

Collaborative parenting: Barriers faced by separated fathers

By Dr Victoria Bourne and Shane Ryan

Background

This study was commissioned by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission to inform the development of a new service which seeks to improve the co-ordination of support services for separating and separated parents. Previous research has shown that fathers, in particular fathers from disadvantaged and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, are less likely to access support services, and therefore we wished to understand what barriers fathers from these groups were facing, and how we could reach them through the new service.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to identify how separated and separating fathers could be positively influenced to work together with the other parent in the best interest of their child, and to access support services where possible. The key objectives were to identify what fathers feel constitutes 'working together' with the other parent and to identify the key barriers which prevent collaboration and accessing of support services.

Methodology

The first stage of the study was to review the existing literature on separated fathers. Primary research then explored these issues in depth, using a qualitative methodology. The research was conducted by Working With Men (WWM), a London-based charity who were already working with this 'hard to reach' group, and who had already developed relationships of trust with the research

participants. Eight focus groups were run with a total of 55 fathers, the majority from disadvantaged and BME communities. All the groups were held in London in March/April 2012. Each group addressed four topics:

- Values and beliefs: Their responsibilities towards, and their relationship with, their child/children;
- Working together: Their relationship with their child's mother;
- Support services: Views regarding the external sources of support available for them as a father and their relationship with their child (and the child's mother);
- Barriers: Discussion of the barriers that exist in developing and maintaining a good relationship with their child and the mother.

A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify core themes and subthemes within the focus group discussions. Four core themes were extracted:

1. Fathers' responsibilities towards, and relationship with, their child;
2. Fathers' relationship with the child's mother;
3. External influences and sources of support;
4. Fathers' feelings of self, identity, emotions and needs.

Within each core theme there were six to nine subthemes.

Summary of key findings

The literature review suggested a number of barriers to co-parenting among separated parents in general, including relationships; emotions; attitudes, values and beliefs; intentions and practical issues. A number of barriers to accessing services were identified, including emotional and practical barriers and stigmatisation. Fathers are less likely than mothers to access services, and there is evidence to suggest that fathers' needs are not addressed by existing services. Young fathers and fathers from BME communities are the least likely groups to access support. The review confirmed that this area is under-researched, and there is a need for research to understand the barriers fathers, particularly young fathers and those from BME communities, face in establishing co-parenting arrangements and accessing support.

The fathers in our focus groups demonstrated positive attitudes towards collaborative parenting. All supported the idea of working with the mother to put the child's interests first, and although most had a poor relationship with the mother, they were committed to improving it in the future. They also reported that they feel responsible for their child's upbringing, in terms of academic education, moral development and acquiring positive and beneficial life skills. They were keenly aware of their financial responsibilities towards their child, but some fathers expressed concern and distrust about how the mother used their contribution.

However, the fathers faced a number of barriers in putting these good intentions into practice. These included:

- low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their own ability to be a 'good dad', and a feeling that they did not have control over their own life;

- a recognition that they needed help and support, both for themselves and to help their relationship with their child and the mother, but an inability to find suitable support. Our research participants described the difficulties they had experienced in accessing support, sometimes because they felt that admitting they needed help reflected badly on them as a man and a father, and always because the right support, to meet their individual needs, is not easily available;
- negative perceptions and experiences of existing services, especially where the fathers had had experience of 'official' services such as social services. There was also a strong perception that where support does exist, it targets mothers rather than fathers;
- feelings of frustration, conflict and isolation, following from these negative perceptions and experiences. Some fathers feel that the only valued contribution to their child's upbringing is financial, whereas they wanted to contribute to, and be involved in, broader aspects of the child's life;
- when the father feels that he lacks support or knowledge, or is in a difficult financial situation, this feeds back into the negative psychological consequences, further exacerbating feelings of low self-esteem and low confidence. This increases conflict with the child's mother and can lead to reduced contact with their child.

Therefore, a cycle of low self-esteem, inability to access support, frustration and conflict is created and the fathers become less engaged. Previous research suggests that the cycle will be influenced by socio-economic factors such as income, employment and homelessness.

In order to design interventions to break this cycle, the fathers' views regarding external sources of support were explored in more detail. The more 'official' external influences, such as governmental agencies, were typically seen in a negative light. Many distrust 'official' services such as social

services or the Child Support Agency, due to previous negative experiences. They also feel that family support services target mothers and little is available for fathers. Where fathers have accessed ‘supportive’ or ‘unofficial’ services there has been a benefit to the fathers themselves, and to the relationship with their child and the mother.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study concludes that separated fathers in challenging circumstances feel there are a number of barriers to them being able to effectively engage in a relationship with their child and the child’s mother. This may result from difficulties with the child’s mother, from difficulties with the official or governmental agencies involved, from the lack of support available for fathers or from their own psychological issues. The findings suggest a number of possible policies to break the cycle of disengagement.

- Interventions should target the right groups – although the starting point for this study was to identify barriers facing fathers from BME communities, it emerged that interventions aimed at young fathers and those from disadvantaged areas may be more effective. Young fathers tend to have a more positive attitude and are at a crisis point in their lives, and are, therefore, more receptive to external support. Fathers in disadvantaged areas are more likely to face both psychological and socio-economic barriers, and therefore, are in greatest need of support. BME communities are over-represented in disadvantaged areas, and so it is likely that interventions to target disadvantaged fathers will also reach BME fathers.
- Linked to this, support must be provided at the right time. This is likely to be at a key transition point in the father’s life, often during the pregnancy or as soon as possible after the child’s birth, so that positive behaviours are instilled from the start.
- Long-term activity is needed to normalise accessing support during and after separation, and to remove the stigmatisation which is currently attached to seeking support.
- ‘Official’ or ‘government’ services need to be improved so that they meet the needs of separated fathers as well as mothers. In particular, more men should be included in early years settings, to counter the perception that existing support caters only for mothers.
- There is also a need to expand the services provided by Voluntary and Community Sector organisations, which are perceived more positively by fathers and, therefore, may be better placed to reach them.
- Fathers should be included in the design of new services, and the improvement of existing services, to ensure that they meet the needs of fathers. Services must be empathetic, non-judgemental and positive about the father’s role.
- Further research is needed to understand the barriers faced by fathers from low-income and non-white populations, and to understand what works in helping these groups to engage with services.

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