

# Recognising Fathers

Ideas for practitioners in education, health, social care and family support settings to involve fathers in meetings and appointments about their children with learning disabilities

There is strong evidence that children benefit from the involvement of their fathers. Including fathers in meetings and appointments is one way of supporting fathers to be involved.

## Benefits from involving fathers in meetings and appointments

For fathers:

- they are more likely to feel involved in their child's life which, in turn, may also lead to greater involvement in practical ways (such as early intervention programmes, communication programmes, addressing problems their child may have with bullying at school, providing support with homework)
- helps them to understand the reasons behind decisions that are made, which may be particularly relevant where fathers are not the primary carer as a result of divorce or separation
- gives them a chance to contribute their ideas: these may be different from their partners'
- they are not dependent on their partners to pass on information and explain decisions
- overall, participation in meetings can give a sense of being valued in their caring role.

For mothers:

- they do not have the sole responsibility of retaining and repeating information to their partners
- they are not on their own with a group of professionals.

For both parents:

- they can give each other support during meetings and afterwards
- gives them the opportunity to use their strengths to complement each other
- enables them to build a common understanding of their child's needs.



## Arranging meetings so fathers can be there

Talk to both parents about:

- their work commitments
- preferences for days and times when meetings are held
- how much advance notice they need to give at work to arrange time off (some may need to give a long period whereas others may only know they can have time off at short notice)



- the best way to co-ordinate and schedule meetings, for example, using email or text messages.

#### Think about:

- other obligations such as prayer times or religious holidays
- whether meetings could be arranged outside normal working hours if fathers would otherwise be unable to attend
- arranging meetings to minimise loss of income
- last minute changes to the times of appointments can lead to fathers being unable to attend or to losing pay unnecessarily (again, better use of technology could help to minimise this)
- what systems can be introduced in your organisation to make the scheduling of appointments work better for parents.

Fathers and mothers would find it helpful if they were given information about the purpose and importance of each meeting at the time it is being arranged so that they can decide whether they both want or need to be there. It would also help couples to decide who would be the best person to attend if only one of them is able to do so. A family held record could be used to note what meetings are planned, for what purpose and who would be present.

### Involving fathers in meetings and discussions

Overall, fathers need to feel welcomed and valued.

Fathers have made suggestions about what would help them to feel included in meetings:

- introduce the other people who are at the meeting
- look at and talk to fathers as much as mothers
- acknowledge the things fathers do for their children
- avoid making a father feel judged in a negative way
- talk to fathers about the things they may want to be involved in, such as an education or speech and language programme, to support their children's development



- give fathers the information they need to understand what is being talked about, as they may have missed out on previous conversations or meetings.

When fathers are not able to attend significant meetings, it may be helpful to contact them directly by telephone or email to let them know about discussions and decisions. This is particularly important when there is complex information to convey so that mothers and fathers both have the necessary information to understand any interventions or treatments arranged for their children. This also reduces the pressure on mothers to repeat and explain information.

## A few overall points

Where couples are separated or divorced, it may be necessary to look at how both mothers and fathers can receive the information they need and can contribute to decision making about their child. It is important that fathers are contacted by educational, social, and health services to inform them of meetings and outcomes, particularly where the line of communication may have broken down between mother and father. The father's contact details need to be recorded so that services can communicate with the father independently of the mother, should the need arise. Those responsible for scheduling meetings should check that fathers' have been contacted in advance. Procedures may need to be modified to allow for this.

Stepfathers may welcome opportunities to be involved in discussions and meetings. However, this should be with the consent of the biological father.

Fathers may respond differently to situations and may need time to discuss things separately from their partners.

The process of coming to terms with their child's disability may be different for fathers and mothers. It would help if post-diagnosis

meetings were offered to parents together and/or separately.

Some fathers may not be comfortable discussing sensitive topics with female members of staff. For some fathers this may be a cultural issue.

It may be helpful to be aware of practical and emotional support that is available to fathers locally and nationally and signpost fathers to this. This could include information about their rights at work or how they could get support to look after their health.

Finally, it is worth thinking whether your place of work could offer something specific for fathers that would encourage them to come along, feel welcome and meet other fathers.

## Further information

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities has carried out research into the experiences of fathers. Two reports have been written:

- *Recognising Fathers: understanding the issues faced by fathers of children with a learning disability*
- *Recognising Fathers: a national survey of fathers who have children with learning disabilities.*

A Need2Know briefing has also been produced for policy makers, commissioners and services.

These reports, as well as links to relevant organisations, are available at [www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/fathers](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/fathers)

These guidelines have been produced by Christine Towers, who can be contacted on 020 7803 1158 or [ctowers@fpld.org.uk](mailto:ctowers@fpld.org.uk)

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities works to promote the rights, quality of life and opportunities of people with learning disabilities and their families.

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