

# foundations

## A man's place in the home: Fathers and families in the UK

The part that fathers play in their children's upbringing is receiving unprecedented scrutiny from policy makers. Yet there is widespread confusion and disagreement over the contribution men make to contemporary family life. Charlie Lewis, Professor of Psychology at the University of Lancaster, draws on findings from recent research to summarise what is known about fathers and fatherhood in Britain.

### The policy focus on fathers

Fathers have become central figures on the policy agenda, but often in the negative context of absence from their children's lives at crucial times.

- Despite the image of the absentee father and historically high levels of divorce, 7 out of 10 families consist of dependant children living with both their birth parents.
- Seventy per cent of non-resident fathers have contact with their children.
- Many men feel they are under pressure both to earn the major income for their families and to care for their children. British fathers:
  - work the longest hours in the Europe Union (an average 48 hours a week for those with children under 11);
  - continue to earn an average two-thirds of family incomes.
- Although mothers still carry the major share of household and childcare responsibilities, parents in dual-earner households commonly report that childcare is equally shared.
- In a substantial minority of households with dependant children, fathers are the main carers while mothers are out at work.
- Men who work long hours and share the childcare responsibilities with their partners are more likely than others to report feeling stressed and dissatisfied with their lives.
- Despite the increasingly 'hands-on' reality of fathering for many men, cultural stereotypes of fathers as 'providers' and 'breadwinners' continue to exert a strong influence over men, women and children's attitudes to parenthood.

### Policy issues

Policy debates about fatherhood continue to be dominated by an 'economic' view of fathering. There is little serious discussion about what policy makers and service providers can actually do to support men's parenting:

- Legal definitions of fathering and fatherhood stress the importance of biological links between men and children.
- The debate about 'absentee fathers' has focused on men's economic responsibilities towards their children, to the neglect of father-child relationships.
- Almost four out of ten babies each year are born into cohabiting relationships, yet few fathers obtain Parental Responsibility Agreements or Orders. This means they lack any legal right to be involved in important decisions about their children's upbringing.
- Current Government initiatives such as Sure Start, the National Childcare Strategy and the National Family and Parenting Institute offer an opportunity to raise the profile of fathers within family support services.
- There are major cultural and social obstacles that will need to be overcome before fathers can be fully included in mainstream family services that have traditionally targeted and been used by mothers.
- Attempts in Britain to limit the working week have the potential to influence the quantity of father-child contact and the quality of family relationships. It is too early to know what effect they will produce.

## Introduction

The contribution made by fathers to their children's welfare and development has received increasing recognition in recent years from policy makers. As the Government's 1998 consultation paper *Supporting Families* puts it: "Fathers have a crucial role to play in their children's upbringing." But fathering and fatherhood have also come under unprecedented scrutiny. The stereotypical division of parental roles that emerged during the last century between bread-winning, disciplinarian fathers, and mothers as non-earning housekeepers and carers, does not match the reality for most contemporary families. Yet there is continuing confusion over the part men actually play in

today's families, and a lack of consensus about their potential role in child-rearing. Modern fathers are occasionally portrayed as 'new' or even 'super' dads, sharing childcare and home-care tasks with their partners while successfully balancing their family responsibilities with paid work. But more often, the media spotlight shines on men as 'deadbeat' dads - no more able to parent and support their children than they are to keep a steady job. Away from these extremes, recent research has sought to create a clearer picture of contemporary fatherhood and of the factors that promote or prevent active fathering. This *Foundations* draws together findings from 21 recent research projects relevant to fathers, most of them supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## Fathers and family trends

Current policy interest in fathers is the culmination of three decades of rapid change in the institutions and conventions of family life. These include:

- *An increase in the levels of employment among mothers:* Two-thirds of women with dependant children are in paid work, compared with fewer than half in the early 1970s.
- *A steep rise in divorce rates during the 1960s and 1970s,* staying at historically high levels thereafter. The divorce rate in 1998 (12.9 divorces per 1,000 married men in England and Wales) was more than three times the level of 30 years earlier. An estimated four out of ten children born to married parents will have experienced their parents' divorce by the time they are 16.
- *Declining marriage rates and an accompanying rise in cohabitation:* The rate for men marrying for the first time in 1997 (28.3 per 1,000 in England and Wales) was a little more than a third of the level in 1971. At least one of the partners has been previously married in four out of ten contemporary marriages. An estimated 8 per cent of the adult population is cohabiting - double the proportion at the start of the 1980s.
- *More babies born outside marriage:* The proportion of births outside marriage rose from 8 per cent in the early 1970s to 38 per cent in 1998. Six out of ten births outside marriage are now registered jointly by parents living at the same address, compared with fewer than half a decade earlier.

The trends in cohabitation and parental separation mean that large numbers of children born today spend at least part of their life outside marriage. They may successively experience their parents' cohabitation, marriage, separation and cohabitation or remarriage forming a stepfamily.

## Changing policies

Demographic trends have directly influenced public policy in the past ten years. Increasing numbers of working mothers have created new demands for alternative forms of childcare. The Government's National Childcare Strategy aims to increase the number of affordable daycare places and other provision. Divorce law reform passed by Parliament in 1996, but not yet implemented, would replace fault-based divorce with a process over a year, allowing

separating partners time for reflection and mediation. Legislation has been promised to confer parental responsibility on unmarried fathers when they register their child's birth, instead of requiring a separate legal agreement with the child's mother or a court order.

The rising level of births outside marriage, as well as high rates of divorce, have also prompted measures emphasising the financial responsibilities of fathers who are unmarried, separated or divorced. The Child Support Agency was established in 1991 to pursue non-resident parents (mostly fathers) for child

maintenance payments and reduce the costs of social security paid to lone parents. Its administrative failings are the subject of further reform.

Fathers are an inevitable focus of attention when families are breaking up or re-forming, because the transition usually involves a man moving out of, or into, the household. They are far less likely than mothers to obtain residence with their children following separation, and more children live with their biological mothers and a stepfather than vice versa. While these and other changes have been widely discussed, they are rarely debated in the full context of what is known about today's fathers and their involvement in parenting.

### Fathers and children

The rapid pace of family change in the past 30 years should not obscure the fact that most families (around seven out of ten) still consist of children living with both biological parents. Around 10 per cent are children living with one biological parent and a step-parent. More than eight in ten fathers of dependant children in the 1992 British Household Panel Study were found to be living with all their own, biological children - and more than seven in ten were doing so within their first family.

Fathers, on average, earn two-thirds of family incomes. Research also suggests that mothers in two-parent households still typically carry the major share of routine household responsibilities and of caring for

children and other dependants. Men, whether they are teenagers or the fathers of teenage children, tend to explain this lesser contribution at home in terms of a man's prerogative to provide for his family. Other parenting activities are viewed as additions to that central task. But an unequal share of domestic responsibilities does not mean that providing an income for their children is all that fathers do.

Although fathers may see themselves as less skilled 'mother substitutes', their contribution to children's care can be crucial. Men have been identified as primary carers in a minority of households throughout the postwar period; and the father is the parent with whom children live for most or all of the time in 10 per cent of families affected by divorce. Moreover, interviews with 33-year-olds whose lives have been followed since birth in 1958 by the National Child Development Study (NCDS) found that fathers were the main carers for children in 36 per cent of dual-earner families while mothers were working - more than any other individual.

Even in dual-earner families, or those where only the mother is in paid work, it is rare for fathers to identify themselves as the main carer. However, it is common for couples to say they take an equal share of being with and looking after their children. The NCDS interviews with 33-year-old parents found that most working and non-working fathers laid claim to an equal share of childcare, unless their partners stayed at home. Mothers were more sanguine about the contribution made by men, but 66 per cent of women

### Fathers at home

Today's parents have been shown to spend more time on average caring for their children than previous generations. Mothers are still more heavily involved in looking after children than fathers and also continue to be chiefly responsible for the household chores (except for repairs and DIY). However, surveys show that fathers' involvement in the home has been increasing and that the 'gender gap' in terms of average time spent caring for children has narrowed. Fathers in many homes are reported to play a central role as a playmates for younger children and as organisers of family activities. Interviews with the 33-year-old parents who were part of the NCDS found that fathers who were actively involved in childcare were also more likely to play out of doors with their children.

Further insight into what today's fathers do - and are expected to do - comes from a study of families with teenage children. It found that men's varied parenting activities ranged from providing discipline, helping with homework and acting as family chauffeur, to organising outings, shopping, acting as an opponent for computer games and watching or participating in sports. Mothers, children and fathers often described men's family role in terms of being 'involved' - a concept they found hard to define, but appeared to include psychological availability as well as physically 'being there'.

working full time and 48 per cent of those working part time said the responsibilities were equally shared.

When questioned in theory about responsibility for childcare, middle-class parents tend to express more egalitarian attitudes than working-class parents. What happens in practice may be different. Among NCDS parents, only 35 per cent of fathers with graduate qualifications said they took an equal share of childcare, compared with 58 per cent of men with few or no qualifications.

### Work, well-being and family involvement

Employment patterns explain much of men's involvement - or otherwise - inside the home. For example, seven out of ten mothers in the NCDS reported working outside the home in the evenings and about half worked at weekends. These patterns suggest that some mothers and fathers take it in turns to look after their children while the other is working. However, the extent of 'shift' parenting is not clear.

Generally speaking, the terms, conditions and expectations of paid employment stand as the greatest barrier to men's involvement in childcare. Across the European Union, 90 per cent of fathers are in paid jobs. In the United Kingdom, they work the longest hours of men in all the member states. One review found that the average working week for fathers of children aged under 11 was 48 hours. More than a quarter of the 33-year-old fathers in the NCDS were working 50 or more hours a week and almost a tenth worked more than 60 hours. Two-thirds regularly worked in the evening or at weekends and a third did night work. Women's average time commitment to paid employment was significantly smaller. Only a quarter of NCDS mothers worked more than 35 hours each week, while a third worked fewer than 16 hours.

Against that background, several studies have demonstrated that the more hours a father works, the less likely he is to contribute to childcare or to running the home. Men working long hours are also less likely to have a wife or partner who is in paid work, and they are more likely to express a view that the man's task is to earn a living for the family. Conversely, fathers are more likely to take responsibility for childcare if they are unemployed and their partners are working. Nevertheless, only 1 in 6 of the NCDS fathers in this situation reported taking the major share of childcare -

outnumbered by the 1 in 5 who said their partner was mostly responsible.

The division of responsibilities within individual families can be expected to alter as children develop and their parents move into and out of the workforce. For example, older children as well as fathers in dual-earner households tend to contribute to domestic chores more than those in other families. Research suggests that the way domestic tasks are shared can not only affect personal relationships, but also relates to well-being. Dual-earner parents in the NCDS were more likely to go shopping and take part in other activities together. But parents in 'traditional' families where the father worked and the mother stayed at home reported slightly greater levels of marital satisfaction than other couples. Working mothers' discontent with partners who contributed little to the care and socialisation of their children tended to increase according to the number of hours that they themselves were working.

Yet there appeared to be little connection between men's sense of well-being and marital happiness and the extent of their involvement with their children. Indeed, men working long hours and sharing childcare responsibilities with their partner tended to be least satisfied of all. One simple message that emerges from these contrasting research findings is that fathers, as well as mothers, find the combination of family responsibilities and a demanding job can be stressful.

### Barriers to active fatherhood

Although clearly important, the amount of time men can spend at home when not working is not the only factor affecting their role in family life. Values and attitudes to parenthood also influence their involvement. For example, those who are less involved with their children appear to define fathering in terms of teaching 'good behaviour' rather than sharing outdoor recreation and other activities with them. The NCDS fathers, in households where they were the sole breadwinner, were generally less hands-on as parents and more likely to espouse 'traditional' beliefs concerning a disciplinary role.

Although most fathers play a substantial part in family life, it is important to consider why some do not. The range of different fathering 'relationships' revealed by recent research is in contrast with the 'traditional'

### Fathers in 'vulnerable' groups

One way that research has shed light on the current debate about fathers and their responsibilities is by looking at 'vulnerable' men. These include socially-excluded groups like young or unemployed fathers, but also those whose marriages and relationships do not fit the stereotypical pattern. There are important differences between each of these groups, yet they share the common problem of society's concentration on fathers' traditional role as economic providers, leading to an assumption that this is the only function men can or should perform.

*Unemployed fathers* rarely take on a major role in housework and childcare after losing their jobs, but their lack of central involvement may be directly related to the reason they became unemployed, such as ill health or a family member's incapacity. Most unemployed fathers have to cope with the 'personal threat' caused by failing to live up to the expectation that men should care for their families by providing an income for the household. While the evidence suggests that unemployed fathers spend more time with their children, for example eating and shopping together as a family, they do not appear to relish it. They are much more likely than other fathers to describe themselves as 'failed providers'.

*Young fathers* (in their teens or early twenties) are viewed as a policy problem because early parenthood is at odds with the chances of achieving economic security or maintaining a lasting relationship with the child's mother. Research suggests that teenage fathers have a strong motivation to become a parent, but confirms their lack of career chances and a strong likelihood of separating from the mother - assuming they live together. However, young fathers who live with their children are usually very involved in childcare, particularly among the high proportion who are unemployed.

*Cohabiting fathers* are a rapidly expanding group of men whose limited legal status, compared with married fathers, has led to Government proposals for reform. Recent research projects have shown that most unmarried fathers are unaware they lack legal 'parental responsibility' unless it has been conferred by a court order or by an agreement with their partner. They tend to assume they must have the same rights as married fathers because they are the 'common-law husband', the 'natural father', or named on the birth certificate. The fact that they are providing financial support for their child and showing commitment does not affect their legal status. Demographic data shows that cohabiting parents who

have children are more likely to separate than those who are married. However, unmarried fathers do not necessarily lose contact with their children as a result of separation.

*Non-resident fathers* have been the focus of policy concern over unpaid child maintenance, leading to the Child Support Act (1991). The regime implemented by the Child Support Agency (CSA) is being reformed following serious administrative failures. A review of schemes across Europe suggests that the CSA has had little impact on the levels of payment by non-resident parents, most of whom are men.

However, the continuing aim of government policy is to ensure that non-resident biological fathers provide economically for their children. Research demonstrates that there are many more issues surrounding child maintenance than just the payment of cash. Data from large-scale studies suggest that two-thirds of non-resident fathers pay maintenance and that seven out of ten have regular contact with their children. Ex-couples usually negotiate the contact between the non-resident parent and the child and this process is often in continual flux. The amount of contact between non-resident fathers and their children has been shown to correlate with the amount of maintenance being paid. But it also relates to the ways that parents interact with each other following separation, whether either parent is living with a new partner and to practical factors like geographical distance and housing. Separated fathers who have tried to continue sharing the care of their children report difficulties, such as an inability to provide adequate accommodation for their children. One study suggests that some men take considerable pains to maintain regular contact with their children, which may involve moving to be near them, or even sacrificing a job or career.

*Stepfathers* are another increasing group whose circumstances and needs are often overlooked in policy debates about biological parents and their responsibilities. While they get little credit for their contribution to childcare, the available evidence suggests that there are as many variations in the contributions of stepfathers as fathers in the caring and providing for children. In general, the partners in stepfamilies take a more equal share of childcare and domestic responsibilities than their counterparts in 'first' families. They are also more likely to be in paid employment - something that may reflect the economic pressures of supporting children from more than one relationship.

pattern of fathers fitting family life around their paid work activities. Yet despite the increasingly 'hands-on' reality of modern fatherhood, cultural stereotypes concerning men as breadwinners remain powerful. The British Social Attitudes Survey continues to show that 53 per cent of fathers and 42 per cent of mothers agree with the belief that the father's role is to 'provide'. Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that many teenagers of both sexes take the same view of men's contribution as parents.

This traditional view of fatherhood remains a major obstacle to any widespread acknowledgement that 'fathering' can be defined by childcare as well as economic provision. As a consequence:

- Young people more readily associate 'being a man' with 'having a job' and 'defending the family' than with 'being a good father'.
- Men who are not the main earners in their families, like mothers who stay at home with their children, receive little compensating recognition for their contribution to the social fabric as parents.

Fathers as well as mothers, in the study of families with teenage children, seemed to presume that women were better communicators, calmer, more patient and generally more sensitive to children's needs than men. The idea that women had a better understanding of 'the' way to parent a child was implicitly accepted. Mothers often said they preferred to look after children, run the home and to serve as the link between the household and other family members. Indeed, there were families where mothers appeared to act as 'gatekeepers' to fathering, exerting control over the family and deciding when their partner's involvement was or was not required.

However, the barriers to active fathering are more than a matter of attitudes. As the evidence concerning long working hours makes plain, some men are prevented by their 'provider' role from spending as much time with their children as they would wish. A number of men in the study of families with teenagers expressed their resentment of uninteresting or poorly-paid jobs that left them with too little time for family life.

### Support for fathers: can the barriers be dismantled?

Current Government initiatives give an opportunity to raise the profile of fathers and fatherhood within services providing support for families and children, including health, social services and education. The Sure Start programme for children under age 4 in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the new National Family and Parenting Institute and the Home Office Family Support Unit have all made strong statements concerning the importance of reaching fathers as well as mothers. The chance exists to focus the interest of professionals and policy makers on the positive part that fathers have to play in securing children's health, happiness and success.

In the past 20 years many individual schemes have been implemented that specifically offer support to fathers in the community. They have tended to be short-lived because of their vulnerability to staffing changes and shifts in local funding priorities. A study of the use that fathers make of neighbourhood family centres has underlined the difficulties of including men in mainstream services that have traditionally been targeted at mothers. The obstacles can be found at a cultural and social level, as well as in the way that families and individuals view their local centres.

However, the fundamental problem is that men appear reluctant to receive support. This holds true even when there are serious problems in their family relationships, including violence towards their partner and/or children. Reluctance among men to discuss problems in their parenting or relationships are compounded by the fact that the services on offer in family centres are often aimed at mothers to the exclusion of fathers.

Women receiving support can exclude their partners simply by not involving them, while professionals often accept a father's seeming lack of involvement in the family without question. Attendance records for parenting programmes show that most men avoid getting involved.

## Finding out more about fathers

There are substantial gaps in current knowledge about fatherhood. While numerous studies are published each year, little research has examined fathering in its widest sense:

- National databases have been criticised as 'naive' about the data that they routinely collect on fathers. Fathering continues to be defined in terms of activities identified with mothering, with insufficient information on fathers' perceptions of family life.
- There is more to be learned about processes that push men towards greater involvement as fathers or send them in the opposite direction. This is crucial, given evidence that some fathers see themselves as marginal and dispensable. More studies of men who are the main carers for their children could inform policy makers about ways that fathers might be drawn towards a more active role.
- There is a shortage of information on fathers and fatherhood in minority ethnic families, allowing assumptions based on stereotypes to prevail.
- Research into the effects of separation and divorce on children has emphasised the influence of the former partner's psychological state on their parenting following the break-up. More knowledge about the ways that mothers and fathers can be helped to adjust and continue to fulfill their parenting responsibilities will be in both the short- and long-term interests of children.
- Research into 'vulnerable' groups of fathers (see above) suggests that even in adverse circumstances, many men parent in ways that are highly effective. More information on fathering as a 'normal' activity is needed to inform policy makers, service providers, frontline staff and parents themselves.
- The 1989 Children Act only recognises biological fathers, while the 1991 Child Support Act emphasises the obligation on men to provide financially for their children. The legislation in both cases neglects and underestimates men's abilities and importance as carers for their children and other dependants.
- Although more than one-third of babies each year are born into cohabiting relationships, few fathers obtain Parental Responsibility Agreements or Orders. In practical terms, this means that many fathers currently lack any legal right to be involved in important decisions about their children's upbringing. But beyond that, such widespread disenfranchisement stands for a devaluing of men's roles as parents.
- The Government's decision to sign the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty means that fathers in the UK have, for the first time, a right to take parental leave and leave for childcare reasons, and to restrict their maximum working hours to 48 hours per week. Although the provision is for unpaid leave, a new opportunity has been created for men to reclaim some of their time to devote to their families.

view is reinforced by media images and by public policies that focus on a 'deficit' model of fathering, especially the need to deal with men who abrogate their financial responsibilities and those who physically or sexually abuse their children. A number of major policy issues arise from the research:

Men's parenting is too often depicted as a social problem rather than a social strength. Fathers are often only visible in terms of their absence: working long hours, not living with their children or lacking legal rights as parents. An economic view of fathering continues to dominate policy discussions. As yet in debates about 'the family' there is little serious discussion about what policy makers and service providers can actually do to support men's parenting.

## Policy concerns

The research summarised in this *Foundations* has identified a gap that exists between the reality of modern fatherhood revealed by research and the enduring and pervasive attitudes linking fathers' responsibilities to breadwinning and little else. This

### How to get further information

This *Foundations* is based on a review of published research on fathers and families, mainly funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The research draws on the following reports. All reports marked \* are available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ; Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; email: orders@yps.ymn.co.uk. Please add £2.00 p&p per order.

The details of any *Findings* (four-page summaries) relating to the research projects are also given. All JRF *Findings* are published on the JRF website: www.jrf.org.uk. If you do not have access to the internet, or have any further queries on publications, you can call 01904 615905 (answerphone for publications queries only) or email: publications@jrf.org.uk.

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