

Are fathers getting a confused message?

Alan McMaster

Dads Project Coordinator & Group Facilitator (Mellow Parenting)

Raquib Ibrahim

Programme Evaluation Assistant & Group Facilitator (Mellow Parenting)

Stewart McLean

Trainer & Group Facilitator (Mellow Parenting)

We are a group of practitioners who are encouraging fathers to take part in parenting programmes which are designed to improve father-child interactions. Our experience demonstrates that there are many barriers to fathers engaging with us. These barriers are often found in well-meaning policies, images, and in the attitudes of service providers.

In 2012, the Scottish Government developed the National Parenting Strategy (Scottish Executive, 2012) which makes a commitment to represent and support fathers, including those living away from their children, better in policies and services. It also suggests that it is committed to changing perceptions of fathers by services so as to acknowledge their role in a child's development more fully. However, while the need to involve fathers has been highlighted in this strategy, fathers (unlike mothers) are identified within the document as 'Parents facing additional challenges'. This places them alongside families affected by imprisonment and domestic abuse. Whilst the inclusion of fathers within the document is a significant step forward, it still clearly marks them as a separate group.

REPRESENTATIONS OF FATHERS

Online searches for how to engage with fathers will identify a number of well-meaning organisations who work with parents and their children. Even here, however, fathers are often segregated in specific sections on the website dedicated to special groups of parents, rather than included in the main sections offering parenting advice. Similarly, images of parents often portray fathers negatively or fail to represent men at all. For example, a Children's Panel website has an image of a vulnerable child and a dirty and intoxicated male slumped on the sofa.



The Children's Panel www.childrenspanelscotland.org/. (Accessed 07/03/2014)



The Scottish Government website www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2006/12/18095521 (Accessed 07/03/2014)

Domestic abuse campaigns often depict men as perpetrators. Whilst there is no arguing with the statistics relating to the number of domestic incidents where women are the victims, these campaigns do little to make men feel that support is on offer to them as well as to women. The omission of fathers from positive family images can sometimes be as damaging as negative images.

ARE SERVICES WELCOMING FOR FATHERS?

Fathers' perception of services will impact on how willing they are to engage. During discussions at a number of our groups, fathers have talked about their experience of services making them feel under scrutiny and unwelcome.

"When she (Health visitor) comes round, I feel I am just there to make the tea and open the door; she is only here to see my Mrs, and she's no interested in talking to me. I just go into the other room"
(Dads' Group attendee 2014)

The authors of this paper have met and worked with a number of health care professionals and it has become apparent that although many of these professionals are aware of the benefits of working with fathers, a lack of resources, or their own preconceptions, restrict them in doing so.

'Dads don't engage in family work'
(Family Support Worker 2012)

'We don't work with Fathers'
(Health Visitor 2012)

Professor Jonathan Scourfield (2006) found that both male and female child protection workers held negative opinions of men and that there was a deep rooted legacy of men not being considered the business of child protection workers.

MOVING FORWARD

As professionals working with vulnerable children, it is our responsibility to do everything possible to ensure the child has the best possible start to life. This means using all available resources and protective factors. One of the ways of doing this is by actively working with the whole family and this includes fathers not living in the family home. It is a myth that fathers will not talk about their feelings and experiences. Many just need support, to be engaged with in a nurturing way and, most importantly, the opportunity to talk.

'Gender stereotypes can make it hard for fathers to ask. You should know what you're doing - you're the man. You should be the strong character that can deal with everything.'
(Dads' Group attendee 2012)

As professionals and as a society, we must change how we represent men in their role as caregiver. Often those who need the support most miss out because of the confusing messages they receive from services. Negative images of men or the lack of any representation at all, make fathers feel that services are not for them.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that the father's role is seen as fundamental to the child's wellbeing. Fathers should not be treated as a specialist group or as an add-on to any support the mother receives. Even though policies and reforms are beginning to address this, they continue to approach fathers as separate from the family. It is a strong belief of the authors that services must adopt an approach of whole family working even where parents do not live together and that health care professionals need to be educated about their role in engaging with fathers. More positive images of fathers and more effort from services to work actively with men around child protection and domestic abuse would help to break down the perceived barriers from both sides.

REFERENCES

- Scottish Executive (2012) National Parenting Strategy <Available at> www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/10/4789 (accessed 23/02/14)
- Scourfield, J. (2006) The challenge of engaging fathers in the child protection process. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2):440-9.

