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Mellow Parenting

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Are fathers getting a confused message?

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Are fathers getting a confused message?

The Scottish Government's National Parenting Strategy emphasise the importance of the role of the father within child development. This emphasis reflects cultural changes in the perception of fathers as being much more than simply "bread winners". Empirical evidence shows that a secure father-child attachment improves future child developmental outcomes (van Ijzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997; Lamb, 2002). These changes in perceptions of men's role in parenting have been evidenced in research but are not always reflected in practice.

We are a group of practitioners who are attempting to encourage fathers to take part in parenting programmes which are designed to improve father-child interactions. Our experience demonstrates that there are many barriers to engaging. These barriers are often found in well-meaning policies, images, and the within the attitudes of service providers. Are fathers confused by the messages that are being given to them?

What does policy say?

In 2012 the Scottish Government developed the National Parenting Strategy which makes a commitment in their policies and services to represent fathers including those living away from their children better. It also suggests that it is committed to changing perceptions within services to consider the role of fathers in a child's development more predominately.

However while the need to involve fathers has been highlighted in this strategy, unlike mothers, fathers are identified within the document as 'Parents facing additional challenges'. This places them alongside families affected by imprisonment, domestic abuse and parenting disabled children. Whilst the inclusion of fathers within the document is a significant step forward, it still clearly marks them as separate and as a specialist group.

Perceptions of fathers in advertising images within charities and organisational websites

Online searches of how to engage with fathers will identify a number of well-meaning organisations who work with parents and their children. Even here, fathers are segregated into specialist groups with specific sections on the website talking about fathers, rather than in the main body of parenting advice. For example on the NCT's website fathers are contained within the diversity and access section. (<http://www.nct.org.uk/professional/diversity-and-access/supporting-dads/general-resources-supporting-dads/involving-father>).

Similarly images representing men as parents give a negative image or fail represent men at all. Fathers seeing are unlikely to feel positive towards the service. (Clapton 2013).

For example the Children's Panel website has an image of a vulnerable child and a male portrayed as being dirty and intoxicated slumped on the sofa.



Domestic abuse campaigns often depict men as perpetrators of abuse. Whilst there is no detracting from the statistics relating to the number of reported domestic incidents, these images do little to make the men feel like support is on offer to them as well as women. The omission of fathers from a positive family image can sometimes be as damaging as a negative image. This can further marginalise men, making them feel the service is not for them.

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 other 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, it is either a lack of resources, or their own preconceptions which restrict them.

*“Dads don’t engage in family work” (Family Support Worker 2012)
“We don’t work with Fathers” (Health Visitor 2012)*

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

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 to achieving this is by actively working with the whole family and not categorising parents into specialist groups; 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 the correct support and 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)

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

Conclusion

It is imperative that the father's role is seen as being 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 a separate entity 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 supported and made more aware of their role in engaging with fathers. More positive images of fathers and more effort from services to work actively with men around child protection, domestic abuse and family services would help to break down the perceived barriers from both sides.

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