



Engaging fathers in support for children and young people

Lubna Siddiqi

Edited by Linnea Wallen

August 2020

Edinburgh Napier
UNIVERSITY



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Abstract

This research briefing examines contemporary child development literature on the subject of father involvement in their children's education and upbringing, and associated life outcomes. The briefing identifies barriers that currently prevent fathers from being more substantively involved in their children's education and lives. These include traditional gender roles associated with parenting, work commitments of fathers, relationship dynamics within separated families, non-inclusive social work practices and inhibited participation in school activities because of socio-economic constraints. It similarly describes various measures that can be implemented to overcome these barriers or mitigate their effect, including engaging fathers in school and extra-curricular activities by availing of the services of specialist male/father-inclusive agencies and adopting 'strength-based' and 'gender-differentiated' approaches. These recommendations have been derived from notable 'father inclusive' interventions and pilot projects that have been successfully implemented in both Scotland and the UK more broadly. The findings gleaned from both the relevant child development literature and the noted interventions can inform People Know How's own endeavours to increase father involvement in their children's education.

Keywords

Children, young people, families, Positive Transitions Service, social work, school, gender

Key points

- There is near consensus in contemporary child development literature on the view that father involvement has a profound impact on the mental, emotional and psychological well-being of children as well as their later life outcomes.
- There are significant barriers to high levels of father involvement in their children's education and lives. These barriers are societal, practical and logistical in nature.
- Effective means of overcoming or mitigating barriers have been identified through interventions such as the Father's Transition Project and East Lothian Father-Friendly Schools.
- Embracing a 'generative' or 'strengths based' approach, as opposed to a 'deficit approach' is beneficial in projects involving fathers and their children.

Introduction

There has been an increased recognition over the last thirty years of the role fathers can play in enhancing their children's cognitive development, psychological well-being, emotional security, educational outcomes, social competence and prospects for social mobility (Clapton 2013; Clark, 2009; Morgan et al., 2009; Potter and Carpenter, 2008, Potter et al., 2012; Potter et al., 2013; Sarkadi et al. 2007; Walters, 2011). This emphasis on the capacity of fathers to improve their children's level of academic achievement and broader life prospects is reflected in a substantial body of European and American child development literature and has come to inform government policy measures across both continents (Potter et al., 2012).

People Know How has undertaken various projects to increase parental involvement in their children's education and engagement with schools. One such endeavour is the Positive Transitions Service that encompasses a broad range of projects designed to support children and their parents throughout the school journey (People Know How 2020). These include the Family Support project providing direct assistance to struggling parents, and Science Club which entails involving parents in science workshops to great effect. Most significantly, People Know How commenced its Whit Dae Ye Hink project in 2017, through which the opinions of both parents and students were sought to gain new insights on how both parents and children in schools. Additionally, People Know How's All Aboard project involves the purchase of a canal which will serve as the venue for various child and parent/

community events and gatherings. People Know How is now seeking to more specifically encourage higher levels of father involvement in their children's education. As such, this research briefing has been undertaken with a view to assisting in this endeavour, through examining relevant child development and social policy literature, and well as drawing on the lessons learned by other implementing organisations. The briefing begins with an examination of the child development literature on the positive outcomes associated with higher levels of father involvement. It also adverts to corresponding legislative measures in the UK. The briefing then proceeds to discuss current barriers to optimal levels of father engagements and means of overcoming these barriers (as identified by notable recent interventions). The limitations of these studies are also adverted to, and final conclusions are drawn accordingly.

Fathers and the state

The state interest in enabling fathers to play a stronger role in the rearing and education of their children has several underpinning motivations. In the Nordic countries, for example, increased father involvement is deemed necessary to facilitate greater gender equality and female work participation (Adler and Lenz, 2016; Potter et al., 2012). In the US, on the other hand, there is more governmental concern about the financial burden fatherless families and disengaged fathers place on the welfare system (Potter et al., 2012). Fundamentally, there appears to be greater general concurrence that fathers have a vital role to play in assisting in

the process of child development and that they can have a major impact on their child's life trajectory. According to the National Child Development Study, which has collated data on a large sample of individuals from 1958 to current times, father involvement in their children's education at the ages of seven and eleven correlated with the children's level of educational attainment at age twenty (Clark, 2009; Sarkadi et al., 2008). The study controlled for maternal involvement, and more broadly indicated a strong linkage between the involvement of fathers in their children's upbringing and increased psychological resilience as well as positive mental health outcomes in adulthood. Sarkadi et al. (2008) reached a similar conclusion in their review of 16 longitudinal studies based on 22,300 individual datasets. Indeed, they found that greater father involvement could be correlated with better child outcomes and specifically noted that: "father engagement reduces the frequency of behavioural problems in boys and psychological problems in young women; it also enhances cognitive development while decreasing criminality and economic disadvantage in low SES [socioeconomic status] families" (Sarkadi et al., 2008, p. 157).

On the basis of their findings they have urged government authorities and social care professionals to increase their engagement with fathers. In the UK, significant pieces of legislation seeking to increase consultation with fathers in the course of service provision include The Child Care Act 2006 and The Gender Equality Duty 2007. Increased provision for paid paternal leave also reflects a societal shift in perceptions of the role of the father. Unfortunately, this shift has not yet been properly reflected in

social work practice, the primary and secondary education sector and the provision of family services. A common refrain in the social policy literature is that, while the desirability of father involvement is broadly acknowledged at a government policy level, family, education and social care services are not held accountable for failing to imbed father inclusive protocol and practices in their service provision (Clapton, 2013; Potter et al., 2013). Accordingly, father inclusive practices are presently "advised rather than prescribed" (Potter et al., 2012, p. 222).

Barriers to father involvement

There are many barriers to fathers' involvement in their children's education and upbringing. These range from being practical and logistical in nature, to having deeper roots in culture and academic discourse. Traditional gender divisions along the lines of men being breadwinners and women being home-makers continue to inform levels of father-engagement with children (Clark, 2009; Clapton, 2013; Kadar-Stat et al., 2017). The work of academics and theorists in the areas of child development and sociology such as John Bowlby, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow also had the effect of 'essentialising' mothers and granting fathers a much more peripheral role in child development (Clapton, 2013). Particularly in the context of separated families, mothers can also act as 'gatekeepers' and limit the engagement of fathers with their children (Clapton, 2013; Kadar-Satat et al., 2017; Maxwell, 2012). Hostile relations between a separated couple carries implications for potential father

involvement. Clapton (2013) adverts to the little effort child welfare authorities often make in identifying, contacting and communicating with non-resident fathers with regards to undertakings concerning their children. The social welfare and early child care services also tend to be dominated by women, and can sometimes be perceived as feminised spaces (whether in terms of being heavily staffed by women, or in terms of décor, colour schemes or activities undertaken therein) making some fathers less willing to engage with them (Clapton, 2013; Palm and Fagan, 2008).

There are also numerous practical obstacles to father's being more actively involved in their children's education. Work commitments, long working hours and lack of flexible working arrangements often bar fathers from spending as much time as they wish with their children and contributing to their children's school endeavours (Clark, 2009; Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). This is even more of a problem for fathers from lower-income groups. Fathers from lower-income groups are often also reluctant or lack the confidence to participate in school undertakings or assist in their child's literacy and broader educational endeavours, if they themselves have a low level of literacy or have not had a good school experience (Clark, 2009; Kadar-Satat et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2009; Potter et al. 2012). These practical reasons inhibiting parental involvement in school endeavours were also identified by People Know How when undertaking the Whit Dae Ye Hink project. Fathers from more educated, higher income groups are reported to be more involved in their children's education compared to fathers from lower income backgrounds (Clark, 2009; Kadar-Satat et al., 2017;

Morgan et al., 2009). This differing level of involvement on the basis of socio-economic background has notably not been identified amongst mothers (Morgan et al., 2009).

Aside from work commitments, and a possible lack of confidence amongst some fathers, the child development literature on this subject also identifies a general tendency among fathers to defer to mothers with respect to literacy practices and position them as the primary care-givers and educators of their children (Clark, 2009). As a high proportion of mothers work part-time, opt for flexible working arrangements or do not work, they often have more time at their disposal to play a greater role in their children's education (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). This should not, however, lead us to conclude that fathers are generally uninterested in or uninvolved in their children's education. For example, the REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) programme was undertaken in a deprived part of North England and was conducted with the aim of assessing the level of father participation in the project and investigating father involvement in child literacy activities (Morgan et al., 2009). It was reported that fathers did not show a high level of attendance at meetings held at child centers or high visibility during parent home interviews conducted by teachers. However, the interview data (often collating the responses of mothers) indicated that 77% of fathers did engage in literacy activities with their children. Accordingly, a lack of direct father engagement with school or early education authorities, need not always be indicative of a lack of father assisted literacy activity at home. However, two thirds of families reported that the

mother was more engaged with child literacy activities than the father (Morgan et al., 2009).

Strategies to overcome barriers

Various strategies have been identified as being effective in encouraging father participation in childhood learning and school activities. A valuable illustrative example is the 'Father's Transition Project' which was successfully undertaken in 2011 in what has been described as an "almost exclusively white working-class area of significant and multiple deprivation in northern England" (Potter et al., 2012). The project focused on increasing father engagement with children through active participation in various excursions and outdoor learning activities. A comparable strategy is being adopted by People Know How, in the implementation of it's All Aboard project, where a canal boat will serve as the outdoor site for various joint parent-child activities. The science workshops People Know How also conduct can also be viewed as having typified this approach. Other comparable Edinburgh based father-inclusion organisations include 'Dad's Rock', which has helped both primary and secondary schools to better engage and collaborate with fathers.

The Father's Transition' project took place during the critical transition period between pre-school and reception. It was hoped that engagement at this learning stage would lay the foundation for continued father involvement in their children's education and active participation in school events and activities. The project entailed extensive coordination between the pre-school/child centre, school and a specialist

male inclusion agency with ten years of experience in devising strategies to engage fathers in child learning, which provided the services of a Fathers Transition Worker. The Father Transition Worker was responsible for recruiting fathers to the project and keeping them engaged with it over several months through face-to-face engagement, text messages and phone calls. Significantly, this worker came from a similar background to the children's fathers, and through his accessibility, friendliness and firm persistence was able to win their trust and confidence (Potter et al., 2012).

Throughout the project, emphasis was placed on embracing a 'generative' or 'strengths based' approach, as opposed to a 'deficit approach', whereby the fathers were deemed to be inherently capable and have something valuable to offer to their children. As such, the project adopted a way of engaging with fathers which built on their strengths and overcame their insecurities, rather than one which presumed them to be inept and insufficiently caring (Potter et al., 2012). The project also espoused a 'gender differentiated' approach, whereby male-oriented activities and excursions were devised to act as a 'hook' to attract fathers to the programme. These included activities such as building birdboxes with the children, a trip to the forest to build a den, visiting a lighthouse and a mining museum as well as making papier-mâché planets. A gender-differentiated approach as opposed to a 'gender-blind' approach is commonly acknowledged as being a highly effective means in drawing men to participate (Potter et al., 2012). Moreover, pursuant to the Gender Equality Duty (2007,) public services must "assess if there is evidence of different needs of men

and women and whether both women and men's needs are being met". While the interests of some fathers may not be catered to through the provision of stereotypically male activities, such an approach does often succeed in attracting fathers at a general level.

Successful initial contact/recruitment of fathers was often made face-to-face; leaflets and brochures were ineffective in this regard. Communication with mothers was also deemed helpful in keeping fathers informed and sustaining father involvement. Funding availability and logistical assistance also proved to be critical to the success of the project. A local authority funded the recruitment of the Father Transition Worker and assisted in funding the excursion and children's activities (Potter et al., 2012). In different projects, the provision of transportation and meals has also aided organisations in facilitating greater father participation (Potter et al., 2012).

Scottish context and case study

The Scottish Government has explicitly acknowledged the importance of parental involvement in children's education and development through both legislation and various policy instruments. The provisions of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 and the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 both aim to promote parental engagement with schools and require schools and education authorities to devise policies which enhance parental involvement in children's education (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). Specific promotion of father inclusive practices can be found in the toolkit Parents As Partners In

Their Children's Learning released by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) in 2006 (Kadar-Satat, 2017). Accordingly, family – and more specifically, father – engagement with schools and children's learning is something that is very much on Scotland's educational policy agenda.

In 2017 the East Lothian Father-friendly Schools (ELFFS) project was undertaken in six primary schools across East Lothian with the aim of imbedding father inclusive practices in the school processes and broader culture (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). The project was implemented through consultation with specialist fathers agencies, as well through collaboration with other schools also seeking to adopt father inclusion measures. Importantly, a conscious effort was made throughout the project to consistently adopt a 'strengths based' rather than 'deficit based' approach. This was principally done through the implementation of a practical Father Inclusion Guide. A father inclusion 'champion' was appointed at each school to implement the guide through cooperation with senior school staff and advice from father inclusion specialist agencies such as DadsWork. Numerous measures were undertaken to increase father involvement and promote a more father friendly school culture. These included placing a 'father-friendly display' at prominent school notice boards. Efforts were also made to familiarise staff with the contents of the guide and their assistance was sought in generating ideas for greater father inclusion. Staff members were additionally required to directly engage with fathers in school settings, such as the playground, and thereby get to know the fathers. Such occasions would serve

as 'ice-breakers' and make it easier for fathers to subsequently approach and communicate with teachers (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). While undertaking the Whit Dae Ye Hink project, People Know How staff and volunteers similarly sought the opinion of parents through informal consultations at pick-up time after school.

The project also directly engaged fathers in school activities and utilised their talents and experience so as to benefit the school community. For instance, they invited fathers to come into the classroom and talk about their work. Efforts were also made to give parents as much notice as possible before school events, so that fathers with work commitments could have greater time to obtain leave or arrange their work commitments in a way that would enable attendance. Other strategies to increase levels of father attendance included holding events specifically tailored to fathers or male carers at convenient times (such as the weekend or evenings). This, of course, was done in consultation with teachers who already had demanding work schedules (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017). The ELFFS project additionally obtained information about the individual family circumstances of students so that contact could be established with non-resident fathers or other significant male carers. A Parents Apart database was similarly set up to assist in the process of communicating information to both parents where appropriate. This would, for example, enable separate appointments to be given to separated parents for parents' evenings. The data collated through the ELFFS indicated that these measures had made a substantial positive difference to the culture of the school and increased

the level of inclusivity felt amongst fathers. (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017).

Limitations

The data generated by the REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) programme was largely generated through interviews with mothers. Most fathers did not directly participate in the interviews and can thus be perceived as a real limitation of that study. Furthermore, while the Fathers Transition Project is a valuable case study, it did draw on a small sample of fathers. It would also be useful if longitudinal data extending over several years was available in the context of that project. A similar observation can be made with regards to the ELFFS project conducted more recently in Scotland. In Scotland there is, at present, only a limited amount of data available on the impact of father-specific interventions as opposed to projects more generally targeted at parents/families as a whole. More robust conclusions could be drawn from larger sample sizes and longitudinal data collated over several years.

Conclusion

There is a strong recognition of the substantial positive impact father involvement can have on children's education and later life outcomes in contemporary child development and social policy literature. This has contributed to the broad concurrence UK policy makers hold on the view that fathers have an important and valuable contribution to make to the upbringing and education of their children. Legislation such as The Child Care

Act 2006 and The Gender Equality Duty 2007 reflect this, as does Scottish legislation in the form of The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. Numerous structural and practical barriers currently exist which impede fathers from engaging more with their children's schools and undertaking more educational activities with their children. These include work commitments, socioeconomic constraints, relationship dynamics in the context of separated families, the approach of child welfare and social work authorities, and the 'feminised' nature of early education spaces. Various projects have, however, been piloted and implemented through the UK, which also identify a number of successful strategies to address

these barriers. Instructive examples of such projects include 'The Father's Transition Project' and the East Lothian Father-friendly Schools (ELFFS) project in Scotland. Both these projects have been successful in increasing father involvement in children's educational endeavours and promoting a more father inclusive culture. People Know How has undertaken numerous initiatives to promote greater parental involvement in the education of their children, such as the Positive Transitions Service. Many of the findings discussed in the course of this briefing can, however, be valuable in further informing the implementation of People Know How's future father-specific endeavours

Adler M & Lenz K. (Eds.) (2016) *Father Involvement in the Early Years: An international Comparison of Policy and Practice*. Bristol, Policy Press.

Bauman D. & Wasserman B. (2010) Empowering fathers of disadvantaged preschoolers to take a more active role in preparing their children for literacy success at school. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 37, 363-370.

Clapton G. (2013) *Social Work with Fathers: Positive Practice*. Policy and Practice in Health and Social Care 18. Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press Ltd.

Clark C. (2009) *Why fathers matter to their children's literacy*. National Literacy Trust.

Kadar-Satat G., Szaboki R. & Byerly A. (2017) *Father involvement in primary schools: a pilot study in East Lothian*. Fathers Network Scotland.

Liscomb R. (2011) Strategies to improve father's involvement with their children's development and academic achievement. *Race, Gender and Class*. 18 (3/4), 253-267.

Maxwell N., Scourfield J., Featherstone B., Holland S. & Tolman R. (2012) Engaging fathers in child welfare services: a narrative review of recent research evidence. *Child and Family Social Work*. 17, 160-169

Morgan A., Nutbrown C. & Hannon b. (2009) Father's involvement in young children's literacy development: implications for family literacy programmes. *British Educational Research Journal*. 35 (2), 167-185.

Palm G. & Fagan J. (2008) Father involvement in early childhood programs: review of the literature. *Early Child Development and Care*. 178 (7&8), 745-759.

People Know How. (2020) Positive Transitions Service. www.peopleknowhow.org/positive-transitions-service

Potter C. & Carpenter J. (2008) 'Something in it for dads': getting fathers involved with Sure Start'. *Early Child Development and Care*. 178 (7&8), 761-772.

Potter C., Walker G. & Keen B. (2012) Engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in children's early educational transitions A UK perspective. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. 10 (2), 209-225.

Potter C., Walker G. & Keen B. (2013) 'I am reading to her and she loves it': benefits of engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in their children's early learning transitions. *Early Years*. 33 (1) 74-89.

Sarkadi A., Kristiansson R., Oberklaid F. & Bremberg S. (2007) Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Paediatrica*. 2008, 97, 153-158.

Walters J. (2011) *Working With Fathers: From Knowledge to Therapeutic Practice*. *Basic Texts in Counseling and Psychotherapy*. London, Palgrave Macmillan.

People Know How

525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

research.briefings@peopleknowhow.org

Registered Charity No. SC043871



@peopleknowhow



@PKHinnovation



@peopleknowhow



/PeopleKnowHow1