

Adrienne Burgess

Adrienne Burgess is Head of Research at the Fatherhood Institute. Adrienne has written widely on fatherhood and couple relationships. One of the founders of Fathers Direct (now the Fatherhood Institute), she has a thorough understanding of both research and practice. Her book *Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father* (Vermilion, 1997) helped set a new agenda on fatherhood in the UK, and has been published throughout the world.



Why an Evidence Base Matters – and How to Use it ...

No government, particularly in these tough times, can open itself to accusations of waste. As a result, and because of the increasing ability of scientific method to measure effectiveness in a wide variety of disciplines, the demand for an ‘evidence base’ for social policy and practice is growing. This is so, even while we know that evidence can sometimes be spun in more than one direction; and that for political reasons it is not uncommon for governments to make policy on the hoof without any evidence base at all.

Such mad moments aside, our ministers, the civil servants who advise them and the third sector and local government departments that develop their own policies as well as commissioning services, need to be convinced of the efficacy and value-for-money of any policy or practice initiative before they will adopt or pilot it. That is as it should be – but providing the evidence can be tricky.

Let’s think first about practice – in our case at the Fatherhood Institute, encouraging practitioners in the statutory and voluntary sectors to engage with fathers alongside mothers in interventions relating to parenting. In this new field a substantial, high quality evidence base simply doesn’t exist. Why? Good evaluations don’t come cheap: you want to look at the outcomes for children and mothers as well as fathers; gather information from all these ‘family players’; measure effectiveness over time to see whether impacts last; and, wherever possible, set up Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) in which the outcomes for individuals who took part in an intervention are systematically compared with the outcomes from a ‘control group’ who did not.

Since money is usually scarce and commissioners tend to think in the shorter term, substantial evaluation is rare. This means that excellent projects can fail to be disseminated because there’s no hard evidence that they work, even though the practitioners can see with their own eyes that they do. Meanwhile, other interventions (often from abroad) get the green light for national roll-out almost entirely because some kind of positive impact has been methodically demonstrated.

The *raison d’être* of the Fatherhood Institute (www.fatherhoodinstitute.org founded ten years ago under the somewhat-more-folksy name of Fathers Direct) was and is our vision for a society that gives all children strong, positive relationships with their father and any father-figures; supports both mothers and fathers as earners and carers; and prepares both boys and girls for a future shared role in caring for children.

Right away we realised that we'd get nowhere without a sound evidence base. Parenting was seen as 'mums' business' and there was a low level of knowledge among policy makers, practitioners and the general public about what fathers actually do and why what they do matters. In 1976 the brilliant young developmental psychologist Michael E Lamb described fathers as the 'forgotten contributors to child development' in the first edition of his book *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, and while when we began our work more than two decades later, the evidence base on fathers' impact on children and mothers had expanded, it was in an academic silo: those who were familiar with it tended to be fatherhood specialists; and when most academics studied 'parenting' they still generally studied mothers.

Realising this, we dotted our training programmes, publications and press releases with 'myth-busting' and 'fact-file' sections where we laid the evidence on the line that (a) fathers are no less capable than mothers of caring well for children; and (b) fathers impact significantly on mothers and children, for good and for bad, and whether they live with them or not.

But we had a mountain to climb. Six years later, when we were well known in government circles and punching above our weight in terms of influence, a senior civil servant responsible for the development of an important family policy paper mentioned in passing that 'fathers don't have much impact on children, do they?' (his question was rhetorical). Stung into action, we spent a frantic six months collating and publishing a summary of the evidence – *The Costs and Benefits of Active Fatherhood* which we promoted widely and made freely available on our website.

This has been enormously influential. It brought fatherhood research out of the shadows and dumped it on the policy makers' desks. Key phrases and even paragraphs have since appeared in important policy documents; while shorter research summaries derived from it (and also published free on our website) present the evidence in bite-sized chunks for those interested in particular policy areas: 'Young fathers' . . . 'Fathers and smoking' . . . 'Fathers and post-natal depression' . . . 'Fathers, mothers, work and family' . . . and so on.

In our collating and dissemination of the evidence, we have taken the view that the best way to do research (and, incidentally, to write press releases) is to ‘attack the facts’ at what the Oxford philosopher Celia Green has called ‘the point of greatest astonishment’.

The fatherhood evidence base is full of ‘astonishments’ and we have exploited these to the full to change the ‘national conversation’ on fatherhood and influence the policy makers and the wider public. Our press releases, developed with DHA, always contain facts that provoke and intrigue and, probably as a result of this, almost always garner significant media coverage.

And the evidence seems to be getting through – to parents as well as policy makers. For example, shortly before the general election, Nick Clegg told reporters that ‘research from the Fatherhood Institute’ had shown that ‘when a father and child are close during the first three years, that closeness tends to last’. This was clearly influencing his aspirations, and very probably his behaviour.

We can also claim responsibility for turning the Aka Pygmies – a hitherto-little-known South American tribe who spend more time than any other known fathers carrying and caring for their babies – into international media stars. Our press release about them, together with a charming photograph, was picked up by news stations right across the world. The purpose of this story was to demonstrate that fathers’ behaviour is mutable – that it responds to circumstances – and that a high level of father involvement can be normative.

We have a rolling programme of updating and extending our research summaries and hope – subject to funding – to have a really big push on this later in the year. Fatherhood research is developing at an exciting rate. We are also now developing our own research proposals through partnerships with academic departments, to explore issues that are not well covered in the existing evidence base. And as we develop programmes for delivery to fathers – currently ‘Hit the Ground Crawling’, for expectant and new dads, and ‘Staying Connected’ for separated fathers – we are building evaluation in, right from the ground floor. . .