

How family centres are working with fathers

There are currently around 500 family centres in England and Wales, providing community-based preventive services to both families and children 'in need' as well as children 'at risk' from poor parenting. Though family centres vary widely in scope and scale, a common feature is that they have traditionally been used primarily by mothers and children, and not by fathers. This study, by Deborah Ghatge, Catherine Shaw and Neal Hazel of the Policy Research Bureau, examined what helps and hinders fathers' involvement with family centres. The research found:

- f** Family centres are still strongly female-dominated. However, many centres are actively trying to work with fathers, enjoying varying degrees of success.
- f** The type of centre mattered less than the general 'orientation' to working with men. Having some identifiable strategy for working with fathers mattered more than what that strategy was.
- f** While family centres cater relatively well to fathers in non-typical circumstances (e.g. to lone fathers or fathers with a particularly high level of involvement in childcare), centres were less successful at engaging with other, more 'ordinary' fathers.
- f** Fathers often found the activities offered at family centres, such as crafts and alternative therapies, unappealing and 'unmanly'. They preferred more active and practically focused things to do, such as outdoor activities and DIY.
- f** Centres often take a different approach depending on the sex of the parent. Work with women tends to follow a family-focused model in which women's needs as mothers, and as women in their own right, are acknowledged. On the other hand, work with fathers tends to be more child-focused, with an emphasis on childcare and little that caters to fathers' other, wider interests.
- f** The researchers concluded there is a need for greater clarity about whom family centres are intended to serve. To work successfully with fathers, centres need to consider working with fathers as men, not just as child carers.

Introduction

There is now growing evidence that promoting fathers' greater involvement in childcare can enhance developmental outcomes for children. Consequently, fatherhood is increasingly emerging as an issue in national and international family support policy and practice. There is a general consensus that involving fathers in family support services is desirable, accompanied by a recognition that many services are not reaching fathers effectively. Drawing upon qualitative in-depth interviews with fathers who were both users and non-users of family centres, their partners, and family centre workers, this report identifies factors operating at the family centre level which act as incentives or disincentives to fathers' greater involvement.

The context

In addition to assessing factors connected with family centres themselves, the study examined background factors connected with the social and cultural context of childcare in contemporary Britain. The circumstances of individual families' lives that influence the need for - and use of - family support services were also explored. Some contextual barriers to fathers' use of family centres were uncovered - for example, the persistence of gender-stereotyped attitudes to childcare as being 'women's work'. On the other hand, the study also found changing attitudes to domestic roles and child-rearing practices, making it easier for many fathers to engage with family and child-related support services. At an individual level, some men and women valued the 'respite' time women users at centres spent away from the home, and did not see joint attendance at the family centre as consistent with their personal needs. Conversely, men in particular personal circumstances (for example, lone parents or men with untypical levels of responsibility for childcare) were more likely to be found taking advantage of family centre support.

In the main, however, factors operating at the level of the family centre were found to be especially useful in explaining fathers' use or non-use of centres. These are also the factors which are potentially most amenable to change at the practice level, and are summarised below.

Centre 'orientation' as a factor

Family centres vary greatly in scope and scale, and the study included different types of family centre from statutory-run, referral-based services dealing mainly

with child protection issues, to voluntary-run centres open to all. Overall, however, whether concerned with barriers or enabling factors, a major finding was that the type of service delivered by a centre mattered less than its broad 'orientation' towards working with men. Three broad orientations were identified: '**gender-blind**', '**gender-differentiated**' and '**agnostic**'.

Gender-blind and **gender-differentiated** centres took opposite approaches to working with men. Gender-blind approaches stressed the similarity of need between mothers and fathers, and described their service as open to all on an 'equal opportunities' basis. At these centres fathers were expected to join in with the same activities as mothers. By contrast, a gender-differentiated approach emphasised the different and sometimes conflicting needs of men and women. They tended to offer at least some sex-segregated activities, including men's groups. The study found that both these approaches were more successful in actually engaging fathers with family centre work than were **agnostic** centres which had not formulated any identifiable strategy towards working with men. Having some identifiable strategy for working with fathers mattered much more than what that strategy was.

Centre priorities and policies

In centres with formal **referral systems**, ensuring the father was explicitly included as part of the referral, or taking the referral of a mother as a mandate to try and engage her partner, was a definite enabling factor to working with men. However, some centres operated non-inclusive referral systems which, rather than taking a 'whole family' approach, viewed only mothers and children as 'clients' of the service.

Attitudes to working with fathers were also important. The research found that fathers were more likely to be present (and more fully involved with centre activities) in those centres where there was a positive commitment by staff to work with men and '*value them as parents*', backed by active support from those at management level. Even in these centres, however, staff needed to adopt proactive and, above all, persistent strategies for encouraging fathers to visit the centre, including making home visits to families, and continued persuasion, or as one male user put it: '*pestering me to come down here*'. Getting women users to persuade their partners to visit the centre - a sort of 'pyramid-selling' - appeared to be a particularly effective technique in some cases.

On the other hand, in some centres

management, staff and female users expressed negative attitudes to working with men in terms of the potential impact on existing women users. Fathers, mothers and workers suggested that the presence of men could undermine the 'safe haven' provided by family centres for vulnerable women, and could inhibit women from discussing sensitive subjects or feeling fully relaxed at the centre. Also, though the need to keep fears in perspective was stressed, the risks of male violence to women or children were mentioned, with staff admitting *'it is very intimidating to be faced with an angry man'*. Additionally, some staff were concerned about possible risks to children, for example from fathers who were known or suspected sex offenders, or even from men in general.

The service offered by centres

Many centres lacked **male workers**, leaving men with *'no one to relate to'*. Where centres did have male staff, this was thought to give fathers a sense of legitimacy in a predominantly female environment and an opportunity to discuss things they might not want to talk about with women. However, some men stressed that a worker's sex was less important than his or her professional skills and ability to form relationships with users. The researchers concluded that though undesirable, the absence of male staff was not necessarily an insuperable barrier to working with fathers.

In terms of the **activities** provided, many men (and women) perceived family centres as places where women congregated mainly to *'drink tea and talk'* or *'gossip amongst each other'*. Fathers found this too passive, and wanted more physical and outdoor things to do (as one father said, men wanted *'manly sports, like football'*). Although few centres regularly provided the types of activities which most appealed to fathers - such as social events, trips and outings, physical or sports-related activities - when available, these tended to be popular and well-attended by men. By contrast, many of the centre-based activities that were on offer were described as unappealing to male users, and dismissed as stereotypically *'women's stuff'* (e.g. aromatherapy, beauty sessions, and crafts) as opposed to the practical, skills-based, activities favoured by men.

Where the opportunity to take part in more masculine, practically directed activities did not exist (e.g. *'fixing things'*), fathers sometimes tried hard to create them, often to the discomfort of staff who worried about *'taking advantage'* of fathers. Yet the

study found ample evidence that allowing men to engage in what they saw as useful activities such as DIY provided a powerful means of enabling fathers to feel more comfortable around the centre. Finally, though men's groups were very much valued by those who had experienced them, and especially by men in difficult personal circumstances such as lone fathers, to outsiders they seemed *'strange'* and unappealing, and tended to be viewed with some suspicion.

Centre atmosphere and 'feel'

One of the major barriers to the involvement of fathers was simply the fact that family centres are heavily female-dominated and are perceived as **highly feminised environments**. The lack of other male users created a sense that fathers were in an alien environment, making them feel uneasy and under scrutiny. As one father said: *'the downfall of that place is there's not enough blokes. It's all women. It puts you on edge'*.

Fathers certainly appreciated it when staff made a special effort to welcome them, though this had to be achieved without appearing to patronise or interfere in their lives. When opportunities were created for men to mix informally with other men within the centre (for example, making tea in the kitchen) staff reported *'a different kind of relationship'* between male users - more relaxed and informal.

Sometimes, female users and staff openly expressed anti-male sentiments and hostility towards men; as one worker said: *'sometimes it's "Slagging Off Men Day" here'*. On occasion, male users were also subjected to flirting, and even overt sexual teasing bordering on harassment. Although this was described as essentially benign, it could prove embarrassing and intimidating to some fathers. Not surprisingly, some fathers felt a little tense and that you had to *'watch your Ps and Qs'* at a family centre.

Implications for policy and practice

The study revealed a complex network of barriers and enabling factors that prevent and promote fathers' use of family centres, but the most frequently mentioned incentives and disincentives to their use were located at the level of family centres themselves. A major question raised by the study was: who are family centres really for?

Taken together, the findings suggested that centres may unintentionally discourage fathers from becoming more involved by adopting different, gendered, approaches to work with mothers and

fathers. As far as mothers were concerned, a 'family-focused' approach was taken, in which mothers were encouraged to engage with centres both as parents and as women in their own right. So, many centres provided activities for women users that did not exclusively revolve around childcare. However, where fathers were concerned, the emphasis tended to be more 'child-focused', based around children's needs and on encouraging men to engage with the centre as fathers - but not as men. Though fathers with high levels of need or in 'unusual' circumstances may be willing to participate on this basis, fathers in more 'ordinary' circumstances were sometimes discouraged by the lack of appeal of the service provided, in particular as regards the range and type of activities on offer. The findings suggested that this narrower focus when working with men may impede fathers' wider engagement, and limit their enjoyment of, and benefit from, family centres.

The way forward?

For historical reasons, not all family centres may be appropriate sites from which to develop work with fathers. However, many centres are enthusiastic about engaging fathers more effectively and in these cases, the study suggested the following directions for change in policy and practice:

- reduce the level of female dominance in family centres, in particular discouraging expression of negative attitudes towards men;
- make a positive commitment to recruit fathers, backed up with pro-active and persistent 'sales' strategies that reach out beyond the centre itself;
- work at better promotion of the centre's activities that stresses the inclusive nature of the service as a place for both parents, not just mothers;
- reconsider the range and type of activities on offer, so that activities are provided that appeal to men as well as women;
- do not rely on men's groups as the only activity catering to men - they do not have universal appeal to men who are new to family support services.

About the study

Fieldwork for this qualitative study was conducted in 13 family centres across 7 local authorities in England and Wales during 1998 and 1999. Centres

were selected in order to represent the diversity of family centre provision, and both statutory and voluntary sector centres were included in the study. At each centre, depth interviews were conducted with mothers who used the centre and their male partners (whether or not they had any involvement with the centre themselves), and also with any fathers who used the centre 'in their own right' either as lone parents or main carers. Members of staff at each centre were also interviewed. In total, 92 depth interviews were conducted, 40 of them with fathers.

How to get further information

The full report, **Fathers and family centres: Engaging fathers in preventive services** by Deborah Ghate, Catherine Shaw and Neal Hazel is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 49 0, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).

Additional contextual data, and full methodological and technical information about the study are available in an on-line report at the Research in Practice EvidenceBank website at: <http://www.rip.org.uk/rep/fathers/index.html>.