

Submission from the National Family and Parenting Institute for the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System

1. Summary

1.1 The evidence from the National Family and Parenting Institute summarises research into the impact of parenting on children's outcomes, the role of fathers and issues relating to non resident fathers. Overall the evidence suggests that there are advantages to children if their fathers' engage with their upbringing, but this is dependant on the circumstances of the case. Where fathers are seriously antisocial, contact can have a deleterious effect on children's outcomes. Where there is a history of significant domestic violence, it can be dangerous. Resilience can also be fostered by one strong family relationship, generally with the mother. Nevertheless, the evidence on children's outcomes supports the premise that in most cases fathers' engagement should be encouraged by schools and family services. There is a readiness amongst many Black families to use family services and this should be supported in service responses. Various models for involving fathers have been developed, but greater impetus and practical guidance is needed to involve non resident fathers.

2. Background

- 2.1** The National Family and Parenting Institute is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and parenting. We carry out research, listen to what parents want and deliver messages from research to people working with families. We advocate policy changes to help parents address challenges successfully as they raise children.
- 2.2** The National Family and Parenting Institute, together with NCH, and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, established the Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children under the chairmanship of Professor Sir Michael Rutter. Clem Henricson, Director of Research and Policy at the National Family and Parenting Institute, is the Commission Secretary. In its report 'Families and the State', published in December 2005, the Commission examined the empirical evidence on the impact of parenting on children's outcomes. The following findings are pertinent to this inquiry.



3. *Psychosocial Experiences that Carry Risk*

- **3.1** Three categories of risk experiences of particular significance for children's outcomes have been identified :
 - There are substantial risks associated with a lack of ongoing, harmonious, selective committed relationships. Risks are present when there is an absence of such relationships (as there often is in most forms of institutional child rearing), when the relationships are profoundly negative (as with rejection, scapegoating, and neglect) and are of a kind that engender uncertainty and insecurity.
 - Social groups are influential through the ethos, attitudes, and styles of behaviour that characterise them. This applies within the family, peer group, school and community. A lack of social cohesion within any of these groups seems especially damaging.
 - Reciprocal, conversational interchange and play constitute important learning opportunities, both with respect to cognitive skills and also styles of social coping and adaptation. Their absence has a negative impact.

4. *Optimal Care*

- 4.1 Baumrind's (1967) concept of optimal 'authoritative' parenting comprising a combination of warmth (love and affection) and demandingness (the setting of standards), as compared approaches which are authoritarian, permissive or neglectful, has had a significant influence on the understanding of parenting. Baumrind also laid emphasis on the overall parent child relationship and the need to recognise that children differ in their characteristics and how they should be responded to.
- 4.2 Research findings have amply confirmed the validity of these concepts (see, for example, Bornstein, 2002; Rutter and Rutter, 1993). There are important cultural variations in the ways in which specific environmental features affect children's psychological development (Stewart and Bond, 2002; Rutter and Tienda, 2005), but the available evidence suggests that these broad principles apply across cultures.

5. *Resilience*

- 5.1 In assessing the impact of care, it is important to recognise the differentiation in individual children's responses to the same risk factors. Gene/environment interaction is significant in this regard, with negative environmental effects often being greatest in those who are genetically at risk, the genetic influences operating through children's vulnerability to their environment (Rutter et al., 2006). There is also evidence that some children have a stronger capacity for resilience, overcoming stress and adversity, than others. This may be determined by genetic influences that moderate the impact of environments, or prior psychosocial experiences; psychosocial advantage can render children less susceptible to the effects of acute stress (Quinton and Rutter, 1976). An alternative protective



relationship within the family may buffer some children from the risk effects of discord and a negative relationship with a parent (Jenkins and Smith, 1990). Ameliorating experiences after adversity can also have a positive effect (Rutter, 2006).

5. The Role of Fathers

- 5.1** Research confirms that fathers as well as mothers have a significant role to play in bringing up children, although mothers continue to be emotionally closer.
- 5.2** Studies in the UK and US show that, in general, children continue to report being emotionally closer to their mother than their father (Warin et al., 1999; Katz, 2003; Halle, 2001; O'Brien and Jones, 1996; Lamb and Lewis, 2004). Adolescents are more likely to discuss their personal worries, their experiences and progress at school with their mother (Warin et al., 1999; O'Brien and Jones, 1995, 1996; Katz, 2003), and mothers continue to invest more time and are more involved in parenting across the child's age span (Paulson and Sputa, 1996). Fathers' contacts tend to be focused on what has been described as bridges to the outside world, for example leisure activities and financial matters (O'Brien and Jones, 1995).
- 5.3** While most fathers have a less close relationship with children than mothers do, studies have shown that their role is significant. Cross-sectional and longitudinal research evidence in the UK and US shows that the level of father involvement is associated with children's greater self-confidence, mental health, positive behaviours and relationships, educational attainment and cognitive skills (see research reviewed in Le Menestrel, 1999; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Lewis and Warin, 2001; Yeung, et al., 2000; Aldous and Mulligan, 2002; Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004). Of particular importance for children's outcomes is the quality and content of fathers' involvement and of the father-child relationship (O'Brien, 2004; Le Menestrel, 1999; Aldous and Mulligan, 2002; Amato and Sobolewski, 2004). Wagner et al. (1996), in their longitudinal study of depression in adolescents, found that young people subject to stress were less likely to suffer from depressive symptoms if they had two parents whom they perceived as warm rather than just one. Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (1997), in their overview of research into the relationship between fathers and adolescents, concluded that the broader perspective of a triadic relationship, involving the father as well as the mother, rather than the intensity of a dyadic relationship with the mother only, was important for the adolescent's psychological adjustment to adulthood. This research needs, however, to be seen in the context of Rutter's assessment of *Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms* (1987), which concluded that one good parent can do much to compensate for a poor relationship with the other.

6. When Parents are Apart

- 6.1 Non resident fathers.** In a recent overview of research into children's relationships with their non-resident fathers, Dunn (2004) noted that findings on contact are mixed, although the effect size of associations between contact and positive outcomes has increased in recent research. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) in their meta analysis suggested that this may be due to non-resident fathers having become more committed to the parental role. Dunn also found the quality of child/father



relationships to be particularly important and to be consistently related to children's capacity to adjust to parental separation. Jaffee et al. (2003) in their epidemiological sample of 1,116 five-year-old twin pairs found that the less time fathers lived with their children, the more conduct disorders their children had. However, this was only the case where fathers engaged in low levels of antisocial behaviour. Where fathers engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour, the more time they lived with their children, the greater the conduct problems their children presented. These findings show that while contact usually benefits children, there is a need for a response that takes into account contra indications dependant on the circumstances of the case.

- 6.2 Reducing the risk to children of domestic conflict.** When parents separate, the objective should be to minimise the risk of children suffering because of domestic conflict. Social policy should take into account the significant impact separation has on children. There is evidence to show that, not only do young people experience approximately a two-year adjustment crisis period (Demo and Aycock, 1988), they also suffer disproportionately from health, social and educational problems, particularly if subject to repeated disruptions (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). These difficulties can be exacerbated by parental conflict. Indeed, evidence shows that parental conflict is a major source of distress to young people whether prior to or post separation, or when partners continue to live together (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990; Richards, 1993). Amato and Keith (1991) found it to be the most consistent feature of divorce to undermine children's wellbeing compared with parental absence and economic disadvantage. These issues around adult parental relationships need to be factored in when considering our expectations of standards of care in bringing up children, the support the state provides and contact arrangements.

7. Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Education

- 7.1** The National Family and Parenting Institute has undertaken a major analysis of research into the role of fathers in supporting their children's education (Goldman, 2005). The overview found a paucity of evidence in relation to Black fathers and those studies which have been undertaken tended to be small and localised, and to relate predominantly to families of South Asian origin. This should be borne in mind in assessing the findings below. Further research is required.
- 7.2** One study of African Caribbean resident and non resident church going fathers (Bruneau, 2002) found significant levels of father involvement with home and play activities, and a similar picture emerges from the South Asian studies (Razwan, 2002; Black Development Agency, 2002; Herrick and Ali, 2003). Fathers who were children of immigrants wanted to give more time to their children than their fathers had been able to give to them (Bruneau, 2002, Herrick and Ali, 2003; Working with Men, 2004). In contrast a small group of African fathers (mainly Somali Muslim) interviewed by the Black Development agency reported low levels of involvement.
- 7.3** In terms of the nature of the involvement, similar patterns emerge to those in white families with mothers taking the prominent role, particularly in the context of schools, but fathers also engaging across a spectrum of activities. Distinctive features include a high level of commitment by fathers to undertaking cultural and religious activities with their children and there was a significant role for men from the extended family as male role models – grand fathers, uncles, older brothers.
- 7.4** In relation to service uptake, a voluntary organisation in London found that African and African Caribbean fathers were high users of services for fathers. Significantly



recent research undertaken by the National Family and Parenting Institute for the DfES (Apps et al., in draft) shows that Black families do not constitute the most hard to reach in terms of service uptake, and that there is a readiness to use services. Greater difficulties are experienced with a small section of resistant white families.

- 7.5 Examining the experiences of non resident fathers generally, Goldman found that they encounter difficulties in becoming actively involved in their children's education. Her study examined school practice and made recommendations to increase engagement with non resident fathers including the development of a school policy on the issue, employing a range of male carers, not just resident fathers, and establishing a set of systematic, practical contact arrangements. Schools have considerable potential in this area and the Bruneau study noted the need for non resident fathers to have a place where they can spend quality time with their children.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 Overall the evidence suggests that there are advantages to children in their fathers' engagement with their upbringing, but this is dependant on the circumstances of the case. Where fathers are seriously antisocial, contact can have a deleterious effect on children's outcomes. Where there is a history of significant domestic violence it can be dangerous.

Resilience can also be fostered by one strong family relationship, generally with the mother. Nevertheless, the evidence supports the premise that in most cases fathers' engagement should be encouraged by schools and family services. There is a readiness amongst many Black families to use family services and this should be supported in service responses. Various models for involving fathers have been developed, but greater impetus and practical guidance is needed to involve non resident fathers.

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