



Children in Wales  
Plant yng Nghymru

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## University of the West of England

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# Families: including fathers

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# Overview

- Brief description of some evidence about fathers
- Highlight the main issues
- Illustrate them with some examples
- Suggest ways in which this work can be taken forward

# Background

## General

- 80% of Western men become fathers
- Changing role from traditional fatherhood
- Few models, isolation from others and little guidance to assist fathers
- More mothers than fathers see it as their duty to know about their children's daily lives
- Working with fathers is new but expanding rapidly



# Background <sub>2</sub>

## Evidence

- Children of more involved fathers do better (Lamb, 2004)
- Fathers' perceptions that services are not for them (Ghate et al, 2000)
- Professional reluctance to engage men (Ryan, 2000)
- Male reluctance to seek help and advice (Lloyd, 2001)



# Background <sup>3</sup>

## Policy

- *Sure Start initiative* (DfEE, 1999) – “to involve parents, grandparents and their carers in ways that build on their existing strengths”
- *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) – “we should recognise the vital role played by fathers as well as mothers”
- *Children’s Centres* (DfES, 2006) – even greater obligations to include men
- *Gender Equality Duty* (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007) – facilitating male access to services has become a matter of legal concern



# Some main issues

- Most fathers believe that they are equally important in looking after their child
- Residual set of attitudes and beliefs – takes time to change
- Even with a range of policy initiatives developing work with fathers will not necessarily be easy/smooth
- Fathers are either reluctant attendees or often absent from family events: fathers' characteristics are important
- Work with fathers too often starts with aim of 'setting up a fathers' group'
- Lack of knowledge about what works and how to measure it



# Illustrations from recent research <sup>1</sup>

## Transition to Parenthood: main themes

Lack of support for men to rely on

Lack of information directed at men

Men's access to antenatal and postnatal care

Lack of preparation for the postnatal period

(Deave *et al*, 2007)



## Major themes running through interviews: 'More information'

- Antenatal classes – include and involve fathers/partners
- Awareness of what lifestyle changes there will be – new parents talking
- Basic practicalities of bathing a baby, making up a bottle, changing nappy
- Coping strategies
- Basic knowledge eg. minor illnesses, when to contact GP
- Parental relationship changes

# Fathers talking

## Involvement in antenatal classes

“The classes are a great help but if you’re not involved in it, you’re sort of put to the back of the class...I felt very left out....” (antenatal interview)

## Anxiety regarding looking after the baby

*Antenatal:*

“..how to hold a baby...I know the principle, but the actual doing it...the fact that you can't communicate, can't talk..” (antenatal interview)

“I've never held a baby, never fed a baby, wouldn't know where to start.” (antenatal interview)



*Postnatal:*

“That must be done before because you need to know how to bath a baby and change a nappy, it’s not, it’s obvious now isn’t it, but you know bathing a baby isn’t?” (postnatal interview)

## Involvement in healthcare provision

“They don’t actually sort of involve you as a couple anywhere along the line....I felt very sort of left out....I felt sort of punished for working (postnatal interview)



# Sure Start initiative

## Main factors in getting fathers involved:

- Programme managers' continued support
- Close working relationship with organisation well-experienced in engaging with men
- Use of a gender differentiated approach
- High interest activities that appeal to men
- Proactive retention process
- Shift in organisational culture

(Potter & Carpenter, 2008)



# How can we move forward?

- Include fathers in health care, eg. personal invitation to antenatal classes and/or care; *welcome* them
- Set up groups *with*, not for, fathers, using a gender differentiated approach (Ghate *et al.*, 2000)
- Understand different dimensions of father involvement: accessibility, engagement, responsibility (Saracho & Spodek, 2008)
- Lack of knowledge about what works with fathers, in what context and settings
- How to measure? Many research issues to address, eg. fathers' involvement is one of many factors in a complex environment

# THANK YOU

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