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### *Introduction*

Children in Scotland believes that children benefit emotionally, physically and mentally from the active involvement of both parents in their lives. Research confirms that fathers play a crucial role in their children's lives whether they are biological/non-biological, resident/non-resident, foster fathers, stepfathers, or even grandfathers. The best possible relationship with a father or father figure is not just desirable for children, but a right of all children.

#### *Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that*

- 1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that **both parents** have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents (or legal guardians) have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.*
- 2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall **render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities** and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.<sup>1</sup>*

Childrearing still tends to be dominated by women and services supporting childrearing are all too often directed primarily (if not exclusively) to mothers. From maternity services that overlook fathers to those schools that still routinely send all information about students just to mothers, public services have a tendency to treat fathers as invisible, uninterested in their children's lives and uninvolved in the furtherance of their children's well-being. This places an unfair burden upon mothers, creates a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for fathers and deprives children and young people of the benefits realised when both parents are supported to play their parenting roles well.

More needs to be done by the Government, the Parliament and civil society to popularise a view of fatherhood that goes beyond that of the father as a breadwinner. We believe that the new UK-wide Gender Equality Duty is one way of achieving this change – particularly in relation to how services are delivered to families and the expectations that this places upon society and fathers.

### *The importance of father involvement for children*

8 in every 10 children and young people live in two parent families. All fathers have a general and valuable role to play in creating a healthy, happy childhood for their children. A lack of involvement will have a negative effect on most children's lives. However, a father's involvement is particularly important to some groups of children. Roughly 90% of lone parent households are lone mother households (although this still leaves approximately 150,000 lone

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the UNCRC is available at [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)

father households across Great Britain). The absence of a father, or low levels of parental involvement can have the following implications for children.

- ❖ Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship than do children from better-off families – and to suffer more when this relationship is lacking.
- ❖ Involvement of fathers can help children’s educational attainment and well-being.
- ❖ Involvement of the father is particularly important and valuable in the case of lone mothers having relatively low educational attainment (no matter the level of the father’s attainment).
- ❖ Children who do not live with their father are more likely to:
  - ❖ live in poverty;
  - ❖ be less successful in school (behaviorally and academically);
  - ❖ have more trouble getting along with peers;
  - ❖ run a higher risk of health problems;
  - ❖ be at greater risk of abuse; and,
  - ❖ run away from home.
- ❖ Boys having little or no involvement with their father are more likely to become offenders than boys with a highly-involved father.

### ***Fathers and the facts***

Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People stated: *If our country recognises that [parents sharing roles] is a worthy goal, then we should make it easier for fathers to do so through a legal and cultural expectation of substantial involvement with their children from the earliest stages.*<sup>2</sup>

A recent survey by the Equal Opportunities Commission showed that the expectations of fatherhood by both fathers and mothers is indeed changing:

- ❖ 96% of fathers who live with their partners now attend the birth of their child.
- ❖ 87% of fathers are confident about their ability to care for their children (77% of mothers share that confidence);
- ❖ 79% of fathers are happy to stay home to care for their children (66% of mothers agreed);
- ❖ 70% of fathers want to be more involved with their children (50% of mothers agreed);
- ❖ 58% of men think that ‘breadwinner’ is not the father’s main role (62% of mothers agreed).

This is indicative of a sea change in the aspirations and expectations of most fathers today from those in previous generations. The definition of being a *good* father has evolved from one of being a reliable ‘breadwinner’ who chastised his children as required, to one who has regular, active, positive involvement with his children. Fathers are still expected to contribute financially to their children’s well-being, but much more also is expected of them in terms of time and commitment.

Whilst a clear majority of men wish to be more involved in their child’s upbringing, many experience significant difficulties in doing so. There are not equal policies in place for fathers and mothers, with the relative paucity of paternity leave compared to maternity leave as the prime example.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Marshall, Presentation at “Fatherhood: the child’s perspective” meeting, January 2006  
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## ***The Gender Equality Duty***

***The Gender Equality Duty explicitly calls for greater equality in the delivery of public services. It is no longer legal for those providing public services to children, young people or families to overlook fathers – biological or de facto, resident or non-resident.***

The GED means that both mothers and fathers should be supported equally in caring for their children, whether or not they continue to reside together. The single biggest driver of the gender pay gap is the unequal sharing of parenting roles. Thus, developing the societal expectation that fathers will be involved actively and positively (as well as financially) in the care of their children would be of great benefit to women, to children and to men themselves.

The GED should serve as a catalyst for all government-funded services and initiatives to invite, encourage and support the active participation of fathers in their children's healthy development. From birth and continuing through adolescence, fathers should feel far more welcome than they do at present to take part in the education and health care of their own children. Active participation of fathers in their children's education should begin with pre-school and continue through secondary school. At a minimum, fathers should feel welcome and be able to take part in parental events.

Finally, the Gender Equality Duty presents an opportunity to positively impact on the education and socialisation of children and young people. It offers a welcome chance to promote and improve gender equality from a very early age. This, in turn, has the potential to reduce the replication of patterns of gender inequality (and stereotypical views of parenthood) among new generations of children and young people in Scotland.

### ***Future fathers***

One often-ignored issue is that some secondary school students already are parents [while a very high percentage of them are prospective parents – and not just in the distant future]. Policies and programmes do exist to assist teen mothers in various ways, although improvements are needed in this arena. Conversely, there are rarely corresponding supports in place through the education system to help teen fathers come to terms with their roles, responsibilities and the potentially positive consequences of being young fathers.

The assumption seems to be that they will not be involved; an assumption that too easily becomes a fact. The Gender Equality Duty creates an opportunity to move beyond the outdated stereotype that young fathers either cannot or will not care for their babies. In fact, the GED offers an occasion to start properly educating and assisting young men to become involved, caring, competent fathers (irrespective of their on-going relationship with the mother). Better parenting education for both young men and young women would be an appropriate and welcome result of implementing the GED successfully.

### ***Publicly Funded Employers***

Employers have proven to be much less amenable to flexible (or part-time or job sharing) working arrangements for fathers than for mothers. Even when family-friendly policies are officially available to both fathers and mothers on an equal basis, there is a strong and

widespread perception that men who take advantage of these policies are looked upon less favourably by their employers than women who do so.

And yet, policies about parental leave and working terms/conditions that result in gender inequality should be re-examined and revised in light of the Gender Equality Duty. The goal is not to advantage or disadvantage either mothers or fathers. Rather, the point is to create and implement effective policies that acknowledge and support the vital contributions of both parents to the well-being of babies, toddlers and young children.

### ***Key points***

- ❖ Children experience better childhoods with the supported involvement of both parents
- ❖ Children are more likely to have positive futures if both parents are actively involved in their lives
- ❖ The involvement of fathers is particularly important to vulnerable children and children in poverty
- ❖ A vast majority of young people will become parents, some when they are still in school. Tackling parenting stereotypes and expectations at a young age is essential
- ❖ Scottish family services do not currently meet the needs of fathers fully and equitably, which can result in excluding father's from the expectation of involvement in their child's life and the shared responsibility of childrearing.

### ***Key questions for the Scottish Government***

- ❖ What steps is the Scottish Executive taking to gather comprehensive data and qualitative evidence about the experience of parental involvement for both fathers and children?
- ❖ How will the Scottish Executive ensure that the implementation of the GED at the national and local levels includes fathers?
- ❖ How will the Scottish Executive promote the importance of involving fathers in health, education and social work services?
- ❖ What is the Scottish Executive doing to identify and address the barriers to fathers' involvement in children's lives and accessing family services?
- ❖ What changes is the Scottish Executive making to its own employment practices to support and encourage a better work /life balance for fathers?
- ❖ How is the Scottish Executive shaping the views, expectations and skills of Scotland's future fathers?

*Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 400 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professionals organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services.*

*The Children, Fathers and Fatherhood Project is a three-year initiative funded by the Scottish Executive and managed by Children in Scotland in partnership with Fathers Direct and EOC Scotland. This policy briefing is based on work done in relation to the project's 2007 conference, Fathers' Footsteps: where is the gender agenda leading for fathers – and their children? Five more extensive briefing documents have been produced addressing the Gender Equality Duty's implications for child-father relationships in the specific areas of Health, Education, Early Years and Vulnerable Children as well as a general overview. These can be obtained from Children in Scotland*