

Report No. 3

# DEFINING AND BECOMING FATHER-INCLUSIVE:

AN EMPIRICALLY DRIVEN AGENDA

## HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

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## KEY POINTS

- Young fathers tell us that they want to 'be there' for their children and that they aspire to be treated well as beneficiaries of services (Neale and Davies, 2015; Tarrant and Neale, 2017). However, they also report innumerable barriers in their aspirations for both.
- Professionals in mainstream family services report that it remains unclear how they should support fathers and their familial involvement. Furthermore, current practice and policy systems are poorly equipped to support mainstream services to adapt and develop father-inclusive designs and offers.
- Father-inclusion offers a means of reframing and designing policy and professional practice to facilitate father's' family involvement and social participation more effectively, including among the most stigmatised and marginalised fathers in society. However, it remains an under-theorised concept and idea and not readily mobilised in practice.
- Father-inclusion has great potential as an ethos, a strengths-based approach to practice, a driver for service design, and as an alternative policy direction that provides the scaffolding for transformation and change for fathers and their families.

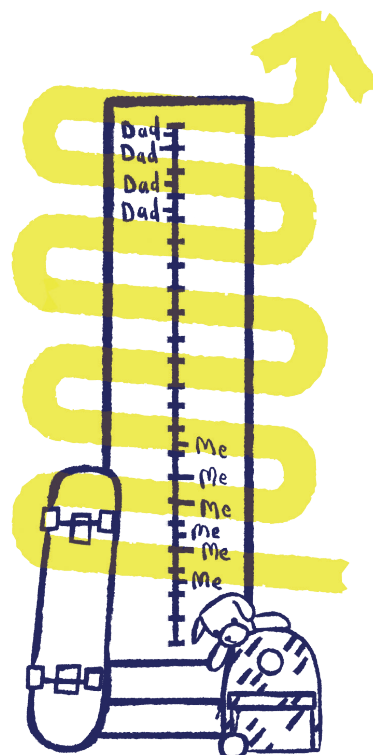
## INTRODUCTION

Generating and responding to an empirical evidence base from which to promote and advocate for father-inclusion has been a core driver and ambition for the [Following Young Fathers Further](#) (FYFF) study. This has been driven in part by international scholarship, as well evidence from young fathers that father involvement is important to them, that they want to 'be there' for their children and they aspire to be treated well as beneficiaries of services (Neale and Davies, 2015; Tarrant and Neale, 2017). However, they also report innumerable barriers in terms of their inclusion in services (Davies, 2016; Tarrant and Neale, 2017; Neale and Tarrant, 2024). Furthermore, where professionals increasingly express a commitment to supporting fathers, their efforts are often hampered by numerous systemic challenges.

In context of these challenges, there has been a notable growth of attention among practitioners about the value of, and need for, father-inclusion. This involves professional encounters that reflect a culture of equality and inclusion and strengths-based approaches underpinned by recognition that fathers have unique strengths, perspectives, and contributions that are valuable to the overall well-being of children and the family unit.

Given the relative recency of academic and practice interest in father-inclusion, it remains very much an unsettled idea and not one that is readily translated into practice. The potential for establishing the conditions that support father involvement and men's social and familial participation, therefore remains unrealised, despite the potential for evidence driven transformation and change.

This report begins by drawing on the narratives of young fathers who have participated in the Following Young Fathers Further study to identify continued gaps in the provision of father-inclusive support. This data confirms that despite their commitment to father involvement, they are routinely excluded from services across their parenting journeys. Synthesising academic literature and practice resources, a conceptual distinction is then made between *father involvement* and *father inclusion*. This distinction is made to demonstrate the overlaps and to distinguish between men's familial involvement and father-inclusion as a socially driven ethos and imperative, with potential as a powerful agenda to affect transformations within and across the familial, practice and policy landscape.





## FATHER-INCLUSION: AN EMPIRICALLY DRIVEN AGENDA

Our interests in father-inclusion as an ethos and a manifesto for change, are driven by evidence presented both in existing academic research, as well as evidence generated with young fathers, aged 25 and under. The young men interviewed for our study tell us that they value support when they receive it but also that they notice when support is lacking or when they feel excluded. Here, Tarrell and Simon reflect:

“

*There's a lot of men suffering in silence and there's no-one helping me.*

*(Tarrell, aged 15 when he had first child, FYFF, wave 2)*

“

*That's one a' my main disappointments, like ...my mental health went really bad. I had a serious mental breakdown. I ended up leaving my household and it just got me to a place where I didn't wanna be around people no more. And like this is another thing why I wanted to do the young dads group 'cause I just think like something like that needs to be set up because we literally had nothing. Like obviously in the wards the midwives and the staff was amazing, like they was so supportive and stuff like that. But for [partner/co-parent] I think she got a bit of extra support from the after care, like she was contacted by the midwives quite a lot and obviously her health visitor. But me, I got nothing. I just got basically...just learn to deal with it and I never did.*

*(Simon, aged 18 when he first became a father, FYFF, wave 1)*

Both Tarrell and Simon's observations speak to continued gaps in support for fathers and the implications for their mental health and emotional well-being when they are not recognised. Their comments confirm the wider side-lining of young fathers (Neale and Tarrant, 2024), sometimes in their encounters with professionals and more generally, where services are either inaccessible or unavailable.





## THE BENEFITS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

The invisibility of fathers especially in the context of universal health and family support services is problematic because the benefits of father involvement often go unrealised without the social structures and systems in place to support fathers' long-term investments in their children's lives.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that father involvement is beneficial for the whole family, supporting both child development and well-being and family functioning (see Panter-Brick et al. 2014; Bateson, 2018; Chung, 2021 for detailed reviews). In brief, for children, positive father involvement impacts directly on the social and educational development of children (Poole et al. 2014) with potential for influence on a child's outcomes throughout infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Panter-Brick et al. 2014).

Engaged fathers also benefit the health of mothers (Equimundo/MenCare, 2017) including the encouragement of more positive maternal health behaviours in early parenthood (Bateson et al. 2017). Father's involvement

in childcare and mother's employment can also help to produce a more gender equal society both in the present and for future generations (Chung, 2021).

Often overlooked and under-appreciated is the value that men themselves derive from fatherhood. Men report that fatherhood makes them happier and healthier (Equimundo/Men Care, 2023) and that meaningful engagement with children is an important source of happiness and well-being (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001).

Despite evidence of the value of fathers' involvement for the whole family, fathers continue to be under-represented in parenting interventions, research, and advocacy for father inclusion (Panter-Brick et al 2014; Moura and Philippe, 2023) with limited influence, either individually or collectively, on the policies and practices that ought otherwise to be created for their benefit and protection (Tarrant, 2023).





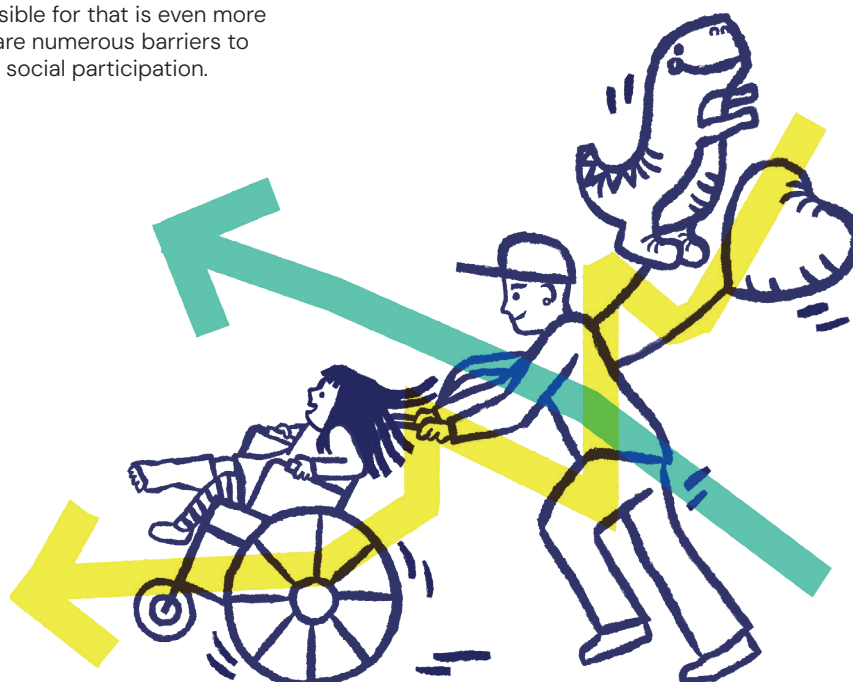


# FROM FATHER INVOLVEMENT TO FATHER INCLUSION

A key challenge is that father-inclusion as a concept is far from a settled idea. In its simplest form, it means to *include fathers*. Some of the more detailed definitions we have identified in the literature and in practice documents are provided below:

- According to the Camden Safeguarding Children Partnership (2021), father-inclusion means: 'To engage fathers and keep them involved in services'. They argue that to do so: 'we all need to be proactive, and inclusive to their diverse needs and perspectives.'
- Father-inclusion means that the wider benefits of father involvement can be realised. The significant impacts that fathers have on the health, development, and well-being of children and on the health behaviours of mothers (Bateson et al. 2017) offer a powerful rationale.
- Approaches to service delivery and evaluation that are sensitive to gender difference and critical attention to 'where, when and how gender sensitivity can make a difference to the quality of provision' (Philip and O'Brien, 2017: 1115). Achieving a balance between paternal involvement and child-wellbeing is also paramount and may be especially complex in situations of divorce or child protection concerns (ibid, 2017).

In sum, father-inclusion involves recognising fathers as parents and acknowledging and facilitating the valuable contributions they make in the lives of their children and co-parents regardless of their personal circumstances and identities. These varied definitions indicate that father-inclusion is a multi-faceted concept. It is one that incorporates concern with promoting father-involvement and men's familial participation to the benefit of children, co-parents, fathers, and society as whole, while simultaneously addressing the exclusion and marginalisation of fathers from services that are designed to enhance child and family outcomes. The question of *how* to include fathers and *who* should be responsible for that is even more complex, not least because there are numerous barriers to be addressed that impact on their social participation.



# BARRIERS TO FATHER-INCLUSION

Fathers' relative invisibility and/or exclusion from mainstream or parenting-related services has been linked to numerous barriers to father engagement in familial, service and institutional contexts. These range from personal and practical issues for fathers, to structural, organisational and cultural barriers for services.



**Barriers to father-inclusive practice are real and numerous and include personal, organisational, strategic and societal factors.**

(Bateson et al. 2017: 1)

*Personal and practical issues* that may represent barriers for men include work commitments, childcare availability, reluctance around help-seeking and maternal gatekeeping, namely maternal reluctance to champion the involvement of fathers (Davies, 2016; Baran and Sawrikar, 2022).

Just some of the consequential *structural, organisational, and cultural* barriers at the service and practitioner level that have been reported include:

- Pervasive gendered occupational cultures, i.e. 'mother-centric' services that are delivered by women, for women;
- Prevalent 'social deficit' views of fathers that cast them as possible risks to their children,
- Persistence in gendered ways of thinking about fathers among professionals, including an uncritical acceptance of stereotypes that assume disinterest in parenting among men and the idea that if a service is supporting mum, then they are also supporting dad (Cooke et al. 2019). Such a belief overlooks how parenting has been viewed over time in feminine social and cultural contexts,
- Limited training and reflective supervision for professionals, compounded by constraints on workload capacity; and
- An absence of policies relating to, and defining, what is meant by father-inclusion (Ferguson, 2016; Bateson et al. 2017; Philip et al. 2018; Tarrant, 2021).

The deficit-based view that some fathers may pose a risk to their children (or to their partners and/or former partners) is especially pervasive and has considerable influence over practitioner engagements with fathers as service beneficiaries (Davies, 2016; Ladlow and Neale, 2016). The associated idea that fathers are 'hard to reach' contributes to the stigma they experience, disguising the complexities of their lives and the factors that contribute to their disengagement (Davies, 2016). Labels and assumptions like these often translate into the blaming of fathers for not accessing services.

For young fathers, this may be amplified where the problems they experience are reinforced if left unchecked in a context where service structures, designs and delivery are not adequately structured to support fathers in all their diversity. As Scourfield et al. (2016: 266) observe, "if men are genuinely to be supported to play an important and valuable role as fathers in the lives of their children, then all agencies need to subscribe to this aim and to recognise and support the particular needs of vulnerable fathers."







## FATHER-INCLUSION AS A MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

As context to the empirical work conducted through the FYFF study, this report identifies a conceptual distinction between father involvement and inclusion, highlighting a lag and a disconnect between cultural shifts towards father involvement that are occurring within families and the ability of services to respond to and include fathers as part of their core business.

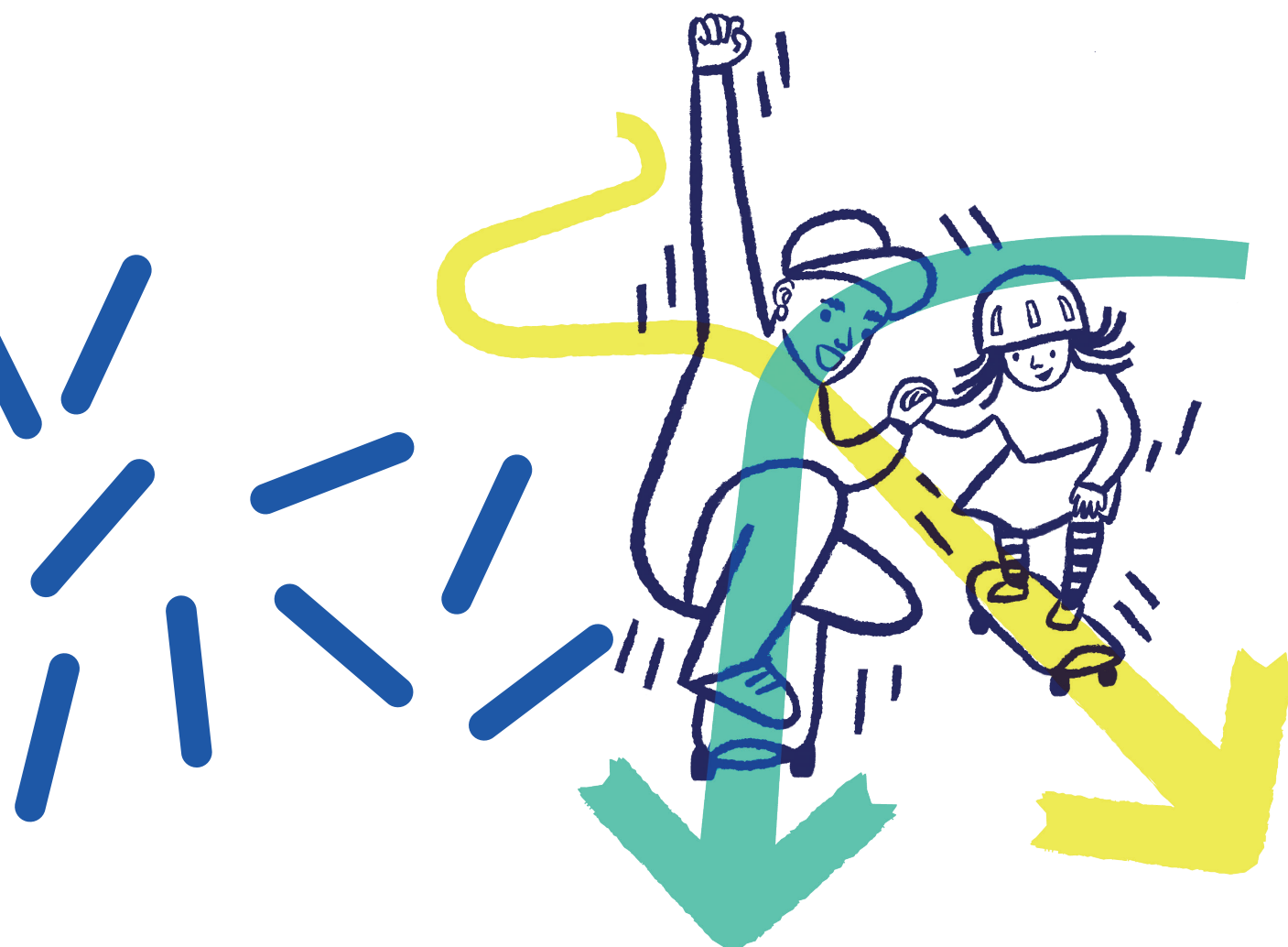
Addressing this lag and disconnection has underscored the core empirical and methodological strategies throughout the FYFF programme of research. Indeed, much of our empirical and participatory work has been built around how we can create the conditions for father involvement and inclusion in a way that is empirically driven and responsive.

And there is evidence to suggest that this is a timely issue (see also Report 7). Among public commentators, as well as researchers, there has been a notable rise in interest in fatherhood and associated shifts in relation to the gendered experiences of work and care, especially since the pandemic. Campaigns for improved parental leave for fathers, as well as increased investment in accessible and affordable childcare as core social infrastructure (Himmelweit, 2016) are reflective of deeply felt inadequacies in the current settlement between fathers, families, and the state.

## CONCLUSION

No matter how well-intentioned campaigns for father-inclusion might be, an ongoing priority for the Following Young Fathers Further team has been to keep young fathers in the frame, such that debates and evidence about the value of father-inclusion remain inclusive of young and other marginalised fathers and consequently capable of responding to the specificities of their parenting journeys and needs across the lifecourse. It has been established that marginalised young fathers are often side-lined or subject to surveillance in practice and policy settings (Neale and Tarrant, 2024). The risk therein is that the promotion and advocacy of father-inclusion nationally could also inadvertently reinforce the marginalisation of young fathers, especially where agendas are driven by the interests and experiences of more resourced fathers.

To this end, the FYFF study has developed new methodological strategies and innovations since January 2020. These include exploring how to sustain the engagement of young fathers in research over time (e.g. Report 4), working with them to implement new innovative models of practice like the Grimsby Dads Collective (e.g. Report 5) and the North East Young Dads and Lads (e.g. Report 6), and by considering the policy and welfare conditions best suited to fostering a more father-inclusive policy and practice landscape (e.g. Report 7). We elaborate each of these empirically driven and responsive innovations in Reports 4 – 7.





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