Research report

Collaborative parenting: Barriers faced by separated fathers

by Dr Victoria Bourne and Shane Ryan

DWP Department for Work and Pensions

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on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CMEC	Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission
CSA	Child Support Agency
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
NHS	National Health Service
SSSP	Support Service for Separated Parents
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
WWM	Working With Men

Summary

The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC) was established in 2008 to deliver three core functions:

- promote the financial responsibility that parents have for their children;
- provide information and support about the different child maintenance options that are available and supporting families in making their own family-based arrangements; and
- deliver an efficient statutory maintenance service, with effective enforcement support.

The Commission's functions were transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in August 2012. Following the transfer of functions, DWP is working with a number of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, and other government departments, to improve the co-ordination of support services for separating and separated families. It is hoped that this service will be available to all parents regardless of their circumstances, including groups who have traditionally found it difficult to engage with external support. Fathers from disadvantaged and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities were identified as a particular target group for the new service.

The aim of this study was to identify how separated and separating fathers, in particular younger and less affluent fathers, and those from BME communities, could be positively influenced to work together with the other parent in the best interest of their child (collaborative parenting) and to access support services where possible. The key objectives were to identify what fathers feel constitutes 'working together' with the other parent and to identify the key barriers which prevent collaboration and the accessing of support services.

The first phase of the research was to conduct a review of the existing literature on the barriers facing separated fathers (see Chapter 2). The review showed that this area is currently under-researched. However, a number of barriers to co-parenting in general have been identified, including relationships; emotions; attitudes, values and beliefs; intentions and practical issues. Similarly, a number of reasons why separated parents do not access services has been identified, including emotional and practical barriers and stigmatisation. Previous research also shows that fathers are less likely than mothers to access existing services, and there is evidence to suggest that fathers' needs are not addressed by those services. Young fathers and fathers from BME communities are the least likely groups to access support.

Following on from the literature review, eight focus groups were conducted to explore the barriers that separated fathers in disadvantaged communities feel exist in developing and maintaining a good relationship with their child's mother. Four structured topics were discussed: values and beliefs, working together, support services and barriers that exist in developing and maintaining a good relationship with their child and the child's mother (see the Appendix for more details on the methodology).

One of the key topics considered by the groups was fathers' perceptions of their role as a father, and the importance of collaborative parenting (see Chapter 3). It was evident throughout the study that fathers in the groups have a strong desire to be involved in their child's life and upbringing. They feel that this involvement should comprise various contributions including educational, emotional and practical support. Financial support was a more contentious issue – while fathers tended to accept that they had a financial responsibility, generally they did not trust the mother to use their contributions to support the child.

The importance of both parents working together as a team, for the benefit of the child, was often emphasised. Even though the current relationship with the mother was generally poor, the fathers consistently reported that they wanted a positive and constructive relationship with the mother in the future and saw this as a goal to work towards.

However, on the whole the fathers in our groups were unable to translate these positive attitudes into behaviours. They described a 'cycle of disengagement' from fatherhood. The initial components of this cycle were the negative aspects of their own psychological condition, such as low self-esteem and low confidence in their ability to be a 'good dad'. Consequently, they felt unable to engage effectively and productively in a relationship with their child and the mother, or to find appropriate support. This then led to increased frustration and conflict and negatively impacted on already fragile self-esteem (see Chapter 4).

Fathers with negative psychological issues are likely to need support, either to help them directly (having a secondary benefit for the relationship with the child) or to facilitate their relationship with the child and/or the child's mother. However, for many fathers this appears to be a major barrier and much of the support that is focused on fathers and their specific needs is seen as lacking, especially in comparison to the amount of support that is available for mothers. Where support is available for fathers, it may not be visible enough. Some men may also feel that seeking advice and support may reflect badly on them as a person and as a father.

This lack of support and advice, exacerbated by the perceived discrepancy between the support available for mothers and fathers, may then lead to feelings of frustration, conflict and isolation. Additionally, a father may feel that the only valued contribution to his child's upbringing is financial, but he wishes to contribute more broadly. When the father feels that he lacks support or knowledge, or is in a difficult financial situation, this has negative psychological consequences, fuelling feelings of low self-esteem and low confidence. This increases conflict with the child's mother and can lead to reduced contact with their child, and so the cycle continues.

Although this study focuses on psychological barriers, research highlighted in the literature review indicates that socio-economic factors such as income, employment and homelessness also play a part, and that these will feed into the cycle of disengagement.

One of the key barriers to collaboration and to accessing support was fathers' experience and perception of existing services (see Chapter 5). Some of the fathers had experience of 'official' or 'government' services, and this was invariably negative. There was also a feeling that official services existed to support the mother and little is available for fathers. However, where fathers had succeeded in accessing 'supportive' or 'unofficial' services there has been a benefit to the father himself, as well as to the relationship with the child and the mother.

This study concludes that separated fathers in challenging circumstances feel there are a number of barriers to them being able to effectively engage in a relationship with their child and the child's mother. This may result from difficulties with the child's mother, from difficulties with the official or governmental agencies involved, from the lack of support available for fathers or from their own psychological issues. The findings suggest a number of possible policies to break the cycle of disengagement (see Chapter 6).

- It will be important to select the right targets for any new interventions. Although this study set out to examine barriers specific to BME fathers, through the research process it became clear that interventions aimed at young fathers and those from disadvantaged communities may be more likely to succeed.

- It will also be important to reach out to fathers at the right time, when they are at a turning point in their lives and more receptive to support. This is likely to be before the birth of the child, or as soon as possible afterwards, so that positive behaviours are embedded from the start.
- Services for fathers need to be highly visible, in order to improve awareness and to overcome the fear of stigmatisation.
- There is a need to work with existing family support services to improve their awareness of fathers' issues. In particular, more men should be included in support services and in early years settings, to counter the perception that existing support caters for mothers.
- It would also be helpful to deliver services for fathers through VCS organisations, as these are perceived in a more positive light. This could include extending existing services or developing new services.
- Fathers should be included in the design of both new and existing services, to ensure that they meet the needs of fathers, and that fathers are more likely to access them. Our research participants also stress the need for an empathetic and non-judgemental approach in the delivery of support services for fathers.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC) was established in 2008 to deliver three core functions:

- promote the financial responsibility that parents have for their children;
- provide information and support about the different child maintenance options that are available and supporting families in making their own family-based arrangements; and
- deliver an efficient statutory maintenance service, with effective enforcement support.

The Commission's functions were transferred to the DWP in August 2012.

The Green Paper, *Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance,* outlines the Government's ambition to co-ordinate support services for separating and lone parents. Whilst there are existing support services available in the UK, there is no unified source of help to connect parents with the different support services they need throughout and beyond separation.

During September 2011, the Minister for Disabled People established an expert steering group of academics and representatives of the VCS to provide recommendations on how better to co-ordinate support services. In January 2012, the Minister announced £20m over three years for this work.

The new service will target all separated parents, but specific research is needed to understand the needs of particular 'hard to reach' groups. Children from Afro-Caribbean communities are more likely than average to grow up in a lone parent household[1], and therefore, they were identified as a priority target. In order to understand how best to reach this group CMEC commissioned research with Working With Men (WWM) to improve understanding of the barriers that low income and BME fathers face when going through separation or having a child outside of a relationship.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to identify how fathers who are going through separation could be positively influenced to work together with the other parent in the best interest of their child (collaboration), and to access support services where possible.

The following objectives supported this aim:

- To identify what fathers felt constituted 'working together', or a 'collaborative arrangement', with the other parent. To examine this by looking at different groups of fathers and examining differences and similarities.
- To identify the key barriers which prevent collaboration and accessing of support services. This included the following factors:
  - relationships with the other parent;

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[1] Forty-seven per cent of Black African and 56 per cent of Black Caribbean families are lone parent families, compared to 25 per cent of White families (Platt, 2009).

  - emotions, e.g. towards the other parent/child/parenthood;
  - attitudes, beliefs and values;
  - intentions;
  - self-efficacy, e.g. belief in own ability to do or change something;
  - structural issues, e.g. financial considerations such being on low income or out of work, legal issues.
- To identify why these barriers exist and variations between different groups. For example, why do some fathers hold particular attitudes or feel particular emotions when others do not?
- By answering why these barriers exist for each 'type' of father, to identify which barriers can be influenced and, if appropriate, how behaviour could be influenced.
- To identify where, if at all, fathers currently turn to for help with the issues they face during separation and divorce.
- To look at different 'types' of fathers and identify variations in barriers between the different groups, if appropriate.

1.3 Research design

The research included a review of existing literature, and a series of focus groups with fathers. A qualitative approach was seen as the most appropriate way of enabling research participants to explore their attitudes and beliefs. Participants were asked to discuss their separation and relationships with their child and their ex-partner, a personal and sensitive topic, where depth interviews might normally be recommended. However, the groups were held in a 'safe' environment and the participants already had a relationship with the WWM workers who led the groups, therefore, focus groups were preferred to depth interviews for this study.

All the focus groups were held in London in March/April 2012. There were a total of 55 participants across eight different focus groups. Most of the fathers were unemployed and from BME communities, although some fathers from other backgrounds were included.

All the fathers in the groups were already engaged with WWM initiatives. This approach has advantages, in that it enabled access to a 'hard to reach' group, and by using workers with whom the participants already have a relationship of trust, it allowed difficult issues to be explored in more detail. **It should be noted, however, that the participants have already demonstrated a willingness to engage with support services, and have a positive view of the services offered by WWM. Therefore, the views of those taking part in this research may be biased towards those with a positive view of support and may not be consistent with the views of fathers who are more resistant to external support.**

A structured topic guide was used for each of the groups, including:

- values and beliefs;
- working together;
- support services;
- barriers.

Thematic analysis was completed in two phases: initial coding to determine core themes and subthemes followed by detailed coding.

Further information on the methodology is presented in the Appendix.

1.4 Report structure

Chapter 2 of this report presents the literature review and further background research. The subsequent three chapters present the findings of the focus groups:

- Chapter 3: Fathers' perceptions of their role as a father and the importance of collaborative parenting;
- Chapter 4: Key barriers which prevent collaboration and accessing support;
- Chapter 5: Experience and perceptions of support.

Finally, Chapter 6 considers recommendations and policy implications.

2 Literature review and background research

Key findings from this chapter

- There is a need for research to understand the barriers faced by fathers, particularly young fathers and those from BME communities, in establishing co-parenting arrangements and accessing support.
- A number of barriers to co-parenting have been identified, including relationships; emotions; attitudes, values and beliefs; intentions and practical issues.
- Similarly, a number of reasons why separated parents do not access services have been identified, including emotional and practical barriers and stigmatisation.
- Fathers are less likely than mothers to access services, and there is evidence to suggest that fathers' needs are not addressed by existing services.
- Young fathers and fathers from BME communities are the least likely groups to access support.

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this review is to consider the existing literature relating to fathers, and specifically those fathers who have difficulty in engaging in collaborative parenting relationships, or engaging with those services which may be able to offer them support. The review begins with a brief overview of key research into the negative impacts of separation, as this provides the broad rationale for interventions aimed at separated families. It then moves on to consider the barriers faced by separated fathers in accessing support, and then looks in more detail at the specific barriers faced by fathers from socially and economically disadvantaged groups, including BME communities and young fathers.

2.2 Separation and fatherhood overview

There is a wealth of literature on the potential negative impacts of separation, on both parents and children. For example, Walker *et al.* (2010) discuss the possible financial, emotional, and health consequences of separation for adults, and Mooney *et al.* (2009) focus on the consequences for children.

However, the literature on separated fathers is more limited. While there is a growing UK literature on fathers in a general sense, there remains a dearth of research that recognises the wide diversity of fatherhood and the specific needs different fathers may have (Sherriff, 2007). In fact, studies have shown that relatively little is known about what works in engaging men, particularly younger fathers (Reeves, 2007), although from later studies there are some signs pointing to clear evidence of promising practice (Maxwell, 2012).

Some studies which have focused on the needs of fathers tend to consider those fathers who are very public in voicing their wish/need to engage but are prevented from doing so, such as the *All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, 2012 (Father's Journey)*. The report provides valuable insight into the impact of separation on fathers, the help they have sought post-separation, and where they have turned to for help, but participants were drawn from Families need Fathers and the Fatherhood Institute. The primary functions of these organisations include lobbying and thought leadership as opposed to direct service delivery with inner city fathers.

The remainder of this review considers the available literature on the target group for this research project, i.e. fathers who do not engage with support and have experienced significant barriers to collaborative parenting in any recognised way. It would appear that this group is currently under-researched.

2.3 Barriers to co-parenting

There is some literature which considers the factors which make a co-parenting arrangement more likely. For example, Andrews *et al.* (2010) draw on some useful case studies (both mothers and fathers), and conclude that the main drivers of successful co-parenting arrangements include:

- relationships with the other parent;
- emotions, e.g. towards the other parent/child/parenthood;
- attitudes, beliefs and values;
- intentions;
- practical issues including finances.

2.4 Barriers to accessing support

Turning now to barriers to accessing support, research cited in Barrett *et al.* (2010) indicates a variety of reasons why separated parents (both mothers and fathers), do not seek support. These include internal factors (reluctance to discuss private relationship problems, denial or failure to recognise the seriousness of problems and unwillingness to accept responsibility for the relationship breakdown) as well as lack of awareness, negative experiences or perceptions of services and practical issues (long waiting lists, restricted appointment times, long distances to travel, clash with other care commitments, prohibitive costs).

To add to this, Walker *et al.* (2010) find that stigmatisation is a strong deterrent to service uptake and service providers tended to define their biggest challenges as to do with a general cultural taboo that prevented people from 'getting through the door'.

2.5 Barriers faced by particular groups

One of the main objectives of this study was to explore whether there are any barriers, either to collaboration or to accessing support services, which are specific to separated fathers from BME communities. Various studies have concluded that particular groups are more likely to encounter difficulties in accessing services. Katz *et al.* (2007) argue that fathers are less likely to access support services, and non-resident parents (typically fathers) are less likely to be satisfied with the services they receive. Barrett and Chang (2009) argue that men are generally reluctant to seek help from couple support services and they may find help provided through less personal channels more useful (e.g. phone and websites). Barrett *et al.* (2010) highlight three groups who find it difficult to access services: fathers, if providers appear to fail to offer a gender-inclusive service; couples whose relationships are characterised by violence; and couples from minority ethnic communities, who may either fear disclosure within their community or who may perceive service providers as lacking insight into their particular predicament.

Although many of these issues related to fathers would appear to be new, a study from Rolph as far back as 1999 indicates that they have been articulated by fathers but not explored or developed as rigorously as might be expected. As Rolph states:

> *'Lack of resolution and uncertainty with regard to contact and participation in care is likely to have a disruptive effect, not only on the parents involved, but the child as well. The emotional costs of an unsatisfactory resolution may also be a factor in failing or limited contact. The effort to maintain contact in a 'hostile climate' may prove too demanding emotionally, not only for the fathers but, as they see it, for their children and, if they exist, new partners. There are also no established norms for unmarried fathers.'*

Blackenhorn (1995) notes that we have not yet evolved a set of powerful cultural norms around what it means to be a good father for a man outside a committed relationship with the mother and a breadwinner role for the children. He further believes that the lack of appropriate cultural norms is partly due to increased individualism and a decrease in community expectations of private behaviour. Thus, unmarried and non-resident fathers are free to create their own way of being a father, even if the result is neglect. Unpublished research by WWM (2006) indicates that this neglect can be further confounded by the obstacles that unmarried fathers often find in the way of them attempting good parenting.

From a different perspective, a review commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (Page *et al.*, 2008) identifies a number of reasons why service providers (local authority managers and practitioners) find it difficult to engage with fathers. This includes structural issues (for example national targets such as those relating to teenage pregnancy focus exclusively on mothers, which can be a direct barrier to working with fathers); issues related to staff (the dominance of female staff, a view that engagement with fathers is not a priority, a difficulty in identifying young and non-resident fathers); and issues related to the fathers themselves. These father-related issues include practical issues for fathers in accessing support, especially for employed or non-resident fathers who may only have access to their children on evenings and weekends; the fact that fathers are less likely than mothers to respond to communication that does not refer directly to fathers or does not include positive images of fathers and their children; and a 'traditional' view of parenting (particularly among some minority ethnic groups) which sees the mother as the primary carer and the father as the main breadwinner and source of discipline.

This review has revealed two key groups whose needs do not appear to be met by existing services: young fathers and fathers from BME communities.

2.6 Barriers faced by fathers from Black and Minority Ethnic communities

Focusing on fathers from BME communities, it can be argued that:

> *'Although evidence has shown that there are barriers when engaging across all male groups, some groups of men appear to be even harder to reach than others. The evidence suggests that young men appear to be the hardest group to reach, followed by men from BME backgrounds. This is due to a number of factors ranging from language and cultural barriers to the susceptibility of peer influence.'*
>
> (Johal *et al.*, 2012)

The DCSF review (Page *et al.*, 2008) finds that too little detailed consideration is given to the needs of some types of fathers (such as minority ethnic fathers, young fathers, lone parent fathers and non-resident fathers) in DCSF policy. Walker *et al.* (2012) argue that men, especially men from some ethnic minority communities, are reluctant to approach support services.

Social support theory suggests that access to, and utilisation of, support services will be highly dependent on family culture, community norms and influences from the informal support network (Summers *et al.*, 2004). A recent study (Williams *et al.*, 2012) working with African Caribbean fathers concluded that there may be much to do if we are to support or communicate effectively with a range of fathers. The fathers in the study reported limited contact with preventive primary care services and were unaware of their purpose, function and availability.

2.7 Barriers faced by young fathers

There is strong evidence to suggest that socio-economic factors are linked with early fatherhood. Young fathers are most likely to come from lower socio-economic groups (Hudson, 1991) and families facing financial hardship (Kiernan, 1995). The younger the fathers are the more likely it is that negative indicators (substance misuse, anxiety, depression and being involved in criminality) are present (Kiselika, 1995). Berrington *et al.* (2007) argue that:

> *'The life trajectories of men who become young fathers are like those of young mothers, significantly more negative than the average.'*

See also Higginbottom *et al.* (2006).

Recent US research also shows that multi-partnering is becoming an increasing trend, with either party moving on to have more children (Benjamin *et al.,* 2007), often creating a web of complex young families. There is also often a lack of support for the young father, except from his own parents, and sometimes even this is not forthcoming (Gelder, 2002).

A study in 2002 highlighted that:

> *'The most important factor predicting young men's post-natal involvement is the quality of their relationship with their partner during pregnancy.'*
>
> (Quinton, Pollock and Golding, 2002)

See also Speak, Cameron and Gilroy (1997); Sewell (2002) and Ngu (2005).

This is consistent with Andrews *et al.*'s (2010) findings that relationships between parents are the key driver of positive parenting behaviour, regardless of age or ethnic group.

The literature review highlights that separated fathers, particularly young fathers and those from disadvantaged or BME communities, are less likely than other groups to access support services. The primary research was designed to explore the barriers to accessing services from the fathers' own perspective, to inform future service development. The findings of that research are set out in Chapters 3 to 5.

3 Fathers' perceptions of their role as a father and the importance of collaborative parenting

Key findings from this chapter

- Fathers participating in the groups displayed positive attitudes and intentions towards their child and their role as a father.
- They accepted their responsibilities as a father, with education (in its widest sense), practical and emotional support being their main concerns.
- They also accepted that they had a financial responsibility for their child, but this was a more contentious issue due to a lack of trust in the mother.
- The fathers were committed to the idea of collaborative parenting, and felt that both parents should be actively involved in their child's life.
- They wanted to have a more positive relationship with the mother and felt that this would be a goal for the future.

3.1 Introduction

The separated fathers participating in the groups faced a number of barriers which negatively impacted on their ability to be a good father, and to work with their child's mother in the best interests of their child. These barriers are explored in Chapters 4 and 5. However, it is important to note that their attitudes and intentions were overwhelmingly positive – they expressed a strong desire to take responsibility for their child and to develop a more collaborative relationship with the mother.

3.2 Fathers' perceptions of their responsibilities towards their child

Fathers in the groups appeared to be aware of their responsibilities and what it means to be a 'good' father. They frequently noted that a wide range of contributions to the child's life and upbringing are essential for the child's development and relationship with their father, for example:

> *'I think it is my responsibility to provide emotionally, financially, physically and mentally for my child. Financially means money and physical material things as much as I can that will benefit my child. Emotionally means teaching them, understand them and emotionally also means supporting the mother.'*

> *'I am responsible for my child spiritually, emotionally, educationally. I believe that I could be his doctor, his entertainer, his supervisor, his teacher, just develop him holistically. All the different aspects coming together.'*

The discussion around their responsibilities as a father tended to focus mainly on education, physical and emotional support and financial support.

There was a clear message from the fathers that they felt the most important contribution they could make towards their child's upbringing was to help educate them – this may be in terms of academic education, moral development, acquiring positive and beneficial life skills morally and academically:

> *'...be a good role model; bring your child up in – well – how we have now in society having an open mind about everything, you've got to set their views in as soon as they are old enough to understand.'*

> *'Part of your responsibility is to guide and protect your child. You guide them through life ... You protect them from making the same mistakes you've made.'*

> *'It's my responsibility to get my child into education so that when he is older he will not need to depend on me as much, like when he is 20, 25, so he can just be doing his thing, independently, because at the end of the day I want my child to be independent, not because I do not want him to rely on me, but for the time I am with him I am going to be teaching him to do his thing from early so when he gets older he won't need my support as much.'*

Practical and emotional support were also raised quite frequently as important responsibilities towards the child – this includes forming an emotional bond as well as merely providing support from a detached position.

> *'I think yeah, that feeding and changing nappies creates more of a bond with your child init. As a father through my experience, my new born child ... when I do do it, it creates a better bond for me and my child. Sometimes after I've changed her nappy and I give her a bottle, she will fall asleep straight in my arms.'*

> *'Caring, providing, loving, teaching, stabilising. Stability is the main thing you need around the child.'*

It was also clear that the fathers were aware of their own emotional difficulties, and wanted to help their children to be more emotionally intelligent.

> *'Men do find it difficult to talk, expressing emotions and men should be able to do that, not just for themselves but as a model for their children, you're teaching your sons that it's not okay to show your feelings and they are going to reproduce that and if you break that cycle then they are liberated from that, and all these things we can do for ourselves which will have a positive impact for future generations.'*

These fathers are also clearly aware of their financial responsibility towards the child:

> *'I strongly believe that whether you live together or not you have to support them.'*

> *'You have to provide init. Another future you are bringing into the world. It is not cheap. You have to do everything for your little boy or girl.'*

Within this part of the focus group discussion, a clear ambivalence emerged regarding the fathers' financial responsibility towards their children. The fathers spoke positively about their desire and responsibility towards their child, like this one:

> *'My responsibility towards my child is to make sure my child has clothes, is fed, you can take a child out and give them everything they need.'*

However, the discussion around financial responsibility was far more negative. Here there seemed to be a conflict whereby fathers acknowledged the importance of contributing to their child's upbringing financially, but there was a lack of trust regarding how the child's mother may spend the money. It seems that fathers required reassurance and confirmation (possibly even proof) that the money they contribute is used for the child's benefit. Where a father feels that this is not the case, they may want to withdraw their financial support, not because they do not want to financially support their child, but because they are not confident that the money they give is used appropriately. A few fathers suggested saving money for their child's future as an alternative to giving money to the child's mother.

> *'If you give the money directly to mum you don't know what she's going to do with it.'*

> *'But when I give you money I get you to sign a receipt to prove that I gave her that money and I also make her go and get the stuff that she needs for my son and send me that receipt so that every penny is there to the pound. Now I have found that my baby's mum has tried to con me.'*

> *'I think you should contribute financially, but the times we're living in now you have to be smarter about it. Putting money into accounts until the child is old enough to take the money, or if you buy gifts and don't give it to the mother to give it to the children, make sure you give it to the child so they know it comes from you.'*

3.3 Attitudes towards collaborative parenting

3.3.1 Family influences

The involvement of the wider family is often a key influence on attitudes. For these fathers this was often positive, either in terms of the father's own upbringing and experiences, or the involvement of the wider family in their child's upbringing.

> *'I know that if my father was not involved in my life I would be in jail right now.'*

> *'I got on with her family and she got on with my family, we are family orientated people so it's like a village raised a child and not me and her separately.'*

Where fathers reported negative experiences in their own childhood, it was typically within the context of wanting to be able to provide a better childhood for their own children. This is important as it indicates that the fathers are very aware of the negative consequences of the parents' behaviours on a child, and consequently do not want their own child to have comparable negative experiences in their own upbringing. They want their child to have a good and positive upbringing that is better than their own, as demonstrated by this father:

> *'I lost my mum when I was three months old and had a step-mum who was very horrible to me and I left the house when I was 11 years old, she'd beat me and leave scars on me. That was a miserable childhood but ... When I had my little girl and held her for the first time, I cried and remembered what I went through and I never want anything like that to happen to her. Your upbringing affects, definitely affects you.'*

3.3.2 Positive attitudes

The importance of both parents being actively involved in the child's life and upbringing was a frequently occurring theme. Fathers often discussed the importance of putting aside any conflict with, or negative emotions toward, the child's mother for the child's needs.

> *'Even if it ends up just being civil. When we broke up, even though we argued all the time it got to a point where we had to say "let's stop arguing now. It's not between me and you it's now between our child. We have to be civil, now that a child is involved, so our child does not see what we are going through. A child is a sponge and all they learn is from their creators".'*

There was a great deal of discussion regarding the importance of the parents both working together as a unit, putting the needs of the child first. This is a particularly important point as it shows that these fathers do want to have an effective relationship with the child's mother in order to put the child's needs first and provide them with a good and consistent childhood and upbringing. However, they face a number of barriers which prevent them from putting these positive attitudes into behaviours, which are discussed in more detail in the next sections.

Fathers were keen to point out that each parent brings something different to the relationship with the child, and that having a child makes the relationship with the mother more important, even if the two parents are no longer together.

> *'One factor that we have to notice is that, we play different roles as parents so it is our responsibility as parents (mother and father) to equally bring up the child because what the father is educating the child indirectly is different from the role of the mother. That's why it's important for them to team up to bring up the child, so we're seeing that the child is missing something if one of the parents is absent.'*

> *'I think that every father or every relationship that has a child needs a second chance, that's what I feel, not just for you; it's all about the child.'*

3.3.3 Current relationship with the mother

In line with the broad discussion about the relationship with the child's mother, the present relationship was typically viewed negatively, but fathers clearly desired a positive relationship with the mother in the future for the benefit of the child. This suggests that support and advice specifically for fathers, aimed at improving and facilitating their relationship with the child's mother, would help to overcome this barrier.

> *'I think in an ideal world both parents are together both getting on perfectly well, but that's not always the case and when that situation kind of goes beyond repair then an arrangement needs to be made.'*

> *'It's still a bit bitter and raw but at the focal point of it all is our son, he needs the best, I need to give him the best, you need to give him the best and for him to get the best we have to work together. He came into this world through us creating him, so everything he needs will be a combination of us deciding together as a team.'*

Relationships with the mothers were generally, but not always, poor. However, some of the fathers did consider that the relationship had been good in the past, and this could provide a foundation for a good working relationship in the future. This suggests that a good working relationship with their child's mother may be possible, even when there is a major breakdown in communication.

> *'Because you know that you were there with this person before and you know that this person used to tell you everything, so now there is a barrier there, there is something on this person's mind for them not to talk. So right now, the relationship is not fantastic. But the only thing I can do as a good dad is not have arguments with her, and let her do what she is doing, but try and progress and get my relationship better with her again.'*

3.3.4 Future relationship with the mother

A clear theme was that fathers felt a good working relationship with their child's mother was an ideal and a good aim for the future, and that this would most likely be achieved through communication.

> *'I have a good working relationship with both of my baby mums despite if we have an argument or not because we both know the boundaries and the rules we've set down for the child so we stick by them and then you can just keep yourself-disciplined and ripples down to your child anyway it has a calm effect if you two work as a unit regardless of whether you're together. It's about your child, regardless of what the situation is.'*

However, some felt that they felt this might be very difficult to achieve:

> *'We do not even communicate that much anymore, because it is too hectic. It's straight war. Every time I talk to my baby mother, it is straight war. Obviously she is still feeling things from our past relationship. She's moved on now, but she is still feeling. So that has put up so much barriers of me communicating with her towards working together regarding anything relating to our child.'*

The relationship with the mother is often a barrier to collaborative parenting, as discussed in the next section.

4 Key barriers which prevent collaboration and accessing support

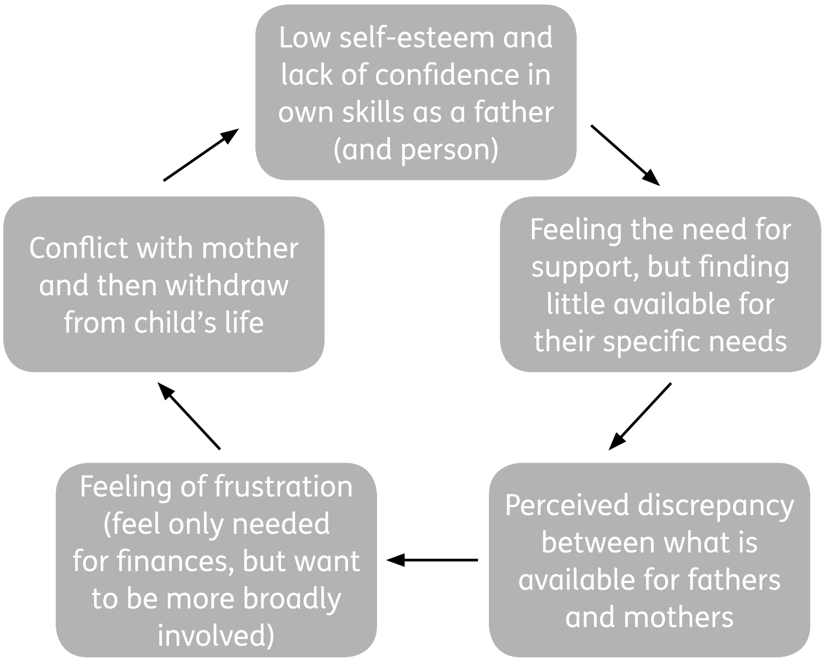
Key findings from this chapter

- Fathers taking part in this research describe a ‘cycle of disengagement’ from fatherhood, stemming from low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their ability to be a ‘good dad’. This leads to an inability to find appropriate support, both because of a reluctance to seek support and a lack of available services. This then leads to increased frustration and conflict with the mother, and negatively impacts on already fragile self-esteem.
- The research revealed a number of barriers, both to collaborative parenting and to accessing support. These included both internal factors (e.g. low confidence and lack of self-efficacy) and external factors (e.g. unemployment and homelessness).
- These barriers did not appear to be linked to ethnicity, but rather to disadvantage. This suggests that relevant interventions may be effectively targeted towards fathers in disadvantaged communities, rather than solely towards fathers from BME communities.

4.1 The cycle of disengagement

Qualitative analysis of the groups showed a cycle of disengagement from fatherhood, which can be expressed in the model below. The rest of this chapter will explore the various components of the model, and the links between them, in more detail.

Figure 4.1 Disengagement cycle extracted through qualitative analysis



This initial model is one of a continuous cycle of disengagement, which can be applied equally to fathers' ability to establish and sustain an effective collaborative parenting arrangement, and their ability to access support. If a father is suffering from poor self-esteem or confidence, he is likely to experience a lack of confidence in his own ability to be a good father. He is also likely to find it difficult to seek help, which is exacerbated by the lack of support available for fathers. The discrepancy (real or perceived) between the support available for mothers and fathers is then likely to lead to a feeling of frustration, which can lead to increased conflict with the mother, with a further negative impact on self-esteem and confidence. As this cycle continues, there is a greater likelihood of the father abandoning his good intentions and withdrawing from his child.

4.2 Low self-esteem and lack of confidence

The initial components of our model are the negative aspects of the fathers' own psychological condition, such as low self-esteem and low confidence in their ability to be a 'good dad'. This father explains that some men may not want to be involved with their children, but that others feel unable to due to their own lack of self-esteem and confidence.

> *'Another barrier is when you do not have a good self-esteem in yourself ... Not every father wants to get involved, some don't want to get involved because they don't, and some don't because they are not secure about themselves, they're insecure which leads them to not do the best they possibly can if they had certain support around them or certain other aids around them to be the best possible dad that they can be.'*

For some fathers it is clear that the conflicts and difficulties they are experiencing are emotionally painful, which is linked to their low self-esteem and low self-confidence.

> *'If the baby mothers felt the pain that we are going through as young fathers and see the effort we are going through to go to these young father forums and that. It may change their view that we want to be a father and do something positive and trying to be a good role so your son or daughter has someone to look up to!'*

Another recurring theme is that the fathers in the research felt that they have little control over their own life. This is either due to the perceived control utilised by the mother or the more 'official' sources such as the Child Support Agency (CSA) or social services.

> *'She can use my child as a weapon as much as she likes and there's not really anything I can do about it.'*

> *'As a man, you should be able to turn up to the door. That is my son or daughter and I want to see them. I did that and got arrested for harassment.'*

> *'I will give money and I should give money but they are going to give her child support and all of them things there which kind of nullifies my role.'*

This perceived lack of control over their life and their relationship with their child is likely to have negative psychological consequences, leading to frustration and low mood/confidence. It is particularly interesting to note the comments from one father who has a good relationship with his child (and presumably the mother), and this is, at least in part, due to his feeling that he is in control of his life and his relationship with his child.

> *'I run my affairs nicely; no one questions me or tells me anything. My daughter likes things as they are; we have a perfect relationship and a perfect stable life.'*

4.3 Feeling the need for support

A father with negative psychological issues is likely to need support, either to help them directly (having a secondary benefit for the relationship with the child) or to facilitate their relationship with the child and/or the child's mother. This raises two issues: firstly that the fathers themselves find it difficult to ask for help, and secondly that when they do seek help there is little available to meet their needs.

Some fathers may not even realise how having support available to them might be beneficial, or do not realise this until they see it in action.

> *'I said at work that I was going to a fathers' group and they laughed at me, but it's because there's not enough of this and we all need this.'*

A further barrier to seeking support may be psychological – they may feel that seeking advice and support may reflect badly on them as a man and father. Even when fathers have acknowledged that they want and need support, they may find it difficult to engage with support, like this participant:

> *'For me it's very hard, even being here today, answering the first question – why should I share my problems?'*

Given the perceived lack of support and the potential lack of knowledge about how help and support might benefit the father and their relationship with a child, it is likely that supportive advice and help is not sought by many fathers. As such, it is important to consider how fathers might be best encouraged to engage in any support available, in addition to considering the development of father-specific support.

4.4 Perceived discrepancy between support for fathers and mothers

One very frequently occurring theme was that once fathers in these groups had accepted the need for support and advice they found it difficult to find support targeting fathers. They felt that the support available is directed towards mothers, not fathers. This also feeds into the themes raised more explicitly regarding 'official' sources of support (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3). Consequently, even if fathers would like support and advice, they feel it is not available.

4.5 Frustration

This lack of needed support and advice, exacerbated by the perceived discrepancy between mothers and fathers, may then lead to feelings of frustration, conflict and isolation. Some fathers felt that the only valued contribution to their child's upbringing is financial, whereas they wanted to contribute to, and be involved in, broader aspects of the child's life.

> *'It's not all about the money; your child does not have to see money. You can show your child with love. You can take your child to the park, the park does not cost you money. It's not only financial; you can be there without finances.'*

Generally, the fathers perceived their current relationship with the child’s mother negatively often feeling that the mother only wants their financial contribution, possibly without allowing the father to see his child. Such feelings often represented frustration with their child’s mother.

> *‘For my baby mum there is a breakdown in communication. We don’t share information, she knows what time I’m coming in and going out to work it happens on a daily basis and with her I’m not too sure of her routine because she can decide “I wanna go out” and she won’t tell me.’*

> *‘She only wants to talk to me when she feels as though my baby needs something and the way she asks me makes me not want to get it, because I do not appreciate being spoken to like that so I won’t get it.’*

4.6 Conflict and withdrawal

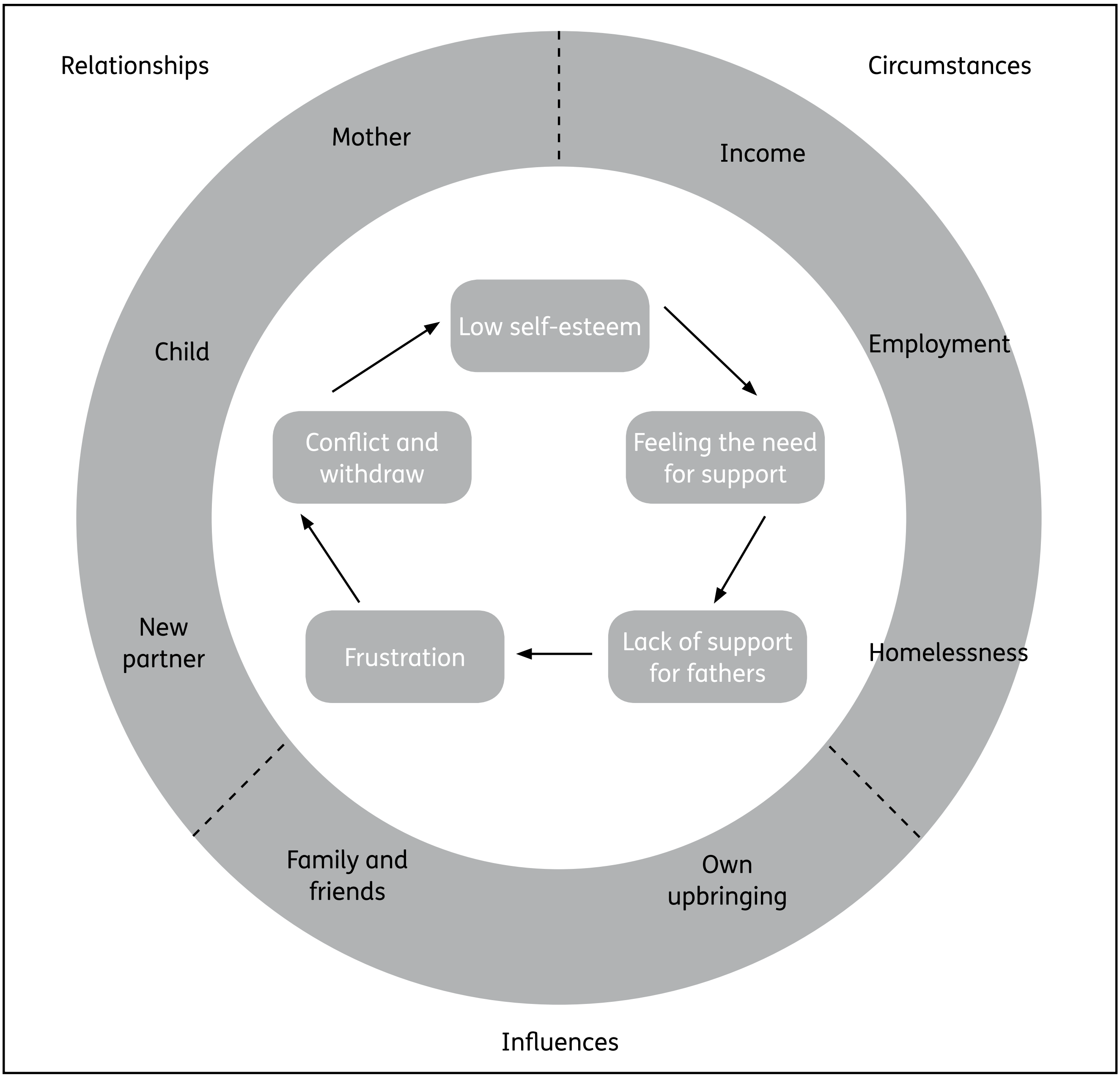
As previously discussed (Chapter 3), fathers felt a good working relationship with their child’s mother was an ideal and a good aim for the future. However, when the father feels that he lacks support or knowledge, or is in a difficult financial situation, this feeds back into the negative psychological consequences, further exacerbating feelings of low self-esteem and low confidence. This increases conflict with the child’s mother and can lead to reduced contact with their child. Hence, the cycle of disengagement continues to propagate. As previously discussed, many fathers report that they feel out of control of their own life and their relationship with their child. One consequence of this can be that the father disengages from their relationship with their child.

> *‘... women have more support, have more rights with children and family and men tend to think, “okay, whatever I do is not going to make any sense so I’ll just go away and start a new life somewhere else”.’*

4.7 Barriers in context

This section began with a ‘cycle of disengagement’ based on our focus groups. However, we also need to understand the factors underlying the cycle. Other studies, summarised in Andrews *et al.* (2011) indicate that there are a number of factors which impact on separated fathers’ payment of child maintenance. Child maintenance is one element of a collaborative parenting arrangement, and therefore, it is useful to consider how these factors might influence the cycle of disengagement. The key factors highlighted by Andrews *et al.* relate to affordability (income, employment and housing) and relationships (relationship between parents, contact with the child, relationships with any new partner and/or children). This study has also highlighted the importance of the father’s own upbringing, as well as his friends and family. By overlaying these factors onto the basic cycle shown in Figure 4.1, we can gain a greater understanding of the external and internal factors which drive the cycle.

Figure 4.2 The cycle of disengagement revisited



4.8 Barriers facing specific groups

One of the main objectives of this study was to explore whether there are any barriers, either to collaboration or to accessing support services, which are specific to separated fathers from BME communities. There was no evidence to suggest that ethnicity and cultural factors were key barriers in themselves, and it can be seen that the cycle of disengagement can be applied to fathers from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Other internal factors such as low self-esteem, and external factors such as unemployment and homelessness have a far greater impact.

Two points need bearing in mind: First, as previously stressed (in Section 1.3) the fathers taking part in this research were already engaged with accessing support. It is possible that fathers who do not access support may experience other barriers. As the literature review has shown (Johal *et al.*, 2012) this may include language and cultural barriers. Second, young men from BME communities are at a higher risk of unemployment and homelessness.[2] Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that, although there is no direct link between ethnicity and collaborative parenting, the two are linked to social and economic disadvantage. The policy implication here is that relevant interventions may be effectively targeted towards fathers in disadvantaged communities, rather than solely towards fathers from BME communities.

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[2] For example, from April to June 2012, 18.6 per cent of Black/African/Caribbean men were unemployed, compared to 7.3 per cent of white men (Labour Force Survey, 2012).

5 Experience and perceptions of support

Key findings from this chapter

- Many fathers in this research have negative experience of support services:
  - they feel that family support services target mothers and little is available for fathers;
  - many distrust 'official' services such as social services, due to previous negative experiences.
- Where fathers have succeeded in accessing 'supportive' or 'unofficial' services there has been a benefit to the fathers themselves, as well as to the relationship with their child and the mother.

5.1 Introduction

From the previous discussion, it would appear that accessing external support is a critical factor in either reversing or accelerating the cycle of disengagement. If fathers have negative experiences of support services, or negative perceptions, the result can be that feelings of low self-esteem and frustration are exacerbated and the cycle becomes entrenched. However, a positive experience can have the opposite effect, giving fathers the tools they need to break the cycle.

Key sources of support raised by the research participants included both 'official' services such as social services and 'support' services, such as WWM.

5.2 Experience of 'official' services

Where fathers had personal experience of 'official' services, such as governmental agencies, or had friends who had been in that position, they typically portrayed them in a negative light, typified by these fathers:

> *'I have friends that have lost their lives because the mother has taken the children away and they have no access to any advice. Not because they were bad people but things have happened with them in the past that has caused them also to lose their kids.'*

> *'Social services are dealing with my case at the moment right. And all I hear from the social worker is "build up your relationship this", "build up your relationship that". Well hold on a minute yeah? If the mum is not willing to build on that relationship then how are you meant to do it? Like where is that support. So it's all good you saying do this do that, you know, from a father you are doing all, everything you're meant to be doing, because you want to see your kid, you want to provide for your kid. But, how can you do it when there is a barrier?'*

> *'Someone needs to sit down and fight my cause for me. Not me though because she doesn't listen to me. Let's forget money. It is something but let us forget about it. If I am willing to spend time and care for my child that is all that really matters.'*

Fathers' experience of the CSA was also negative. The father's lack of trust in the mother in relation to financial contributions has previously been discussed, and this also extends to distrust of the CSA. This suggests that distrust may be a more significant barrier to financial contributions than affordability.

> *'Pay the money into the account and get a receipt from that. So when the CSA come and say I need to be paying I have evidence and show them how I have been paying more than their £20 a week.'*

5.3 Official support focuses on mothers

The fathers in this research mainly do report wanting to be involved with their children and to make a positive contribution to their life. However, often they feel that their ability to have a relationship with their child is limited by the lack of support groups, avenues for advice or places to meet other fathers. This lack of support forms a barrier to the father's relationship with their child. Additionally, it is perceived that the support that does exist focuses on mothers, not fathers, further limiting their ability to find and use supportive resources when needed.

> *'There are all these mothers everywhere and they are talking, they are at groups and I go and they all turn around and look at me like "why are you here?".'*

> *'Do you know what; it would be good to see a place where we could go to, you know like connections, alright, this government don't want to put no money there. But Prince's Trust could give you man building to work in so that we could have people come there.'*

> *'I saw a leaflet for the forum and today's group and I couldn't get here quick enough. I saw the leaflet and thought 'dad' that is the biggest three letter word.'*

The key issue raised within this part of the focus groups was that the support and advice available to fathers was either lacking or difficult to find, whereas there is a great deal of support and advice readily available for mothers. It is clear that fathers would like to have more support and advice to improve their relationship with their child, but they feel it is not available specifically for fathers. It seems that if more support were available for fathers and that this support were specifically designed for the needs of fathers, then the men, their children and their children's mothers would all benefit. In particular, the more 'official' external influences, such as government agencies, were typically seen as being biased towards supporting and favouring the needs of the mother.

> *'I feel that there is none. When it comes to fathers, we're always an afterthought. Women are right we are wrong.'*

> *'You can't do it alone and you need to put your energy into your problems. We all have something in common, we're all dads and basically there's not enough of 'this'. The government put a lot in place for women.'*

5.4 'Support' services

In contrast to views on 'official' services, fathers' views of 'unofficial' or 'support' services were positive. Where external support has been sought and/or used, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive.

> *'I think talking out loud helps as well, like if there is someone there to listen. A stranger helps at times because that person is not going to know you from nowhere and don't know your background and you can tell them something and they can react to it and say "yeah I've been through a situation like that and this is how I went through it and this is how I dealt with it".'*

Interestingly, a number of fathers had clear ideas regarding the types of support that would help to facilitate their relationship with their child and their child's mother. These suggestions provide some helpful indicators of the types of support needed (e.g. assistance with supervised contact), the method used (e.g. an empathetic approach) and the need to make the support available and the benefits of engaging in support more visible to fathers.

> *'More resources for example, now me yeah I have to have supervised contact. Now if there is not any one there who can supervise that contact or someone at the family centre I am not having contact that week ... where are the people to be there for when we need supported contact? So bring more people into it.'*

> *'I think it's about education as well, where fathers know what exists and they are welcome because it's not something you'd know about unless you know about it ... Maybe that's what the problem is, there is stuff there to help but, you just don't know about it. It's not advertised.'*

6 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter sets out recommendations from the research in relation to:

- targeting the right groups, i.e. young fathers and disadvantaged fathers;
- intervening at the right time, i.e. before the birth of the child or as soon as possible after the birth;
- ensuring that seeking support is seen as the norm, to overcome emotional and psychological barriers and stigmatisation;
- improving existing services, including 'official' or 'government' services, to ensure that they are aware of fathers' issues, welcome fathers and recognise the full range of fathers' contributions;
- developing new father-specific services delivered by VCS organisations, or extending existing services, in particular outreach and mediation work.

6.1 Introduction

This study concludes that separated fathers in challenging circumstances feel there are a number of barriers to them being able to effectively engage in a relationship with their child and the child's mother. This may result from difficulties with the child's mother, from difficulties with the official or governmental agencies involved, from the lack of support available for fathers or from their own psychological issues. The findings suggest a number of possible policies to break the cycle of disengagement.

6.2 Targeting interventions

6.2.1 Reaching the right groups

The rationale behind this study was to understand the barriers faced by separated fathers from BME communities, in order to design interventions targeting this group. However, the barriers we have identified are not specific to these fathers, but are more likely to be associated with disadvantage in general. Therefore, related interventions should target disadvantaged rather than BME communities – although in practice BME fathers will be disproportionately represented in these communities.

A key finding from the literature review and from the focus groups was that young fathers, in particular, showed positive attitudes towards their child and their responsibilities, but found it difficult to translate these attitudes into behaviours. In addition, young fathers are often at a crisis point in their life and, therefore, more receptive to support, and are likely to be easier to reach than older fathers through existing services such as schools and youth workers.

6.2.2 Providing support at the right time

It will be important to reach out to fathers at key turning points in their lives, as they may be at their most receptive during these times. Although support is needed for all separated fathers, it is important to reach them early in the process either before or as soon as possible after the birth of the child, as the relationship during pregnancy is a key indicator of collaboration after birth. If a positive relationship with the mother can be established early on, before negative behaviours have been established, it is more likely to continue. Therefore, activities to develop new services for young fathers, or to help the services they already encounter to understand and meet their needs, are likely to be effective.

6.3 Accessing support

This study has shown that for many fathers, low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence in being a 'good' dad and a fear of stigmatisation are key barriers in seeking help, and providing services may not be enough to overcome these barriers. Therefore, seeking help and accessing support services needs to become the norm. Long-term behaviour change activities (e.g. developing case studies and working with local champions) are needed here. Services for fathers also need to be highly visible, both to reach potential service users and to further the process of normalisation. Including more men in these services, especially early years services which are traditionally female dominated, will also help men to identify with the services. There is also a need to ensure that third parties (including friends and family, as well as professionals) are aware of the support available, so that they are in a position to provide guidance if needed.

6.4 Providing support

A significant barrier to accessing support was a perception that fathers were excluded from existing 'family' support services, sometimes reinforced by negative experiences of 'official' services. In addition, it appears that there is a genuine lack of services specifically designed for separated fathers. Therefore, there is a need to improve existing services, by ensuring that service providers understand the needs of fathers as well as mothers, and to develop new father-specific services.

6.5 Support organisations

The study has shown that fathers may be resistant to using government services, and would prefer to use services provided by VCS organisations. This finding has two implications – firstly 'official' or 'government' services must be improved, and secondly new services should be developed by the VCS.

6.5.1 Improving existing services

There is a need to improve existing services targeting families so that they are more aware of fathers' needs, more welcoming to fathers (either with the mother or alone), and recognise all aspects of the father's role. This includes his contributions to the child's overall upbringing, including educational, practical and emotional support, rather than focusing solely on financial contributions. In particular, more fathers (or at least men) should be included in the delivery of family services and in early years settings, to counter the perception that existing support caters only for mothers.

6.5.2 Developing new father-specific services

There is also a need to extend the services provided by VCS organisations, either by extending existing services or by developing new services for fathers. There was a particular call for more mediation and outreach work.

The fathers in the study recommend that fathers should be included in the design of new services, and the improvement of existing services, to ensure that they meet the needs of fathers, and that fathers are more likely to access them. They also stress the need for an empathetic and non-judgmental approach. Because some fathers feel that seeking support reflects on them badly, as a man and as a father, new services must portray a positive image of separated fathers.

6.6 Continuous improvement

Our literature review showed a need for more work to understand the barriers faced by many fathers, especially in primarily low-income and non-white populations, and therefore, we recommend that a more systematic approach be taken to understanding what works in helping fathers to engage with services.

Appendix
Focus group methodology

A.1 Focus groups

A focus group methodology was developed to obtain a qualitative insight into the barriers that fathers feel exist in developing and maintaining a good relationship with their children. The fathers in the groups were service users already engaged with WWM initiatives, therefore a relationship of trust had already been established, making it easier to discuss potentially painful and emotional issues. However, the study may be biased towards fathers who are willing to engage with support and who have a positive experience of working with VCS groups.

All the groups were held in London in March/April 2012. Each group was run by a trained facilitator and had between four and ten participants. There were a total of 55 participants across eight different focus groups. Most of the fathers had just one child. Most of the fathers were either single or married/cohabiting with a roughly even balance within each category. The majority were educated to either secondary school level or vocational qualification level; however, there was a wide range of educational levels. Many of the fathers were unemployed, although a number were at-home dads, in education, employed part-time or self-employed. Most of the fathers either reported having no religious beliefs or were Christian. Of those who disclosed their ethnicity, the majority were from BME communities, mainly Black African/Black Caribbean. (See Table A.1 for full details.)

A.2 Focus group participants

Table A.1 Focus group participants' characteristics

		Focus group							
	Total	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Number of participants	55	7	8	4	8	10	5	4	9

Participant information			
Age (mean)	24 years	**Annual income**	
Relationship status		Less than £10,000	12
Single	19	£10,000 – £15,000	4
Married/cohabiting	14	£15,000 – £20,000	3
Divorced/separated	4	£20,000 – £30,000	1
Number of children		£30,000 – £45,000	–
1 child	30	More than £45,000	–
2 children	6	**Religion**	
3+ children	4	No religious beliefs	11
Children from same relationship?		Christian	19
All from same relationship	30	Muslim	1
From different relationships	5	Jewish	–
Education level (highest)		Hindu	–
Junior/primary school	3	Sikh	–
Secondary school	8	Other	4
A or AS levels	1	**Ethnicity**	
Vocational qualifications	21	Asian (Indian/Pakistani)	–
UG degree	3	Asian (Bengali)	–
PG degree	3	Asian (Chinese)	–
Employment status		Asian Other	–
Employed full time	1	Mixed Black Caribbean/White	2
Employed part time	4	Mixed Black African/White	–
Self-employed	5	Mixed Other	2
In education	5	White British	6
At home dad	7	White European	3
Unemployed	12	White other	2
Employment change (6 months)		Black African	10
No	21	Black Caribbean	10
Yes	9	Black other	1
		Other	–

Note: There are some missing data, therefore, N is not always complete.

A.3 Topic guide

A 90-minute focus group was developed comprising four core areas for exploration. Approximately 20 minutes was to be spent on each part of the focus group with a brief introduction and conclusion to the session.

Table A.2 Parts and questions within the focus groups

Part 1: Values and beliefs	Do you feel that fathers should be as involved as mothers in the day to day care of their children?
	Do you feel that you have a responsibility towards your child? What sort of responsibility? Why? What are the problems?
Part 2: Working together	Do you feel you have a good working relationship with the mother around issues related to your child/children?
	If yes, describe what this is and how you work together on issues related to your child.
	If you feel you work well together, what has helped you get to this point?
	If you are not currently, would you like to live together?
	Do you feel that you should contribute to supporting your child financially? Why? What are the problems?
Part 3: Support services	Have you had any support on working together in the past or are you getting support at the moment? If so, where did you get this support? What did you like about it?
	If you had difficulties with the mother around issues related to your child where would you go for help?
	Do you use social networking sites (Facebook, etc.) or other specific father-related sites?
Part 4: Barriers	What are the problems with the current systems and support for fathers?
	If you could choose any method for receiving information and advice what would be best for you?
	What do you feel would enable a better relationship with your child's mother right now?

A.4 Analysis

The qualitative analysis was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: Initial coding to determine core themes and subthemes

Transcripts were read by two psychologists, identifying all possible themes. About 65 themes were identified. These themes were then examined to remove replications or combine similar themes. Four broader themes were then identified, each with six to nine subthemes. This coding was validated by WWM before conducting the final coding of the full dataset. The four broad themes for coding are shown in Table A.3 and the subthemes within each core theme are provided in Table A.4.

Phase 2: Qualitative analysis of transcripts

A detailed coding of all transcripts was completed in which all occurrences of core themes and subthemes were identified and coded. Two psychologists separately coded all transcripts using the coding scheme developed in phase 1. Any ambiguities within the transcripts or discrepancies between coders were discussed and agreed to ensure a high quality and reliable coding.

The use of psychologists to undertake the analysis could mean that the findings are biased towards emotional and psychological factors, rather than socio-economic ones.

Table A.3 Core themes identified for qualitative coding of the focus group transcripts

Core theme 1	Fathers' responsibilities towards and relationship with their child
Core theme 2	Fathers' relationship with the child's mother
Core theme 3	External influences and sources of support (including modes for contact)
Core theme 4	Fathers' feelings of self, identity, emotions and needs

A.5 Core themes

Core theme 1: Fathers' responsibilities and relationship with the child

This theme specifically related to the responsibilities that a father has towards their child and the relationship that they do or might have with their child. This theme comprised various aspects including providing financially and practically for the child, emotional and educational involvement and putting the needs of the child before their own needs.

Core theme 2: Fathers' relationship with the child's mother

This theme considered the fathers' relationship with their child's mother. Both positive and negative aspects were coded separately, and were defined as past, present or future. There were also two contrasting themes where one identified both parents working together as a unit with shared roles and responsibilities, the other identified where each parent should have a distinct role in the upbringing of the child. Finally, there was a subtheme for stating that the needs of the child should be put before any conflict between the parents.

Core theme 3: External influences and sources of support

Within this theme various external potential sources of influence were identified. These included the extended family and new relationships for both the mother and the father separately. Additionally friends and community figures were included as possible sources of support. 'Official' sources of support included government, police, social services, etc. 'Supportive' sources included voluntary and community groups.

Core theme 4: Fathers' feelings of self, identity, emotions, etc.

The final theme concentrated on the fathers' own needs, strengths and weaknesses, for example, low self-esteem as a weakness or confidence as a personal strength. The fathers' own emotional and financial needs were also identified. Two final themes were identified: the perception of a discrepancy between the support available for mothers and fathers, and the ability for fathers to have the right and ability to make decisions for themselves with regard to their life, finances, etc.

A.6 Coding scheme to identify core themes and subthemes

Table A.4 Subthemes identified within each core theme for qualitative coding

	All parts	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
Core theme 1: Fathers' responsibilities/ relationship with child	**220**	**128**	**67**	**20**	**5**
Providing financially/materially (present and future)	68	27	31	9	1
Practical (e.g. nappy changing, feeding, taking to school/clubs)	31	18	10	3	0
Recreational (e.g. go to park, out for food)	12	6	2	1	3
Emotional, psychological, cultural, religious	35	28	5	2	0
Educating child: safety, respect, behaviour, life skills, etc	55	38	13	3	1
Putting child's needs before self	19	11	6	2	0
Core theme 2: Fathers' relationship with the child's mother	**327**	**122**	**165**	**21**	**19**
Positive aspects: Past (e.g. good relationship at beginning)	12	2	9	0	1
Positive aspects: Present (e.g. able to communicate)	33	4	27	1	1
Positive aspects: Future (e.g. importance of working together)	23	6	13	1	3
Negative aspects: Past (e.g. financial strain, conflict)	24	6	13	3	2
Negative aspects: Present (e.g. lack of trust, difficulties with communication, conflict over money, conflict over contact)	81	18	51	7	5
Negative aspects: Future (e.g. negative impact on child)	14	5	6	0	3
Mother and father working together as a unit for the child, shared/flexible roles and responsibilities	67	48	13	3	3
Distinct roles and responsibilities	24	14	6	4	0
Putting child before self and protecting child from conflict	49	19	27	2	1

Continued

Table A.4 Continued

	All parts	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
Core theme 3: External influences and sources of support	191	18	42	98	33
Father's extended family	24	6	6	11	1
Mother's extended family	14	2	8	3	1
Mother's new relationship	13	2	8	3	0
Father's new relationship	3	2	1	0	0
Friends	7	2	4	1	0
Community, culture, society and strangers	10	1	0	6	3
'Official' (e.g. government, CSA, social services, police)	51	3	12	26	10
'Supportive' (e.g. charity, father-specific support services)	48	0	3	29	16
Online and social media	21	0	0	19	2
Face-to-face and/or personal contact	11	-	-	-	11
Electronically – email, social media	6	-	-	-	6
Telephone or text	4	-	-	-	4
Combined methods	1	-	-	-	1
Core theme 4: Fathers' feelings of self, identity, emotions, etc.	227	43	54	56	74
Positive aspects and personal strengths (e.g. self-esteem)	12	2	4	2	4
Negative aspects and personal weaknesses (e.g. self-doubt)	35	6	10	15	4
Changes in situation: living, working, relationship, role	10	2	4	2	2
Fathers' own needs: emotional, financial, psychological	59	10	18	14	17
Feelings of not being needed, lack of support, perceiving a discrepancy between what is available for mothers and fathers	78	14	7	18	39
Different image/attitude/behaviour in front of child, ensure they don't repeat your own mistakes	10	5	2	2	1
Right and ability to determine own decisions, needs, finances, future, involvement with child	23	4	9	3	7

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This research was commissioned to inform the development of a new service to improve the co-ordination of support services for separating and separated parents. The key aims were to identify what fathers, particularly low income fathers and those from black and minority ethnic communities, feel constitutes 'working together' with the other parent; and to identify key barriers which prevent collaboration and accessing of support services.

The key findings are that separated fathers taking part in the research generally had positive attitudes towards fatherhood and collaboration, but were prevented from putting their good intentions into practice by a number of barriers. A 'cycle of disengagement' has been developed, whereby low self-esteem, low confidence in their skills as a father and a lack of available support and conflict with the mother lead to a withdrawal from the child's life. This cycle can be broken by the provision of appropriate support, but all too often fathers' perceptions and experience of 'official' support services are negative, and serve to perpetuate the cycle rather than break it. The report makes a series of recommendations for the improvement of existing services for families, and the development of new services designed specifically to meet the needs of fathers.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please email:
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