



# Research on the Importance of Both Parents in Children's Lives

A summary by *Families Need Fathers*

We summarise in this note data and research on the positive impact of shared parenting, and its absence, on children whose parents have separated or divorced.<sup>1</sup>

## The Background: changing trends

- Between 150,000 and 200,000 parental couples separate each year.
- Of the 12 million children in the country, in the region of ¼ have had to endure the separation of their mother and father.<sup>2</sup>
- 93% of resident parents are female and 89% of Non-Resident Parents (NRP) are male.<sup>3</sup>
- The UK census shows that in England and Wales between 1991 and 2001:
  - Married couple households with dependent children fell from 73% to 60%
  - Cohabiting couple households with dependent children rose by 102%

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<sup>1</sup> There is research which shows a negative impact, or no discernible impact, on children's welfare. But we believe that the body of evidence cited here is sufficiently convincing, and sufficiently lacking currently in an impact on policy, to merit attention.

<sup>2</sup> HMG July 2004 Green Paper Parental Separation: Children's Needs and Parents' Responsibilities

<sup>3</sup> ONS Omnibus Survey, 2003

- Lone parent households rose by 21%

Comparing the situation now with some fifteen years ago, a period in which concepts of parental equality have come increasingly to the fore, the picture is of:

- More fathers taking more involved parenting roles in families prior to separation;
- More families, when intact, having fathers as primary carers or at least in properly shared primary caring roles;
- More fathers, subsequent to separation, having residence and shared residence orders for their children than before.
- Many men feel they are under pressure both to earn the major income for their families and to care for their children.<sup>4</sup>
  
- British fathers:
  - work the longest hours in the Europe Union (an average 48 hours a week for those with children under 11);<sup>5</sup>
  - continue to earn an average two-thirds of family incomes.
  
- Although mothers still carry the major share of household and childcare responsibilities, parents in dual-earner households commonly report that childcare is equally shared.
  
- In a substantial minority of households with dependant children, fathers are the main carers while mothers are out at work.

The change in the nature of the father's role is borne out by research<sup>6</sup>:

- British fathers now undertake approximately nearly half of all childcare; According to a 2007 EOC study, mothers recorded an average of 2 hours 32 minutes per day looking after their own children, compared with 2 hours 16 minutes by fathers;<sup>7</sup>
- The amount of time that fathers of children under the age of 5 spend with them on child-related activities has gone up from less than a

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<sup>4</sup> This point and the following in this paragraph are from C Lewis *A man's place in the home: Fathers and families in the UK* available from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/foundations/440.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> See also Louie Burghes, Lynda Clarke and Natalie Cronin *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain* Family Policy Studies Centre 1997

<sup>6</sup> I Shemilt & M O'Brien *Working Fathers: Earning and Caring* (London, Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), 2003)

<sup>7</sup> EOC, *Completing the Revolution: The Leading Indicators* (London, 2007)

quarter of an hour per day in the mid 1970's to two hours a day by the late 1990's.

Research related to this work showed that<sup>8</sup>:

- A child of separated parents stands a greater chance of negative outcomes than a child who has not experienced this, such as offending, running away from home, teenage pregnancy, entering adulthood unqualified, being unemployed, substance abuse, mental health problems, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and subsequent repercussions on future generations and relationships.
- Most children<sup>9</sup>:
  - want and value contact;
  - view the NRP as an important figure who is still part of the family, and the loss of contact as painful;
  - miss the NRP and many would like to see more of them;
  - value the effort and commitment of their NRP in making a family life for them.
  - And would like to be actively involved in maintaining contact.
- Looking at the current situation as opposed to 15 yrs ago:
  - more fathers take more involved parenting roles in families prior to separation;
  - more in tact families have fathers as primary carers, or at least properly shared primary caring roles;
  - more fathers have residence and shared residence orders for their children than before.

The closer children are to their father, regardless of the quality of the mother-child relationship, the happier, more satisfied, and less distressed they are<sup>10</sup>. The quality of contact is significant, as well as the quantity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> P Pressdee, J Vater, F Judd QC, J Baker QC, Contact; The New Deal, (2006) Family Law

<sup>9</sup> See Pressdee et al op cit, J Owusu-Bempah (1997) Information about the Absent Parent as a factor in the well-being of children International Social Work 38 pp 235-275 and Dr Bren Neale, Professor Carol Smart, Dr Amanda Wade 1999 New Childhoods? Children and Co-Parenting After Divorce available from <http://www.hull.ac.uk/children5to16programme/briefings/smart.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> P Amato, Father-child relations, Mother-child relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-being in Early Adulthood (1994) Journal of Marriage and the Family

<sup>11</sup> See J Dunn et al (2004) Children's perspectives on their relationships with their non-resident fathers: Influences, Outcomes and implications Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 45(3) 553; and S Gilmore Contact/shared residence and child well-being: research evidence and its implications for legal decision-making International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family 20 (2006) pp 344-365 a good survey of the literature combined with a defence of the status quo.

The relationship between father involvement and outcomes for UK children is demonstrated<sup>12</sup>:

- Father involvement established before the age of 7 is associated with good parent-child relationships in adolescence and also later satisfactory partnerships in adult life;
- Children with involved fathers are less likely to be in trouble with the police;
- Father involvement is strongly related to children's later educational attainment.

Research into contact post-separation shows that contact can deliver a number of benefits, including the meeting of the child's needs for<sup>13</sup>:

- Warmth, approval, feeling unique and special to a parent – 'experiences that can be the foundation for healthy emotional growth and development';
- Extending experiences and developing (or maintaining) meaningful relationships;
- Information and knowledge;
- Repairing distorted relationships or perceptions.
- Building the child's self esteem and relations with their peers, especially at school.<sup>14</sup>

An ONS Survey<sup>15</sup> indicated that:

- Overall, at least half of all children surveyed had some form of contact (direct or indirect) with their non-resident parent at least once a week.
- 43% of children in the resident parent sample and 59% of children in the non-resident parent sample had direct contact with their non-resident parent at least once a week.
- A further nine per cent of children in the resident parent sample and 18% of children in the non-resident parent sample had indirect contact at least once a week.

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<sup>12</sup> Various papers published by E Flouri & A Buchanan 2002-2004, with the use of data from the British National Child Development Study

<sup>13</sup> J Sturge & D Glaser Contact and Domestic Violence – The Experts Court Report (2000), Family Law 615, at p 617

<sup>14</sup> L Kurtz (1994) Psychological coping resources in Elementary School Children of Divorce American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 64 pp 554-563

<sup>15</sup> Alison Blackwell & Fiona Dawe NON-RESIDENT PARENTAL CONTACT Based on data from the National Statistics Omnibus Survey for The Department for Constitutional Affairs October 2003

- A fifth (21%) of children in the resident parent sample and a tenth (10%) of children in the non-resident parent sample had direct contact with their non-resident parent less than once a week.
- Less than a twentieth of children have indirect contact less than once a week (4% for children in the resident parent sample and 3% of children in the non-resident parent sample).
- A quarter (24%) of children in the resident parent sample and 10% of children in the non-resident parent sample have no direct or indirect contact with their non-resident parent.
- On the whole children's parents were more likely to be 'very satisfied' with the contact arrangements if the non-resident parent saw the child frequently.
- Satisfaction with the contact arrangements among the responding parents of children whose non-resident parent did not have direct contact with the child was very different in the two sample groups. Over half the responding parents in the resident parent sample were 'very satisfied' with the arrangements while only 6% of responding parents in the non-resident parent sample were 'very satisfied'.
- In general, the more frequently the child has some contact with their non-resident parent the more likely it is that the contact arrangements were informally agreed between parents. This pattern is reversed for informal contact arrangements that were never agreed between the parents: the less often the child has contact with their non-resident parent the more likely it is that the informal contact arrangements have never been agreed.

A US study comparing 'joint custody' and 'noncustodial' fathers indicated that the former paid more in child support than the latter (refuting a belief some espouse that shared parenting can be used as a bargaining counter to reduce the non-resident parent's payments to the other parent).<sup>16</sup>

A 2 year study of 162 children of separated parents selected from a representative community sample in the UK, which sought to address 'the unresolved issue of the links between relationship quality, child-father contact and children's outcomes' concluded that<sup>17</sup>:

- More frequent and more regular contact (which included communication by telephone) was associated with closer, more intense relationships with non-resident fathers (relationships that were both more positive and more conflicted), and fewer adjustment problems in the children;

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<sup>16</sup> J A Arditti (1992) Differences between fathers with joint custody and noncustodial fathers American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 62 pp 186-195 (see especially p 194).

<sup>17</sup> J Dunn, H Cheng, T O'Connor & L Bridges Children's Perspectives on their Relationships with their Non-Resident Fathers: Influences, Outcomes and Implications (2004) Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, Volume 45:3, pp 553-566

- That contact with non-resident fathers was associated with children's well-being.

Regarding the issue of quality and quantity of contact, findings were<sup>18</sup>:

- The two concepts ought not to be mutually exclusive and must in many cases be inter-related;
- Unless contact is relatively frequent and includes overnight stays, it was hard to see how active parenting and closeness can be maintained. It could be used as an argument for shared residence as the arrangement which is most likely to facilitate high levels of involved and authoritative parenting.

A Cambridge University longitudinal study<sup>19</sup> took issue with the myth that non-resident fathers often simply fade away from the children's lives::

- Some 60 per cent of fathers who rarely saw their children were in dispute with ex-wives about the frequency contact.
- Nearly half the fathers who never had children staying overnight described ongoing disagreements with their ex-wives, often centred around new partners.
- In most cases, the new partner identified by fathers as the source of conflict was that of the ex-wife - in other words, a potential or actual stepfather.
- Stepmothers, whatever fairy tales might indicate, were far less often a cause of conflict in respect of contact with children, at least in the eyes of the fathers.
- Of the fathers who had seemingly 'dropped out' by 1992, 74 per cent wished to change what was, for them, an unsatisfactory situation.

Regarding children's' contact with members of the wider family<sup>20</sup>:

- “..at some level relations are taken for granted and unexamined, perhaps because they are so much a part of the fabric of our emotional landscape. Yet for children they are a powerful and subtle source of identity. They offer unique perspectives on parents and on themselves, in ways that enhance an emerging sense of self within the web of family within which most children develop.”

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<sup>18</sup> A Buchanan & J Hunt Disputed Contact Cases in the Court in A Bainham, B Lindley, M Richards & L Trinder (eds) Children and Their Families: Contact, Rights, and Welfare (Hart Publishing, 2003)

<sup>19</sup> Janet Walker, Peter McCarthy and Bob Simpson Renegotiating Fatherhood Relate Centre for Family Studies February 1997

<sup>20</sup> J Pryor Children's Contact with Relatives, in A Bainham, B Lindley, M Richards & L Trinder (eds) Children and Their Families: Contact, Rights, and Welfare (2003) Hart Publishing

Interesting light on the idea that young fathers are often feckless and uncaring about their offspring came from a study by Newcastle University<sup>21</sup> which investigated a group of single, non-residential, non-custodial fathers aged 16-24 who did want to be involved with their children. The study found that:

- Fathers felt they were made to feel unimportant both during the pregnancy and after the birth. Little effort was made to encourage them to develop and maintain involvement with their child. However, the men themselves saw 'being there' for their children as extremely important. They were keen to be 'better' or more involved fathers than their own fathers had been.
- Few young men were aware of their lack of legal rights in relation to their child. There was an amount of misinformation both amongst fathers and those working with them. No information on rights was readily available to them.
- Most of the fathers did report contributing towards their child's maintenance. However, this sometimes took the form of gifts, clothing, treats and practical child-care if cash was limited. The men resented the fact that their financial contributions would be deducted from the mother's Income Support and thus not benefit the child.
- Difficulties establishing and maintaining a suitable independent home prevented men from having greater access to and involvement with their children. Unemployment and resulting lack of money also prevented young men being involved in the way they wanted to be.
- Because of their young age many felt unable to access support from the few fathers groups which existed. They did not feel welcome at general family support groups or support groups established for young mothers.
- Both the child's paternal and maternal grandparents strongly influenced the young man in developing an early relationship with his child. Despite the stress it sometimes caused, the fathers' families often helped with accommodation and financial support.

Even allowing for the increase in cohabitation in recent years, there is a greater chance of a child conceived and born out of marriage being raised from birth by a mother alone in the 1990s than there was a decade ago. Whilst research in recent years has focused on single lone mothers, little is known about the role of the men who fathered their children. Birth data do not record

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<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Speak, Stuart Cameron and Rose Gilroy Young, single, non-residential fathers: their involvement in fatherhood Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1997) Social Policy Research 137

details of a child's unmarried father. Thus, single fathers are invisible as a group; we have no way of knowing precisely how many there are or, more importantly, how many maintain a close relationships with their children, or what form their relationships may take.

**Summary**<sup>22</sup>:

- Contact has potential value in terms of developing the child's sense of identity, preserving links with the wider family, and providing an additional source of support for children and even protection from abuse. In ordinary circumstances a parent with an established relationship with the child should not have to prove that contact is in the child's best interests.

**Families Need Fathers**

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<sup>22</sup> J Hunt & C Roberts Child Contact with Non-Resident Parents (2004) University of Oxford