



Timescapes Policy Briefing Paper Series

Editors: Sarah Finney & Sarah Morton
*Strengthening Men's Involvement
in Fathering: Opportunities and
Challenges*

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Brief Overview

Discussions of fatherhood often refer to how men today are expected to be more involved with their children than in previous generations. This briefing outlines findings from a study of continuities and changes in men's experience of fathering over time. This dynamic understanding of men's changing experience of being a dad raises key issues for policy in relation to opportunities and barriers around strengthening fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

Background

Major social and cultural shifts occurring in Western countries - including economic restructuring, changes to the labour market and the impact of feminism - are changing expectations and experiences of fatherhood today. It is now much more common to think of fathers as intimate and involved as opposed to the breadwinner and disciplinarian role often associated with fathers in previous generations.

Whilst fatherhood has become a topic of research and policy interest in recent years, there remains little consensus about the extent to which men and their families support ideals of involved fatherhood in their everyday lives, the practical barriers to achieving this, and to what extent 'traditional' models of fathering remain relevant. Some commentators link the decline in traditional ideas about fatherhood to social problems, while others see new ideas about intimate and involved fatherhood as positive.

The Men as Fathers (MAF) study explores some of these issues in order to think about the potential opportunities and barriers to strengthening fathers' involvement in family life (*Coalition for Men and Boys*, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). This helps us to

Key points

- Men see being involved with their children and providing for them as important aspects of being a father. Providing is not only related to finances but also to providing opportunities for their child over both the short and longer term
- Men were often surprised at the challenges of being involved with the lives of their new babies. 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 experienced a 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 informed their own approaches in many and sometimes unexpected ways, not just in rejecting or following their own father's approach

make sense of the gap between some of the ideas about 'new' fathers and the lived reality of fathers' lives (Daniel and Taylor, 1999), and offers productive ways for reflecting on further changes - particularly in relation to issues of gender equality - needed to strengthen father involvement.

Recognising the need for more dynamic research on fatherhood over time (Lewis and Lamb, 2007), the MAF project revisits men on several occasions over the transition to fatherhood and beyond. Using this strategy we encounter the same fathers as they enter into and practice different approaches to fatherhood at different moments in their life. The study seeks to explore the complexity of contemporary fatherhood, without losing sight of common themes, broader contexts and issues.

The Study

The project built on work from 2000 which involved interviewing a group of 30 expectant fathers from East Anglia once before and twice within the year after the birth of their first child (Henwood and Procter, 2003). The study lay dormant for several years until becoming part of the Timescapes project when 19 of these original participants were interviewed again in 2008/9. A further 16 men from South Wales were recruited in 2008 and interviewed three times over their transition to first-time fatherhood. In total, these groups provide a sample of 46 men who became fathers between the ages of 15 and 41. Revisiting the same participants over time (what is known as a qualitative longitudinal study) allows us to see the continuities and changes in their accounts in the immediate and longer-term, thus building a detailed picture of fathering through time.

Findings

Early experiences and expectations

All fathers in the study were present at the birth of their child and often attended antenatal appointments and classes beforehand, reflecting a contemporary trend towards men's greater involvement during these early stages.

Most men were positive about their experience of antenatal services, although some felt ignored by health professionals and believed that they could have been provided with more information to enable them to support their partners. Having good quality information helped the men to feel more confident in their abilities;

however, some experienced difficulties in identifying or accessing appropriate sources. Some of the men also felt that there was no opportunity to discuss their concerns as an expectant father and often relied on their partners to provide information; for example, women often selected sections of books or magazines for their partners to read. Those men who had experienced National Childbirth Trust classes were positive about the benefits of all-male sessions where they could ask 'silly' questions and share their existing knowledge with other expectant fathers.

Changing relationships to involvement

The study research suggests that men's relationships to involvement change over time in relation to their life experiences.

During the pregnancy men could feel excluded and often looked forward to their baby arriving so they could be involved. However, post-birth some men were surprised that involvement was more limited than they had imagined.



This was variously attributed to the demands of paid work, the child's dependence on the mother for breastfeeding (fathers of bottle-fed infants often found it easier to get involved at this stage), or the child's immaturity and lack of responsiveness. These feelings often came as a surprise and prompted some men to look towards the future to a time when they could be more involved.

Revisiting some men eight years later, several of these practical barriers were no longer relevant and the majority of men felt that they were more involved with their children. However, this high level of involvement in both paid work and family life meant many fathers experienced their time as pressured. This prompted some men to look forward to a time in the future when they would have fewer family responsibilities and more time to themselves.

Caring for and caring about

Contemporary parenting is seen as particularly demanding in order to ensure children's positive future development. Parents are required to invest in their child emotionally and practically (in ways that require both time and money) whilst relying on 'expert' guidance to do this in the most appropriate way.

Simultaneously, research points to the way in which, despite increased expectations of men's involvement, women continue to have primary responsibility for childcare. The demands of 'intensive parenting culture' are subsequently seen to fall predominantly on women.

Our research highlights how men reported taking on more childcare than their own fathers had done but feeling that



practical barriers (as discussed above) prevented equal involvement in hands-on care. However, although the tasks of caring and earning remained gender differentiated, participants demonstrated a commitment to greater involvement in childcare and knowledge about children's everyday worlds.

“the father's got to get really hands-on involved here, they cannot just be a wallet in the sense of passing the money over to the mother and the mother goes and buys the stuff for the child, that's not parenting. You've really got to get engaged completely with them, you've got to know everything about your child; you've got to know everything that's going on”

They also showed involvement in 'thinking about' the child by planning for the future e.g. saving for the child to go to university.

Involvement and the economic downturn

Although involvement is central to the ideals of contemporary fatherhood, discussion of the economic downturn reveals men's continuing emphasis on providing financially in order for their child to have the 'best start'. Focussing on the experience of three men in professional employment (and who thus may appear relatively 'insulated' against the strains of the recession) analysis revealed changes in their accounts over time as the consequences of the downturn unfolded.

Several findings emerged by posing questions about changes to these men's anticipated futures brought about by the economic downturn: awareness of greater financial uncertainty, constrained choices, and financial risk-taking. One man described how the housing market crash meant they were unable to buy a family home, whilst high costs of childcare and employment insecurity restricted the likelihood of having any further children. Another man spent a long period working away from the family home during the week, and therefore missed out on time with his partner and child, as increased job market insecurity meant he was required to 'go where the work is'. Some men did not compromise their long-term plans,

although steps to achieve this were made risky by the financial crisis e.g. buying a larger family house in an insecure economy. Other men felt that the downturn had far-reaching implications and influenced their longer-term plans e.g. the number of children they were likely to have.

Fathering across generations

Men's prior and continuing relationships with their own fathers were influential in shaping their own desire for, or distance from, more intimate and involved practices of fathering. For example, some men who had negative memories of their father wanted to have a highly involved, loving and caring relationship with their own child to make up for what they had missed out on, whilst others were concerned that they would inevitably follow their own father's behaviour and replicate potentially damaging patterns. On other occasions, mothers and fathers were upheld as ideal parents, with men seeking to emulate their approach.

“My father I wouldn't say was particularly very good. He was quite Victorian, and there's certainly no way I'd like to be like that. I'd like to be a bit more modern and approachable”

Biographical influences mainly come to the surface through experiences and memories of relationships, but they tend to work through the emotionally charged dimensions of masculinity and gender that are more difficult to speak about. Important here is an unspoken fear of not being recognised as a man and father if one moves outside of what is expected within a family or community. The study research suggests that investments in masculinity (and associated ideas of class and culture) pull men back towards inherited or more traditional fathering models. This is apparent even in those cases when the opportunity or desire for change is pushing men toward more involved and less gender differentiated parenting. This perspective is in tune with other gender and fatherhood researchers (e.g. Featherstone, 2009) who suggest theory and policy needs to take account of these complex gendered and generational issues.

Implications for Policy

Our research promotes understanding of the complex range of issues facing policy makers and practitioners today as they help to build capacity within families whilst also helping them to flourish.

- As men are increasingly encouraged to be involved during pregnancy, birth and the early stages post-natally, having good quality information and the opportunity to ask questions can help them to feel more confident in their abilities to both care for their child and support their partner during this time. It would also be beneficial to consider how access to antenatal programmes which provide men-only sessions could be widened.
- After the birth, practical barriers (such as paid work, baby's reliance on the mother for breastfeeding) limit men's involvement. Yet, in addition to practical tasks such as nappy changing and bathing, some men found that activities such as reading stories and playing music to their baby helped them to feel more involved. Policy and practice guidance could do more to highlight these positive contributions to prevent feelings of exclusion amongst fathers and to promote their involvement in family life in the longer term. For example, images of involved fathers in the 'Birth to Five' booklet (NHS) could be reinforced by supporting text.
- Although men continue to see themselves as primarily responsible for providing financially for their families – valuing this as a positive source of paternal identity – the provider role can also represent a source of anxiety (Coalition for Men and Boys, 2009). Recent changes to state support for families may intensify this pressure to provide financially. Ideals of father involvement and commitments to an egalitarian model of parenting appear to be widely upheld amongst fathers. Research will be needed to establish the impact of recent changes to parental leave implemented by the coalition government on patterns of working and caring in different families.
- Fathers in our study saw themselves as making important contributions to family wellbeing and resilience, but the resources fathers offer are shaped by practical restrictions, and many other forces including popular cultural understandings of masculine and paternal 'roles' and identities. Practitioners and policy-makers still need to promote and remove barriers to non-traditional contributions by men as fathers e.g. promoting educational practices aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes and encouraging the social and emotional development of boys and men in ways that improve their capacity and potential to care for themselves and others (as recommended the Council of the European Union).
- Ideas of masculinity inherited from the older generation can be struggled with in times of abrupt social change. This means that engaging men in fathering needs to be done in ways that are sensitive to the pros and cons of upholding gender norms. Men's chances of coming to a settlement with their family legacies in ways that promote self-esteem and positive recognition from family members could also be improved. Such engagements would not only be aimed at improving fathers' experiences but also address how they see relationship risks to help promote genuinely co-operative couple and parenting relationships. Alongside the management of fathers as potential and actual risks to children and mothers, practitioners and policy makers need to keep up their efforts to engage fathers as resources.
- Our research takes a relational perspective to parenting which considers how the experiences of one parent hold implications for the other, building on recommendations to foreground the mother-father relationship in more joined up approaches. As well as addressing the practical barriers to father involvement, this perspective could create new opportunities for mothers in the work of earning and caring.

References and Further Reading

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