

Understanding fathering: masculinity, diversity and change

Findings
Informing change

September 2009

This was a study of fathers and fatherhood in modern Britain, focusing on 29 two-parent families across four ethnic groups in England: Pakistani, White British, Black Caribbean and Black African.

Key points

- More similarities than differences were found in fathers' behaviours, attitudes and aspirations, and the challenges they face.
- On the surface the beliefs and attitudes of fathers, mothers and children suggest that parenting roles are less strictly differentiated than they have been: it has become normal to see fathering as multi-dimensional. However, closer examination revealed some traditional gender stereotypes still persisting in practice.
- Certain roles were still seen as predominantly the father's responsibility, namely financial provider and protector. Economic provision still defined the father's role and conceptions of 'good fathering'. Fathers were also viewed as having a key role in discipline.
- Both within families and across ethnic groups, members generally agreed that fathers have a particularly important role in leisure and play with their children.
- Children were less likely to base expectations of parenting on parents' gender, suggesting a continuing trend towards fathers' involvement in a broader range of responsibilities.
- The values and attitudes fathers described often differed significantly from their actual behaviour. This was due to a combination of practical circumstances, ideas about gender, gender relations within the family, and individual abilities.
- The time fathers spent with their children varied considerably across ethnic groups, mainly due to differences in employment and working hours within the sample.
- Across all groups, the largest amount of fathers' time with their children was spent in leisure and play activities at home.

The research

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Background

Parents in Britain today show signs of being in the midst of a 'parenting transformation'. Gender stereotypes of parental roles are still alive and well within the family. However, the role of the father continues in its transformation from a traditional one-dimensional role to one that is more multi-dimensional, to meet the current demands of fathering/parenting and the expectation that a father should be involved in all aspects of childcare and child-rearing activities.

Accompanied by a growing body of research evidence endorsing the benefits of 'good parenting', the issue of parenting has been a key policy focus over much of the last decade. Evidence suggests that children benefit significantly when their fathers are actively involved in their care and upbringing. Fathering – what it is and how it can be supported – has in consequence risen higher on the political agenda for UK policy-makers.

The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of what being a father means to parents and children in four ethnic communities in England: Pakistani, White British, Black Caribbean and Black African. It explored:

- what fathering involves;
- what values and aspirations are attached to fathering; and
- to what extent, in a modern multicultural England that is changing fast, a 'common model' of fatherhood can be identified that holds within and across families from diverse ethnic groups.

The research was based on fathers', mothers' and children's qualitative reports of values, attitudes and behaviours relating to fathering, together with quantitative analysis of their activity diaries.

Values and attitudes

Across the sample there was evidence that values and attitudes concerning the role of fathers were changing. Fathers were expected to engage in all aspects of raising children assuming a greater multiplicity of roles than ever before. However, consensus on the exact nature of the role – that is, what they should and should not do – was less evident.

Roles such as financial provider and protector continued to be seen as predominantly the responsibility of the father. In particular, economic provision still tends to define the role of the father and remains linked to conceptions of 'good fathering'. Whereas traditionally this one-dimensional approach might have been sufficient to fulfil the paternal role, fathers today are expected to be more than just financial providers, embracing the more multi-dimensional notion of fathering that has now become the norm.

"I think more's expected of fathers now than thirty years ago, thirty years ago the man's responsibility was to go out to work and come home ... but I think gradually it's become that way where from a father having maybe ten per cent of the responsibility, his responsibility has gone up, he's going up like fifty per cent ... having to learn to have equal responsibility as the mother for what goes on in children's lives and how much you contribute towards them, I think that's what's changed." (White British father)

Fathers were viewed as having a unique disciplinary role to play, in particular for boys, and more specifically in Black families, where more authoritarian discipline often takes prominence in child-rearing. In both Pakistani and Black families, the father's ability to engender a greater level of respect in their children was seen as important in ensuring that children grow up to be disciplined and well behaved in society. There was a general consensus across all ethnic groups that fathers were more effective disciplinarians than mothers, and were also important role models for their children, especially their sons.

"Boys don't tend to take what I say, they tend to take what he [father] says more, like he's above me, that's how they view it." (Black Caribbean mother)

"I do think that to bring up a boy child you do need a man to put him in place ... the woman can't put them in place because they're turning young men now and they are bigger than their mum, they're stronger than their mums and they wanna do what they wanna do." (Black Caribbean father)

Many parents believed that a lack of paternal involvement in disciplining children could lead to detrimental outcomes for children and young people that may become more apparent during adolescence, such as lack of respect, delinquency and criminal behaviour. Mothers and children also considered fathers to be important in their role as protectors of the family.

The presence of a father made families feel secure and safe, not just in terms of physical safety, but also financially safe, given their role as breadwinner.

The values and attitudes held by parents in relation to fathers' roles and responsibilities appeared to be quite fluid over time. This was in response to a range of complex and sometimes competing factors, such as practical life circumstances, ideas about gender (individual and societal), gender relations within the family and individual abilities. For example, despite traditional ideas about gender roles, financial difficulties in a family were reflected in changed attitudes to the father as sole financial provider.

For children and young people, values and attitudes around fathers' roles and responsibilities seemed to be largely consistent with the roles that their fathers actually fulfilled.

Fathers' behaviour

The time fathers spent with children was directly linked to the time they had available. Fathers in full-time employment spent significantly less time engaging directly with their children than those who were unemployed or employed part-time.

Fathers spent considerably less time than mothers in physical care-giving, on average only fifteen minutes per day, although this increased to twice this time among Black Caribbean fathers. As might be expected, fathers who worked long or irregular hours were less involved in activities such as housework and cooking. On the other hand, fathers who were employed in higher grade jobs, or who were unemployed, spent greater amounts of time in domestic responsibilities.

Fathers had a special role to fill in playing with their children. The diary records and interviews with all family members revealed that across all ethnic groups, when fathers were involved, leisure activities with children consumed by far the greatest amount of their time. They spent on average three hours per day on play, both at home and outside the home. The middle years of childhood were clearly a key period when fathers had the greatest direct involvement in such activities with their children.

“Without my dad, I really wouldn't be having that much fun.” (Pakistani young person)

Across all families in the sample, fathers spent on average 5.5 hours per day directly engaged in activities with their children. The White British fathers generally

spent more time in this way than any of the other ethnic groups, largely due to the higher rate of unemployment and self-employment in this group which resulted in their greater availability.

What shapes fathering?

Own experiences of being parented

Many fathers described having experienced a fairly traditional style of parenting from their own fathers. Fathers of the previous generation were generally confined to the role of breadwinner and disciplinarian, with relatively low levels of involvement in other domains such as child rearing and domestic activities. On the whole, the fathers in this sample showed more differences than similarities with previous generations in their style of fathering, though the extent varied between individuals and ethnic differences were not apparent. In particular, those fathers who described very low levels of paternal engagement and nurturing in their own childhood tended to be more motivated to increase their involvement with their own children.

Gender relations/constructs

Although on the surface parents across all ethnic groups expressed egalitarian views on gender roles and the division of labour, a more traditional view emerged when parents talked in detail about specific roles and responsibilities. More than half of parents across the sample believed the genders to be inherently different in relation to the task of parenting, such that one might be more naturally suited to certain roles than others (for example, mothers more suited to physical care-giving). At the same time, most parents also thought that parents of either gender could competently fulfil most parenting roles if required. Overall, Pakistani and Black African parents tended to hold more traditional views on gender roles in contrast to their White British or Black Caribbean counterparts.

Tradition, culture and religion

Tradition and culture continued to have a strong influence in shaping fathering behaviours and ideals within Pakistani families, and also in some Black Caribbean and Black African families, particularly when the father had been born outside the UK. Parenting practices and ideals across a number of domains such as discipline, financial provision, guiding and monitoring relationships, and encouraging children to learn about parents' culture and religion seemed to be shaped by tradition and culture. At the same time, the findings suggest that the influence of tradition and culture was moderated somewhat by practical, social and cultural factors associated with living in a modern English society.

Current life and family circumstances

Work was the dominant theme with regard to greater paternal involvement: it was both the key constraining factor for those who were employed, and viewed as an enabling factor by those who were unemployed. Long and unsocial hours were frequently cited as being incompatible with family life. Fathers often reported that it was impossible to satisfy the expectation of being a provider as well as having greater involvement in the home. On the other hand, fathers who were unemployed cited their inability to work, and the resulting lack of money, as an equally constraining factor. More family-friendly work patterns with flexible hours and better pay were all identified as facilitating increased levels of paternal involvement.

Implications for policy and practice

All of the fathers in the sample, irrespective of ethnic group, were facing similar challenges in their role as parents, largely as a result of practical circumstances such as work commitments, long working hours, unemployment, or poor health. The findings of the study endorse existing and ongoing policy recommendations around supporting and promoting a better work-life balance for fathers, increased financial support for families on low incomes and increased parenting support for fathers.

The similarities in values and attitudes to fathering across the sample, together with fathers' experiences of fatherhood, suggest that support for men in their fathering role and attempts to recruit them into parenting activities might be more successful if they were based upon the shared experiences and commonalities of fathering.

These findings suggest that fathers engage most actively with their children in play and leisure activities during middle childhood. With this in mind, universal services might attract more fathers to participate by designing play and leisure activities appropriate for fathers of primary school aged children, offered at times – such as evenings and weekends – which are convenient for fathers.

About the project

The findings of this exploratory qualitative study came from a sample comprising 29 'ordinary' two-parent families (father, mother and index child - 87 individuals in total), drawn from areas of England with high rankings on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Ten Pakistani families were recruited in a metropolitan borough in the North of England, ten White British families were recruited from inner London and cities in the Midlands and North West, and seven Black Caribbean and two Black African families were recruited from the Greater London area. The age range of index children involved in this study was 7 to 18 years. Qualitative interviews were conducted with individual family members in their homes, and participants were asked to keep detailed time use diaries for 8 days, to record their daily activities and interactions.

For more information

The full report, **Understanding fathering: Masculinity, diversity and change** by Hanan Hauari and Katie Hollingworth, is available for free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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