Supporting fathers after separation or divorce: implications for practice

Based on a review of divorce-related parenting programmes and their impact and effects on fathers (O’Brien & Philip, 2012)

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Context: what kind of services are potentially available to separated fathers?

• Expansion and *expectation of mediation* (removal of legal aid from private law) & *compulsory MIAM* (Mediation Info & Assessment Meeting)

• *Reform of Child Maintenance Service* (Child Maintenance Options)

• *Children’s Centres* – expectation to include and engage fathers

• *Contact Centres* – levels of supervision

• *Parenting courses* – e.g. The Separated Parents Information Programme (CAFCASS, National Family Mediation, Relate)

• *Online resources* – information, guidance, template agreements etc. (e.g. One Plus One; Gov. initiative: ‘Sorting Out Separation’
What did the review involve?

- Evaluations & reported findings from divorce-related parenting programmes aimed exclusively at, or including fathers, and which focus on improving parent-child and coparenting relationships.

- Included a range of evaluation study designs, including experimental (e.g. control or comparison groups) and qualitative (e.g. descriptive, or based on experiences/satisfaction & self-reporting).

- Peer reviewed or commissioned evaluations published between 2005-July 2012.

- Not restricted to the UK, but published in English.

- 29 publications were initially identified. From this, 18 peer reviewed articles and one commissioned report met all the criteria for inclusion resulting in 13 interventions.
The programmes/interventions:

• 13 programmes were identified (and had been evaluated)

• 9 are American, and one from the UK (SPIP), New Zealand, Australia and Israel

• 1 programme aimed directly at fathers; 6 aimed at individual fathers and mothers; 3 involved couples and 3 focused on whole families

• Some focus on parent education; some more therapeutic or psych-educational; some focus on mediation process and some combine elements.

• Variation in: duration & intensity, court-affiliation, format/delivery

• Certain common aims: increase awareness of impact on children; reduce inter-parental conflict; improvement of co-parenting; improve outcomes for children
General findings:

Impact: Number of programmes reporting improvements in family relationships after participation (N=13)
Findings related to fathers

- **Indications/inferred evidence of:**
  - Reduction of interparental conflict, as reported by fathers: including reduction in ‘conflict in the presence of children’ or reduction in depth and breadth of conflict issues
  - Improvements in perception/practice of coparenting for fathers
  - Benefits for children (of fathers’ participation): reporting that children experienced improved emotional availability of their fathers
  - Reported benefits to men’s adjustment/wellbeing (e.g. feeling supported, perception of ‘fairness’ over caring arrangements)
Limitations of the evaluation evidence

• Only 4 evaluations had a control/appropriate comparison group with follow-ups limiting the ability to identify whether benefits were related to the programme, the passing of time or other unobserved factors.

• A significant number of evaluation studies involved small sample sizes, underspecified inclusion criteria and high rates of attrition

▪ No consistent consideration and analysis of gender as part of evaluating the potential impact. In a significant minority of evaluations there is no distinction made between fathers or mothers, with mother and father measures routinely not analysed separately and the term ‘parents’ being used to present and discuss all findings

▪ Little clear or comprehensive information on men’s parenting or father-child relationships, or on fathers’ coparenting perceptions or behaviours. Even where programmes involved goals related explicitly to father involvement, such as Dads For Life, these were sometimes not captured in the evaluation
Insights: in search of the ‘active ingredient’

- **Involving both fathers and mothers in the intervention:** The question is not “whether to intervene with fathers or with couples, but, in either approach, how to involve both parents in the intervention programme” (Cowan et al, 2006: 677)

- **Perspective taking:** The opportunity to see/hear the perspective of the ‘other parent’ was commented on as a valuable tool in facilitating conflict reduction and increasing parents’ capacity to focus on the needs of children. Perspective taking was commented on by some fathers as a benefit of being in a mixed sex group

- **Impact of direct input from children:** Powerful ‘wake-up call’ or ‘light bulb moment’ or a way of making difficult issues around managing and reducing parental conflict more ‘palatable’ – commented on by both fathers and mothers

- **Palatability and ‘feeling safe’:** The importance of how and when to introduce delicate conflict/relationship management material; making content ‘palatable’ may contribute to perceived ‘levelling of the playing field’ where fathers felt more empowered but also more able to listen to views that differed from their own (McIntosh, Wells & Long, 2007)
Other practice issues to consider:

• **Father visibility** – collecting and using demographic data & disaggregation by gender

• **Recruitment** – court/community; ‘hard to reach fathers’; active ‘father-targeting’ strategies; universal or ‘specialised’ services

• ‘**Risky Fathers**’ – screening; balancing welfare needs/rights of fathers, mother & children; service gap?
Recommendations from our review:

- Improving routine administrative & demographic data about fathers
- Incorporation of analysis by gender of parent into evaluation design
- Further development and application of father-related indicators
- Further conceptual work on family restructuring and coparental relationship adjustment after separation and divorce
- Undertaking more formative evaluation and feasibility studies
- Increased collaboration between research institutions and practitioners in both statutory and voluntary sectors
References:

• Featherstone, B (2009), Contemporary Fathering, Theory, Policy and Practice, Bristol: The Policy Press
References:


- Philip & O’Brien (2012), Supporting Fathers after separation or divorce: evidence and insights, Centre for research on the Child & Family


