

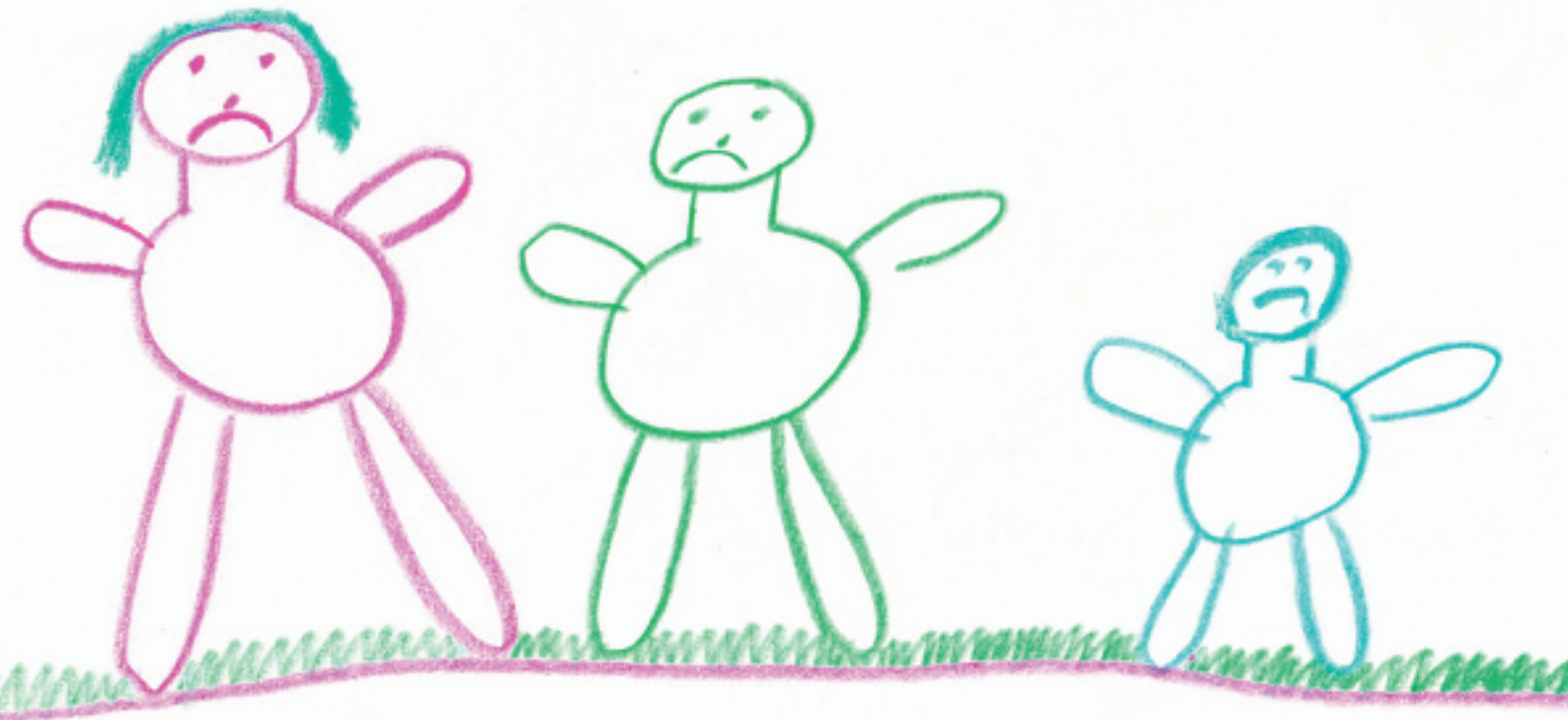


Man Matters Policy Briefing Paper No 3

Separated fathers: Fathers, Separation and Co-Parenting

This policy briefing paper was prepared for the Man Matters project by Dr Helga Sneddon

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Executive Summary

Divorce and separation are increasingly becoming part of life for families in the United Kingdom (UK). It is crucial that support services are put in place to help parents communicate with each other during this time, reach agreements, support them psychologically through transition and provide them with practical information about their rights and responsibilities. This will benefit both parents' and children's behaviour in coping with and adapting to the new family life. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the child's right to maintain regular contact with both parents following divorce/separation, except in cases where such separation is deemed to be in the best interests of the child. This paper examines issues relating to fathers who have separated or are separating from their children's mother. It provides a brief overview of what is known about the effects of separation on men, the benefits to children of having actively involved fathers, fathers' experiences of separation, how they seek support and how other countries have approached co-parenting.

Key Messages

Fathers need to be valued. The contribution that fathers can make to their children's lives, whether they live with them or not, should be valued. Fathers have a role beyond that of the traditional breadwinner who provides financial support. Having fathers who are positively involved in their children's day to day lives can lead to better outcomes for both fathers and children.

Co-parenting is usually best for children. Courts should work on the presumption that a child's welfare is likely to be furthered through safe involvement with both parents unless the evidence shows this not to be safe or in the child's best interests.

Fathers need opportunities to spend quality time with their children. Residency arrangements should facilitate shared parenting responsibilities and quality interactions. Using contact time for a balance between leisure activities (e.g. playing sport, going to the cinema) and more instrumental activities such as schoolwork and talking to children about their problems are most beneficial for child outcomes.

Family conflict needs to be minimised during separation. The level of conflict between parents and how the child interprets it are strongly associated with negative outcomes for the children. Parents should be offered support to minimise conflict during separation and court proceedings should promote cooperative rather than adversarial interactions. Family mediation can be beneficial when parents engage with the process.

Separation can have negative impacts on men. This can include poorer physical health, psychological and emotional wellbeing, social relationships, financial pressure and poorer relationships with their children. Fathers may not volunteer information about their family circumstances and they often do not seek support from professionals.

Fathers need to be supported. Different groups of men have different needs and show different help seeking behaviour. Services need to be designed to meet the needs of separating fathers and their families and actively engage with them whenever opportunities present. Professionals should be trained to see fathers as part of the family even when they are not living in the same household as the mother and child.

Gaps to be addressed in our knowledge base

There are a number of gaps in our knowledge which could be usefully addressed by local research. In particular:

- Although there is an increased interest in fathers who live with their children (resident) compared to fathers that don't (non-resident fathers), data on men is not systematically collected. This may render men invisible in the eyes of services and make it more challenging to identify their needs.
- We do not have a good understanding of how fathers, particularly separated/separating fathers, access support services in Northern Ireland and what factors make this easier or more difficult. Research should be undertaken to better understand the help seeking behaviour of fathers pre and post-separation, how they experience the support provided to them and its effectiveness.
- The impact of private law proceedings on children's welfare and their perceptions and experiences of the process should be examined to assess the effectiveness of the support provided.
- Assessments should be undertaken of the long-term outcomes of private law proceedings involving children. These should involve examining outcomes for the children as well as for both the parents.

Introduction

'Man Matters' is a partnership project in Northern Ireland which involves the Workers' Educational Association, Home-Start NI, Parenting NI, and the Men's Health Forum in Ireland. It was launched in September 2009 and has five year funding support from the Big Lottery Fund.

The project focuses upon men, and addresses the themes of health, education, parenting/family and community work/volunteering. The overarching aim is to encourage men to engage in learning in these areas. The programme works primarily with men themselves to increase their knowledge and capabilities, but it also seeks to influence how services are provided and policies are made.

In 2010 the Man Matters project hosted a seminar in Stormont celebrating Father's Day. The event was a success with contributions from academics, practitioners and fathers on the importance of the fathering role. However at the same time a number of participants raised the important issue of separation. As one separated father put it "How can I celebrate Father's Day when I don't see my kids?" The Man Matters project team committed to take forward work on the issue of separated fathers.

This paper examines issues relating to fathers who have separated or are separating from their children's mother. It also includes fathers who have been divorced. Throughout this paper we use the term 'separated' to describe both married and non-married couples who break up. This is a complex issue with little local research undertaken in Northern Ireland. Not all fathers are the same and not all will experience separation in the same way. Some parents with children are able to negotiate residence and contact arrangements between themselves, often with the help of friends or an organisation specialising in family mediation. However, others have entered the legal process and have become involved in acrimonious and lengthy court proceedings. The wellbeing of the child is of paramount importance and there will be cases where access needs to be restricted to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child. The majority of fathers do want to be part of their children's lives, although there will be some fathers who do not want to be involved with their children as they grow up. Having actively involved fathers can be beneficial for children's outcomes in many different ways.

This paper provides a brief overview of what is known about the effects of separation on men, the benefits to children of having actively involved fathers, how the process of separation can be experienced by fathers, how they seek support and how other countries have approached co-parenting. The Man Matters partners have also carried out a small piece of qualitative research to explore the lives of separated fathers in Northern Ireland. Quotations from some of these fathers are also included in this briefing to illustrate their real life experiences. A separate briefing paper will be available from the Man Matters partnership on some of the concerns that have been raised to their organisations by separated fathers.

Fathers need to be valued

Fathers are an important influence on their children. This role and contribution of fathers is discussed in the second policy briefing in this series by Man Matters 'Understanding Fatherhood in the 21st Century'¹. Fathers can influence their children's social development, cognitive development, behaviour and educational attainment. Children with highly involved fathers tend to have²:

- More positive friendships.
- Fewer behavioural problems.
- Lower criminality and substance abuse.
- Higher educational achievement.
- Greater capacity for empathy.
- Less stereotypical attitudes to earning and childcare.
- More satisfying adult sexual partnerships.
- Higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction.

With respect to families whose parents have divorced, most studies show that the children who fare best after the separation are those who see their fathers most often. Children with non-resident fathers who are involved in their lives, and who have positive relationships with them, tend to have fewer adjustment issues and better academic attainment than children with less involved fathers³.

Co-parenting is usually best for children

The policy relating to who should look after a child in this area is non-gender specific insofar as it does not differentiate responsibilities between fathers and mothers. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the child's right to maintain regular contact with both parents following separation, except in cases where such separation is deemed to be in the best interests of the child. It also states that both parents have equal responsibilities for the raising of their children, and that 'the best interests of the child will be their basic concern'. The Children Order is also gender neutral focusing on the principal that when a court determines any question relating to the upbringing of a child, the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration.

Research has identified five key protective factors which support child resiliency following separation^{4,5}:

- Shared parental residency, with studies indicating that shared residency, as opposed to sole residency, has a positive influence on child adjustment.
- Living with the parent (mother or father) who has the best psychological wellbeing.
- Involvement of the non-residential parent, with economic support particularly important.
- Reduced conflict in the post-separation period.
- Parenting styles, with parental warmth, responsiveness, authoritative discipline and appropriate monitoring and supervision.

In practice, there are concerns however that the default position in the UK is for children to remain with their mother after parental break-up and fathers must negotiate any change from this position. This is different from other countries such as the Netherlands,⁶ and Denmark⁷ where the starting position for the courts is to assume there will be shared parenting following separation, unless proven otherwise. Their guiding principle is that the child has the right to two parents. Other countries such as Sweden⁸ and France⁹ promote the use of alternate residences where a child spends part of the time living with the mother and part of the time living with the father.

In the UK¹⁰ mothers are more likely to apply for residence orders, while fathers tend to apply for contact orders. Mothers and fathers tend to obtain similar outcomes for the same applications. In the UK, the principle guiding the courts when deciding residence is

thought to be that of *status quo*, unless grave concerns are expressed over the child's wellbeing. It would be useful to examine what type of advice is given to fathers in Northern Ireland about applying for residency and whether this differs from that given to mothers.

"What stopped me going for custody? I didn't think I would get it. What with me being the dad and so young and all. But it got to the stage where I thought I would have to go for it. When people found out I had got full custody they were phoning me to say congratulations and I've never heard of a young fella getting full custody of a child."

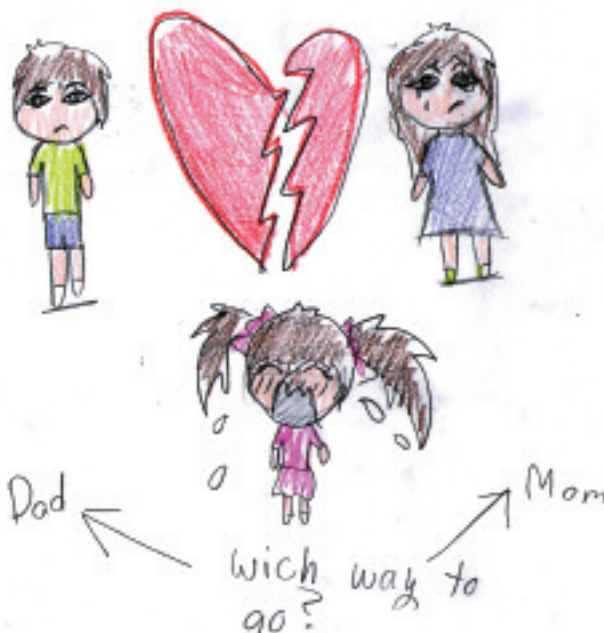
Contact cases tend to be protracted when there is a high degree of hostility between parents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that contact and residence disputes are often fuelled by other issues to do with financial and housing matters and the quality of the past relationship. However, the courts' focus remains the wellbeing of children when making their decisions. Some qualitative research suggests that parents may find it difficult to understand why the law does not take into account other underlying matters. Contact issues and disagreements over parenting responsibilities can be a source of stress for many years, and even when arrangements have been agreed in the courts they may not always be carried out.

"So the arrangements that were made in the Family Court are to keep me up to date on any illnesses that the children have and how they are doing in school. I'm still not getting any notice of birthdays or medical treatments. It's very frustrating that she doesn't let me know about what's going on. My son has serious epileptic seizures. I only found out two days later when he was being treated in hospital."

Fathers need opportunities to spend quality time with their children

In terms of contact arrangements, it is not only the amount of time spent with the child that is important, but what happens during this time¹¹. Over half of all non-resident fathers spend the majority of their time with their children in leisure activities. Researchers have observed that contact arrangements may place non-custodial parents essentially as visitors in their children's lives – taking their children to the zoo, to dinner and to other activities - in a similar way to how grandparents, uncles or aunts behave. Children may enjoy these activities and it can be different from their home lives where the usual hassles occur with the resident parent about cleaning their rooms, brushing their teeth, going to bed on time, being polite and behaving themselves. Although the father may be getting time with their child, it may not help them to share the parenting responsibility and this can lead to further tensions with the resident parent¹².

Using contact time for a balance of leisure activities (e.g. playing sport, going to the cinema) and more instrumental activities such as schoolwork and talking to children about their problems are more beneficial for child outcomes¹³. It also represents a fairer approach to the co-parental relationship, as opposed to leaving the more day-to-day parenting behaviours (e.g. discipline, establishing rules and boundaries) to the resident parent. However, the details of the contact arrangements may impact on the quality of co-parenting fathers can engage in, such as when contact with their child must be supervised or take place in public, and lack of funds as a result of paying child maintenance and possibly paying for new accommodation on top of this.



Family conflict needs to be minimised during separations

One of the most consistent messages from the research is the importance of minimising conflict between separating parents. Parental separation can often mean children can be exposed to on-going parental conflict and distress. The likelihood of this increases with the number of children in the household¹⁴. The level of conflict between parents can be more predictive of child adjustment to divorce/separation than any other factor¹⁵.

Children show poorer outcomes where there is overt physical and/or verbal conflict between parents. Covert conflict can also be harmful, when parents try to get children to take sides, use the child to get information about the other parent and speak negatively about the other parent in the presence of the child. Passive aggressive behaviours can also be harmful when the parent shows resentment and tension indirectly in words and actions. Parents often underestimate the amount of conflict that their children are aware of¹⁶. Many fathers in acrimonious residency disputes describe feeling like their ex-partner is deliberately manipulating the situation and giving the child and professionals misleading and harmful information.

"The first time I saw my kids was two and a half months after the separation and it was 'Daddy why didn't you want to see us?' So their mum had been telling them I didn't want to see them. Later down the line she started to use the children to try and get me as well. Saying: 'how much do you pay? Do you own this house daddy or do you pay rent?' These are questions that children don't ask."

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is suggested as an extreme form of parental manipulation. The term was first coined by Gardner in 1985 to describe situations where one parent 'brainwashes' the child to denigrate the other parent. The child refuses to visit the non-custodial parent. In extreme cases, reports of allegations of abuse may be made by the child. There has been much controversy around the concept and its evidence base. Various authors have concluded that PAS as a concept has not received empirical or peer-reviewed support from the academic and scientific community^{17,18}. However, it is cited frequently in the Family Court system despite a lack of research or scientific evidence.

We are beginning to understand better why some children are badly affected by negative family conflicts while others survive without significant problems. When children blame themselves for the conflicts between their parents, they are more likely to have behavioural problems, such as anti-social behaviour. But if their parents' fighting or arguing led to a child feeling threatened, or fearful that the family would split up, the child can be more likely to experience emotional problems such as depression. This may be made worse by children being used as pawns or weapons in parental disputes¹⁹.

Although most parents are able to come to an agreement themselves about how to organise looking after their children, for a minority of children these decisions have to be made by the courts. Private law cases relate to parental disputes concerning the upbringing of children following relationship breakdown. According to one study, about 1 in 10 child contact arrangements are ordered by the courts²⁰.

In Northern Ireland the number of residence applications which the Courts decide on has been steadily rising for the last 5 years with over 1800 decisions relating to where children should live made in 2012/13, and over 2,300 decisions about contact arrangements for children. Residence cases tend to be decided more quickly (on average 23.7 weeks) than contact cases (31 weeks). It is not possible to disaggregate from the available figures how many of these applications were applied for by mothers or by fathers, or what the outcomes were. In examining how long these decisions take in the courts, one must consider how much contact between the non-resident parent and their child is prevented during these proceedings. Such information is not available, so the true impact of these cases on fathers' relationships with their children is difficult to assess. The welfare of the child is paramount and due consideration has to be given to ensure this. However, fathers often voice concerns that court proceedings can be used as a tactic by mothers to delay contact with their children.

It is not possible to tell however how many applications for non-molestation orders taken out against fathers are shown later to be without justification. Information was not available on how long it takes to obtain decisions on interim contact orders, but anecdotal evidence would suggest that some fathers experience these as causing frustrating delays in keeping them away from their children. Stopping all contact for several months is a long time in the life of a child and could make it more difficult to maintain a meaningful parental relationship. It might be useful to examine the substance of the orders that are brought before the court, the length of time they take to deal with and the impact of the process on the parties involved (mothers, fathers and children).

"It was the case that I wasn't going to get to see them without a fight and the fight lasted years. That was difficult. When we went on a day out they were too dirty coming home. If we'd done anything, if we'd been anywhere and come back late, there was a scene in the street and it was a court visit to get access."

When separating or separated parents are able to co-parent or share the responsibilities of parenting, the outcomes are generally better for both the adults and the children. The importance of inter-parental conflict for the outcomes of both the adults and children whose families are separating has led to calls for the legal and social support systems to be examined as to whether they act to minimise conflict or by using adversarial approaches run the risk of making problems worse. The issue is to what extent support can be provided to help children remain in a meaningful relationship with both of their parents after separation as well as with other family members. There are concerns about dividing parenting responsibilities into 'care' and 'contact' as this may further differentiate parenting status and increase the likelihood of dispute and reduce the potential for collaboration between parents.

Several countries such as Australia, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland encourage greater use of mediation services to reduce conflict in these situations²¹. The Northern Ireland Government's own strategy, Families Matter 2009, identifies the requirement for early intervention to achieve best outcomes for children and families. Within that document it is acknowledged that family mediation services should be developed to reduce the increasing numbers of parents entering the court system. This is partly because of positive evaluation findings, reductions in court costs and speedier resolution of issues when parents are able to co-operate and engage with the process. All individuals are screened and the case assessed by mediation services for their suitability for mediation. In Australia mediation is compulsory for all parents before being able to lodge a court application unless there are domestic violence and/or child protection concerns. It has been found that up to 40% of parents who undertook mediation did reach agreement. However, in cases where there is already a serious level of antipathy or significant lack of trust between parents, family mediation, without other support services, can result in less positive outcomes for the entire family including children. In England & Wales, attendance at a pre-mediation information meeting is mandatory before any access to the court system is permitted. Similar to Australia if there are any concerns about domestic abuse or child protection, the cases may not be appropriate for mediation and the court system is therefore the decision maker. It has been found that the cost per client of mediation is £535 compared with up to £7000 for court costs. Mediation is also quicker – approximately 110 days compared to 435 days for court cases.

Separation can have negative impacts on men

Separation can be a traumatic and turbulent time for parents, children and the wider family unit. It is a process of significant change, which can include ending a long term relationship, conflict and confrontation with ex-partners, changing residences, experiencing a decline in standard of living, legal proceedings, adopting a single lifestyle, and for children, losing contact with grandparents, parental re-partnering and possibly changing residence and school. The concentration of such significant change in a short time period makes it a difficult period of transition which can have adverse effects on social and emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and development.

Marriage is generally held to have a protective effect on many aspects of men's wellbeing with married men often living longer than unmarried men. Getting divorced directly and indirectly affects men's physical, psychological and social wellbeing. This section outlines some of the key areas that may be influenced during or after separation. The information on help seeking behaviour by fathers for each type of issue is drawn from the findings of an online survey undertaken by the Fatherhood Institute and Families Need Fathers²². This was not a representative sample and likely to include more contested family circumstances. Nevertheless it does provide a useful insight into a little researched area.

Physical health and psychological wellbeing

Divorced men are at risk of higher rates of mortality, substance abuse, depression and lack of social support compared to married men. Premature death rates for divorced men are often a result of causes such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and stroke. Separated men are more likely to experience higher rates of depression and substance misuse. They are four times more likely to experience a new depressive episode compared to married men, and they undergo inpatient or outpatient psychiatric care at a rate 10 times that of married men²³.

Divorce has been identified as a key risk factor for suicide with separated men being nearly 10 times more likely to kill themselves than separated women²⁴. In Northern Ireland divorced men and women aged 20-34 years had by far the highest suicide rate compared to other age ranges. These young divorced men in particular can be identified as the highest risk group for suicide with an incidence rate of 109 per 100,000²⁵.

Not all men experience separation in the same way and having resources like education and employment, support from a new partner and being the spouse who initiated the divorce are all associated with better emotional health and psychological wellbeing²⁶. Many men do not seek help, but if they do it is likely to be from their GP. Men visiting their doctors may often focus only on physical symptoms even when they may be aware of the emotional, psychological and social contexts connected to them. It is important for health professionals to explore further in these cases. Professionals may be more likely to routinely ask women than men about their family circumstances and men are much less likely to volunteer the information.

Social Relationships

Divorced men may experience more social isolation, greater conflict with former spouses and lose emotional support from former friends and peers compared to married or never married men²⁷. The stressors associated with organising residency, access and child maintenance arrangements, in addition to trying to navigate relationships with extended family, can increase conflict between parents, grandparents and others.

"I didn't talk to friends so much. I couldn't actually trust anybody. It's a paranoid thing to say but you just really could not trust them not to tell tales about you behind your back. It took a long time to make friends for myself, almost three years."

Grandparents can play a stabilising role and provide a central point for family contact and communication in separating families²⁸. In particular, paternal grandparents can help facilitate their son's relationship with their child when he is no longer a resident parent. Ongoing contact with paternal grandparents is associated with better behavioural adjustment in the post-separation period for children. This is supported by qualitative research recently conducted in Ireland which showed that paternal grandparents reported trying to compensate for their son's perceived sub-optimal parenting skills, providing social support to their grandchild, and acting as a mediator between the two parents to ensure access to their grandchild²⁹. The important role of grandparents during this period has also been highlighted in the 2012 *Government Response to Family Justice Review: A System with Children and Families at its Heart*³⁰, which called for private family proceedings, be it court or mediation, to keep the need for on-going grandparental contact in mind if in the best interests of the child.

Relationships with their children

Non-resident fathers may have poorer relationships with their children and feel that their former partner does not encourage or support their input into their children's lives. The amount of contact between non-resident fathers and their children varies widely. It is difficult to get accurate information on this because resident parents tend to overestimate the amount of contact and non-resident parents may underestimate the level of contact. We do not have local information, but elsewhere in the UK³¹:

- Over half of fathers who don't live with their children say they stay in touch at least once a week.
- 38% have contact several times a week.
- 21% are in touch once a week.
- 28% are in touch less than weekly but at least a few times a year.
- 13% have no contact.

Nearly half the fathers report that their children regularly stay with them during school holidays or at weekends (49%) and a further 14% report irregular stays.

Contact between non-resident parents and a child tends to decrease in the long term. In one of eight divorces a father will have no contact with their children after they separate from their partner. The figure is higher among fathers who enter into a new relationship after a divorce, as they are twice as likely to have no contact with their children from the previous relationship. Fathers are still the most likely to lose contact with their children as the children remain with their mother in 97% of divorces.

The non-resident parent can often face difficulties co-ordinating their contact with their children, with work and school schedules as well as other commitments often restricting the time in the week that suits all parties involved. In some cases the relationship between the parents has broken down considerably and arranging child contact proves difficult.

Qualitative studies suggest that social class and income may be linked to frequency of contact. Non-manual workers were more likely to have frequent contact with their children and unemployed fathers are more likely to never see their children. How close the fathers live to their children is important. Fathers may be more likely to lose contact if their children are girls than boys. Contact arrangements may also need to change as children grow up and become more independent. Older children tend to form their own independent arrangements to see their non-resident fathers and contact could well increase or decrease as a consequence.

In some cases the relationship between the father and children can improve after the separation which can act as a catalyst to boost their parenting involvement. This relates in part to how the father experiences their transition and is able to use it as a motivator to become more actively involved in their children's lives.

In terms of where fathers turn to for support, many rely on their solicitor for advice on how best to deal with maintaining relationships with their children particularly around contact and residence issues during the first year after separation. Citizens Advice is also often approached for advice about contact and residence.

"When the children were younger I worked day and night and didn't see the kids as much as I see them today. In fact their mum was the primary carer at the time. I was very traditional – I was the breadwinner. Since the separation that role has changed. I've become a lot closer to the children. I know them better and we talk better. It's good. I always had a good relationships with them but not as strong as it has developed into. We all went on this journey together and stuck it out together and we cried together and fought together and we worked it out. It's working out so far."



"She gets all the Child Benefit. Even though I take them for two, maybe three times a week on average. She gets the seven days Child Benefit for the week and social security which places a very large financial burden on me and gives her an unfair advantage. It's very hard for me to actually look after them properly in the way their mother does. That came as a shock to me that you don't get the Child Benefit proportionally to the time you spend with your kids. I was told no, it goes to the one who has the main custody."

Finance

Divorced and separated men may have a lower standard of living, reduced wealth, and experience greater economic hardship than married individuals. Although both non-resident mothers and fathers can be required to pay child maintenance, currently 95% of parents in receipt of payments are the child's mother reflecting that in the UK children are most likely to live with their mother following separation. Maintenance is paid to the parent who the child lives with for the greatest proportion of time and is not split between parents. Maintenance payments can often be an issue of contention for parents particularly if there are other difficulties in the relationship surrounding contact.

Although financial problems have been shown to be strongly correlated with separation (both as a precursor to and a result of separation), very few fathers seek professional advice on this area instead either seeking no help or relying on family and friends. Citizens Advice tended to be the most commonly consulted source about financial problems.

Working patterns

With respect to changes in employment, separating fathers often changed their working patterns in the year before and after the separation. Although the reasons for this need to be explored further the researchers suggest that the high proportion of separating men who slip into unemployment, change employers and are signed off sick during and immediately after separation suggests that it could be in the employer's interests to look at innovative ways of providing support to these men so that they optimise their performance and retain them. Fathers were also more likely not to seek advice from anyone about their employment issues. For the minority that did seek help, it tended to be from family or friends rather than professional supports.

Fathers need to be supported

There may be several reasons why separated parents (both mothers and fathers) do not seek support³². These may include personal factors such as not wanting to discuss private relationship problems, a reluctance to recognise how serious problems are, and unwillingness to accept responsibility for the relationship breakdown. In addition to this, there can be factors relating to the support on offer including a lack of awareness of what support is available, negative experiences or perceptions of services, and practical issues (such as long waiting lists, restricted appointment times, long distances to travel, clashes with other family commitments and costs).

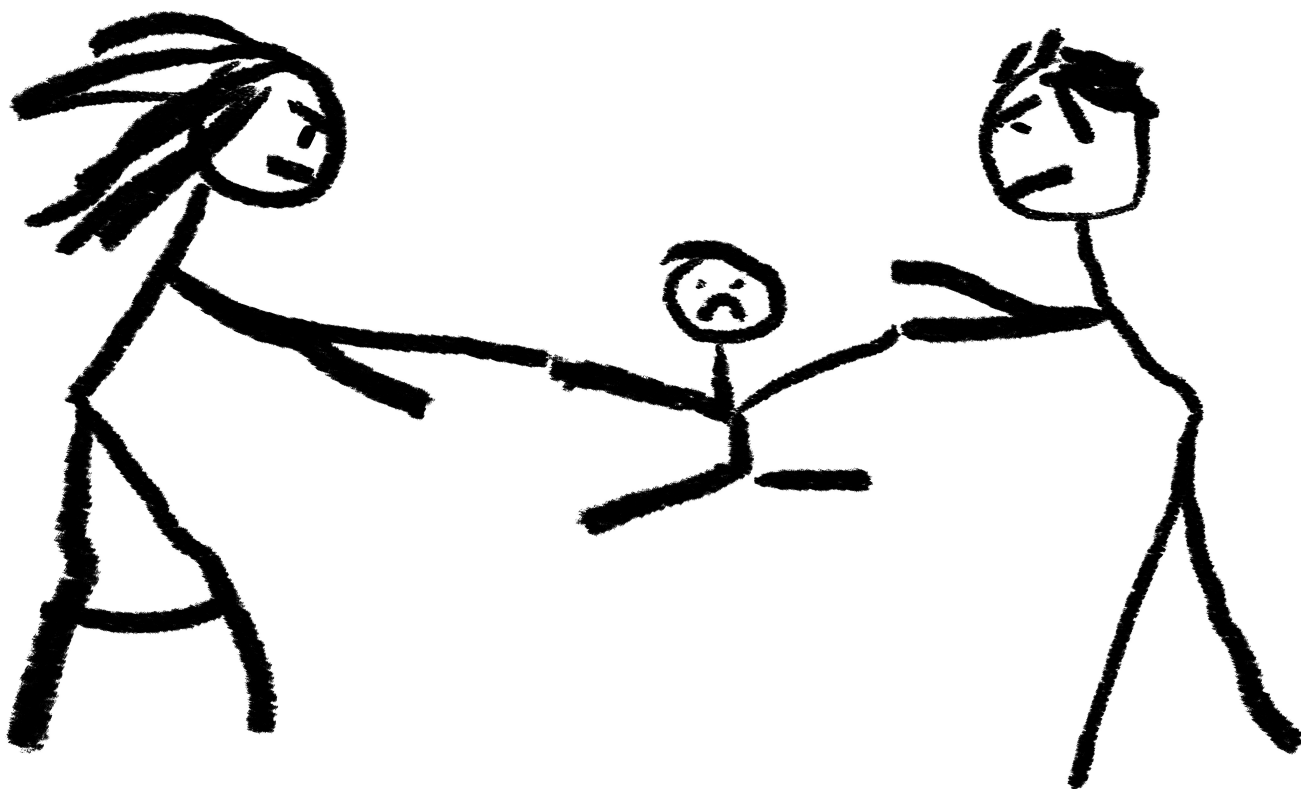
To add to this, Walker *et al.* (2010) find that stigmatisation is a strong deterrent to service uptake and service providers tended to define their biggest challenges as to do with a general cultural taboo that prevented people from 'getting through the door'. A recent online survey concluded that contrary to popular belief a considerable proportion of separated and separating fathers seek help on a range of issues³³. Research has also shown that different groups of men are likely to have different needs and show different help seeking behaviour. For example, younger, poorer separated fathers are unlikely to see solicitors³⁴. They are also more likely to experience greater mental health challenges than older separated fathers. Yet they are no

more likely to access mental health services³⁵. These are also the men who are least likely to remain in contact with their children or provide financial support for them.

Services are often organised around families and there may be a predominant focus on mothers. Fathers can feel that official services exist to support the mother and little is available for fathers. This reflects in part traditional views of caring roles, but also that women seem to be more likely than men to ask for help when family problems arise. Services may be designed and delivered in a way that makes them more accessible to women. At the same time, services may accept the lack of involvement of men without question and may also unwittingly promote it by failing to collect information about the role of the father in the family, thereby rendering fathers (especially separated fathers) invisible in the family support system.

The following issues should be considered when developing services for fathers^{36,37}:

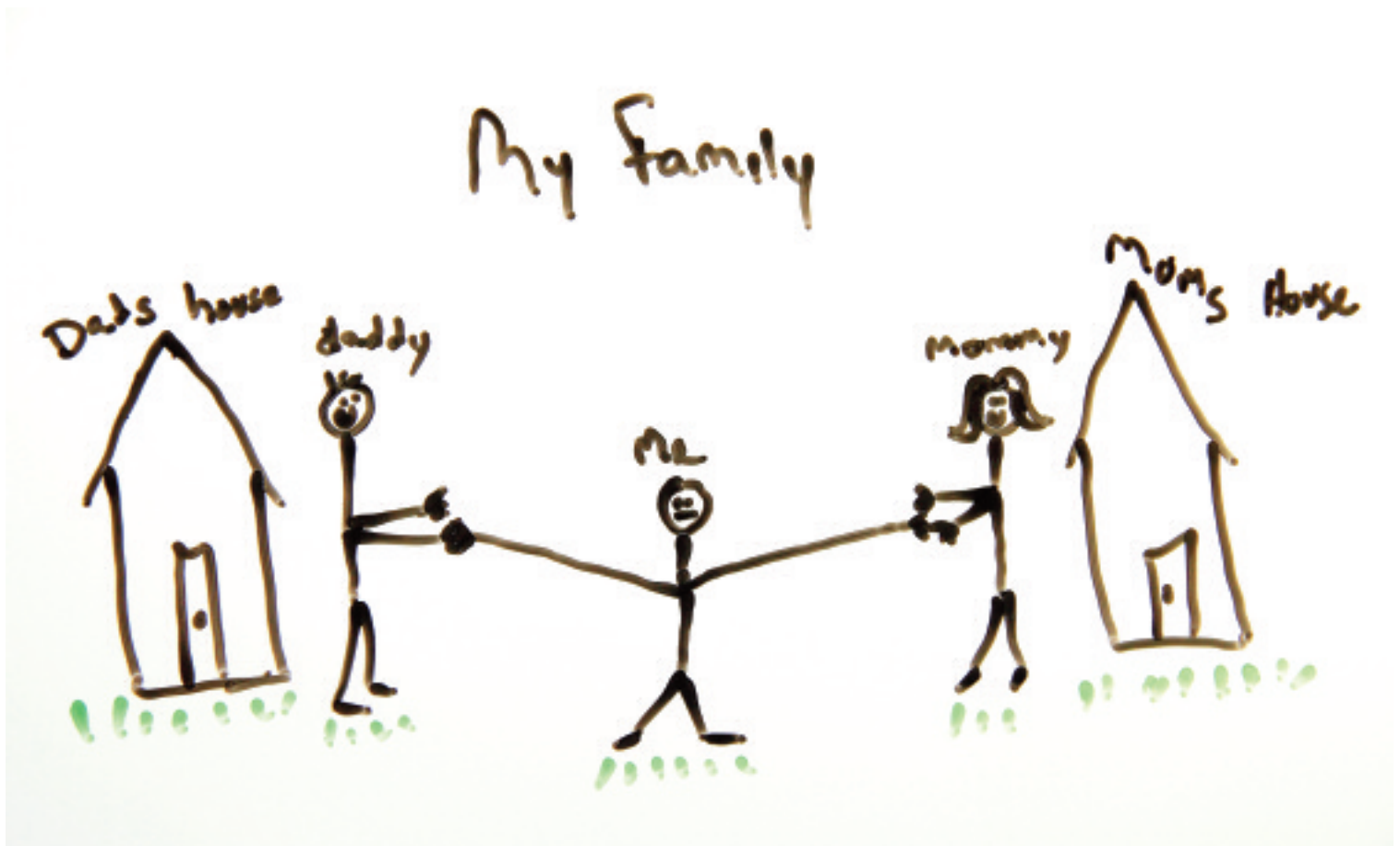
- The needs of fathers and particularly different types of fathers have to be understood and the most appropriate types of service response identified.
- Fathers should be included in the design of both new and existing services, to ensure that they meet the needs of fathers, and that fathers are more likely to access them.
- A strength-based perspective should be used rather than seeing fathers from a negative deficit model.
- Professionals should be trained to see fathers as part of the family even when they are not living in the same household as the mother and child.
- It is important to reach out to fathers at the right time, when they are at a turning point in their lives and more receptive to support. This is likely to be before the birth of the child, or as soon as possible afterwards, so that positive behaviours are embedded from the start.
- Services for fathers need to be positively promoted in order to improve awareness and to overcome the fear of stigmatisation.
- Recruiting more men in to the caring professions would help change attitudes that caring, both inside and outside the family can be done by both men and women.
- Promote awareness of family services in a way which is seen to be supportive of men and fathers at every stage in the life cycle from child birth to old age. Currently many existing images of family services focus primarily on the mother and child.



There are also some programmes which have been developed specifically to support separated or separating fathers. Philips & O'Brien (2012³⁸) reviewed the evidence base for the effectiveness of 14 programmes targeting fathers who were separated developed in America, UK, New Zealand and Israel. They concluded that there is evidence that programme participation is associated with:

- Reductions in parental conflict, even in high conflict cases.
- Improvements to the co-parental relationship such as improved co-parenting skills and relationship adjustment.
- Reduction in children's sadness and low moods over time, with the effect being strongest for those children experiencing the greatest problems at baseline.
- High levels of parental satisfaction and valuing of separation-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.

We do not have a good understanding in Northern Ireland of how fathers in general, as well as separated/separating fathers access support services and what factors make this easier or more difficult. It would be useful to undertake research in Northern Ireland to better understand the help seeking behaviour of father's pre and post-separation for various issues. This should include mapping the services and support that are available, how and when father's use these, what the barriers to accessing support may be (e.g. lack of awareness, suitability of services, etc.) and what is most helpful in delivering effective and appropriate supports. The Government's Family Support Website will be a useful resource in identifying support services. Research would be useful for a range of Government departments. It would allow us to identify touch points for delivery of support, adjustments needed to existing services and gaps in support. Understanding the variations in help seeking behaviour shown by different groups of fathers as well as how this changes over time during the separation process would also be useful so that the most appropriate help can be offered in the most efficient way at the right time.



Conclusions

Divorce and separation are increasingly becoming part of life for families in the UK. It is crucial that support services are put in place to help parents communicate with each other during this time, reach agreements, support them psychologically through transition, and provide them with practical information about their rights and responsibilities. This will benefit both parents' and children's behaviour in coping with and adapting to the new family life. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the child's right to maintain regular contact with both parents following divorce/separation, except in cases where such separation is deemed to be in the best interests of the child.

Key messages

Fathers need to be valued. The contribution that fathers can make to their children's lives, whether they live with them or not, should be valued. Fathers have a role beyond that of the traditional breadwinner who provides financial support. Having fathers who are positively involved in their children's day to day lives can lead to better outcomes for both fathers and children.

Co-parenting is usually best for children. Courts should work on the presumption that a child's welfare is likely to be furthered through safe involvement with both parents unless the evidence shows this not to be safe or in the child's best interests.

Fathers need opportunities to spend quality time with their children. Residency arrangements should facilitate shared parenting responsibilities and quality interactions. Using contact time for a balance between leisure activities (e.g. playing sport, going to the cinema) and more instrumental activities such as schoolwork and talking to children about their problems are most beneficial for child outcomes.

Family conflict needs to be minimised during separation. The level of conflict between parents and how the child interprets it are strongly associated with negative outcomes for the children. Parents should be offered support to minimise conflict during separation and court proceedings should promote co-operative rather than adversarial interactions. Family mediation can be beneficial when parents engage with the process.

Separation can have negative impacts on men. This can include poorer physical health, psychological and emotional wellbeing, social relationships, financial pressure and poorer relationships with their children. Fathers may not volunteer information about their family circumstances and they often do not seek support from professionals.

Fathers need to be supported. Different groups of men have different needs and show different help seeking behaviour. Services need to be designed to meet the needs of separating fathers and their families and actively engage with them whenever opportunities present. Professionals should be trained to see fathers as part of the family even when they are not living in the same household as the mother and child.

Gaps to be addressed in our knowledge base

There are a number of gaps in our knowledge which could be usefully addressed by local research. In particular:

- Although there is an increased interest in fathers who live with their children (resident) compared to fathers that don't (non-resident fathers), data on men is not systematically collected. This may render men invisible in the eyes of services and make it more challenging to identify their needs.
- We do not have a good understanding of how fathers, particularly separated/separating fathers, access support services in Northern Ireland and what factors make this easier or more difficult. Research should be undertaken to better understand the help seeking behaviour of fathers pre and post-separation, how they experience the support provided to them and its effectiveness.
- The impact of private law proceedings on children's welfare and their perceptions and experiences of the process should be examined to assess the effectiveness of the support provided.
- Assessments should be undertaken of the long-term outcomes of private law proceedings involving children. These should involve examining outcomes for the children as well as for both the parents.

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Man Matters is a partnership project made up of the Workers' Educational Association (lead partner), Parenting NI, Home-Start and the Men's Health Forum in Ireland. For this work on separated fathers we were joined by Family Mediation Northern Ireland.

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