

# How to talk about 'mums and dads' without excluding 'non-traditional' families.

Source: <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2014/how-to-talk-about-mums-and-dads-without-excluding-lgbt-parents/>

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One of the points we often stress in our work is the importance of actively using the 'F' word (Father) in any letters, posters, papers, briefings, tender documents or other communications you produce.

We are often challenged on this, sometimes on the basis that there are families where there 'isn't a dad' – especially lone (mother-headed) families and those where children 'have two mums'.

Our view is that as a general principle, promoting your focus on 'mothers and fathers' rather than 'parents' enables you to make crystal clear to your audience that you value, and are addressing the issue of, men's involvement in parenting.

This is important because it helps create a situation where dads, as well as mums, feel comfortable and valued – in the context of a culture which still privileges women as more naturally suited to caring, more important as parents (and by extension, less important in other ways).

Unless you explicitly address fathers, they are overlooked and implicitly excluded: most people (mothers and fathers, practitioners, policymakers, researchers etc) see the word 'parents' and read it (consciously or subconsciously) as meaning 'mothers'.

## Some useful evidence

Two health visitors in Grantham, Lincolnshire, conducted a comparative study in which one continued to use the standard letter about the primary birth visit, while the other used a new father-inclusive version (below). With the standard letter 3 out of 15 Dads attended, while with the father-inclusive letter 11/16 dads attended. That's an increase from 20% to 70%.

*Dear new Mum & Dad,  
Congratulations on the safe arrival of your baby. As your Health Visitor, I will take over your care from your midwife. I would like to arrange an appointment to see you both at your home to review baby's progress and explain my role.*

*In order to have an appointment that is convenient for you both, could I ask you to contact me on the above telephone number to arrange a time/date before your baby reaches two weeks of age.*

*I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

*Best wishes,  
Health Visitor*

## **What about ‘non-traditional families?’**

To give you an idea of scale:

- In the UK at the time of the birth, mothers report that only three men in every thousand (0.3%) are unaware of the pregnancy, and only two women in every thousand (0.2%) report having a same-sex partner.
- Around 1 in 4 families don’t fit the traditional ‘mum, dad and children, all living in the same house’ model. But in around half of the apparently ‘father-absent’ homes, the child’s birth father is playing a huge part in his child’s life. The others may not, for whatever reason, be massively involved – but they’re still very much around in the child’s consciousness. Stepfathers and other father-figures are also important; and it’s worth noting that children in lone parent families are actually in close contact with more males than are children raised by two birth parents together.
- A few fathers are dead, some are in prison, and a small number are able to see their children, but do not. As noted above, a tiny number of children have two mums (though quite often with a donor-dad or dads, or other ‘father figures’ in the picture). An even tinier number live with two dads (again, often but not always with a mother or mothers in the picture).
- Small numbers of children have a dead or otherwise unavailable mother; small numbers are cared for in children’s homes.

Crucially, even where fathers *are* truly absent, this doesn’t mean that the concept of *having a father* is absent from children’s lives and understandings (or from their mothers’) – or that mothers object to the idea of involved fatherhood.

*(Anecdotally, Fatherhood Institute trainers also report that on the rare occasions where an FI training course has included lesbian mums, they have been supportive of our approach because they felt it was inclusive, identified all the people around the child and was respectful of the roles everyone played.)*

## **When writing to parents...**

The ideal to aim for is to have such good data about everyone in the family, that your letters would be addressed to named people – and that if a child lives across more than one household, you’d be writing to named people in each household, because all the adults involved in that child’s life have significance, and you’re engaging successfully with them.

If you haven’t got to that point yet, and you’re worried that simply addressing something to ‘Mum and Dad’ suggests you’re promoting a particular, ‘traditional’ model of family life, we would suggest that you clarify further with a footnote. So for example, a school might

address a letter home thus (along with a clear message asking them to update the information you have for them, so that next time you can address them more personally):

*Dear Mum and Dad\**

*[Body of letter]*

*\*We use the terms 'mum' and 'dad' to refer to birth parents and other mother- and father-figures, including stepmums, stepdads, partners or boyfriends/girlfriends who have a caring role; and, where relevant, grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles etc. We include any such adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.*

## **When talking to children about their families...**

The best way to be inclusive is to explain that when you talk about 'fathers', this includes fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, other father-figures – and could include "someone who's like a dad to you" (and specify that "it could be your mum").

For more guidance on the particular challenges of being inclusive of children with LGBT parents, have a look at Stonewall's guide [Including Different Families](#).