

## RECOMMENDATIONS

WWM and other civil society organisations can continue to do small projects, but to sustain and embed this successful approach that ensures fathers can and do make a positive difference to their children, a step change is needed nationally and locally.

## NATIONALLY

A national framework is required to embed a father-inclusive approach into mainstream services for pregnancy, childbirth and parenting/family support. This framework should:

- require Local Authorities to build father-inclusive work into their strategic plans and commit/safeguard the required funding;
- require that Local Authorities' local-area needs assessments include fathers as well as mothers, whether living together or apart, so that all family support services can be aligned accordingly;
- require data collection by agencies to monitor, target and reach fathers and mothers, and assess patterns of service use;
- require all early years' services to have a role in providing support to fathers; this should involve midwives, health visitors and social workers and should include measurable targets;
- require all inspection regimes for services linked with early years to examine the achievement of targets of engagement with fathers; and
- require that training is provided for health and social care agencies on fathers as caregivers and father-inclusive practices, and develop a comprehensive national training programme suitable for these agencies.



## LOCALLY

Local Authorities set the culture, direction and resources of local services, and the proposed national framework will require them to make changes. But good local authorities can already act. They should:

- develop and implement a 'fatherhood' policy for all their statutory responsibilities including children in need and child protection which should comprise pathways of referral and assessment to identify fathers in need of support early on;
- ensure fathers are provided with appropriately focussed and gender-specific information pre- and post-birth.

## CHANGES TO WORKING PRACTICES

Changes to working practices are needed if fathers are to be involved properly and systematically. There are things that service managers and practitioners can do now:

- engage with mothers and fathers and provide support equally, whether or not the father resides with the family;
- use gender-differentiated strategies to engage with 'hard to reach' fathers most in need of support;
- address all aspects of the role of the father, at all stages of the child's development;
- improve referral and assessment processes to ensure fathers are included and to ensure fathers' data is collected systematically and accurately;
- embed father-inclusive practices in agency objectives with targets for engagement with fathers for the organisation and for individual practitioners;
- include male practitioners in service delivery ; and
- develop and promote a clear code of practice for the involvement of fathers and mothers and other caregivers that is understood by all staff and made visible to all families.



**Tel:** 0207 237 5353

**Email:** [info@workingwithmen.org](mailto:info@workingwithmen.org)

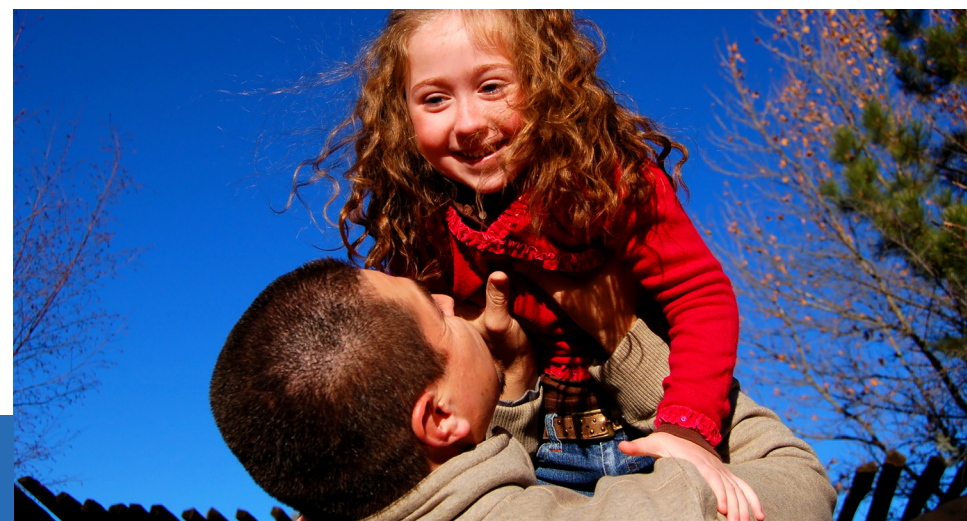
**Website:** [www.workingwithmen.org](http://www.workingwithmen.org)

Registered Charity Number 1102451



## A FATHERS' DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Working With Men (WWM) is a not-for-profit organisation working to ensure that fathers are supported to be actively engaged in the lives of their children. WWM has deep knowledge of why fathers matter, how to work with them, and what needs to change so that the work WWM has pioneered can be embedded into policy and practice. The longer report of the Fathers' Development Programme sets out research findings, the approach WWM used, the evaluation findings of the Fathers' Development Project based in Islington, London and draws a series of recommendations based on the learning from the work.





## BACKGROUND: WHY FATHERS MATTER

Research is clear that fathers are important for their child's development. Father-child relationships, whether positive, negative or absent, have wide-ranging effects on children that extend into adulthood; these effects are stronger for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. There are strong correlations between father involvement and child physical, emotional, social, cognitive and academic development. Conversely, low father contact is correlated with a range of negative outcomes in children. Interventions to improve the nature of father-child relationships can improve outcomes for children and be instrumental in increasing social mobility.

A father's relationship with his children's mother is also important; research shows that the parental relationship is a strong predictor of the father's involvement in co-parenting. Mothers' perceptions of fathers as competent caregivers, and the extent to which mothers are supportive or resistant, has the potential to shape or restrict father involvement.

But engaging men in services to support, enhance, and promote positive involvement with their children is challenging. WWM have demonstrated that engaging men in fathering programmes can be done. Evidence from our recently-completed three-year project in Islington shows how best to engage men in fathering programmes and effectively promote their development as parents.



## ENGAGING FATHERS

When services fail to engage with fathers, there is often an assumption that fathers choose not to engage. But there are some very real barriers to engagement. WWM has developed a profound understanding of the internal or psychological barriers and external barriers to involved fatherhood faced by fathers, particularly those from disadvantaged socio-economic communities or marginalised backgrounds.

Internal barriers include low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in fathering skills whilst external barriers include a lack of father-specific support (perceived or otherwise). Internal and external barriers combine to create a cycle of disengagement from fatherhood that prevent these fathers developing and maintaining constructive relationships with their child and, in the case of separated fathers, with the child's mother, and accessing mainstream support services.

Services believe they are gender neutral, but research and practice tell us that all too often fatherhood is seen as an add-on, while motherhood is viewed by mainstream agencies as essential. When fathers do not live with their children, they are rarely seen as caregivers in their own right, but instead as financial providers and at times as a risk to be managed. Fathers themselves see services as being for mothers, dominated by a female workforce, and by female service users, with an overtly female-oriented culture.

The WWM Fathers' Development Programme was designed in recognition of the importance of both father-child relationships and father-mother relationships for a child's development and to meet the challenges of effective engagement with fathers, especially those least likely to access services. WWM developed a multi-strand approach, working not only with fathers directly, but also with Local Authorities and mainstream agencies.

## KEY FINDINGS: ISLINGTON FATHERS' DEVELOPMENT PROJECT EVALUATION

The evaluation of the Islington Fathers' Development Project demonstrates that disadvantaged fathers want to be involved, have the capacity to be involved, and can develop the confidence to be involved in their children's lives. And doing so, improve their children's lives and their own.

The project demonstrates that a negative cycle of fathers' own internal barriers can be broken so that men can be both positive influences in their children's lives and equal partners in sharing the work of parenting. And it demonstrates that when support is father-friendly, external barriers to involved fathering can be overcome.

**The independent qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the work showed a wide range of positive outcomes;**

- There were significant increases in confidence among the men in terms of their fathering skills.
- Fathers understood that, above all, they were parents, and that caring for their children is something both mother and father can accomplish.
- The fathers valued help to develop practical skills for being a parent and to understand the emotional aspects of having a child.
- Fathers were able to return to work or study.
- Fathers accessed services.
- Fathers improved their relationship with their child/ children's mother and improved their ability to manage conflict.
- And fathers improved their relationships with their child/ children, which improved their children's, and their own, wellbeing.

The Project was highly effective in demonstrating the far-reaching benefits of working with fathers to practitioners, agencies and the local authority. There is evidence of fathers' work and fathers' engagement targets being incorporated into strategic plans, cross-sector working leading to referrals for support across different agencies and an increased emphasis on fathers generally.

