

## WHY ADDRESS FATHERLESSNESS?

Almost no baby in the UK is born without a father who intends to love and nurture him or her: almost no expectant father today is unaware that he is becoming a father and fewer than 1:20 couples say they are 'not in a relationship' at the time of the birth. Yet by the time their children are aged 16, around half will no longer be living with their dad. And, of these, one third will not be seeing him at all. This means that somewhere between one and two million children in the UK at any one time, are not in meaningful contact with their father.

We are living through major change in family behaviour and gender relationships. Women are more engaged in the workplace throughout their adult life. Men who live with their children are spending more time with them than ever before. Family breakdown is earlier and more frequent.

Research shows that fathers' impact on children, like mothers', is central and lasts a lifetime; and that not having a supportive relationship with one's biological father (resident or non-resident) is a major risk factor for youth drug and alcohol abuse, mental health challenges, educational failure, anti social behaviour and difficult transitions into adult relationships.

But our social structures, and the services that support them, unwittingly (and sometimes knowingly) 'nudge' fathers away from their children. Services continue to operate largely on the outdated assumption that engaging directly with fathers is not important, because fathers are not very significant in children's lives and women provide nearly all the childcare and "set the tone" of family life. The law (in relation to maternity leave for example) does the same, as do workplace and popular cultures. Every time a midwife jokes to a father that he'd do 'better down the pub' than at the birth...or a manager rejects his request for flexible working... or a social work team focuses support on 'mum' and leaves dad to fend for himself... or a TV advert shows mother 'knowing best' and father bumbling along, the 'nudge' is felt and the father's face is turned away from his child.

Highly motivated fathers in successful relationships can negotiate their role in spite of cultural, legal and services' bias in favour of motherhood, but less motivated or confident fathers, and those who become non resident, find these systemic barriers to involvement harder to overcome and may drift into lower levels of involvement. By the same token, the removal of these barriers can have a substantial impact on the strength of fathers' involvement in their children's lives. This means children, and often particularly vulnerable children, are losing out on the protective effects of positive and involved fatherhood. This represents enormous waste, particularly since research suggests that, among fathers who never see their children, fewer than 1 in 6 are men who might have a negative impact on them. The vast majority of these 'disappearing dads' would be a resource – generally a substantial one.

Given the risks for young people who lose contact with their fathers or do not have supportive relationships with them, to look for a reduction of the numbers of young people who will not see their father at age 18 is a reasonable policy aspiration. Further, there are several policy options which fall comfortably within the government's ability to act, and which offer the prospect of this policy goal being a realistic one.

As a first step, government should be explicit about this policy goal, stating publicly, and in unequivocal terms that it wants to reduce the numbers of children who have no meaningful contact with their father over the next five years and developing a fatherhood strategy in partnership with Whitehall departments, local authorities and voluntary organisations.

This short paper offers thoughts in two areas: proposals for public policy and research/intervention topics to address father-child relationships in families where children are at risk.

## **A. PROPOSALS FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

These fall into four categories

### **1 Equalise our expectations of fathers and mothers**

A public policy framework that places equivalent expectations on fathers and mothers to be responsible parents would require, for example, changes in birth registration and welfare benefit law, and in how we address children's anti-social behaviour.

To take a key symbolic policy area, fathers are not required to sign birth certificates, whereas mothers have a legal duty to register the birth of their child. In fact a man generally does more paperwork when he buys a car than when he becomes a father. Meanwhile mothers will be filling out birth registration forms, taking charge of the child vaccination/development 'Red' book, claiming child benefit and negotiating various other bureaucratic processes. We are not arguing that pointless bureaucracy should be invented merely in order to provide a rite-of-passage experience for a man becoming a father. However, we should require men to identify themselves as their child's father on a birth certificate (as is the case in Australia), as a very basic but at the same time clear and powerful indication that the state regards them as equally responsible for the support and welfare of their child.

This and other proposals are summarised in the following table:

	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
1	Roll out the joint birth registration requirements included in the Employment Reform Act 2010	As long as fathers are not required to be named the birth registration process strongly suggests that motherhood is mandatory whilst fatherhood is optional

2	<p>Review benefits. Benefits to families are predicated on the 'primary carer' model, which generally defines the 'secondary carer' as a non-parent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e.g. Child benefit could be split between mother and father who could each receive half. This would also be fairer in terms of the proposed child benefit cap: if one parent earned over the cut-off-level, then the other would still receive their 50% of the benefit. If parents separated, the split could still operate, provided both parents were providing regular and substantial care</li> </ul>	<p>The state currently funds children through mothers only, which leads to an understanding that a father's role is marginal and that the state is happy for fathers to exit through an open door. Even if a father looks after his children 50% of the time, he is likely still to be regarded as a 'non-parent' by the State.</p>
3	<p>Increase the extent to which fathers are held responsible for their children's behaviour</p>	<p>Unless negative behaviour by children and young people is perceived as the responsibility of both parents, whether or not they are living together, mothers are made unfairly and often unbearably responsible. For example, currently 80% of parenting orders are handed down to mothers, even though the fathers are resident in at least half of these cases – and on occasion have even been in the court room at the time.</p>

## **2 Require Services to engage with both parents, whether or not they live together**

Couples may set out to parent equally but, from the moment they register with maternity services, they are confronted with services which usually focus on the mother-child dyad and either ignore or actively exclude the father (and often also any father-figures – who, themselves may be risk/resource in children's lives). By the time children are born the state has invested a great amount of education and preparation for mothers whilst most fathers will have received no support at all.

Midwives and health visitors rarely perceive fathers as clients and, despite some good work and policy development, early years services and schools still operate largely in relation to mothers and are not perceived as being father inclusive.

Whenever a family or children's service engages with one parent rather than both, or sends a father off to join a 'fathers' group' instead of actively seeking to include him, routinely, in all engagement with his family, the father becomes diminished, as does his sense of personal responsibility. And it is his children who lose out. If the

'authorities' don't see him as central to his child's health, wellbeing and learning, what will prompt him to act as if he is?

Services should be engaging with both mothers and fathers as individuals who each have parental roles to play. When faced with difficult behaviour in a child, teachers should talk to both parents rather than assuming that by talking to one they have engaged with both of them. After separation, schools and doctors should communicate with both parents. Parenting interventions of any kind need to be based on the idea that both parents need to go through a learning process. Sending a mother on a parenting course and assuming that she will then be able to change the parenting behaviour of her partner is largely an unsuccessful strategy – especially in families where parents' relationships are not positive.

	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
4	<p>Health services should be tasked with engaging with fathers before the birth of their child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fathers should be specifically invited to key ante natal appointments and addressed directly when they are there. It is as important for maternity services to meet men who may pose a risk to mother or infant, as to support benign fathers in their transition to parenthood alongside mothers.</li> <li>Maternity services should record the father's details as a matter of course – and if a mother is not forthcoming with his details, she should be pressed, for the child's sake, to do so. Reluctance may highlight or even reveal risk - vital information for maternal and child wellbeing.</li> <li>Materials and antenatal education should clearly address the father as well as the mother</li> <li>Where family or maternal difficulties are identified, the father as well as the mother should be assessed</li> </ul>	<p>Current ante-natal services leave fathers uninformed about health and parenthood issues and communicate to fathers that they are unimportant to children and have no important role to play in their family.</p>
5	<p>Early Years, Health, Education, Social Care and other services should be judged on their ability to engage with fathers as well as mothers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inspection frameworks should require reporting on engagement with 'fathers' and 'mothers', not just 'parents' (which generally will equate with 'mothers')</li> </ul>	<p>Fathers are not involved in many of these state funded services, which reinforces the marginalisation of fatherhood</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All policy relating to families should be 'father proofed' to make sure that where 'parental' engagement is required, fathers are explicitly mentioned (the word 'parent' tends to be heard, and used, as a synonym with 'mother')</li> </ul>	
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### 3 Help couples to negotiate their parenting roles in a gender neutral space

Assumptions about gender divisions of breadwinning and childcare have resulted in a maternity and paternity leave system in the UK which strongly disadvantages families who would like to share earning and caring roles, or would prefer the father to stay at home whilst the mother returns to work. Gender bias should be removed from this system.

Universal credit, which is more advantageous to single earner households than to households in which both partners are employed, should be reviewed in order to ensure that it does not propel parents into the roles of *either* breadwinner *or* carer.

6	<p>An expectant father should have a statutory right to paid time off work to attend key ante-natal appointments. This will provide powerful recognition of the importance of his role early on.</p> <p>Reduce differences between mothers' and fathers' entitlement to paid parenting leave: make most of this interchangeable but reserve two months for fathers and two months for mothers on a 'use it or lose it' basis. Ultimately, pay this well.</p> <p>Currently, mothers have six months 'use it or lose it' paid parenting leave; fathers have two weeks.</p> <p>Mothers not entitled to maternity leave and pay are entitled to maternity allowance; there is no equivalent benefit for fathers</p>	<p>Unless and until serious steps are taken to enable and increase men's take-up of parenting leave in the first year, gender inequity in women's life-long earnings/pensions will remain and fathers' participation as carers will be dis-incentivised. .</p> <p>Substantial take up of paternity and parental leave in the first year enables fathers to develop skills and self-confidence and internalise all the responsibilities of parenthood.</p>
7	<p>Reform the tax and benefits system to accommodate shared parenting</p>	<p>The current proposals for Universal Credit are designed to incentivise one person working in each household, which is not going to generate an increase in shared parenting – or shared earning. This will entrench female poverty and reduce shared</p>

		<p>parenting.</p> <p>The way in which child benefit is paid (currently to the 'primary carer' who is then the only one of two parents, whether married, cohabiting or not living together) to be designated a 'parent' by the tax and benefits regime. Splitting child benefit between parents would transform this approach.</p>
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#### 4 Positively support the continued involvement of fathers after separation

The current official stance is too neutral on whether or not separated fathers stay in touch with their children and is resulting in thousands of children missing out on the support – and improved outcomes - they could experience from having regular and significant contact with their positively involved father. Government should be more proactive in helping parents to negotiate successful ongoing involvement for both father and mother.

	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
8	<p>A more robust response to the issue than the proposals contained within the Norgrove report – with legislative change as well as statutory guidance on the importance of meaningful parenting time within the framework of the best interests of the child. Government has indicated that such steps are being seriously considered.</p> <p>Enforcement of/support for contact, where child and mother are not at risk, should be more robust, with, for instance, cases reserved for the same judge, use of judge-led mediation and greater willingness to use sanctions including community service orders, fines and switching residence when contact orders are regularly flouted.</p> <p>In the Children Act (Scotland) children and in some other jurisdictions (e.g. Israel) have a right to pursue their fathers through the courts for non-contact. Children in England and Wales should be afforded the same opportunity.</p> <p>Relocation is normally permitted unless there is a shared residence agreement or order in</p>	<p>There is an established pattern of assumptions and precedent within family law processes, (including for families who do not end up in court) which assume one 'caring' parent and one 'contact' parent. This 'primary carer' model requires the 'secondary parent' to justify why parenting time with the child is in the child's best interests. The onus should rest the other way, with a parent who does not wish to encourage such parenting time demonstrating why this is <i>not</i> in the child's best interests.</p>

	place. This is too limited. Where there is a meaningful relationship between both the parents and the child, relocation should be addressed as seriously as if residence is actually shared. Both parents should be required to explain why they wish/do not wish to move and to consider whether they can.	
9	Legal Aid – should be more widely available to non-resident fathers seeking parenting time with their children	Some fathers drift away from their non-resident children because they cannot afford to pursue contact or residence through the courts
10	Non-resident fathers with overnight care of their children (or for whom this would be possible if suitable accommodation were in place) should be eligible for housing benefit and/or prioritised along with mother-headed families for social housing	Otherwise housing policy is pushing fathers away from their children
11	Non-resident fathers under 35 with overnight care of their children (or for whom this would be possible if suitable accommodation were in place) and who are in receipt of housing benefit should be exempted from having to share houses with other benefit recipients and should be supported in self-contained accommodation.	Otherwise the housing benefit system is pushing fathers away from their children
12	A zero-tolerance view of fatherlessness. When a child comes to the notice of a service professional (teacher, GP, social worker, the criminal justice system) and is found to be having no or very little contact with his or her father: this should give rise to some enquiry, rather than the present shrug of the shoulders	If we do not ask questions about fatherlessness we accept it and are unlikely to be able to address it.

Find out more about us at [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org).

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#### Contact us

Jeremy Davies, Head of Communications Tel 0780 371 1692

Email [j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org).

Adrienne Burgess or Kathy Burgess, Joint Chief Executives

Email [a.burgess@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:a.burgess@fatherhoodinstitute.org); [k.jones@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:k.jones@fatherhoodinstitute.org).

FI admin office number: 0845 634 1328