

Acknowledgements

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It takes great courage - as well as extra work - for professionals to allow their practice to be explored by researchers and we would like to thank the social workers, family support workers and the social care workers who gave so much to this work. We would like to sincerely thank the staff and managers of the Daughters of Charity and the Good Shepherd Sisters.

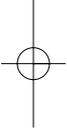
Ultimately this report would not have been possible without the fathers, mothers and children, who gave so much of their time, to share so intimately their life stories. These stories of vulnerability and family life are stories of loss, pain and sadness as well as hope, resilience, success and love. Sharing



time in their company has taught us both more about family life, fatherhood and the healing power of love.

Finally, we wish to thank our families. We have had to try and fit this research around the pleasures and duties of trying to be good enough fathers and carers for our own children, which has meant that many of the themes of this report have been far from simply academic for us. We owe a huge debt to our partners Claire Mackinnon and Claire Nolan for their love and support. And to our children Katie, Ben, Susie King and Ellen Ferguson; Lorcan Nolan and Caelum Hogan who have taught us so much about fathering, they allow our mistakes and reminding us about the important things in life.

*Harry Ferguson
& Fergus Hogan*



Executive summary

Many gaps exist in our knowledge of fatherhood in Ireland. These include father's own accounts of what fatherhood means to them, how they 'construct' it and motherhood, and what do Irish men actually do with their children? Moreover, there is a dearth of information regarding how social care systems engage with or respond to the needs of men as fathers in vulnerable families, what we have called 'vulnerable fathers.'

The objectives of the study and research process

It is now widely accepted that fathers are generally excluded from the bulk of the child care and family support work that goes on. The key research question this study addressed is how can this be reversed and what needs to be done to ensure that more men are included and become users of child and family services? In this report a 'vulnerable father' is defined as a man who is known to be struggling to be a good enough parent due to having involvement with social services and family support agencies. The report documents a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 24 'vulnerable' fathers; 12 mothers; 12 children; and 20 professionals. All of the interviewees came from the same cases as, where possible, we adopted a case-study approach to analyze how men, women and children from the same families and the professionals who worked with them viewed the father, fatherhood, family life and the intervention work they had experienced. The notion of vulnerability we adopted included a wide range of experiences, from men who were vulnerable to being violent to their children and/or partners or were known to have already been, to those who were experiencing a range of problems, including 'marital' breakdown, relationship and communication problems with their children, poverty and the impact of extreme social exclusion, surviving child sexual abuse, addictions, and domestic violence. The sample was accessed through social work departments and family centres and strategically included only those men who were known to have at least one professional attempt to work with

him. Our primary aim was to establish what kinds of inclusive work is going on with fathers, to learn from best practice and to use this as the basis for developing a father-inclusive framework for family policy and practice.

Dangerous masculinities and the powerful dynamics excluding fathers

This study provides evidence, for the first time in Ireland and in many respects beyond it, of the ways in which men as (vulnerable) fathers are included (or not) in child protection and family support work. While our primary aim in the study was to move the literature, policy and practice forward by critically analyzing work where fathers were actively included and to build profiles of best practice from that, our data still produced important findings on the dynamics of men's exclusion. We found that the overall orientation of welfare systems to exclude men is so powerful that even in cases of inclusive practice clear evidence emerged of men's exclusion. All of the men in our sample, despite having been worked with by at least one professional, told powerful stories of being excluded in the past or present. The dynamics of such exclusion took many forms, the most common and powerful of which was a view of men as dangerous, non-nurturing beings. Some men were excluded from being worked with and seen as possibly carting fathers simply on the basis of their appearance and perceived life-styles, such as men who had tattoos, bulked-up physiques, skinheads and who did hard physical violence prone work such a bouncing or 'security'. Yet interviews with the same father's children (and some partners) revealed the complexities of the men's identities in how they were seen as responsible, caring, vulnerable, loving men. This is not to suggest that these men were never a risk to their children and partners. Some were dangerous and known to have been violent and this report documents some of the best work that is going on with such fathers to develop them as safe, nurturing carers. In addition, some men contribute to their exclusion by refusing to seek or accept help. But others, despite being labeled dangerous men, were never known to have actually been violent. They were excluded simply on the basis of stories, appearances, perceptions.

A striking pattern to emerge from our data is the organisational differences in approaches to fathers and families. Statutory social workers are generally

much less father-inclusive than voluntary agencies like family centres. The irony is that in many instances including fathers could make social worker's statutory obligations to promote the welfare of children easier to discharge. Yet our findings suggest that social workers generally expect mothers to carry the load, leaving the potential resource those fathers have to offer largely untapped. In general, organisational cultures, rather than simply the individual mindset of workers, have the most impact in shaping what form interventions take. This is evident in the striking pattern for the family centres - in our sample at least - to be much more inclusive of fathers than statutory social work. There is something in the very nature of social work and how it is organised and done which is currently antithetical to adopting a more holistic, father-inclusive form of practice. A key factor surrounds the different contexts within which the work goes on. Family centres work within much more 'solid' structures in that the service is offered on their premises and fathers and families come to them. Social workers, on the other hand, practice mainly in the community and homes of clients, which is a much more fluid process where they have much less control over what they get to see. We found that when family centres have policies to actively include fathers, such as refusing to accept referrals without reference to the father, the men are much more likely to engage. Crucially, engaging fathers is too often not seen as a matter of human rights, and unless and until it is professionals will not be motivated to go beyond mothers. Our data shows that many social workers do not actively seek out the fathers and try to include them. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as fathers who are around are not regarded as service users and so are rarely engaged with. The net effect is that social workers in general do not 'know' men, have little confidence around them, and often fear having meaningful discussions with them. They also lack skills in discussing fatherhood with men and strategies to divert attention and responsibility for child care away from the mother.

A key finding of this research concerns the need for men to be directly included in assessments of their capacities as fathers, unless there is compelling evidence on which to exclude the man – such as a known history of violence or intimidating behaviour. Education and training of

child and family professionals needs to address head on dominant images of masculinity which regard men as non-nurturing beings – and all the more so if they carry markers of being the ‘hard-man’ on their bodies and demeanours – and which equate caring solely with femininity/motherhood. Our findings show that the most effective father-inclusive practitioners are those who are able to go beyond the one-dimensional imagery of dangerous masculinity to hold a view of men’s identities as multi-layered and complex, and containing resources to care for children as well as possible risks, and to develop those caring capacities accordingly.

Changing fathers, changing masculinities

There is nothing from our data to suggest that in general vulnerable fathers love their children any less than any other men. Their struggle is in showing it. Professionals need to begin to include men as fathers from the very start of the process of social intervention and family support. Our data suggests that some fathers need to be invited, challenged and actively brought into this responsibility through social intervention. We refer to this as calling men into responsibility around their children, which we see as a crucial life-changing event and strategy in engaging and changing fathers.

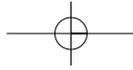
Some very creative and effective work is going on with fathers and their families. This includes regular casework visits from social workers and community based family support workers, intensive family support work in residential type units and day care settings, and less intensive but still regular individual and family sessions at family centres. The types of work being done includes individual sessions with family members, such as direct work with traumatised children; couple work; sessions with entire families together; and parenting courses. A key finding is that changing fathers is not simply about finding ways of equipping them with techniques to manage destructive behaviours, absences and acquiring better parenting ‘skills’ in some limited technical sense. In every case in our sample where significant change occurred, therapeutic and support work with the men - often in tandem with their partners and children - led fathers to question the basis of their very identities as men and in many respects to reconstruct their

masculinity. Gaining the necessary skills to be a good enough parent involves learning about the self - including the impact of how one was parented, acquiring capacities to communicate - active listening, expressing feelings - and engaging in 'emotion work'. A key expression of this changing of masculine identity was in the men's attitudes to help-seeking: the fathers shifted from a view where seeking or accepting help from professionals was seen to compromise their sense of themselves as strong, rational, coping males to one where an acceptance of their vulnerabilities and need for support became integrated into their identities.

Younger vulnerable fathers and social intervention

This study shows that different kinds of intervention work needs go on with fathers and families according to their particular difficulties and stage in the life-course. Younger marginalised men who become fathers are perhaps the most at risk, yet invisible category of all. Typically, the position of men in public debates about 'teenage pregnancy' or 'unmarried mothers' is so absent and negative it is as if the children had no fathers. Moreover, the implications of the (apparent) absence of those fathers from their children's lives is rarely seen as an issue of social concern. Nor is the fact that many younger mothers apparently parent alone, or without the support of an intimate male partner. At its worst, the underlying assumption seems to be that families are better off without such fathers because they are invariably irresponsible and uninterested.

Typically, young vulnerable men are unmarried fathers who have no automatic legal rights as fathers. At its worst they are officially written out of the script of family life due also to the significant pattern of the man's name being omitted from the birth certificate to make it difficult for state agencies to identify the father and them as a cohabiting couple. In Ireland, most one parent family payments (97 per cent) are paid to mothers, and is done so on condition that the woman may not cohabit. The direct effect of such a condition is to exclude both birth fathers and stepfathers who are in relationships with women on social welfare benefits from (officially) living with their partners and children. This powerful exclusionary dynamic is



heavily influenced by the state itself as the social welfare system creates a financial benefit for mothers to claim lone parent family benefit and for fathers names not to be put on the birth certificate, in effect for them not to be seen to officially exist.

Our findings show that, typically, younger fatherhood is unplanned. But this does not mean that it is (always) unwanted. On the contrary, the very marginality of the young man, the absence of other prospects in terms of education and work, can heighten the desire to construct a meaningful life, to see oneself as a worthwhile person and make a tangible contribution through fatherhood. The younger fathers in our sample went to extraordinary lengths to remain involved with their pregnant partners and form loving committed relationships with their babies. They had to, such was the pressure by family and professional agencies to exclude them. If a marginal young man in Ireland today wants to become a committed involved father with his children, he not only has to deal with the usual joys and challenges involved in making such a rite of passage - especially the adjustment to an altogether new form of responsibility - he has to overcome the immensely powerful pressures that exist to exclude him from his child's life. In most cases it is a matter of vulnerable young fathers remaining involved with their children despite, not because of professional systems.

Yet our data also shows what can and needs to be done to enable such men to be good enough fathers. The paradox is that while officialdom generally fails to see the presence and importance of these fathers in their children's lives, in reality the men are active, committed carers, and seen and valued by their partners as such. Yet these young men typically also have serious problems, the most significant of which is a 'wildness' and unreliability which makes their consistent support for their children and partner uncertain. A core challenge is to move them beyond acting out what Connell (1995) calls a 'protest masculinity' where their wildness is tamed to the extent that they can adjust to the discipline of domestic routines and remain with their children and partners and in their families (as opposed to prison, for instance). We show that when child and family services do



include such fathers, this can only really work best through a model of intensive day or residential family support which work to literally contain the men in their families and fatherhood role, ensuring their involvement in domestic tasks and routines, while helping them overcome some of the adversity in their lives to develop into still better, more reliable, fathers. We strongly recommend the provision of resources by the government to enable the much wider availability of such intensive residential and day family support services.

Intervention work with working fathers

Fifteen of the men in our sample (63%) were working outside of the home. This is no guarantee of relief from poverty and extreme marginality in terms of such things as poor housing, crime and drug ridden neighbourhoods - the fate of some families in our sample. Generally, though, men in paid work were less socially excluded. While men in jobs generally defined themselves as providers, some were struggling to spend more time with their children. Our findings suggest that what being a more active father means to men does not necessarily involve spending less time at work. The men and their partners knew that for the family's survival they had little choice about one of them being a full-time breadwinner, and for a mixture of cultural and financial reasons it tended to be the men.

Acknowledging the heroic struggles of poor parents to provide a subsistence living for their children is an essential aspect of best practice with such families. This needs to involve 'being with' the family in their struggle in a manner in which they feel and know their difficulties are understood and being worked with in the interests of social justice, as well as healing. Many of the men who spoke of how family support and therapeutic work had helped them 'reconnect' emotionally with themselves and their families and find ways for them to use the time that they did have with their children in qualitative ways which benefited themselves and the entire family. For some men, the emotional component of active child care compensates at least somewhat for the brutalizing

effects of hard manual labour and helps to promote men's health in a context of great risk to their physical well-being.

The style of work that was with the men made a real difference to how they felt. Central to this was an appreciation of a worker's approachability and 'less formal' style in relation to appointments, where workers tried to 'fit' therapy into the already pressurized demands on the couple's life. The notion of 'informality', of speaking 'with' rather than 'to' them, of feeling listened to and not just spoken 'at', was central to what all the men in this study liked about intervention. They distrusted professionals who 'did things by the book', who they perceived as too 'formal' and over-controlling. A sense of 'informality' enabled the men to maintain a sense of control while surrendering to their vulnerability and need for intervention.

The tension working class men have to work with is how to show their loving vulnerable side in a social context which demands toughness and punishes weakness. Joining with men in therapy is about helping to 'equip' them in their journey of un-blocking themselves and discovering their inner resources and of allowing men to unleash the strength of their own vulnerabilities. The rationale for including fathers in the work is not simply as a support to the mother, or because he has been referred as dangerous and needing to be changed, but because, as one family worker exemplified it, 'we need the father here because he's important. His life is important'. This is preventative family support work at its best in that it enables families at high risk of cracking under the pressure to stay together, so that children are not at risk of entering care and family relationships can thrive on love rather than pain.

Working with separated fathers and families

Ten men in our sample (42%) were separated or divorced from the mothers of the children. Whether separation was experienced in the past or the present, all the men spoke with passion about the exclusion they felt by the family law system, including social services, which they saw as cruelly sexist and anti-man/father. For one sub-sample of men their identity as

separated fathers was central to how they defined themselves as service users, and their struggle to be active fathers. For these men, the problem is the family law system, the fact that the courts have been so restrictive in the access given to their children, that the men do not feel allowed to be active fathers. Often their criticisms extended to social services because of their role in deciding custody and access arrangements for children.

Our findings show how, in such scenarios, family workers tended to play a mediating role between family members, the courts and social workers. The striking thing about these men is their anger at the injustices they feel have been done to them. The importance of men feeling listened to and affirmed in themselves and their struggles is a feature of every father we interviewed. It takes on particular significance for those men who feel completely excluded by the system and whose relationships with their children are under threat because of the judgements of experts. The children in such cases spoke openly of their desire to have relationships with their fathers and some of the best work that went on in such cases worked with fathers and their children to help open up honest communication about the hurts experienced in the family and ways of healing the relationships.

Reconstituted families, love and healing interventions

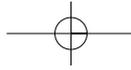
The men in our sample became fathers in more ways than conceiving their own biological children in that nine men (38%) 'stepped' into parenthood by living with a partner who already had children. We included a focus on social intervention work with fathers and 'fractured' or reconstituted families and we were concerned to explore both the risks and resources that stepfathers can be in children's lives. Stepfathers are at particular risk of being ignored by social workers who see themselves as working with women and children. Choosing to work with men as fathers in families requires an assessment of just how involved the man is in the family's life. To establish whether the man is anything more than a casual acquaintance of the mother's, a transient lover, or a man committed or trying to live a life as a father to the children can be a complex endeavor. The interplay of some men's avoidance of family responsibilities, coupled with social workers

giving up what on were perceived as disinterested or ambivalent fathers led to some of the men's exclusion. On the other hand, some stepfathers were recognized to be a huge resource for the family to an extent where children were either not taken into care or were returned to mothers and their new partners because of the stability and care the latter now offered the family. The intervention work in these cases generally took the form of what we call expressive family support work. It focused primarily on working with the children and fathers to give them the opportunity and means of expressing their experiences and feelings, rather than 'acting out' disruptive and ultimately damaging behaviours.

Developing a father inclusive culture

Our research shows that the more professionals help to keep men distant from their children, the less chance there will be that they will be brought into responsibility. The dilemma for professionals is that vulnerable fathers are all too often initially framed as dangerous and unfit to care, and so calling them into responsibility involves taking a risk. A key area of learning from this study concerns how a dramatic re-framing of the case can go on and men can be moved along a developmental pathway from being a risk to a overall resource to the family. The data also shows that this is not simply a matter of what gets done by single agencies or professionals working alone but emphasizes the centrality of inter-agency perspectives (and tensions) in how father's identities are constructed and reconstructed by professional networks.

At their best, therapeutic and supportive interventions engage in 'emotion work' with men, helping them to recognize the legacy of past events and traumas and how they impact in the present. This involves not only dis-embedding past hurts and destructive patterns, but aspects of traditional masculinity and re-embedding a new, more expressive, aware masculine self. Non-expressive, traditional masculinity, our findings suggest, keeps men closed off from the skills and emotional capacities required to be good enough active fathers in the post-modern social conditions of today. Such



encounters with therapeutic and support services have unquestionably helped many of the men in our study to develop themselves to a point where they have reached a new integration of the worker/provider and intimate self and become good enough fathers.

Workers who develop the capacity to sit with vulnerable men and call forth their stories set up a positive developmental dynamic within organisations as more positive images of men and stories about effective engagement become part of the culture. The organisational context remains crucial. The proper mix of an open, learning organisation, staffed by well trained, critically reflexive individuals creates not simply a good technical approach to such work, but generates a wisdom and spirit to the work which men and their families feel and respond to. Ultimately, working with fathers in families is not only important for men, but benefits women and children too.

