



Working with fathers – what’s going on out there?

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Summary

A web-based survey of practitioners was set up in Autumn 2012, to build up a description of the work being done with fathers in the UK to improve children's well-being. Contact was made with practitioners through local authority service managers and the Fatherhood Institute email list, with both interventions specifically for fathers and services for both parents being targeted. Two hundred and twenty-one responses were received from 53% of local authorities.

Most responses (63%) were from universal services and only 8% came from services for fathers with complex needs. The most common organisational setting (42%) was Sure Start Children's Centres (England) or their equivalent in other nations. Just under a quarter of respondents were from the voluntary sector and a similar proportion were from local authority social care services. The other 22% were made up of respondents from education services, the health service and criminal justice, with just 1% of respondents coming from the private sector.

The most common type of service (63%) was structured parenting classes, 85% of which were provided for both parents. Next most common (62%) were practical activities for parents and children (including play). Unstructured support groups were provided by 47% of respondents. Advice on employment and benefits was provided by 39% and legal advice by 20%.

Most of the interventions specifically for fathers seemed to be unique services devised by committed local practitioners. Some interventions were named several times, however, and these were mostly services for both parents. Seventeen per cent of all respondents were using the Triple P parenting programme and 11% were using Incredible Years. The only intervention for fathers specifically which was mentioned more than twice was Caring Dads (four responses or 2% of sample).

Numbers of fathers engaged are relatively low. The median annual number of fathers attending across all service was ten. In services for both parents, the median proportion of fathers attending was 30%, which is an improvement of previous estimates, probably because respondents to this survey are especially committed to involving fathers.

Responses on ideological and theoretical approaches suggested that overt gender politics play only a small part, with strong statements on feminist and fathers' rights approaches being the least popular rationales for work with fathers. The dominant views of practitioners were in line with mainstream approaches to parenting support. Cognitive and behavioural approaches were the most popular.

Introduction and background

There is little doubt that fathers matter for the welfare of children and adults. Many studies show conduct problems in children to be associated with anti-social characteristics, substance misuse and depression in fathers (Phares, Rojas, Thurston and Hankinson, 2010). More optimistically, father involvement seems to protect against adverse outcomes later in life. For example, Flouri and Buchanan's (2002a; 2002b) analysis of data from the UK National Child Development Study found that father involvement when a child was aged 7 predicted lower levels of emotional and behavioural problems in adolescence and less involvement with the police for boys. Furthermore, father involvement at age 16 predicted diminished psychological distress at age 33 for women (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002c).

For child and family services to make a dedicated effort to work with fathers is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following criticism that services have been too geared towards the assumption that mothers will be the main adult clients (e.g. Parton and Parton, 1989; Strega *et al.*, 2008), in the last couple of decades there have been some moves towards greater inclusion of fathers in various different kinds of family services. In recognition that modern families include a range of different relationships, beyond the biological link of father to child, here the term 'fathers' is used inclusively, to encompass step fathers, adoptive fathers and all kinds of social fathers in addition to biological parents.

Although the field of fathers' intervention research is relatively under-developed, some recent reviews indicate that there is a small emerging body of evidence about intervention effectiveness (Magill-Evans, 2006; Bronte-Tinkew *et al.*, 2007; Philp and O'Brien, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2012). Very little of this evidence involves experimental or even quasi-experimental studies. There are few randomised controlled trials specifically powered for father-related outcomes. A rare example is the study by Cowan *et al.* (2009); a three-arm trial comparing a couples' group with a fathers group and a one-off information session as a control condition. Participation in either intervention group led to improvements in fathers' engagement with children, the quality of couples' relationships, and children's behaviour problems. More long-term and positive effects were found in those who attended the couples' group.

There is much larger body of evidence about the effectiveness of parenting interventions, many of which are open to fathers and mothers. Some of these studies paint an optimistic picture for father engagement. Lundahl *et al.* (2008) have observed that programs involving fathers as well as mothers are more effective than those for mothers only. However, there is also some evidence that fathers gain less from these interventions than mothers. For example, Nowak and Heinrichs's (2008) meta-analysis of studies of Triple P, the program with the strongest international evidence base, found fathers reporting lower levels of improvement than mothers or children's teachers for parenting, parental well-being and child problems. Wilson *et al.*'s (2012) systematic review of Triple P evaluations concluded that child outcomes reported by fathers were not significantly different in intervention and control groups. Generally, attendance at parent training is much lower for men than for women. Lindsay *et al.*'s (2011) study of parents attending one of five evidence-based parenting programs in England found that only 15% of parents attending programs were male.

Social interventions for fathers are contested territory and ideological debates can be fierce; especially those between feminist and men's rights perspectives. Fault lines are drawn between, for example, those who emphasise the on-going harm caused by violent fathers after separation from their partners (e.g. Harne, 2011) and those who instead emphasise the importance to children of on-going contact with both parents in almost all family circumstances (e.g. the UK organisation Families Need Fathers). Where men are known to be abusive to women, there are tensions between

explicitly feminist approaches which intervene with men as perpetrators of abuse and other approaches sympathetic to feminism which address men primarily as fathers (Featherstone and Fraser, 2012). In addition, across all services there are tensions between approaches which prioritise fathers' own needs and those which see the main reason for intervening with fathers as making life easier for mothers.

What is not known from research to date is what kinds of approaches are commonly used in practice. The study reported in this paper attempted to establish what kinds of services were being provided in the UK that were consciously attempting to engage with fathers. The survey covered practical information such as how many men are being worked with and strategies for recruitment of fathers, in addition to ideological justifications and intervention theory. The approach was rather similar to that taken by Scourfield and Dobash (1999), who mapped interventions for the perpetrators of domestic abuse in the UK.

Method

A web-based survey was set up via www.qualtrics.com. The questionnaire included both fixed-response and open questions about services provided and their theoretical under-pinning and evidence base (see appendix). An email requesting participation in the survey was sent to the head of children's social care services in each local authority in the UK (n=162). More precisely, this included local government administrative areas in England, Scotland and Wales and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. These organisations are likely to be the main commissioners of family welfare services. The senior managers were asked to pass the email message on to practitioners in their area. Further to this, two other email lists were used. Firstly, a mail shot was sent to the mailing list of the Fatherhood Institute (<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>). This organisation describes itself as 'the UK's fatherhood think tank'. It has been the most prominent organisation in providing training and lobbying on the issue of father involvement in family services and has a mailing list of 7500, an unknown number of which are social welfare practitioners. Secondly, the same message was sent to the email list of people attending a conference, recently attended by the first author, which presented a wide range of different parenting programmes.

The questionnaire covered types of services, numbers and proportions of fathers attending, organisational location, recruitment of fathers and evaluation. There were also sections of the questionnaire about rationale for working with fathers, which we term intervention ideology, and the respondent's theoretical approach to intervention (i.e. their views on what kind of approach is most helpful). Seven options were given for intervention ideology. These were: improving fathers' attachment with children, improving the management of children's behaviour, improving the wellbeing of fathers, taking pressure off mothers, preventing men's abuse of women and children and promotion of fathers' rights. The aim of improving the well-being of children was assumed to be shared by all practitioners so this option was not presented. There was an option of writing in an additional idea, although this could also be left blank. Respondents were asked to rank the seven options for ideology according to how important they were to the respondent as reasons for working with fathers. Seven statements about intervention approach were presented in the questionnaire and respondents were asked to rate each one on a 7-point Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree. These mapped on to different theoretical emphases within the field of social work and social interventions: family systems, behaviourism, a cognitive approach, feminism, a psychodynamic approach, counselling and material help.

The first stage of data handling was the cleaning of the dataset, which involved some additional quantitative coding where multiple choice questions had included an additional 'other' category.

Descriptive statistics were produced on all quantitative data. Where survey questions generated only qualitative data, responses were sorted into coherent themes. The Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to assess whether the apparent differences in the popularity of statements were significant. Sensitivity analyses were conducted, using the Wilcoxon rank sum test for independent groups, to assess whether ideology and intervention theory statements differed according to whether interventions were provided for fathers only or for both parents. The same test was used to assess evidence that gender politics (feminist and men's rights ideologies) varied by organisational status (public or independent sector) or whether or not services were universal or targeted on need.

Results

A total of 221 responses were received from 85 (53%) of the 162 local authorities. The median number of responses per authority was two. To establish whether there was any socio-economic difference between local authorities which responded and those which did not, an independent samples t-test was applied to data on the percentage of people of working age claiming Jobseekers' Allowance (because they are unemployed) in each authority. The test found no evidence of any association between response and claimant rate ($t=0.53$, 160 d.f., $p=0.60$), with a mean of 3.61% of claimants in authorities which responded to the survey, compared with 3.20% in authorities which did not respond.

Organisational location

As can be seen in Table 1, the largest group of respondents (42%) were in Sure Start Children's Centres (England) or similar organisations in other UK nations such as Flying Start in Wales. These are area-based, multi-disciplinary and preventative family support initiatives for families with pre-school children, loosely comparable to Head Start in the USA. The next largest group (23%) was in the voluntary sector, a category which includes large national children's charities (e.g. Action for Children, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), smaller local charities and local not-for-profit social enterprises. The third largest category of respondents (21%) was from local authority social services. These differ in organisation between the four nations, but this is essentially the public child welfare function, including social work services for children in need or at risk. The fourth largest group of respondents (10%) were in education services, including schools, followed by the Health Service as fifth largest group (6%) and criminal justice settings (prison, probation or youth justice) as sixth largest group (5%). The smallest category, with just two respondents (1%), was from the private sector.

Types of services provided

Table 1 also presents a summary of responses on types of services for fathers and the proportions of services that were provided for fathers only or for both parents. The most common services were structured parenting classes. Sixty-three per cent of respondents reported that these classes were provided in their services and a large majority (85%) reported that they were provided for both parents. Next most common (62%) were practical activities for parents and children (including play), of which 62% were for both parents and 38% for fathers only. Unstructured support groups were provided by 47% of respondents. Sixty-one per cent of these were for both parents and 39% for fathers only. Twenty-eight respondents (13% of the whole sample) referred specifically to 'stay-and-play' sessions, either for the whole family or only for fathers with their children. Advice on employment and benefits was provided by 39% and 91% of these respondents provided this service to both parents. Finally, legal advice was provided by 20%, with 71% of these providing this advice for both parents and 29% for fathers only. The majority of respondents (63%) were offering universal services (see Table 1). A further 29% were offering services to fathers/parents who are

vulnerable or in need of support and only 8% were providing specialist services for fathers/parents with complex needs.

Table 1: Services provided for fathers to improve children's well-being

Type of service	<i>n</i>	% (of whole sample)	% (within service type)
Structured parenting classes	140	63	
For fathers only	14		15
For mothers and fathers	80		85
Data missing on which parents attended services	46		-
Practical activities for parents and children (including play)	137	62	
For fathers only	31		38
For mothers and fathers	50		62
Data missing on which parents attended services	56		-
Unstructured support groups	103	47	
For fathers only	26		39
For mothers and fathers	40		61
Data missing on which parents attended services	37		-
Advice on employment or benefits	85	39	
For fathers only	3		9
For mothers and fathers	29		91
Data missing on which parents attended services	53		-
Legal advice (e.g. about contact with children)	44	20	
For fathers only	5		29
For mothers and fathers	12		71
Data missing on which parents attended services	27		-
Targeting of services	N	%	
Universal	131	63	
Targeted on fathers who are vulnerable or in need of support	65	29	
Specialist services for fathers with complex needs	17	8	
Organisational location	N	%	
Sure Start Children's Centres (or equivalent)	75	42	
Voluntary sector	51	23	
Local Authority Social Services	45	21	
Education services	21	10	
Health Service	14	6	
Criminal justice	11	5	
Private sector	2	1	

There was some creative naming of projects, no doubt designed to appeal to men as non-traditional users of family services. Examples were *Mantenatal*; *Men Behaving Dadly*; *Flat Pack Guide* for

Dads; Dad's Baby; and Dads, Lads and Lasses. Most of these interventions specifically for fathers seemed to be unique services devised by committed local practitioners. Some interventions were named several times, however, and all those which occurred more than twice in the survey are listed in Table 2, along with a description. One named intervention, Men Behaving Dadly, was mentioned by four respondents but does not feature in Table 2 as responses implied these were in fact diverse approaches sharing the same name. Seventeen per cent of all respondents were using the Triple P parenting programme and 11% were using Incredible Years. There was almost no overlap between these two groups of respondents, so it can be noted that more than a quarter of all respondents were using an approach with evidence of effectiveness from randomised controlled trials (Hutchings *et al.*, 2007, Sanders, 2012). This finding matches the survey conducted by Klett-Davies *et al.* (2008) in England, where these same two programmes were also the most commonly used parenting programmes. It should be noted, however, that in the questionnaire (see appendix) Triple P was given as the one example of a named intervention so there may have been some reporting bias in favour of this programme.

Table 2 shows that with the exception of Caring Dads (Scott and Crooks, 2007), all the interventions named by three or more respondents were provided for both parents, albeit in the case of Mellow Parenting via separate mothers' and fathers' groups. Most are mainstream parenting programmes, although there is variation in theoretical underpinning. Most fall into the category of structured parent training classes, although some respondents put some of the approaches listed in Table 2 into the 'other' category.

Numbers of men engaged

In an intervention market, some services may talk up their efficacy in the hope of gaining commissions. It is therefore important to try and get beyond rhetoric about father engagement and find out the real extent of successful engagement. The extent of insight from a cross-sectional survey of practitioners is limited. However, practitioners were asked about actual numbers of fathers attending services in the last 12 months. This was not a compulsory question, as it was assumed that some respondents would not have the required information to hand. As can be seen in Table 3, the response rate for this question ranged from 72% for structured parenting classes to 46% for employment and benefits advice.

The range of numbers provided was wide, so medians as well as means are provided in Table 3. The largest annual numbers of fathers were for practical activities, including play (mean 44, median 20), followed by structured parenting classes (mean 27, median 8). Across all kinds of services where numbers of fathers were reported, including 'other' services which did not apparently fit into the categories offered in the questionnaire, the mean number receiving services in the last year was 28 and the median 10. This low median is an indication of how challenging it can be to engage fathers in family services. Across the whole data set and all services including 'others', the mean proportion of fathers using family services was 44% and the median 30%. This mean includes the services provided for fathers only which were 27% of those where proportions were reported. Across all services offered to both fathers and mothers, the mean proportion of fathers was 30% and median 23%. For structured parenting training programmes open to men and women, the mean proportion of fathers attending was 21%. This is higher than the 15% found in Lindsay *et al.*'s (2011) study of parenting programme implementation in England.

Table 2: The most common named interventions and description of their approaches

Named intervention	Description of approach *	Frequency: <i>n</i> (% of whole sample)
Triple P	Teaches effective strategies for child behaviour management. Several different variants for different ages and levels of need.	38 (17%)
Incredible Years	Teaches effective strategies for child behaviour management. Different versions available but all for pre-school children.	25 (11%)
Solihull Approach	Some behaviour management, but also psychoanalytically-informed, with emphasis on containment of emotions. Suitable for any age.	14 (6%)
Family Links Nurturing Programme	Aims to build parental self-esteem and self-awareness which are seen as the prerequisite for the learning of effective parenting behaviours which also takes place. Any age of children.	9 (4%)
Mellow Parenting	Single-sex group. Combines exploration of parents' own childhood experiences and current needs with parenting skills reflection through use of video. Targeted on high need. Different versions for different ages, all young.	5 (2%)
Caring Dads	The only intervention in this table that is specifically for fathers. Combines motivation enhancement, parent training and cognitive behavioural therapy. An emphasis on men's abuse of children and mothers.	4 (2%)
National Childbirth Trust ante-natal classes	Classes mostly focused on child birth, with some content on the baby's first days. Some areas also run a 'beyond birth' class on baby care and parental well-being. The cost of attendance is directly incurred by class members.	4 (2%)
Parents Early Education Partnership (PEEP)	Aims to improve educational attainment in the early years through work on literacy, numeracy and self-esteem. Based on social learning theory.	4 (2%)
Strengthening Families 10-14	Main aim is to prevent substance misuse, by improving family communication, boundary setting and resistance to peer pressure. Universal whole family intervention. Children aged 10-14.	4 (2%)
Family Caring Trust	Espouses flexibility in parenting style. Different programmes for different ages, drawing on Adlerian psychology, family systems, reality therapy and re-evaluation counselling. Optional faith-based elements.	3 (1%)
Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities	Emphasis on cultural diversity and the influence of parents' cultural background and upbringing on parenting. Promotes understanding of non-violent disciplinary practices and children's developmental needs.	3 (1%)

* Refers to published sources: Department for Education (2013) commissioning toolkit and literature published by the organisations.

Table 3: Numbers of fathers receiving services

Type of service	Response rate to this question	N. of men taking part over last 12 months			
		Mean	Median	Range	St. dev.
Structured parenting programmes	101/140 (72%)	27	8	0-314	51
Practical activities for parents and children (including play)	85/137 (62%)	44	20	0-600	77
Unstructured parenting programmes	70/103 (68%)	20	12	0-70	19
Advice on employment or benefits	39/85 (46%)	17	9	0-130	25
Legal advice (e.g. about contact with children) *	25/44 (57%)	10	6	0-60	13
All services, including 'others' which did not fit the categories above *§	**	28	10	0-600	52

* Not including the outlier of one nation-wide service, since all others were local

§ Not including the outlier of one county-wide service, since all others were local

** No response rate could be calculated as 'other' services did not apply to most respondents

Recruitment of fathers

Qualitative responses were provided by 186 respondents to an open question about approaches to recruiting fathers to services. A brief summary is presented in Table 4. Many respondents emphasised attitudinal orientations to fathers, e.g. being open and honest, person-centred, being welcoming and non-judgemental, making a personal connection, having a respectful curiosity about their lives. In a similar vein, some noted the importance of asking fathers what they want, using their knowledge and expertise. Many simply noted the importance of always including men – i.e. assuming they are interested and their children matter to them; addressing them directly from the start; expecting men to be engaged even where separated from the children's mothers.

Another set of responses focused on practical measures: the need to improve data on families and ensure fathers are recorded, always addressing both partners in a couple, being flexible about the hours of engagement, including work on evenings and weekends if necessary (this was mentioned by several respondents). Other ideas included making venues inclusive of men, the use of promotional literature specifically targeting fathers, using men to promote services and educating other services to make them more father-friendly. It was perhaps surprising that only two respondents mentioned the value of having male staff or volunteers.

Special events for fathers and children were mentioned by several respondents. Some of these events were, intentionally, stand-alone sessions without an expectation of on-going commitment. Some targeted men with activities compatible with traditionally masculine roles: e.g. doing useful jobs in school rather than engaging directly with learning, help with gardening or some other physical activity. Food was mentioned several times as a draw for men: cheese toasties, biscuits and especially bacon rolls. Also mentioned were, bush tucker trials (i.e. unusual and challenging food challenges), football tournaments, treasure hunts, barbeques, fires, sawing wood, making dens and sliding down muddy banks.

Table 4: Summary of strategies for recruitment of fathers to interventions

Attitudinal orientation
Assumption of father's involvement from the start
Better data and recording systems
Flexible working hours
Special events for fathers and children
Providing food as a draw
Acknowledging the need for cultural diversity
Recruitment via mothers
Use of text messaging and email

There was a variety of views about whether it is better to approach fathers alongside women partners or separately from them, with contrary views on the success of these very different strategies. Only one respondent noted it was more effective for family recruitment to get fathers on board first. Several practitioners wrote that in practice they recruited men through their women partners. One respondent noted that some men are more comfortable meeting in an office than at home, but several more respondents thought home visits were helpful, especially to reassure fathers about attending a parenting course.

Word of mouth recruitment was mentioned by several, as was taking referrals from others agencies. Some respondents found the implicit coercion of the child protection system to be a useful way to get fathers to attend, whereas others noted the usefulness of not being associated with social services (i.e. public child welfare services). More creative approaches to finding men were more rarely mentioned than might have been expected. Isolated examples were street outreach and contacting fathers when they meet children from school. Cultural diversity was mentioned by just a couple of respondents – i.e. the need to show interest in different cultures and integrating Islamic values in working with Muslim fathers. Text messaging and email were mentioned by a few practitioners. One had the idea of getting children to design an invitation for fathers to attend a service.

Ideological and theoretical orientations

Survey respondents were first asked to rank statements about their rationale for working with fathers – also referred to here as their *ideological orientation*. The popularity of statements and their mean scores can be seen in Table 5. The most popular rationale was improving attachment between fathers and children, followed by improving the management of children's behaviour. Of the two weaker gender politics statements, improving fathers' well-being was ranked more highly than easing pressure on mothers. The two stronger statements of gender politics were the least popular, namely preventing men's abuse of children, followed by promoting fathers' rights. Only 25% (n=56) of respondents opted to write in their own rationale for working with fathers but most of these then ranked this statement first or second. The differences in ranking between each statement were significant at the 0.05 level (Wilcoxon signed ranks test).

Next, survey respondents were given seven statements about theoretical approach to intervention and asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each one. The statements reflected some of the main categories of social work intervention theory (see Table 5). The two most popular were what could be termed a behaviourist approach, followed by a cognitive approach. Third most popular was a psychodynamic approach. Fourth, fifth and sixth most popular were an emphasis on material help, a feminist approach and what could be termed non-directive counselling, although it should be

noted that the differences in scores between these three were not significant at the 0.05 level. The least most popular was a family systems approach.

Table 5: Ideological and theoretical orientations of interventions, listed in order of popularity

	Mean rank (7=highest; 1=lowest)	Standard deviation
Rationale for working with fathers		
1. To improve attachment between fathers and children	6.23	0.99
2. To improve the management of children's behaviour	5.35	1.33
3. To improve the wellbeing of fathers	4.72	1.28
4. To take the pressure off mothers	3.62	1.38
5. To prevent men's abuse of women and children	3.14	1.47
6. To promote fathers' rights	2.71	1.29
7. Respondent's own reason (could be left blank)	2.23	2.23
	Mean score (7=strongly agree; 1=strongly disagree)	Standard deviation
Approaches to working with fathers:		
Statement (<i>theoretical label</i>)		
1. Fathers can learn techniques to manage their children's behaviour better (<i>behaviourist</i>)	6.31	1.03
2. Fathers can learn to change the way they parent by learning new ways of thinking about problems (<i>cognitive</i>)	6.20	0.98
3. Fathers need insight into emotional problems which are rooted in past experiences (<i>psychodynamic</i>)	5.62	1.18
4. It is important to help fathers and their families improve their material conditions, such as income and housing (<i>material help</i>) *	5.40	1.12
5. We should encourage fathers to change their attitudes towards gender roles and do more child care so that families are fairer for women (<i>feminist</i>) * §	5.26	1.26
6. The best help we can give fathers is to listen to them talk about their problems (<i>counselling</i>) §	5.19	1.37
7. You cannot change fathers' patterns of behaviour unless you look at the whole family system (<i>family systems</i>)	4.57	1.65

* and § = the differences between these pairs of statements are not significant at the 0.05 level (Wilcoxon signed ranks test). All other differences between statements in ranking and scoring are significant.

Sensitivity analyses

No association was found between gender politics statements – either weaker or stronger varieties - and whether services were universal or targeted (universal v. any targeting). Similarly, there was no association between gender politics and organisational location (public sector v. independent sector).

For structured parent training and unstructured support groups, practitioners providing services for fathers only were compared with those providing services for both parents, in terms of how they responded to the ideological and theoretical statements. Similar comparisons were not made for the other kinds of services listed in Tables 1-3, because these are essentially practical services, limiting the range of theoretical options, in contrast with parent training and support groups where choices need to be made about ideology and intervention theory. The majority of these sensitivity analyses found no significant difference at the 0.05 level, but some did find differences between groups.

For structured parent training, practitioners running services for fathers only were more likely to agree or strongly agree with a feminist approach – i.e. encouraging fathers to change gender roles ($z=-2.16$, $p=0.03$) and they also gave higher ranks to the importance of improving fathers' attachments with their children ($z=-2.06$, $p=0.04$). A surprising finding was that practitioners offering services for both parents gave higher ranking to the importance of promoting fathers' rights ($z=2.002$, $p=0.05$).

For unstructured support groups, practitioners providing services for both parents gave a higher ranking to the importance of improving the management of children's behaviour ($z=2.31$, $p=0.02$). They were also more likely to agree or strongly agree with statements about behavioural interventions ($z=-1.99$, $p=0.05$) and material help ($z=-2.03$, $p=0.04$) than were practitioners working with fathers only.

Evidence base for services provided

Qualitative responses were received from 101 practitioners (46% of sample) on the evidence base for services. The question asked in the survey allowed for a range of different kinds of evidence from practice wisdom to systematic reviews. Responses were coded into broad categories. Numbers of responses matched percentages, as the number was so close to 100. Thirteen responses did in fact not address evaluation at all. The most common response ($n=38$) was to emphasise personal experience and practice wisdom. Examples of this kind of response were 'good quality professional counselling / psychotherapy training plus ten years' experience of delivering the service' and 'practice wisdom and the fact that fathers have been open to communication in the work undertaken'. Fifteen responses were of a very general nature. For example, one respondent simply stated 'evidence-based parenting programmes'.

Three respondents referred to specific research evidence about some aspect of fathering, but without any mention of service outcomes. Twenty respondents mentioned specific internal evaluation systems. These included the use of standardised measures (e.g. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) and less structured but systematically collected feedback from fathers attending services.

Eight respondents either specifically mentioned randomised controlled trials (RCTs) or else referred to independent evaluations of programmes known to have evidence of effectiveness from RCTs, such as the Triple P parenting programme (Sanders, 2012). Four respondents mentioned specific external service evaluations which did not involve RCTs.

Discussion and implications

In line with fathers being non-traditional clients of family welfare services, the survey responses suggest that numbers of fathers receiving services in the UK are typically small – across all services a median of ten fathers in the last twelve months. A slightly higher proportion of men were reported to be attending structured parenting programmes than was found in Lindsay's (2011) English study.

It is conceivable that the picture is different across the four nations of the UK than that in England, but the finding might simply be explained by selection bias, insofar as practitioners with a conscious interest in work with fathers are more likely to take part in the current survey than parenting practitioners who give little thought to the need to involve fathers.

Both the survey responses on types of services and the responses to the intervention ideology and theory statements suggest that mainstream approaches to parenting support are prevalent. By 'mainstream approaches', we are referring to the use of structured parent training courses and practical help including play, as well as underpinning cognitive and behavioural ideas. More practical approaches such as behaviour management and material help, were favoured by those working with both parents, compared to those working with fathers only (in unstructured support groups), which might suggest that father-only work can tend to be introspective. Most services were said to be universal rather than targeted, reflecting the direction of policy in recent years (see, for example, Lewis, 2011 on England).

The relative lack of overt gender politics may be disappointing to those who are primarily motivated by either feminism or men's rights. In particular, feminist practitioners may perhaps not be too pleased that improving the well-being of fathers received a higher mean agreement score than taking the pressure of mothers. Interestingly, there were indications that those working with both parents had stronger feminist views than those working with fathers only, at least for unstructured support groups. This needs further exploration in future research. The relatively unpopularity of family systems approaches may be primarily explained by the format of services, whereby few are working with whole families and most with individual family members.

Responses on recruitment of fathers to services suggested that attitudinal orientation and basic inclusive practice such as always addressing fathers as well as mothers were seen to be important, and more so than recruiting men via any non-traditional location. It was interesting that having male staff was not noted as important. This may reflect the reality that having a same-gender worker is much less important than the inter-personal skills of a worker of whatever sex. However, it may also reflect the reality that male staff are simply not available in most family services.

Looking at the named interventions provided for fathers and the responses on evaluation, it could be concluded that a robust evidence base – i.e. experimental evaluations – play a relatively small part in services for fathers. There is some provision of parenting programmes which have RCT evidence, although it should be noted that even for these apparently well-supported interventions, outcomes may not be as good for fathers as for mothers (Nowak and Heinrichs, 2008). These programmes (Triple P, Incredible Years) were the most commonly used named interventions, but they were nonetheless a minority of all responses. There were no specified interventions for fathers only which were as popular as these named parenting courses, and neither do any interventions for fathers only that were used by survey respondents have as strong an evidence base as these parenting courses. Many interventions seem to be unique to one locality.

However, although this aspect was not specifically tested in the survey, it could be said that some of the ten 'characteristics of effective fatherhood programs' identified by Bronte-Tinkew *et al.* (2007: 10-12), on the basis of what is known more generally about effective social interventions, may well have been present in many of the specific interventions for fathers. The following characteristics were at least implied in many of the survey responses, especially when qualitative data are considered:

- Incorporating teaching methods and materials appropriate for fathers and the cultures of the populations served;
- Selecting teachers or leaders who believed in the program they were implementing and then provided them with training;

- Using targeted curricula;
- Using theoretical approaches that have been effective in influencing parenting behaviours in other contexts;
- Employing a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on the fathers as individuals, thereby personalizing the information;

The study is generally limited insofar as the only data are from practitioner self-report, with no triangulation via documentary evidence, observation or interviews with fathers, mothers and children. Furthermore, responses were only received from 53% of local areas. A specific limitation is that judging services to be for fathers only or for all parents was done on the basis of the percentage of men attending services. This judgement cannot take account of where respondents were in fact referring to more than one type of service, some of which may have been for all parents and some for fathers only. The statements used to indicate ideological and theoretical preference have not been validated, so should be considered a pilot only.

Conclusion

This survey provides some insight into the UK national picture of which services are being provided for fathers to improve children's well-being. Further evidence would be useful to go beyond practitioner self-report. A comparison with other countries to build on this UK pilot would also be useful. Most importantly, robust evidence on the outcomes of social interventions with fathers should be considered a priority.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Working with fathers – a practitioner survey

Where are you?

Click on the local authority where your work is based. English authorities are first in the list, followed by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (*list provided*)

In what organisation is this work with fathers based?

- Social services
- Voluntary sector (e.g. Barnardo's)
- Health service (e.g. CAMHS)
- Sure Start / Flying Start
- Probation
- Youth justice
- Prison
- Other (please state)

What services do you provide?

Please tell us about the services provided by your organisation which fathers take part in. Complete the other columns for each one where the answer is YES

	Service provided? Yes / No	Please add a sentence or two to describe this service (if a named programme, e.g. Triple P, please state name	What % of parents using this service over the last 12 months are fathers?	How many fathers have taken part in the last 12 months?
Structured parent training Classes				
Unstructured support group				
Practical activities for parents and children (including play)				
Legal advice (e.g. about contact with children)				
Advice on employment or Benefits				
Other (please specify)				

Who is the target of these services?

- They are universal
- They are targetted on fathers who are vulnerable or in need of support
- They are specialist services for fathers with complex needs

If you need to, please expand to clarify the answer you have just given on targeting

Why do you work with fathers?

Please drag and drop the statements below to show how important they are to you as reasons for working with fathers. (1 = most important and 7 = least important)

- To improve the management of children's behaviour
- To take the pressure off mothers
- To improve attachment between fathers and children
- To improve the wellbeing of fathers
- To prevent men's abuse of women and children
- To promote fathers' rights
- Add your own reason for working with fathers here if you like or just leave it blank

What approach to intervention do you think is most helpful for fathers?

If you use a particular approach in your intervention with fathers, please name the theory or theories on which this is based (this is optional).

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements (Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Somewhat Disagree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Somewhat Agree / Agree / Strongly Agree)

- You cannot change fathers' patterns of behaviour unless you look at the whole family system.
- Fathers can learn to change the way they parent by learning new ways of thinking about problems.
- Fathers can learn techniques to manage their children's behaviour better.
- We should encourage fathers to change their attitudes towards gender roles and do more child care so that families are fairer for women.
- The best help we can give fathers is to listen to them talk about their problems
- Fathers need insight into emotional problems which are rooted in past experiences
- It is important to help fathers and their families improve their material conditions, such as income and housing.

Recruiting fathers to take part in your services

Please list the most successful strategies you have used to recruit fathers to your services. List 1-3 strategies and especially anything that has worked well for men who might be considered 'hard-to reach'

Evaluation

What kind of evidence is intervention approach based on? For example, you might have based it on practice wisdom, expert opinion or knowledge of similar services provided elsewhere. Or you might have had some evidence from formal evaluations or systematic reviews. Please answer in the box below.