



Response to the Equal Opportunities Committee Enquiry on Fathers

About Parenting across Scotland

Parenting across Scotland (PAS) is a partnership of voluntary organisations working together to provide a focus for issues and concerns affecting parents and families in Scotland.

The PAS partners are CHILDREN 1ST, Aberlour Childcare Trust, Capability Scotland, Children in Scotland, Families Outside, One Parent Families Scotland, Relationships Scotland, Scottish Adoption, and The Spark.

The Parenting across Scotland partners work with thousands of disadvantaged families throughout Scotland. Partners provide services to families living in poverty, lone families, families affected by disability, families affected by substance abuse, kinship carers, adoptive families, separated families, stepfamilies and many others. We use the views and experiences of those using partner services to inform our policy responses.

PAS provides **information and support** to parents through:

- its website www.parentingacrossscotland.org
- its partners' helplines (Parentline, Lone Parent helpline, Advice Service Capability Scotland and Relationships helpline)
- our Ten Top Tips publications for parents

PAS works on **policy** through consultation responses, engagement with politicians and decision-makers, participation in government working groups, conferences and seminars, and its e-mail newsletter for practitioners.

PAS uses **research** to inform its policy and information work. We commission research and work with others to inform their research.

Surveys of parents - PAS has conducted representative surveys of parents in Scotland (undertaken on behalf of PAS by Ipsos-MORI). The results of our MORI polls can be found on the PAS website (<http://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/polls-and-surveys.aspx>).

Contact: Clare Simpson, e-mail: clare.simpson@children1st.org.uk

Fathers

Introduction

[Please note: Parenting across Scotland's evidence considers fathers both generally, and specifically considers issues affecting single and non-resident fathers; the general comments about fathers will also be pertinent to single and separated fathers.]

The benefits to children, mothers and families (and fathers) of involved fathering have been clearly established (Flouri 2005; Lamb 2010). And on the ground, the facts of Scottish fathers' greater involvement are also clear - men living in Scotland are the most 'hands-on' fathers in the UK. More than 65% of Scottish fathers change their baby's nappies once a day or more, a fifth more than the UK average of 43%, and they are also most likely to watch their babies being born (Dex and Joshi 2004). (Extract from Gary Clapton's essay for Parenting across Scotland, see below).

Many fathers are (or want to be) playing a more active role in their child's life. A number of studies show fathers wanting to have more time to spend with their children. The Equality and Human Rights Commission report, Fathers, Family and Work, found that 54% of fathers with children under one felt they were not devoting enough time to them, while 42% of fathers felt they were not able to spend enough time with their children. The report also found 62% of fathers thought that, in general, fathers should spend more time caring for their children.

(http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/41_wb_fathers_family_and_work.pdf)

The quality of the time that fathers spend with their children is more important than either the amount of time that they spend together. For separated families establishing a relationship that puts the well-being of their child at the centre and minimises conflict between the couple is essential but problematic. Given how strong the evidence is around high levels of conflict producing negative outcomes for children, emphasis needs to be put and resources directed towards services which enable parents to work together for the benefit of their children.

We would draw the Committee's attention to Gary Clapton's article about fathers, Scottish Fathers: an absence in Scottish policies, in Parenting across Scotland's collection of parenting essays, Scotland: the best place in the world to bring up children, which addresses the need to include fathers: <http://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/essays-about-parenting/parenting/scottish-fathers-an-absence-in-scottish-policies.aspx>

Services

Services for parents are generally seen as being geared up for women and not welcoming of men. Societal attitudes that parenting is primarily a female responsibility borne largely by mothers has undoubtedly had an impact on service design and development. From antenatal groups through to parents' evenings, fathers often report feeling excluded and unwelcome. Attendees at many parents' groups tend to be primarily female. The workforce in childcare and other caring/children's services tend to be composed largely of women. Altogether the child raising sphere is perceived as a female environment. More needs to be done to redress this balance for fathers. Service design needs to consider the needs of fathers, ensure that they are represented in publicity materials and feel welcomed by services. Measures need to

be taken to address the gender imbalance within the workforce so that men are better represented.

Fathers report workers in early years provision, childcare and educational settings seeing them as less capable or less involved simply because of their sex. Often fathers report not getting communication from schools and doctors about their children.

Because services often feel as if they are for women and indeed are often used almost exclusively by mothers to the exclusion of fathers, a number of services specifically designed for fathers have been developed. It is important that services specifically for men do exist and allow men a chance to develop their parenting skills and to engage with other fathers. Projects designed specifically for men often attract and engage men where universal services currently cannot. However, services specifically designed for fathers are relatively few and are geographically dispersed, making it difficult for many fathers to access support in their local area.

Information for parents is often seen to be designed and addressed to mothers, with the result that it is often not used by fathers. Parenting websites are often aimed primarily at mothers, even down to their names, netmums and mumsnet, for example. Research indicates that this is off-putting for many fathers, and that many fathers would welcome 'dad-specific' information. When Parenting across Scotland gathered together information for dads on its website, and had a marketing campaign aimed at dads (through social media and football programmes) to highlight this area of the website, website traffic soared, indicating that fathers were interested in receiving this sort of targeted information.

Fathers in the workplace

Fathers are more likely than mothers to be working whether they are separated or part of a couple. Yet their needs as parents are less likely to be considered within the workplace. Generally while both mothers and fathers experience difficulties combining work with family life, fathers are less likely to be seen as parents and to have their needs considered as valid. For example, fathers are twice as likely to have their requests for flexible working turned down as women (Dept for Business, Skills and Innovation 2012). Nearly one father in five who applied for flexible working in 2012 had their request turned down compared to one woman in ten.

A recent report by Working Families, Time, Health and the Family, found that:
"Fathers, particularly young fathers, are more resentful towards their employers about their work-life balance. Fathers in the 26-35 age group were the most resentful. Fathers with a single child tended to be more resentful towards their employers than fathers with more than one child. "

The full report is available here

<http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/admin/uploads/THFembargo27JanFinal.pdf>

We would also draw the Committee's attention to the report by Working Families:

<http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/admin/uploads/Fathers%20research%20project%20interim%20report.pdf>

How fathers regard their parenting responsibilities is changing, which impacts on how they view their work commitments and what they need from their employers. In a study

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-26274518>) launched today (21 Feb 2014) researchers reported that more than a fifth of men wish they had looked after their children rather than returning to work. More than a third of men questioned told researchers that they worked full-time and were offered no flexibility at all by their employers.

Changing legislation (the Children and Families Act 2014 UK) from Westminster, parts of which have Scottish extent, will bring in new regulations relating to flexible working and to parental leave (including the provision to share maternity and paternal leave) later this year. While, undoubtedly, these provisions do not go far enough and more could be done (for example, allowing fathers more paid paternal leave), nonetheless they represent some progress and should be widely promoted in Scotland to enable fathers to take up legal rights which will improve fathers' position in the workplace.

Contact issues

Contact issues are frequently a cause for dispute with fathers either being unable to gain access rights or access breaking down. Parentline report a significant volume of calls from men relating to these issues. Many fathers report bias by the courts in decision making, difficulty gaining access to their children and mothers withholding access for no valid reason. Conversely, mothers often report fathers failing to turn up for contact time, failing to pay maintenance or breaking agreements. Some fathers undoubtedly do face genuine difficulties with contact from assumptions made by the court to the mother breaking existing agreements. However, it should also be recognised that this is an area where emotions run high, and there may be perceived injustices and resentment on both sides with completely disparate accounts, and that the reality may lie somewhere between the two conflicting reports. Where this level of conflict exists between separated parents, it should be remembered that it is children who bear the brunt.

Evidence shows that parental relationships which are supportive, positive and co-operative are important for children's well-being. High levels of conflict are associated with more negative outcomes. This is as true for children where parents are separated as for couples, but is obviously more difficult to achieve. Services provided by our partner organisations, Relationships Scotland and the Spark, such as counselling, parenting apart classes, and family mediation, have a large part to play in minimising conflict between separated parents and achieving better outcomes for children. We refer the Committee to the evidence provided by Relationships Scotland. The Committee should also note that Relationships Scotland have recently called for mediation to be put on a mandatory footing and offered to all separating parents as a means to reducing conflict between parents. Given the impact that parental conflict has on children, the Committee should look at ways to minimise and alleviate this conflict for the benefit of children.

Fathers in prison

One group of fathers who are non-resident but are not often considered is fathers in prison. Many fathers still want to stay in contact while they are in prison, and often their families wish this to happen too. However, even where there is willingness for this to happen, a number of barriers often get in the way. For many families, the cost and time of travel can be a deterrent. Where prison visiting times are rigidly upheld and enforced, this can make it difficult for families to attend. Prison visiting facilities are often inappropriate for family visits.

Sometimes too, the prison may use withdrawal of visiting rights as a disciplinary measure, impacting not only on the father but on the children anticipating a visit with their father.

Things are changing, and it seems to be becoming more accepted that a withdrawal of liberty does not, and should not, mean a withdrawal of parental responsibilities and contact. Evidence shows that recidivism is much reduced when prisoners are released and have maintained family contact. Equally importantly, children should not be deprived of a parent because their parent is deprived of their liberty.

A number of prisons are taking proactive and positive steps to engage with families and encourage sustained family relationships. Examples include play projects, parenting and relationship programmes and improved family visiting facilities within prisons. However, each prison has its own regime and the provision of programmes is not uniform throughout the prison estate, so that families affected by imprisonment throughout Scotland cannot expect the same treatment.

There may, of course, be instances where it is not safe or desirable to maintain contact, and risk assessments should be undertaken to ascertain whether this is the case. However, where it is safe to do so, encouraging and supporting fathers in prison to maintain contact with their family is often beneficial to the father, the children, the wider family and ultimately society in terms of its effect in reducing reoffending.

Additional information

Parenting across Scotland, in association with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, is about to publish an evidence review, Fathers' contribution to children's wellbeing: a review of the literature. We would be happy to share this review with the Committee once it is finalised and published.

We have also attached a booklet produced from evidence about what matters for children after parents separate. This booklet has been widely disseminated to separating parents throughout Scotland.