Supporting fathers after separation or divorce: evidence and insights

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2012

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, in the UK and many other Western societies, there has been anxiety and extensive debate about the absence of separated fathers from children’s lives and the material and emotional costs of this to children, fathers, mothers, and governments. Yet despite the growing literature on divorce-related parenting interventions, claims about their effectiveness continue to be modest and little is known about if and how such programmes may offer support to men as fathers.

The aim of this report is to focus specifically on the issue of fathering after separation or divorce and to review divorce-related interventions potentially available to fathers in this context. It presents findings from an international review of interventions supporting separated parents and/or fathers, undertaken between 2005 and 2012. The time frame was selected in order to identify the most recent interventions and evaluative research and expand the scope of more generic reviews of divorce related interventions.

The review assesses whether and how divorce-related programmes operate to support men’s parenting, father-child and co-parental relationships - the process dimension (intervention goals and implementation); and secondly, it seeks to examine the evidence on whether the selected programmes benefit fathers, mothers and children’s family relationships after separation or divorce- the outcome dimension (intervention impact and effectiveness).

Review of Interventions

A comprehensive search of the appropriate social science databases, the Cochrane and Campbell Libraries was carried out initially using the key words ‘fathers and divorce’ and subsequently alternative combinations of keywords in order to refine the search and identify studies involving programmatic interventions. The most effective were ‘fathers and dispute resolution’ and ‘fathers and co-parenting’ and each database was searched using both of these combinations. An electronic search of relevant family support organisations and charities was also conducted, to identify relevant grey literature. In addition, some hand searching, and author’s name searching from identified articles, was also undertaken to identify and cross reference any further publications on divorce education programmes aimed at or including fathers.

The criteria used for selection were:

- Evaluations or reports of findings from divorce-related parenting programmes aimed exclusively at, or including separating/separated fathers, and which focus on improving parent-child and coparenting relationships.
- Peer reviewed or commissioned research studies published between 2005-July 2012
- Experimental (e.g. control or comparison groups; pre and post-tests) and exploratory (e.g. qualitative, descriptive or feasibility studies) designs
- Not restricted to the UK, but published in English

The Interventions

The table below lists each of the 14 interventions and goals. Ten are American, and one each from the UK, New Zealand, Australia and Israel. The set consists of programmes with a parent education focus, some which are more therapeutic or psycho-educational, others which focus on mediation processes and some which combine elements of all of these. The programmes vary in terms of context for delivery, target group and duration, certain common aims can be identified: to increase parental awareness of the impact of separation and divorce on children; to reduce interparental conflict through the learning or improvement of co-parenting and conflict
management skills; to improve outcomes for children; particularly in relation to psychological and emotional adjustment.

In terms of formally stated programme goals, only four programmes: *Dads For Life, Kids’ Turn, The Separated Parents Information Programme, and Supporting Father Involvement*, expressed goals which explicitly related to fathers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention (n=14)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dads For Life (Braver, Griffin &amp; Cookston 2005, Cookston, Braver, Griffin, Deluse &amp; Miles 2006)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for non-custodial fathers, to improve father-child relationships and reduce interparental conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Collaborative Divorce Project (Kline Pruett, Insabella &amp; Gustafason 2005, Kline Pruett, Ebling &amp; Cowan 2011)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing couples who are parents of young children, to provide wraparound services to support parents and generate a ‘culture of collaboration’ between them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids’ Turn (Cookston &amp; Fung 2011)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for all members of a separating or divorcing family, to improve parent-child relations, increase awareness of the impact of separation on children and reduce interparental conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Forever (Dworin &amp; Karahan 2005, Brotherson, White Masich 2010, Brotherson, Rittenbach &amp; White 2012)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing parents, to increase awareness of the impact of separation on children and improve co-parenting skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Father Involvement (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett &amp; Kline Pruett, 2006, Cowan, Cowan, Kline Pruett, Pruett &amp; Wong, 2009, Kline Pruett, Cowan, Cowan &amp; Pruett, 2009)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention, involving two treatment groups (couples and fathers-only) for low-income families with young children, to support father involvement, prevent coparenting conflict and support coparenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Kids (Schramm &amp; Calix 2011)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing parents, to increase awareness of the impact of separation on children and improve co-parenting skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parenting Education Programme (Laufer &amp; Berman 2006)</td>
<td>ISRAEL</td>
<td>Intervention for separated or divorced parents to increase awareness of the impact of separation on children and encourage parental cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated Parents Information Programme (Trinder et al 2011)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing parents, to encourage parents to focus on children’s needs and reduce interparental conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PACT (Parents Achieving in Collaborative Teams) (Brown et al 2009)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing families experiencing high levels of conflict, to facilitate dispute resolution and reduce interparental conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cooperative Parenting and Divorce Programme (Whitehurst, O’Keefe &amp; Wilson 2008)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing couples, to increase awareness of children’s needs for adjustment after separation and reduce interparental conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Apart (Brandon, 2006)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing parents, to increase awareness of the impact of separation and interparental conflict on children and improve parenting skills to help children’s adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Through Separation (Robertson &amp; Pryor 2011)</td>
<td>NZ</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing parents, to increase awareness of the impact of separation on children, minimise interparental conflict and increase parental cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Together (Owen &amp; Rhoades 2010)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing couples experiencing conflict, to reduce interparental conflict and increase cooperative coparenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-Focused and Child-Inclusive Dispute Resolution (McIntosh, Wells &amp; Long 2007)</td>
<td>AUS</td>
<td>Intervention for separating or divorcing families experiencing high levels of conflict (including domestic violence), involving two treatment programmes, both aimed at reducing interparental conflict and children’s distress</td>
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</table>
Summary of Key findings

General impact of Interventions:

Although the number of intervention studies is limited and the quality of evaluation uneven, there is evidence that programme participation is associated with:

- **Reductions in parental conflict**, even in high conflict cases. This result includes more specific findings such as reduction of conflict in the presence of children, or reduction of breadth and depth of conflict issues. This effect was strong, reported for 11 of the 14 interventions, and cited as a key benefit for children, fathers and mothers.

- **Improvements to the coparental relationship.** The evidence is more modest, not least because the conceptualisation and measurement of this outcome is varied. Reported findings include: increased positive coparenting behaviours, reduced negative coparenting behaviours, improvements in perception of the other parent's coparenting skills and improved relationship adjustment. Seven of the 14 interventions had some impact on coparenting and so it seems fair to say that these programmes may offer support for improving coparenting after separation or divorce.

- **Reduction in children's internalising problems** (children's sadness and low affect) over time, with the effect being strongest for those children experiencing the greatest problems at baseline. Seven of the 14 interventions had some positive effect on child outcomes.

- There is also consistent reporting of **high levels of parental satisfaction and valuing** of divorce-related parenting programmes, particularly immediately after the programme had been completed. This positive response was not affected by whether attendance was voluntary or compulsory.

- Increased parental report of 'intention' to become more **aware of the impact of separation on children**.

Intervention impact and fathers:

There was no consistent analysis of gender in studies evaluating the potential effects of divorce related parenting programmes. In a significant minority no actual distinction is made between fathers or mothers, with mother and father measures routinely not analysed separately and the term ‘parents’ being used to present and discuss all findings. Similarly there is no routine disaggregation of parental status (mother or father) and parental residential status (resident or non-resident).

Three studies did disaggregate men’s experiences and identities as fathers, either through the design of the intervention or the evaluation, (**Dads For Life, Supporting Father Involvement, The Collaborative Divorce Project**). Seven evaluations present some differentiation between fathers and mothers on co-parenting. The evidence base of these studies is still small, and there is little clear or comprehensive information, particularly on men’s parenting or father-child relationships. Even where programmes and evaluations involved goals related explicitly to father involvement, these were sometimes not captured or measured in the evaluation.

Benefits for children:

Three of the 11 evaluations which offer any discussion of gender report findings which suggest that intervention with fathers brings certain benefits for children. **Dads For Life** reported the
reduction of internalising problems for children (according to both fathers and mothers); and Child-Focused and Child-Inclusive Dispute Resolution reported that children experienced improved emotional availability of their fathers. Two further indirect benefits to children arising from father's participation were also reported from The Collaborative Divorce Project: firstly, that father involvement remained constant with a small increase over time, and secondly, that there was an increase in the payment of child maintenance by non-resident parents in intervention families.

**Improving coparenting:**

Seven of the evaluations which differentiate between fathers and mothers on this dimension reported positive effects of programmes on coparenting behaviours and/or relationship adjustment. In general, these findings relate to the reduction of interparental conflict and the increase in positive coparenting behaviours. In addition to the overall finding that fathers perceive a reduction in conflict, the Working Together evaluation noted a decrease in conflict in the presence of children, with this effect being slightly stronger for men over time.

Evidence also suggests differences in fathers and mothers perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the coparenting relationship. For example, the Working Together study showed that whilst both fathers and mothers reported improved coparental relationship adjustment, this effect appeared to decrease for fathers over time. Similarly, in Dads For Life, although the reduction of conflict remained for fathers over time, the positive affect on perceptions of coparenting did not.

With reference to negotiating overnight stays, in the Child-Focused and Child-Inclusive Dispute Resolution evaluation, fathers in the CI group reported greater satisfaction with caring arrangements which did not necessarily involve a substantial increase, or ‘equal share’ in overnight stays, and were more likely to report that the mediation process was ‘fair’.

**Father-child relationships and men’s parenting:**

The evidence on ways in which divorce related parenting programmes may improve father-child relationships is very small, predominantly because the majority of studies either did not seek to measure this, or did not report any findings related to it. Indeed where reporting on this question is included, potential effects are often inferred or raised as a discussion point rather than an empirically validated finding.

Very few standardised measures of parent-child relationships were used or adapted across the set of studies, and only two evaluations used a standardised measure of father-child relationships and/or parent-child relationship quality, and did include some reporting of findings related to this.

Findings from both the Dads For Life and The Collaborative Divorce Project evaluation infer improvement in father-child relationships by their reporting of improvements in child behavioural outcomes, and slightly increased father involvement over time, respectively, but this potential effect is not reported on directly. The Child-Focused and Child-Inclusive Dispute Resolution study reports that children experience increased emotional availability of fathers and greater feelings of closeness to him. Because the child-father measure was used with children only, there are no reported findings on relationship quality from fathers’ perspectives, but again, it may be inferred that greater emotional availability and closeness is experienced as a benefit to fathers also.

Supporting Father Involvement is the only evaluation to use a direct measure of the father-child relationship, with fathers, and to report the findings. It shows that, in comparison to the control group, both treatment groups (delivered in either couple or fathers-only format) positively
affected men’s psychological involvement with children, over time. The stronger impact was found for the couple rather than father-only mode of intervention. Only a minority of participants of the Supporting Father Involvement programme were separated.

Men’s psychological responses to separation and divorce:

There are very few, predominantly inferred, findings which can be linked to men’s psychological responses or adjustment (e.g. fathers’ perceptions of, ‘fairness, or of feeling ‘safe’ or supported by the programme). One study Supporting Father Involvement, reported a decrease in parental stress for both fathers and mothers.

Recommendations

A series of recommendations for developing father-inclusive and gender-sensitive divorce-related parenting programmes relevant to academics, practitioners and policy-makers are offered:

Improving demographic data about fathers

Basic demographic information on the parental status of men, male fertility and family formation is not routinely collected in many countries. More systematic collection of demographic data on men’s lives as fathers would be valuable to researchers, practitioners and policymakers alike.

Incorporation of analysis by gender of parent into evaluation design

There is no consistent consideration and analysis of gender as part of evaluating the potential effects of divorce related parenting programmes. Developing both more systematic and nuanced ways of including gender as part of programme and evaluation design, would improve understanding of the complex process of family restructuring after separation or divorce.

Further development and application of father-related indicators

Few father-related measures are used in the evaluation of divorce-related parenting programmes, and where they are present, they are not necessarily reported on. We recommend that existing father-related indicators be more routinely used, and that collaborative work between researchers and practitioners in this field could contribute to the development of further measures of fathering activities and relationships.

Further conceptual work on family restructuring and coparental relationship adjustment after separation and divorce

Alongside the development of reliable research indicators, there is also a need for appropriate theoretical frameworks to inform programme design and shed light on evaluation data. We recommend further conceptual work on men’s parenting, the gendered dynamics of the coparental relationship and changing fathering roles and identities. This work would provide valuable insights for this field of intervention. The importance of applying a critical gender perspective in order to attend to issues of gender difference and of gender equity is recommended.

Undertaking of more formative evaluation and feasibility studies

The review shows that evidence on the impact of divorce-related parenting programmes on fathers, or on issues relevant to father-inclusive design and implementation for this group of men is surprisingly rare. There is much scope for developing formative evaluation of settings, practices and processes involved in the provision of such interventions, in addition to summative evaluation of programme effects. Given the current governmental ambition to extend services to separated families, there may also be scope for innovation in developing gender-sensitive and father-inclusive support programmes.
Increased collaboration between research institutions and practitioners in both statutory and voluntary sectors

A good deal of support for separated fathers is delivered at a regional and local level, often via various partnerships or commissioning arrangements between statutory and voluntary organisations. In this network of diverse and often imaginative regional provision there is much valuable knowledge and insight. We recommend that increased collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners could be highly productive for improving programme design, implementation and understanding of the complex family processes and relationships involved.
The authors

Dr Georgia Philip:

Georgia Philip is currently an ESRC Post Doctoral Research Fellow, and joined the Centre for Research on the Child and Family in November 2011 after completing her PhD with the Open University. Her doctoral research was a qualitative study of fathering after divorce or separation, which focused on fathers’ accounts of fathering experiences and identities, and on the processes of sustaining relationships with children and with mothers. Georgia Philip is a member of the BSA, BSA Families and Relationships Study Group and the Workshop for Qualitative Research on Personal and Family Relationships (London South Bank University). She is also an affiliate member of Centre for Research on Citizenship, Identities and Governance, at the Open University. Her current research interests include: fathers, gender and care, qualitative and feminist research, the feminist ethics of care, parenting interventions and family policy.

Professor Margaret O’Brien:

Margaret O’Brien is co-director of UEA’s Centre and Professor in Child and Family Studies. Her research interests are in the field of fathers, work and family life with a policy and parenting support focus. She is a UK representative with Peter Moss on the International Network on Parental Leave Policy and Research which produces a yearly review of 33 countries available at http://www.leavenetwork.org/ and member of UN experts group preparing background reports for the International Year of the Family 2014 Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing World (2011), Work-Family Balance Report. She is currently working with Georgia Philip reviewing parenting programmes supporting fathers after separation (ESRC); Michela Franceschelli and Alice Haynes evaluating parenting support for engaging with fathers in Children’s Centres who are recent arrivals in the UK (Trust for London/ Fatherhood Institute).