Fathers’ involvement in the Parent Support Adviser pilot – the disjunction between policy and practice.


Symposium: Parenting Support – some lessons from three interventions.

Symposium 1511, Session Number 1.06.

Stephen M. Cullen,
Mairi Ann Cullen, Susan Band, Liz Davis, Geoff Lindsay.

CEDAR, University of Warwick,
Coventry, CV4 7AL.

S.M.Cullen@warwick.ac.uk
**Background:**

The role of fathers

The 1997 Labour government established universal principles for its future education policy with the 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997). A key strand in that strategy was the recognition of the importance of parental participation in their children’s education. Parents were seen to have an essential part to play, in partnership with schools, to further government policy objectives to maximise the benefits accruing to school students from their schooling experience. *Excellence in Schools* laid the groundwork for a continuing series of initiatives that seek to enhance parental involvement in their children’s education – a strategy that has strong foundations in the evidence relating to the role and importance of parents in their children’s education. There is clear empirical evidence that parental involvement and student achievement are strongly related across student age ranges. (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003a, 4-5; Carter and Wojtkiewicz, 2000, 33-4). In addition, parental involvement with their children’s education and achievement is positive across a wide range of indicators, from providing a secure home environment to engaging fully with their children’s schools. (Harris and Goodall, 2006, 5)

Policy progress has, however, been characterised by the existence of numerous barriers to the engagement of parents with their children’s education and schooling. Much of the literature on the topic has addressed barriers such as socio-economic status, or parental perceptions of their role, and relationships with schools. However, little attention has been paid to the
role and importance of fathers in relation to their children’s development, education, and schooling, and the particular barriers to involvement that fathers face. For example, although by the early 1980s, there was increasing interest in the area of father-child, as opposed to parent-child, which often meant, in fact, mother-child, relationships (Maccoby and Martin, 1983); the main focus of that work was concerned ‘to what degree [and] in what ways, and with what effects, child-rearing functions can be more equally shared between mothers and fathers than has traditionally been the case’ (Maccoby and Martin, 1983, 56). Essentially, such a focus was not on the relationship between fathers, their children and their children’s education and schooling, but on the relationship between mothers and fathers. Similarly, in their recent study of 2,722 British adolescents aged between 14 and 18 years, Flouri and Buchanan noted that little has been done to examine the particular nature and impact of fathering on children, as opposed to mothering, and aggregated familial effects on children’s development and well-being (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003, 400).

Some work has, however, addressed the issue of father-child relations, the implications of those relations, and the role for fathers in the educational development of their children. Evidence from a variety of countries indicates that fathers have a particular role to play in the parenting of their children, and their educational progress. For example, Amato studied children’s views of family processes in one parent, step parent and intact Australian families, and separated out the particular contribution of fathers compared to mothers. Whereas children’s perceptions of maternal support were unchanged by
divorce or remarriage, children in one-parent families, compared to those in intact families, experienced less support from fathers (1987). Stepfathers could, over time, compensate for this loss of support, but this difference between maternal and paternal support for children further highlighted the loss of paternal support that children in one parent and step-parent families often experienced.

Father involvement with their children as a vital component of children’s cognitive, social and academic development has been stressed in a number of recent studies (Ryan, 2000; Cabrera et al, 2000; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Goldman, 2005; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006; Fatherhood Institute, 2007). Interestingly, there is evidence that the impact of father involvement with their children is not so much as a man, but as a parent (Ryan, 2000). The gendered impact of parenting on sons and daughters was also specifically addressed by Carter and Wojtkiewicz (2000), who examined parental involvement with adolescents’ education, asking: do daughters or sons get more help from their parents? The prevailing view was that ‘parents would be more involved in the education of their adolescent sons’ (Carter and Wojtkiewicz, 2000, 34). However, Carter and Wojtkiewicz’s findings were that parents of both sexes were more involved with their daughters than their sons. Neither the causes, nor the implications, of these findings were clear, but Carter and Wojtkiewicz postulated that changing social and economic conditions, for example, ‘delayed marriage and more divorce’ may ‘have altered traditional socialization practices that favoured males’ in the past (Carter and Wojtkiewicz, 2000, 41).
Fathers, absent fathers and changing family structures

The impact of rapidly changing economic conditions, and consequent social responses, particularly in terms of family structures and gender roles, imply that the role of fathers and mothers is undergoing substantial change, with uncertain implications for children. The experience of family life, and fatherhood in particular, in the USA over the last half century has been marked by dramatic change, with the proportion of children who (in 2000) could expect to spend some of their childhood living with only one parent exceeding 50% of all children (Cabrera et al, 2000, 128). The dominant element here is the growth in the number of children who have experience of absent fathers and/or fatherless homes. The implications are that increasing numbers of children will experience negative outcomes because of the lack of fathers in their lives. Cabrera et al (2000) summarised the implications of absent fathers for their children, identifying five key areas: (i) absence of a co-parent, (ii) economic loss and disadvantage, (iii) social isolation, (iv) psychological distress, (v) social-emotional costs. Father involvement, by contrast, is associated with gains accruing to their children in terms of their psychological and emotional well-being, educational benefits, and improved behavioural outcomes. In relation to policy initiatives concerned with parent involvement, the issue here is the increased importance that good links between schools and fathers take on in the case of families characterised by fatherless homes.
The experience of fathers’ involvement in family education programmes

Despite the evidence of the importance of paternal involvement in relation to children’s development, the inclusion of fathers in ‘family’ orientated policy is problematic. For example, the US Head Start programme, a long-standing public initiative, and the model for the UK’s Sure Start programme, provides an illustration of the common experience that ‘in early childhood programs, parent involvement has typically meant mother involvement’ (Levine, 1993, 4). Barriers to fathers’ involvement in Head Start were located in fathers’ fears but, more particularly, in the ‘ambivalence of staff about father involvement, gatekeeping by mothers, and inappropriate program design and delivery’ (Levine, 1993, 14). The experience of the UK’s version of Head Start, the Sure Start programme, also indicated that fathers’ involvement in this ‘family’ policy was limited (2000-2006). Key barriers to father involvement were identified in Sure Start evaluations: programmes were characterised by a predominantly female environment/lack of male presence; Sure Start opening hours matched fathers’ employment hours; limiting access. There were traditional, gendered attitudes towards childcare and male-female roles characterised by the view that ‘mother knows best’ which acted as a barrier to father involvement; and services were female-centred (Lloyd, O’Brien, and Lewis, 2006, 40-47). This picture is confirmed by local studies of the Sure Start programme, with, for example, Cullen and Lindsay (2006, 17-18) noting that it was a common feeling among fathers that ‘their’ local programme was, in reality, intended for mothers and children.
Some researchers have argued that the main obstacle to father involvement in family programmes is, at base, attitudes among fathers themselves. On the basis of 46 interviews with family workers, Asmussen et al (2007) argue that the problem lies with fathers’ refusal to engage with family programmes. It was argued that even family workers of long standing were unable to attract fathers, and that even father-oriented advertising or father-sensitive timing of events had little effect. On the face of it, such conclusions may be problematic in that they may be interpreted as locating explanations only on the fathers. Accepting such an interpretation could limit initiatives with a commitment to equal opportunities, and suggest a degree of complacency in terms of family programme implementation. By contrast, work undertaken in Australia takes a much more nuanced approach to the issue. Noting the almost universal lack of success in recruiting fathers to health, education, welfare and family support services, Fletcher (2008) stressed gender and cultural issues as explanatory variables. In addition, he called for a greater degree of self-reflection on the part of practitioners, the development of ‘cultural competency’ that focused on ‘male culture’, and the importance of early intervention.

Government policy and fatherhood in England

If the inclusion of fathers in family programmes has been less than successful in many cases, the UK policy context is quite clear – successive governments have, in recent years, seen the engagement of fathers in the lives of the children as essential to the successful implementation of a range of policy initiatives. Major government policy initiatives - *Excellence in Schools* (1997);
Supporting Families (1998); and Every Child Matters (2003) – have all stressed the priority that public policy places on the engagement of fathers. The importance of father engagement has been consistently reiterated in practitioner guides issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and its successor, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF); for example, in ‘Parents as Partners in Early Learning Case Studies, Engaging fathers through Active Play’ (DfES, 2007).

The present paper explores the involvement of fathers using data derived from the national evaluation of the Parent Support Adviser (PSA) pilot which took place during the period September 2006 to July 2008. This initiative formed part of a broader government initiative, the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder, 2006-2008, concerning parents, particularly those of children at risk of developing behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (Lindsay et al, 2008a). A government grant of £40 million was made available to 20 local authorities (LAs) selected by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) largely on the basis of high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage but also to include LAs across the English regions and demographic differences with respect to size, urban and rural, and ethnicity. The government grant was used by the 20 LAs to fund employment of a total of 717 PSAs who supported parents in 1167 schools, and to develop the LA infrastructure to support the PSAs. (Lindsay et al, 2007, 2008b, forthcoming 2009). The particular research questions relating to fathers within the PSA pilot were: to what extent were fathers being engaged by PSAs? What problems were
associated with PSAs, schools and father involvement? In what ways could father engagement with the PSA service be enhanced?

3. Methods:

The sample

A sample of 12 of the 20 LAs in the PSA pilot was selected as case studies for more intensive investigation. These were selected mainly to ensure a reasonable mix by urban/rural and geographic location.

Measures

Interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format comprising main questions followed up, as necessary, with probes to explore issues in depth. This method provides a balance between the benefits of a relatively informal ‘conversation’, which encourages flow, and the need to ensure consistent coverage of the themes under investigation at the time. Interview schedules were bespoke for each interviewee group for each phase. Most interviews were face-to-face, typically carried out in the school or PSA’s centre (in a private room), but telephone interviews were also carried out. All interviewees were provided with information about the project and were assured of confidentiality. All gave informed consent. LAs were allocated a code number (e.g. LA54) at random. Similarly, within each LA’s interviewee group, each interviewee was allocated a code at random (e.g. LA67/C – being the co-ordinator from LA67). This data generated by the interviews – with 24 PSA co-ordinators (who each had LA-wide responsibilities for the co-ordination of
PSAs), 59 PSA line managers, 79 PSAs, 162 interviews in total – forms the evidence base for this article.

**Procedure**

Interviews were conducted face to face or over the telephone, depending on the interviewee’s preference, although most were conducted face to face. The interviews that form the base of this paper were all undertaken in the later stages of CEDAR’s evaluation of the PSA pilot, during January and February 2008. All interviewees were told about the nature and purpose of the evaluation, and gave informed consent to participate having been told that all the results would be anonymised. Permission was sought to record each interview and was granted in all cases. The interviews were transcribed. Four researchers, responsible for between two to four LAs (12 LAs in total) read and analysed the interviews for themes derived from the interview questions, with additional themes arising from interviewee-generated topics being added. All the data were then collated under the themes to ascertain the range and relative balance of views within each topic. Three researchers then collated themes by job category - PSA LA co-ordinator, PSA line manager, and the PSA – and produced overall analyses by theme and function.

**4. Results:**

*Planning for the inclusion of fathers*  
Planning for the inclusion of fathers into PSA work was limited. For example, in seven LAs specific provision aimed at fathers was entirely on an *ad hoc* basis, and there was little in the way of anything approaching a coherent or
planned approach to the issue of engaging fathers. In three LAs there was no provision specifically aimed at fathers at all. The most that the PSA co-ordinator from one of these LAs could report was that ‘we’re looking at it at the moment’ (LA67/C). This co-ordinator went on to comment that ‘I think they [fathers] need a different sort of service’ (LA67/C), but was unable to say why, or what, that might be.

There was a heavy reliance on the initiative of individual PSAs. In the case of LA58, a male PSA provided martial arts based courses for fathers and children; this course was repeatedly referred to by interviewees from that LA, the co-ordinator included. Similarly, in LA65, one male PSA had been appointed with specific experience of work with fathers. This PSA was then used as a resource by other PSAs interested in work with fathers. In LA51 training had been arranged training for interested PSAs with Fathers Direct the Fatherhood Institute, which provides a range of training programmes related to fatherhood (Fatherhood Institute). This training provision appeared to be unique to that LA.

A minority of PSA co-ordinators were able to provide clearer evidence of more targeted PSA provision for fathers and strategic thinking from the outset of the pilot. Three LAs stood out in this respect. For example, the co-ordinator for LA57 noted that the LA’s PSAs had adopted four specific strategies to include fathers, including the recruitment of two male PSAs (although the PSA co-ordinator acknowledged that both these PSAs intended to leave their posts, for personal reasons), and a dads and lads club, run with support from Family
Learning. This co-ordinator explained that their approach was part her LA’s general approach to the issue of PSA engagement with fathers:

‘We tried to do it right from the start. Wherever we’ve been dealing with a mum where there’s been an issue with school, we’ve always tried to deal with the dad as well. It was a decision that we took as a group, that we’d do that. Sometimes you can engage them and sometimes not. […] It’s one of our local authority targets so we’re just following them, really.’ (LA57/C)

This LA-wide approach contrasted with the ‘hands-off’ approach of LA54, which had little in the way of specific provision for fathers. According to the co-ordinator any provision was simply up to individual PSAs and schools:

‘We haven’t done it [planned provision for fathers] as a local authority, if you like. It’s been done at a school level so where the school sees that as an issue they will have dealt with that.’ (LA54/C)

However, among the PSAs themselves there was little in the way of planning, or ideas about how to engage fathers, even when PSAs appreciated that the question of paternal involvement needed to be addressed.

*Recognising the issue of father involvement*

There was a general awareness that there was a specific issue surrounding father involvement with the PSA pilot on the part PSA line managers,
however, attitudes to the issue varied greatly. For example, while all the PSA line managers recognised that there was an issue surrounding the generally low levels of engagement with fathers, this was not seen to be a high priority area by the majority of line managers. For instance, a female cluster line manager said, on being asked about how she had encouraged fathers to work with PSAs:

‘Erm…I suppose if I was to be honest, the answer is, I don’t particularly differentiate. Parents are all engaged the same. We do have male PSAs, who do tend to encourage fathers to us better, to work more readily, and this team has more male PSAs than any other team in [the LA]’. (LA58/LM1)

The line manager then gave the familiar – for LA58 - example of the male PSA with specific martial arts skills who ran martial arts groups for fathers and children. In addition, she noted that in one town in the LA there was an established fathers’ group that the PSA cluster had been able to utilise. However, these were the only two examples she was able to provide.

In a minority of cases, PSA line managers argued that engaging fathers was not a problem in their particular school or cluster. However, the line managers in these cases were only able to give limited accounts of father engagement with the PSA service. For example, one line manager said that her school had no problem in the area, but was unable to give details of the numbers of
fathers engaged. However, she was able to give examples of an existing group, and a planned group where the PSA would focus on fathers:

‘[PSA] has worked hard on this, and she does try to get the dads in, and I know that she has got things planned like “Lads and Dads”, and we have had dads in for the [name] family project, so it is an issue for us, but perhaps not as much as an issue as it is elsewhere’. (LA54/LM2).

In contrast, a minority of line managers were able to give detailed examples of steps that had been taken to engage fathers as a conscious response to the recognition that it was a problematic area. One school line manager was able to give extensive detail about the way in which the school’s PSA had fitted into pre-existing schemes to attract fathers. These had been funded directly by the LA. The issues revolved around the timing of events, and making a specific appeal to fathers. Saturdays were seen to be the best days to run fathers and children activities, and examples of successful events included an ‘exotic creatures’ morning, a ‘bug hunt’, and ‘African drumming’.

Although some PSAs appeared to regard father engagement as an issue, others said that they believed that it was what they had come to expect. There was little in the way of planning, or even ideas, about how to engage more men in the future. Nonetheless, on the part of a minority of PSAs, the realisation that levels of father engagement were low was matched by some thoughts on the nature of barriers to PSA engagement with fathers. PSAs
were able to suggest some approaches to improving father engagement, but, in most cases, this was a case of possible future approaches, rather than strategies that had been put into practice. Further, there was a widespread sense of resignation among PSAs who regarded the problem as irresolvable. There were ideas about how to engage fathers in the future, but they were aware that their ideas were not particularly new or innovative. For example,

‘Ideas on how to do that [engage more fathers] I suppose really are the same ones you’ve probably heard 100 times; try and maybe organise more support work in different locations; after work if the dads are working; things like bring your dads to school day, that sort of thing, working in conjunction with the schools who have got these ideas to try and get fathers in. We’ve actually got a fathers’ worker in [voluntary organisation] as well so we have signposted the fathers and the families to his project as well so we’re quite lucky with that.’ (LA54/PSA3)

This commentary was from a male PSA, and his additional observation that ‘The take-up hasn’t been brilliant but it’s a perennial problem’ was one that was shared by many PSA professionals.

Access for fathers

Some initiatives had been put in place to attract fathers into contact with the PSA service. Where they had been attempted, the success of these approaches was mixed. While there were examples of success, both on a one
to one and on a group basis, actual numbers of fathers engaged were usually quite small. In LA56, for example, all the PSAs had fairly regular contact with a small number of fathers (between two and eight) though nothing was offered specifically for them. One PSA attracting three fathers out of a group of eight families described this as ‘a huge success’. In interviews with different professionals involved in the pilot, it was noticeable how attracting even very low numbers of fathers was regarded as a success. For example, one PSA line manager noted:

‘We do actually have a father who attends quite regularly at one of our schools, and he has three daughters. Quite interestingly, he’s married, and he and his wife are still together, but the main care of the three children actually comes down to dad. It’s been dad that’s been attending all the sessions, which, you know, is commendable and great, in fact, I wish we had more of a balance between males and females. I think engaging fathers is a very difficult one […]’

(LA54/LM5)

In this case, it seemed as if the father was engaged almost as a surrogate mother. In another example, a line manager was only able to identify two cases in which her school’s PSA had worked with fathers, and both in association with their female partners.
As regards group working, male focused activities rather than arts and crafts seemed on the whole to be more successful, though again numbers were fairly small:

‘What you put on is important, and it’s a matter of consulting with them to find out what they want. It’s no good just thinking of an idea and then just expecting them to come in. If you put something on that’s a kind of like a hook, then they’ll come in. If you put something on that dads would never dream of doing, then they’ll not come in.’ (LA61/PSA4)

For some, but by no means all activities, football being an example, it seems likely that a male PSA would be at an advantage in recruiting a team, or accompanying ‘Dads and Kids’ on a football focused outing. Nonetheless, this type of approach is far from being unproblematic, as it raises the issue of gender stereotyping that may well end up excluding many fathers. There is, perhaps, a danger that fathers could be stereotyped as being only interested in sport, and, by extension, their sons rather than daughters: fathers have an importance as parents, not just as men (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Ryan, 2000).

In general, PSAs supported the view that ‘it’s how you approach fathers’ (LA55/PSA5) that helps or hinders fathers’ access to the PSA service:
‘You do have to do the drip-drip approach because a lot of fathers will say initially, “I leave her [the mother] to deal with all that type of thing.”.’

(LA55/PSA5)

This view was echoed by a male PSA from LA58, who stressed the importance of personal contacts and getting beyond accepting engagement only with mothers by engaging fathers in their homes:

‘It’s quite normal to find, [on] initial [home] visits that you conduct with families, it’s always mum, and then it will be mum and the kids. [...] I always try to reinforce the message with mum that dad is important in this place, and he needs to be part of. It’s not always successful to engage with dads, but very, very often you can sift through those that are going to give you a bit of input, if you bump them up and are going to say how important their role is within the family and how they can affect the changes that we’ve all been discussing, a good majority will partake.’ (LA58/PSA1)

However, even with this targeted approach and persistence, this PSA argued that with the best will in the world, you can’t get everybody to engage: sometimes they just won’t.’

Overall, the evidence provided by the PSAs indicated that, at the point of service delivery, the levels of engagement of fathers with PSAs was low, and
that for a new role designed to improve parental engagement with schools and children’s education, there was a clear deficit in terms of paternal as opposed to maternal engagement.

**Barriers to engaging fathers**

Interviewees appreciated the difficulties of engaging fathers that arose from the typical work patterns of men, or cultural attitudes towards child care on the part of LAs, schools, communities, and some men themselves. The co-ordinator for LA50 noted that her LA had only recruited three or four male PSAs, as opposed to 50 female PSAs; this, the co-ordinator felt, ‘testified to the way genders were perceived in relation to supporting young people through learning’ (LA50/C). However, there was little sense that LA co-ordinators or PSAs as a whole were developing strategies to address the issues.

Three main reasons were suggested by interviewees as barriers to engaging fathers with PSA work. Traditional social attitudes among men and women towards gendered roles, with women being see as carers and child issues being primarily the concern of mothers, hindered the process of trying to engage men with PSA work. Timing was also raised as a key issue, with weekdays being seen as a difficult time to engage fathers (particularly at primary school level when compared to mothers). Instead, Saturdays were seen as being more suitable, but that had implications for PSA work practices requiring weekend work. Associated with this was the view that fathers’ mindset was dominated by work. Thirdly, men could be discouraged by
attending groups and events dominated by mothers and women carers, as indicated by this line manager:

‘I think sometimes men feel that when it comes to the children, although there has been a lot of publicity about the fathers should be more involved, and the benefits of it, I do think there is still a bit of a image thing with men – they come to a group, and it’s full of women, and they think, “oh”. It puts them off, it puts them off.’ (LA54/LM5)

Other barriers included the nature of family structure and practicability. For example, the prevalence of single parent families headed by mothers effectively removed the possibility of accessing many fathers. Involving both mothers and fathers raised practice issues such as the need for childcare if both parents attend, for example, a parenting course. Parent Support Advisers were able to suggest some approaches to improving father engagement, but, in most cases, this was a case of possible future approaches, rather than strategies that they had already put into practice. These included: home visits at a time when fathers are available; addressing letters, newsletters and other communications to both parents and in cases where fathers live apart from their children, explicitly to fathers; offering activities that are likely to appeal to male parents, e.g. football; specifically targeting activities that will involve fathers and their children, e.g. ‘Dads and Kids’ events; and deploying male PSAs to deal with fathers.
Male PSAs

The PSA role is overwhelmingly a female role, with 91% of PSAs in post in June 2007 being women (Lindsay et al, 2007). Interviewees across the sample commented that the balance between female and male PSAs might disadvantage fathers in accessing the PSA service. However, there was also a sense that in respect of family working a female dominated workforce was the ‘norm’, especially in primary schools. Further, even where male PSAs were available, the fact that they were in such a clear minority made the utilisation of male PSAs problematic. This issue was highlighted by LA58/LM2, who was both a male line manager and PSA. He acknowledged that there were advantages in being a male PSA when working with fathers, but explained the problems that could arise if it was felt that male PSAs should work with men:

‘I think that it has helped with fathers [being a male PSA], I think that it does provide some difficulties though, in that with there just being myself and [PSA] as blokes in a team of 11, if it is envisaged that a fella will work purely because they are fellas, then it does push cases towards me and [PSA]. Two outcomes really – either you end up with not having the best worker purely and simply because it has to be a woman purely and simply because there’s only me and [PSA] and we get stacked out; or parents not getting the right service […] I don’t want to bog it down that it’s presupposing that blokes need blokes. I guess what I’d say is that no matter what the sex of the case that we are working with, if it’s envisaged that a fella will work better with it, then it
comes down to the fact that there are only two of us out of ten’.

(LA58/LM2)

The combination of having only a minority of male PSAs two PSAs, out of ten PSAs in this example, and the sense that fathers needed male PSAs, had the potential to both overload the two PSAs in question, and to distort, on gendered grounds, the provision of PSA services.

5. Discussion:

Problems associated with PSAs, schools and father involvement

The PSA pilot introduced a new role, and profession, into schools in 20 LAs in England. Early indicators were that, at the conclusion of the DCSF funded pilot in July 2008, that the PSA role had established itself, and was, overwhelmingly, highly valued by schools, parents, and LAs (Lindsay et al, forthcoming). In consequence, most stakeholders intended to continue to fund the PSA role, whether in schools, school clusters, or area clusters, depending on local needs and conditions. The experience of the success of the PSA as a valued profession in schools, and its function as a bridging role between parents and their children’s schools reflects both research and policy emphases on the importance of engaging parents in their children’s education. However, the evidence from the pilot indicated a gendered initiative with respect to both provision and clients: only one out of the ten PSAs was male and only 18% of the PSAs’ casework was with fathers (Lindsay et al, forthcoming 2009, 184).
Previous research has shown that fathers are an essential element in children’s development and well-being (Cabrera et al, 2000; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Goldman, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2006; Ryan, 2000). However, fathers’ typical experience of ‘family’ programmes and initiatives is characterised by exclusion (Cullen and Lindsay, 2006; Levine, 1993; Lloyd et al, 2006). The PSA pilot similarly displays, overall, the problem of paternal non-engagement. This is in spite of the weight of research evidence, and a clear policy orientation that stresses the important role that fathers have to play in their children’s development. The response of PSA co-ordinators, PSA line managers, and PSAs themselves, referred to collectively as PSA professionals, of increasing fathers’ engagement was, in general, limited in terms of overall planning, specific measures aimed at engaging fathers, and PSA practice.

The dominant picture that emerged from this research was that little thought had been given to the issue of engaging fathers. The typical approach of PSA co-ordinators was characterised by a reliance on ad hoc provision, and the unsupported initiative of individual PSAs. There was evidence that some PSA professionals adopted a gender-blind approach to parents. However, research has shown that this type of approach, in this type of context, leads to a situation where ‘parent’ equates to ‘mother’ (Levine, 1993; Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Further, the attitudes displayed by some of the PSA professionals revealed noticeable levels of indifference towards developing specific, targeted approaches to engage fathers. Further, there was little evidence that any sustained effort had been made to recruit significant
numbers of male PSAs, nor was there any evidence that co-ordinators had considered the issue of gender and the PSA role.

Low levels of PSA engagement with fathers was the norm across LAs. PSA professionals were often aware of the issue, but tended to regard the low levels of father engagement as a given, something that was a particularly intractable norm faced by all schools and family initiatives. Some PSAs were aware that father-focused strategies had to be developed in order to boost their engagement with fathers, but examples of these being undertaken during the pilot were few.

There was also a general awareness that barriers to fathers’ engagement: social attitudes, timing issues, and fathers’ reactions to female dominated groups all acted as barriers to PSAs successfully engaging fathers. This did not mean, however, that line managers had supported their PSAs in following strategies to engage fathers. While there were some, generalised, ideas about possible future strategies, the typical experience of the PSA pilot was that few of these strategies had been pursued in anything like a systematic fashion.

The numbers of PSAs who were men was low – only 9% of over 700 PSAs. The significance of the low level of male employment in the role was acknowledged by a minority of co-ordinators and line managers. However, there were also issues surrounding the use of male PSAs to engage fathers. For example, the male line manager and PSA from LA58 (LA58/LM2) was
aware of the complexities of employing male PSAs with the intent of targeting fathers, but this degree of reflection was unusual among line managers.

Enhancing father involvement

The dissonance between research on father involvement with their children’s development, and government policy imperatives relating to the key role of fathers, on the one hand, and the experience of father engagement in the PSA pilot on the other, is striking. Despite the strength of research on the importance of fathers, and the existence of a body of literature on strategies for engaging fathers, key players – co-ordinators, line managers and PSAs – in the PSA initiative frequently struggled to articulate an effective approach to engaging fathers with the PSA role, and, hence, with schools and their children’s education.

The practitioner focused literature on father engagement provides strategy directions for those engaged in the PSA role. Goldman (2005) delineated the necessary components of effective practice, supported by 13 case studies of effective practice in action. The basic principles of good practice outlined by Goldman reflect, to some extent, the type of considerations that some of the PSA professionals articulate, albeit in a patchy fashion. Goldman’s general principles of good practice in working with fathers include the following key points: putting children first; including children’s fathers (resident and non-resident), but also other male carers, “father figures” and the extended family; developing policies, programmes, strategies and recruitment specifically to engage fathers and male carers; consulting fathers, mothers and children in
planning service design and content of programmes; recognising that one model of practice is not sufficient – offer alternatives to fathers; and working in partnerships with other organisations, and share good practice (Goldman, 2005, 161).

To an extent, Goldman’s principles of good practice for those working with fathers contains much that can be seen as universal good practice in family work. Richard Fletcher’s ‘Father-inclusive practice and associated professional competencies’ (2008) provides a valuable summary of the issue, and an important statement of the need to address professional standards. Fletcher discussed, in particular, the ‘culture of maleness’, and argued that ‘practitioners [need] to reflect on their stereotypes and beliefs about men, educate themselves about male culture(s) and find techniques that suit men in need’ (Fletcher, 2008, 7). In respect of practitioner competencies, Fletcher points to the Australian Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council’s draft competencies for Vocational Graduate Diplomas of Relationship Counselling and of Family Dispute Resolution as ground-breaking in the specific requirement to develop competencies such as ‘Work with Men’, and ‘Working with separated fathers’ (Fletcher, 2008, 7). In the UK context, PSA professionals should also be more aware not only of policy requirements, such as those contained in Excellence in Schools, 1997; Supporting Families, 1998; and Every Child Matters, 2003, but also the recently established National Academy for Parenting Practitioners (NAPP), whose mission statement explicitly notes that ‘the Academy sees fathers as equal partners in parenting’ (NAPP, www.parentingacademy.org/parentserv_fathers.aspx accessed 30 September
and provides a range of practitioner resources aimed at engaging fathers in the lives of the children and in policy programmes. NAPP is a developing resource that will support the training of a range of parenting professionals, with the stated aim of

‘Acting as a national centre and source of advice on high-quality academic research evidence on parenting and parenting support, combined with practical knowledge of what works and has worked in different situations and with different client groups.’


In terms of the PSA role in schools, the desirability, importance, and necessity of greater engagement of fathers with their children’s development through the provision of PSA services should be a salient element in the future development of the profession.
References

- Asmussen, Kirsten; Corlyon, Judy; Hauari, Hanan; La Placa, Vincent; (2007), *Supporting Parents of Teenagers* (Nottingham, DfES, Research Report RR830).
- Carter, Rebecca S.; Wotkiewicz; Roger A., (2000), Parental Involvement with Adolescents’ Education: Do Daughters or Sons get more help?, *Adolescence*, vol. 35(137), 29-44.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES), (no date), *Engaging fathers in their children’s education* (Nottingham, DfES)

• Department for Education and Skills (DfES), (2005), *How to be a more involved dad* (Nottingham, DfES Publications).

• Department for Education and Skills (DfES), (no date), *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children’s Education* (Nottingham, DfES Publications).

• Department for Education and Skills (DfES), (2007), *Parents as Partners in Early Learning; Case Studies – The National Strategies, Early Years* (Nottingham, DfES Publications).


• Desforges, Charles; Abouchaar, Alberto; (2003b); *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review* (Nottingham, DfES, Research Report RR433, 2003).


• Fatherhood Institute, http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org

• Fletcher, Richard, (2008), *Father-inclusive practice and associated professional competencies, Australian Family Relationships*
Clearinghouse Briefing (Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies).

- Flouri, Eirini, Buchanan, Ann, (2003), The Role of Father Involvement and Mother Involvement in Adolescents’ Psychological Well-being, British Journal of Social Work, 33, 399-406.


- Harris, Alma; Goodall, Janet; (2007), Engaging parents in raising achievement – do parents know they matter? (Nottingham, DCSF Research Brief no: DCSF- RBW004).

- Harris, Alma; Goodall, Janet; (2006), Parental Involvement in Education: An Overview of the Literature (Coventry, University of Warwick).


- HM Treasury and Department for Education and Skills, (2005), Support for Parents: The Best Start For Children.


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 11 August 2009*