DADDY DEAREST?

ACTIVE FATHERHOOD AND PUBLIC POLICY

EDITED BY KATE STANLEY
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We are grateful to Lloyds TSB, and particularly to Fiona Cannon, for their support, without which the project would not have been possible. We are also grateful to Relate and the Metropolitan Housing Trust for their kind support. Our thanks also to Tom Beardshaw, Duncan Fisher, Margaret O’Brien, Penny Mansfield and Bren Neale.
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1. Introduction: fathers and policy
Kate Stanley and Corinna Gamble

1.1 Introduction

Millions of children, women and men in the UK today are not deriving benefit from fathers and fatherhood. Many children grow up with absent or distant fathers; mothers raise children with little emotional, practical and financial support from fathers, and men report unfulfilled aspirations to play a more active role in the lives of their children. Public policy could be very much more effective in harnessing fatherhood for private and public good. This book sets out why and how public policy could play a more effective role in enabling children, women and men to get more from fatherhood.

Fatherhood matters. Fathers can improve the life chances of their children. They can improve the circumstances and experiences of mothers. And being a father can enhance the wellbeing of men. For all these reasons, fatherhood is a direct and appropriate concern of public policy. If policymakers do not think about fatherhood, their decisions will still impact on fathers and their relationships with their children – including in potentially undesirable ways.

This book builds on IPPR’s body of work over the last 15 years on gender equality, and men and their children (see, for example, Burgess and Ruxton 1996; Coote 2000). These publications have ranged widely arguing for policies that enable men to be involved with their children. At IPPR in 1990 Anna Coote, Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt set out six goals for family policy. They argued that policy should support:

- all kinds of families
- the right of children to be dependent and become dependable
- strong, self-reliant women
- a new sense of responsibility in men about their relationships with their children and partner
- policy should recognise that the essence of successful family life is interdependence.

This publication seeks to promote these objectives 15 years on. We would add that public policy also has a role in enabling fathers to fulfil their commitment to care. At the core of this publication and IPPR’s previous publications in this field is an understanding that unless a gendered approach is taken to social policy, everyone loses.
It is essential to be clear about what we mean by ‘father involvement’ or ‘father care’. Caring for children, by mothers or fathers, is about both direct interaction and economic care (O’Brien 2004). The classic description of father involvement (Lamb et al 1987) has a tripartite topology of father involvement consisting of:

- ‘Engagement’ – refers to care-taking and shared activities with the child, involving direct contact.
- ‘Accessibility’ – concerns the father’s potential availability for interaction by being present or available.
- ‘Responsibility’ – includes making sure the child is taken care of and arranging for resources to be available for the child.

Using this understanding of ‘father involvement’ or ‘father care’, importance is attached to both nurturing and economic activities by fathers, as well as the possibility of fathers undertaking these activities. The latter emphasises the role of fathers as an asset in the family in that, simply through their presence, fathers can bring benefit by enabling others in their activities. ‘Fathers’ here refers to both biological and social fathers, and may refer to both resident and non-resident fathers, although this is specified where it is important to distinguish between them.

This chapter makes the case for reassessing public policy in relation to fatherhood. It identifies two key social trends that are driving the need for reassessment: changes in women’s participation in the labour market and changes in the structures of families. It then discusses the roles of fathers and how fatherhood is practised today. The key issues that emerge from this analysis are then explored in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two identifies barriers in the workplace and in families to more active fatherhood and proposes multi-level systemic change. Chapter three highlights the importance of parents’ relationships for ensuring positive experiences and outcomes for children and outlines a role for public policy in supporting these relationships. Chapter four examines how public services should be reoriented to promote active fatherhood. Finally, chapter five draws out the key public policy implications from the analysis.

1.2 Time to focus on fathers

Two key trends have fuelled much of the concern that has caused fatherhood to gain momentum as an issue for public policy. Firstly, there has been a substantial increase in women’s participation in the paid labour market, straining traditionally gendered divisions of responsibility in families. Secondly, changing family patterns have meant that fatherhood is now often conducted outside of marriage and the residential home, and there are increasing numbers of lone parent families and stepfamilies.
These trends and policy responses will not have affected all families in the same way, as fathers are not a homogeneous group but fulfil different roles, often reflecting their class, ethnicity, age, disability, beliefs and sexual orientation; none the less some clear patterns emerge. These trends are not restricted to Britain but follow a pattern across industrialised nations.

**Labour market trends**

Women’s participation in the paid labour market has increased from 59 per cent in 1984 to 70 per cent in 2004, giving the UK the highest female employment rate of the major European Union countries (ONS 2005). In 1992, there was a 16 per cent gap in the economic activity rates of women and men; by 2004, this had reduced to 10 per cent (WEU 2004a). In 1981, men filled 2.5 million more jobs than women in Britain; 20 years later the numbers were almost equal, although almost half of the jobs held by women were part-time (ONS 2001).

These trends are set to continue. Of the 1.3 million new jobs expected to be created over the next 10 years, more than one million are likely to be taken by women. This is due mainly to the changing composition of jobs in terms of status, sector and occupation, which is likely to favour women’s employment and is defined by significant horizontal and vertical segregation. For example, about a quarter of female employees work in administrative or secretarial jobs, and men are twice as likely as women to be managers and senior officials (ONS 2003).

This continued occupational segregation is one of the reasons for the persistence of the gender pay gap, which has barely narrowed in the last two decades. In 2004 women’s median hourly pay was 85.7 per cent of men’s (ONS 2004a). There is also a parental pay gap. In the late 1990s, mothers earned, on average, 12.6 per cent less than women without children (Harkness and Waldfogel 1999). Public policy in this area often conflates gender and parental status, but it is important to be clear that motherhood specifically imposes a pay penalty.

The gender and parental pay gaps contribute to an economic rationale for women – rather than men – to reduce their working hours in order to care for children. This is self-perpetuating, as working part-time involves a downward occupational shift for many women, which does not fully exploit their skills (Women and Work Commission 2005). The UK has the highest part-time pay penalty and one of the worst problems in the industrialised nations in enabling women to move between full-time and part-time work without occupational demotions (Manning and Petrongolo 2005). In 2004, 43 per cent of women in employment worked part-time, compared with just nine per cent of men (WEU 2004b). Figure 1.1 below shows the breakdown of typical weekly hours by gender (not parental status) in 2004. It shows 50 per cent of all men in employment working a
typical week of more than 40 hours, compared with less than 20 per cent of women (ONS 2004b).

**Figure 1.1: Usual hours worked per week (including overtime), by gender, 2004**

![Graph showing usual hours worked per week by gender, 2004](image)

Source: ONS 2004b

On average, fathers in the UK work the longest hours in Europe. In 2001, the average number of weekly hours worked by fathers was 46.1, compared with 27.8 by mothers. One in eight fathers worked 60 hours or more per week, whereas less than two per cent of mothers worked such hours (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003). The equity issue in the UK is not women working in part-time jobs, but the ways in which part-time jobs are remunerated and valued (meaning women are more likely than men to do them), and how they are perceived (as jobs for people who are less committed than full-time workers). These overall trends in shorter hours for women mask the fact that, in certain families, both parents work long hours, including those in very poor families who need to work very long hours to get by (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003).

Working age women in Britain with dependent children are less likely to be economically active than those without, but this is closely related to the age of their youngest child, with activity increasing with age of the child (ONS 2003a). However, working age men with dependent children are more likely to be economically active than those without, and the age of their children appears to have little impact, although, in contrast with
women, those with the youngest children are most likely to be working (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003; ONS 2003a), as figure 1.2 shows.

Figure 1.2: Economic activity by age of youngest dependent child, 2000

![Graph showing economic activity by age of youngest dependent child]

Source: ONS 2003b (based on UK Time Use Survey 2000)

While mothers’ working patterns closely match the age and number of their children and they frequently work part-time, fathers’ overall working patterns appear to be relatively unaffected by their children, and they appear to work at least as long hours as other men. Women’s – including mothers’ – labour market participation has risen significantly in recent decades but the evidence is less clear that this has been matched by an increase in men’s – including fathers’ – participation in unpaid household or caring work.

Changing families
Changes in the labour market have been accompanied by changes in living arrangements and household formation. There has been a reduction in the number of married and cohabiting couples with dependent children, and a rise in lone parenthood and one-person households. Figure 1.3 shows that in the early 1970s, 92 per cent of dependent children lived in families headed by a couple, compared with 73 per cent in 2002 (ONS 2004c).
Stepfamilies are the fastest growing family type. In 2003 around 55 per cent of all divorcing couples had at least one child under 16 (ONS 2005). Most children live with their mothers following family break up, and so most stepfamilies tend to include children from the woman’s previous relationship, with around one in 10 stepfamilies including children from the father’s previous relationship (ONS 2005).

The proportion of children living in lone parent families in Britain more than tripled in the three decades from the early 1970s to almost one quarter of all children, while the proportion of lone father families grew from one per cent in 1971 to three per cent in 2002 (ONS 2005 and 2004c). The rise in lone parenthood is not evenly spread across gender or ethnic groups. For example, nine out of ten lone parents are women; almost half of the Black Caribbean babies in the Millennium Cohort Study lived in lone parent families compared with 13 per cent of white babies and five per cent of Indian and Bangladeshi babies (Dex and Joshi 2004).

Up to the mid-1980s, a large part of the rise in lone parenthood was due to divorce. More recently, however, the number of lone mothers has grown at a faster rate because of the rise in the proportion of births outside marriage (ONS 2005). Five times as many children were born outside of marriage in 2003 compared with 30 years earlier, and in 2001 40 per cent of all live births were to unmarried mothers (ONS 2005). This raises issues around children’s contact with their fathers; for example, 15 per cent of the babies in the Millennium Cohort Study lived with just their mothers, and although nearly five out of 10 of them saw their father at least once a week, nearly four in 10 had no contact at all (Calderwood 2004).
These trends have contributed to a sense of crisis in some quarters about the state of the family, and attention has ranged variously from mothers to fathers. But despite these changes, around six in ten adults in the UK live in a couple, marriage is still the most common form of partnership, and the ‘nuclear family’ of two parents and their children remains the statistical norm for family arrangements, with 65 per cent of children living with both their natural parents in 2003 (Ferri et al 2003).

None the less, like all family arrangements, both lone parent families and stepfamilies present challenges for public policy. Lone parents are consistently poorer than couple families. One quarter of all children living in poverty in 2003 lived in lone parent households (DWP 2003). This is partly accounted for by the relatively low employment rate of lone parents of less than 50 per cent (ONS 2004b). In 2002, 35 per cent of lone parent families had a gross weekly household income of £150 or less, compared with only five per cent of married couples (ONS 2004c). The growth in stepfamilies points to a strong trend towards social rather than biological parenting, while at the same time the role of separated biological parents cannot be ignored. Nearly double the number of fathers born in 1970 are stepfathers (17 per cent), compared with those born in 1958 (Ferri et al 2003). Despite this, public policy continues to emphasise biological fatherhood, no doubt because it is an immutable fact and, therefore, seemingly more straightforward to deal with, compared with social fatherhood, which changes over time.

Explanations for the changes in family types over recent decades are prone to caricature (Stanley 2004). There is a tendency, particularly on the political right, to cite these trends as evidence of moral decline. Then there are those, particularly on the political left, who cite the same trends as evidence of ‘self-actualisation’ and ‘democratisation’, whereby individuals have become freer to make choices to end unfulfilling relationships and enter new ones, creating more equal and mutually satisfying relationships within the family and between genders (Williams 2004). Public policy must be based on a more sophisticated understanding of the family than either of these caricatures. There are two key dimensions to understanding family change that must underpin public policy. First, empirical evidence supports the idea that it is the quality of care and not its arrangement that matters most. This means public policy needs to move away from a focus on the social institution of the family and towards a focus on the role of the family; in other words, what it does, such as provide care, rather than what it is (Williams 2004). Second, there is also an increasing understanding that there are differences in the way people experience and cope with these changes in family arrangements, and there is a need to support those who are coping least well.
1.3 Breadwinners and carers

These labour market and family trends have led to increasingly urgent questions being asked about the roles of fathers. There is a common perception that, since time immemorial, men and women have taken very different roles within the family. This supposedly universal family included a father who supported the family through paid work and a woman who supported the family through the care of their children. However, it is by no means clear that this family type was ever really dominant, let alone universal. Scholarship has shown caring expectations among fathers in earlier historical periods (see Frank 1998; Tosh 1999; Johansen 2001), and McKee and O’Brien (1982) have further shown how fathers’ caring role may have been hidden from history. None the less, the link between fatherhood and work, and motherhood and care, is embedded in public discourse. Social policy has both reflected and reinforced this. The Beveridge report of 1948 established the post-war principle of social insurance to protect the whole family against the risks of men losing their breadwinner roles through unemployment. Similarly, provisions were made for widows without a male provider and seen as deserving of support (in contrast to divorced or never-married mothers).

This concept of the breadwinning father is still prominent, despite its uncertain basis in reality. For many men, being a good father equates with being a good provider, and forms the basis of their masculine identity. Recent social, economic and cultural changes can be seen to undermine this ideal of fatherhood, tied to the family through marriage, and in the role of provider. Responses to shifting perceptions of fatherhood have been grouped into two camps by Fiona Williams (1998): those concerned with ‘father absence’ in an economic and moral sense, and those concerned with ‘father distance’ in an emotional and caring sense.

A concern with father absence stems from New Right thinking, which says fatherhood is in crisis, and a rise in divorced and single, never-married mothers, which has created an ‘underclass’ (Murray 1990). Increasing the involvement of fathers is seen as a means of lessening problems such as anti-social behaviour and crime. The policy implication is to seek to reinstate traditional gender roles to address the worst effects of family breakdown. Underlying all of this is a concern with state dependency and the cost of lone mothers to the welfare state. This perspective has influenced government policy both in the UK and the US, leading to a focus on lone mothers, absent fathers and issues of financial responsibility. For example, the Child Support Agency, created in the early 1980s, which is responsible for ensuring fathers meet their financial responsibilities to their children, was based around the objective of maintaining fathers’ breadwinning role after family dissolution (Lewis 2002).

Concern about ‘father absence’ also comes from some fathers’ groups
who want to strengthen men’s legal rights, particularly in terms of child custody after parental separation. They are also responding to the focus on men’s financial obligations, particularly where this has not been accompanied by adequate attention to contact between fathers and their children after separation. The fathers’ rights agenda can be a divisive one, which appears to blame women for the circumstances in which men find themselves. However, this publication does not directly address failings in the current system of support and intervention following family breakdown, not least because this is where policy and media attention has often been focused to the detriment of other important issues.

On the other hand, those concerned with ‘father distance’ have conceptualised social change as an opportunity to further renegotiate gender roles in order to enable men to become more active and engaged fathers. In this view fathers’ involvement is seen to bring positive benefits for men, women and children. Debate has focused on reasons for a lack of involvement, a common view being that structural and attitudinal barriers prevent fathers playing an active role in their children’s care (Burgess and Ruxton 1996). There is also a feeling that there is a need to reconstruct the image of the ‘good’ father, creating a ‘society in which neither fathers nor mothers have exclusive roles, and where both are equally valued as breadwinners and intimate parents’ (Burgess 1997). This perspective adds that concern with addressing structural and attitudinal barriers must also take into account gender inequality, resistance to sharing domestic tasks, and resistance from Government and employers in encouraging men to assume a greater caring role.

However, there is another critical perspective on fatherhood that comes from their children. Research undertaken by Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman (2002) provides insights into how boys view their fathers. The study explored how boys conceptualise and articulate their experiences of themselves, their peers and the adult world. Most boys in the study constructed their fathers as more jokey than their mothers, but also more distant and detached. Many said they wished they could see more of their fathers, with some saying their fathers did not respond adequately to their need for help. Many boys held idealised constructions of fatherhood that were not always matched by their accounts of their own experiences of fathers, which were often permeated by loss and disappointment. There was evidence of boys wishing for closer contact with fathers than they managed to achieve. These sad but hopeful views of fatherhood held by young boys reinforce the need to re-examine public policy to explore the opportunities to promote more active fatherhood.

In order to construct a clear framework for policy it is important to have a clear narrative about fatherhood that is capable of reflecting the different ways in which fatherhood is talked about and practised today. This is difficult to represent without submerging the considerable range of discourses
and practices around fatherhood. However, it is the nature of policy making that it must at once seek to make sense of how different people think, and behave, and respond in a way that is coherent, yet be capable of responding to, and embracing, divergent practice. The varied aspirations, perceptions, attitudes and expectations that exist all impact on fathering behaviour, and these are explored in the next section.

1.4 Fatherhood today

The breadwinner role is still strongly tied to the identity of many fathers and is often cited as the main family commitment. However, aspirations for involvement in other forms of care, particularly among young men, do seem to be rising, and many fathers express an interest in playing a bigger role in childcare (Scott 2004). One recent survey found that 87 per cent of men believe that it is best for a father to be ‘very involved in bringing the child up from an early age’. More and more fathers are expected – and often express a desire – to fulfil the dual role of ‘being there’ and providing financial support (O’Brien 2005).

These expectations are strengthened by a growing empirical understanding that the ability to care is not dependent on gender, as it involves practical and emotional roles that either parent can fulfil. However, the idea that fathers and mothers do provide distinct and separate roles remains strong in the minds of many people. Hatten and others (2002) found that around half of fathers believed that mothers and fathers are equally able to care for their children, but there was a perception that women are better at ‘juggling’, that they are better suited to the role due to greater experience, and that men have a breadwinning role to fulfil, which then impacts on behaviour and involvement. An expectation persists that women will change their working life in order to fit it around the care of their children, and mothers often have low expectations regarding the time that men can give to their families (Hatten et al 2002; Stanley et al 2003). Public support for women to stay at home has halved over the last 15 years but there is still a strong belief that women should be responsible for the majority of the domestic duties and for childcare (Taylor-Gooby 2005). The difficulty is determining whether this data indicates support for gendered parenting roles or simply reflects reality and circumstance.

Many men feel they are not living up to ‘contemporary good father norms’ (O’Brien 2005). Part of this is due to men feeling unsure about the role they should assume, no longer secure in the knowledge that work alone is a valuable contribution. There is increased awareness that lack of involvement in childcare is viewed by society as negative, and many fear being labelled a bad father (O’Brien 2005). It seems that both parents are increasingly expected to fulfil economic, practical and emotional functions
Data from different surveys tends to report different levels of involvement, but time-use surveys do show that fathers are living up to their aspirations for greater involvement, at least to some extent. There has been a significant shift towards greater father involvement in childcare, although it is still less than the time mothers spend (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004). Longitudinal evidence suggests that fathers’ involvement with children under the age of five increased from less than 15 minutes a day in the mid-1970s to two hours a day in the late-1990s (Fisher et al 1999). In 1999, fathers of under-fives were responsible for an average of one third of all childcare. Over time, the smallest increase was among professional class fathers, who spent the least amount of time on childcare in 1999. It is worth noting that this pattern towards greater involvement in childcare by fathers is not replicated in general household tasks (Kodz 2003). Housework must be included in any assessment of gendered activity within the household, especially as, for women, it often forms part of childcare.

Although most fathers believe that both mothers and fathers are equally able to pursue a career, in practice it is hard for both to do so. A survey in 2003 showed that in 68 per cent of cases where men worked more than 48 hours per week, childcare became the responsibility of the mothers. In only 26 per cent of the cases where the woman worked more than 48 hours per week did the father take responsibility, reflecting the reality that men are likely to continue with full-time labour market participation regardless of their partner’s hours (Kodz 2003).

Part of the explanation for the gap between mothers’ and fathers’ engagement with their children is likely to be the continued inequality in pay between men and women, making it financially difficult for fathers to reduce their hours. The trade-off between cash and care and the roles assumed for dual-earner couples cannot be separated from inequality in pay between men and women. However, there are clearly other issues at play. There is some evidence that men do want more flexible working conditions, but often do not want flexible working that means a reduction in money (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003). On the other hand, evidence shows some women would choose to stay at home if they could afford to do so (Bell and La Valle 2003). Most fathers believe that the process of balancing family and work commitments is a personal responsibility, which in turn impacts on fathers’ expectations, demands and use of family-friendly policies (Hatten et al 2002). None the less, there is, in principle, a high level of support for policies to help people achieve a good balance between their working and caring roles, with 80 per cent of fathers and 85 per cent of mothers in one survey agreeing or strongly agreeing that everyone should be able choose how to balance their work and home commitments (O’Brien and Shemilt 2003). The culture of the workplace has a major
impact on the ability to balance work and family commitments, and this is explored further in chapter two. On the whole, fathers have not embraced flexible working practices, and part-time working in particular is not seen as a viable option for most fathers.

Although there are many fathers who want to be more involved, there are also those who do not. Hatten et al. (2002) found that around three quarters of the fathers they interviewed expressed satisfaction with their level of involvement, which was usually a supporting role. Both paid and unpaid care has always been highly gendered; 97.5 per cent of the UK childcare workforce is female and is not highly esteemed or paid, consigning care work to a low status position (Daycare Trust 2005). Some fathers do not have the motivation to be more involved in childcare (Hatten et al. 2002). This is often tied up with the perceived connection between self-esteem and the breadwinning role. It is also related to the fact that men as a group occupy a relatively privileged position in relation to women in the economic, social and sexual spheres, and derive benefit from this position (Ruxton 2004), which they may be motivated to protect.

Motivation is key to men’s ability to balance working and caring, and in forming their ideas of what it means to be a father. Initiatives such as paternity and parental leave have the potential to shift the underlying culture in Britain, but, on their own, are unlikely to result in any major changes.

1.5 Conclusion

Public policy has the potential to change the context in which fatherhood is conducted and to drive both attitudes and practice. It is important also to acknowledge the limitations of public policy. It can only achieve a certain amount in relation to fatherhood and so what it can do, it must do well. This can only be achieved if there is greater appreciation of the fact that public policy is not being created in a gender neutral environment or being implemented in a gender blind world. Policy provides incentives and disincentives to fatherhood in terms of the time and other resources that can be devoted to it, and shapes the rights and responsibilities of all parties. In doing so, it must acknowledge the conflicts that exist between parents, between biological and social fathers, and between children’s and parents’ rights. One route to reconciling these – sometimes competing – interests is to place children at the centre of policy making. Consequently, this book adopts an explicit hierarchy of goals. The priority objective is to enhance fathers’ involvement in order to improve children’s experiences and outcomes. The secondary objective is to improve gender equity. The tertiary objective is to enable men to fulfil their own aspirations for their fathering role.

The next chapters will examine fatherhood in relation to three themes in more depth. First, Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport draw on their pri-
mary research on caring and employment practices to assess strategies for enabling fathers to better reconcile work and care. Second, Stanley and Williams argue that parents’ relationships are worthy of public policy attention, and develop a progressive policy framework for supporting these relationships. Third, Burgess considers how public services might be reconfigured to better reflect and enhance the caring roles of fathers. The final chapter pulls together the policy implications of these chapters and sets out a new narrative for public policy around fathers and fatherhood.

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1 The term ‘outcomes’ covers a broad range of circumstances and experiences that children may experience as they grow up and reach adulthood. We use this term to refer to the six outcomes identified in Every Child Matters (HMT/DfES 2003): being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing.


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2. Overcoming workplace and family barriers to change
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2.1 Introduction

Enabling fathers to have the time and space to be more involved with their children has multiple benefits for men, women and children and also, potentially, even workplaces. Enabling fathers to be more actively involved in childcare can have positive effects on a child’s wellbeing (Flouri 2005; Burgess and Russell 2003; Scourfield and Drakeford 2002), and enabling fathers to be more involved in unpaid care has clear links with gender equity (Lister 2003; Fraser 1997). If fathers alter their working patterns to make time and space for care activities, then mothers will have more opportunities to participate in paid work and other activities. Perhaps even more profoundly, if fathers really change how, and the extent to which they participate in paid work, expectations about ‘normal’ or ‘committed’ workers being those who need no time off for care or other responsibilities may begin to shift. Enabling active ‘father care’ could also be a responsive strategy, reflecting the emerging needs and wishes of men. For example, fathers are increasingly involved in care activities and say they want more time made available to spend with their children (O’Brien 2005; OECD 2001; Burgess 1998). Furthermore, at the workplace level, evidence is beginning to suggest that enabling people – including fathers with care responsibilities – to have more time for care activities or other responsibilities in life can also have positive long-term impacts for workplace effectiveness (Rapoport et al 2002; Reeves 2002).

But while the case for enabling fathers to have time to share childcare involvement is increasingly compelling, and recognised in part by Government, many tensions and barriers to change remain. Enabling fathers to care requires, for example, challenging workplace cultures and practices that demand or expect long working hours, and rethinking notions of family roles and responsibilities, including assumptions that mothers – rather than fathers – are the ‘natural’ and more talented carers of children. So what can public policy provisions and initiatives really do to enable fathers’ greater involvement with their children?

In this chapter we begin by discussing the notion of ‘care’ and the equity and wellbeing factors associated with enabling fathers to share care. We then explore British policy developments and reflect on key challenges, including policy assumptions that may serve actively to exclude fathers from sharing care, and workplace cultures and individual identity challenges that can make change difficult, messy or threatening. We draw from
comparative material, including some of our own recent research, and emphasise the importance of making connections between government policy and initiatives and experiences at multiple levels, in this case at the workplace and family levels in particular. We stress two points: collaboration and reciprocal change. We argue that collaboration between multiple actors – notably Government, workplace and families – is crucial for enabling fathers to participate in care, and that opportunities for greater father involvement in caring for their children involve ongoing reciprocal changes for both men and women.

While there are many particular challenges in enabling fathers to be more involved in childcare, including fathers who do not live with their children and mothers who may resist such steps because of histories of abusive relationships, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore these dynamics fully. We focus primarily on challenges inherent in enabling resident fathers to share childcare with mothers.

2.2 Paternal care

The notion of care and shared care is difficult to define. As noted by Margaret O’Brien (2005, p iii), ‘shared care is a slippery concept dependent on how both sharing (equal or contributory) and care (direct engagement, availability, responsibility or attitude) are defined or prioritised’. Joan Tronto (1993) argues that care includes both feelings (caring about) and activities (caring for) and involves both care giving and care receiving. This broader notion of care has been utilised by authors, such as Fiona Williams, who discuss the importance of an ethics of care that emphasises the value of feelings and activities for men and women that occur across a range of life experiences, to somewhat counterbalance the ‘past century’s fixation with the ethic of work’ (2001, p 489). An ethics of care stresses the importance for men and women to have time and space for paid work and personal and care activities.

It can be argued that most fathers have long been active carers of their children through involvement in paid work to secure financial resources for them (Jenson 1997) and that economic welfare should be included in a ‘positive care package’ (O’Brien 2005, p 12). Similarly, fathers’ responsibility to provide economically has long been the focus of social policy. But there has been growing attention on the importance of enabling fathers to engage in physical and emotional care activities, including feeding.

2 With a grant from the Ford Foundation to the Institute of Family and Environmental Research, we have explored developments, evolutionary processes and contemporary ‘work-life’ challenges in seven countries: India, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, the UK and the US. See Gambles R, Lewis S and Rapoport R (forthcoming).
dressing, playing and interacting with their children in multiple ways that require time and emotional involvement. When we use the term ‘care’, we are referring specifically to the paternal time fathers have for actively looking after their children in this more physical and emotional, rather than just economic, sense.

It is crucial to acknowledge the wider constraints acting on current policies designed to enable caring. Developing affordable childcare provision is an important dimension of shared care, which recognises that childcare should not only be a mother’s or father’s responsibility, but also one of wider society more generally. But such an approach is insufficient on its own. Childcare cannot be neatly boxed away into particular timeslots to suit paid work: children’s needs are continuous and demanding, and parents often have to respond immediately. It tends to be mothers rather than fathers who are called up at work if particular needs arise, for example; this reflects and reinforces assumptions and expectations about mothers’ and fathers’ roles and contributes to gender inequities at the workplace and at the family level. Similarly, leave and flexible working policies alone are inadequate. Persisting inequalities in pay between men and women mean that, even if fathers are able to take parental leave or work flexibly, in practice, again, it tends to be mothers who make greater use of provisions (DTI 2004; Gornick and Meyers 2003; Devon and Moss 2002). This has further implications on mothers’ subsequent labour market opportunities and often increases the gender pay gap differences between mothers and fathers.

So mothers and fathers’ ‘choices’ about how to combine paid work with care responsibilities are constrained: women tend to concentrate on care and men on paid work because it is economically ‘rational’. And this is often seen as inequitable as it is difficult for mothers and fathers to make genuine choices about roles and responsibilities and share these in ways they feel to be fair (Rapoport and Rapoport 1975). As O’Brien (2005, p 26) notes: ‘the challenge is how to provide a framework of choice which does not disadvantage either the female or male parent’. This is a big challenge, which requires much reflection on which activities are valued – in terms of pay in workplaces and care responsibilities in family contexts – and which activities for men and women are legitimated. But the challenge is also to provide a framework that does not disadvantage children.

Gornick and Meyers (2003, pp 242-245; 249-255) offer a succinct summary of international research examining the effect of maternal employment on child wellbeing. But they note that little research has focused on either the impact of paternal involvement on child wellbeing or the impact of shared care. This is an example of the deficit perspective in academic research that serves to marginalise men’s potential opportunities to be involved in childcare, as well as affecting their perceived abilities (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997). Yet in light of recent evidence of the benefits of fathers’
care involvement and shared care by mothers and fathers for child development and wellbeing (Flouri 2005; Burgess and Russell 2003; Scourfield and Drakeford 2002), this is a crucial gap.

These policies are also played out in a changing labour market. There has been more generic concern about the emerging ‘care deficit’ that is occurring in many countries, as more women are participating in paid work without commensurate support and reciprocal change in men’s family involvement (Hochshild 1989). As Folbre and Nelson (2000, p 129) argue: ‘past a certain point … family time cannot be reduced without adverse consequences for all family members’. The emerging ‘care deficit’ is further exacerbated by demanding workplace cultures. Current demands and expectations in much paid work, or the addictiveness of some types of paid work, can make it particularly difficult for fathers to make time for family (Reeves 2002; NFPI 2000). So long hours or growing work intensification can make it difficult for mothers and fathers to share paid work and family responsibilities in equitable ways, thus contributing to – and exacerbating – gender inequities, stress and wellbeing concerns (Gambles et al forthcoming).

This is not just a problem for families. Current demands and expectations in the workplace can also be a problem for workplace wellbeing, at least in the long term. Limited opportunities for people to participate in care activities outside paid work can prevent opportunities fully to develop relationships and interpersonal skills, which are increasingly required in many forms of paid work (Fletcher 1999; Sennett 1998). Moreover, current workplace cultures and practices which assume that committed or ‘ideal’ employees need less scope to change the way they work for family or other commitments can also hold back opportunities to redesign the organisation and practice of paid work in innovative ways that can increase time for other parts of life as well as potentially increasing performance (Gambles et al forthcoming; Lewis and Cooper 2005; Rapaport et al 2002).

2.3 UK policy developments in a comparative perspective

Although the UK is historically a strong male breadwinner country (Lewis 1992), since Labour came to power in 1997, fathers as care providers have received much more attention than previously. Against the backdrop of a greater focus on ‘work-life balance’ that has emphasised the business case for change and the role of employers, actual policy provisions seeking to encourage fathers to be more involved in the care of children include:

- the right for parents to take 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave (which can be taken by the mother or father at a maximum of four weeks per year)
- the introduction of two weeks’ paid paternity leave after the birth of a child
- legislation on working time with a maximum of 48 hours per week (although opt-outs currently exist)
- rights for parents with children under six to ask for flexible working arrangements (although this can be refused on business grounds).

The Government is also considering extensions to maternity leave, initially from six to nine months, and later to 12 months, with the potential to transfer the second six months to fathers.

But there are many problems. Firstly, the language of ‘work-life balance’ that frames many of these policy developments in the UK is problematic in itself. It paints a superficial and over-simplistic picture of the challenges involved in enabling mothers and fathers – or men and women more generally – to have more time for multiple parts of life. For example, the term ‘work-life balance’ appears to suggest that work is not a part of life. Yet paid work – although often too much of a part – is a necessary, and often meaningful and rewarding, aspect of life for many people. The language of ‘work-life balance’ also ignores distinctions between paid and unpaid work, and may further undervalue unpaid care work by implying that it is just another part of the ‘non-work’ domain. Furthermore, the word ‘balance’ implies a trade-off – one side goes up, the other goes down – yet paid work and family care activities are not necessarily at odds with each other. Indeed, a focus on employees’ needs and wishes beyond the workplace may also enhance workplace effectiveness (Fletcher 1999).

Secondly, the actual detail of ‘work-life balance’ associated policies is also problematic, and these policies have not gone far enough if actively enabling fathers to share care is to become a legitimate possibility. Paternity pay is not linked to earnings; it is a fixed rate (currently £106 a week), which can be a disincentive for take-up of paternity leave during an expensive time for parents. And the 13 weeks of parental leave that may be taken by mothers or fathers is unpaid. This is despite evidence from European countries that parental leave with salary compensation results in higher take-up by men (Devon and Moss 2002). Scandinavian countries, in particular, have initiated measures that have dramatically increased the take-up rate of parental leave by fathers. In Norway, for example, a one-month period of paid parental leave, introduced in 1993, commonly known as the ‘daddy month’, is assigned to men in two-parent families on a ‘use it or lose it’ basis. If men do not take it, the family loses this month of parental leave. Most men now consider it a matter of course to use at least part of this allotted leave, and take-up in 2003 was 80 per cent (Fagnani 2004). However, Norwegian fathers working in particularly competitive organisations can be discouraged from making use of this leave (Brandth and Kvande 2002).
The Dutch government has enabled mothers and fathers working in the public sector to share parental leave on a part-time basis, which can also be negotiated in the private sector by collective agreements. A small but growing minority of fathers has reduced their working week to four days, although this tends to be limited to highly educated men working in the public sector. So, while these are clear examples of government actions that can make certain behaviour or activities possible, or even, in the case of Norway, increasingly normalised, they also show that attention to workplace implementation and workplace cultures is needed.

At the same time, however, the UK Government is proposing the unusual step of extending the six months’ paid maternity leave, first to nine months, and later to 12 months. This will mean the UK having the longest period of maternity leave in Europe. It also offers a rather contradictory set of messages in terms of enabling parental choice about who cares for children. Although it is proposed that mothers will be allowed to transfer the second six months of that leave to fathers, the idea that it is the mother’s leave, which she can choose to share if she wants, is particularly controversial. As Julie Mellor, former Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, and Duncan Fisher, Director of Fathers Direct, have argued: ‘transferable maternal leave threatens to reinforce that outdated stereotype of parenthood, because the leave belongs to the mother … the Government should make paid leave, beyond the first six months currently available to the mother, truly shared. The leave should belong equally to both parents – “shared parental leave”’ (Mellor and Fisher 2005). This is an important consideration if fathers’ involvement in care is to be actively supported and legitimised.

In terms of British working-time legislation, opt-out clauses remain, despite recent challenges to the legality of this by the European Union. Many people are expected to sign away their rights to a maximum 48-hour working week, which impacts on the ways fathers and mothers are able to combine paid work and caring responsibilities. As Ruth Lister (2003, p 182) succinctly points out, ‘a culture of long, paid working hours can serve to constrain male participation in unpaid caring and domestic work, while it also creates barriers to women’s full integration and advancement in the workplace’. This demonstrates how long hours’ cultures prevent fathers from becoming more involved in childcare, and holds back gender equity, because it prevents possibilities for reciprocal change between men and women. But even if working-time legislation was enforced, there will always be implementation issues to consider in the context of demanding workplace pressures, and expectations that employees across a range of occupations and pay levels will experience workplace stress and intensification (Gallie 2002; Webster 2004).

Flexible working legislation only grants a right to ask, which can be refused on business grounds. This may account, in part, for Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) findings that one in four mothers uses flexible
work arrangements, compared with only one in ten fathers (DTI 2004). Actually enabling fathers to work flexibly is a challenge facing a number of countries that are attempting to promote father care involvement. In the case of Norway, for example, the government has extended flexibility and choice for parents via a ‘time account’ scheme. This gives mothers and fathers the opportunity to work shorter hours, without a reduction in income, until the child is two or three years old. However, this has been less successful than the ‘daddy month’ in changing men’s behaviour because it depends on negotiations between fathers and workplace managers (Brandth and Kvande 2001). This indicates that the current UK position on flexible working – emphasising an ability to ask – may not be strong enough, and implementation may be resisted from unresponsive employers. More generically, rights to request flexible working can be problematic, as it is argued that flexibility can often be used to get people to work more rather than less. As Dianne Perrons (2003, p 69), writing in the UK context, notes, ‘flexible working seems to be more concerned with accommodating life to rather demanding and unquestioned working hours rather than one of reorganising work to allow for time for domestic and caring responsibilities’. This may be a particular problem for fathers who prefer to make use of changes in working times rather than reductions in hours (O’Brien 2005). Again, this points to the need to challenge workplace cultures and expectations that can make policy implementation difficult and can prevent mothers and fathers from being equally enabled to share care.

The Government’s ‘work-life balance’ policies have been described as a ‘light touch’, using a non-compulsory approach (Harker and Lewis 2001). The extent to which working cultures or practices have actually changed varies dramatically across organisations; thus implementation is patchy. Crucially, little has been done to challenge assumptions of ‘ideal’ workers being those who have no other responsibilities beyond paid work to contend with, and who are available to put the job first, no matter what.

2.4 Connections between government policies and the workplace level

Whatever government policies are put in place, the day-to-day implementation has to be worked out at the level of the workplace and the family. At the workplace level, employers can also offer policies or measures that top up or go beyond legislation. In the US, where there is minimal social policy support, workplace initiatives can be the only support available. Yet, given contemporary workplace developments such as work intensification, downsizing and efficiency drives (Burchall et al 2002; Gambles et al forthcoming; Webster 2004; Dex 2003; Perrons 2003; Sennett 1998), the implementation of government or workplace policies can be problematic.

Although many governments and employers have developed policies
that aim to enable people, particularly mothers, to combine paid work with care responsibilities, policies are insufficient on their own. Policies, while offering varying levels of entitlement and support, tend not to tackle or address cultural and organisational values or identity tensions that mothers and fathers may experience when considering strategies to combine paid work and childcare, which are so important in implementation. For example, both statutory parental leave entitlements and employer policies on part-time or flexible work are more often taken up by women than men, as we have already noted, even in countries where father involvement is positively encouraged in policy making. This is due, for example, to assumptions that ‘ideal’ workers do not modify work for family reasons, alongside notions about what is appropriate behaviour for men and women. The result is that people – usually women – who take up ‘work-family’ or ‘work-life’ entitlements tend to be undervalued in workplaces and are often penalised in terms of pay and advancement. This also has clear implications for fathers.

We illustrate some of the problems by recounting an experience that occurred to a Norwegian father we spoke with as part of our research, who sought to change his working practices.3 Many similar stories can be found in other countries.

There are provisions for flexible working arrangements in Per’s workplace. In many departments, men and women are encouraged to make use of them. After talking with his wife, Siri, who is keen to increase her participation in paid work, Per approaches his employer about working three days a week. He is prepared to take a drop in salary and, reluctantly, his boss agrees. For six months it works well. He has more time and energy to give to his family, personal and business relationships. He works in an international section and is now more willing to leave his mobile phone on and take work-related calls as and when they come up. But over time his boss feels increasingly uncomfortable with the situation. Despite the Norwegian political ideology of supporting fathers in modifying paid work for family reasons, Per’s boss is not used to having such a senior member of his team away from the office and dislikes having to plan meetings to suit Per’s schedule. After seven months Per receives a call to say if he wants to retain the hours he is doing, he should move to a different, lower status job. Per is very frustrated and, after much discussion with his boss and deliberation with Siri, he makes a decision to leave and go freelance. (Gambles et al forthcoming)

This example shows how widespread assumptions about which activities are valued institutionally are perpetuated, and illustrates notions about how the ‘ideal’ worker should act, notions that are likely to prevent other

3 Names and some details have been changed to protect our participants
fathers attempting similar changes in their working practices. But there are also ramifications for long-term workplace effectiveness. Per’s international contacts and knowledge made him a valuable member of the team and, without his input, his company’s failure to accommodate his needs means that it no longer benefits from his contacts and widespread experience.

Policies set a standard, provide a sense of entitlement and offer important immediate support – especially for vulnerable or low-paid workers. Yet, for all the policy developments that Government or workplaces instigate to enable fathers to be more actively involved in childcare, unless bigger changes in workplaces occur, progress will be halted. Policies in themselves fail to challenge or systemically alter organisational structures and cultures: values and assumptions that determine and reflect current social constructions of ‘ideal’ workers (Lewis 1997). By ‘systemic’ we refer to practices, structures and cultures (including values and norms) that encourage certain behaviour and characteristics over others. For example, in workplaces, assumptions that ‘ideal’ workers do not need time for family involvement are based on the outdated assumption that most workers have full-time ‘wives’, partners or other relatives at home to take care of family matters and do not need or wish to modify work for family reasons (Rapoport et al 2002; Williams 2000).

These outdated assumptions enable gender inequities to persist and actively exclude fathers from paternal care. But, as illustrated with the story of Per, these assumptions may also have adverse effects on long-term workplace effectiveness. There is a need to affect a fundamental shift, so that it is not necessary to work full-time or regular hours in order to realise maximum productivity. So, when we refer to systemic change, we refer to change that seeks to challenge the practices, cultures and structures of organisations such as workplaces that may be seen as ‘natural’ or ‘effective’, but that have actually emerged out of particular assumptions or realities that may well be outdated, ineffective and inequitable.

The UK Government has recently allocated funding (the Challenge Fund) for consultants to go into organisations to help workplaces bring about changes in the ways that employees can combine paid work with family and personal life. This has the potential to move employers beyond policy to practice and bring about actual change in workplace practices, structures and cultures. However, it has, so far, been something of a missed opportunity. Funding has generally been short-term and there is a requirement of quick reporting of results, neither of which is conducive to meeting the difficult challenges of workplace culture change, particularly when dealing with thorny issues of gendered assumptions about commitment and competency in the workplace (Rapoport et al 2002).

The Dutch government has gone somewhat further in this context by working with employers, unions and parents to promote and explore innovative changes in adapting from a single- to a dual-earner model (Gambles
et al forthcoming). It has part-funded a series of experiments within workplaces that seek to change actual working practices and assumptions about how to work (see Van de Bogard et al 2003; Lewis and Cooper 2005) and supported projects that seek to break down ‘traditional’ images of masculinity and femininity, to try to encourage a shared care approach between mothers and fathers, recognising the links with gender equity and well-being factors. However, changes in workplace cultures and men’s behaviour have been limited.

The goal of systemic change, in this case, is to bring about changes in the structure, rules and assumptions of workplace (and family) systems that enable mothers and fathers to work in ways that allow them to share childcare responsibilities alongside paid work, in ways of their genuine choosing that do not impinge on overall or long-term workplace performance: what can be called a ‘dual agenda’. The dual agenda refers to changes that advance goals of gender equity and attention to personal-life needs, alongside advancing workplace performance. But systemic change towards a dual-agenda goal is difficult. It can feel counterintuitive and meet with resistance from many people at many points in the process of change. As Rapoport and colleagues found:

‘change at the level of work practices is difficult because it challenges the importance of work in people’s lives. It requires dealing with mindsets and feelings about commitment and competence that support established ways of working, as well as the prominence of paid work in life. Such entrenched beliefs are particularly hard to deal with – even talk about – in work groups, because they touch on men’s and women’s sense of identity and self-esteem’ (2002, p 168).

In these ways, resistance (in terms of the ‘virtue’ and importance that paid work currently enjoys in many individuals’ lives, as well as across society more generally, perpetuated by Labour) and conventional wisdoms about how to get work done are evident. Gendered working cultures and practices that reward certain behaviour over others, and tap into notions and assumptions about efficiency, workplace effectiveness, competence and commitment, are particularly knotty and complicated to deal with.

Recognising these challenges, Rapoport and colleagues used a process-orientated approach to dual-agenda change, in which they attempted to enable work groups to develop and implement new ways of organising and approaching their work activities. They worked in collaboration with managers and work teams in leading-edge US companies to try to redesign work in ways that enhanced opportunities for accommodating a range of life responsibilities, including childcare activities, at the same time as enhancing, or at least not mitigating, workplace performance. It was a long process, involving interviews and focus groups to diagnose problems, feedback, and group and individual reflection, collaboration and innovation
to make changes, and working continually with resistances and tensions as they arose. But they had surprising levels of success.  

It could be argued that such a process is necessary in the US, where there is so little emphasis on state provision and support. Yet in other contexts where policy support is offered to varying degrees, and demonstrates more support for mothers, some fathers and vulnerable individuals, policy alone is clearly insufficient for change, as we saw with the Norwegian example of Per. In recognition of the limitations of policy alone, a similar process-orientated approach to dual-agenda change is beginning to be used within some companies in the UK – large and small, and across a range of occupations including blue- and white-collar work (see Lewis and Cooper 2005). Very often, such change is seen as interesting and potentially relevant for people working in white-collar or new economy industries, or workplaces that can afford to make such changes. It is often seen as irrelevant or unrealistic for manual, labour-intensive work, or organisations that are experiencing economic difficulties. Interestingly, however, one of the DTI’s own case studies is a small manufacturing company employing lower paid workers that began the process of dual-agenda change as a way to try to transform an ailing and ineffective company. By approaching workplace change from a dual-agenda perspective, it has been able to enhance opportunities for mothers, fathers and others, working across a range of job levels and job types, to adapt their working practices to suit personal life needs, at the same time as enhancing workplace performance.

Before these change processes began, the company was facing financial ruin. Within four years it had transformed itself, and staff felt motivated, valued and listened to in terms of both workplace and family or other personal life matters (see Lewis and Cooper 2005). Enabling fathers to be more involved in the care of their children does not always have to run counter to workplace efficiency, and can happen across a range of organisations and across a range of organisational levels.

2.5 Connections with reciprocal change in men-women relationships

Whilst there has been recent discussion about workplace barriers to paternal family involvement (O’Brien 2005; Gambles et al forthcoming; Brandth and Kvande 2001 and 2002) and some workplace redesign experiments to counteract this, barriers within the family have received less attention in policy discussions. Deeply rooted and prevailing assumptions about women being natural or ‘ideal’ carers run alongside and interact with gen-

4 For full discussion and a range of examples see Rapoport et al (2002). See also Lewis and Cooper (2005), who document process-orientated approaches in a range of workplaces – both large and small – and in a variety of countries.
der pay gaps. This not only underpins the tendency for employed mothers to retain the major responsibility for childcare or other forms of care, but can also exclude fathers from caring.

Men may fear losing the status and power paid work can offer them if they become more involved in the care of their children, even though fathers increasingly say they want to undertake more childcare. So, alongside persisting gender pay gaps, gender identity issues can also be barriers to increased paternal care, if this involves some measure of withdrawal from the world of paid work (Woodward 2000). But women can also be hesitant to accept men in the home and give up some of the ‘power’ they may gain from involvement in family life. Allen and Hawkins (1999), writing in the US, find that women act as gatekeepers. Many women redo households jobs done by men, like to be in charge of the domestic arena, and believe that others make judgments about how good a wife or mother they are on the basis of how well cared for their homes are. We found similar incidents of gatekeeping in our own recent research. For example, in our recent cross-national study one woman in the UK said to us:

I’m an active feminist, and I know it is important to share responsibilities with men in the home … but, if I’m being, well, really honest, it’s not easy … I guess I feel it’s my body, I’m the one who had children, I feel a sense of ownership in a way … I also find it difficult to fully trust him when he is looking after the kids … I worry that he is doing other things and not giving them enough attention … there are so many contradictions … those have been really big tensions throughout my life, but it’s hard to be honest about this when you are fighting for change. (Gambles et al forthcoming)

In the Norwegian context, one woman reflected:

We are talking about a transition not just for men, but for many women. A lot of women are unprepared in practice to take the full implications of it, which means actually giving up some control over how things are done in the home and relationships with children. This is a division that has to be reworked. (Gambles et al forthcoming)

There are real anxieties for both men and women, which can present problems among parents, even as they try to make changes in their roles. To illustrate some of these tensions, we recount the experiences of a Dutch woman who, while benefiting from supportive policies and practices to enable a greater sharing of childcare between her and her husband, found it difficult to accept reciprocal change in the home.

Despite commitment to a life in line with their egalitarian beliefs, with both of them working part-time and sharing the care at home, Tanja was finding it a real struggle. It wasn’t so much her pressures
at work, but more from trying to deal with the fact that Hans seemed better with their children than she was. The way they organised their lives had been something they had long discussed and had worked hard to achieve. But it wasn’t as easy as she thought it would be. She couldn’t shake the feeling that it didn’t feel quite right. She resented the ways the children responded to Hans, and she was jealous of some of her women friends who seemed to be closer to their children. (Gambles et al forthcoming)

Women often face – and are expected to face – psychological, emotional and practical pulls and demands from the domestic sphere, and men from paid work. Assumptions about what it means to act as a mother or father are deeply ingrained in individuals’ identities and wider societal expectations about what these identities should be (West and Zimmerman 1987) and this can make reciprocal change feel very difficult. There is a need to reflect more on how to support mothers and fathers in navigating these complex dilemmas. This becomes all the more important for unemployed men or men in more insecure jobs, who may feel an erosion of breadwinner abilities and a sense of potential uselessness. For these men, a legitimation of care roles and responsibilities may help enhance a sense of dignity, purpose and status.5

2.6 Conclusion

In order for there to be genuine choice for mothers and fathers to negotiate how they combine paid work and care activities in ways they perceive to be fair or equitable, there needs to be social policy support for fathers and mothers to share parental leave, and active encouragement for fathers to take a certain portion of (paid) leave through initiatives such as the ‘daddy month’ seen in Scandinavian contexts. There also needs to be further attention on the impacts and effects of hesitancy to legislate against long working hours on mothers’ and fathers’ labour market participation and opportunities to share childcare activities. Attention to shared parental leave (rather than transferable maternity leave) and working hours is needed. Shared care should not focus solely on mothers and fathers; attempts to increase afford-

5 Although this point refers to fathers who are unemployed or in insecure, low-paid work, Richard Sennett (2005) is currently working on the notion of the ‘spectre of uselessness’ among people in high-tech, flexible, new economy work. Yet, in both these scenarios, we argue that inclusion and involvement in other parts of life may be all the more important for continuity, meaning and social inclusion more generally, thus, further developing the case for enabling active fatherhood across all income groups and levels of society.
able, quality childcare for all are important, so that costs and provisions of care can be shared throughout society more generally. Attention also needs to be paid to reducing the gender pay gap, which prevents genuine choice about care responsibilities between mothers and fathers.

The impacts of policies on flexibility and leave arrangements on workplace cultures have often been limited. These policies are very important, particularly for supporting lower paid or vulnerable workers, yet they tend to be superficial and fail to address systemic factors that prevent mothers and fathers from having genuine choice about how to combine paid work and parenting. Workplace cultures continue to value employees who are able to operate with no other responsibilities in life. So, greater attention need to be paid to workplace values and practices that currently penalise employees who work less than full-time, work flexibly, make occasional interruptions to work schedules or take longer periods of leave from work. This requires rethinking current workplace assumptions and expectations, alongside rethinking values and which activities are seen as worthwhile or profitable. Bringing these dimensions into the frame, while potentially seemingly counterintuitive, may not actually be antithetical to workplace effectiveness. But if these ‘win-win’ outcomes are to be seen – and this is something that will only be known in the long term – there is a need for process-orientated, dual-agenda approaches in relation to enabling mothers and fathers to share childcare. There is a need to enable individual and group resistances to change to surface in workplace contexts. There is also a need for those resistances to be discussed collaboratively, in order to seek solutions to enhance opportunities for parental time that do not reduce workplace effectiveness.

At the family level, mothers and fathers may encounter difficulties or resistances in adapting their behaviour in reciprocal ways that enable mothers to be more involved in paid work and fathers to be more involved in childcare responsibilities. Although identities are never static, and are formed in particular contexts on the basis of particular assumptions and expectations, making changes that may impact on financial wellbeing or identity issues and expectations can feel threatening or uncomfortable. It could be argued that policy is unable to deal with these challenges – that these are personal and rather ‘private’ matters. But, while mothers and fathers may think they ‘choose’ particular strategies, they do so within current constraints. Constraints include: lack of childcare; family leaves that may be available to women rather than men and women; pay gaps between men and women; particular notions of ‘ideal’ workers and ‘ideal’ carers; and assumptions about men’s and women’s ‘appropriate’ or ‘natural’ roles. So, norms and assumptions about mothers’ and fathers’ ‘appropriate’ roles are shaped by and interact with current policy provisions and assumptions, alongside workplace structures and cultures that can often penalise employees who work less than full-time.
So what can Government do? Firstly, there is a need for policy provisions to set a truly enabling context that allows mothers and fathers to share paid work and care opportunities with each other in equitable ways. This means acknowledging current workplace norms and expectations, and legislating for parental leave and working-time arrangements, extending the availability of affordable childcare and tackling the persistent gender pay gap.

But this is not sufficient; we have argued for attention to the processes needed to work through issues that will allow for dual-agenda change. A dual-agenda approach to change, one that seeks to enhance gender equity and more time for care alongside enhancing workplace effectiveness, needs to be seen as an evolving process. Change will be an ongoing process and new needs will always surface and require attention. Policy makers need to recognise this and pay much more attention to the ways in which policy approaches interact with, and are shaped by, workplace and family norms in processes of implementation. There needs to be more monitoring and responding to the implementation challenges and resistances that emerge, as and when they arise. Moreover, the Government can play a vital role in funding process-orientated research in workplaces and family contexts to uncover and deal with emerging new resistances that act to hamper effective, long-term change.

A process-orientated approach to these kinds of challenges is not easy and does not foster quick fix solutions. Instead, such an approach recognises and works with notions that the challenges mothers and fathers face in sharing responsibilities for paid work and care responsibilities are highly complex and involve multiple actors at multiple levels engaging in deep, collaborative thinking, reflection and action. Such an approach may sound difficult and time consuming but, given that policy alone is insufficient for creating a truly enabling environment for mothers and fathers to feel able and entitled to share care in equitable ways, it may be increasingly necessary.

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3. Relationships between parents
Kate Stanley and Fiona Williams

3.1 Introduction

In recent years the Government has placed greater emphasis on policy around parenting and parents’ relationships with their children. This has been partly in response to the weight of evidence showing the importance of the parent-child relationship to children’s outcomes (see Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Policies have been developed that attempt to bolster parenting skills through a combination of support and the enforcement of parental responsibilities. There is considerable scope to go further in supporting parent-child relationships, for example Adrienne Burgess shows in chapter four how there is a need for public services to be reconfigured to better support father-child relationships. Also, we do not yet have a clear sense of the effectiveness of many interventions and there are serious questions about the appropriateness of some enforcement policies. Nonetheless, steps have been made in the right direction, such as the focus on integrated services being delivered through Sure Start and Children’s Centres and the creation of the Parenting Fund.

The emphasis of policy to date has been largely on the mother-child relationship, but this is just one relationship within the complex web of relationships to which parents and children attach importance. Evidence shows that they are all influential on children’s wellbeing and that children themselves attach great importance to values of care and respect in their relationships and the relationships between their parents (Neale 2004). While acknowledging this, this chapter focuses on relationships between parents and the impact of these on children, as this is a neglected area of policy. We focus on parent couple relationships where both partners have a relationship with the child (this includes social parents, such as stepparents, as well as biological parents, who may be together or separated).

We argue that public policy should take a more deliberate and positive role in providing an enabling context in which parents’ relationships can

6. The term ‘outcomes’ covers a broad range of circumstances and experiences that children may experience as they grow up and reach adulthood. We use this term to refer to the six outcomes identified in Every Child Matters (HMT/DfES 2003): being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. But it is important to note that different research looks at different outcomes to assess the impact of life events or processes and often places greatest weight on the outcomes that are easiest to measure, such as educational attainment.
flourish. Of course, you can’t legislate for good relationships and this is an area where the role of public policy is limited. However, we can identify a number of important characteristics of good policy. Firstly, support has to be the sort that people trust and be non-judgemental and recognise the diversity of relationships. Secondly, people’s experiences and needs should shape policy. Research shows that this means support must be based on principles of care and respect. Finally, policy should be focused on enabling people to negotiate conflict and change (such as divorce and separation) successfully, rather than on problematising them.

We begin by briefly outlining the key messages from the evidence on the impact of parents’ relationships on child outcomes. This emphasises the importance of the quality of relationships above the way in which they are structured. We then consider continuity and change in the nature of relationships between parents over recent decades. This highlights the importance of ethics of care and respect in people’s lives and how they negotiate changes in their intimate relationships. On the basis of this evidence, we propose a progressive vision for how public policy might better support parents’ own relationships with each other as one means of promoting child wellbeing, improving gender equality and enabling fathers to practise their commitment to care.

3.2 The impact of parents’ relationships on children

A survey in 2000 (MORI 2000) found that seven out of ten teenagers considered that their parents getting on well together was one of the most important factors in raising happy children. An extensive literature also shows that the quality of relationships between parents is linked to positive parenting and better outcomes for children (see, for example, Cummings and Davies 1994; Emery 1999). The most extensive evidence of the impact of parents’ relationships on parent-child relationships and parenting, and on the impact of interventions is from the United States.

Much of the US research reports a consistent overarching finding that children who grow up in an ‘intact, two-parent family’ with both biological parents do better on a wide range of outcomes than those who grow up in a single parent family although many, if not most, children who grow up in a single parent household also do well. Evaluations have also suggested that certain relationship support interventions have led to positive effects on children in terms of school performance and sustained increased involvement by fathers (Cowan and Cowan 2002).

These findings might suggest that marriage promotion is the answer;

7. Throughout this chapter (except for section 3.2) we draw largely on evidence from research studies undertaken under the CAVA programme at the University of Leeds. See Williams (2004).
indeed, the Bush administration in the US is investing $1.5 billion in 2005/06 in programmes that aim to promote ‘healthy marriage’ among low-income unmarried couples by providing services to improve relationship skills and increase union stability. But this would be an all too easy answer, for there are both limitations to the evidence and complexities around this issue. For example, few studies have looked at child wellbeing or have been longitudinal. Class is also likely to be a key issue here and most studies have looked only at white middle class couples. Perhaps the most important caution is that the finding that the children of married parents are more likely to do better than those of unmarried or separated parents, does not mean it is marriage itself that confers benefits. Instead it may be that the presence of two incomes makes the difference, or that better adapted partners, or those with better relationships get married (Cowan and Cowan 2002). The research to date has failed to disentangle adequately these effects, so it is not useful to pit one family type against another.

Nonetheless, it is possible to draw out a number of insights from the US research that are supported by UK research, where this is available.

Firstly, relationships between family members do affect both individuals and other relationships between family members in many ways. The ‘spill-over hypothesis’ argues that there is emotional spill-over of positive affect or stress from one family relationship to another. The research provides strong evidence for a positive association between parents’ relationship quality and parent-child relationship quality. In particular, greater levels of supportiveness in the mother-father relationship appear to increase fathers’ involvement at least around the time of a non-marital birth (Carlson and McLanahan 2005). UK evidence has found that fathers who are relatively satisfied with their marriages are likely to report more positive relationships with their children (Pike et al forthcoming). Older children in the study also reported less anger and hostility from those fathers who were more satisfied with their marriages. For mothers, their own personal characteristics were closely linked with the quality of their relationships with their children, whereas for fathers, contextual factors such as the marital relationship were key. The authors conclude that being part of a strong, emotionally satisfying partnership enables fathers to develop better quality relationships with their children. This suggests a pivotal emotional role that mothers are expected to have in maintaining balance in different family relationships, one that needs acknowledgement and support.
Secondly, research shows that poorly handled conflict can be detrimental to children’s sense of wellbeing (Harold and Howarth forthcoming). The child-rearing years tend to be the times of greatest marital discord, with conflict escalating during the time of infancy and early childhood and reaching a peak between early childhood and pre-adolescence. More frequent conflict appears to deter fathers’ positive engagement with their children and at times of marital distress fathers may become more withdrawn, especially from daughters, and mothers may become more involved with children (Reynolds et al 2001). Childhood mental health problems associated with parental conflict include behavioural problems such as aggression and anti-social behaviour, and emotional problems such as depression and withdrawal. Children from very discordant homes are also more likely to fare worse at school, and have problems establishing good relationships with peers, siblings and adults (Reynolds et al 2001).

Thirdly, family processes – such as how conflict is handled – can explain children’s mental health better than family structures (Reynolds et al 2001). Parental conflict can influence adverse outcomes for children in all family forms (see Reynolds et al 2001; Amato 2003; Rodgers and Pryor 1998) and what really matters is not family structure but how conflict is handled. Conflict can be constructive when children can learn about negotiation and resolution. For example, research at the University of Leeds on post-divorce family life has shown that people can learn how to manage processes such as divorce as a life event and move on in ways that are enabling rather than constraining of their family relationships. People do get through conflict and it is more helpful to consider what support can be provided for people to help them to get through it, instead of problematising divorce. ‘Good families’ are those with good quality relationships in place regardless of family structure and we are now beginning to learn from ordinary divorced families ‘what works’ in different circumstances (Neale and Smart 2001; Smart et al 2001; Neale and Flowerdew forthcoming).

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The fragile families and child wellbeing study

This US study followed a birth cohort of (mostly) unmarried parents and their children over four years. The study was designed to provide new information on the capabilities and relationships of unmarried parents, as well as the effects of policies on family formation and child wellbeing.

An examination of data from the study found that there is a positive association between parents’ relationship quality at the time of a baby’s birth and positive parenting about one year later for both mothers and fathers (Carlson and McLanahan 2005). This held for both married and co-habiting parents.
The structure of a family and how this might change over time will of course be one factor interacting with family processes and other characteristics, such as the family’s socio-economic circumstances and the individual characteristics of a child, to determine the extent to which a child is affected by conflict. So, for example, children in stepfamilies may be exposed to two sources of conflict between parents: between biological parents living apart and between parent and stepparent. However, this might be mitigated by the different ways in which stepfamilies can function from first marriage families, for example, adults can be more influenced by children in stepfamilies (Reynolds et al 2001). In this way the structure of a family is likely have a role in influencing a child’s wellbeing, but it is only one element of a wider set of processes and circumstances.

Another finding that emphasises the importance of process over structure is that children who have experienced disruption and multiple family structures are more likely to experience poor outcomes, such as poor mental health, than children living continuously in lone parent families or stepfamilies (Rodgers and Pryor 1998). However, the Enduring Families project has shown that there is nothing inherently harmful about multiple changes in family life; just as conflict has to be managed if harm is to be avoided, so change, too, is a challenge that can be managed well or poorly. Much depends on how effectively children are prepared for the changes in their family lives, the pace of change, and the ways in which they are supported through them (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). The key to conferring benefits to children appears to be the continuity of loving relationships and this can be achieved through all family forms and sustained through changes in family structure over time.

Fourthly, multiple problems and factors such as economic stress can exacerbate the effect of conflict on children (Cummings and Davies 1994). Links between marital conflict and children’s difficulties appear to be stronger in families experiencing a range of other problems. Parental depression and family stresses such as poverty may increase the likelihood of conflict, as well as reducing parents’ ability to engage positively with each other and their children (Reynolds et al 2001). There is strong evidence that parents’ experience of multiple, overlapping and cumulative problems, including poverty, disability, poor quality housing, access to services, long-term health difficulties and debt can contribute significantly to relationship breakdown (Ghate and Hazel 2002).

Finally, research in the UK has illuminated the impacts of divorce or separation on children. The risks that children face in relation to divorce are often less to do with actual parental separation and more to do with the context. The key factor is the conflict that can occur before, during and after

8. The sister project to the CAVA programme at the University of Leeds (see footnote 7).
separation and the impact that poorly managed conflict has on parents and parent-child relationships, as Rodgers and Pryor (1998) noted:

Separation does not occur out of the blue … it is preceded by stress and distress in families. At least one parent is sufficiently unhappy to initiate separation, and often both are embroiled in conflict that impinges on all family members. (1998, p 3)

Parental divorce and separation lead to short-term emotional distress for most children and long-term negative impacts on the outcomes of a minority (Rodgers and Pryor 1998), although it is important to note that children often show tremendous resilience (Neale and Wade 2000; Hetherington and Kelly 2001). Amato (2003) found that children from families with high levels of conflict experienced many of the poor outcomes of children from separated families and did better after their parents separated. Children do not become used to discord, they become more sensitive to it and more vulnerable to its effects (Reynolds et al 2001). Grandparents can play an important role in supporting their children and grandchildren at times of parental separation (Williams 2004).

After separation what appears to matter to children is not an exact sharing of time and, but being able to have a relationship with both parents that meets the child’s needs at different ages and stages of development (Walker 2005). The quality of relationships is vastly more important to children than the quantity of time spent with each parent (Neale and Smart 2001; Smart et al 2001). The research also found that if parents were able to be on good terms, children who had to migrate between the two were relieved of conflicting loyalties and a sense of guilt. This emphasises children’s own capacity for emotional awareness and cautions against seeing them simply as objects of concern or victims. Many children reported that they wished to exercise this awareness through involvement in discussion and decision making about family life, although they did not want to be forced to choose between parents (Neale and Smart 1998; Smart 2000; Neale 2002).

Both the amount and the type of contact a child has with their father after separation will be influenced by whether the father re-partners or remarries, physical distance, the personal motivation of the father and – absolutely key – the quality of the relationship between ex-partners (see Lewis et al 2002). Father involvement post separation can be sporadic, even for those who had high levels of involvement before separation, although many fathers and mothers report that they do not want this (Lewis et al 2002). Fathers who do not maintain regular contact with their children after separation are often portrayed as having lost interest but frequently the barriers are structural and emotional, around the practical and psychological adjustment required after divorce, rather than a simple lack of interest (Lewis et al 2002). What is clear is that cooperation and mutual
respect between parents helps children to have a better relationship with each parent (for example, Hogan et al 2002). Yet the emphasis of policy post separation has tended to be on money and maintenance rather than on relationships and compromise.

Although it is well established that children benefit from stability and supportive, caring relationships, the argument that marriage and two-parent families are the only means of securing these things needs revisiting, as divorce or separation itself does not negatively affect children’s wellbeing, rather it is the nature of the parenting and the relationships within the family and kin that are central in how separation and father absence affect children (Flood 2003). For example, it may be that for some fathers, divorce and separation may provide an opportunity for them to become actively involved caring fathers (Smart and Neale 1999).

3.3 Parenthood and partnership

In the 1960s sex and marriage were uncoupled. In the 1980s parenthood and marriage were uncoupled. In the 2000s parenthood and partnership are becoming more loosely bound. However, we argue that qualitative studies show that this does not mean there has been a loss of commitment in people’s lives. The structure of family life is shifting, but a sense of commitment still guides the way people manage change. Qualitative evidence reveals that people care a great deal about doing the right thing by the people they cherish and are deeply embedded in the relationships that matter to them, continually negotiating how to balance a sense of themselves with the needs of others around them, especially their children. Rather than acting purely as individuals, people are bound by an ethic of care, as Fiona Williams (2004) has said: ‘Moral reasoning based on care informs the way people attempt to balance their own sense of self with the needs of others’ (p 8). In the context of diverse and changing family forms, the values of care, civility and respect provide consistent characteristics which guide all families and so may be thought of as constituting what people think of as ‘normal’. This is not to say that everyone succeeds in realising these values in their everyday actions and decisions but they do provide an ethical framework that informs actions and decisions. However, the combination of change and continuity in people’s experiences of family life, the fact that, for example, mothers are more likely to be involved in paid work but at the same time continue to take most responsibility for domestic and care work in the home, means that heterosexual couples are faced with new situations to manage and negotiate.

Many of the changes in family structure were outlined in chapter one, and it is only necessary to add some of the data on partnership and parenthood here. In 2001 around half of the UK adult population was married and around one in ten people were co-habiting (ONS 2001), as shown in figure 3.1. The number of marriages has risen in recent years but the
number of people getting married is still one third less than the 1972 peak (ONS 2005). Around 12 per cent of men and women aged under 60 were co-habiting in 1986. By 2004 this had grown to 26 per cent (ONS 2005). This trend is set to continue. The number of married men and women is predicted to fall below 50 per cent of the adult population by 2011, and by 2031 the number of partners living together outside of marriage is expected to nearly double from two million to 3.8 million (GAD 2005).

**Figure 3.1: Living arrangements in the UK, 2001**

This trend towards co-habitation is important, partly because two-thirds of children born to co-habiting partners see their parents separate before they are 16 years old, compared with around one third of children born to married parents (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). This is explained in part by the fact that the characteristics of parent cohabitees have changed over time. They now include, for example, those who in the past were together as a result of ‘shotgun marriages’. Even so, parental cohabitation does not intrinsically mean less stability, Survey research shows as much commitment by cohabiting couples to the relationship as married couples, sharing income, property and parental responsibilities in similar ways. Of particular concern, however, is the low awareness of a lack of legal rights, especially to property, accorded to heterosexual cohabitation as compared with marriage, which can lead to conflictual separations, with resort to the courts. It is therefore more realistic in policy terms, and better for parent-
ing practices, to align cohabitees’ legal rights with marriage rather than persuade them to marry (Barlow et al 2005).

An increased number of children are also being born to parents who are not partners. The Millennium Cohort Study showed that 15 per cent of babies in 2000 were born to parents who were neither co-habiting nor married (see Kiernan 2005). These trends point towards a separation of parenthood and partnership that makes parents’ relationships both more difficult and more important to recognise and support. They are more difficult because there are significant challenges in supporting parents’ relationships after separation or where no commitment has yet been made to one another. They are more important because after separation or pre-partnership, contact between the child and the non-resident parent – typically the father – will depend to a large degree on the relationship between the parents. Mothers frequently mediate the relationship between fathers and their children and a father’s involvement with his child is associated with having a satisfactory relationship with the child’s mother (Pike et al forthcoming). This means that the way parents relate to each other affects the quality of other family relationships, even when the parents do not live together (Reynolds et al 2001).

This separation of parenting and partnership can be constructed as a threat to fatherhood. Elements of the fathers’ rights movement depict issues around contact with children after separation as a gender conflict and assert the need for the reaffirmation of men’s rights in relation to women and children. This view tends to shift the focus away from children’s experiences and desires (Neale and Smart 1997; Smart 2003). When adult partnerships become less permanent, the child is invested with the ideal of stability, of enduring and unconditional love, and as the one true relationship. This can often lead to conflict around contact with children. It can also lead to parents of both genders expressing the view that the one who left the marriage ‘broke’ the contract, and so should be punished by having no or limited contact with the children (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart 2000).

This example highlights the risks to individuals from changes in family structures and the importance of how the process of change is managed. There is significant unevenness in the way people experience and cope with change, and policy would do well to support those who struggle to manage the process.

3.4 Policy under Labour

Policy reforms have reflected some of the changes in family life, and a new version of what the family should look like has begun to emerge in Labour’s family policy. This family revolves around the adult couple whose relationship is based on parenting responsibilities, and whose priorities are rooted in work, economic self-sufficiency, education and good behaviour.
The ‘male breadwinner’ model of the family has begun to be replaced by an ‘adult worker’ model.

This is evidenced through three strands of policy. Firstly, support for ‘hardworking families’ such as investment in the childcare infrastructure. Secondly, a focus on children’s outcomes – as opposed to childhoods – exemplified by the objectives and reforms to children’s services described in *Every Child Matters* (HMT/DfES 2003) and the focus on attainment in education policy. The concept of outcomes, or an exclusive focus on outcomes rather than experiences, creates a tension around whether children are treated as investments for the future or citizens of the present (Lister 2003; Neale 2002). Thirdly, the ‘rights and responsibilities’ agenda manifest in policies to fine, or even imprison, parents for their child’s behaviour. This creates tensions between policies that reinforce the expectation that parents work, and those that require them to take greater responsibility for their children’s behaviour, as well as between supportive or prescriptive policies about parenting.

Overall, policy has emphasised the importance of paid work and economic self-sufficiency in people’s lives at the expense of care and interdependence. At the same time these policy trends illustrate how parenting has been pushed further into the public domain, where the state increasingly expects to intervene, whilst adult partnerships have been pushed further into the private domain, where the state rarely expects to intervene. The Government has spoken recently of the need to rediscover notions of interdependence (Miliband 2005), which implies looking at family relationships rather than just individuals. Welcome though this is, substantive policy continues to be based on an adult worker model of the family.

In 1998, not long after Labour came to power, there were indications that the Government would place greater emphasis than it has on adult couple relationships. The *Supporting Families* consultation paper published by the Home Office (1998) articulated the Government’s family policy for the first time in office. It was supportive of marriage, saying: ‘marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships’. However, this was balanced by another statement: ‘there are strong and mutually supportive relationships outside marriage and many unmarried partners remain together throughout their children’s upbringing and raise their children every bit as successfully as married parents’.

The document also set out what it saw as the role of Government in family life with a strong emphasis on advice and support:

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9 Although one important exception has been state support for same-sex civil partnerships.
Families do not want to be lectured about their behaviour or what kind of relationship they are in … But they do want support: advice on relationships; help with overcoming difficulties; support with parenting. And, should the couple’s relationship break down irrevocably, a system of divorce which avoids aggravating conflict within the family. (p 30)

This consultation was followed by what Harker and Kendall have described as a ‘loss of confidence within Government about its own position’ (2003, p 48). There was no subsequent White Paper and many of the specific policy proposals were shelved, including those relating to relationship support.

Also in 1998, the Lord Chancellor – whose department, at that time, had responsibility for marriage and relationship support – commissioned Sir Graham Hart to examine marriage support funding. The Hart Report, (1999), found that relationship and marriage support can be effective in helping partners improve their relationships and ‘is a highly appropriate and worthwhile use of public funds’. Hart argued that the voluntary sector should be given increased support to lead the development and provision of appropriate services. He also argued that additional spending would generate savings to the public purse. However, it is far from clear that the Government accepted this analysis or had a clear vision of the appropriate policy response, as only a very low level of priority has subsequently been awarded to relationship support.

In 2005/06, £11.4 million has been allocated to the Strengthening Families Grant programme.\(^{10}\) This aims to support and develop activities that enable families to get access to information, help and advice. Within this programme, development grants provide funding for work on marriage and relationship support and parenting for up to three years, and one-year infrastructure grants provide funding for work on marriage and relationship support. In 2004/5 just £4.9 million was allocated specifically to marriage and relationship support.

In 2005, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which is now responsible for funding marriage and relationship support, announced that it intended to integrate all grant programmes managed by the Children and Families Directorate into one. This is intended as an efficiency measure, but its purpose is also to bring about greater strategic coherence to funding, in particular, so that funding is firmly linked to the child outcomes in Every Child Matters (HMT/DfES 2003).\(^{11}\) Grants can also be linked to supporting parents and carers to play their role, which includes providing safe homes and family stability. The intention is that DfES will provide strategic fund-

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\(^{10}\) This combines the Marriage and Relationship Support Grant (£4.9 million in 2004/05) and the Family Support Grant (£6.3 million in 2004/05).

\(^{11}\) See footnote 6.
ing to organisations which it makes sense to fund at a national level, and all other activity, including most project activity, will be funded through Children’s Trusts. These changes will take place from 2006 and it is not yet clear how much of the funding pot – a total of £45 million in 2005/06 – the Government intends to make available for adult relationship and marriage support. It is entirely possible that organisations providing these services will see their share of the pot diminish.

There has been some substantive policy change. For example, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 clarified the existing definition of harm to include ‘impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of others’, giving recognition to the fact that children are affected by the relationship between their parents. However, this recognition has not been consistently applied to policy. Two key recent policy documents, Every Child Matters (HMT/DFES 2003) and the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (DoH 2004), have won considerable praise for the way in which they place children at the heart of service design and delivery and present a comprehensive vision of how policy and practice can deliver better outcomes for all children, including the most disadvantaged. However, neither document pays attention to the importance of parents’ relationships for parenting. Whilst there is an increasing acceptance of the public interest in ensuring child wellbeing, there is no such sense that this extends to parents’ relationships. This is despite the fact that, in principle, the Government backed the concept of providing support for relationships and marriages in 1998, and the activities that this would involve fit comfortably with the principles of early intervention and workforce development which are core in both these documents.

It is striking that, despite the importance of strong and loving family relationships for the successful achievement of Government objectives across a wide range of departments from the Home Office to the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Skills, there is no evidence of a coherent strategy or strategies to support family relationships, much less evidence of resources to support their achievement.

3.5 A progressive policy response

It is commonplace to describe ‘the family’ as being ‘in crisis’ (for example, Etzioni 1993; Morgan 1995). In this understanding marriage is viewed as an institution with public and private benefits, whereas changing family patterns are seen as the root cause of an increase in crime and violence, a reduction in community ties, a growing ‘divorce culture’, a cycle of fatherlessness and an increased dependence on the state welfare (for example O’Neil 2002). The focus of those who would have us believe in this crisis is on how to stop these trends. But as Coote, Harman and Hewitt argued at ippr in 1990, effective policy must acknowledge change and respond
appropriately rather than fighting a rearguard action as a simple reflex response. In the US, this is evidenced by the failure of welfare reform aimed at reducing ‘illegitimate’ births to generate any significant change in patterns of birth; instead it has led to considerably poverty and hardship (see Duerr Berrick 2005; Acs and Koball 2002). Similarly, making divorce more difficult is unlikely to stop parents from separating or forming new families, but it is likely to attach stigma to families already under pressure.

The recommendations of an Advisory Group on Marital and Relationship Support established to advise the Government in 2002, included: ‘[Government should] foster a culture in which relationships are valued’.12 The notion that this needs to be fostered reflects a lack of recognition of the store people lay by their intimate relationships. Successive governments have concentrated on promoting individual economic fulfilment at the expense of valuing care. Such simplistic models of the ‘rational economic actor’ as a calculating machine that is only interested in maximising its financial benefits result in the distortion of people’s choices about working and caring. Caring and concern for one’s friends and family are an important part of individual identity, as well as important to collective wellbeing and happiness (Layard 2005). An example of the implications of this perspective is that the central question for policy makers is not ‘how should the state enforce fathers’ responsibility to care for their children’ but ‘how far can society support fathers’ commitment to care’. This would mean enabling fathers to create time to care and to foster their relationships of care and intimacy as well as providing financial and practical support for caring activities.

We now turn to the sorts of practical policies the Government could develop to provide better support for adult couple relationships. We outline the potential of interventions around improved information, new skills for frontline practitioners, formal skills training for parents, counselling and support around and after separation.

Although most parents say help should be available when needed, in

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12 The recommendations of the Advisory Group on Marital and Relationship Support were: gather a clearer picture of current service provision; greater dissemination and publicity to raise awareness and foster a culture in which relationships are valued and it is acceptable to seek support; provide early help before problems become intractable; provide appropriate and tailored support at the time that people need it; ensure support is accessible, timely and affordable; improve support for children – including relationship education – which recognises their needs; recognise and cater for diversity; more innovative ways of delivering support; resources must be spent effectively, with appropriate monitoring and evaluation. It is difficult to take issue with any of these recommendations, but equally they do not point to a clear strategic policy on strengthening parents’ relationships and they do not appear to have a significant influence.
reality the vast majority of parents only turn to family and friends for support (Reynolds et al 2001). A study of people in a relationship for at least five years found they talked to their partners first when they identified a need for relationship support and people were generally keen to address problems themselves. When thinking about seeking help, people wanted it from someone who was familiar to them or with whom they shared a social background, however, few people knew what information was available or where to find it (Ayles and Panades forthcoming). A 1999 MORI survey found nearly one in three parents did not know where to go for help if they had family problems. A survey of parents experiencing disadvantage revealed they would prefer to receive support in the form of leaflets and other self-help materials (Ghate and Hazel 2002).

Fathers, in particular, often report that they do not have the necessary social support networks to provide the kind of support they would like (Lewis et al 2002), as well as a lack of support services, including within the family justice system, available to them around the time of separation. Paternal contact often depends on negotiations between the mother and father. It is notable that studies have found that frequency of contact with children related to fathers’ social class, income and employment status – the higher these were, the greater the contact. Three quarters of unemployed fathers in one study had infrequent or no contact with their children (Corney 1998). Men, particularly unmarried men, say a lack of legal rights and the link between financial contributions and contact leaves them feeling powerless and insecure (Lewis et al 2002).

Reform of the child support system, introduced in April 2003, attempted to make separation less conflictual and more transparent by simplifying support calculations, allowing non-resident parents reduced rates according to parenting responsibility and circumstance, and instituting deductions for parents with care responsibilities in receipt of Income Support. However, the more explicit linking of parental contact to the rate of payment creates the possibility of increased conflict between divorcing parents, as does the continued deduction of child support from resident parents who are on Income Support. Tess Ridge has argued that making children the legal beneficiaries of child support in their own right via the state, with rights to receive the payments directly as they get older, would better promote the best interests of the child and reduction of conflict (Ridge 2005).

This indicates a need for information and support services to be improved around separation, as well as a streamlining of the principles upon which policy affecting separation is made. There is a clear demand for better and more easily accessible information for fathers about their rights and responsibilities and sources of support. Much discussion in this area has been framed in terms of fathers’ entitlements, but research suggests that this can generate more, not less, conflict and does not give fathers (or mothers) the opportunities for support to develop the negotiating skills
that are required for respectful engagement with an ex-partner (Day Sclater and Yates 1999; Featherstone 2004).

There is also evidence to support the idea that sources of support need to be increased. In particular, new skills should be bolted onto the skills of those professional practitioners with whom families already have contact. These are people who are familiar to them, and practitioners could notice problems early and at key moments; signpost to information and services; offer acceptable and effective support where required; mobilise informal support through relationship support; and make relevant referrals to formal services. The critical issue is that a relationship of trust is established and that people do not feel that they are being ‘judged’, that the support is culturally sensitive in recognising the diversity of people’s cultural and sexual lives and that it is confident to deal with the gendered nature of such issues and the vulnerabilities that both men and women feel.

This would require policy to give greater priority to this role to free up practitioners. It also means the full and effective implementation of plans for workforce development. For example, midwives’ and health visitors’ roles need to continue to take a more rounded (as opposed to child health monitoring) approach in supporting families (Harker and Kendall 2003). Most family support professionals, including social workers, receive no training in relationships or on how to intervene to reduce conflict and distress. For example, social workers used to receive this training in the 1960s and 70s, but it came to be seen as a specialism and was left to counselling whilst the mainstream was focused on the child-parent relationship. It is time to bring relationship training back into the mainstream. Primary care and early years workers are key, yet in studies say they don’t respond to apparent relationship problems or feel their responses have been inadequate. They also reported that they were overwhelmed or lacked time to address issues. Simple tools are needed by these professionals to enable them to respond appropriately and to be able to manage their workload, as in the example of the Brief Encounters pilot with health visitors described opposite.

So when should practitioners be offering support? While there is evidence that poorer partners are at greater risk of relationship breakdown and when the relationship ends they are likely to experience further poverty (Kiernan and Mueller 1999), interventions that target risk times rather than risk people would reduce the stigma currently associated with support. Risk times have been identified when support could be most effective. These ‘golden moments’ for offering support often occur in the early years of partnership and parenthood. For example, around the time of the birth of a child unmarried fathers frequently articulate a strong commitment to their child (McLanahan et al 2001), yet the transition to parenthood is a particularly vulnerable time for partners and relationship satisfaction often falls and discord rises (One Plus One 2005).
This all points to ensuring that practitioners with whom parents tend to have contact around the time of the birth of a child having a timely opportunity to identify issues and offer support. It may also be necessary for those professionals who currently tend to have less contact with fathers, such as midwives, to pay particular attention to working with fathers. Often practitioners feel daunted by such engagement because there is no ‘model’ of family life to prescribe. Featherstone’s analysis of family interventions suggests that these are more successful when framed in terms of respectful negotiation and dialogue on the give and take of family life, rather than around fixed roles and responsibilities (Featherstone 2004). This requires good listening skills and understanding the needs of all family members and of how they relate to each other. There is a risk in offering support to those who don’t need it but this risk is small in comparison with the potential benefits to those families who may need it.

Apart from a handful of pilots this approach is little tested. However, as Children’s Trusts are rolled out across the country and practitioners are increasingly expected to work in new ways and with one another, there is an opportunity to build in new dimensions to the roles of frontline practitioners that cross professional boundaries and provide a more comprehensive service to parents. It is important, for example, that developments in tackling domestic violence are joined up with father engagement and couple support. There is a need for central government patiently to invest in such programmes and evaluate the short and long-term effects.

Does the evidence also point us a step further, towards formal relationships skills training? According to Cowan and Cowan (2002), who have conducted studies of relationship support interventions in the US, there is compelling evidence that the investment of resources to help parents make

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**Brief encounters**

The marriage and relationship research institute, One Plus One, developed a brief intervention model called ‘Brief Encounters’ to provide health practitioners with knowledge about family relationships and effective listening skills to identify and work with adult relationship problems when they encounter them in their routine work with mothers and fathers.

In a randomised controlled trial of 1000 new mothers, health visitors trained in Brief Encounters who used a simple relationship screen, alongside a post natal depression screen, were found to be highly effective in identifying relationship problems – 21 per cent of mothers in intervention groups compared with 5 per cent in a control group. These mothers were twice as likely to have discussed their relationship problems with a trained health visitor and 75 per cent more likely to have received help. None of the mothers involved chose to use the fast track counselling service that was offered.
their relationship more effective could have important and long-lasting payoffs for their children’s development. Unfortunately, however, the UK evidence is under-developed. Most parenting programmes do not include training in relationship skills, and programmes tend to be less effective with parents with a discordant relationship (Reynolds et al 2001). There is some consensus that behavioural marital therapy and premarital training programmes can have short-term positive benefits, such as improving communication and conflict management skills, and self-reported marital satisfaction (Reynolds et al 2001). However, Bradbury and Karney (2004) found that conflict, especially among lower socio-economic groups, is a symptom of a lack of support in the relationship and that focusing on that, rather than on problem solving skills or conflict management skills, may be most effective approach. What is clear is that more research is needed to understand whether formal skills training is a promising way of supporting better adult couple relationships. In the meantime, resources would be best spent on well-constructed pilots with robust evaluations.

Counselling services have tended to be the main focus of relationship support. The largest provider of relationship counselling services, Relate, has begun an evaluation of its services (Jackson unpublished). On the basis of data drawn from a sample of 450 people between February 2004 and April 2005, it found that 64 per cent of its clients had children, just over half of all clients went to Relate to save their couple and family relationships and 15 per cent wanted to be a better parent. The vast majority (95 per cent) of clients rated the services they had received as good or very good. Parents reported high rates of improvement in their children’s behaviour. For example, 91 per cent said going to Relate had had a positive effect on their child’s anti-social behaviour and over 80 per cent said their children’s attainment and attendance at school had improved. Of course, this data is highly subjective and does not measure actual outcomes, only parents’ estimation of results, and parents may not be able to distinguish the impact of counselling versus, say, the effects of passing of time which can itself make a difference and enable parents to cope (Walker 2005).

The Relate sample is self-selecting in that it captures the views of people who have chosen to go to counselling, which is not a representative group. For example, people from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely than the white population to seek counselling (AGMARS 2002), reflecting greater general consensus in family support services about inappropriate or coercive forms of intervention amongst different minority ethnic groups (Dutt and Philips 2000), and the need to ensure culturally appropriate services are mainstreamed. It is important to recall that most people experiencing relationship breakdown never receive any formal help, and those who do tend to seek it do so at a very late stage and even then there may be problems with accessibility (AGMARS 2002).

It is the relationship between the person providing support and the
parent that is the key to the effectiveness of the intervention. The person providing support does not have to be a counsellor but does need to have good listening skills. This suggests that the key is to ensure that a range of listening support is available in different formats that meet the needs of diverse populations. Some of this might take the form of support from professionals already known to families, or it might be formal counselling.

Research under the CAVA programme found that many divorced parents had absorbed the idea of divorce as a social problem and felt very much responsible for the consequences. This was accompanied by anxiety about state intervention and a degree of mistrust between statutory agencies, parents and children. At the root of this mistrust was a fear of the power of the state to take children into care, combined with a sense of devaluation of the efforts made by parents to live up to their aspirations of being good and responsible parents. This was also the case for families with a disabled child, with multiple births, or having experienced the death of a child, where parental relationships can be under particular strain. This is not to say parents do not want support when under duress but it is critical that they are offered the right sort of support. The wrong sort of support can be damaging to people’s self-esteem and their capacity for involvement with others.

In relation to divorce, Smart and Neale (1999) identified three principles for mediation in separation. The first is ‘actuality’, that is, making decisions with reference to the reality of the lives involved. For example, if a child has experienced violence from a parent this should take precedence in considerations over any principle of equal care. The second is ‘care’, that is, consideration of the care needs of the child in terms of the quality of the relationships the child has with parents and how these may be fostered in the future. The third is ‘recognition of selfhood and loss’, that is, parents’ immediate post divorce experiences often involve a loss of confidence and a need to build up their sense of who they are. Becoming a non-resident parent – something most frequently experienced by fathers – also causes feelings of loss and grief, acknowledging these is important to facilitate a less conflictual process. It appears that the ability to renegotiate fatherhood successfully lies in the ability to separate emotions, feelings and memories surrounding the marital partnership from a focus on being a parent.

Briefly, a note on those people who become parents before they become co-habiting or married partners. In the US, Mincy and Huang (2001 cited in Duerr Buerrick 2005) found that a father being in employment in the week before the child’s birth increased the odds that the mother would form a family unit with him by 148 per cent. Where men could not offer significant material support, upward mobility or stability, women had few plans for marrying them as they felt they could compromise the safety and security of their children. Precisely because women were concerned about
their children’s wellbeing, single parenthood was viewed as more advantageous than marriage. This should caution us against an assumption that women are placing their own needs before those of their children in not forming partnerships with their children’s fathers. It also suggests that the promotion of employment opportunities amongst low-income men is a legitimate route to supporting couple relationships, but within an overall approach in which fatherhood is about opportunities for both providing and caring.

3.6 Conclusion

The ethic of paid work is not a broad enough principle to meet the aspirations which people have around time and the quality of their relationships. What is needed is a political principle about care which is equivalent to that about paid work. This would focus attention on the question of what can policy do to create an enabling environment in which people’s relationships can flourish. In particular, it gives rise to the question of how policy can support father’s commitment to care. Policy attention to parent-child relationships needs to be complemented by attention to relationships between parents. The quality of the relationship between parents can affect the way parents parent and, in particular, fathers’ relationships with their children seem to be positively affected by satisfaction with their relationship with their partner.

Policies need to focus on practical and non-judgemental support for people to carry out their commitments, and to respect and recognise the diversity of these commitments. If policy seeks to privilege certain types of relationship, such as biological relationships and marriage, it can narrow the framework in which policy can reflect and respond to the diversity of families and their needs.

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4. Fathers and public services
Adrienne Burgess

4.1 Introduction

The concept of fatherhood is awakening innovative thinking in public service policy and practice. But this is accompanied by a failure of philosophy and procedure that is causing public services and the labour market to neglect the best interests of families, and a government that prides itself on policy led by clear core messages to present itself as incoherent.

This chapter sets out a case for public service reform that places children at the centre, mobilises the assets that fathers can bring to families and tackles the failures of some fathers in family life. It recognises that social transformation continues, and that involved fatherhood must play a central and increasing part if the goals for child wellbeing set out in Every Child Matters (HMT/DfES 2003) are to be achieved and the final chapter in the advancement of women is to be successfully written.

The chapter begins by examining why fathers matter to children’s experiences and outcomes. It then assesses developments in policy and practice in relation to public services and fatherhood, particularly under New Labour and, finally, sets out ways in which policy might drive further change.

4.2 Why fathers matter

A substantial body of research now indicates that high levels of involvement by fathers in two-parent families are associated with a range of desirable outcomes in children and young people. These include: better peer relationships; fewer behaviour problems; lower criminality and substance abuse; higher educational/occupational mobility relative to that of parents; capacity for empathy; non-traditional attitudes to earning and childcare; more satisfying adult sexual partnerships; and higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction (for reviews see Flouri 2005; Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004). The converse is also true: low levels of involvement are associated with a range of negative outcomes. For example, among teenagers both low father involvement and decreasing closeness predict delinquency in adult life (Flouri 2005).

Among separated families, children do best when they maintain close and positive relationships with both parents (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). Contact needs to be designed in such a way that father and child regularly experience a range of activities together: bedtimes, mealtimes, watching TV,
doing homework, trips out, ‘hanging’ in, visiting friends and family (for discussion see Lamb 2002). The benefit to children of payment of child support by their fathers is also well established, and greater contact with non-resident fathers tends to be associated with more child support being paid (Seltzer et al 1998).

Disadvantaged children are in greater need than other children of ongoing positive relationships with their fathers (Dunn et al 2004). For example, high levels of father involvement protect against adult experience of homelessness in the sons of manual workers and against later mental health problems in children in separated families; and fathers’ active care of ‘difficult-to-raise’ pre-schoolers is related to fewer problems in these children later (Flouri 2005). The children of young parents – who tend to be amongst the most disadvantaged – may particularly benefit from a positive relationship with their father: ‘When young men do not take on the responsibilities of fatherhood, it has serious consequences for the child’s development, the mother’s resources and consequent social costs’ (ESRC 2002). In Russell and others’ 1999 survey of school children’s experiences of fatherhood, a 12 year-old wrote: ‘My dad ... make me feel bad, [is] strict, not happy, frightens me, don’t care about me’. Mixed feelings were also found: ‘I love my dad: loveable, fun, mean, unkind ... I hate it when my dad comes home drunk, that’s when he starts fighting with my mum’ (11 year-old).

However, greater father involvement may not always prove positive. Studies also show a range of negative developmental outcomes associated with fathers’ (and father figures’) poor parenting or psychopathology – as is also the case with mothers. Conflict with fathers, fathers’ negativity and fathers’ harsh or neglectful parenting are strongly associated with children’s externalising behaviour, and fathers’ harsh parenting has a stronger effect than mothers’ on children’s aggression. A father’s own bullying behaviour at school is a risk factor for his child becoming a bully. Fathers’ antisocial personality behaviour and/or substance abuse correlate with conduct problems and aggression in children and adolescents (studies cited by Phares 1999; Flouri 2005). Over and above negative developmental outcomes is the pain and suffering experienced by children whose fathers neglect or abuse them, or who neglect or abuse their mothers.

When is no father better than a bad father? Like a mother, when his negative behaviour cannot be modified through intervention, and when it is extreme. For example, when a father is involved in low-level antisocial behaviour, his child will exhibit more conduct problems if s/he doesn’t live with him than if s/he does; when the father is engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour, the child who lives with him will exhibit more conduct problems than the child who lives in another household (Jaffee et al 2003, cited by Flouri 2005).

These relationships, however, are complex. While some might argue that
a father who poses any kind of risk must forfeit his right to a relationship with his child, Daniel and Taylor (2001:149ff) believe ‘this misses out the child’s perspective. The strength and complexity of children’s attachments to significant adults cannot be underestimated’; simply to sever a relationship between a father and his child does not mean that the child automatically ends up in a better family situation. Furthermore, since the impact of father absence on child development is often negative;\(^{13}\) since absent fathers can loom large in their children’s imaginations, often unhelpfully as ‘heroes or villains’ (Kraemer 2005); and since father absence can cause their children substantial distress and self-doubt (Laumann-Billings and Emery 1998), current thinking is moving away from the idea of severance of unconstructive father-child relationships as a simple solution.

It is likely that, as fathers play an increasing role as direct carers of their children, rupture of the father-child relationship may cause greater distress, as these quotes from a DfES/Fathers Direct study (2003) illustrate:

Dear Father, I don’t say dear dad, because you have not been a dad to me, have you? My name is Daniel … and I am Rebecca …’s son. You might not remember my mother, but I think about you all the time. (11 year-old)

I might not have seen him for eight years but I love him every single day and night. (11 year-old)

Dear Dad, I only see you once a week … Some small things I ask of you: please come to my school plays and come to parents’ evening to see how I’m getting on. (12 year-old)

What is clear from the research is that everything a father does – negative or positive – impacts on his child; and, while negative behaviour by fathers can be seen as an impetus to exclude men from family support programmes, an alternative view is that the association between, for example, paternal mental health problems and child problems accentuates the need to work with fathers in public services (Lloyd \textit{et al} 2003).

There is now emerging evidence that engaging with family professionals can impact positively on fathers’ negative behaviour and parenting styles; increase their knowledge and understanding of child development; increase their confidence in their parenting skills; and lead to more sensitive and positive parenting and to greater involvement in infant and child care, and

\(^{13}\) This can be direct (for example as a cause of difficulties with peer relationships, including bullying (Berdondini and Smith 1996) and indirect (maternal stress and reduced income are both strongly associated with father-absence and both impact negatively on children (McLanahan 1997 and McLanahan and Teitler 1999)).
in interaction with children (Pfannensteil and Honig 1995; O’Brien 2004). A review by Goldman (2005) of five studies using multivariate analyses which isolate the independent impact of fathers’ involvement in children’s learning on educational outcomes, clearly shows that fathers’ involvement in their children’s schools (both in terms of level and frequency) is a key factor that correlates with better educational outcomes for children.

Where child conduct is an issue, fathers can be as effective change agents within families as mothers; delivering a parent education programme to both mother and father is more effective than delivering it to just one parent; and each individual parent’s sensitivity towards their child (and their child’s attachment to them) is enhanced when both parents are included in the intervention (O’Brien 2004). Delivering parenting support to mothers only may, in fact, be risky to women and children in that, where the parents’ relationship is volatile, the intervention may destabilise the situation without providing adequate supports.

Fathers who have been involved in public service programmes talk about their learning as parents and how they have transferred this learning from the programme to the home environment. They comment on the value of being able to spend ‘quality time’ with their child, and see benefits to their children via benefits to themselves (‘If I am a better father, he will be a better kid’). They also talk about trying to get involved with children other than their own when they know these children do not have involved fathers, because from engaging with the programme they have come to understand the benefit to children of involved fathering (Fagan and Palm 2004).

### 4.3 Fatherhood policy and public service reform

Since the 1970s, there has been talk in public services of engaging with ‘parents’. In reality, this has included few fathers, and the term ‘parent’ is often used as synonymous with ‘mother’. This was graphically illustrated when the Minister presenting the Labour Government’s first Green Paper on family policy, *Supporting Families* (Home Office 1998), commented at its launch in London that the document would be of great interest to ‘parents and fathers’.

However, within that document, Labour had, in fact, taken a radical step. It had changed its terminology. While we should not set too much store by language without action, it is an important first step. Not only does that Green Paper include the statement ‘fathers have a crucial role to play in their children’s upbringing’, but the phrase ‘mothers and fathers’ (or ‘fathers and mothers’) is used widely throughout instead of ‘parent’. This differentiation is recognised by fatherhood initiatives worldwide as a key first step to engaging effectively with fathers. Unless, and until, public services develop differentiated strategies to engage fathers, they will fail to
do so (Ghate et al 2000). Furthermore, applying gender-neutral policies in gendered environments (such as childcare) does not challenge or change gendered inequalities or practices, but, in fact, reinforces them.

Since the Millennium, there has been a gradual increase in policy focus on fatherhood, both inside and outside of Government, although this has been patchy, uncoordinated, and even contradictory. Chapter two of this report looks at the dilemmas experienced by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) as it struggles with making ‘family-friendly’ policies father-friendly. And though the 1998 Home Office consultation paper Supporting Families had disaggregated the term ‘parent’ into ‘mother and father’, New Labour’s second family policy Green Paper, Every Child Matters (HMT/DfES 2003) reverted, in the main, to ‘parent’ – although it does contain the statement: ‘We should recognise the vital role played by fathers as well as mothers’. By contrast, the July 2004 Green Paper Parental Separation: children’s needs and parents’ responsibilities (DCA, DfES and DTI) is not only specific about the need to ‘better support fathers who are going through separation’, but, like Supporting Families, disaggregates ‘parent’ into ‘mother and father’ (or ‘father and mother’) throughout.

Major policy initiatives focusing on men in their role as fathers have not been in evidence across public services or, indeed, within an individual sector other than, to some small extent, in dealing with separated families.

The Child Support Agency was instituted by the Conservatives in 1991, with exclusive focus on fathers’ breadwinning role. Under Labour, this has changed a little, as the Government has taken some account of fathers’ caring contributions by reducing some of their child-support obligations as they increase the time spent with their children – a policy not always found in other countries. Since December 2003, unmarried fathers have had automatic ‘parental responsibility’,14 provided they register the birth of their child jointly with the mother, and a court may now order a paternity test against a mother’s wishes. New legislation will make the enforcement of contact orders easier, and small steps have been taken towards developing services to reduce hostility between parents which, among other things, should better support positive relationships between children and their non-resident parents (mostly fathers). In July 2005, a statement from the head of the Children and Families Family and Court Advisory and Support Service indicated a new willingness to consider a ‘two home strategy’ for the children of separated parents: ‘Children can grow up with multiple attachments and can cope with parallel parenting ... shared residence approaches are usually best (Douglas 2005).

Some policy impacting on fathers is implicit, not explicit, for example, in tax and benefits systems which, through their design, help to define parents’ roles as earners or carers. The benefits system remains predicated on

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14 Meaning that they have the same rights as married fathers.
the notion of one primary caring parent, such that non-resident fathers are, in the eyes of this system, non-parents – that is, single men without children. This remains the case even when they have substantial care of their children (some provide half of all care), and so they cannot access state benefits in respect of those children, including adequate social housing. It is worth pointing out a potential conflict here with Family Court policy, if it does begin to favour greater shared residence.\textsuperscript{15}

The taxation system is more ambivalent: while individual taxation supports both parents as earners (and, therefore, potentially as carers), Child Tax Credit reinforces the old ‘primary carer’ model, since it cannot be split between parents.\textsuperscript{16} The ‘primary carer’ concept in social security legislation has recently been successfully challenged in the Court of Appeal (Hockenjos v. Secretary of State for Social Security 2005). However, this was in respect of a benefit that no longer exists,\textsuperscript{17} and it is not yet known whether this will eventually impact on social security legislation more broadly.

In the introduction to this volume, Stanley and Gamble identify a ‘hierarchy of goals’ for involved fatherhood, their priority being to enhance fathers’ involvement in order to improve the outcomes of children. Their secondary objective is to improve gender equity and their tertiary objective to enable men to fulfil their own aspirations for their fathering role. How do policies relating to fatherhood express these last two objectives? The Equal Opportunities Commission has promoted equality between fathers and mothers in earning and caring as the ‘way forward’ in meeting the needs of families and a fairer society. Here, the objective of improving equality for women takes precedence, but attention is also paid to enabling men to fulfil their own aspirations for their fathering role, the two being seen as interdependent.

Now a new policy initiative will change the way public services engage with fathers. The Equality Bill, to be enacted in 2006, places a duty on public services to consider the impact of their policies on practice in a range of equality areas, including gender. For example, it will become illegal for any family or children’s service not to gather data about fathers, unless there is evidence that it is not necessary; local authorities (among others) will have to analyse their services and ask a series of questions, including whether men or women are discouraged from using a service by, for example, an unwelcoming environment, and so on. None of this will happen overnight, and there is likely to be a struggle between the new law and tradition, but

\textsuperscript{15} Anecdotal evidence is that separated fathers’ applications for more parenting time are being refused, not because the father himself is seen as a risk to children, but because he cannot provide suitable housing.
\textsuperscript{16} In Australia benefits can be split.
\textsuperscript{17} The benefit was the supplement to the Jobseeker’s Allowance, available in 1997, payable in respect of dependent children.
the days of public services failing to meet the needs of children, by operat-
ing in terms of gender stereotypes that accord fathers little or no role in
their children’s lives, are numbered.

The most thought-through policy so far, in terms of uniting both policy
statements and strategies for their implementation, has been in education,
where father-specific policies were developed, culminating in a good prac-
tice guide for teachers on how to engage fathers in schools (see Goldman
2005). Recently this pioneering work has stalled, although the Basic Skills
Agency’s Skills for Families programme, which aims to improve the literacy,
numeracy and language skills of ‘parents and carers’, has been trying to
adapt some of its materials to make them more father-inclusive.

The Sure Start Unit is also now beginning to make policy statements
concerning involved fatherhood. Originally Sure Start had no specific
brief to engage with fathers, but guidance for the forthcoming Sure Start
Children’s Centres specifies that these new bodies are to ensure that ‘fam-
ily support and parental outreach’ contain ‘specific strategies and activities
which increase the involvement of fathers’, and that ‘consultation and
information sharing with parents/carers on what services are needed’ must
include ‘fathers’, as must ‘systems to get user feedback on services’ (DfES
2005). Although these references to fathers are very much an add-on, they
are significant.

The most comprehensive policy statement relating to involved father-
hood is found in the National Service Framework for Children, Young
People and Maternity Services (DfES and DoH 2004), which elaborates
on the ways in which ‘good parenting’ by fathers can promote children’s
development, emphasises the need for the word ‘parent’ to include both
‘mothers and fathers’, and ‘supports a cultural shift in all service provi-
tion, to include fathers in all aspects of a child’s wellbeing’.18 There are copious
references to engaging fathers and the wider family, with pregnancy and
birth seen as ‘the first major opportunities to engage fathers in appropriate
care and upbringing of their children’.19

There can, of course, be an enormous gap between policy and imple-
mentation of policy, and there is currently very little funding being made
available by the Department of Health, for example, to provide fathers
with information around the birth of their child. But the fact that major
national policy so explicitly and comprehensively addresses fatherhood is
an important beginning, and may prove a lever for funding support in the
future.

International bodies are beginning to think about involved fatherhood.
Between 2002 and 2003, UNICEF surveyed the countries in which it has a
presence for activities specifically designed to enhance the role of fathers

18 Standard 2.2, 3.7.
19 Standard 11, 5.6.
in children’s care, and reported over that 12 month period a near-threefold increase – from 10 to 28 – of countries so involved (Engle et al 2005). In March 2004, the Commission on the Status of Women meeting in New York urged:

governments, other organizations, civil society, and the UN system to ... promote understanding of the importance of fathers ... to the wellbeing of children and the promotion of gender equality ... [to] create and improve training and education programmes to enhance awareness and knowledge among men and women on their roles as parents ... [and to] include fathers as well as mothers in programmes that teach infant child care development.

UNICEF has taken a robust approach to involved fatherhood in a series of publications, most recently The Child’s Right to Shared Parenting (Engle et al 2005). UNICEF’s ‘child’s right to shared parenting’ does not refer (as might at first be thought) to shared parenting after separation and divorce. The ‘right’ referred to is the right to daily care from an involved father as well as from an involved mother when parents live together and, as far as possible, when they do not. UNICEF, also declaring in that paper that ‘fathers’ involvement and fathers’ investment is one of the greatest under-used sources of support available to children in our world today’, is the first organisation to advance the argument that day-to-day involved fatherhood should be promoted, not only out of a sense of fairness, or even for children’s good, but as a child’s right.

UNICEF’s approach builds on international policy. Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: ‘The child shall … have … the right to … be cared for by his or her parents’. Also expressed in the UN Convention is the notion of parents (mothers and fathers) as the source of the child’s ‘identity’. Article 7 states that the child has the ‘right to know … his or her parents’ (as well as to be cared for by them); and Article 8 asserts the child’s right to the ‘preservation of his or her identity’ and to its ‘speedy restitution if illegally deprived of it’. The child’s identity is deemed to flow from ‘nationality, name and family relations’.21

20 Author’s italics. Article 7 (1) ‘The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.’

21 Author’s italics. Article 8 (1) ‘States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.’ (2) ‘Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to speedily re-establishing his or her identity.’
4.4 Practice development

While explicit policy has been thin on the ground, there is a growing body of practice in public services around engaging with fathers. This has been enabled by funding streams that have either mentioned fathers as a special interest group, or have ring-fenced small amounts of funding for them.

In 1999, the first government funding for community-based support for men as fathers came on stream. National and regional organisations that have, as a result of this and subsequent funding, developed expertise around fatherhood include: the Children North-East Regional Resource Centre on Fatherhood; Working with Men (main focus young fathers); the YMCA (national ‘Dads and Lads’ parenting programme); Contact-a-Family (services for the fathers of disabled children); Barnardo’s ‘Babyfather’ Initiative (African Caribbean communities); ContinYou (male literacy and young fathers); the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (young fathers); the Men’s Health Forum (supports men and fathers to take care of their own health); and ‘Respect’ (promotes programmes to support behaviour change in men who use violence). In addition, Fathers Direct, the national ‘peak body’ on fatherhood, contributes to policy development; uses the media to communicate ideas relating to fathers’ changing roles and publicise good practice; and helps to build capacity in the field by, among other things, operating as a training and information resource – including drafting standards for father-friendly practice, launched in 2005 as the ‘Fatherhood Quality Mark’.

Fatherhood practice is found in a variety of sectors, particularly early years. One example is the Hoole Lighthouse Centre (Chester), where more than 30 fathers attend the monthly, Saturday-morning ‘Who Let the Dads Out?’. In Norwich, a fathers’ worker meets almost all expectant fathers in his Sure Start area, runs a parenting course (‘Dad’s Guide to Healthy Children’) and is successfully integrating fathers into Sure Start services.

Although funded support services for non-resident fathers are almost non-existent (self-help organisations try to fill the gap), Sunderland and South Tyneside Family Mediation and Child Contact Centres have now employed a fathers’ worker; and the One Parent Families Support and Information Network in York is re-launching as a new organisation, with differentiated approaches to single parents of both sexes and a redefinition of ‘single parent’ to include non-resident fathers.

Across the country, there is an emerging body of practical work, some of it of very high quality, with local and national providers beginning to offer training and consultancy. There is also a growing awareness on the part of some family service providers of the need to develop interventions,

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22 The Family Support Grant from the Home Office, now incorporated into the DfES Strengthening Families Grant Programme.
and a few initiatives that use men’s roles in caring for their children as a foundation for programmes to tackle exclusion, poverty, crime, destructive behaviour and educational underachievement (Bartlett and Vann 2003).

Although such developments are heartening, they must be kept in perspective. Work with fathers in public services remains sparse. Reports by Ghate and others (2000), Henricson and others (2001), Lloyd and others (2003) and Goldman (2005) find very few examples of public service engagement with fathers, and those that exist tend to be short-term ‘add-ons’, and patchy in distribution and quality (Bartlett and Vann 2003). Some domestic delivery departments, or parts of departments, have neither policies nor practice relating to fathers; others have practice but no policy, or policy but no practice; and there is no coherent, interdepartmental narrative on fatherhood.

This is costly. For example, Sure Starts are devoting resources to trying to track fathers, when earlier identification through maternity services would be simpler and more cost effective. The prison service works with fathers and then sends them back to their families with raised ambitions about fatherhood, and few services to pick them up. The Department for Trade and Industry’s introduction of statutory, paid paternity leave has not been matched by Department of Health policies to equip on-leave fathers as carers of mothers and infants, even though almost all fulfil this role, which is made increasingly important through earlier hospital discharge of new mothers and wider use of caesarean sections. And, while the Department of Health is working to identify domestic violence in pregnancy, no public service is supporting a programme of community-based behaviour-change

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**Interventions with fathers can be categorised as follows:**

- Pregnancy prevention: prevention of either first or subsequent pregnancies.
- Parenting preparation: mainly antenatal, though can begin in schools.
- Parenting support: group or one-to-one; counselling; case-management; crisis intervention; parenting skills and information; father-child activities; social support.
- Health: mental and physical, including substance abuse and domestic violence; recreational activities.
- Couple support: as parents (non-resident/co-resident); as partners.
- Advice and advocacy: housing; benefits; financial and legal issues including child support.
- Education and employment: basic skills; education access; job-readiness; vocational skills; job placement; support with work/life balance; post-employment support; self-employment. (Bartlett and Vann 2003)
programmes for violent men, even though most can be helped to cease violent and other controlling behaviours (Gondolf 2001).

While services can be positive about confident, engaged and competent fathers, they do not regard as important support for fathers who need help, and have a fundamentally casual approach to the breakdown of the child-father connection. By contrast, the breakdown of the mother-child connection is regarded as a tragedy. There are many reasons for this – not least John Bowlby’s research (1951), which attributed negative developmental outcomes in institutionalised infants entirely to separation from the mother. This ‘essentialized’ mothers (Silverstein and Auerbach 1999) and cast fathers as optional extras in their children’s development; and even though Rutter (1974) challenged Bowlby’s hypothesis, pointing out that his young subjects were experiencing not just maternal disruption but disruption of their entire life circumstance, mothers are regarded as the key resource in children’s lives throughout public services, with information and support (which many are willing to accept) showered on them. ‘Mother care’ is to such an extent the dominant paradigm in public service discourse that Cameron and others (1999, p 8) go so far as to propose that: ‘gender ... modelled on a particular concept of care – ‘mother-care’ is … embedded within the being of childcare institutions and childcare work’.

It is ultimately the workforce’s ability to engage with men and offer them something meaningful that determines whether fathers will come to a programme. A major barrier is the tendency among public service providers (both managers and frontline workers) to make negative attributions concerning fathers’ motives and behaviour.23 This has been dubbed the ‘deficit perspective’ on fatherhood, with unexamined generalisations (prejudices) about men and fathers widespread in a range of sectors, and fathers’ behaviour and intentions construed more negatively than mothers’ (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997).

Other research confirms these findings. Russell and others (1999) found many public service workers unsure about fathers’ capacities to understand their children’s changing needs, or to provide them with care and emotional support, with a substantial subgroup holding wildly exaggerated notions concerning the prevalence of father-daughter sexual abuse. Ghate and others (2000) found many family-centre workers uneasy about engaging with fathers. Goldman (2005) reports on a range of ambivalences among school staff towards engaging fathers in schools. And Harrison (1998) found this to be especially marked in attitudes towards black men (Daniel and Taylor 2001). ‘Double-think’ is common. Edwards (1998)

23 These include such (false) beliefs as ‘men cannot multi-task’, ‘mothers have special sensitivity to children that fathers lack’, ‘fathers’ attachment to their children is far weaker than mothers’ – none of which is borne out by research (Parke 1996).
found health and social care practitioners claiming that it was important to engage with men, while regularly missing opportunities to do so, and consistently regarding men as problems – when absent, as irresponsible; when present, as making demands on the mother and potentially violent (Daniel and Taylor 2001). Lloyd and others (2003) found most Sure Start managers and staff expressing positive attitudes to male involvement, but almost never actioning this.

Another barrier is the belief held or advanced by many public service workers that ‘there are no fathers in the community I deal with’ (Ferguson and Hogan 2004). The ‘invisible father’ can be a real issue: mothers may hide a father out of child protection concerns (fearing they may lose their children if they are seen with him), or from fear of jeopardising benefits, and fathers may have absented themselves, or be unavailable for other reasons, such as imprisonment. However, much of the ‘invisible father’ syndrome arises from workers simply not ‘seeing’ fathers who are present in households – not collecting data on them, failing to invite them to attend consultations or to put pressure on them if they don’t attend (Ryan 2000). Ferguson and Hogan (2004) point out that, even when, in practice, fathers are included, they are usually simultaneously excluded.

The invisibility of fathers living outside the mother’s household is even more marked, even to services that are expected to engage with them. For example, under education law, non-resident parents have the right to be involved in their children’s education, and a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance note for schools recommends that schools involve both parents ‘wherever possible, including non-resident parents, unless this would be contrary to the child’s needs’ (Goldman 2005, p 185). However, there is no evidence that involving non-resident fathers in schools is widespread, and non-resident fathers report huge difficulties in obtaining the most basic information from their children’s schools.

Daniel and Taylor (2001, p 166) find the invisibility of fathers in child protection settings particularly puzzling, asking why, when a lone mother is accused of gross neglect: ‘no attention is paid to finding the [biological] father and carrying out a comprehensive assessment of what he has to offer? And why are not both parents named as perpetrators and summoned to case conferences and other proceedings?’ These researchers believe individual practitioners should not be blamed. The problem is systemic: ‘there has not been clear guidance on this issue from statutory bodies, or from the literature and training establishments’ (p 23). Milner (1996) suggests that ‘there should be an obligatory inclusion of fathers on official forms, not one that is subsumed under ‘parenting’ and is therefore likely to include only mothers’.
4.5 Conclusion

How can the design and delivery of public services better support the active involvement of fathers in their children’s lives? In the US, it is now understood that a prerequisite is to ‘sensitize staff’ to their own attitudes, with ample time ‘for staff to talk openly about their preconceived notions and biases regarding fathers and father-involvement’ (Fagan and Palm 2004, p 170). But other changes, too, are needed. Public service providers know very little about fathers – either about fathers in general, or about the fathers in their communities – so professional training and development need to address issues of gender-blindness in family and children’s services, include information on the father’s role in child development, and provide public service providers with opportunities to meet and discuss fatherhood with a range of fathers.

The ‘femaleness’ of services must also be tackled. Key to this will be the greater employment of men in childhood services (a growing priority for Government in any case, due to employment shortages in the children’s workforce, and the desire to transform this into a high-quality, high-status profession), and environmental awareness, including redesign of premises to be father-inclusive. This will involve introducing positive images of fathers (on walls, in brochures), eschewing language that will be ‘heard’ as for mothers only (‘Family Centre’, ‘Parent and Toddler’ or ‘Lone Parent’) and materials that portray men only in a negative light (such as very prominent leaflets and posters relating to domestic violence, with no balance of materials representing men in positive roles). There will be a need to review the type of activities offered, the father-friendliness of referral services (health, employment, parenting programmes) and structural issues including opening hours. This is an issue for many employed fathers, and also for some unemployed fathers, who may feel too humiliated by their non-working status to take their children to weekday, daytime events.

Even where the word ‘father’ is used by public services, and appropriate activities are offered, there is the need to develop innovative approaches to address fathers as men. Parenting has become so feminised that there is a genuine anxiety among men that if they publicly associate themselves with it they feminise themselves. The only successful solution is to bring masculinity to parenting, to demonstrate to men that when they are engaged as parents they are not losing their masculinity – that, in fact, active parenting is a key to being a good man.

Supporting the child-father connection through public services does not mean blindly encouraging sustained contact between children and fathers whose capacity to parent positively is deeply flawed. But it does mean acting decisively to mend this relationship wherever possible and to challenge institutional practices, which actively or passively undermine it. Supporting active fatherhood means developing a coherent narrative on fatherhood.
that recognises most fathers as assets to their children, or able to become so, and that holds high expectations of fathers’ involvement – which it promotes for children’s good and as a child’s right.

Supporting active fatherhood requires the development of maternity services that ‘think round corners’ to prepare fathers and mothers of all social groups for the birth and beyond; employment legislation and practices that perceive men as no less responsible for caring work than women; education services that reach out to fathers as well as mothers, and prepare boys and girls for a future shared role in caring for children; and social and health services, family courts, criminal justice, and tax and benefits systems that accept the child-father connection, like the child-mother connection, as a precious relationship – a relationship that public services have a duty to sustain and develop, and that should be severed only as a tragic last resort to protect a child from substantial harm.

Which public services are best placed to take the lead? The obvious ‘motor’ is maternity services, which set the scene for the roles parents will play in their children’s lives, and which are increasingly being recognised by the Government as the gateway to its early years services. Nor is it by chance that the recommendations by the Commission on the Status of Women in 2004 incorporated a call for including ‘fathers as well as mothers in programmes that teach infant childcare development’.

The call to widen maternity services’ circle of concern to include fathers can cause people who have struggled to promote autonomy for mothers in the face of male-dominated medical hierarchies to fear for women’s access to resources. In fact, as the new National Services Framework recognises, twin concerns for mothers and for the men who, in most families, are their main support at this time, are not mutually exclusive but mutually supportive. The transition to fatherhood is known, in the research, as the ‘golden opportunity moment for intervention with fathers’ (Cowan 1988) when providing appropriate information, training and support opens a door on improved care for mothers and infants. To think otherwise is to import the politics of gender conflict and gender competition into an area in which they have no place.

This chapter began with the observation that the current government has not been able, as yet, to speak positively about involved fatherhood, or to create a coherent narrative to inform the development of policy and practice. In July 2005, in London, in an important speech entitled ‘Building a Modern Social Contract’, the Minister of Communities and Local Government called for the welfare state to support ‘social networks of family and community’ by, among other things, providing ‘help through parental leave for mothers and fathers’ (our italics). Beyond breadwinning, however, father-blindness set in again. ‘Parents’, we were told, ‘are to be helped through extended schools to develop new skills, gain confidence and understand they are not alone’. ‘Parents’ are to be obliged to ‘face up to
their responsibilities ... through Parenting Contracts and Parenting Orders’ (Milliband 2005). The singling out of Parenting Orders is truly ironic given that their application has been so gendered that some have suggested they be called ‘Mothering Orders’ (Henricson 2003).

Engaging positively and coherently around active fatherhood should be fertile territory for any party attempting to modernise its philosophies and policies relating to families, and trying to keep in step with the changes in voters’ lives. In particular, it should be second nature to a movement that, springing from political philosophies that recognised the alienation of men from what they do, dedicated itself to promoting their self-realisation by strengthening their position in the labour market and in other forms of self-actualisation such as education. Yet, now, as so many individual men begin to discover, in a broader definition of fatherhood, a new and tremendous way of reducing the alienation of their own lives, and begin to extend, through this, the rich panoply of care available to children, while at the same time providing real support to mothers, the Left and Centre Left have little to say.

Could it be that, since emerging feminism grabbed the language of Marxism to set out women as the victims of men, the Left and Centre Left feel they cannot ally themselves with the cause of male domestic self-realisation? Could they even be bowing to the idea that men are engaged in a new project of trying to control women through their children, as male attempts to control women through marriage falter and fail (Eriksson and Hester 2001)? If so, then the Left and Centre Left are flying in the face of a mainstream feminism that, in the words of Julie Mellor, outgoing chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission and Chair of the Board of Trustees of Fathers Direct, recognises that the ‘last chapter in the story of women’s advancement must be written by women and men together’ (Mellor 2005). Surely it is now time for the Labour movement, with its rich history of supporting the brotherhood of man, to begin to support the fatherhood of man.

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5. A framework for public policy
Kate Stanley

5.1 Introduction

After decades of public policy emphasis on men as economic actors, it is time to acknowledge also the importance of men’s caring roles, particularly their roles as fathers. This acknowledgement is all the more necessary at a time when the Government has set out its intention to focus on improving children’s outcomes and evidence has grown about both the positive and negative impact fathers can make on these outcomes. Policy makers need to find new ways of thinking and talking about fatherhood that capture what fathers are for and how public policy can enable them to fulfil those roles. Policy needs both to reinforce father’s responsibilities to care and support their commitment to care.

This publication has shown that this question is an appropriate concern of public policy. The arguments are summarised by Hobson:

Through laws and policies, all states indirectly or directly shape the different borders of fatherhood … and this varies over time as well as across societies. These include legal parameters that define who the father is and on what basis. Policy frameworks shape the kinds of choices men make as fathers and foster certain kinds of identities and interests. Public discourse creates hegemonic ideologies around fatherhood, which can be enabling or constraining for fathers. A growing emphasis on fatherhood and care has provided men with discursive resources to make claims on their employers. (2002 p 14)

But this publication has also shown that we must be aware of the limits of policy to support fathers’ commitment to care. Bringing about greater opportunities for men to be involved in their children’s lives will require support from women and employers, as well as an enabling public policy environment. There are also risks inherent in poorly constructed policy that is designed to promote active fatherhood. For example, feminists have suggested that it is a threat to the autonomy of women to focus on fatherhood in the context of a male dominated society. While women stand to gain very much more from well thought through policy to promote men’s caring roles than they stand to lose, it is important to consider possible unintended consequences of policy.

This chapter attempts to provide a narrative about fatherhood and set out how public policy could support fathers in their caring roles by identifying a range of practical policy measures. First we describe the role
of fathers, then we draw out the policy implications from the preceding chapters.

Fathers can be seen as a resource for their children and one that is frequently underused. The absence of a father can be detrimental to the social adjustment of children, although the actual effects of father absence cannot reasonably be determined without considering important ecological variables such as socio-economic status and effects (Lamb 2003). Similarly, a lack of involvement or poor fathering by fathers who are not absent is a wasted asset, or, at worst, a danger to children. Women and men are sharing roles more and this is releasing new potential at work and in the home (Fisher 2005) and there are opportunities to make greater use of fathers as a resource for children – and for women.

This does not mean that there is some gender-specific role for fathers in relation to their children. Empirical evidence has shown that the gender of the carer does not appear to matter in terms of child outcomes; it is parental warmth, nurturance and closeness that are important. Likewise, the structure of the family appears to be less important than the functioning of the family. Some separated fathers groups have promoted the idea of a gender-specific role for fathers to support their case for contact with their children, but it is possible to argue for a role for fathers without entrenching existing gender stereotypes.

The breadwinning role continues to play an important part in the way that many men and women construct the idea of fatherhood, and it is an important aspect of the role of fathers as it is, increasingly, of the role of mothers. But so, too, is the nurturing role and emotional care provided by fathers. Both these aspects of care are important in any understanding of active fatherhood. We must also recognise the significant diversity in how families operate and how fathers enact their roles.

5.2 Implications for policy

In this report we have adopted a broad hierarchy of objectives. Our primary objective has been to develop an analysis and policies that will promote positive outcomes and experiences for children. Our secondary objective has been to promote gender equality. Our tertiary objective has been to promote opportunities for fathers to fulfil their caring ambitions. Placing children at the centre can often enable us to reconcile sometimes competing interests, such as between parents, biological and social fathers, children’s rights and parents’ rights. Most policy questions are amenable to this hierarchy.

Below, we outline the opportunities to promote active fatherhood in the development of three policy areas: leave policies and work-life balance; early years, maternity and childcare services; and relationship support and child protection. The preceding chapters made clear that it is not possible to achieve genuinely transformational change through policy change in
any one area. It will be necessary to implement change across all the areas broadly simultaneously, if the individual changes are to be effective and to avoid unintended consequences.

**Leave policies and work-life balance**

In chapter one Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport showed that there is a need to break down notions of the idealised worker as an individual with no commitments or responsibilities beyond the workplace. This is a person who is all but non-existent in reality and business would benefit from recognition of the real lives of their employees. There is no automatic relationship between increased caring roles for men and decreased productivity – as demonstrated by the productivity of many millions of women in the labour market.

In 2005, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) consulted on proposals to extend maternity and adoption pay from six to nine months, with the goal of extending both to 12 months by the end of the next parliament, and enabling mothers to transfer a proportion of their maternity leave and pay to fathers. While the proposals are appealing at first sight, closer consideration suggests they are flawed. The proposal to transfer leave to fathers could actually serve to reinforce stereotypes of parenting roles because the leave would still belong to the mother. Although under one proposal the mother could choose to give a fixed proportion of these to the father, he would only be automatically entitled to two weeks’ leave, compared with a mother’s nine months’. Our analysis indicates that it may be more important to prioritise the enhancement of paternity and parental leave before extending maternity leave entitlements.

The rate of paternity leave pay should be increased and the period of leave extended. Research has consistently shown that take-up of paternity and parental leave by fathers increases when there is high wage compensation (O’Brien and Schmildt 2003). A study published in 2005 (Thompson et al) found that only one in six fathers took all two weeks’ leave at the statutory rate, most used a combination of statutory and other forms of leave. This is clearly unsatisfactory because, if men are using up their annual holiday leave entitlement instead of their paternity leave entitlement, this reduces the total leave available to them to spend with their children and partner. In this survey, 80 per cent of fathers thought statutory paternity pay was too low, and the proportion of fathers who say they would take paternity leave rose from 28 per cent at the current rate of just over £100 a week to 80 per cent if it were £200 a week. We should be cautious about such survey responses, as intentions are not always borne out in practice, but the international evidence does strongly point to the importance of near-replacement wage rates of pay. We estimate that to increase paternity

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24 Although this later proposal is likely to prove unlawful under a European Directive that stipulates that maternity leave cannot be reduced once it has been awarded.
pay to £200 for two weeks would cost approximately £67.7 million, based on 80 per cent take-up. To increase both the level of the pay and the length of the leave to four weeks would cost approximately £135 million. If the length of paternity pay was extended but was unpaid or paid at a low rate, it would be unlikely to be taken up very widely. Such a policy would therefore be unlikely to be effective but would be likely to absorb valuable political capital in relation to business.

Our analysis also points to a need for changes to the current parental leave system as it is inadequate and may even serve to entrench gendered inequalities. The following two key changes are needed:

■ The introduction of pay for parental leave and leave for family reasons, ensuring that at least one of the paid months is allocated specifically to fathers.

■ The removal of the limit on the number of weeks that can be taken in the first year.

Ruth Kelly MP, now Secretary of State for Education and Skills warmly endorsed payment for parental leave, writing for IPPR in 2000. She argued that a strategy to mainstream fatherhood was needed, through which gender inequities could be tackled:

Responsible fatherhood is critical to women’s opportunities in the labour market … That means gearing employment policy towards the needs of men as fathers as well as women as mothers … This model sees family-friendly policies in the workplace as the way to promote equal parenting. (2000 p 130)

She went on to argue that parental leave should be paid to contribute to this goal:

Initiatives such as paid parental leave and a strategy to ‘mainstream’ fatherhood take on highly symbolic as well as practical value. The likely result of unpaid parental leave is … that gender inequities are exacerbated in the workplace, rather than narrowed. By contrast, parental leave paid at a high-earnings-replacement ratio is much more likely to be taken up by men as well as women. (2000 pp 130-131).

Kelly rightly highlighted that making parental leave available without offering pay risks exacerbating, rather than reducing, gender inequality. Kelly calculated that 13 weeks’ paid parental leave per parent, at full replacement value, would cost £2 billion in 2000 prices. If it were paid at £100 a week, the costs would be £175 million.

Assumptions about take-up rates were based on answers to the question: ‘how many weeks parental leave would you take if money were not a problem?’ in an ICM poll in April 2000 and costed by KPMG.
At least four weeks of the paid leave entitlement should be designated specifically for fathers, known as a ‘daddy month’. If the father did not take up the paid leave, it would be lost to the family. This policy has substantially increased men’s take-up of parental leave in Scandinavian countries where it has been introduced (and indeed some countries have gone further and introduced two or more daddy months). However, even with a policy that clearly assigned leave to fathers, there is a risk that domestic and workplace cultures could jeopardise take-up. This makes it essential that the policy is implemented alongside all the other measures we describe; on its own it will never be enough.

The removal of the limit on the number of weeks that can be taken in the first year is important, because the first year of life is a critical time for child development and a time when the father’s contribution is likely to have a significant impact (Harker and Kendall 2003). It is a time when parents’ relationships may be under strain and would benefit from the opportunity for leave. It would also allow the father to enable the mother to return to work sooner if she wished. Finally, it is also one of the ‘golden moments’ discussed by Stanley and Williams in chapter three, which present opportunities to forge attachments and patterns of caring in the father-child relationship.

We use the term ‘work-life policies’ here to refer to the cluster of policies that can enable people to combine and integrate their full range of responsibilities and experiences, although the criticisms of this term made by Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport in chapter one are clearly important to recognise.

The introduction, in 2003, of the right to request flexible working for parents of children under the age of six and disabled children under the age of 18, was hailed a success for consensual policy making. However, it is important that we acknowledge the risk that this policy will exacerbate, rather than reduce, gendered patterns of working and caring, illustrating the dangers of consensual policy making in this field. For example, women have taken up the right much more then men and – crucially – have been granted their request more frequently. This could serve to entrench gendered pay inequalities if flexible working comes to be associated with mothers, not fathers. In 2005, the DTI consulted on a proposal to extend the right to request flexible working to carers of adult relatives and/or parents of older children. Before the DTI implements an extension of this policy, it is necessary to explore why fathers are requesting flexible work less frequently and being granted it less frequently.

There is a need to bring about a fundamental shift in British working practices so that it is not seen as necessary to work full-time or regular hours in order to realise maximum productivity. This shift should be promoted through government support for action research that seeks to promote this change within business. It is also necessary for Government to reconsider
working hours legislation and, in particular, systematically to re-evaluate the opt-out from the European working time directive.

**Early years, maternity and childcare services**

Despite the Government’s enthusiasm for mothers’ paid employment, it has not yet introduced adequate measures to deal with the care deficit this creates, and men’s involvement in caring has not increased at the same rate as women’s involvement in work. Responsibility for care is beginning to shift away from women, but it is still unclear in what measure state, private, informal or paternal care will share the responsibility. The availability of high-quality, affordable childcare is one of the key constraining factors on mothers’ and fathers’ choices about how they share care and how they each balance work and care. The Government’s 10-year childcare strategy seeks to enhance the state’s contribution to shared care, but this is not enough on its own.

Maternity services are in the prime position to be the motor for the promotion of active fatherhood. The key to this happening is workforce development. As we’ve seen, services currently have a fundamentally casual approach to the breakdown of the father-child connection, and many practitioners do not take seriously the need to engage the father as well as the mother. Transformation needs to begin with the workforce accepting this need and gaining the skills to engage with men and offer them something meaningful. There is a need for professional training and development, including information on fathers’ roles in child development. This would be boosted by the recruitment of more men in childhood services and ensuring that services are accessible to men. The present time is a key moment to embed the imperative for change within newly created services, and the final critical factor lies with the management of early years’ services. As Burgess has shown in chapter four, at the moment, engagement with fathers is praised, but a lack of engagement is tolerated. The next step is to make engagement universal. This requires a clear message from managers that a lack of change will not be acceptable.

There are opportunities for greater joined-up government. For example, it would be more efficient for maternity services to take the lead in identifying absent fathers, rather than Sure Start or the Child Support Agency. The benefits of public investment in paternity leave could be maximised by also equipping fathers who are on leave as carers. This should include specialised work with young fathers in the transition to parenthood. Antenatal classes should include information about infant care and infant and child development, as well as preparing both mothers and fathers for the social and emotional impact of becoming a parent on each of them as individuals, and on their partnership. Attendance at classes should be actively promoted to prospective fathers.
The National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services requires that: ‘parents and carers are enabled to receive the information, services and support which will help them to care for their children and equip them with skills they need to ensure that their children have optimum life chances and are healthy and safe’. In order to meet this standard, services will need to provide information in places that men frequent and in forms that men are used to receiving – rather than simply targeting mothers, with whom services are likely to be more familiar with communicating. In light of the gap in support for fathers, particularly for men who are becoming fathers, and for post separation, there is a need for a national information service for new fathers that clearly announces society’s expectation of active engagement of all fathers in their children’s lives.

**Relationship support and child protection**

There have been signs that the Government wants to see greater support made available for parents with relationships difficulties. The landmark consultation paper *Every Child Matters* (HMT/DfES 2003) asked how local authorities could develop stress and relationship counselling for couples. The *National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services* requires that: ‘parents with specific needs such as relationship conflict … have their needs identified early and are provided with effective multi-agency support’. In order to meet this standard there is a clear need for investment in a range of relationship support services. This needs to include new skills for professionals as part of workforce development in the NHS and social services, to enable them to identify and respond to relationship difficulties in couples with whom they come into contact.

The evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to strengthen relationships is patchy and mostly American. However, there is a clear case for certain interventions that have been shown to be effective in delivering simple and effective early support. Support based on the principles illustrated by the Brief Encounters pilot should be piloted further. The principles we should take from this are that the support should be:

- straightforward to teach and to apply
- not too time consuming for professionals
- non-intrusive
- targeted at risk times rather than risk people, so it is non-stigmatising
- thoroughly evaluated.

The Government ought to be investing in a UK study similar to the US Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study. This study generated rich data and explored the conditions and capabilities of unmarried parents, especially fathers; the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents;
how children born into these families fare; and how policies and environmental conditions affect families and children. A UK version should focus on the management of change within families rather than the impact of family structures.

The level of funding for relationship support services is extremely low, at £5 million in 2004/05. A wide range of government departments recognise the importance of strong family relationships in supporting the achievement of their desired outcomes, from preventing re-offending to improving children’s educational outcomes. However, few seem to have either a strategy or the resources to support family relationships. If the Government is serious about the National Service Framework standards – as well as a wide range of other objectives – being achieved then this must be addressed through strategic development, backed by increased resource allocation for research and practice development. The Government would be well advised to learn from existing practice within the voluntary and community sector.

One cause of relationship breakdown of particular concern is violence. Where there has been violent behaviour by a father, it is clearly appropriate that children are removed from danger. However, it is unacceptable simply to remove a violent parent – usually a father – from the scene and do nothing to tackle this violence, not least because men can move from one vulnerable family to another without any change in their behaviour. There is an urgent need for a roll-out of perpetrator programmes to tackle the behaviour itself. These programmes need to be integrated into existing projects supporting female victims of violence and their children, as well as into maternity services to tackle violence in pregnancy. Now that health professionals are expected to try to identify violent behaviour, community-based behaviour change programmes are required to deal with it. Probation services ought to be linked up with professionals in Children’s Centres to ensure there is effective local intervention. The fear that violent men create has been a factor in a more general neglect of fathers by practitioners, and has added to the invisibility of men in child protection settings.

In circumstances where parents do separate – for whatever reason – there is a need for adequate emotional and practical support for separating families, not least to boost the chances of fathers remaining involved with children, supported by willing mothers. The role of the Child Support Agency is critical in this. This report has not considered the role and functioning of the Child Support Agency in depth, however IPPR has published elsewhere a discussion of the lessons that the UK could learn from Australia in the successful operation of child support (Burgess 2005). At present the Child Support Agency frequently perpetuates conflict between parents, whereas it could act to facilitate improved relations if it worked more effectively as it does in Australia. Such improvements would have the added effect of increasing payments received by mothers for the support of their children, which would have an impact on child poverty, again as it has done
in Australia. To transform the effectiveness of the Agency it will be necessary for the current review seriously to examine the options for radical and fundamental reform. For example, there is a strong case for its functions to be transferred to HM Revenue and Customs.

Furthermore, the success of the Australian Child Support Agency – based as it is within the Australian Taxation Office – has been in a position to promote exploration of the way in which the benefits system functions in relation to separated families, which could have far reaching consequences for the ability of non-resident fathers to play an active role in their children's lives. At present the UK tax/benefit system treats non-resident parents as non-parents and this clearly places significant limits on fathers' ability to care for their children.

5.3 Conclusion

Fathers are a resource for children and the time has come for public policy to enable men to maximise the benefits they can bring to their children. When fathers' behaviour is negative, this is also of importance to their children, and steps should be taken to address it. Five places for policy makers to start are:

1. Increase paternity pay to 90 per cent of earnings; introduce pay for parental leave allocating a paid ‘daddy month’.

2. Support the development of information and support services for fathers at key transition points, notably in perinatal services and during separation.

3. Include couple relationship support training and training around working with men and fathers in social worker, health visitor and perinatal training and development, and establish a pilot scheme to test supportive interventions.

4. Roll-out community-based perpetrator programmes for fathers with violent behaviour.

5. Establish a UK cohort study to explore how relationships within families can best be supported by policy.

References


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