

**BRIEFING PAPER**

**T H E**

**D A D**

**F A C T O R**

**IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**HOW FATHERS IMPROVE CHILD OUTCOMES**

September 2015

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## Background

Dads Direct aims to promote the value of actively engaged fathers in their children's lives. The aim of this briefing paper is to bring to the attention of policy makers, service providers and practitioners how involved fathers can positively influence their children's outcomes. This is demonstrated through research evidence and reference to effective models of practice. However, there is also a need for further research into the important role of fathers.

Dads Direct was formed in July 2014. It is comprised of representatives from Child Contact Centres, Family Mediation NI, Home-Start, Men's Health Forum in Ireland, Parenting NI, Relate NI, and Sure Starts. The group seeks to build upon the highly successful work undertaken by the Big Lottery funded Man Matters project between 2009 and 2014.

The overall aims of Dads Direct are to promote the important role of fathers in children's lives, and to advocate for a society which is free from any gender bias about parenting roles and responsibilities. In practical terms, the main goal is to ensure that fathers are included in family support and parenting policies, and that these policies translate into father-friendly practices.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states, in Article 18, that both parents have responsibility for their children. However, stereotypical views of mothers and fathers often pervade all levels of society. Consequently, children sometimes lose out on the benefits of actively engaged fathers - particularly in cases of parental separation.

We know that dads can have a huge influence upon their children's lives. The benefits include improved health and well-being, higher educational achievement, increased self-esteem and confidence, and improved relationships. These, in turn, have economic and social benefits. Dads Direct believes that it is imperative that there is a paradigm shift from the current societal position, which often under values and marginalises fathers, to embracing their worth, celebrating their input, and learning from their perspectives.

This paper sets out the evidence for the need to value and support fathers in the same way that we value and support mothers.

## Dads Direct members:



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## Executive Summary

The focus of this briefing paper is fathers in Northern Ireland. The purpose of it is to influence policy and practice so that fathers will be viewed as equally important to mothers in their parenting role, and family support services will become more inclusive of fathers and seek to meet their specific needs. This paper collates clear evidence which indicates how fathers have a positive impact on the outcomes of children and young people.

This research for this briefing paper\* was undertaken by Dr Helga Sneddon who was commissioned by Dads Direct to identify and collate evidence on the involvement of fathers in their children's lives and the effect this can have on the well-being of these children.

The paper discusses current policies and available data in relation to fathers in Northern Ireland. It describes the large body of evidence which demonstrates the beneficial outcomes for children who have actively engaged fathers, and it advocates that it is now time to move beyond 'father-proving' (i.e. focusing upon why we should work with dads) to 'father-proofing' (i.e. systematically changing how dads are supported by services).

The key messages from the Briefing Paper are:

- Dads play a significant role in improving outcomes for children.
- The culture of our society needs to embrace fathers' roles as vitally important.
- Policies need to explicitly name and include fathers.
- Service provision has to be inclusive of fathers, and to be based upon evidence and models of what works.
- There is a need for more primary research as well as the collation of existing data on fathers in Northern Ireland.

These messages are reflected in the recommendations which explore: how to change practice; the need for a regional approach - with strategies developed within services; the necessity for minimising parental conflict and promoting co-parenting.

These recommendations are summarised under four headings:

- Think Family: Think Mum and Dad
- Father-Proof Services
- Support Fathers' Well-Being
- Encourage Co-Parenting as the norm

Alongside promoting the importance of dads, there needs to be a drive towards gathering relevant Northern Ireland data on fathers as, currently, the focus is often upon collecting data only on mothers. Better data is the foundation stone for informing the design and adaption of services.

\* This briefing paper should be cited as:

Dads Direct & Sneddon, H. (2015) *The Dad Factor in Northern Ireland: How Fathers Improve Child Outcomes*. Briefing Paper. Belfast :Dads Direct.

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## Introduction

Evidence shows that children do best when they have access to a range of people who can provide social, emotional and financial resources, and who can support them in learning about the world as they grow up. Mums, dads and other important adults all have complementary roles to play by engaging with children in consistent and supportive ways. We know that mothers and fathers both influence children's outcomes; irrespective of whether their children live with them or not.

Family structures have changed considerably over the last few decades. Many children are not raised by both their biological parents living under one roof. Some families experience couple break-ups and form new families with step-parents and step-children. However, most children grow up with both their mum and their dad involved in their lives, even if they no longer all live together.

Families may not see some aspects of care-giving as being part of the father's role. However, dads tell us how important their children are to them. We also now understand some of the challenges that they face in transitioning to this new role when they have their first child.

Children whose fathers are actively involved and supportive are more likely to have: better outcomes including fulfilling friendships; fewer behavioural problems; lower risk of anti-social behaviour and criminality; higher educational attainment; greater self-esteem and life satisfaction. This is especially true for children living with disadvantage.

Supporting fathers to be actively engaged in their children's lives from the outset is likely to save money on costly interventions at a later stage when there is a need to sort out the negative consequences of non-involvement. Policy makers, service providers and practitioners need to recognise the potential value of engaged fathers in improving children's outcomes. Fathers are a very under-utilised source of support for children.

Fathers and mothers often do not share the care of their children equally - even though evidence shows that when dads are given the same exposure and support, they learn parenting skills as quickly as mothers<sup>1, 2</sup>. Currently, much parenting support has been designed (either explicitly or implicitly) to meet the needs of mothers.

To provide effective support to their children, fathers themselves need to be supported, involved and prepared. It can be difficult for fathers to know where and how to get support with raising their children, and they may not feel the support offered is relevant to them.

As fathers can sometimes feel invisible when dealing with professionals, attitudes to working with mothers and fathers need to evolve and adapt so that the most appropriate forms of support can be provided for the needs of today's families.

**GOVERNMENT  
POLICIES ON  
DADS**

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## Government Policies on Dads

Policy in Northern Ireland tends to be fairly gender-neutral; often using the term 'parent' rather than specifying 'mother' or 'father.' There are no policies which differentiate between mums or dads in terms of how important they are to children's outcomes. Where mothers and fathers are mentioned separately, it is often to underline that they can both provide support to their children. Given the body of research on the importance of engaged fathers for children's educational, health and well-being outcomes, it is crucial that policies and strategies reflect this evidence.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>3</sup>, to which the UK is a signatory, includes children's rights to housing, clothing, education and, as far as possible, to be cared for by their parents. It is the responsibility of both parents to ensure that the rights and needs of a child are met and the UNCRC does not differentiate between the contributions of mothers and fathers.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 - which is the main legislation governing the care, upbringing and protection of children in Northern Ireland - does not make a distinction between the role of mothers and fathers in raising children. It is gender neutral, apart from the acquisition of parental responsibility, which is automatically acquired by all mothers, married fathers, and can be acquired by unmarried fathers in a number of circumstances. Parents with parental responsibility continue to have parental responsibility even when their children are no longer living with them.

There are concerns that after parental break-up the default position is, in practice, for children to remain with their mother, and fathers must negotiate from this position. In the United Kingdom (UK), mothers are more likely to apply for and obtain Residence Orders, while fathers are more likely to apply for and obtain Contact Orders. However, even when arrangements have been made in family courts, these may not always be carried out.<sup>4</sup>

The Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge (2006)<sup>5</sup> Strategy references securing and harnessing the support of parents as a mechanism to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. However, it makes no specific reference to the role of fathers in achieving this.

The Families Matter policy (2009)<sup>6</sup> discusses the importance of parents in influencing children's outcomes and recognises that *"there have been major changes to family structures in Northern Ireland over the last few decades."* In the section about why some families do not readily access the support available, the policy acknowledges fathers as a group of parents who often face barriers to accessing support.

The Healthy Child, Healthy Future Strategy (2010)<sup>7</sup> highlights the importance of working with the family to improve outcomes for children. It recommends recognising the specific impact that mothers and fathers have on their children, as well as their combined influence; highlights the importance of working with fathers during pregnancy; states that fathers and/or partners should be routinely invited to participate in child health reviews; and recommends that parenting reports should ensure that contact with the family routinely involves and supports fathers/partners, including non-resident fathers/partners.

Shared Parental Leave was implemented in Northern Ireland in April 2015. Under the new rules, mothers will still take at least two weeks of maternity leave immediately after birth but, after that, working couples have the opportunity to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay. It will be important to track how useful this change in policy will be to encouraging shared

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parenting, by monitoring who takes up the option of parental leave and how it is shared between mothers and fathers.

Government departments have the responsibility for developing and implementing policy which, in turn, influences and shapes practice. How well children and young people achieve their potential in every sphere of their lives correlates directly with the quality of their upbringing. The effects are seen in education, employment, health and justice.

In general, there needs to be cross-cutting departmental co-operation in the revision and development of policies to ensure that children and young people benefit from the active and engaged roles of mothers and fathers. Particular attention should be given to 'father proofing' policies, strategies and services, as fathers' positive influence in improving children's outcomes is widely under-recognised.

There are several upcoming opportunities to review legislation, policy and strategy that can be used to ensure that children and young people benefit from the improved outcomes associated with engaged dads. The Department of Finance and Personnel has undertaken a public consultation on the law relating to parental responsibility for unmarried fathers and contact with children post-separation, and plans further research into these issues in the future. Upcoming reviews of the Children and Young People's Strategy and of Families Matter provide further opportunities to clearly signify that both parents need recognition, support and services in equal measure if they are to fulfil their parenting role effectively and improve outcomes for their children. The revision of these strategies, and the development of any new strategies affecting children, should be based upon evidence which takes account of the positive effect of engaged fathers. Government departments should consult fully with both mothers and fathers.

#### KEY MESSAGES

- The contribution of fathers to achieving positive outcomes for their children needs to be recognised.
- All family support policies and strategies need to be father-proofed, and to target the specific needs of fathers.
- Father-friendly policies and practices should be developed on a cross-departmental basis and implemented via family support services.

**DADDY**  
**DATA**

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## Daddy Data

Within Northern Ireland there is a range of 'types' and 'identities' of fathers, as well as differences in their age, status and ethnicity. They are heterosexual, gay, bisexual and transgendered. They live with their partners, or separately, or with their own parents. Some have adopted children. Some have sole or joint residency of their children. Grandparents and other males can also be important father-figures. The 2011 census in Northern Ireland suggests that the majority of fathers in Northern Ireland are white, British / Irish / Northern Irish with an average age of 32.7 years.

2012 saw the highest number of births to non-married couples to date (42%). The prevalence of lone fatherhood, as a proportion of all families, is almost 2%.

Beyond this, there is a distinct lack of information about dads in Northern Ireland. This would be useful for understanding their characteristics, needs and circumstances, and is crucial for planning and delivering effective services which build upon fathers' strengths and address their specific issues.

Not all fathers live with their biological children, and not all men are biologically related to the children to whom they are fathers. However, information about how much time children spend living with their biological or non-biological fathers is not routinely collected in Northern Ireland.

Divorce and separation are increasingly becoming part of life for families. Statistics in a recently published report from Relate indicate that almost one in four people (24%) have experienced the break-up of their parents' relationships<sup>8</sup>.

It is crucial that support services are put in place to help parents communicate with each other during this time, reach agreements, support them psychologically through transition, and provide them with practical information about their rights and responsibilities. This will benefit both parents' and children's behaviour in coping with and adapting to the new family life.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 9 emphasises the child's right to maintain regular contact with both parents following divorce/separation, except in cases where such separation is deemed not to be in the best interests of the child. With respect to families whose parents have divorced, most studies show that the children who fare best after the separation are those who see their fathers most often. Children with non-resident fathers who are involved in their lives, and who have positive relationships with them, tend to have fewer adjustment issues and better academic attainment than children with less involved fathers<sup>9</sup>.

As stated before, there is a lack of statistics on dads in Northern Ireland. However, we can use data collected in England to guide our thinking. After separation, most children live with their mother rather than their father. Most fathers (85%) who do not live with their biological children remain involved in their children's lives - including spending time with their children as well as providing some financial support.

- Many of these fathers (46%) are very engaged with their children's lives. These dads see their children every week, have the children to stay with them regularly, most provide child support and live less than 15 minutes away from their children. Most of these dads tend to be single.
- Around 28% of fathers who don't live with their children are still involved, but can be categorised as less engaged. These fathers have contact once a week or month, most

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have their children to stay over, most provide child support and live around an hour away from their children, and they live in a mix of family situations.

- Distance fathers (11%) tend to contribute financially to their children's lives but, otherwise, have little direct contact or involvement. These dads all live over an hour away. Although they rarely see their children, most provide child support.
- A small group of non-resident fathers are not involved in their children's lives - either in terms of face-to-face or financial support (15%). These dads have very rare or no contact. The children don't stay over with their dad, and most of these dads don't provide child support. These dads tend to be more economically disadvantaged and more likely to report poor physical health.

Sneddon (2014)<sup>10</sup> examined the evidence base for separated fathers and made several recommendations around the need to collect local evidence about fathers, provide support which is tailored to their strengths and needs, and reduce conflict in separated families.

Former couples need to be supported when their relationships breakdown so that conflict is reduced. They should have access to counselling and mediation services in order to empower them to manage the separation and agree a future co-parenting plan that supports the whole family. Access to early intervention support services is vital in order to reduce the emotional and financial cost of parental separation.

#### KEY MESSAGES

- There is a need for dedicated research on fathers and their parenting role in Northern Ireland.
- Couples should have access to counselling and mediation services to reduce family conflict and negative impacts upon their children.

WHAT IS

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FATHER PROVING

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## What is the Dad Factor? Father-Proving

There is clear evidence that dads who are actively engaged with their families can improve outcomes in lots of ways.<sup>11</sup> Key to this is what the father does with the child. Better outcomes are associated with fathers who are actively involved and who provide supportive parenting which is sensitive to the child's needs. There are variations amongst outcomes in different groups of fathers and children, and it is often difficult to disentangle and separate the effects of mothers and fathers. Forced high paternal involvement does not usually bring with it the same benefits as greater paternal involvement through choice. Agreement between parents as to the desirability of the involvement is also key<sup>12</sup>.

Children whose fathers are actively involved and supportive are more likely to show:

- better outcomes, especially if living with disadvantage
- better friendships
- fewer behaviour problems
- lower criminality and substance abuse
- higher educational achievement and social mobility as adults
- greater capacity for empathy
- higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction
- better language development at age five
- better outcomes in primary school
- less risky behaviour such as drugs/alcohol taking, early pregnancy, or anti-social behaviour as teenagers

Fathers can also act as a 'buffer' for their young children against the potentially negative effects of a mother's postnatal depression.

Actively engaged, supportive fathers improve outcomes throughout the different stages of childhood, and the impact can be long-lasting into adulthood.

*Table 1: Child outcomes which are improved when fathers are actively engaged*

Child stage of development	Outcomes which improve when fathers are actively engaged
<b>Early Years</b>	<p>Fathers show the same physical responses to their child's crying as mothers<sup>13</sup>. Oxytocin is a hormone which supports touching, hugging, holding and trusting others. Oxytocin in fathers can increase after childbirth in a similar way to mothers - particularly when they are encouraged to cuddle their baby. Fathers should be encouraged to hold and cuddle their child. Knowing this interaction may help the child benefit from more secure social relationships and friendships when they are adolescents<sup>14, 15</sup>.</p> <p>Fathers play an important role in supporting and encouraging the mother to breastfeed for longer<sup>16</sup>. This allows the infant to get the full benefits<sup>17</sup> which include better fine motor skills at age 1 and 3, higher adaptability to new situations at age 2 and higher verbal communication scores at age 3<sup>18, 19</sup>.</p> <p>Rough and tumble play, within safe limits, is important in developing secure father-child attachment<sup>20</sup> and can lead to improved emotional regulation in</p>

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adolescence<sup>21</sup>. Rough-and-tumble play is often seen as an integral part of a father's role<sup>22</sup>. Although mothers can also engage in this type of play, most mothers believe their children miss out on this type of physical activity if their father is not present.

Sensitive and substantial father involvement in the months following birth are connected with positive outcomes in babies and toddlers, including higher ratings of cognitive development at both 12 months and 3 years, and better language development<sup>23</sup>.

Active fatherhood can improve a child's sleeping pattern<sup>24</sup>.

Fathers spending time reading to their 1-2 year olds is associated with their child's increased preference for books at school age<sup>25</sup>.

### **Middle Childhood**

Fathers' involvement with their 7 and 11 year old children is associated with the child's better national examination performance at age 16, and with their educational attainment at the age of 20. This is shown with both boys and girls across all social classes, and whether their mother is also highly involved or not<sup>26</sup>.

A father's high level of interest in his child's schooling, high expectations for their achievement, and direct involvement with their school is associated with children's higher exam and class results<sup>27</sup>.

Children say their father is the second most important person in their lives to inspire reading, after their mother<sup>28</sup>.

A father's interest in their child's educational outcomes at age 10 can predict their level of educational achievement at age 26<sup>29</sup>.

Active fatherhood can improve general behaviour<sup>30</sup> and mental health<sup>31</sup> throughout childhood and into adolescence.

### **Teenagers and Adulthood**

Children who reported feeling that their fathers both like and understand them exhibit fewer behavioural problems, and say they have more positive friendships in adolescence than children who do not<sup>32</sup>.

Teenagers who have experienced an engaged and involved father are likely to have fewer behaviour problems, less criminality or contact with the police, and lower levels of substance abuse<sup>33</sup>.

A father's perceived interest in their child's life benefits the child's interpersonal competence and self-esteem<sup>34</sup> and can lead to more satisfying adult sexual partnerships, higher self-esteem, and life-satisfaction.

How close a young person felt to their father at age 16 was found to predict these young people's marital satisfaction and lower psychological distress at age 33, particularly for girls. Reduced psychological distress at age 33 was also found to be influenced by father involvement at age 7. This was particularly the case if the mother had low levels of involvement. In these cases, high father involvement seemed to act as a buffer against some of the negative impact of low maternal involvement.

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## Fathers Support for Mothers

Fathers have a supportive role in improving mothers' outcomes. In fact, studies show that if we are trying to influence a mother's lifestyle behaviour, we should also involve the father, because their behaviours are often closely linked:

- A well prepared father has a positive effect on his partner's birth experience, and good preparation can reduce his fear of seeing his partner in pain. In the UK, women who had the support of a partner during labour felt more positive about the birth and were found to require less pain relief.
- Expectant fathers can be influential advocates for breastfeeding and are important in encouraging a mother to breastfeed the newborn baby.<sup>35</sup> Mums who feel their partner supports them feel more capable and confident about breastfeeding<sup>36</sup>.
- Pregnant women eat and live more healthily when their partner supports them, so it is important to give health messages to both mums and dads.
- Teenage mothers who have positive partner support are more loving towards and accepting of their children, and score lower on the Child Abuse Potential scale.

## Fathers Well-Being

As 1 in 4 people in today's society will experience mental health issues, it should be recognised that fathers' can experience those very same issues; particularly those who are separated. A father's well-being is an important factor in improving child outcomes in a similar way to a mother's well-being. Professionals such as midwives and health visitors may not routinely ask fathers how they are coping in the same way that they ask mothers. Fathers may not volunteer information about their family circumstances and, often, they do not seek support from professionals regarding their well-being.

A father's involvement with their children cannot be separated from the network of family relationships. Key in this network is the quality of the relationship between the mother and father; irrespective of whether they live together or separately. Fathers and mothers who report better quality relationships with their partners are more involved with their children, even when other factors are taken into account. Overall, there is a link between more positive couple relationship and more involvement with children, for both fathers and mothers<sup>37</sup>.

Being positively involved with his family influences a father's wellbeing<sup>38</sup>:

- Involved fathers are more able to understand themselves, empathically understand others, and integrate their feelings in an ongoing way<sup>39</sup>.
- Fathers who engage with their children are likely to feel less psychological distress - men's emotional involvement with their children has been found to act as a buffer against work related stress<sup>40</sup>.
- Involved fathers are also more likely to participate in the community, to do more socialising<sup>41</sup>, and to serve in civic or community leadership positions<sup>42</sup>. Fathers can then reap the benefits of these social relationships and positions.

## Actively Engaged Dads

Engaged fathers are actively involved in supporting many different areas of their children's development. They are often involved in more nurturing and care-giving aspects of child rearing

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which have previously been more typically associated with the mother's care-giving role. There are many ways in which fathers can be involved with their children, and Pleck (2010)<sup>43</sup> identified five different components of father involvement:

- Positive engagement activities - such as playing games, looking at books or doing sports together.
- Warmth and responsiveness - for example hugging children or telling them they are loved and appreciated.
- Control - particularly decision-making and monitoring children's behaviour.
- Indirect care - activities done for children that do not involve direct involvement with the children, such as buying things or booking services for the child.
- Process responsibility - making sure that the child's needs are met, although this doesn't necessarily mean doing these things themselves.

The Timescapes Men as Fathers Study<sup>44</sup> studied a group of fathers in the UK over several years. It showed that:

- Men see being a father as getting involved with their children and providing for them. 'Providing' isn't just about money, but is also about giving their child opportunities over both the short and longer term.
- When their new baby was born, men were often surprised by the barriers to their involvement. This included practical challenges like being out at work, finding the baby unresponsive and feeling excluded by breastfeeding.
- Most men described taking on more practical care than their fathers did, but also felt under time strain as they balanced work and being involved with their children. The economic downturn has had an impact on some men's experience of fatherhood by introducing financial uncertainty - changing work commitments and family decision-making.
- Men's experiences and memories of being fathered influenced their own approaches in many, and sometimes unexpected, ways - not just in rejecting or following their own father's approach.

Substantial research has found no biologically-based differences between the sexes in sensitivity to infants<sup>45</sup>. Parenting skills are learned by both sexes. Given the same exposure to children and access to practical support, fathers learn these skills as quickly as mothers.

#### KEY MESSAGES

- Actively engaged, supportive fathers improve outcomes throughout the different stages of childhood, and the impact can be long-lasting into adulthood.
- Valuing fathers does not lessen the importance of mothers. Children benefit from actively engaged mothers and fathers.
- The structure of service provision should ensure that fathers' well-being needs are fully addressed, and services are timed to suit their availability.

# FATHER PROOFING

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## Moving from Father-Proving to Father-Proofing

The time is right for us to move from 'father-proving' (where we highlight and consider the evidence base) to 'father-proofing' (where we systematically and practically change how we support dads)<sup>46</sup>. Although there are pockets of promising work, not all family services are making progress in father-inclusive practice.

Good practice is often driven more by individual service managers and committed practitioners, rather than by a coherent national approach to supporting dads.

If fathers are to engage with support services, they need to be encouraged to access them and be made to feel welcome. Often, unintentionally, information is presented in a way which appears to be 'mothers only', and services may not take into account that making links with fathers needs to be done differently to how mothers are engaged. For instance, services could use creative marketing and recruitment techniques to reach out to fathers. This may include, for example, advertising in traditionally male spaces such as sports centres and pubs. The timing, location and format of services should be flexible to take into account various lifestyle patterns.

Fundamental to having services which meet the needs of fathers is educating the workforce. Staff need to be aware of their own attitudes towards fathers, so that their communication shows no partiality or bias, and services need to develop approaches with fathers that will overcome barriers to engagement.

The dissemination of models of 'what works' can be very helpful. For professionals such as Health and Social Care practitioners and those in education there are some useful guides which can form the basis of discussion by staff to enable them to develop a framework in which a service can become father-friendly<sup>47,48,49,50</sup>. For example, there have been some initiatives to support fathers and improve service provision in the UK. 'Think Fathers' aimed to encourage family and children's services to look at how they include fathers in their day-to-day work. It was set up by a partnership including the Fatherhood Institute, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Children's Society and the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners. The Fatherhood Institute has also developed a 'Fatherhood Quality Mark' to enable health and social care practitioners to benchmark and improve their work with fathers. This idea could be replicated in Northern Ireland, and would provide a useful tool to monitor progress.

Other actions could include, for example:

- Targeting services specifically at fathers and not just parents generally.
- Making fathers visible - referring to mothers and fathers, not just parents.
- Using positive language and images of fathers.
- Celebrating becoming and being a father, using peer support, videos and role models.
- Focusing on fathers' strengths rather than their deficits.
- Being explicit in identifying the key benefits to fathers and children of greater involvement.

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## KEY MESSAGES

- Family support services should be father-proofed.
- Father-friendly resources need to be developed.
- Capacity building should be undertaken with service providers.
- Identifying father-friendly services should be made easier.
- There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of services in engaging with and improving outcomes for fathers.

## Conclusions

In summary, there is clear evidence which highlights the important contribution which engaged fathers make to improving children's outcomes. Being a parent is a role which both men and women often require support with. Although we have various policy directives which underline the importance of supporting fathers as well as mothers, this does not always happen in practice. Fathers need to be more visible to providers. Fathers should find it as easy as mothers to get the support they need in bringing up their children. Research has highlighted effective approaches to encouraging fathers to engage with the support that is being offered. We need to ensure that this learning is incorporated into our policies, services, practice and cultural attitudes across Northern Ireland. This will ensure that our children get the best possible start in life, and grow up with the best possible support from those around them.

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The following recommendations would help to enable the key messages arising from this paper to be embedded in policy and practice.

### Think Family: Think Mum and Dad

- Instruct professionals who work with families to engage both fathers and mothers - irrespective of who the child lives with.
- Develop a regional approach to working with fathers, and support practice change in all sectors.
- Review the evidence base for effective practice in working with fathers.
- Develop standards of practice for working with fathers in Northern Ireland.
- Support an initial investment to make services more 'father-friendly'. This could include developing father-focused resources, training programmes, and capacity building with staff.
- Support 'learning communities' to share best practice.
- Develop a 'Working with Fathers' handbook.
- Restructure services to ensure fathers' well-being needs are fully addressed.
- Plan programmes to suit the access needs and availability of fathers.
- Ensure that databases (such as the government's family support database) include listings of support for fathers - to make it easier for families and professionals to find services that are 'father-friendly'.
- Undertake new research which examines: fathers' needs; the current level of service provision offered to them; and the uptake of this provision in Northern Ireland.

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## Father-Proof Services

- Services should be benchmarked against best practice and supported to integrate evidence about what is known to be most effective when working with fathers.
- Every service working with parents should develop a strategy for engaging with fathers, and ensure that their staff have the necessary skills, capacity and confidence to work with fathers.
- Services should evaluate the effectiveness of their work with fathers, both in terms of engagement and improvements in outcomes.

## Support Father's Well-Being

- Fathers' well-being should be made a priority in times of key transition such as becoming a father or during parental separation.
- Steps should be taken to de-stigmatise help seeking actions by men who experience difficulties. This could involve awareness raising campaigns for professionals and the general public on the importance of paternal mental health, as well as reviewing barriers to fathers' engagement in services.
- Professionals such as midwives and health visitors should be trained to routinely support paternal well-being as well as maternal well-being.
- Professional guidelines such as NICE should be strengthened to show the importance of working with fathers, and assessing and intervening with paternal mental health.

## Encourage Co-Parenting as the Norm:

- Parents should be supported to minimise conflict, particularly during separation. Family mediation can be beneficial when parents engage with the process.
- Court proceedings should be seen as a last resort. When used, they need to promote a cooperative parenting model rather than adversarial interactions.
- Professionals should always work on the presumption that a child's welfare is likely to be furthered through involvement with both parents - unless the evidence shows that this is not safe or in the child's best interests.
- Residency arrangements should facilitate shared parenting responsibilities and quality interactions. Using contact time for a balance between leisure activities (e.g. playing sport, going to the cinema) and more instrumental activities (e.g. schoolwork and talking to children about their problems) are most beneficial for child outcomes.
- There is a need for local research to examine the experiences of families who experience separation. This would help to better understand how to reduce conflict, and maximise the potential for co-parenting in these situations.

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