

Engaging Fathers in Early Childhood: An overview of best practice, policy and insights from the Island of Ireland.

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Executive summary

This document integrates the findings from three processes within the wider Parent Engagement Research Project: a) Inventory of parenting support services with a father-inclusive focus in the Republic of Ireland; b) Visits to Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland with a focus on engaging fathers; and c) Roundtable discussion with international experts on engaging fathers.

Recommendations based on these findings were developed for policy and practice. These included: developing a father-inclusive framework across agencies working with children and families based on best practices and taking into account the diversity of family structures; providing universal and tailored support according to families' needs and preferences; developing parent support services for fathers at every stage of parenthood, from the moment of pregnancy planning or awareness; and promoting professional development strategies with a father-inclusive focus for practitioners working with families. At a strategic, policy level, recommendations include the need for a cross-government father-inclusive focus across all agencies and services working with children and families; a gender perspective and father-inclusive focus in relevant workforce training; promoting gender equality and the inclusion of diverse family structures and contexts in policy development and practice guidance; researching and evaluating interventions aimed at supporting fathers in their parenting role and disseminating.

1. Introduction

The engagement of fathers or a second primary caregiver in children's lives from an early age, along with mothers, has been associated with positive impacts on children and families (Lechowicz et al., 2019; Smyth & Russell, 2021). Studies in the Republic of Ireland found that fathers aspired to be involved as equal caregivers in their children's lives (CDI, 2021), and that the majority of mothers and fathers of three-year-olds had a positive view of themselves in relation to their parenting role (GUI, 2013).

Despite increasing recognition of the relevance of fathers' engagement in children's lives, the need to maximise their inclusion through policy, practice, and research still requires attention (Kiely & Bolton, 2018; CES, 2016). Mothers have made up the majority of those enrolled in parenting support services and programmes (SPEAK, 2019). Fathers have identified the lack of father-focused resources and supports in the Republic of Ireland (Hickey & Leckey, 2021; Swirak, 2015).

This paper aims to integrate findings from three processes within the Parent Engagement Research Project related to the engagement of fathers: a) Inventory of parenting support

interventions with a father-inclusive focus in the Republic of Ireland; b) visits to Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland to learn about engaging fathers; and c) a roundtable discussion with experts on engaging fathers. Based on these findings, we have developed recommendations for promoting a father-inclusive focus within policy, practice, and research.

The overarching aim of the Parent Engagement Research Project was to contribute to effective parenting support policies and practices to improve children's outcomes by: reviewing policies and practices aimed at supporting parents and families with children under six in Ireland, including fathers; and researching the parenting support model Powerful Parenting, developed by CDI, which involves placing a dedicated Parent/Carer Facilitator (PCF) within early years services to support parents and carers.

2. Parenting support interventions with a father-inclusive focus, Republic of Ireland

We aimed to identify parent support policies and interventions with a father-inclusive focus in the Republic of Ireland.

The importance of supporting fathers in being actively engaged in their children's lives is acknowledged in Irish policies and strategies, including the following:

- *National Men's Health Policy* (Minister for Health and Children, 2008): It recommends implementing a father-inclusive framework across all Government departments. It highlights the importance of paternity leave, supporting separated/divorced and single fathers, monitoring access of single fathers to their children through the family law courts, and supporting fathers' involvement in children's education.
- *Action Plan for Men's Health (Healthy Ireland – Men 2017-2021; Health Service Executive, 2016)*: It reinforces the importance of parental leave, and highlights promising evidence indicating that separated/divorced fathers have found ways to maintain open lines of communication with their children.
- *Investing in Families: Supporting Parents to Improve Outcomes for Children* (Tusla, 2013b): It specifies that the term 'parent' is used as shorthand to include mothers, fathers, carers and other adults with responsibility for caring for a child or young person. The *50 Key Messages to Accompany Investing in Children* (Tusla, 2013a) includes the involvement of fathers. The *Toolkit for Parental Participation* (Tusla, 2015) notes that some parents have specific needs, including fathers.

- *Strategic Framework for Family Support* (Family Support Agency, 2013): It addresses the need to distinguish between household and family, so that non-resident parents (usually fathers) continue to be perceived as part of the family.
- *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014): It includes the provision of opportunities for ongoing education and training for “both parents”.
- *First 5, a whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-2028* (DCYA, 2018): It sets actions to facilitate children’s care at home during their first year by mothers and fathers, including a new paid Parental Leave scheme. *First 5* also proposes the development of a tiered national model of parenting services, entitled *Supporting Parents* (DCEDIY, 2022). Its related literature review (Geraghty, 2021) explicitly focuses on fathers, considering issues relating to leave, retention and engagement in programmes, and engagement with children, among other topics. *Supporting Parents* aims to promote inclusive supports for parents, respecting diversity and tackling gender stereotypes.

Based on the documents consulted, there seems to be an increased policy focus on fathers in relation to child and youth affairs, while the earlier health focus on fathers appears to have become less evident. For example, fathers are not specifically mentioned in the more recent *Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025* (Healthy Ireland, 2021), although it includes actions on the provision of parenting programmes and resources for parents.

Despite Irish policies acknowledging the importance of fathers in children's lives, among the OECD countries with paid leave entitlements for fathers, Ireland had one of the lowest payment rates in 2020 (OECD, 2021). Loss of income could explain the low uptake of parental leave so far (DCEDIY, 2021). In 2018, 45% of fathers entitled to paternity benefit did not take it (Central Statistics Office, 2020).

References to "shared parenting" or "coparenting" have been absent from the policy discourse in Ireland, and unmarried fathers do not have automatic legal rights regarding their children (Kiely & Bolton, 2018; Working With Men, 2006). The Irish Constitution defines family as a married couple (Working With Men, 2006), where mothers are associated with the home, while, by implication, fathers are associated with public settings and financial provision. According to the Irish Constitution¹ “*the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved, and “The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”* (Article 41.2, p. 164)

¹ <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/pdf/en.cons.pdf>

The policy context has inevitably shaped practice and service development. For example, whilst Family Resource Centres provide a wide range of services and opportunities to support families, which can include men's groups, information on the prevalence of parenting supports that particularly aim to assist or engage fathers is not readily available.

To map parenting support interventions with a father-inclusive focus in the Republic of Ireland, we searched for those specifically recruiting or inviting fathers to participate, and/or including content or delivery methods particularly aimed at fathers. Twenty-six interventions developed by 15 different service providers were identified². The following characteristics were found:

- *Types of intervention* - Diverse types were found, including projects, programmes, organisations, groups, a model of parenting support, and a federation of services
- *Target population and main aims*
 - Half of the interventions were aimed at parents in general, regardless of being mothers, fathers or other carers (these interventions are included in the inventory because they explicitly seek to invite/engage fathers). The other half was particularly aimed at supporting fathers (but was generally available to provide support or information to other carers, when needed and possible)
 - Most of the interventions (n=23) were universal (at least within the catchment area, i.e. targeted universalism), in the sense of not targeting only families at risk of poverty or social exclusion
 - Most interventions were aimed at parents of children in specific age groups, with the antenatal and early childhood periods being the most common (n=12). Other target groups included unmarried or separated parents (n=7); all fathers, without focusing on a specific period of the child's life or family situation (n=3); parents with school-aged children or teenagers (n=3); one-parent families (n=1); and fathers in prison and their families (n=1)
 - More than half of the interventions (n=14) seemed to particularly address one area of need (e.g. health, social welfare, children and youth affairs), while the remainder had a multidimensional focus (n=12)
 - Most interventions (n=16) included both a response-led approach (i.e. tailored to the users' needs and/or preferences) and a structured approach (e.g. with defined topics). Seven interventions were response-led, and three were structured.
- *Theoretical approach*. Among the interventions a indicating specific approach, a strengths-based approach was the most frequently named (n=4)
- *Mode of delivery*. Some interventions used a range of delivery methods (n=11), while others used mainly one (n=15). The delivery could be centre-based (n=15), community-based (n=7), include home visits (n=3), or remote, via web (n=13) or telephone (n=5)

² According to the data consulted, four interventions were no longer running at the time of this inventory. These interventions were however included in the inventory and analysed.

- *Type of activities.* Most interventions (n=21) included more than one type of activity. The activities could consist of group sessions (n=21), which generally occur weekly, one-to-one support (n=18), provision of information (n=5), advocacy (n=6), training (n=3), and social events for families (n=2)
- *Region.* The majority of the face-to-face interventions were located in Dublin. The availability of supports seemed to vary across the country
- *Staff.* Most of the interventions were led by professionals (n=21). Some could involve volunteers (n=5) or peers (n=5). Some interventions involved both professionals and volunteers/peers (n=6). Most interventions required some training before staff could provide direct support
- *Integration with other services.* In general, the identified services have some interagency aspects, including referral processes in most services and joint initiatives in some
- *Evaluation.* Among the interventions identified, some had been subject to evaluation (n=7). Findings suggested positive outcomes for parents regarding parenting aspects (e.g. happiness in parenting, positive parent-child relationship). Factors relevant to the success of the interventions included interagency working, the development of a trusting relationship between the participants and the facilitators, and the tailoring of supports.

3. Sure Start, Northern Ireland

Sure Start is a UK Government funded area-based initiative. There are 38 *Sure Start* projects across Northern Ireland. These projects support parents with children under four years old living in disadvantaged areas. They aim to promote children's learning skills, health and well-being, and social and emotional development. Each *Sure Start* project works with parents, statutory agencies and local community-based organisations, bringing together health, family support and early education services. The supports are offered in the home and group-based settings, and can include fathers' groups.

The National Evaluation of *Sure Start* in England included a study that aimed to provide an in-depth account of the nature and extent of men's and fathers' involvement in a number of *Sure Start* projects. According to this study, programme staff reported that the provision of services specifically for fathers and the presence of a fathers/dads worker encouraged father involvement (Lloyd et al., 2003). A case study of a *Sure Start* programme in the North East of England explored fathers' and mothers' perceptions of the benefits of father involvement. The perceived benefits included: fathers' increased engagement with their children and concern for their psychosocial development, improved relationships with children, increased social interaction with other fathers, increased knowledge and skills, changes in the understanding of the fathering role, and access to a better quality of life (Potter & Carpenter, 2010).

The Parent Engagement Research Project aimed to learn how to better engage fathers in parenting supports from *Sure Start* projects. This aim aligns with the CDI strategic focus of promoting fathers' engagement within its programmes. We had the opportunity to learn from three *Sure Start* projects in Belfast, Northern Ireland. We observed a session of a five-week hypnobirthing course and a session of an antenatal course (starting at 31-37 weeks of pregnancy), and gathered information from the respective facilitators. We also collected information from two other professionals - a Dads Worker and an Early Learning Coordinator. We gathered the following insights.

Session of a hypnobirthing course

- During the observed session, both mothers and birth companions (all fathers in this session) were involved in the activities. For instance, they were invited to choose from a range of resources to help them during birth (e.g. visualisation aids). Parents were also asked about their preferences regarding birth. The facilitator provided a list of prompts for fathers about what they could say to mothers during birth and gave them specific tips. The facilitator also asked questions of the fathers about their views
- Most activities during the group session required the active participation of both parents (e.g., physical and relaxation exercises, sharing of insights or queries about the birth). Where the activity was aimed only at the mother (e.g. practicing breathing), the father was encouraged to remain attentive and supportive
- Activities can take place outdoors, depending on what works for parents
- Both mothers and fathers are invited to the first session
- There are sessions with both parents and babies and sessions only with fathers and babies (in the pool)
- The course is open to birth companions (regardless of their gender or whether or not they are the biological parent)
- The facilitator acknowledged the importance of parents/couples meeting other couples and learning from each other. The classes have five or six couples who get meet each other and potentially develop informal networks. The facilitator noted that the fathers being comfortable is also important
- The classes are provided outside office hours to facilitate attendance
- Parents can be referred from the ante-natal service or self-referred
- The facilitator can contact either mothers or fathers. Fathers are asked to provide their contact details if they wish in the first session. Mothers are also informed that they need to bring their birth companion to at least some of the sessions.

Antenatal course sessions

- During the observed session, an icebreaker with pictures was used involving both parents. The facilitator addressed fathers directly (all birth companions were fathers in this session). Both parents participated in the activities during the session
- The course facilitates a maximum of four couples. Both parents are invited to all sessions
- Parents' birth options/preferences are considered during the course
- The facilitator noted that they seek to do activities that parents can enjoy
- The facilitator noted that she provides information on baby development and what happens during pregnancy and birth, and seeks to reassure parents about any concerns
- The facilitator highlighted the importance of both parents being present in the sessions and developing a bond with the baby. The facilitator acknowledged the relevance of fathers' engagement during the antenatal and postnatal periods to promote later father engagement
- The course includes inputs on depression after birth, for both mothers and fathers.

Information collected from the Dads Worker

- *All Sure Starts* projects used to have a Dads Worker, who came together for reflective practice, but not all projects have one currently
- Dads Workers lead diverse activities aimed at fathers, including:
 - Father and toddler groups (once per month at the weekend). These sessions include: a) A time for parents and children to play. The Dads Worker highlighted that this is important to promote understanding that children learn from playing; and b) A time with fathers only (parent course while children are in the crèche)
 - Integration work with fathers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (sessions held once per month or fortnightly)
 - Packs with activities to do at home can be delivered to parents.
 - Story-telling sessions once per month, during which the Dads Worker reads a story and parents can then choose a book. These sessions are focused on building confidence and a bedtime routine
 - Peer support groups for fathers (without their children). These sessions can include speakers (e.g., Speech and Language Therapists, dental specialists). Listening to testimonials from other parents was acknowledged as relevant by the Dads Worker in order to highlight the benefits of engaging
 - Group-based support with six to eight parents (up to 12 parents) who gather weekly
 - One-to-one support in the evenings. Zoom and WhatsApp were used during the Covid-19 pandemic

- Seasonal events (e.g. Summer events/holidays)
- To encourage parents to attend the father-only sessions, the Dads Worker texts them the day before and sends pictures of the breakfast offered in the session. The setting opens one hour before the session, so parents can arrive early. Parents can also bring older children
- The activities are planned by taking into account fathers' needs and schedules. As a way of better understanding fathers' needs, the Dad's worker may follow up to see why they didn't turn. This can be done anonymously
- Some activities include both parents, and other carers can also attend, such as grandparents.
- The work conducted by the Dads Worker includes coordination with social services and the City Council in relation to some activities and referrals, and also involves promoting the supports available for fathers by sharing information with mothers attending the *Sure Start* project, and by posting on social media, in shops, job centres, and schools (e.g., via leaflets).

Information collected from the Early Learning Coordinator

- The Early Learning Coordinator described activities within *Sure Start* aimed at fathers as including the following:
 - An antenatal hypnobirthing course aimed at mothers and fathers
 - Attendance at other courses, which provide opportunities for learning together (e.g., how to hold the baby), build trust, and for fathers to see and meet other fathers
 - Men-only programmes
 - Events aimed specifically at fathers twice a year (e.g. football).
- Referrals can be received from the hospital, and fathers can be invited through the mothers
- Fathers and other carers, such as grandfathers, are encouraged to participate in the activities, and the project seeks to break down barriers regarding engagement
- The *Sure Start* project also has a Family Worker
- There is a focus on linking the service with the parents, investing in the early years, and building a relationship with parents
- The activities are planned according to parents' preferences and needs
- Support in relation to food and financial resources also is also provided, with packs being delivered to homes and online contact offered during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The support includes coordination with other organisations.

4. Roundtable discussion on engaging fathers

A roundtable discussion was held with a number of key stakeholders working with and promoting fathers' engagement. Findings from the inventory of parenting support interventions with a father-inclusive focus in the Republic of Ireland were presented, and an open dialogue took place. Feedback included the following discussion points:

- Mapping interventions with a father-inclusive focus is relevant and useful, given the gaps in efforts to engage fathers
- Although policies might aim to be gender neutral, addressing the target populations explicitly and naming them can promote the visibility of issues that need to be addressed. However, the language used in policies can be challenging, given that policies need to be broad and applicable to different contexts
- Fathers do not always feel included in antenatal support. This finding highlights the importance of:
 - Linking with health professionals to better support fathers
 - Developing and promoting training for future health professionals (e.g. mid-wives) on engaging fathers, which could be included in existing pre-service training and continuous professional development strategies
 - Father engagement being integrated into health promotion policy and practice.
- Diverse family types are not always recognised in policy and practice (e.g. lone parents can face stigma and have specific needs)
- Supports should be targeted for those parents who are not involved in their children's care (while protecting the engagement of the other parent where there is conflict between parents or other challenges)
- Including the unmarried father's name in the birth certificate is an important step in enabling fathers to be fully engaged as parents, particularly where there is conflict between parents. Not naming the father on the birth certificate can be extremely problematic as it leaves the father with no legal rights in relation to his child
- Early years' services and schools should help children understand from a young age what it means to be a carer and to deconstruct gender bias
- The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have brought increased involvement of men in caregiving (the notion of care became central) and changed how the role of fathers is perceived. Fathers were more available, as work responsibilities were taken into the home, or they were not able to work.
- There is anecdotal evidence that fathers engaged more in online parent education and child-related activities. This may be because remote participation at events and training is more comfortable for them than in-person engagement
- Encouraging more men to be involved in the child and family workforce would help to challenge gender stereotypes in relation to caregiving

- Promoting parents and children spending quality time together can result in better outcomes for children.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings described above, the following recommendations were identified.

- **Developing a cross-government father-inclusive focus**

Supporting fathers can benefit their children, families and themselves. Therefore, the importance of providing supports to fathers should be acknowledged and promoted across Government departments and State Agencies. The development of a father-inclusive focus should take into account best practices and available evidence, the diversity of family structures and contexts, gender relations, and the need for explicit inclusion of fathers and other caregivers in policies.

A cross-government father-inclusive focus could contribute to achieving the aims of the national *Supporting Parents Model*, ensuring greater awareness of and access to more inclusive parent support services. Coordination between Government departments, agencies, public, voluntary, community and private services could enhance the accessibility and sustainability of supports for fathers and their families. Consideration of available services, local needs and specificities, implementation plans and continuous monitoring is needed to ensure quality implementation (Cadima et al., 2017).

A continuum of universal and tailored support needs to be developed in order to respond to families' need, preferences, and contexts. The provision of a continuum of support, from universal to targeted (i.e., support is offered to all parents, while families with specific needs are offered additional supports), and easily accessible supports can contribute to avoiding stigmatising vulnerable families.

In line with the actions set out in *First 5*, flexible working arrangements and increased paid parental leave can facilitate children's care at home during their first year by mothers and fathers. Measures to support parents achieving a balance between work, personal and family lives can sustain the perceived increased involvement of men in caregiving during the Covid-19 pandemic. Parents and children spending quality time together can bring positive outcomes for children, as reinforced in the stakeholder's consultation. A previous study found that spending more time with the family was perceived as a positive change by some parents during the pandemic (Leitão et al., 2022).

Legal changes should also be considered, particularly issues arising from the unmarried father's name not being on the birth certificate need to be addressed.

- **Developing a father-inclusive focus in agencies and services working with children and families**

Agencies and services should reinforce fathers as valued contributors to children's lives, and consider explicit strategies to engage them (when suitable). These strategies can include: contacting and inviting fathers directly; considering broadening the intervention schedule to include after-work hours (evenings/weekends); offering diverse delivery modes of support (e.g. Web-based or telephone support has been perceived as being more accessible than face to face engagement for fathers); and explicitly naming fathers and other carers in resource materials and content. Investing in professional roles with responsibilities/duties which specifically support fathers and other carers besides mothers (e.g. Dads/Father Worker) can also encourage their engagement in the services (Lloyd et al., 2003).

Strategies to engage fathers should be based on their needs, resources, and interests. Fathers must be consulted and involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of supports aimed at them and/or their families (when suitable), from the start, to maximise engagement and positive outcomes. Fathers should be able to provide inputs on the content, delivery modes, and activities they prefer, as observed during the visits to the *Sure Start* projects. Agencies and services remaining creative and responsive regarding delivery modes and activities, will better enable them to meet fathers' and families' needs and preferences.

- **Including a gender perspective and father-inclusive focus in workforce training**

Encouraging more men to be involved in the child and family workforce could help to challenge gender stereotypes in relation to caregiving. To increase the visibility of the child and family services workforce as a suitable career choice regardless of the person's gender or biological sex, it is important to present the workforce as being constituted of diverse persons (e.g. using images of staff that show diversity in terms of attributed gender, and cultural and ethnic background).

Current and future practitioners working with families should have access to training on gender and family dynamics, including the importance of supporting fathers. Continuous professional development strategies can include a safe space to reflect on one's own beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Slot & Nata, 2019). These strategies can improve fathers' experiences with services, and thus their engagement, which influences the achievement of positive child outcomes.

- **Promoting gender equality and the inclusion of diverse family structures and contexts**

Open dialogue in relation to gender norms and parenting can contribute to more equal parenting and engagement of caregivers in children's lives regardless of their gender. Children can be involved in these debates. For instance, early years' services and schools can work with

children to help them understand from a young age what it means to be a carer and to deconstruct gender bias.

Considering families' diverse structures and contexts is crucial to promoting equality and inclusion, and better supporting families in the context of their experiences, views, needs and resources. Specific supports should be considered for unmarried, separated, and/or lone parents, non-resident parents, young parents, families experiencing socio-economic disadvantaged, parents experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, and families impacted by imprisonment.

Developing parenting support interventions for fathers at every stage, from the moment of pregnancy planning or awareness, can promote their engagement as equal caregivers for their children, as acknowledged by the *Sure Start* practitioners and the roundtable discussion.

- **Researching and developing evidence-based interventions with a father-inclusive focus**

Researching interventions contributes to understanding their impacts and the characteristics or conditions that foster parental engagement and positive outcomes for families. In research on parenting supports, it is essential to include the views of fathers and, when possible, other family members. According to the studies of the interventions included in this inventory, factors such as tailoring supports to families' needs and resources, coordinating with other services, and building trusting relationships with parents/families are important to consider when developing parenting supports.

- **Disseminating interventions with a father-inclusive focus**

Effective dissemination of information which shares and promotes supports aimed at/available for fathers is important both to reach fathers and to increase public knowledge and awareness of available supports. Multiple mechanisms can be used, including online, and via leaflets in community, educational and health settings depending on the environmental context, the behaviours in the community and individual preference.

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