Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a two-year action research project on the engagement of fathers with social care services. Funded by the DCSF/Parenting Fund, the project included:

- work with two Children’s Services authorities to develop “best practice” models on working with fathers that could be replicated elsewhere;
- a survey of, and work with, higher education institutions to improve the teaching of social work students on engaging fathers;
- involving fathers in social work course design and delivery;
- developing and piloting a training course for social care workers and managers entitled “Addressing child welfare concerns – working with fathers”;
- supporting fathers to become joint trainers on this and other social care education courses; and
- legal information and advice for fathers, paternal relatives and practitioners via Family Rights Group’s advice service, electronic discussion boards on the Family Rights Group website and project newsletters.

The report’s recommendations also draw upon the findings from Fathers Matter Round 1, which are set out in the publication Fathers Matter: Research findings on fathers and their involvement with social care services (Family Rights Group, 2006).

Background

In 2004, Family Rights Group submitted a successful two-year bid to the Parenting Fund, in conjunction with Children Law UK (now part of TACT), Fathers Direct (now The Fatherhood Institute), The Grandparents’ Association and a local Hackney youth organisation SKY Partnership (now SkyWay). The proposal was to develop a project that aimed to identify barriers to the involvement of fathers and paternal...

1 Ashley, Featherstone, Roskill, Ryan, White (2006) Fathers Matter: Research findings on fathers and their involvement with social care services (London, Family Rights Group)
relatives within the child welfare system. The project started to examine what works for fathers and why.

Family Rights Group was prompted to draw together this bid because of the increasing number of calls its advice service was receiving from non-resident fathers and paternal relatives. Some of these callers had only heard late in the day that their child had been taken into care. Some had confronted inconsistencies in policies and practices across the country and even within the same authority. As well as being overlooked by social care services, there appeared to be a lack of suitable support and information for these fathers. Family Rights Group found that partner organisations were also witnessing a similar trend.

It was not only family members who lacked support. There also appeared to be a lack of practical help and advice to inform the work that practitioners undertake with fathers in the voluntary and statutory sectors. Moreover, there was no published research study in the United Kingdom that exclusively examined the role and involvement of fathers in the child protection process.

The Fathers Matter Round 1 project included:

- a detailed analysis of calls from fathers to Family Rights Group’s advice line;
- an international literature review;
- focus groups and interviews with social care service users, including fathers, mothers and wider family members; and
- a survey of local authority Children’s Services.

The project was overseen by a steering group and the findings were discussed at a seminar and presented and considered at a conference held in June 2006. They were also published in the report *Fathers Matter*. Later in 2006, Family Rights Group and its partners successfully applied for a further two years’ funding to the then DfES/Parenting Fund\(^2\) to take forward the findings from Fathers Matter Round 1. The work was to focus, although not exclusively, on local Parenting Fund areas. This report is the culmination of this research project.

**Fathers Matter 2 recommendations**

\(^2\) Now called DCSF/Parenting Fund
Family Rights Group and its partners on the steering group have drawn up the following recommendations to improve the safe engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in their children’s lives. These are based upon the project’s research findings from Fathers Matter 1 and 2, as well as published academic research in this field.

These recommendations reflect examples of good local practice by social care practitioners and agencies that could be replicated elsewhere. They are also intended to address gaps in research knowledge and to achieve improvements in policy and practice.

Our proposals are as follows:

(A) Research
There remains a dearth of research in the United Kingdom on fathers’ involvement in children’s welfare and the social care system.

We therefore recommend that a research programme is commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), in conjunction with other key research commissioning bodies, that addresses the following areas:

- how social care agencies can effectively engage with fathers and the variety of father figures who are important to many vulnerable children;
- the impact of specific treatment programmes commissioned by social care services on fathers’ behaviour and relationships;
- the perspective of fathers from different minority ethnic groups, their experiences of fatherhood and their interaction with social care services;
- risk or resource? – the impact of fathers on outcomes for children in vulnerable families;
- the impact of fathers in families where children are at significant risk of neglect;
- children living in troubled families – their perspective on their fathers; and
- whether men who are or have been violent to their partners can be or become good fathers. If so, how?

(B) Education and training
When Children’s Services are involved with a family, how and whether fathers and father figures are engaged in planning and decision making
for their children remains largely dependent on the skills, knowledge and attitudes of individual practitioners and their immediate line managers. The starting point for improving practice must therefore be the education and training of social workers.

1. Drawing upon the audit of social work courses, we believe it is critical that all courses teach the following:

- the changing roles and responsibilities in contemporary fathering and the opportunities and constraints faced by those experiencing social exclusion and disadvantage;
- relationship work, so that social workers are equipped to engage with complexity, hostility and with the difficulties of intimate relationships;
- how to carry out good quality assessments that engage with the birth father, other father figures and significant adults, such as paternal relatives, who could be important to the child;
- gender and power, including conflicted and abusive relationships;
- the need for professionals to be able to engage with fathers’ versions of events in an open and exploratory way as well as acknowledging the wide range of beliefs, perceptions and descriptions of fatherhood that is found in today’s societies; and
- the legal framework for partnership working between the state, the parents and the wider family network.

We also believe that teaching and learning are significantly strengthened if there is service-user involvement in the design and delivery of courses, including fathers giving direct input.

In order to support social work educators:

- Leadership is required from the General and Social Care Council (GSCC) in this area. This should be demonstrated through their validation and quality assurance systems and by encouraging the engagement of fathers as part of promoting user involvement in social work education.
- The directors of social work courses should be encouraged to ensure that social work courses promote research and academic and practice-based engagement in respect of gender and fatherhood. Curriculum reviews and re-validation processes should provide opportunities to discuss both in terms of what is taught and how it is delivered.
The GSCC should take a leading role in encouraging the recruitment of male social workers.

The GSCC and Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) should take a leading role in designing and commissioning creative learning resources and teaching in this area for social work educators, drawing upon the good practice identified by Professor Featherstone within this project.

2. Training of the social care workforce should encompass the changes in attitudes and practices outlined in the recommendations below.

(C) Improving policies and practices and changing attitudes
As demonstrated by the audit of two local authorities in this project, there is some excellent practice and considerable commitment among senior social care managers and practitioners that local authorities can draw upon. However, there is also inconsistent practice within and across authorities. A striking example from the research is that the fathers responded much more positively to social care staff based in family centres than to those based in local authority offices. There is likely to be transferable learning that would be to the benefit of all.

We recommend:

1. A co-ordinated approach is taken between health, education and social care services, in conjunction with voluntary sector services to identify young fathers and provide appropriate support in assisting them:
   - to adjust to becoming a father;
   - to be good fathers to their children; and
   - to have a positive, on-going relationship with their child’s mother.

2. Positive images of fathers, including young fathers, are promoted in health, maternity, social care and other services that are potentially used by parents.

3. Local authorities monitor and record the attendance of fathers (resident and non-resident) at child protection conferences and at all meetings that plan and make decisions about children.

4. Local authority Children’s Services departments review whether the way services are structured supports fathers (particularly non-resident fathers) to be involved in their children’s lives. The following are an
important but not exhaustive list of key practice points drawn from the research:

- The timing of child protection conferences and reviews need to take into account the distance the father has to travel to the meeting and parents’ work commitments.

- The same expectations in terms of reliability should be made of staff as are made of parents, for example turning up on time, producing accurate information, having a clear understanding of the child’s views and following through commitments.

- Information, advice and support should be available to fathers and to mothers whose children are in need as defined by Section 17, Children Act 1989, or where there are child welfare concerns. This should be in an accessible form for such parents, for example using different media.

- Local authorities should have easily accessible, published policies and procedures setting out how social care services should involve fathers, including non-resident fathers. These should cover the Common Assessment Framework and children in need assessments, as well as safeguarding children and looked-after children.

- Any forms requiring information about parents should be designed with an assumption that the father’s views are required and not just those of “the parent”.

- Children’s Services social care staff should be trained to work effectively with both fathers and mothers. They need to keep an open mind as to whether or not a father is interested in his child.

- Staff should have a clear understanding of the law as to how it affects the engagement of fathers. Local authority children’s social care services should work in partnership with the family, and the presumption should always be to try to involve the child(ren’s) father. The exceptions are:
  - if it is assessed as unsafe (and even then alternative ways of working may be feasible); and/or
  - the father does not have parental responsibility and the mother has explicitly refused to allow social care agencies to
involve the father and the child is not subject to statutory state intervention.

- Children’s records on the integrated children’s system must be clear as to:
  - the name and contact details of the birth father and any other significant father figures;
  - whether the birth father and/or any other significant adult, aside from the mother, has parental responsibility; and
  - whether the birth father and/or any other father figure is actively involved in the child’s life.

- The local authority should be routinely inviting fathers to planning meetings about their child, monitoring their attendance and ensuring they receive minutes and decisions. The evidence from the research indicates that if invited, the majority of fathers will attend.

- Social workers should allow sufficient time to engage with non-resident fathers when carrying out assessments, in particular core assessment. They should explore the child’s views, not only about their relationship with both their parents but also whether there is any other adult whom the child values as a father figure.

- The local authority should ensure that the letter giving notice of intention to issue care proceedings is sent to fathers as well as to mothers, inviting them to attend a meeting in order to consider how concerns can be addressed and proceedings averted.

- In relation to looked-after children, the duty to consult with parents about any decision relating to the child is irrespective of whether the parent has parental responsibility. If this is not happening, the Independent Reviewing Officer should be questioning why not.

- Where the father’s views do not accord with those of the department and/or of other family members, this should be accurately recorded and their views given due consideration in relation to decision making.

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4 S.22(4)&(5) Children Act 1989
• Complex cases should be allocated to experienced social workers, with sufficient supervisory support available. Workers’ fears and concerns, particularly when working with violent or threatening men, should be acknowledged and effective supervisory structures and support should be in place.

• Schools should communicate concerns about children’s welfare (e.g. inviting them to discuss a child’s absences from school) to non-resident fathers.

• All policies impacting upon children’s or adult services should recognise men in their fathering role and the importance of engaging fathers as well as mothers.

The above points are likely to have implications for, and thus require changes to, Children’s Services in the following areas:

• employment policies, including flexible working patterns;
• training strategies;
• policies and procedures;
• recording of key data on children; and
• strategy/budget for the commissioning of services.

However, the potential benefits of such changes to children, as well as their families, are likely to be considerable.

(D) Effective preventative and specialist services to avert crises and the provision of advice and support when concerns arise

Interviews with fathers and grandparents and the analysis of calls to Family Rights Group found that fathers were often asking social care services for help in parenting a child, and that frequently the state only responded when the situation escalated into a crisis. Even then, children sometimes failed to get the assessment and support services they required.

We therefore recommend:

1. There are accessible and effective local services available to fathers, mothers and children so that they can get appropriate support when problems first emerge. Good quality information about local services, including eligibility criteria for accessing specialist services, should be published by statutory services and made easily accessible to parents.
2. Children’s Services should recognise and address, in partnership with the voluntary sector, the lack of services designed for fathers and for specific groups of fathers. When designing services, Children’s Services should therefore address the following points:

- Services need to include parenting groups and courses that are welcoming to fathers, as well as children’s activities that are open to non-resident fathers at weekends.

- Supervised contact centres need to have extended opening hours to suit the needs of working parents and to enable more extensive assessments of the relationship between father and child. This may help address the delay that can occur between when agencies agree to supervise contact and when such contact actually starts.

The literature review in Fathers Matter 1 spelt out some clear messages for those wanting to set up fathers groups, specific programmes for fathers or to get fathers more involved in family centres or early intervention programmes. Yet there is still a national dearth of treatment programmes that recognise men’s parenting role; including few non-mandatory perpetrator programmes for violent or abusive fathers. This needs to be addressed.

3. There is a widespread body of research that shows that key to the successful protection of children at risk of harm is a positive working partnership between the family and the local authority. Yet many of the parents, mothers and fathers contacting Family Rights Group’s advice service are unclear about the nature of Children’s Services’ concerns, about what steps Children’s Services intend to take, and are confused about their legal rights. Fathers, particularly non-resident fathers, sometimes only hear second-hand or late in the day that Children’s Services are involved with their children and do not know how to respond or who to ask for help.

Access to specialist independent advice and support can be crucial in assisting fathers, mothers, grandparents and other relatives to work with Children’s Services to safeguard and protect their children effectively. We therefore welcome the expansion of parenting helplines and specialist telephone and web advice to socially vulnerable fathers and mothers, and support steps being taken by government under the Parents-Know-How agenda.
However, where there is a possibility of care proceedings, such parents may need legal representation. In these circumstances, it is very important that the local authority’s letter before proceedings should be sent early enough to allow time for the satisfactory resolution of concerns to prevent care proceedings, not least because this will enable parents to access level 2 legal advice under the new public funding scheme devised by the Legal Services Commission.

(E) Family involvement in planning for children who are involved with social care agencies

Family advocacy
Families whose children are subject to child protection enquiries can often feel overwhelmed and powerless at statutory child protection meetings/reviews. The situation can feel particularly hopeless for unsupported mothers and fathers with learning difficulties and for those who have already lost a child to the care system. Family advocacy enables family members to understand what is happening and to have a voice at child protection reviews and related meetings and thus to influence the plan for the child. Yet very few local authorities commission family advocacy services. We therefore recommend that local authorities commission family advocacy services and work with central government, Family Rights Group and other relevant agencies to build upon the *Protocol on advice and advocacy for parents involved in child protection processes*[^5] to develop national family advocacy standards.

Family group conferences
Research shows that family group conferences are often more successful in involving fathers, father figures and paternal relatives than statutory decision-making mechanisms (see Fathers Matter Literature Review). As the research demonstrated, they can be successful in producing plans for children that enable them to live safely within their family network (for example with a grandparent) when they cannot remain living with their mother or father. We therefore recommend that all authorities should provide a family group conference service to address child welfare concerns, and all families should be offered a family group conference prior to the local authority issuing care proceedings. This is entirely

consistent with new government guidance\textsuperscript{6} about the work to be undertaken prior to care proceedings and the \textit{Public Law Outline}.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Family mediation}

Family mediation is beginning to be used in the public law field to resolve conflicts in approaches between parties, including between parents and carers, and between carers and local authorities (for example, in managing contact arrangements and in resolving disputes between significant adults in the child’s life about important decisions for the child). The benefits of mediation are that the mediator is impartial; the parties engage with the proposed plan because it is an entirely voluntary process in which they find their own solutions to identified problems and the discussions are legally privileged, although mediators are subject to a reporting requirement in relation to any risk of harm to the child. Thus it provides a safe place to consider different scenarios and options. In this way, mediation has an increasing role to play in helping those involved in the child’s life to find solutions to tensions and disputes.

We recommend that the government funds the expansion of family mediation services to address public law related disputes, and commissions an evaluation study on the impact of family mediation in such circumstances.

\textbf{Support for paternal relatives caring for children}

The focus group with grandparents that formed part of the Fathers Matter Round 1 project, together with an analysis of calls to Family Rights Group and The Grandparents’ Association advice lines, shows that often paternal relatives are overlooked by social care services as a potential resource. Moreover, those paternal relatives who are raising children who cannot live at home often struggle with little or no support from local authorities, especially if the children are with them under a private arrangement, residence order or special guardianship order. Yet relative carers are generally older, in poorer health and more impoverished than “stranger” carers. If the child is looked after by the local authority, relatives must be assessed as foster carers, but some relatives have found the process to be overly intrusive. We therefore recommend that the government supports the raising of children, who cannot live with their

parents, by their extended family when this is safe for the child. The government should:

- provide financial support, including a national financial allowance to assist relatives who are raising children who cannot live with their parents; and
- promote the development of models of assessment that assess risk but also draw upon families’ strengths.

(F) Legal issues

Statutory assessment of children in need
Section 17, Children Act 1989 should be amended so that local authorities are under a duty to assess a child’s need for support services on request from a father, mother, carer or agency with which the child is involved who believes the child is “in need” as defined in s.17(10) Children Act 1989.

Family group conferences
Section 22, Children Act 1989 should be amended to ensure that before, or if that is not possible then as soon as is reasonably practicable after, a child becomes looked after, their family should be offered a family group conference to address the child’s welfare needs.

Judicial training
Judicial training should address the need for magistrates and judges to take sufficient care to ensure that fathers, mothers and carers, especially if they are not legally represented in court, understand the basis for their decisions.

Deemed consent of fathers to adoption
Currently, if the mother gives formal consent to placement and the father does not have parental responsibility, the father will be deemed to have given formal consent to the placement for adoption when the mother consents. This stands even if he later acquires parental responsibility. Thus, a non-resident father, who may not have been informed of a pregnancy or of his child being placed in care, can find later that the mother has consented for his child to be adopted and that his consent was assumed by the mother’s agreement. In fact, Family Rights Group’s advice service has dealt with calls from fathers in exactly such circumstances. It cannot be assumed that social care services will seek out

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8 s.52 (9 and 10) Adoption and Children Act 2002
the father, and they may be blocked if the mother refuses to disclose the name of the child’s father.

It would appear to be a great injustice to both child and father that the child’s mother alone has the power to consent to the breaking of the legal connection between a child and his/her father. We therefore recommend that this provision be repealed and that the definition of “parent” in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 should be the same as in the Children Act 1989 (i.e. it includes all parents irrespective of parental responsibility.)