

Fathers' Experiences of Support in North East Glasgow ¹

Summary Paper – September 2017

Background

Local research in Glasgow demonstrated the importance of social support as a protective factor for the mental health and wellbeing of mothers.² The evidence around the role and impact of social and peer support for fathers is lacking. An increased knowledge of the experiences and needs of fathers, and their views and experiences of social support, may help to improve current service provision to better meet the needs of fathers in North East Glasgow.

Aim

The study, which was conducted in 2016/17 aimed to explore what are the support experiences and needs of fathers and fathers to be in North East Glasgow. It explored the main social and emotional challenges for fathers and fathers to be by conducting interviews with 15 fathers from North East Glasgow. Of specific interest was to find out if and how fathers in North East Glasgow access social support and peer support for becoming a parent.

Findings

Theme 1 – Avoidance of emotional difficulties and gender role constraints

- Overall fathers reported coping well in the transition to fatherhood, and did not report high levels of stress or anxiety.
- Fathers felt it was difficult to prepare for the impact having a baby would have on them practically, socially and emotionally, but news of a baby brought feelings of nervousness and a sense of responsibility that was usually welcomed by the father to be.
- There was a tendency among the fathers to focus on the practical difficulties relating to pregnancy and parenthood. These included changes to lifestyle and circumstances, childcare, financial concerns and providing support to their partner.
- Many of the fathers in the study felt that fatherhood did not come naturally to them in the way that it did for their partner; however previous experience with children, often those of a friend or family member, seemed to be related to feeling more confident.
- Fathers said that they were unlikely to talk about the emotional or mental health impacts of fatherhood, however many spoke about the ups and downs of fatherhood and a small number described feelings of

¹ This research was conducted and submitted in part fulfilment of the Master of Public Health degree, College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences, University of Glasgow. The fieldwork was conducted in 2016 and 2017 and the project was submitted in August 2017. The full paper available from Susie.heywood@ggc.scot.nhs.uk

² Sloan, H & Donnelly, R (eds) (2013). *From 'Bumps to Bundles': Perinatal mental health in NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde. NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Glasgow.*

fear, worry, stress, exhaustion, pressure and depression. In most cases these were felt to be a normal part of becoming a father.

- Many fathers still seemed constrained by traditional gender roles, despite an acknowledgement of the changing nature of fatherhood from previous generations, and this significantly impacted their ability to seek support with most fathers tending towards self sufficiency.
- There was a sense that fathers struggled to find a role during pregnancy, however once the baby had been born they described a hands on role that was different to the role their own fathers had taken.
- While the fathers were aware of recent policy changes allowing shared parental leave, only one father had taken an extended period of time off work following the birth. For those who did not this was primarily for financial or job role reasons. For many fathers this was felt to limit their ability to be involved in the day to day aspects of child rearing.

"I don't think anybody can prepare for it. I don't think it isnae until you actually have got the baby there and you are haudin them and you start to realise that your full world just revolves around you doing things for them. I think that's where it starts to kick in" **H, 31 years old**

"I remember there was a point a couple of weeks in where I'd got so used to the fatigue there was a breaking point where it was just so bad, and then after that it was just no problem...I was so used to being exhausted that for some reason my mind and my body kind of kicked in and just adjusted to being exhausted and I managed to cope better that way." **C, 37 years old**

"It brought out fears that am I going to be the same as my dad? Am I going to abandon my child and stuff like that? I know I wouldn't have, but those kind of thoughts were going through my head all the time." **A, 29 years old**

"because I was that young, I just thought I could dae it myself. I didn't think I needed any help." **J, 21 years old**

"I guess because dads are parents as well. It gave me that bit of assurance that dads can play their part and it doesn't necessarily have to be a defined part, it can be a fluid flexible type part particularly in the year 2017 as well. Even amongst some older dads there doesn't seem to be any right or wrong way to be a father." **G, 31 years old**

"I don't think there's a fair balance. Dads get two weeks and the mums get six to nine months or a year. It just puts the value on each parent. Yeh its kind of set out before you even begin." **M, 37 years old**

Theme 2 – Society, services and support which prioritises mothers

- Many of the fathers had not attended antenatal classes due to inability to get time off work. Time off tended to prioritise appointments which were viewed as more crucial such as scans.

- Fathers described antenatal classes which prioritised labour and birth and how they could provide support for their partners, rather than helping them to prepare emotionally or practically for becoming fathers.
- Support from services in the antenatal period and beyond was perceived by the fathers to be focused on mothers and this was accepted by the fathers, though many reported feeling frustrated at the lack of specific services or support for them as fathers.
- This focus on mothers was felt to extend into community based parent and child groups, activities and organisations. While most of the fathers had attended some sort of parent/child activity they reported feeling awkward, uncomfortable and in the minority. For many of the fathers work commitments were a barrier to attending such activities, and several felt that the content and nature of these groups were geared towards women. Most fathers were unaware of anything targeted towards fathers.
- Where services were discussed there was a feeling amongst the fathers that there were for “other people” who for various reasons may be more in need.
- Despite reporting a lack of support many of the fathers praised the more general support, care and professionalism of staff that they as a family received.

“You went to antenatal classes and it was like, you need to support the wife, you know? I would sit and watch people and you could see the dads pure like, their shoulders going up and just feeling dead tense...it was kind of like you need to support, you need to do this, you need to do that, it was all this is what you should be doing and it was kind of like, I think that was pressure because you don’t really know what to expect yourself!” A, 29 years old

“I certainly feel that fathers in my personal point of view are treated like second class citizens...I just got the feeling that I was just a spare throughout the entire time and you know I was just there as a passenger...I don’t feel as if I was ever addressed directly.” C, 37 years old

“I was on my own you know. I remember still trying to tie the knot at the back [of his gown], the daft knot, and at the same time trying to wipe the tears away from my eyes, and listening to [my wife’s] crying.” K, 43 years old

“There was a lot of different midwives that came out to us. There was one in particular that actually just kind of sat with mum for a bit and said how are you doing? Like took her to a different room and just kind of asked her how she was doing because obviously baby blues and whatnot. And then she came in and took me to a different room and started asking how I was getting on and that was really good. It felt like it wasn’t, it felt like it wasn’t all these midwives coming out. It felt like there was one midwife coming out and a couple of people with a baby.” O, 21 years old

“There isn’t an organisation or anything like that that’s there for the father. A lot was going on and all the organisations were saying ‘well you should see it from [the mothers] point of view, and there wasn’t anyone going the other way.” D, 37 years old

Theme 3 – The role of informal social support

- Family was the most commonly cited source of support for the fathers. They described receiving advice, reassurance and practical support from various family members, and there was a sense that even when not being given the support was there if they should need or ask for it.
- For a small number of the fathers this support was either unavailable or undesirable, and in some cases this was down to perceived generational differences in parenting styles.
- Partners were the most common source of emotional support, and many fathers described a team work type approach to parenting, with strong, open and communicative relationships.
- The transition to parenthood was felt by many of the fathers to have had a positive effect on their relationship with their partner, and even where relationship breakdown had occurred there was often evidence of continuing support and co-parenting.
- The fathers also received support from wider sources including friends, acquaintances, work colleagues and extended family. None of the fathers had made new friends as a result of becoming a father, however becoming a father had for many of the fathers brought with it a renewed or strengthened connection with existing friends who were also fathers. Some reported a distancing from friends who were not fathers.
- Social support tended to happen informally and opportunistically, and tended to be focused on the practical aspects of parenting. The support was often reciprocal in nature and involved sharing stories and experiences, ideas and solutions.
- While the fathers described having lots of support available from these sources should they need it, many appeared to tend towards self sufficiency and spoke about finding their own solutions. Many had found individual coping mechanisms which helped them when things were difficult.

“It seems to me that although here in Glasgow and in Scotland society has got problems like everywhere else, family is important. And families seem to be reasonably large and people are quite happy to go and spend time with each other. And so probably the function, you know meeting fathers with kids, it is done in the family itself and doesn’t need anything from the outside world, but this is more of a feeling than anything” **L, 48 years old**

“I kind of shied away, I kind of, in my friends group I kind of, like I’d be the joker and that, whereas I just kind of didn’t want to talk about these things. I know I should have but, and I know they would have been there if I wanted them to be but I was just kind of like, they don’t know what I’m going through.” **A, 29 years old**

“They reinforce, so even when you’ve got that wee element of doubt in yer own head, they are gieing ye their approval, its no approval but them saying that you are doing a good job geez ye that wee bit of confidence in yerself.” **H, 31 years old**

Theme 4 – Support from other fathers

- The fathers in the study had not experienced high levels of peer support from other fathers and had not increased their social circle as a result of fatherhood. Interaction with other fathers was minimal and tended to be within families or existing friendship groups. When they did occur, these interactions were thought to be useful.
- None of the fathers mentioned using the internet as a support tool or as a way of meeting or chatting with other fathers.
- Support from their own fathers was not common amongst the fathers, and was often related to perceived differences in parenting styles.
- The fathers could see positives and negatives in father to father peer support, and did not see this as something they particularly needed.
- The fathers felt that initiating conversations and building relationships with other fathers was not something that came as naturally for men as it seems to with women. This was felt to be because men were naturally more awkward and guarded, but also because the environments and dynamics of the groups they had experienced were not conducive to social contact between fathers and were often very child focused.
- While none of the fathers had attended a group specific to fathers many were able to identify motivations for attending such a group. These tended to be around spending time with their child, to bond and interact, but many spoke about welcoming the chance to spend time with other fathers.

“When we went to that prenatal class it was great to be around other fathers as well who were prospective fathers, and hearing their points of view and all the rest of it.” C, 37 years old

“One of my good friends has two kids of his own so he was able to share some invaluable advice and erm again there was the relationship there where I didn’t feel like I couldn’t, there was no questions I couldn’t ask well so that was quite good.” G, 31 years old

“I think maybe if you were around someone that was in the same situation being either positive or negative about it, the more positive they are you might not be that positive and then start to think, why am I not that positive? Or they might be that negative and that would just cloud your judgement.” O, 21 years old

“I was walking past other dads and you’re kind of making eye contact and just saying alright, alright, alright, but there’s no kind of meaningful conversations. You are just passing each other...I don’t think other dads seem to be comfortable in that environment, talking to other dads. I don’t know, they’re just other strangers, maybe that’s it.” B, 29 years old

“See the play areas, ye wurnae bonding wae them. See that way he’d just be running about and I’d be sitting on ma phone and I’d be like this isnae what its for know what I mean?... They are just running about and you are just sitting there so there’s not actual interaction.” I, 29 years old

Conclusions

It is clear that fathers' support needs and experiences are quite different from those of mothers. The cultural masculine ideal continues to impact fathers despite attitudes towards fatherhood having changed from the previous generation. The pervading idea that men should be able to "handle it" continues to impact on men's ability, as fathers, to seek support, and limits their ability to share the emotional impacts of becoming a father. Adapting services and support offers to be more acceptable and useful to fathers appears to be important, though fathers may be more likely to access these in an ad-hoc informal way, and may most benefit from support which is practical and helps them become prepared for fatherhood. Given its importance as a source of support, initiatives which support and preserve the family unit, including relationships with wider family, may be beneficial to fathers. Additionally increasing informal opportunities for fathers to meet other fathers may help to improve access to peer support, however anyone planning such groups or activities would need to consider how they can support the building of these peer relationships as this may not occur naturally. Initiatives which aim to counter the impact of negative masculine stereotypes which are a barrier to men accessing support should be welcomed.

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