; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ¹⁷ There has been much debate about how dads relate to their newborn children, but much of the discussion relies upon

stereotypes and hearsay. In a detailed home observation, White, Woollett & Lyon (1982: *Fathers' involvement with their infants: The relevance of holding*. In N. Beail & J. McGuire (Eds.) *Fathers: Psychological Perspectives*. London: Junction) found that fathers hold their babies a great deal and talk to them for a similar amount of time as mothers. Parke and O'Leary (1976) discovered that fathers hold their babies more when mothers are not present. See footnote 11 for a review of this work.

- ¹⁸ Every generation of men feels that it has discovered "fathering" as an activity. Lewis (see footnote 1) found similar accounts in fathers were described in 1960 and 1980. However the dramatic increase in maternal employment over the past 30 years has meant that in many households dad takes over from mum when she works (Ferri & Smith - see footnote 3).
- ¹⁹ Studies over the past 30 years have shown that men fitted childcare tasks around their wives' routines (Lewis 1986) and when the need or opportunity arise (Osborn and Morris 1982). Osborn and Morris (1982) examined paternal involvement in over 13,000 five year olds in a British National Cohort study looking at 4 areas of care (1. looking after child without mother; 2. putting the child to bed; 3. collecting/taking child to nursery; 4. reading to him/her). 25% of fathers had not performed any of these tasks during the week preceding the survey. 4% had performed all. (For a review see Lewis C. (1997) *Fathers and Preschoolers*. In M. E. Lamb (Ed) (1997) *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (3rd Edition) New York: Wiley.
- ²⁰ For example, when children were hospitalised (for non-emergency minor procedures (such as having their tonsils removed) fathers alter their work schedules to spend time with their children - often unofficially. Knapfl and Dixon (1984 - cited in Lewis: see footnote 19) found 68 per cent of fathers behaving in this way.
- ²¹ For a review see Schaffer, H. R. (1996) *Social Development*. Oxford. Blackwell.
- ²² Over 100 studies have compared the ways in which 1-2 year olds relate to mothers and fathers as "attachment" figures (Lewis,1982; Bentley & Fox, 1991). These show that the closeness of father and baby is usually very similar to that of mother and baby. This is surprising given that most fathers see little of their babies because they tend to work very long hours and it says a lot about the baby's ability to form attachments. Schaffer (1996: see footnote 21) considers the factors that influence babies' choice of attachment figures and suggests there are two important considerations: 1.The quality of the interaction is important. Individuals who provide fun and playful stimulation are sought after and missed by the young child. Fathers often fit this category. 2.The baby becomes attached to the people who respond sensitively. However, the small amount of longitudinal evidence suggests that it is maternal attachments in infancy which predict the child's later psychological development, not paternal attachments (see Lewis, 1997 (footnote 19) for a discussion).

What Good Are Dads?

²³ See for example, Steele, H, Steele, M & Fonagy P. (1996) Associations among attachment classifications of mothers, fathers and infants. *Child Development*, 67, 541-555.

²⁴ See, for example, the references in footnote 1.

²⁵ Lewis (1997: footnote 19) reviews a number of studies of men interacting with children in public areas. In Warin et al. (1999: footnote 5) wider definitions of "play" can be seen to influence the father's involvement at any age – for example "fun" trips to Blackpool centrally involve dads.

Longitudinal research on families shows that fathers become more involved as their child moves from infancy to pre-school age. Clarke Stewart (1980), for example, shows that fathers' predisposition for playful interaction with their young children has an equalising effect on maternal and paternal contact with children as the need for maternal "caring" tasks diminish and play becomes a more regular feature of parent-child interactions.

²⁶ The study by MacDonald and Parke (1984) has concordant results with that by Youngblade and Belsky (1992). These studies are reviewed in Lewis (1997: footnote 19)

²⁷ Gleason (1975) was one of the first studies to analyse the speech that fathers' direct to their preschool children to see if they modify their language, as mothers do, according to the child's age-related linguistic abilities. She found that fathers do indeed use child-directed speech but they also use terms that are inappropriate to the child's understanding. She suggested that the positive outcome of this behaviour is that fathers, perhaps unwittingly, act as a "bridge" to the outside world. While other studies have supported the "bridge" hypothesis, there is little evidence to suggest that these inappropriate words stretch the child's language (see Lewis, 1997 footnote 19 for a review).

²⁸ Lewis C. and Warin J. (1998: Mothers and Fathers and Early Sex Role Development. In K. Niven & C. Walker (Eds.) *Current Issues in Infancy and Parenthood*. Volume 3. London: Butterworth Heinemann) report a number of studies which show that fathers interact with their young sons and daughters in different ways, engaging in more "rough and tumble" play with their sons. For example, Lamb (1977) found that during infancy fathers engage in more physical play than mothers do and also that this behaviour is magnified with their sons. In turn infant boys are likely to seek out their dad to play with. This research may suggest fathers make themselves more salient in order to assist their son's sex role development. However, large-scale reviews and meta analyses [analyses which pool many studies into one large data set] do not support the assumption that men treat their sons and daughters differently. The few studies which show a difference may reveal simply an expectation about how men should treat their children rather than a clear influence on the child's sex-role development.

²⁹ Lewis and Warin (1998: footnote 28) review this literature. It is important to remember that a child's ideas about gender are

absorbed through the wider culture not just through the culture of their family. For example, longitudinal research, conducted by Williams, Radin and Allegro (1992), on families where the father has been the main care taker early in the child's life, shows only minor attitudinal differences about sex differences in employment.

³⁰ See for example, Hawkins, A & Dollahite, D. (Eds.) (1997) *Generative Fathering*. London: Sage.

³¹ In the Newsons' longitudinal study of 700 families Lewis et al. (Lewis, C., Newson, J., & Newson, E. 1982 Father participation through childhood and its relation to career aspiration and proto-delinquency. In N. Beail & J. McGuire (Eds.) *Fathers: Psychological Perspectives*. London: Junction) found that greater involvement of the father with the child at the age of 7 and 11 predicted both the number of CSE/GCSE passes at age 16 and the likelihood of the child escaping a [non-driving offence] criminal record by the age of 21. However, psychologists no longer assume that such associations are the result of fathers providing a magic ingredient for the child's psychological health. Rather they suggest that a father's involvement can be seen in two parent families to be an indicator of how harmonious relationships are within the family.

³² See study by McBride and Austin in Lewis (1997: footnote 19).

³³ Langford, W., Solomon Y., Lewis C., and Warin J., (2001) *Family Ideals* Understanding, authority, and independence in mothers, fathers and 11- 16 year olds. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.

³⁴ Catan, L., (1999) *Getting Through*. Brighton: Trust for the Study of Adolescence.

³⁵ Clarke (1997) found that 7 in 10 non-resident fathers have contact with their children. In a study undertaken by Relate of 90 divorced fathers three quarters of them see their children. (Simpson et al. 1995). These studies are reviewed in Burgess, Clarke and Cronin (1997: footnote 2). More recently, Bradshaw and his colleagues (Bradshaw, J., Simpson, C., and Skinner C. 1999: *Absent Fathers*: London: Routledge) suggested that 80% of non-resident fathers had seen their children in the last year.

³⁶ See for example, Lewis, C., Papacosta, A., & Warin, J. (in press) *Cohabitation, separation and fatherhood*. London: Family Policy Studies Centre.

³⁷ See for example, Hetherington, E. M. (1989) Coping with family transitions: Winners, losers and survivors. *Child Development*, 60, 1-14.

³⁸ See for example, Hetherington, E. M, Clingempeel, G. et al., (1992) Coping with marital transitions: A systems perspective. *Monograph of the Society of Research in Child Development*, 57.

³⁹ Finer, M. (1974) *Report on the Committee of One Parent Families*. London: HMSO.

⁴⁰ Hipgrave, T (1982) When the mother is gone. In L. McKee & M. O'Brien (Eds) *The father figure*. London: Tavistock.

fatherfacts

Making The Most Of Fathers

This paper provides powerful evidence of the contribution men make to their children's lives. Put simply, involved fathers can improve the health, emotional well-being and educational achievement of young people. A dad's backing can reduce the chances of his child turning to crime. In short, he can perform many functions in raising children as well-adjusted, productive, and caring members of society.

The findings also identify fundamental social changes in the way children are being raised. Parenting is increasingly shared, as fathers aspire to a more active role in their children's lives and as mothers spend more time in paid employment. This "shared parenting" model also reflects reality for many separated couples. The study finds that many non-resident fathers retain a strong, positive presence in their children's lives and that, where this is the case, children benefit greatly.

All of this presents both challenges and opportunities to those wishing to improve children's lives, in particular to fathers themselves. Those who are already struggling to do things "differently" can take heart, even though they must often overcome barriers within themselves, and in the world outside, to forge closer links with their children.

The size of our responsibility is also clear. If we can demonstrate the impact that fathers have on their children, none of us – not government, not policy makers, not practitioners, not mothers, not fathers themselves – can take refuge behind a discredited stereotype suggesting that fathers are of little significance.

There are also opportunities for policy makers and service providers. Many agencies are re-examining their focus on a "one parent" model of caring parenthood in favour of an image more fitting today's

realities. The Government itself has taken a lead in supporting the development of services that include fathers. As Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, stated recently: "A child needs the care and attention of both parents. Fathers want to share in that joy."

The NHS is thinking about fathers afresh. The Royal College of Midwives recently declared: "Having a baby marks not just the creation of individual life, but the birth of a family... Midwives should make fathers feel welcome and involved".

The judicial system could be another locus of fruitful progress. In Australia the concept of "primary" and "secondary" carers after separation and divorce has been done away with and, as in many parts of the USA,

most judges are moving towards a "default" position of shared parenting. Here, the notion is finding favour with increasing numbers of policy makers. And in the workplace, while there is clearly much to be done, some employers are addressing work-life issues for men as well as women. The Government has pledged to introduce statutory paid paternity leave and introduced a six per cent target for the employment of males in early years work.

We also need to consider how we are raising the next generation of fathers. It is crucial to encourage boys and young men to develop the qualities they need to be good fathers. We must create an "early years" environment in which children see the presence of men as routine and ensure that our young women also have a full sense of all that men can offer their children.

This paper should enable us to move on from the question, "What good are dads?" The real issue is: "How can we maximise the opportunities for children to develop close and positive relationships with their fathers, from their earliest years?"

"None of us can take refuge behind a discredited stereotype suggesting that fathers are of little significance"



Fathers Direct is the national information centre for fatherhood. An independent charity, funded by public and private grants, we were founded in 1999 to promote close and positive relationships between men and their children. 020 7920 9491 email: enquiries@fathersdirect.com website: www.fathersdirect.com

The National Family and Parenting Institute is an independent charity set up to enhance the value and quality of family life. We work to support parents in bringing up their children, to promote the well-being of families and make society more family-friendly. 020 7424 3460 email: info@nfpi.org website: www.nfpi.org

NEWPIN is a national organisation established in 1980 to break the cycle of destructive family behaviour. Its Fathers' Centre was established in London in 1997 to help men build stronger relationships with their children and their communities. NEWPIN offers specific services for young and black fathers. Contact Celestine Chakravarty-Agbo 020 7740 8997 email: fathers@nationalnewpin.freeserve.co.uk

Working With Men is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the development of work with men through resources, publications, training, consultancy and advice, backed by a network of trainers and consultants. DIY Dads is one of our projects funded by the Home Office, developing innovative, community-based fathers initiatives in the London Borough of Lewisham. 020 7732 9409 website: www.wwm-uk.freeuk.com.