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Author(s): Cullen, Stephen M.; Cullen, Mairi-Ann, Band, Sue; Davis, Liz; Lindsay, Geoff

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**Supporting fathers to engage with their children's learning and education: an under-developed aspect of the Parent Support Adviser pilot.**

**Stephen M. Cullen\***,

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

\*Corresponding author,

Dr Stephen M. Cullen

CEDAR, University of Warwick,

Coventry, CV4 7AL

[S.M.Cullen@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:S.M.Cullen@warwick.ac.uk)

02476 522911

**Supporting fathers to engage with their children’s learning and education: an under-developed aspect of the Parent Support Adviser pilot.**

**Abstract:**

The Parent Support Adviser (PSA) role, piloted in 2006-2008 in 20 Local Authorities (LAs) in England, offered preventative and early intervention support to families where there were concerns about children’s school attendance or behaviour. Overall, this was a highly successful initiative in terms of supporting parental engagement with their children’s schools. However, this article presents evidence drawn from 162 interviews (with PSAs, their line managers and coordinators in 12 case study LAs) showing that there was one key area in the PSA pilot that was less successful – the engagement of fathers. The article examines views about how to engage fathers and of the barriers explaining the overall absence of fathers from the PSA project. It highlights the dissonance between policy and practitioner guidance on the one hand and practice on the other with regard to the relative failure to engage fathers with this important initiative.

**Key Words:**

parents, fathers, Parent Support Advisers, parenting, England, gender relations.

This paper explores the involvement of fathers in one English government funded initiative, the Parent Support Adviser (PSA) pilot, which took place during September 2006 to July 2008. The pilot formed part of a broader government initiative concerning parents, particularly those of children at risk of developing behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (HM Treasury & DfES, 2005; Steer, 2005; Respect Task Force, 2006). 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 funding was used to employ a total of 717 PSAs who supported parents in 1167 schools, and to develop the LA infrastructure to support the PSAs (Lindsay *et al.*, 2009) The PSA pilot was evaluated over the same time period (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007, 2008, 2009). The PSA pilot subsequently became a national initiative covering every LA in England.

The PSA role was wide-ranging, encompassing practical and emotional support around problems at home that impacted on children's attendance and behaviour at school, encouragement and support for parents to engage with school events and activities and with adult and community learning, family learning and parenting groups. Some PSAs worked in single schools and others across a cluster of schools. Work involved both tailored support to individual families and activities for groups of parents. A minority of PSAs had

a specific focus on supporting families where a child had been or was at risk of exclusion.

The PSA pilot was announced in the pre-budget report, *Support for Parents* (HM Treasury & DfES, 2005), a document that explicitly noted that, 'public services have tended to ignore the different contributions that mothers and fathers make and their different needs by grouping them together as "parents"' (p22). It cited research pointing to 'strong, positive relationships between children and their fathers being associated with a range of benefits later on - including better exam results at age 16 [...] and to 'the quality and content of fathers' involvement' mattering more for child outcomes than quantity of time spent together' (p22). It acknowledged structural constraints on managing work and family life for both mothers and fathers (p7) and the challenges associated with parenting in a period of economic and demographic change (p11). The previous year, the Department for Education and Skills had published a guide for schools on engaging fathers (DfES, 2004) which drew on a (then forthcoming) literature review and mapping of initiatives in England involving fathers in children's education (Goldman, 2005). As Page, Whitting & Mclean (2008) have shown, 'explicit recognition of fathers in DCSF and its partners policies was partial and uneven' but policy documents with a 'sustained and detailed recognition of fathers' (p4) continued to be published throughout the second and third terms of the Labour government (see e.g. DfES, 2005; DfES, no date; DfES, 2007).

The TDA had input from Fathers Direct (now the Fatherhood Institute) in the preparation of initial training materials from PSAs and all PSAs were offered copies of the Fathers Direct publication, *Working with fathers* (Burgess & Bartlett, 2004) and one developed specifically for PSAs entitled, *Engaging fathers in their children's learning*.

Because of this policy context and training promoting the engagement of fathers, particular research questions relating to fathers were included within the evaluation of the PSA pilot. These were: 1) to what extent were fathers being engaged by PSAs? 2) What were the barriers to father involvement? 3) In what ways could father engagement with the PSA service be enhanced?

***Background:***

A key strand in the 1997 Labour government's education policy, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997), 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. O'Connor & Scott's review (2007) found considerable research evidence that the quality of the parent-child relationship is connected to a wide variety of child outcomes: behavioural, emotional, psychological, social, educational, intellectual and physical health but also that the connections are not straightforward. In relation to educational outcomes, Harris & Goodall (2007) distinguished between parental 'involvement' in school based or school related activities and parental 'engagement' with their children's learning within the home

environment. It was the latter that related to improved attendance, behaviour and achievement of children. This corroborated a key finding from Desforges & Abouchar's review (2003) that it was good parenting in the home (defined as including 'a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship' that had 'a significant and positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment had been taken out of the equation' (p4).

Research on the nature and extent of fathers' involvement in their school-aged children's learning, education and in school and family learning programmes was comprehensively reviewed by Goldman (2005). Reviewing five high quality studies using large scale nationally representative samples of fathers and children, she concluded that, 'fathers' greater interest and involvement in their children's learning and in schools are statistically associated with better educational outcomes for children, including better exam results, better school attendance and behaviour, and higher educational expectations.' (p121). These associations were independent of mothers' involvement. She also reviewed the literature on barriers to fathers' involvement in children's learning and education and found societal level barriers, those relating to behaviour, attitudes and circumstances of fathers and of others, and practical issues. Similar barriers are discussed in the literature on engaging fathers in family/parent support services (e.g. Levine *et al.*, 1998; Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis, 2003; Cullen & Lindsay, 2006; Asmussen *et*

al, 2006; Fletcher, 2008) while Ryan (2000) and Featherstone (2004) perhaps emphasise more practitioners' awareness of, and fears about, the risks of involving fathers who may be violent or abusive. Suggestions about overcoming barriers and factors associated with successful engagement of fathers are also highlighted in Goldman and in that literature on engaging fathers in family support services.

Goldman noted that fathers least likely to be involved were manual workers, those who worked evenings, and those whose child had emotional and behavioural problems in primary school. Fathers were most likely to be involved in children's education and learning when mothers were too, but single parent fathers tended to be more involved in schools than resident fathers in two parent families. Goldman's review used 'fathers' to include biological and adoptive fathers and a range of male carers and 'father figures' and stressed the importance of taking into account the diversity of fathers – unlike the DfES guidance (no date, c 2003) on engaging fathers in their children's education which privileged biological fathers.

### *Changing family structures*

Rapidly changing economic conditions, and consequent social responses, particularly in terms of family structures, have led to substantial changes in the role of fathers and mothers, with uncertain implications for children. The experience of family life, and fatherhood in particular, has been marked by dramatic change over recent decades. The 2001 census for England and Wales showed that 59% of households with dependent children are married



couple households, 11% cohabiting couples and 22% lone-parent families (higher in London), of which 90.5% are headed by women (ONS, 2003). The same census shows the percentage of married couples is declining and divorce is rising – in 1971, 1.3% of the population in England and Wales was divorced, rising to 8.23% in 2001. Thus, while the majority of households with dependent children are headed by married or co-habiting couples, over a fifth are one parent households, in nine out of 10 of which the parent is the mother. In terms of employment patterns, lone mothers are more likely than lone fathers to be out of work or to be working part-time (ONS, 2003),

Alongside the growth of divorce and of mother-headed lone parent families, there has been a rise in campaigning for ‘fathers’ rights’ in England and Wales, especially since the 1990s which, in turn, stimulated a feminist critique of that movement, as well as reviews and changes to family law (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, have edited a trans-national collection of essays exploring fathers’ rights and law reform across five jurisdictions). In addition to the agenda around divorced, separated and unmarried fathers’ rights and responsibilities, there is also growing pressure from grandparents and step-parents for extended rights of contact after parental separation (Wasoff, 2009). There has also been legal recognition for same sex partnerships in many Western countries and the granting of parenting rights, such as second parent adoption in same sex couples, as well as greater recourse to surrogate parenthood (Millbank, 2008).

In this context of changing and more complex family structures, initiatives designed to increase parental involvement with children's education are potentially sensitive because they must engage with the lived experience of individual family lives, however these are constituted. Further, while taking into account that about a fifth of families with dependent children will be headed by a lone parent mother, such initiatives, while seeking to involve fathers and male carers appropriately in children's lives, also need to be alert to the issue of domestic abuse. (For example, Wasoff's study (2009) of social attitudes in Scotland found a high level of public support for parental rights and responsibilities for unmarried fathers but strong dissent from domestic abuse support organisations concerned for the safety of women and children.) The diversity of ways of being a father has received increasing attention in research (e.g. Cabrera *et al.*, 2000; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000;), as have the practices of masculinities around fatherhood (e.g. Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003), not all of which are linked to positive outcomes for children (e.g. Jaffee *et al.*, 2003). Research on fathers' working hours indicates that fatherhood roles are in transition (Biggart & O'Brien, 2009) and that attitudes among some working fathers are ahead of the reality of their work and care arrangements (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009; Fox, Pascall, Warren, 2009). It was in this context of diverse and changing family practices that the PSA pilot took place.

### **3. Methods:**

#### *The sample*

Of the 20 LAs in the PSA pilot, 12 were selected as case studies on the basis of ensuring a reasonable mix by city/urban/rural locations and geographic spread across England. At the start of the pilot, the lead person coordinating the PSA project locally was asked to identify 5-10 PSAs to participate in the qualitative elements of the evaluation. When selected, the PSAs had either not started or had just begun work. The PSA co-ordinators were asked to select the PSA sample from across the LA and to reflect models of service delivery (for example, PSAs working in single schools, across a school cluster, and focusing on parents of pupils at risk of exclusion). In Phase 1, 97 PSAs were interviewed. Sixty nine of them were interviewed again in Phase 2, and 79 of them in Phase 3. Data collected in Phase 3 is the focus of this paper. During Phase 3, the 59 line managers of these PSAs were also interviewed as were the PSA coordinators in all 20 pilot LAs (24 people).

### *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 provided a balance between the benefits of a relatively informal 'conversation', which encouraged flow, and the need to ensure consistent coverage of the themes under investigation at the time. In Phase 3, the interview schedules for each interviewee group included a section about work with fathers/male carers. These focused on what had already been done to encourage fathers and male carers to engage with PSAs, plans and ideas for encouraging more fathers/male carers to engage, and views about the barriers preventing PSAs working more with fathers and male carers.

### *Procedure*

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. The same interview schedule was used in face to face and telephone interviews.

The interviews that inform this paper were all undertaken during January and February 2008 (Phase 3 of the evaluation). 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.

To preserve anonymity, LAs were allocated a code number (e.g. LA54) at random. Within each LA's interviewee group, each interviewee was allocated a role code (C for coordinator, LM for line manager, PSA for PSA) and a number (e.g. LA67/PSA12).

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. Three researchers then collated themes by job category - PSA LA co-ordinator, PSA line manager, and the PSA – to ascertain the range and relative balance of views within each topic and produced overall analyses by theme and function. For the data on fathers, inter-rater reliability was high (99% of a sample of 100 units of text)

with queries being resolved by discussion and referral back to the original transcripts.

#### *Database*

Where relevant, reference is made to the data recorded by LAs involved in the PSA pilot on a database designed by the evaluation team to capture 'significant work' with parents (i.e. case work as opposed to group work or fleeting contact). This recorded over 20000 cases across 18 of the 20 LAs (Lindsay *et al.*, 2009)

#### **4. Results:**

##### *Views of PSA co-ordinators' - planning for the inclusion of fathers*

The PSA pilot co-ordinators, drawn from all 20 LAs involved in the initiative, were interviewed but, because of constraints on the time granted for interview, information on PSAs' work with fathers and male carers was gained for 15 LAs only. From their responses, it was clear that planning for the inclusion of fathers in PSA work in these 15 LAs was limited. Three LAs had included the engagement of fathers in strategic planning of parent support work across the LA, with the result that planning to engage fathers in the PSA pilot happened from the start. For example, the coordinator from LA57 explained that engaging fathers in parent support initiatives was a LA target and had been attempted 'right from the start' of the PSA pilot:

'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)

She went on to explain that, where fathers and mothers had separated or divorced, this usually meant meeting and working with them separately. In this LA, two male PSAs had been recruited and both were viewed as working successfully with mothers and fathers. The LA was committed to 'working hard to recruit more men'. As well as routinely seeking to involve fathers in all PSA case work, the LA had targeted some PSA project work at fathers/male carers, such as a Dads and Lads Club supported through Family Learning and a family financial literacy course aimed at fathers. The co-ordinators' view was that 'because it's a bit macho, of course we got tons of dads turning up for that'. Her view was also that it was easier to engage the fathers of younger children because 'at that point, they seem as interested as mum'.

In another of these three LAs, engaging fathers was part of the Parenting Strategy and PSAs had consulted with fathers/male carers as to what kind of support and activities they wanted. This resulted in activities linked to sport and cookery which were successful in attracting fathers and grandfathers. The PSA co-ordinator there talked about the PSAs being expected to speak to fathers directly as a routine part of getting to know their case work families, being encouraged to think about each family in a holistic way, rather than 'just speaking to mum' (LA68/C). This included deliberately arranging home visits

when both parents were at home. A similar approach was adopted in LA59 with some targeted projects, such as Dads and Kids, in addition to routinely offering support on Saturdays, as well as weekdays, and offering issue-focused parent support events that attracted both mothers and fathers.

In addition to the three LAs with a strategic, planned approach to engagement, two more recognised the need to move to such an approach. For example, one co-ordinator said that, although there had not been a strong focus on engaging fathers to date, plans were in place 'to put it on the map – that fathers are a parent' (LA55/C2).

Also two LAs had provided PSAs with some training on how to engage fathers. In LA 51, this was led by Fathers Direct (The Fatherhood Institute) and was followed up by targeted project work with fathers on Saturdays. In LA 63, training 'to encourage [PSAs] to see the issues and to work more closely [with fathers]' was led by the PSA coordinator but, in her view, was not successful as the PSAs quickly forgot about offering 'more macho type things, like reptile days, and encouraging dads to come in when they can at weekends or different times of the day to run activities' and returned to 'the old idea of having a coffee morning or a drop in session' (LA63/C).

At time of interview, however, the majority (12 of 15) of the LAs had no planned approach to engaging fathers. These co-ordinators could only describe *ad hoc* instances of targeted PSA work with fathers/male carers and fathers' limited engagement in universal PSA work. Examples of targeted *ad*

*hoc* work with fathers included a heavy reliance on the initiative of individual PSAs. The limited number of male PSAs were over-represented in this way.

Regarding the diversity of families, a very small number of examples were given by co-ordinators of specific work to engage traveller and ethnic minority fathers but, again, this was done on the initiative of individual PSAs. There was also some limited evidence of awareness among the co-ordinators of the needs of families where mothers and fathers had divorced or separated and of the care needed to ensure that involvement of fathers was appropriate. For example, in certain areas of some LAs, the incidence of male on female domestic violence was reported as 'rife' or 'phenomenal' and appropriate support for the mothers and children, not engagement of fathers, was the priority for PSAs. A small number of examples were also offered of PSAs supporting fathers in families where the mother had died, was ill or where the father had custody of the children. (Only one example was given during the evaluation interviews of PSAs supporting a lesbian couple.)

#### *Views of PSA line managers -Recognising the issue of father involvement*

All the PSA line managers recognised that there was an issue surrounding the generally low levels of engagement with fathers but the majority did not see addressing this as a high priority. 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)

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 accounts of limited 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. 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 and how strongly the traditional model of mother as main carer was ingrained. 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 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.

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'.

*PSAs' views – acceptance of the status quo versus individual efforts to engage fathers*

Although some PSAs appeared to regard low levels of father engagement as an issue, others said that father disengagement 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, resigned observation that ‘The take-up hasn’t been brilliant but it’s a perennial problem’ was one that was shared by many PSA professionals.

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, the 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 general, PSAs supported the view that 'it's *how* you approach fathers' (LA55/PSA5) that helped or hindered 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 )

'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)

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 level 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 fact that men were more likely to be in full-time employment, or cultural attitudes that child care was women's work 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 these 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 seen 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 compared to mothers. This was particularly the case at primary school level when mothers were more likely to be not working or in part-time employment compared to fathers who were more likely to be in full-time employment. 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. The evaluation

database of PSAs' 'significant' casework with parents showed that a very high proportion involved one-parent families – 42% (Lindsay *et al.*, 2009) as opposed to the national average of 22% (ONS, 2003) – and that in over eight of every ten cases (86%), PSAs were working with mothers, as opposed to with fathers or with both parents. PSAs reported that both working mothers and fathers raised practical issues, such as the need for childcare if both parents attended, 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, with the mother's permission, contacting fathers separately, in cases where fathers lived apart from their children but retained parental responsibilities and rights;; offering activities that are likely to appeal to male parents, e.g. football; specifically targeting activities that would involve fathers and their children, e.g. 'Dads and Kids' events; and deploying male PSAs to interact with fathers.

### *Male PSAs*

The PSA workforce was overwhelmingly a female one, 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 argued that the issue ought to be ensuring that the most appropriate worker was assigned to a family, not that male PSAs should automatically be assigned to fathers. Apart from other issues, this approach was unrealistic, given the limited number of male PSAs:

'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 [another male 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 [the other male 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 [are] 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 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 and father involvement*

The PSA pilot introduced a new profession into schools in 20 LAs in England. Early indicators, at the conclusion of the DCSF funded pilot in July 2008, were that the PSA role had established itself, and was, overwhelmingly, highly valued by schools, parents, and LAs (Lindsay *et al.*, 2009). 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 in ten PSAs were male and only 18% of the PSAs' casework was with fathers (Lindsay *et al.*, 2009).

Previous research has shown that fathers who carry out their role in a warm, involved way play an important, positive part in children's development and well-being (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Goldman, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2006). While some studies have found some fathers' experience of 'family' programmes and initiatives is characterised by exclusion (e.g. Levine,

1993; Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis, 2003; Cullen & Lindsay, 2006; ) Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000 argue that fathers' *voluntary* disengagement also needs to be explored. 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 educational 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-neutral 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 some 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, and limited evidence that co-ordinators had considered the issue of gender relations 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.

While there was a general awareness of some barriers to fathers' engagement, such as a high prevalence of single mothers in the PSAs' caseloads and fathers' working hours (i.e. gender structures) and the fact that the role of PSA had attracted ten times as many women as men, in the pressure on men PSAs to focus on work with fathers and in some fathers' reluctance to share a space where women were in the majority (i.e. gender relations). This did not mean, however, that line managers had supported their PSAs in adopting strategies to address these in order 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.

In addition, there were unacknowledged barriers: the lack of strategic planning to include fathers in all but three of the LAs; the gendered stereotypes of fathers as 'macho' and uninterested in their children and of mothers as main carers that were implicit in many interviewees' responses; the assumption that the process of engaging parents was gender-free and therefore no particular

thought needed to be given to engaging fathers; the limited acknowledgement of the diversity of families and therefore of fathers' roles within diverse families; the unwillingness of many school-based line-managers to employ PSAs to work flexible hours to suit families, including working parents; and the assumption that female PSAs could ignore the needs of fathers as fathers would want to work with male PSAs anyway. Our findings in relation to the views of professionals about fathers in the PSA initiative have since been corroborated across a wider range of family support services (Page, Whitting & Mclean, 2008).

#### *Enhancing father involvement*

Our data indicate that some successful engagement of fathers was achieved when striving to do so was strategically planned in from the start, when fathers were consulted about what sort of support and activities they needed, when the way in which fathers were approached was conscious and respectful of different masculinities and ways of being a father, when at least some of the PSAs on a local team were men, when PSAs were enabled, and willing, to work outside traditional 9-5 Monday to Friday hours, and when some PSA work was specifically targeted at fathers.

Yet the dissonance between research on the benefits of positive father involvement with their children's learning and education and government policy imperatives to engage fathers, on the one hand, and the experience of father engagement in the PSA pilot on the other, is striking. Despite the existence of a body of literature on strategies for engaging fathers, PSA

professionals frequently struggled to articulate an effective approach to engaging fathers with the PSA role, and, hence, with schools and their children's education. As Connell (2002) notes, 'Recognising the gender order is easy; understanding it is not' (p3). Our findings suggest that the social relations of gender in the everyday practices of family support and extended services in and around schools merit careful research, such as that done in schools by Skelton *et al.* (2009). Skelton (2009) found that gender was not a particularly significant factor for primary teachers' in relation to their career – men and women both identified with the professional role of teacher; this is similar to the men PSAs in our study who wanted to be viewed as PSAs, not placed in a gendered position dichotomous to women and aligned with undifferentiated fathers. The social structures of gender also warrant consideration in this context. For example, Paull (2006) shows the negative impact on childbearing on women's employment while Lewis & Campbell's review (2007) of UK work/family policies and gender equality show the inter-related constraints on both men and women regarding work/family balance. As Connell (2002) notes, men as a group (though not necessarily as individuals) benefit from this gender order through higher wages and greater status (the 'patriarchal dividend').

The practitioner focused literature on father engagement provides strategy directions for those engaged in the PSA role although some elements (e.g. in Goldman 2005 and Fletcher 2008) could be read as adopting an 'essentialist' view of gender relations of the type critiqued by Skelton (2002). Nevertheless, the basic principles of good practice outlined by Goldman (2005) reflect, to

some extent, the type of considerations that some of the PSA professionals articulated. Fletcher (2008) provides a useful summary of the issue, and an important statement of the need to address professional standards. In the UK context, this aspect of PSA training should be strengthened by the TDA whose recent publication (TDA, 2009) acknowledged the potential of the role in engaging fathers but not the very limited success in this regard during the pilot.

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