

Timescapes Conference

Understanding & Supporting
Families Through Time

Strengthening Men's Involvement in Fathering: Opportunities and Challenges

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An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study

Introduction

- Social and cultural shifts have led to changing expectations of fathers
- Ideals of involved fatherhood but what is the reality?
- To what extent do ‘traditional’ models of fathering remain relevant?
- What are the potential opportunities and barriers to strengthening father involvement?

The Men as Fathers Study

- Qualitative longitudinal interview study
- Men interviewed during their partner's pregnancy and twice in the first year afterwards
- Some also interviewed eight years later
- Samples from South Wales and East Anglia
- In total, 45 men aged 15 to 41 at the time of their child's birth

The study provides:

- Both 'as it is happening' and 'long term' perspective
- A relational approach

Early Experiences and Expectations

- All men attended the birth and were keen to be involved in the early stages
- Having good quality information improved confidence
- However, little opportunity for men to discuss their concerns

Implications:

- Importance of providing or directing fathers to good quality information
- Widening access to men-only sessions in antenatal programmes

Access to Good Quality Information

Case Example:

Birth to Five (2009 Edition)

- A key Department of Health Publication
- Given free to all parents in England
- Replete with images of involved fatherhood
- Supporting text focuses on the transition to motherhood or addresses parents generically

Changing Relationships to Involvement

- Mismatch between expectations and the reality of men's early involvement
- Practical barriers: feeding, paid work
- This resulted in men looking forward to future involvement
- Easier to be involved with older children, but this could be experienced as pressurising

Implications:

- Need to highlight positive contributions in early fatherhood e.g. bathing, reading, music

Caring for, caring about

- Increasing demands on parents to provide the best start for their children
- Demands of ‘intensive parenting culture’ seen to fall predominantly on women
- More involvement than previous generations but practical barriers limit equality
- Demonstrated a commitment to ‘thinking about’ the child by planning for the future

Implication:

- Need to promote non-traditional contributions of men

Involvement and the Economic Downturn

- Continuing emphasis on men as financial providers
- Economic downturn constraining ability to provide the 'best start'
- Changes to family futures e.g. work arrangements, decisions about family size

Implications:

- Providing can be both positive identity and source of anxiety
- Research needed on implications of government cuts for family life

Fathering Across Generations

- Influence of prior and continuing relationships with own fathers
- Influence of family and community ideas of masculinity
- Importance of accounting for complex gendered and generational issues

Implications:

- Engaging men needs to be done in ways which are sensitive to gender norms
- Need to promote genuinely co-operative couple and parenting relationships

Multiple Meanings of Strengthening

- Quantity and quality of father involvement
- Not just father-child dyad, how does father involvement impact on partners, children, other family members?
- Sensitivity to potential tensions related to increased father involvement
- Strengthening the promotion of gender equality

The Value of a Temporal Approach

- Importance of dynamic research on fatherhood over time (Lewis and Lamb, 2007)
- Insights into both short- and longer-term experiences highlights different opportunities and barriers across time
- Understanding fatherhood within the context of other life events and experiences – pasts and futures

Selected References

- Shirani, F. Henwood, K. and Coltart, C. (in press) Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture: Gender, Risk Management and the Moral Parent. **Sociology**
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- Shirani, F. Henwood, K. and Coltart, C. (2009) Men's Experiences of Antenatal Services: Findings from the 'Men as Fathers' Study. Research Report (available via the Men as Fathers website)

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/research/researchprojects/menasfathers/index.html>