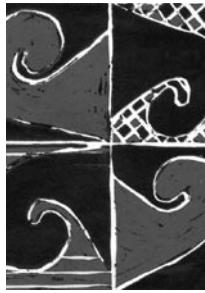


# Fairer to Fathers

## The role of schools in nurturing positive fatherhood – A United Kingdom perspective.

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### ABSTRACT

Fatherhood in this 21st century is changing. There is wider societal recognition that, for the sake of our children, we need to value fathers and the contribution they make to family life. In the United Kingdom, various initiatives are actively supporting 'Dads' in their role.

For fathers of children with disabilities, there are even greater challenges to their fatherhood. This article reviews ways in which fathers of children with disabilities have traditionally been viewed. It asks schools to reflect on ways in which they engage fathers, and makes specific reference to the new UK report (chaired by the author) on *Recognising Fathers* (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2006).

### Position Paper

#### Keywords

*Family centred services, family structure, fathers, men, parent participation, parent school relationship, parental support, parenting.*

### INTRODUCTION

Fatherhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very different to how it was a hundred or even fifty years ago. Then, being a father, with all of the Victorian patriarchal overtones of authority and discipline, was largely undertaken within the context of a married relationship, with both parents living under one roof. In 2003, 41% of all births in the United Kingdom were outside marriage. This is a substantial increase when compared with the 1980 figure of nearly 12% and is mainly due to the increasing number of cohabiting couples (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2005).

This trend is also observed across the European Union, where for only one family in seven is mother, father and two children the reality (Roll, 1991). The UK also has the highest level of teenage pregnancy in Europe; in 2003, there were 26.6 live births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19 years and 149 live births per 1,000 girls aged 14 years and under in the UK (ONS, 2005). It is reasonable to conjecture therefore that a similar number of young men become fathers.

The social structure of fatherhood has changed generally for all men, and very specifically for a few (e.g. teenage fathers) (Cohen, 2001). Today's media frequently publish photographs of fathers carrying their babies, pushing prams, playing with their children. Prominent political figures (e.g. the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and David Cameron, Leader of the Opposition) are depicted as proactive fathers, alongside a whole host of celebrity fathers from footballers to pop stars.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the acceptable father figure was "softer", more liberal and one who acknowledged the need to "get in touch with his feminine side" (Lamb, 2004).

Patterns of fatherhood have varied throughout history. When men were weavers, farmers or craftsmen and worked at home, they were involved with their babies. Industry changed all that, sending them into factories and keeping them apart from their children. Now things are changing again as more men work from home and have regular coincidental contact with their children (Carpenter, 2002).

The traditional definition of fatherhood within the stereotypical definition of family is no longer totally helpful to modern families. Families today are far more "self defined" (Carpenter, 2000) and therefore fatherhood itself needs not only to be redefined, but also to be re-assimilated by society in its modern, dynamic and ever-changing context.

All of the current social roles need to be accepted as "units of masculinity" (Tolston, 1977), alongside those often perceived as inherently masculine, such as "protector", "provider", "strong in a crisis", "emotionally competent" (Herbert & Carpenter, 1994). Expressions of fatherhood in a variety of modern media forms are now readily available to men. A recent issue of *Dad* (the magazine for new fathers) asked the question, "Can fatherhood be cool?" – a question variously answered by Pierce Brosnan, David Beckham and the author, Tony Parsons (2003), who gave an insightful analysis of his own response upon becoming a father:

I didn't understand the love [my dad] felt for me and the pride he took in childish achievements until I had a son of my own. I looked at my tiny baby and there was some kind of chemical reaction – here was the most precious and beautiful thing I had ever seen, here was the best thing that had ever happened to me (p. 25).

In another magazine, *FatherWork*, the social changes imposed on fathers are discussed in the context of political reform. Beverley Hughes, a UK Politician, states that 'services which support parents should be geared to supporting fathers as well as mothers' (Hughes & Fisher, 2006, p. 4). Hughes and Fisher (2006) call upon services to modernise to support other significant carers in the family, notably fathers. Within the context of the service development guidance should be given that encourages service providers to think carefully about ensuring that their services are father-friendly. If fathers are now looking after children for lengthy periods of time, fathers need the same skills and knowledge that we have traditionally expected mothers to have.

Paternity leave is now available in the UK to all men in the time following the birth of a child. The rights of fatherhood are championed by the organisation, Fathers Direct ([www.fathersdirect.com](http://www.fathersdirect.com)). They offer advice, resources and valuable links to dads at all ages and stages of fatherhood. To encourage services, Fathers Direct have developed a Fatherhood Quality Mark, which identifies and celebrates agencies which have positive strategies for strengthening children's relationships with their fathers.

A new resource, *The Dad Pack* ([www.dad.info](http://www.dad.info)), has been produced by Fathers Direct. The pack is a basic toolkit for organisations to use in supporting dads in being, and becoming, more involved with their children. It covers issues such as pregnancy, birth, work, relationships, health, benefits, legal rights and responsibilities, and how to praise children (Fathers Direct, 2006). It may seem that such approaches over-emphasise fatherhood, but this may be necessary to counterbalance stereotypical attitudes to fathers, and a lack of realisation that the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century fatherhood are very different, both in context and delivery – for some men direct nurturing may be necessary. Are fathers born or created? Even now, seemingly innovative courses on working with families ignore completely the role and needs of the father (Moore, 2005).

Effective fatherhood has always been essential to society's well-being and that of its children. It is even more essential in today's transformed and transforming society, and strategies which engage men as dads throughout modern media and technology can ultimately only be to the benefit of our children and the well-being of the men themselves.

### THE NEEDS OF FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Research around the needs of fathers of children with disabilities has been infrequent (Gavidia-Payne & Stoneman, 2004). In families of children with disabilities, mothers and fathers can react differently to the news that their child has a disability or special need (Fidalgo & Pimentel, 2004). Different family members may look to the father for support at a time when he is adapting to a new and sometimes difficult set of circumstances. The needs of the father, among them for him to be nurtured himself, often go unrecognised by professionals (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2005). Fathers have been identified by researchers in this field as "hard to reach" (McConkey, 1994), "the invisible parent" (Ballard, 1994), and the "peripheral parent" (Herbert & Carpenter, 1994).

Sheila West (2000), based on her research, described them as "just a shadow", where, generally, fathers felt that the support systems that were in place were beneficial to their partners, but not to them. Improved support, information and the opportunity to access services, fathers felt would enable them to be much more involved with their child. Carpenter and Herbert (1997) observed that fathers found it difficult to assert their involvement. Neither health and education professionals nor employers recognised the need of the father for inclusion in the family situation. Fathers were forced by professional structures and social expectations to fall back on the 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotyped role of "protector", of "being competent in a crisis", yet emotionally uninvolved.

Emotional reactions by fathers to the birth of their child with a disability vary (Rendall, 1997). Meyer (1995) tells how the birth brings about life-transforming experiences. For some, it is a challenge that allows them to display aspects of their personality not previously acknowledged. For others, it causes stress, disorientates their life goals and affects their work patterns. Many fathers in the New Zealand study, *Perilous Passage*, spoke of their almost immediate worry about their child's long-term future (Bray, Skelton, Ballard & Clarkson, 1995). This study also reported that fathers consumed more alcohol and more frequently as a way of dealing with their emotional trauma. Throughout all of these studies, the provider/breadwinner role of the father is central, a finding confirmed by Contact-a-Family in their recent study (CAF, 2005). Conversely, a recent report from the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) stated that fathers of deaf children actually believe they are overlooked by service providers (NDCS, 2006).

### WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO TO SUPPORT DADS?

Whatever the school setting, there will be a father of a child with special needs/disabilities who has experienced some of the emotions and reactions described earlier in this article. It would be unrealistic to expect every school to have resources available to support dads directly, but they can act as a conduit. Schools, probably through the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), can have some key website contact available ([www.fathersdirect.com](http://www.fathersdirect.com); [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk); [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)).

More fundamentally, all schools can ask: Are we father-friendly? Do dads feel welcome in our schools? Do we engage fathers as supporters of their children's learning? Some fathers will have come through early years programmes where they have been actively involved in the care and education of their child. Indeed, Family Services should "have specific strategies and activities which increase the involvement of fathers in the services" (Department for Education and Science, 2003).

Hughes and Fisher (2006) describe the Daddy Cool programme at a Sure Start Children's Centre in Southampton, which has developed Saturday morning breakfast clubs for male carers and their children. It has a special magazine for fathers, and runs a weekly five-a-side football game for them as well as other activities. The result is a large increase in the number of dads at the centre, learning about childcare, first aid, debt management and a host of other issues vital to the lives of their children. What is the potential transference of such ideas to the concept and practice of other family-focused services in other settings?

There are a range of paper-based resources that schools could have available – the Dad Pack (Fathers Direct, 2006) or the Fathers Factsheet (CAF, 2005). Advice to staff is also downloadable from SCIE, who have produced a summarised literature review. Outcomes from the Recognising Fathers research project are also available via the internet ([www.fpld.org.uk](http://www.fpld.org.uk)). Books written by fathers of disabled children are increasingly available (for example, *Ollie* by Stephen Venables, 2006). The National Deaf Children's Society has recently published a blog written by a father of a deaf child on its website ([www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)).

For some fathers, support groups around disability might be a good way of meeting other fathers who are in a similar situation. In the CAF (2005) study, one dad reported how useful it had been to make friends with another father, 'You need support from people who "get it" – only dads who are in the same situation can really understand' (p. 8). While a school may not run its own support group, it would be possible to network fathers to groups that may exist in the area. Not all groups need to meet physically; some are virtual. Sunfield School in Worcestershire, UK, runs an email group for its fathers – SunDads.

The same school has also developed a model of training, Celebrating Families, which specifically addresses the needs of particular family members and brings them together annually for their own training events (e.g. Mum's the Word, Siblings' Workshops) alongside a general family training programme (Carpenter, Addenbrooke, Attfield & Conway, 2004). Specific Dad Days have focused on such topics as housing, sex education, challenging behaviour and fatherhood. Men process information differently: research on fathers of children with disabilities has indicated that they tend to focus on the "big picture" (Gray, 1992). Their concerns are often for the future – employment, housing, work, money. Training needs to be tailored to these topics and to male brain modes of learning and acquiring information (Baron-Cohen, 2003).

Many fathers have specific skills from their professional lives which mean that within a model of reciprocal partnership that relies on skill-sharing as an approach to problem solving and development (Carpenter, Attfield & Logan, 2006), they can assist many aspects of school policy development.

### THINKING "DAD"?

Do our schools think "Dad"? There has been a worrying trend towards parents evenings being held between 4.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. when many fathers (and mothers too) may not have returned from their own day jobs. If only the mother is able to attend such parent-teacher interviews, then she again becomes the holder of complex, detailed information, which it is assumed she will transmit to the father. Where parents have different foci of interest in their child's education, this could cause conflict. Why are we putting such unnecessary pressure on relationships when some optional, later evening times would have enabled both parents to attend the consultation?

Among parents of pupils with special needs, many fathers would welcome the opportunity to attend their child's review meetings in school, but research reported by Carpenter (2002) discovered that many were given little, or no, notice of the review meeting date, and the school's expectation was often that the mother only would attend. Fathers in this study recommended that schools should always give them the option to attend. To achieve this, they felt several months' notice in advance would help them either to plan time out, take paid or unpaid leave or, as one father who worked in a manual post suggested, arrange to skip a lunch break. Most of all, these fathers wanted their right to attend acknowledged and for the decision to rest with them.

Many schools are locked into operating only within defined hours, Monday to Friday. This may coincide exactly with a father's working hours and give him little or no opportunity to visit the school or participate in school-related activities. Can we not generate more flexibility in how school staff discharge their working hours? One school organised a termly Saturday morning computer club where dads supported their child with special needs; the school benefited directly in that several of the fathers were able to offer particular expertise regarding information technology. Another school organised a summer holiday working party, where fathers volunteered to carry out painting of classrooms. The Head reported that during these three days the fathers not only achieved a lot for the school, but bonded as a group, exploring their attitudes, feelings and thoughts around rearing a child with disabilities.

### CONCLUSION

The Recognising Fathers (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2006) project has echoed some of the key messages found in the earlier research studies cited. From the interviews conducted during this project, it was apparent that many fathers of children with special educational needs are playing an active role in family life – through providing care to their children, supporting their partner and campaigning for resources. They are often balancing this with paid employment. The interviews in this study identified several aspects of good practice (e.g. flexible working patterns), but concluded with a series of major recommendations for policy makers, service providers and professionals.

What is new is that the Recognising Fathers study has articulated these messages in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century fatherhood. The range of initiatives around fatherhood generally (e.g. paternity leave) may at long last mean that the messages will be heard and acted upon. Government policy and service provision need to be challenged, and, finally, fathers can be liberated from the "myth of manhood" that has trapped them within a previously unquestioned set of expectations, both in their role as providers and as family members.

Fatherhood needs to be offered status and equality, and the fathers of disabled children warrant respect and support. For the sake of these children, we need to be "Recognising Fathers".

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