

# Working with Fathers in Child and Family Services

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## CASCADE Research Briefing

Number 9: June 2018



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Children's Social Care  
Research and Development Centre  
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### Key messages for policy and practice

- Analysis of cohort study data found that fathers' extreme frustration with looking after toddlers is a risk factor for depression in these children when they are teenagers.
- There is relatively little published evidence to date about the effectiveness of work with fathers specifically.
- Interventions need to be developed for fathers who experience extreme frustration with child care.
- A survey was carried out to find out what kind of help was currently being offered for fathers in the UK. Much of the family support work going on with fathers seems to use approaches which are broadly based in the evidence on what works for parents such as cognitive and behavioural techniques.
- Most services for fathers are universal rather than targeted.
- Most work with fathers in the UK is not overtly feminist or motivated by a men's rights approach.
- A qualitative study of one parenting programme for fathers of at-risk children found that because they are non-traditional clients of family services, engaging men who are having problems with parenting can be very challenging.
- Practitioners should expect engaging fathers to require time and patience
- Intensive work may be needed on relationship building to maintain fathers' participation in parenting programmes
- Culturally appropriate programmes should be considered for fathers from minority ethnic or religious groups

There are three studies briefly summarised here and links to open access articles which contain more detail. All the studies were led by Jonathan Scourfield as part of his mid-career fellowship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, entitled 'Fathers, social interventions and children's well-being'. All three studies relate in different ways to vulnerable fathers and services to support them.



## Fathers' frustration with child care and later outcomes for children

**STUDY 1** considered which characteristics of fathers when children are in infancy are associated with later mental health problems in these children. A cohort study was used that followed the same children over time – the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). The data showed that fathers' extreme frustration with child care when children were aged 21 months was associated with risk of depression when these children were aged sixteen. The frustration was indicated by responses to a series of statements such as 'I really cannot bear it when my child cries' and 'my child's demands sometimes bring intense feelings of anger'. Breaking this down further, the association between fathers' frustration with the care of toddlers and depression in these children as teenagers was only found in children from non-manual social class households. This association was over and above other risk factors, such as mothers' negative experience of child care, maternal depression and family-related adverse events in the teenage years. Other aspects of fathering such as confidence, enjoyment and discipline were neither risk nor protective factors for later depression in the children. The findings suggest that in order to prevent later mental health problems in children, interventions need to be developed for fathers who experience extreme frustration with child care.

## What kind of help is currently being offered to fathers in the UK?

**STUDY 2** was a survey with family practitioners across the UK to find out what kinds of approaches were being used in work with fathers. Most services were said to be universal, rather than targeted. As found in previous studies, the numbers of fathers attending services were relatively small. As for the approaches being used, overt gender politics played only a small part, i.e. there was little evidence that practitioners were primarily motivated either by feminism or by a belief in promoting men's rights. Instead it was mainstream approaches to parenting support that were most popular, including cognitive and behavioural techniques. These have a general evidence base to support their use in helping parents, so it is encouraging to see that these are the approaches most often claimed by practitioners. However, the evaluations that have been done tend not to consider the effects of father participation there is a lack of specific programmes for fathers that have been subject to robust evaluation.



## How does help for fathers work out in practice?

**STUDY 3** consisted of two separate pieces of qualitative research to shed some light on the process of fathers' groups and how they work in practice. One was a study of Mellow Dads, an intensive group programme for the fathers of children at risk. This highlighted the additional challenges faced by practitioners in working with fathers as non-traditional clients of family services and the limited change that might be possible even with an intensive parenting programme. It also highlighted the extra time and additional skills required to maintain his group of fathers in such a programme. The practitioners were highly skilled in keeping the fathers motivated and engaged with the course. The other qualitative study considered the Family Links Islamic Values course. This is an adaptation of an existing parenting programme for Muslim parents. This showed the potential for creative approaches to parenting support that take seriously parents' cultural backgrounds, including religious faith. The programme is not specific to any ethnic group, but to Muslim parents of any ethnic background. The specific course we observed, however, was attended mostly by fathers of Pakistani ethnic background so the language of the course was Urdu. The fathers and their wives were very positive about their experience on the programme.



## Further Details

### STUDY 1

*More detail can be found in this open access journal article:*

Scourfield, J., Culpin, I., Gunnell, D., Dale, C., Joinson, C., Heron, J. and Collin, S. (2016). The association between characteristics of fathering in infancy and depressive symptoms in adolescence: a UK birth cohort study. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 58: 119-128.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213416301107>

### STUDY 2

*More detail can be found in this open access journal article:*

Scourfield, J. Cheung, S-Y. and Macdonald, G. (2014). Working with fathers to improve children's well-being: Results of a survey exploring service provision and intervention approach in the UK. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 43: 40-50.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740914001595>

### STUDY 3

*More detail can be found in these open access journal articles:*

Scourfield, J., Allely, C., Coffey, A. and Yates, P. (2016). Working with fathers of at-risk children: Insights from a qualitative process evaluation of an intensive group-based intervention. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 16: 259-267.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740916302699>

Scourfield, J. and Nasiruddin, Q. (2015). Religious adaptation of a parenting programme: Process evaluation of the Family Links Islamic Values course for Muslim fathers. *Child Care, Health and Development* 41 (5): 697-703 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cch.12228/full>



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