

EVIDENCE RESPONSE

Supporting fathers: what difference does early intervention and support make to the children of contact fathers and fathers with care

This report was produced by *About Families* as part of a pilot of an Evidence Request System. It will outline key points, give comments on the range and type of research found and report on the findings. Spotlight boxes offering examples of programmes are included throughout. The appendix gives search details, keywords used and references. Weblinks for references are included where possible.

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About Families aims to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing relevant and accessible evidence to inform service development.

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1. KEY POINTS

What do we know?: there is little evidence on the outcomes of parenting programmes for children and few interventions involving fathers have been evaluated. Evaluations that exist tend to look at the process, rather than outcomes, of interventions and control group evaluation is difficult for both ethical and practical reasons. Evaluations often refer to 'parents' rather than mothers or fathers, and references to fathers generally do not state whether they are in a couple, a step-father, non-resident or the primary carer. Consequently, evaluations only provide a partial picture of 'what works' and only partial understanding of why some programmes work better than others.

Parenting style and child outcomes: parenting style is linked to well-being in childhood and adult life, and the involvement of fathers in parenting is important. This suggests that improving fathers' parenting skills can have positive impacts on family life and children's outcomes. Programmes which promote an authoritative style of parenting and/or support co-parenting are particularly likely to improve outcomes for fathers and their children.

Parenting programmes and child outcomes: parenting programmes can improve parenting practices and improve child behaviour. Behavioural parent training has been consistently shown to improve parenting practices and reduce conduct problems in children.

Parenting programmes offer longer-term benefits: parents learn strategies which enable them to bring about improvements in their own and their children's behaviour, which can be maintained after the programme ends.

Fathers, parenting programmes and child outcomes: good father-child relationships are important to children's long-term outcomes, and can be improved through parenting education. Children of participating fathers have shown healthier behaviour, better school-readiness and improved self-

perception, particularly where fathers' participation in the programme was substantial.

Benefits of engaging with family professionals: engagement with family professionals can impact positively on fathers' negative behaviour and parenting styles; increase their knowledge and understanding of child development; increase their confidence in their parenting skills; and lead to more sensitive and positive parenting and to greater involvement in infant and child care, and in interaction with children. Fathers are able to transfer learning to the home environment, and see benefits to their children via benefits to themselves.

What works for fathers? Services for fathers are most successful when they are underpinned by theory, have specific outcomes and clear mechanisms. Fathers are more likely to participate in programmes when goals are clear. Attempts to 'hook' fathers using one service into other services are often unsuccessful, particularly with vulnerable fathers.

Father-friendly programmes: since fathers are much less likely to participate in programmes, personalising services for fathers can help with inclusion and retention. Assessing the needs of separated, divorced and other non-resident fathers alongside those of resident fathers and step-fathers is important.

2. COMMENTS ON THE RESEARCH

Summary

While a range of evidence is available on the importance of fathers to children and family life, there is little evidence on the outcomes of parenting programmes for children, and in particular parenting programmes and interventions aimed at fathers.

Evaluations that exist tend to look at the process, rather than outcomes, of interventions. Where they do look at outcomes, they tend to refer to outcomes for the parent (e.g. increased understanding of child development, increased confidence). However, since evidence shows that parenting style and skills impact on child outcomes, it is reasonable to suggest that programmes aiming to improve parenting skills can benefit children.

Most of the literature concerning the way in which parents can be supported in improving emotional and behavioural outcomes for their children focuses on their role in reducing non-compliant or antisocial behaviour. Interventions often focus on parenting practices because of the associations between harsh, inconsistent parental discipline, poor monitoring and supervision, and emotional and behaviour problems in children (Social Services Improvement Agency, 2008).

Evaluations often refer to 'parents' rather than mothers or fathers. References to fathers generally do not state whether they are in a couple, non-resident or the primary carer.

For the above reasons, this brief report has included evidence relating to parenting style and parenting programmes linked with outcomes for children, as well as evidence relating to programmes aimed specifically at fathers. References to, and examples of, interventions including contact fathers or fathers with care are given where possible and clearly stated using the same terminology as the evidence cited.

Gaps in evaluation

Few interventions involving fathers have been evaluated. Existing evaluations do not tend to assess outcomes for children. A review of interventions in the US reported that few fatherhood programmes have been systematically evaluated. Of those that have, none has investigated whether interventions may have different effects when unmarried fathers live with or apart from the child. Furthermore, programmes rarely assess child outcomes systematically (Cowan et al, 2010). Similarly, a meta-analysis of resident fathering education programmes notes a dearth of long term follow-up evaluation (Holmes et al, 2010).

It seems an increase in fatherhood programmes designed to promote paternal involvement and positive family outcomes has not been accompanied by a rise in evaluations (Pruett et al 2009; Moran et al 2004).

Where evaluations are carried out, they often assess the process of the intervention rather than the outcomes. Material relating to the effectiveness of parenting programmes for fathers often refers to the recruitment and retention of fathers on programmes, rather than effective outcomes for fathers and children (Hollingworth et al; Geddes 2011).

Evaluations of parenting programmes do not always capture information by gender. The evidence base for the efficacy of mainstream parenting programmes (such as Triple P, Strengthening Families/Strengthening Communities or Incredible Years) is problematic when looking at what works for fathers. Most evaluations do not collect or present findings by gender. Too few fathers may have attended for viable conclusions to be drawn; their attendance may have been relatively sporadic; facilitators may have engaged more substantially with mothers (Fatherhood Institute, 2009).

Consequently, evaluations only provide a partial picture of ‘what works’ and only partial understanding of why some programmes work better than others. A report by the Policy Research Bureau summarises what is *not* known about what works in parenting support programmes, based on current international research:

- how effective UK parenting interventions are;
- the extent to which interventions can successfully translate from other countries to the UK;
- not just what works, but for whom and under which circumstances;
- whether positive changes in parenting and child behaviour can be sustained over the long term;
- what aspects of parenting support are most effective when working with fathers and how programmes need to be better designed to meet their needs;
- the optimal duration of different types of interventions.

However, it is clear that the provision of parenting programmes represent an important pathway to helping parents (Moran et al, 2004).

Evaluations in Scotland

Measuring the effectiveness of early childhood interventions is difficult.

A Scottish study shows that early childhood interventions are often complex and few report on outcomes. Control group evaluation is difficult for both ethical and practical reasons; consequently few evaluations of early years interventions have control groups (Geddes, 2011).

Of 23 maternal, family and parenting programmes currently operating in Scotland (e.g. Mellow Parenting), 4 had evaluations with control groups and 9 had some form of evaluation in place, though not necessarily assessing outcomes. In line with evaluations in the UK and internationally, most evaluations are descriptive (looking at the process and, for example, describing how many people participated) rather than monitoring impact and outcomes (Geddes, 2011).

3. REPORT ON FINDINGS

a) Evidence on parenting styles

Although few evaluations of parenting programmes (including those aimed at fathers) assess outcomes for children, evidence shows a link between parenting style and its impact on children. This suggests that improving parenting skills can have positive impacts on family life and children's outcomes.

Parenting style influences health and well-being in childhood and adult life. How a child is looked after at home has a crucial impact on their development, educationally, emotionally and physically. Adequate or good parenting has a protective influence against some of the negative outcomes linked to deprivation. Negative parenting styles are strongly linked with emotional and behavioural difficulties in children and young people, while positive, nurturing relationships between children and parents/carers are a crucial foundation for well-adjusted development. How parents communicate and resolve conflict in families are key in the development of child conduct and peer relationships. However, the child's temperament and other child or environmental factors will also have an impact on parenting and child outcomes generally (Social Services Improvement Agency, 2008).

Programmes which promote an authoritative style of parenting and/or support co-parenting are particularly likely to improve outcomes for fathers and their children. Examples of such programmes include the *Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1997), *Triple P* (Sanders et al, 2000), the *Supporting Father Involvement Project* (Cowan et al, 2009) and the *Marriage and Parenting in Stepfamilies Intervention (MAPS)* (DeGarmo and Forgatch, 2007) which have all undergone at least one randomised controlled trial and have demonstrated improvements in both fathers' and children's behaviour (all cited in Asmussen et al, 2010).

The involvement of fathers in parenting is important. Research based on the National Child Development Study shows that fathers' involvement when a

child is aged 7 is linked to later educational achievement, a good parent-child relationship in adolescence, and protection from later mental health problems for children in separated families (Sure Start, 2006 and Goldman, 2005 cited in Hollingworth et al).

b) Parenting programmes and outcomes for parents and children

Given that evaluations do not necessarily capture information on gender, material on parenting programmes which refer to 'parents' (i.e. not specifying gender) are included in this evidence response.

Parenting programmes can improve parenting practices and improve child behaviour. Programmes developed specifically for parents of children with conduct and behavioural problems, such as Webster Stratton Incredible Years and Triple P, tend to be built around the primary-school age group, aiming to prevent problems in adolescence. Group-based parenting programmes such as these have been shown to reduce behaviour problems in children aged 3 to 10 (Liabo et al 2004, cited in Hollingworth et al). Behavioural parent training, whether on a group, family or individual basis and whether self-administered or not, has been consistently shown to improve parenting practices and reduce conduct problems in children (Barrett, 2010).

Parents learn strategies which offer longer-term benefits. A further report on the implementation and impact of four evidence-based parenting programmes - Incredible Years, Triple P, Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities, and the Strengthening Families Programme 10-14 (collectively aimed at children aged 8 to 13 years) - shows that most parents interviewed said they learned strategies that enabled them to bring about positive change in their own and their children's behaviour. Parents interviewed 3-6 months after the programme ended reported that these improvements had been maintained. However, there was limited evidence of father-specific recruitment (Lindsay et al, 2010).

Programme spotlight

The SPOKES programme (Supporting Parents on Kids Education) is based on the Incredible Years Webster Stratton Programme in conjunction with a parent led literacy programme. SPOKES was developed by Oxford University and the Institute for Psychiatry, London to facilitate parental support of child learning and literacy (using the 'pause, prompt and praise' technique), and develop effective child behaviour management strategies. It has been shown to reduce anti-social behaviour and improve reading ability (Hollingworth et al).

c) Programmes for fathers and outcomes for fathers and children

Good father-child relationships are important to children's long-term outcomes, and can be improved through parenting education. Parent-education directed at fathers (in schools, prisons, family centres, home visiting, etc.) can improve father-child relationship quality and quantity. Children of participating fathers have shown healthier behaviour, better school-readiness and improved self-perception, particularly where fathers' participation in the programme was substantial (Utting, 2009; Fatherhood Institute, 2009).

Programme spotlight

An evaluation of the effects of participation in a Head Start-based father involvement intervention programme for fathers and their children in the US suggests that high levels of participation in the intervention are related to increased father involvement with children. These children showed higher mathematics readiness, while children of fathers with low participation levels showed a significant increase in behaviour problems (Fagan et al, 1999).

Engaging with family professionals can benefit fathers' parenting.

Engagement with family professionals can impact positively on fathers' negative behaviour and parenting styles; increase their knowledge and understanding of child development; increase their confidence in their parenting skills; and lead to more sensitive and positive parenting and to greater involvement in infant and child care, and in interaction with children (Pfannensteil and Honig 1995; O'Brien 2004; both cited in Fatherhood Institute [online]).

Fathers who have been involved in public service programmes have commented on their learning as parents and how they have transferred this learning from the programme to the home environment. They highlight the value of being able to spend 'quality time' with their child, and see benefits to their children via benefits to themselves. As one father comments, 'If I am a better father, he will be a better kid' (Fagan and Palm 2004 cited in Fatherhood Institute [online]).

Programme spotlight

Dads Work – Neighbourhood Service, Aberdeen City

Dads Work is a project in Aberdeen which was set up 4 years ago to help fathers and in particular, those with chaotic lives. It aims to promote education in parenting and provide a range of supportive experiences and skills for men with parental responsibilities.

Many of the men attending the groups have gone on to take a more active, positive role in the care of their children. Evidence of this can be found in the decisions and planning found within Child Protection Case Conferences, Looked After Children Reviews and Family Centre Reviews (Making the Gender Equality Duty Real [online]^a).

Family Action Nottingham's Break the Cycle project worked to improve outcomes for children and young people by working with fathers whose parenting is a cause for concern. These included fathers known to social services or CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service), fathers involved in legal proceedings around custody, contact and/or access via the courts, and fathers whose parenting has raised safeguarding issues, formal or otherwise.

The project aimed to promote positive fatherhood by encouraging and supporting fathers to develop a greater understanding of, and confidence in, their parenting role and by challenging the obstacles that fathers frequently encounter. It offered parenting programmes and support groups, as well as a range of 'wrap around' support services specifically geared to the needs of fathers.

95% of fathers/male carers who had participated in the project reported resumed contact or increased contact with their child or children (Morgan et al, 2011).

Children with fathers involved in their learning do better at school and have better mental health, even after other factors such as fathers' socio-economic status and education have been taken into account (Flouri and Buchanan 2001 cited in Family and Parenting Institute [online]). Well attended 'dads clubs' activities within schools have resulted in behaviour/educational progress among individual children (Goldman 2005, cited in Fatherhood Institute 2010).

In the UK, systematic inclusion of very vulnerable fathers in an Education Action Zone primary school resulted in some remarkable turnarounds in father-child relationships, including among non-resident fathers, accompanied by substantial improvements in some children's school behaviour, interest in

school and school achievement (Mantle et al 2006, cited in Fatherhood Institute 2010).

d) What works for fathers?

Early interventions mean better and longer-lasting outcomes for children.

However, late intervention is better than none and may help parents deal with parenting under stress (Moran et al, 2004).

A clear purpose and outcome are important. Fathers are more likely to appreciate why their attendance is necessary and be more motivated to participate in the programme when goals are clear (Asmussen et al, 2010).

Services for fathers are most successful when they are underpinned by theory, have specific outcomes and clear mechanisms. Interventions should have a clearly specified target group, a clearly specified theory of change based upon solid theories of child development and therapeutic support, mechanisms for ensuring continued participation and a proven track record for improving outcomes for fathers *and* children. Interventions should also be clear about intended outcomes and how they will be achieved (Asmussen et al, 2010).

Most UK services targeting fathers lack these elements. The key aim is usually to 'hook' fathers using one service into other services, yet this strategy is often unsuccessful. Moreover, 'hook' services are most often attended by the most able fathers. More substantive interventions which are targeted specifically at vulnerable fathers and their families are preferable (Asmussen et al, 2010).

Fathering interventions are more effective if they promote authoritative parenting, good communication with the mother and efficacy in co-parenting (Asmussen et al, 2010).

Programme spotlight

Group work with fathers in Scotland. A recent review of practice development in Scotland found that at least 3 local authority areas have groups that work specifically with fathers. Practitioners highlighted the importance of adapting parenting support approaches to suit male participants as they had been found to be less likely to engage. Group work and the use of activity-based tasks, for example, had proved to be very effective (Hutton et al, 2007).

Action for Children in North Solihull works with dads of children aged one to three. They used 'hands-on' or practical services, such as the Campaign for Learning – Family Learning Works materials, 'Best Coach' course, and PAFT (Parents as First Teachers) approach to child development. These proved effective ways of working with dads and male carers, offering them an end product and something they were able to take away, which was key to engaging and keeping them involved. Dads reported having a more balanced and calmer home life, a more positive relationship with their children, being more willing to do things with them and having developed skills to support their children's development (Dalzel et al, 2009).

e) Father-friendly programmes

Some fathers prefer 'fathers only' groups, though others are just as likely to attend parenting groups that include fathers and mothers (Fagan 1999, cited in Asmussen et al, 2010). However, the evidence does not indicate whether preferences differ between separated, non-separated, non-resident or primary carer fathers.

Since fathers are much less likely to participate in programmes, personalising services for fathers can help with inclusion and retention (Hollingworth et al). Decisions about resources for supporting fathers cannot be based on assumptions that mothers and fathers will simply access the same services delivered at the same times and in the same places. Assessing the needs of separated, divorced and other non-resident fathers alongside those of resident fathers and step-fathers is important (Utting, 2009).

Programme spotlight

Mellow Dads/The Dad's Club - West Lothian Sure Start

Informal, peer learning is fundamental to the approach of this intervention. Fathers play more with the children and are more relaxed, so they have more fun. They are often surprised and pleased to find there are fewer behavioural issues to deal with at home and that their children seem happier. Over the weeks fathers also notice changes in their children's development. (Making the Gender Equality Duty Real [online]_b).

Other reported outcomes from a range of parenting programmes with fathers in England, which aimed to promote active and positive fatherhood, with a particular emphasis on engaging fathers in their children's learning and development include:

North Staffordshire YMCA

90% of non-resident fathers now play a more significant role in their child's life

SCOPE North East Lincolnshire

75% of fathers are more involved in their disabled child's care since attending the Face2Face dads' breakfast group

Barnardo's Liverpool

96% of fathers demonstrate more positive involvement with their family

(Morgan et al, 2011)

4. APPENDIX

About Families Evidence Request System

This brief evidence report has been produced by About Families as part of a pilot of an Evidence Request System. It aims to help services supporting parents, including families affected by disability, to develop services that are based on reliable evidence. The pilot of the system is yet to be evaluated at the time of writing this report.

How the research was carried out

Existing evidence was searched for in the following way:

Research standards: To ensure high quality all evidence drawn on is peer-reviewed¹, publicly funded or produced by government bodies. The draft report was field-reviewed².

Key sources searched:

- Australian Fatherhood Network
- Families Need Fathers
- Family and Parenting Institute
- Fatherhood Institute
- Google Scholar
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Making Gender Equality Real (Children in Scotland)
- National Academy for Parenting Research
- Scottish Government
- UK Government
- Web of Science academic database

¹ Peer review is a process used to ensure the quality of academic work through a process of academics with similar expertise reviewing each other's work.

² Field review involves professionals working within the relevant sector reviewing draft reports independently

Keywords: Searches were conducted using combinations of: father, dad, parent, carer, parenting, outcomes, children, non-resident, resident, contact, evaluation, intervention, programme, service/s, family, support.

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