

'The Invisible Man' - working with fathers

Seminar at HOWDEN PARK CENTRE, SPACE 3

Tuesday 10th May, 2011

9am- 12.30

Please note that tea and coffee can only be offered mid-morning

9.15 Opening remarks

9.30 David Drysdale, Men2Mentor

'Fathers' Network Scotland and the new Scottish Dads2B toolkit'

10 Dr. Gary Clapton, University of Edinburgh

*'Social Work and Fathers:
Absences, Stereotypes and Children's Welfare'*

Time for questions and discussion

11 Tea and coffee

11.30 John Rogers, Parenting Co-ordinator West Lothian;

Stewart McLean, Children & Young People Team

'Mellow Dads: group work with fathers'

12.10 Discussion groups: what next?

12.30 Finish

This event is free of charge



Hosted by Sure Start, Early Years: Social Policy Specialist Services,
West Lothian Council

Social Work and Fathers: Absences, Stereotypes and Children's Welfare

Dr. Gary Clapton, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Edinburgh.

Delivered to Sure Start seminar 'The Invisible Man' 10th May 2011

...current service provision in the UK for vulnerable families is generally based on an assumption at **odds with the evidence** and with the child's perspective – that fatherhood is an optional and marginally significant “add-on” for children, unlike motherhood, which is an essential.

(The Costs and Benefits of Active Fatherhood, Fathers Direct, 2009, p.79)

A brief look at this evidence that is at odds with assumptions of father as optional add-on

Education and schooling

Major studies across the world which follow families over time have found fathers' involvement with their children linked with their higher educational achievement and higher educational /occupational mobility relative to their parents (Sarkadi et al, 2008; Flouri, 2005; Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004). For example, in the UK, **fathers' involvement with their 7 and 11 year old children is linked with their better national examination performance at age 16** (Lewis et al, 1982) and their educational attainment at age 20 (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004). This is as true for daughters as for sons, across all social classes – and whether the mother is highly involved too, or not.

In 1992, British sociologists Dennis and Erdos found unemployed fathers' support for their children's education strongly connected with those children's escape from disadvantage. More recently, a father's interest in his child's education, particularly at age 11, has been found to have more influence than family background, the child's personality or poverty on education success (Hango, 2007). But Blanden (2006) found **low fatherly interest similarly predictive – in the other direction: a father's low interest in his son's education, for instance, reduces his boy's chances of escaping poverty by 25%.**

Fathers' (higher) commitment to their child's education and **their involvement with the school are also associated with children's better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion** (for review, see Goldman, 2005). Children's school behaviour is strongly linked with their educational attainment; and **fathers' influence on that behaviour is not only significant (Lloyd et al, 2003); Velleman, 2004; Jaffee et al, 1990) but may at times be more significant than mothers': for instance, fathers' harsh parenting is more strongly linked to children's (especially boys') aggression than is mothers' harsh parenting** (Chang et al, 2003).

Later life

In the UK, high levels of father involvement at ages 7 and 11 were found to protect against experience of **homelessness** in the adult sons of manual workers (Flouri, 2005a) Both low father involvement and decreasing closeness in adolescence predict **delinquency** in adult life (Harris et al, 1998).

In separated families, high levels of non-resident father involvement protect against later **mental health problems** in children (Flouri, 2005a).

Young fathers

Quinton et al (2002) found that, by ignoring young fathers, services were ignoring mothers' wishes: while in **50% of cases health visitors did not even know the fathers' names**, the young mothers themselves often placed a high value on the involvement of their babies' fathers.

Quinton et al (2002) also found young fathers much **keener to be involved than hitherto believed**, as did Bunting and McAuley (2004a). Florsheim and Ngu (2003) observed fatherhood to be a 'wake up call' for some hugely disadvantaged young men, who gradually pulled their lives together afterwards. Interestingly, a positive attitude during the pregnancy was no predictor of this, and some of the young men spent time in prison after their babies were born. The 'wake up call' often kicked in a little later.

Non-resident or absent fathers

Controlling for other factors, absent fatherhood has been shown negatively to affect children directly, for example, by contributing to their **difficulties with peer relationships, including bullying** (Parke et al, 2004; Berdondini and Smith, 1996); and indirectly, via increased maternal stress and reduced income (McLanahan, 1997; McLanahan and Teitler, 1999).

In Australia, Funder (1996) found **96% of children including their non-resident fathers as part of their families.**

Fathers and Child protection

In child protection, as in other settings, **most children want contact with most fathers** (Scourfield, 2006); and the strength and complexity of these children's attachments to significant adults, including fathers and father-figures, should not be underestimated (Daniel and Taylor, 2001).

In the UK, £3 billion a year is currently spent on children by local authority social services, of which more than £1 billion goes to residential provision. It is likely that these costs could be substantially reduced, were fathers and paternal relatives systematically involved in care proceedings (Hirsch, 2006). And: **'The identified relationship between the involvement of a noncustodial parent, most often a biological father, and a reduction in the likelihood that children are placed into out-of-home care is a unique finding'** (Bellamy, 2009, p.260).

Vulnerable children seem to be in the greatest need of ongoing positive relationships with their fathers. **They tend to do worse** than better supported children when father-child relationships are poor or non-existent; and **seem to experience greater benefits** when a relationship with a biological father and/or father-figure is positive (Dunn et al 2004).

Scott and Crooks (2004) and Ashley, Featherstone, Roskill, Ryan and White (2006) note that when mothers are vulnerable, service providers work intensively with them to improve mother-child relationships. When fathers are vulnerable, however,

practitioners and policymakers tend to ignore father-child relationships or approach them with some level of hostility (Family Commission, 2009, p.31).

Before I return to practice wish to highlight the role of policy-makers, trainers child protection experts in marginalising fathers. In the most extreme of the following cases, how to make them disappear.

Integrated working



The team around the child (TAC) and the lead professional

Trainer notes

March 2010

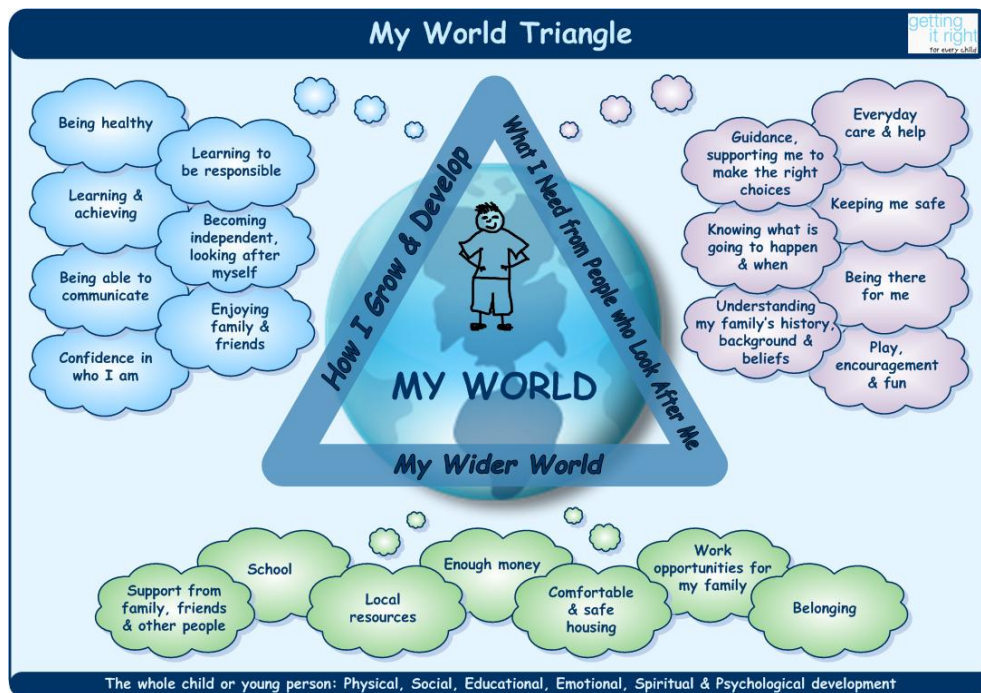


- *Alex (17) moved to the area six months ago with **her mother**, to be nearer her grandparents. She has struggled with the move but does attend college where she is on a vocational course*
- *Sam (aged three) has mild hearing loss and some communication difficulties. There are some issues around his behaviour and social skills at nursery... **Both parents** are getting very tired of the whole situation and taking their frustrations out on Katy.*
- *Letitia is 17 and is currently six months pregnant. Ever since she had her pregnancy confirmed her attendance at college has started to be very sporadic. Prior to the pregnancy she was predicted good grades at A level. Letitia feels that one of the reasons her attendance has slipped is due to her feeling uncertain about the future. **She lacks support from her father** who does not even talk to her and does not want her in the house once the baby is born. Her mother is more supportive but the situation has caused arguments at home. Letitia wants the baby but does not want to live in the current atmosphere.
The father of the baby (aged 19) has disappeared and friends have told Letitia he has moved away which has left Letitia feeling very alone*
- *John is six and his performance at school has dropped significantly over the last term, since his move to a new school. He finds it difficult to concentrate and fit into an ordered and structured school environment. John has also been refusing to go to school at least once a week and **his parents** have struggled to get him there. His parents are worried that this may be linked to some form of bullying. John has asthma that makes him feel like he cannot fully take part in play with other children. He enjoys going to the local play centre in the evening; has a really good relationship with one of the play centre volunteers who works there for two evenings per week.*

John's mother is at her wits end and is completely unsure of what to do next. John will talk to her about some things but starts shouting and screaming if he is asked about school. John's mum is desperate to get help from someone but is not happy with the school as she feels they could do more to help. There have been discussions with John's teacher but both parents have felt that they were being blamed for lack of attendance.

John			
Person	Advantages	Disadvantages	Choose as lead professional?
John's mum	Knows John well.	Want support from practitioners.	Not a good choice in this case.
Education welfare	Can support main needs and initiated the CAF with consent from parents and gets on with John.	Relationship with parents could be better.	A good choice as the relationship with Mum and John was good enough to undertake CAF and hits most of the other criteria.
Learning mentor	Can support main needs and has potential for a positive relationship with parents.	Does not know the area yet.	Could be a good choice with support to understand local provision.
Family support worker	Mum has chosen to involve them so probably a positive relationship.	New to the situation and focused on supporting Mum.	Not a good choice here. Useful to involve, but not focused specifically on John.

2. The Scottish Government's Assessment Triangle



There is an online learning resource www.sieswe.org/opencontent/assessment/ which is intended to be 'relevant to any professional working with children or young people whether in the context of education, social work, health, police or other services'. The material is built around a **case study** of the life of 'Mairi' from birth to eighteen. A **timeline** presents various critical incidents in her life such as being fostered, her adoption and referral to a Young People's Unit for an eating disorder. At the end of the time line Mairi goes to University.

Nowhere in all the various discussions of her life's ups and downs is a birth father, foster father or adoptive father given a part. There is one passing reference to Mairi's biological father (to explain why a hospital record is not being opened on him) then...nothing. If this were simply a scenario of an **abandoning birth father** it would not be rare. But we are not told this. Just that he has returned to Asia. There is no reference to the nature of the relationship between Mairi's mother and father. No efforts are made to create a picture of him for Mairi's memory box and in other preparations for her fostering and adoption. **In Mairi's foster placement the only active parent is her foster mother who 'records details of development progress'.** The information on **her adoption and her later life with adoptive parents** continues on the same father-less trajectory: at one bedtime, Mairi accidentally falls and cuts her knee in the bathroom and there's a dash to the local accident and emergency – only

her adoptive mother is involved in this scenario. Officially, she has adoptive parents (and the reference to her adoptive mother being her main carer is without explanation) yet to all intents and purposes Mairi has no adoptive father¹.

3. Latest Policy Guidance from Scottish Government



But where's Daddy?

¹ The pitfalls of ignoring Mairi's birth father take on double importance because he is Asian (not that her picture on the web-site conveys this). Identity needs often loom large in the lives of adopted people who need information and background on both of their parents so as to mature and develop. In Mairi's case, her needs related to her ethnic heritage ought to be accorded the same prominence on the web-site as other issues in her adoption, rather than the reader being left to hunt around clicking through various web addresses.

Three Key Messages for those working with fathers:

Services need to reach out **routinely** to fathers and have high expectations of their involvement (Six signposts for fatherhood, Fatherhood Institute, April 2010)

But Social Work has deep-seated problems about how it regards fathers.

1. A Glimpse at Social Work's Body of Knowledge

Besides, it is much easier for the children to be able to have two parents; one parent can be felt to remain loving while the other is being hated, and this in itself has a stabilising influence....Every now and again the child is going to hate someone, and if father is not there to tell him where to get off, he will hate his mother and this will make him confused, because **it is his mother that he loves most fundamentally** (Winnicott 1964, p.115).

In the young child's eyes father plays **second fiddle** and his value increases only as the child becomes more able to stand alone. Nevertheless, **fathers have their uses even in infancy**...as the economic and social support of the mother' (p.16) Child Care and the Growth of Love" Bowlby, J. (1951) World Health Organisation, Geneva. This was rewritten for the general public under the title Maternal Care and Mental Health (1953). See Clapton, G. (2009), 'How and Why Social Work Fails Fathers: Redressing an Imbalance, Social Work's Role and Responsibility' for a more extensive discussion of the role of social work writings in perpetuating stereotypes of mothers and fathers.

2. A note on rigid thinking

A number of issues emerged including the dearth of information about men in most serious case reviews; failure to take fathers and other men connected to the families into account in assessments; rigid thinking about father figures as **all good or all bad**; and the perceived threat posed by men to workers. (2009 Analysis of Serious Case Reviews).

Points have already been made about the potential value of fathers and therefore the importance of taking them into account but let's look at the question of threat posed by men. .

3. Attitudes and suspicions - worker bias?

Although:

The first imperative of child protection practice with fathers or father figures is to find out about them (Ferguson, 2011, p.153)

Fathers not on the professional radar, even when mothers identify them as supportive, **social workers ignore them** (Dominelli et al, 2005). Fathers not part of social work's "core business"...**social workers do not completely trust** fathers to care for children (Dominelli et al, 2011, p.364).

It seems that as they go about their day-to-day work and approach the homes of service users, one of the things that most fills practitioners with anxiety and even dread is that there may be a man behind the door. (Ferguson, 2011, p.151)

Overall, focus group participants who worked in child welfare admitted that it was easier to work with families made up of single mothers and children. One worker with 24 years of experience stated flatly: "We don't involve fathers. The system is mother focused." Another worker said, "If the mother says the father is dead, we stop right there. It quite simply is easier than trying to locate the father, especially if we feel the mom will not be cooperative." Yet another worker made the point, "**A father in the family makes it harder. It's easier to let dad stay in the background and not deal with him. Then I don't have to deal with my own issues about men. It is easier to deal with mom only.**" (*Best Practice Next Practice* Summer 2002, National Child Welfare Resources Center for Family-Centered Practice, 'Father Involvement in Child Welfare: Estrangement and Reconciliation')

Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) found unexamined negative generalisations (prejudices) about men/fathers to be widespread. These can include such beliefs as **‘men are unable to change’ ‘men are not willing to change’ ‘a man cannot cope with children without a woman to help him’, ‘fathers do not love their children as much as mothers do’**, and so on.

Russell et al (1999) found service providers unsure about fathers’ (men’s) capacity to understand children’s changing needs, or provide them with care and emotional support – with a substantial minority holding wildly **exaggerated notions of the prevalence of father-daughter sexual abuse.**

Message to Practitioners: “Do I have deep-seated suspicions about men?”
(Daniel and Taylor, 2001)

McBride et al (2000) found that if fathers were to be successfully engaged in early childhood programmes, staff needed ample time to talk openly about their preconceived notions and biases regarding fathers and father-involvement. Partly as a result of such attitudes, service providers rarely gather the most basic information about the fathers in the families they serve.

The result? Children’s best interests not served

Child and family services commonly fail to identify important males in children’s lives and their relationship to the child (Ashley et al, 2006; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004; Daniel and Taylor, 2001; Radhakrishna et al, 2001; Ryan, 2000) especially when the fathers are living in another household (Edwards, 1998).

Systemic institutional change (for example, taking the stance that men have to be involved in assessments and family interventions, or refusing to accept a referral without reference to the father), can quite quickly achieve a higher level of father participation than is typical in mainstream child protection (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004; Pithouse et al, 2001).

A meta-analysis of interventions aiming to enhance positive parental behaviours found that those **involving fathers ‘appear to be significantly more effective’ than interventions focussing on mothers only** (Bakermans- Kraneburg et al, 2003).

Interventions which involve fathers as well as mothers seem to be more effective in enhancing EACH parent’s sensitivity to their child, and their child’s attachment to them (Bakermans-Kraneburg et al, 2003).

Caveat

Dangers of seeing the issue as being only about the father-child dyad. The mother, her relationship with the child, father and mother’s relations, mother’s relations with paternal networks all remain crucial components. In this sense mothers are gate-keepers. However statements such as ‘uncaring’ ought not to be a fall-at-the first-hurdle description. **But mother’s relations, views and feelings about him must be understood, addressed and discussed. And not necessarily be the last word.** Ultimately, support or at least understanding from the mother is a vital element in maintenance and development of child-father relations.

See also *Evaluating the evidence: Fathers, families and children*, National Academy for Parenting Research (2010):

[www.iop.kcl.ac.uk/iopweb/blob/downloads/locator/l_1119_Fathers, families and children.pdf](http://www.iop.kcl.ac.uk/iopweb/blob/downloads/locator/l_1119_Fathers,_families_and_children.pdf)

And also:

www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/

And:

www.fathersnetwork.org.uk/

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NB

What does HM Inspectorate say about child protection and fathers in Scotland?

In *How well do we protect Scotland's children? A report on the findings of the joint inspections of services to protect children 2005-2009* (HM Inspectorate of Education 2009 52 pages) **there are:**

- **No references to mothers or fathers**
- **15 non-gender specific references to parent, parents or parenting**
- **Many images of children**
- **Three images of adults, two of whom are teachers (one woman and one man), the other photograph is that of a mother...**