

Where's Dad?

Father-Proofing Your Work

Dr Gary Clapton

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From father-proving to father-proofing

The value of positively involved fathering is incontestable and proven (Burgess, 2008). Involved fathers ensure that children, women and families as a whole benefit. A consensus is emerging that we now need to move from having to prove the value of fathers to designing services that include rather than exclude them, thus the use of the term ‘father-proofing’. In the welfare services, debate has turned to how best to engage with fathers with discussions taking place about, for instance, how to reach out to young fathers, ensure the participation in children’s lives of fathers in prison and work with men who are or have been deemed to be angry or aggressive.

A key determinant of whether services are doing the best they can to involve fathers obviously includes encouraging positive attitudes among staff (men and women) and the dedication of father-friendly provision. However, the importance of image projected by services should not be underestimated. Image, first impression, ‘feel’ of a place, waiting room or reception area, all these things give off messages which can say that this service is really just for women and mothers. Such messages can be conveyed in policy, publicity, training materials and just the ‘look’ of services. This paper advances some suggestions concerning how to father-proof services by countering such messages and begins by providing some examples of what not to do.

Images

Leaflets, posters, websites and other publicity materials convey powerful messages about what constitutes a family and who a service is designed for. The following two images advertise two key Scottish Government policies.

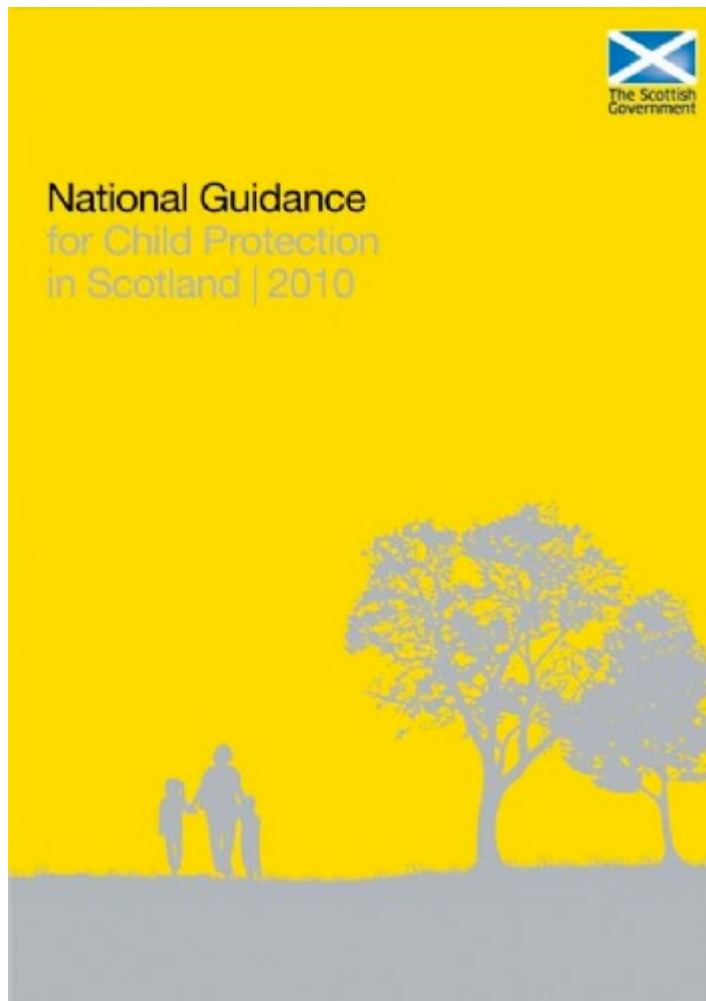


(The Early Years Framework, 2009 p.6)



(Curriculum for Excellence factfile -- Parents as partners, Learning and Teaching Scotland, October, 2010)

The next image is taken from the front cover of the current Scottish Government guidance on child protection (The above image is repeated on the cover of this year's *Child Protection Guidance for Health Professionals*, Scottish Government, 2013).



All three images suggest two things. Firstly that children are women's business and secondly that men by being invisible are dispensable in the lives of families. These images, and the messages they give out, are perpetuated throughout a vast swathe of child welfare publicity materials.

For example, the three parents on the webpage of leading Scottish child protection online resource are all women. <http://withscotland.org> (accessed 3 June 2013):



On occasion the issue is not so much one of **omission** but rather, implicitly, one of **commission**, i.e. families are depicted as women and children-only as in this advert carried by a leading Scottish welfare charity:

Quarriers
Transforming Lives

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Search...

HOME WHO WE ARE WHAT WE DO GET INVOLVED RESOURCES **DONATE** ▶▶

SOMEONE WHO RECOGNISES YOU'RE AT BREAKING POINT

At Quarriers we know the tell tale signs of when a family is struggling. Read more about our services for Children and Families

IT'S A FAMILY THING

WHERE YOUR MONEY GOES

GIVE YOUR TIME
VOLUNTEER FOR QUARRIERS

ORGANISE AN EVENT
BE PART OF SOMETHING GREAT

CASE STUDIES
DIVERSITY IS OUR STRENGTH

DONATE ONLINE

Official examples are no less frequent:



(Healthy, Happy Kids, Simple steps to a healthy weight for children and their families, NHS Health Scotland, 2013, p.5)

This cover even refers to what is depicted as the whole family.

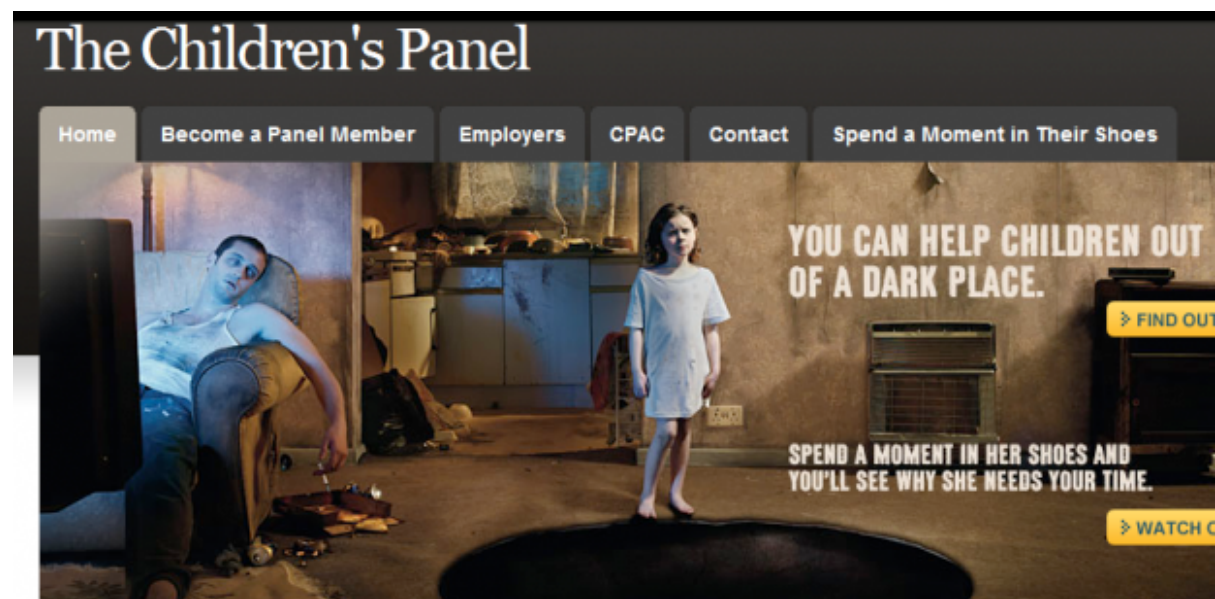
The notion of women-only, fatherless families is also perpetuated in online materials:

The Early Years Network was established by NHS Health Scotland to support the early years workforce in the implementation of the early years framework and other key early years policies. Recognising the importance of working across sectors to improve outcomes in the early years, the network provides practitioners with a vehicle for

sharing knowledge and learning and disseminating evidence, policy and practice. Click here: www.maternal-and-early-years.org.uk

If this is done, and note in passing that the title of the web pages indicates that mothers are the sole adult subject of these early years materials, the one image of an adult on the page is that of a mother reading with her child.

When images of fathers are presented these are generally not positive, most especially in social work materials:



If every picture conveys a story, or in the above cases, a message that fathers are either non-existent or to be treated with suspicion, then the words and phrases used in these leaflets, booklets, on-line materials and other such documents also give a subtle (and sometime not so subtle) communication.

Language

In the most studiously neutral examples aimed at mothers and fathers, in an effort not to identify only mothers with child-care, the words 'parent' or 'parents' is used as in 'parent and toddler group'. However very few people read or hear 'mother' **or** 'father' in this and other examples because of the societal default understanding that parent equals mother.

Elsewhere mothers are often 'mums' and fathers are often, well, fathers, or 'the father':

Claire's mum engaged well with education services for all four children. Claire's father was not available during the home visit.

(GIRFEC Training Materials, Lanarkshire, 2010, p. 13 'Claire aged four')

Public health and education worked together with Claire's mum and the children to support understanding of the father's illness and help mum to prepare the children for changed circumstances (ibid, p14)

<http://www.girfecinlanarkshire.co.uk/girfec-resources/Item%2018%20Practice%20examples/Item%2018%20Practice%20examples.pdf>

Using the familiar 'mum' renders 'father' unfamiliar.

A similar set of coded messages, and these are generally unintended, can be found in much in-house training materials. These are also accompanied by an unconscious deprecation of fathers.

Case Studies, practice scenarios and training examples

Within agencies, training and staff development activities, often either by commission (depicting fathers as pervasively abusive or useless) or omission (rendering fathers invisible) repeat the message that fathers are dispensable and mothers are to be regarded as the sole carers. The impressions of fathers and fathering fall into a number of categories.

The disappearing father

- *John is six and his performance at school has dropped significantly over the last term, since his move to a new school. He finds it difficult to concentrate and fit into an ordered and structured school environment. John has also been refusing to go to school at least once a week and his parents have struggled to get him there. His parents are worried that this may be linked to some form of bullying. John has asthma that makes him feel like he cannot fully take part in play with other children. John's mother is at her wits end and is completely unsure of what to do next. John will talk to her about some things but starts shouting and screaming if he is asked about school. John's mum is desperate to get help from someone (national guidelines quoted from Clapton, 2013)*

In the above example the story starts with parents yet proceeds to the child's mother (the caring one) and ends with 'mum' still doing the worry and caring.

The father as problematic

In the following on-line child protection resource parents are divided into mother and father three times:

- ‘Watch this video clip of Consultant Perinatal Psychotherapist Amanda Jones working with two different mums and their babies’ and
- ‘For example, a child whose mother is admitted to hospital might cope very well despite feeling upset and worried. In contrast, a child who is also trying to cope with poorly controlled asthma, parental substance misuse and bullying is likely to be more at risk.’
- Then comes the fathers’ mention. But in the following terms: ‘Routinely involve fathers when assessing risk’

(NHS Education for Scotland, On-line Child Protection Module

<http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/home/learning-and-cpd/learning-spaces/child-online-protection.aspx> accessed 3 June 2013)

Other common examples are more explicit about the risky fathers.

The threatening father

It is difficult to find examples in the many books, papers and training materials where fathers are an asset. Instead fathers are regularly portrayed as alcoholic, drug-taking, wife-beating, child-harming brutes. See for example the ‘Craig’s Story’ video made by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children which begins “My dad was always in a bad mood, always fighting, especially when he went doon the pub’ (CELCIS) http://www.celcis.org/resources/entry/craigs_story

Examples of such routine and lazy depictions stretch to disabled (and thus unable to help) grandfathers and routinely risky step fathers and boyfriends.

Supposing that none of these messages were received by the kind of fathers who, it may be thought, need encouragement to involve themselves with services and they come looking for help. How might they be greeted **before** they talk to anyone?

Physical surroundings

Walk in the door of the clinic, GP waiting area, family centre, social work office. Look around, look around again.

These are not places where men and fathers are expected to be.

Posters and leaflets on the walls and tables are mostly intended for women e.g. Weightwatchers, Moon Walk or have images of women and children (Fostering campaigns) or carry hotlines and warnings to women about dangers such as rape (Rape Crisis). When men feature it is generally negatively as in domestic violence or the common Zero Tolerance posters.



Other posters have depictions of men as threats (sometimes just as a pair of knuckles or a shadowy gang of males being warned about knife crime) and it is very rare that there will be adverts for services for men/fathers or that men are shown in anything other than a negative (let alone neutral) light.

If our man/father decides to wait and is oblivious to the walls and leaflets on the tables what can he read? These areas are generally stocked with *Bella*, *Take a Break* or an old *Cosmopolitan*.



Once in contact with staff and practitioners, the range and quality of attitudes and services for fathers is another matter and has been discussed elsewhere (see for instance, Clapton, 2013).

Father proofing: why do it?

Father-proofing is not only about the importance of **depicting** men as involved or capable of being involved in the lives of their children and families, it is also a tool for drawing men into the services we offer in family welfare, child care and public health. And it is also as much about **ceasing** to depict women as sole carers with the sole responsibility for the health, welfare and safety of children and families. In this sense, flipped, father-proofing is mother-proofing.

As indicated at the beginning father-proofing on its own will have limited effect if it is not part of a strategy to change cultures, attitudes and practices about children, families and mothers and fathers.

But it can be a place to start.

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References

Burgess, A. (2008) *The Costs and Benefits of Active Fatherhood*
<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/uploads/publications/247.pdf>

Clapton, G. (2013) *Social Work with Fathers: Positive Practice*,
Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press