



Fathers and parenting Equal Opportunities Committee call for views

At CHILDREN 1ST we listen, we support and we take action to secure a brighter future for Scotland's vulnerable children. Our work is built on 130 years experience as the RSSPCC. By working together with, and listening to children, young people, their families and communities, and by influencing public policy and opinion, we help to change the lives of vulnerable children and young people for the better. We work to safeguard children and young people, to support them within their families and to help them to recover from abuse, neglect and violence.

CHILDREN 1ST has 52 local services and four national services across Scotland, and we work closely with many local authorities as well as working in partnership with other organisations. We work with lone fathers and separated fathers in many of our services, and currently 274 of our service users told us they are affected by lone parenting. We also provide ParentLine Scotland; the confidential helpline and email service for anyone caring for or concerned about a child.

In March 2014 CHILDREN 1ST in partnership with Scottish Child Law Centre and One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) will be delivering a new service - Family Decision Making. The service will combine the expertise of the three organisations to create a seamless national online, phone and face to face service for separated and separating parents. It aims to reduce conflict and improve collaboration between separated and separating parents by helping them deal with issues such as contact, maintenance and residence using family group decision making.

ParentLine Scotland – calls from lone fathers

ParentLine helps callers by listening and offering support and is used by dads who need extra support and advice and who want to find the best way forward for their family. ParentLine can also signpost callers to other relevant information sources, and frequently offers on going telephone support through a call back facility.

ParentLine receives calls from lone fathers and from separated fathers about a variety of issues, many of which are similar to other callers.

However a larger proportion of calls are about contact and residence, where children have been affected by the separation or divorce of their parents. Additionally some fathers call ParentLine because they are worried about family members, they may be worried about their child or young person's behaviour, or they may feel under stress, worried or anxious, and just need a little time for themselves, talking with someone who understands.

Dads tell us that many agencies are much more accustomed to dealing with mums and this can add to feelings of inadequacy or isolation or the right support not being

available. We know it can be harder for males to talk to friends and family, so having someone who will listen to them is very important.

Some fathers have told us that due to relationship breakdown, their relationship with their children has also become more difficult or strained. Like other callers, lone or separated fathers sometimes call about challenging behaviour displayed by their children, which can sometimes be a result of unresolved issues relating to the family breakdown. Additionally, some callers have told us they find it difficult to access the support they need in their area, and don't know where to turn.

Calls to the helpline from dads:

“I’m on my own with my daughter – she’s staying out late and not going to school. I know she’s sleeping with older boys and I’m really worried. Where can I go for help?”

“My ex has just moved in with a man at work. My kids don’t like him – they say he shouts and swears at them. I don’t want them living with a man like that but if I say anything she might stop me seeing them.”

“I needed a plan of action, but couldn’t find a place to start.”

It is crucial that readily available and easily accessible support and information is provided for lone fathers and separated fathers to help them with the variety of challenges they may face.

Case study – separated father

CHILDREN 1ST works with lone and separated fathers across Scotland and currently one of our recovery from abuse and trauma services is working with a father who has shared custody of his child. This father wanted to express, in anonymity, some of the issues he faces.

This father told us he is currently unemployed, and is finding it difficult to secure employment at this point in time. He needs to attend regular children’s panel meetings with his son. Meetings with social work are sometimes at short notice, and can be quite frequent. This has contributed to the difficulty this father has experienced trying to find steady paid employment. Although this father has had some great support from his family and friends during children’s panel meetings, he also told us that getting his views heard has not always been easy. He feels that during these children’s panel meetings the mother has been favoured as the guardian of the child, rather than himself as the father.

It is vital that support to enter employment or training acknowledges the commitments that fathers may have. It is also important that fathers’ voices and concerns are heard and taken seriously, and that they are involved and included, where safe and appropriate to do so, in decisions relating to their children.

Research – “Fathers of children born to teenage mothers”

CHILDREN 1ST led a research study conducted by the University of Strathclyde in 2010, about the experiences of fathers of children born to teenage mothers in Scotland¹. While this research does not solely focus on lone or separated fathers, some of the issues explored are still very relevant to the committee’s inquiry.

The research found that many young fathers expressed difficulties continuing education or training, or finding suitable employment, and that there appeared to be a lack of relevant support services for them, particularly ones that acknowledged their role as fathers. The research notes that this is in contrast to recent policy changes, which have appeared to help young women overcome obstacles and return/ enter further training or work.² It is vitally important that employers recognise the needs of fathers as parents, and not just mothers, and that there is adequate support so that fathers can also play an active role in parenting.

The research explored reasons behind relationship breakdown for these fathers, which included issues relating to division of labour regarding childcare; some young men’s inability to cope as parents; affairs; arguments; aggressive behaviour; postnatal depression.³ The research highlighted that the participants who were co-parenting were committed to maintaining a relationship with the mother of their child, to maintain access and involvement in their child’s life – a situation which their ex-partners encouraged.⁴

In the study, some separated fathers expressed that they had a good relationship with their ex partner and child:

“We are still really good friends just now, we still go out for a drink and that. Because people say “How can you still be friends after having a kid together and splitting up?... we have got a bond and no matter what we do, it will never be broken” - Gary

Others however explained the challenges they face:

“She dictates to me, there’s no room for negotiation whatsoever with Kirsten, which I find very frustrating sometimes, but the more I argue with her, the sort of further away I am pushing her, so I don’t bother and as long as Rosie is safe and looked after well then I pretty much just go with the flow” - Douglas

“We are not getting on at all... I need to wait until she phones me so I can see him.. I don’t make decisions for him at all” – Paul

¹ <http://www.children1st.org.uk/shop/helpful-resources/for-professionals%2c-students-and-volunteers/the-fathers-of-children-born-to-teenage-mothers/c-24/c-103/p-338>

² P 40 “The Fathers of Children Born to Teenage Mothers: A study of processes within changing family formation practices

³ P27 “The Fathers of Children Born to Teenage Mothers: A study of processes within changing family formation practices

⁴ P28 “The Fathers of Children Born to Teenage Mothers: A study of processes within changing family formation practices

Mapping parenting information resources – new report

As part of the National Parenting Strategy, the Scottish Government commissioned CHILDREN 1ST to undertake a mapping exercise of current parenting information resources.⁵ The research mapped physical parenting resources, such as leaflets, booklets and websites from 119 organisations. The research discovered a wealth of information resources available, but found that only a relatively small number of parenting resources were explicitly aimed at fathers, lone fathers or separated fathers. The research found that many information resources, while claiming to be for a universal audience, were more targeted at mothers, than fathers. The research also highlighted that some information resources may alienate fathers due to the language, wording and photos used to illustrate the resource. Information providers need to be conscious about the needs of fathers and lone fathers during production of their resources.

The full report as well as a list of all the resources mapped can be accessed here: <http://www.children1st.org.uk/parenting-resources>

Conclusion

CHILDREN 1ST know from experience that some lone or separated fathers need support with issues stemming from relationship breakdown, or the challenges they face parenting alone. We also know that some fathers have found it difficult to access support in their area. The new Family Decision Making Service, provided in partnership by CHILDREN 1ST, Scottish Child Law Centre, and OPFS will be able to provide intensive and targeted help and support for separated fathers across Scotland. The service will help service users improve communication and cooperation with their family, to improve decision making skills, and help relieve stress and anxiety.

Lone and separated fathers should be able to access the right support, at the right time, to build on their capacity and skills as parents, and support and advice should be easily accessible for all lone or single fathers. As explained above, the recent parenting resources mapping report conducted by CHILDREN 1ST found there are relatively few parenting resources that specifically target fathers, separated fathers or lone fathers and their parenting role. Organisations need to ensure that “fathers” are included in relevant parenting resources and are not left feeling alienated.

It is vital that Scotland invests in services and resources for lone and separated fathers. The right information and support at the right time will help dads play a key and active role in their children’s lives, and help support them through any challenges they may face.

For more information about the issues in this briefing, or about CHILDREN 1ST and any of our services, please contact the policy team at policy@children1st.org.uk or on 0131 446 2300.

⁵ <http://www.children1st.org.uk/parenting-resources>