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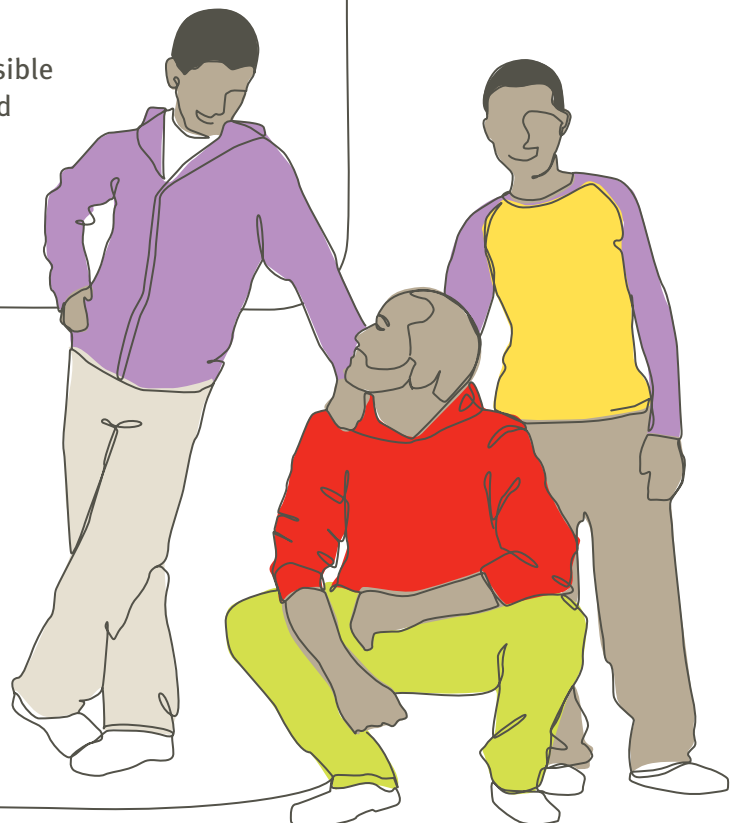


Action for Children briefing

Action for Children's approach to working with fathers and male carers in our early years services

Summary:

- ▶ Fathers are important. Their involvement in the early years of their children's lives will have a profound impact on their children's later development.
- ▶ Action for Children is committed to engaging with fathers and male carers as an integral part of the services we offer.
- ▶ Service providers need to be responsive to the different circumstances of fathers and male carers and able to respond to their diverse needs.
- ▶ The current provision of services that are both accessible and relevant to fathers and male carers is patchy and needs to improve. A systematic response is needed.



Note: References to 'fathers' in this briefing applies to fathers, father figures, male carers including foster carers etc.

Why the involvement of fathers in their children's early years is essential

What happens in the early years of a child's life has a big impact on their future development. Fathers are now choosing to spend more time with their children.¹ Yet they remain largely invisible within service delivery. Parenting is still largely seen as primarily the responsibility of mothers, too often leaving fathers feeling marginalised and ignored.

'Father-child relationships – be they positive, negative or lacking – have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime, particularly for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.'

Every Parent Matters, Department for Children, Schools and Families²

The increasing volume of research on the impact of fatherhood reflects not only the important role men play in their children's lives, but also an increasing recognition that we are doing our children and young people a disservice if we do not fully involve fathers and male carers in our work with families. Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship – and suffer more when this is lacking.³

Research shows that where fathers are involved in their child's early life:

- ▶ there is a positive correlation with later educational achievement
- ▶ there is an association with a good parent-child relationship in adolescence
- ▶ children growing up in separated families are better protected from mental health problems when their fathers are still involved

The more involved fathers are in the early years of their children's lives, the more likely they are to stay involved with that child in the future, even if their family circumstances change. This is particularly important given the increasing number of couples with children who separate. Fathers and male carers need access to services that support them in their caring role and equip them with the skills and confidence to look after their children.

Look beyond the stereotypes

Fathers, like mothers and children, are individuals. For services to engage effectively with fathers and male carers, service providers need to look beyond the stereotypes and strive to understand the diversity of the service users they wish to connect with. Services need to engage with fathers, stepfathers, father figures and male carers. It is vitally important that family support services recognise the array of different circumstances that fathers and male carers may be living in, for example not all men are employed and not all fathers live with their children.

When people debate the importance of fatherhood, often they can make negative assumptions about what this might mean for mothers. It is important to remember that as well as being good for children, engaging with fathers is good for mothers too. In the vast majority of cases this is what mothers want. As a default position, agencies must strive to engage both parents and significant carers from the outset.

Services need to encourage the inclusion of fathers in all activities, unless there are indicators that such involvement could place children or women at risk of harm.

Too often significant male figures (whether they are fathers, male carers, extended family members or new partners) remain invisible within safeguarding processes. Agencies do not seek information which may prove vital in order to identify both protective factors or risk. This is where guidance and leadership is needed.

Why services need to catch up

Despite the increasing policy interest in fatherhood, the provision of services for men as carers is still patchy and lags well behind provision for mothers. Fathers are not well served by generic family support services, or widely catered for as parents in their own right.

The 2007 Treasury review of family support⁴ found that early years services do not yet fully recognise or support the key role of fathers:



Simon's story

Like most fathers, Simon's sole ambition was to provide his child with security and stability. Yet, after a complicated break-up with his son's mother, Simon found himself unemployed, penniless and newly homeless. In addition, Simon's former partner was unable to care for their son.

After staying in a hostel, Simon managed to get a housing trust flat. He says: 'I'd cared for Marshall a lot since he was born, but suddenly being alone and having him full time wasn't easy. The practicalities – like sorting out benefits, money for food, nappies, electricity and gas – consume you, and on top of that your child is crying, or needs changing or feeding or playing with. I had no idea who to turn to.'

Simon then discovered Action for Children's Chester Family Support Service within our Blacon Children's Centre, which is funded by the local authority. As well as providing play facilities, the services offers help

to sort out benefits and budgeting, childcare advice, parenting classes and courses on issues such as child behaviour, speech development and alcohol and drug problems.

Simon began attending a regular father's group, which boosted his confidence as a parent and helped him to start enjoying being a dad. He built up a strong bond with the family support team and took various classes that helped him understand his son's behaviour and improved their relationship. 'The one-to-one contact is vital; having a friendly face you trust enough to ask anything. You really believe that these people are here because they genuinely want to help you, not just because it's their job.'

Simon has been so affected by the support he received that he has become a fully employed family support worker at Blacon Children's Centre.⁵

'The very word "parent" in relation to services can have the effect of excluding fathers – both because fathers often perceive the term to mean "mothers" and because this can be reinforced by the approach of practitioners whose habits of working mainly with mothers are deeply ingrained. This impacts on the ability of both parents to fulfil their rights and responsibilities towards their children and, particularly after separation, can lead to fathers drifting out of the life of their children. This can have wider negative emotional, financial and educational consequences for children.'

Governments across the UK are now taking up the challenge. For example, the Welsh Assembly Government funds a fatherhood development officer who has produced a range a literature reviews, training and guidance for professionals, such as *Including fathers in early years services; positive practice for professionals*. This report states: 'Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship than children from better-off families, and suffer more

when this is lacking.'⁶ The important role that fathers can play in their children's lives is also highlighted in the Early Years Framework recently launched by the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).⁷ In England, Think Fathers is a new campaign designed to encourage family-friendly public services. It brings together representatives of government, employers and all those working with parents and children, to celebrate the important role of fathers in family life and try to overcome some of the challenges they face. Action for Children is one of the campaign champions.

There are also strong international policy drivers for change. Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: 'Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.'



Action for Children Carmarthenshire Family and Community Team

Camarthenshire Family and Community Team is a partnership between Action for Children and Carmarthenshire County Council. Within the team Action for Children provides a range of family support services including parenting support, a family group conference team and two mobile family centres (provided through two play buses).

As part of our parenting support service we run parenting programmes, delivered both in group settings and on a one-to-one basis. Our dad's worker, Paul, acts as a role model and encourages take up of all our services by fathers and male carers. He also runs groups specifically for fathers. For some men the very idea of attending a family support service is alienating, so a father's only group is an invaluable route into mainstream services. Men find the groups an important source of peer support, with some men reporting that it is much easier to talk within a male-only group.

The group of men we work with is very diverse. We engage with fathers who are single parents, in couples, non-resident parents, stepfathers, grandfathers, etc. Some men self-refer for parenting support, and others are referred to us by external agencies including social services and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

In the dads' groups Paul keeps the focus on the child, delivering the programmes in a way that is attractive to men. The aim is to help fathers look at empathy and explain the importance of developing a relationship with their child – both for themselves and their child. This can be a shock for some fathers who previously did not realise how important they are for their children. One father of a 12-year-old girl said: 'I didn't even know the colour of my daughter's eyes until I came to this group. Now my relationship with her has been transformed.'

We run a range of activities that complement the parenting sessions, including first aid, food hygiene training, work with Gateway Gardens Trust, a photography project, outings and holiday activities.

We also involve fathers and male carers in our family group conference (FGC) work. FGCs provide a decision-making forum for children and young people where the child's immediate and extended family are in charge of decision making. In our service we use FGCs to help children and young people who may be at risk of being accommodated or excluded from school because of offending behaviour. The aim is to draw upon strengths within the family network, and the young people themselves decide who they want to invite. As well as fathers, other important male figures will be invited, including grandfathers, uncles and stepfathers.



This policy challenge now needs to be reflected in practice. A culture change is required in the way that early years services operate to ensure that services reach out and support fathers as well as mothers. This also requires funding. For example, in Northern Ireland there are few resources to fund work with men in early years settings. Most initiatives are linked to Sure Start centres and tend to be staffed by male practitioners in part time/temporary positions or male staff taking on engagement work with fathers as part of other duties.



Existing barriers to fathers' involvement in early years services include:

- ▶ services that are not sensitive to fathers' needs and/or do not adequately connect with the context of fathers' lives or motivations
- ▶ an overtly female focus and culture among staff and service users and a lack of confidence to explain to female service users why it is important to engage with fathers⁸
- ▶ underestimating the significance of a father's involvement if he is not visible to the service or not living with the child⁹

Action for Children's early years services

Action for Children has a long history of working with the most vulnerable families in society. We are the largest provider of family support services in the UK, helping children and families with the most difficult problems. Our family support services act as a focus in communities, particularly for excluded groups such as fathers.

We believe that early years services should:

- ▶ involve fathers in service design. It is particularly important to consult fathers over issues such as timings and the range of services on offer
- ▶ be systematic about engagement. Services targeting fathers can be important, particularly as a pathway into mainstream services, but all services should be father-inclusive
- ▶ address any suspicions about the implications of taking up services, especially fears of being labelled a poor parent. Fathers' experiences of discrimination may create or heighten these suspicions and these feelings are likely to be exacerbated if they are not living with the child's mother and/or if they are from a minority ethnic community
- ▶ promote positive role models of fatherhood, including in generic materials
- ▶ promote positive perceptions of men as fathers and carers. Several studies have revealed very negative and general perceptions of men, which could exclude them from services.¹⁰ These perceptions need to be countered if services are to be accessible to fathers

Parents on the Ball: Action for Children Alness and Dingwall

Action for Children Alness and Dingwall provides community-based family support services for families with very young children in the Highlands of Scotland. The service targets areas of greatest need and its work includes innovative outreach provision to families not likely or able to seek services. It aims to support mothers, fathers and carers to give their children the best start in life and to empower parents by building confidence, self-esteem and parenting skills.

The Parents on the Ball initiative, developed with the most vulnerable and excluded families in mind, is a course run in partnership by Action for Children and Ross County Football Club. It is open to mothers and fathers and has been particularly successful in engaging fathers and creating a supportive environment. It targets parents of children aged 3–8 and incorporates the Webster Stratton Incredible Years parenting course, combined with an adapted version of the Sports Leader award. As a result, it promotes a healthy lifestyle alongside improved parenting.

The course aims to strengthen parenting skills, reduce children's negative behaviour, prevent children's problem behaviours, promote positive child–adult relationships, reduce isolation and promote the uptake of universal provision for families with young children in their local communities. It also promotes the physical and emotional wellbeing of families.

In an evaluation of the Parents on the Ball course, course leaders said: 'The perception of some of the dads has changed. There's a positive environment now.'¹¹

The course is well regarded by referral agents, who see it as a vital ingredient in the support offered to families. It is not the whole answer nor is it a quick fix. But stakeholder feedback and interviews with mothers and fathers indicate that it has been very successful in helping parents to enjoy and care for their children.

Developing a resource pack for working with fathers and male carers

Working with fathers and staff at the Campaign for Learning, Action for Children is creating a pack describing a programme of work at our projects in North Solihull that successfully developed and extended services for fathers of young children. The pack's purpose will be to share the knowledge we gained and help other services be father-inclusive. It will contain a range of practical tools and resources to assist practitioners in adopting this programme of work.

The work in North Solihull was initiated through the Early Learning Partnerships Project (ELPP), which was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to help parents get involved in their child's early learning. Action for Children

participated in the ELPP through work at our North Solihull Children's Centre Network, which focused solely on fathers and male carers – an under-represented group across these Children's Centres.

One aspect of the project was to develop a rolling exhibition of positive father and male carer images, called Putting Dads in the Picture. In Solihull, Action for Children engaged fathers and male carers by offering them a free professional photoshoot with their child or children. This was very successful, enabling us to engage over 200 new fathers and male carers over two years. These photographs will feature in each of our local children's centres. Paper publicity such as posters and flyers were also developed and widely distributed across North Solihull. We used a number of different designs and styles and we consulted with fathers and male carers at all stages of development.

Action for Children North Solihull Children's Centre Network

The North Solihull Children's Centre Network is a dynamic group of children's centres managed by Action for Children. Within the ELPP project we used a variety of methods to engage fathers and male carers.

The aim was to widen fathers' participation in service delivery, increase their take up of Children's Centre services and positively affect their parenting skills and ability to help their young children learn and develop. To do this, we developed a multifaceted approach to the work to increase the level and range of services provided locally to fathers, deliver family learning materials to engage working parents, and train workers to assist parents to help with their children's education.

At the time of writing we have engaged over 500 fathers or male carers. Action for Children is also offering drop-in courses for fathers during the course of the project as well as fun days, football training and games with other local Children's Centres. We are also increasing home visits and devising a programme using the garden as a learning resource tool (we have already secured an allotment for this purpose).

The fathers and male carers that have attended different groups, trips and activities report a positive impact on their lives, for example home life is more

balanced and calm as both parents are supporting their child, and fathers have a more positive relationship with their child, are happier to do things with their child, have developed their skills to support their child's development and now feel more confident to attend other services and groups (including services that are not father-specific).

In one example, feedback from a six-week storytelling initiative that engaged 16 fathers and male carers includes:

- ▶ fathers' confidence, self-esteem and social skills improved
- ▶ there is now better interaction between fathers and their children
- ▶ fathers feel able to tackle their children's problems through stories
- ▶ fathers have a better social and support network
- ▶ fathers feel happier and fitter
- ▶ bedtimes are now much easier
- ▶ partners are happier
- ▶ fathers are playing a more active role
- ▶ both fathers' and their children's literacy skills improved and children are keener to engage in literacy activities as they now see it more as fun

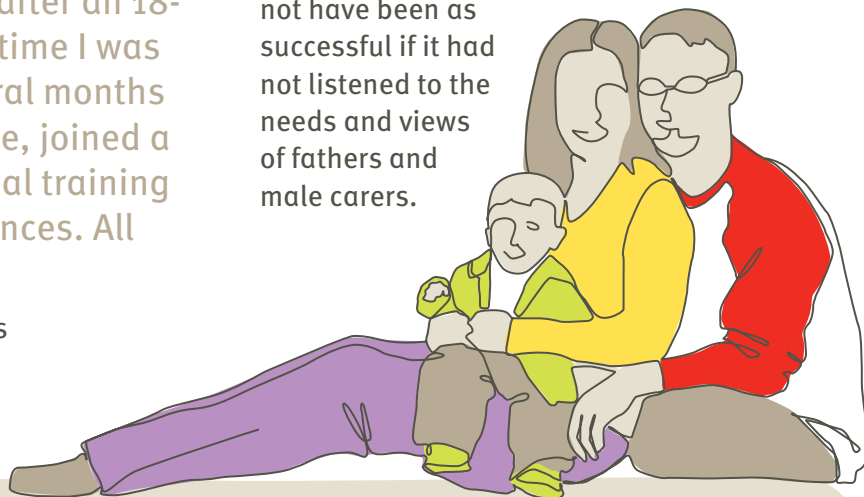


Through different training events and conferences, Action for Children has disseminated our best practice to over 500 professionals, both locally and nationally. We developed a user-friendly website and pocket guides for fathers and male carers, as well as developing weekly groups to ensure that initiatives continue after the ELPP ended.

‘I was finding it difficult to socialise after an 18-month custody battle, during which time I was a bit of a hermit. Over the past several months I have befriended a number of people, joined a football team, returned to educational training and been a speaker at three conferences. All through the dads’ groups.’

A father at one of Action for Children’s projects

The project has ensured that fathers and male carers feature prominently in the local Children and Young People’s Plan, Parenting Strategy and the Children’s Centre Service Delivery plans. Throughout the project fathers and male carers have been at the centre of our work. Each activity, group, trip, and mini project was developed and managed with fathers and male carers. This project would not have been as successful if it had not listened to the needs and views of fathers and male carers.



Evaluation by the University of Oxford

The ELPP programme was evaluated by the University of Oxford. The evaluation highlighted the strengths of the voluntary sector in working with families who may be disaffected with statutory sector services. Key findings were:

- ▶ The initiative developed understanding and skills among practitioners and showed that the continuous development of those skills in the workplace is important.
- ▶ Successful organisational practices were identified that brought about valuable changes in the workplace and in practitioners’ new awareness of and commitment to parental involvement.
- ▶ ELPP shows that it is possible to reach and engage some vulnerable families in disadvantaged areas to support their children as learners.
- ▶ There was evidence of improvement in parents’ relationships with their children. Parents also showed improvement in ‘organising’ their children’s environment through better health and safety practices and more opportunities for children to learn from day-to-day activities with their parents outside the home.

Flexibility is the key

Although service responses are significant, on their own they will not be enough. There is also a range of external barriers to fathers’ greater engagement with their children in the first years of their lives. This is particularly true in relation to employment and entitlements to paid leave and flexible working.

Fathers in Britain work longer hours than non-fathers (although fatherhood status is not a predictor of the number of hours worked).¹²

Nearly two-fifths of fathers who are regularly engaged in paid employment work more than 48 hours per week (the EU Working Time Directive maximum), and around one in eight work over 60 hours.¹³

The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s recent *Working Better* report says: ‘The needs of working fathers are often neglected. There is little discussion of the constraints facing them, or of the economic penalty for being active fathers. Yet fathers’ active involvement in

bringing up children is important. There should be an opportunity for everyone to create the right balance between life and work.'

This report found that a large number of men are also asking for flexible working, but that employers are much more likely to refuse requests from men than from women. Action for Children has welcomed the government's extension of mothers' and fathers' rights to request flexible working, but we will all need to work to ensure that fathers and male carers are able to benefit fully from this provision.

New ways of working at Action for Children

It is very important to Action for Children to provide a good work-life balance for our staff. Our New Ways of Working programme is intended to lead to a flexible approach to work, using technology, workspace and agile working arrangements. We hope this package will be attractive to potential employees and current staff by helping them to move towards appropriate flexibility in their work-life balance. Through this work, we hope to attract more staff who live in rural areas, who may have a disability, or who have caring responsibilities.

Conclusion

Fathers would like to be offered more support and advice to help their children develop and achieve their full potential. At Action for Children we are committed to providing services that are appropriate and accessible to fathers and male carers. We understand that this is good for children, good for mothers and good for fathers.



Endnotes

1. *Working fathers: earning and caring*, O'Brien, M & Shemilt, I (2003), Manchester: EOC
2. Every Parent Matters, DCSF, 2007
3. *Flying Start fatherhood guidance: A literature review*, Children in Wales, January 2008
4. *Aiming High for Children: supporting families*, HM Treasury/Department for Education and Skills, March 2007
5. Daily Telegraph, 18 April 2009, www.telegraph.co.uk/actionforchildren
6. *Including fathers in early years services: positive practice for professionals*, Children in Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, October 2008
7. *The Early Years Framework*, Scottish Government, January 2009, www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/01/13095148/2
8. Research looking at early years provision found that 40 per cent of fathers had contact with the service, albeit often briefly, while only between one per cent and two per cent of staff were male. This may not in itself be problematic if services are genuinely welcoming and accessible to men. See *Understanding fatherhood: a review of recent research*, Lewis, C & Lamb, E (2007), York: JRF
9. Every Parent Matters, DfES, 2007
10. 'Research realities: fatherhood and parenting – messages from research' in *Community Care*, Blewett, J, 8 May 2008
11. Course leaders' view taken from an evaluation of the Parents on the Ball course conducted for Action for Children by Donald Macleod
12. Fatherhood status is not a good predictor of the number of hours worked; in fact, hours of work are more closely related to age, form of economic activity, occupation, earnings and partner's working time. See *The effect of fatherhood on men's patterns of employment*, Dermott, E (2006), Swindon: ESRC
13. *Working fathers: earning and caring*, O'Brien, R, & Shemilt, I (2003), London: Equal Opportunities Commission

as long as it takes