

# Impact of absent fathers and research into participating parents



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‘Where’s the Daddy?’, a report on fathers and UK data sets (Goldman and Burgess, 2017) in association with the Fatherhood Institute and funded by Nuffield University has recommended that the diversity of 21<sup>st</sup>-century fatherhood should be captured when statistics are released. Birth, adopted and step should be differentiated and those fathers that are classed currently as ‘non-resident’ re-classified as to how much time they have with their children including words such as full, part and then not at all. Wilson (2010) describes some families lives as a ‘revolving door’ in which many parents and children are living together only some of the time.

Research by Modern Fatherhood (Poole, 2013) found that a growing number of fathers are not living with their children. They estimate that around 17% of fathers have ‘non-resident children’ which equates to around one million fathers in the UK, however, this statistic is based around fathers with children under the age of sixteen so it is likely that this number would increase with sixteen to eighteen-year-olds included. Nickson (2018) explains that unmarried fathers in the UK have parental responsibility if the child’s birth was registered after December 2003 and their name is on the birth certificate. In these cases, Mothers and Fathers have the same rights, not on the everyday life of the child but on major agreements, such as schools, religion and medical treatment. Previous to 2003, a father may gain parental responsibility through a legal agreement.

The Office for National Statistics Families and Households Report (Horscroft, 2017) highlights the number of lone parent families living in the UK. The statistics state that the amount of lone-parent families has actually decreased from 3 million in 2015 to 2.8 million in 2017. Also mentioned in <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-absent-fathers-and-research-into-participating-parents/>

the report is that households containing more than one family, are documented as the fastest growing household type over the last decade. This includes lone parents that have been separated and then started a family with a new partner. However, it is evident that the missing group is that of fathers; lone parents are described as 'resident' and therefore live with the child full time. The government estimates indicate that the vast majority, around 97% of separated parents with primary care of children are mothers (Gingerbread, 2018). Therefore the statistic of 2.8 million lone parents is very likely to be around double that number as it states that this only includes 'those with residential care' in which the majority are mothers. There is a great amount of evidence that parent participation in education helps children do better in school. The Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement (Department of Education, 2010) found that the involvement of all parents has a positive impact on children's learning. Fathers are becoming more and more involved in activities such as schooling compared to a decade ago. However, Goldstein and Coleman (2015) found that 70% of co-resident fathers and 81% of non-resident fathers want to be more involved in their children's education (2016).

Since 2003, in England and Wales, both parents have parental responsibility for their dependent children and this remains even if the parents choose to separate regardless of the residential situation with the child (GOV, 2003). Major welfare reforms were started by the Coalition Government in 2010 and have continued through the Conservative government which can put added pressures on non-resident fathers who are less financially well off. An example of this is 'Bedroom Tax' where occupants have their Council

Housing Benefit reduced to pay for a spare room in the house. In turn, this may prevent a father from staying in accommodation where he has to pay this, despite his non-resident child or children staying potentially a few nights a week (Fathers Institute, 2013). Policy changes cannot be effective if the population has not been completely understood such as that of separated parents. Shared parenting acts as evidence that fathers are being left out of publicly-funded data collection, leaving potentially harmful gaps in policy around children and families.

A substantial amount of research has showed the impact that parents participation has on children's educational achievement (Goldman, 2005). The early years professionals have a great window of opportunity for addressing men. Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) found that men are powerfully motivated by their love and concern for their children which can help with engaging them with their children's educational needs. The early years, unlike any other time is the most child focused where mothers and fathers spend more time interacting with their children. In early years settings this can be any father figures who may be the 'lead adult male' in a child's life. Children need as many supportive adults as they can get; this does not mean ignoring the child's biological parent though.

Research shows that Dad's that are more engaged and caring towards their children makes for a better relationship with everyone involved, including mothers. Allen and Daly (2007) found that fathers that are around has helped children to have better social skills, educational outcomes and mental health. Not only is there benefits to this, fathers also want to be included and involved in all aspects of their children's lives; this includes appointments

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with professionals. Fathers can often lack information and skills on parenting because of this. However, gaining information surrounding pregnancy and child development should only be able to help contribute positively to a child's life. The Dad Network's campaign displayed how easily a father can become sidelined from their children. In terms of social work practice as well as schooling; practitioners need to make sure that fathers are not being excluded from the work with families (NSPCC, 2017). It is evident that policy changes comes from research and the statistics that are formed from this research, overcoming these barriers to fathers may require such a policy change at least in staff training and capacity. Nevertheless, data surrounding fathers is often missing and these problems go unsolved.

Currently, the UK is undergoing huge changes in policy; it is becoming increasingly important that the data that shapes these policies are representative of the lives and situations of non-resident fathers. The evidence gap is evident when it comes to non-resident fathers as they are not as easily identifiable. The group are not as easily reached, unlike lone mothers they are not identified through government records. However, literature is slowly developing to represent the socio-economic well-being of non-resident fathers. Although, many of these studies are currently being conducted in the US.

Ferguson and Gates (2015) published research around young fathers, this included those whom had been on the edge of education society and the criminal justice system. A majority of these fathers explained how they wanted to make their children proud and becoming a father was a moment of deep reflection and a reason for transition in their lives. However, they <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-absent-fathers-and-research-into-participating-parents/>

found that they felt unprepared and would have valued professional support in their role as a new father especially at the beginning. It is crucial therefore, that professionals include the father by taking contact details, working with them and allowing him an equal space as a parent. Going back almost thirty years, 90% of fathers have attended antenatal services with their partner in Britain (Alderdice, 2016). Most recently research found 93% of fathers attended ultrasound scans (Davies, 2018). Nevertheless, this would likely be even higher if a direct invitation was sent to them as 78% of men were not sure if their presence is necessary, if they even feel welcome or if that they make a useful contribution (Newburn & Singh, 2018). Fathers in Britain have a statutory right to have time off to attend at least two antenatal appointments (GOV, 2000) and are therefore acknowledged as a support person that needs to be just as informed and educated as the mother.

Statistics clearly show that fathers are there for mums every step of the way; the majority of dads are interested and willing to be there. However they also the failings of the National Health Service (NHS) approach to fathers. Services are ignoring fathers, despite the evidence that good fathers are important to healthy pregnancies and babies (Burgess, 2018). Nevertheless, it has to be clear that this is not always because the mother does not want the father to be involved and kept informed of everything surrounding their child. Including fathers and keeping them informed could also benefit the whole family. Fathers-to-be are given no formal status within health services especially the maternity side. It is very unlikely that the father's name will be

entered on the pregnant women's record. Often this is why fathers are not engaged with.

The Government's Healthy Child programme states that services are not doing enough to support fathers, research shows that a father can influence the health and wellbeing of both mother and child in positive ways. The programme supports strong couple relationships and ensures that contact with the family involves fathers including those that are non-resident (DCSF, 2007). A Father's position is not much different to any other family member or visitor except at the actual birth, although even the mother can refuse to have him in the room (Knight, 2006). When any information is requested about him and his family, the mother is asked for it. Fathers then become neglected by the institution which can in turn hinder a father's relationship with his infant. Most importantly however, this prevents services from gaining vital information which could in turn place the mother and infant in danger rather than preventing them from harm which is their first objective.

Inclusive of all means including mothers, fathers and same sex parents.

Practitioners can ensure that this happens by showing a positive image of all parents in venues and considering calling toddler groups something inclusive and not for example; 'Mum and Tots'. Research regarding families is almost always based around studies of two-parent families, it is rare that research is done on fathers who parent their children alone or part time. A report surrounding the Modern Fatherhood Project that seeks to better understand fathers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2013) found that economic circumstances are a factor in whether a non resident father sees his children or not. Fathers who

are not in contact are more likely to be unemployed and 29% do not see their children or contribute financially to their upbringing. Over 300, 000 UK non resident fathers say they are unable to pay child maintenance. Although there is more research on child maintenance, it does not give a clear overview of how many non-resident fathers see their children due to the fact many will have their own financial agreement with the mother of how they wish to financially support their children.

This leaves many barriers to full involvement of both parents in the lives of their children. These barriers include gender stereotyping of services and the practice that makes an assumption that parenting is all about the mother. Maxwell (2018) describes the lack of data around fathers as a data ' desert' that then leads to a ' policy' desert, however, this is not just an issue for fathers, this is also an issue for all those surrounding any child. Research points at the greater the involvement of the mother and the father the better the life chances of every child.

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