

With Father's Day coming up at the end of this month, we take a look at one group that is making a world of difference to some parents – and their children. Tom Carroll introduces us to...

The Edinburgh lone father's club

In his book *Fever Pitch* Nick Hornby paints a vivid picture. His father, separated from Nick's mum and trying to keep in touch with his kids, does everything he can to maintain a relationship. But it's seventies England: his ex-wife isn't supportive of contact, he doesn't have much confidence in his parenting skills and he isn't quite sure how to relate to his children. Many of his attempts are doomed to painful failure.

Today you may see more dads than previously at parent and toddler groups, school gates and children's events. But they're still usually outnumbered by mums. For many men networks similar to those that support women with young children just don't exist, and being a lone or contact father can sometimes be an isolating experience.

Enter the Edinburgh Lone Fathers Club.

Set up in 2001, it is an activity-based support group for single and contact fathers run jointly by Gilmerton Child and Family Centre and One Parent Families Scotland, with financial support from Edinburgh Childcare Partnership through the Sure Start programme.

Dads' groups are a great way for men to come together, share their experiences, and realise there are people in a similar situation who may be able to help. The issue of supporting lone fathers is something that comes up a lot in conversation: a typical comment, especially among dads who have struggled to be granted access to their children, is "The courts favour the mothers and support for the fathers is not always recognised".

The Lone Fathers Club offers members information and help on a range of problems, such as practical parenting advice, benefit entitlements, or support in making arrangements with ex-partners. Regular outings are organised, with a support worker always on hand: the group doesn't offer supervised contact, but some fathers have been able to arrange to attend outings as part of an agreed resumption of contact, or as a next stage after supervised contact.

Issues facing lone and contact fathers

Several key issues have emerged over the years.

Almost every family we have worked with has experienced some difficulties with **contact arrangements**, ranging from complete

refusal of access to disagreements about the extent of contact. Some fathers have gained overnight and extended contact during the time we have worked with them.

We support fathers to achieve shared care and stress the importance for both parents and children of maintaining positive relations with ex-partners.

Men bringing up children on their own are in a minority. Many fathers we have worked with have been **isolated**, lacking friends or family support. They are unlikely to meet other lone fathers and may be cut off from friends because of childcare.

Parenting support agencies have made considerable efforts in recent years to include men, but many still work with a largely female group and the staff in both childcare and early years education is still predominantly female. For some fathers this can be a barrier.

Many fathers we work with have also told us they are **reluctant to seek help** as it can be seen as a weakness or as a sign they are unable to cope, especially when they are trying to gain contact with their children.

The cornerstone of the Dads' Club remains the Saturday activities: these have included a barbecue at Yellowcraig beach, swimming and trips to Our Dynamic Earth and Deep Sea World. Dads get a chance to meet fathers in similar circumstances and an opportunity to share experiences on a range of parenting issues from positive parenting to bedtimes. The children gain a lot: they can make new friends, gain social skills and build upon the relationship with their father – especially significant in cases where this has been strained due to lack of contact. They can try together activities they may not have thought of, or been unable to afford.

Tom Carroll is the Lone Fathers Support Worker for the Edinburgh Lone Fathers Club. For more information contact him at One Parent Families Scotland at tomcarroll@opfs.org.uk

Children in Scotland is currently running a 3-year project, 'Making the Gender Equality Duty real', funded by the Scottish Government. The project promotes the value and importance of involving fathers positively in their children's lives, and shares information and examples of good practice to support and further the equalities agenda. Find out more at www.makinggenderequalityreal.org.uk

One father who has used the Lone Fathers Project tells us

Why I use the Dads' Club

"I was a father who was experiencing extreme difficulties in obtaining contact to see my children. I was almost at the end of believing I would ever see my children again. My ex-partner did not wish me to see my children.

Although my ex-partner was still reluctant, it was agreed in court that I could see the children on a Saturday morning through the Dads' Club.

I obtained information about the Dads' Club from the internet and through a meeting with Tom Carroll. This helped to give me an understanding to the background of the club and its main purpose to provide support to lone fathers. I was still apprehensive about using the club. However, this seemed to be the only way in which I would be reunited with my children and

I was willing to try anything.

I had not seen my children in over 2 years and I was concerned about how they would react to seeing me again. I felt that it would be an emotional experience and was worried that we might feel awkward meeting in front of fathers and children.

In my particular case, I feel it has been extremely important for me to have the support of the Fathers Club. It has offered the opportunity for me to demonstrate to the courts that not only should I have contact with my children but that I am more than capable of looking after them.

I am in no doubt a significant number of other fathers out there have given up hope of seeing their children. Without this help I would have become one of those fathers.

I cannot thank the Dads' Club enough for helping and supporting me and my children in rebuilding our relationship."



Photographs published with permission of the Edinburgh Lone Fathers Club

Back on board

Boarding school education is almost universally regarded in the UK as a mark of privilege, yet the cost can be less than that of paying for a child in care.

June Statham evaluates a radical suggestion for vulnerable children



Looking after a child in a children's home costs on average over £2000 a week. Yet outcomes for such children are notoriously poor. Could paying for a child in or on the edge of care to attend boarding school be a cheaper and more effective option?

Championed by the former Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Andrew Adonis, who himself spent time in care as a child and received a local authority grant that allowed him to attend boarding school, the English Government set up the Boarding Pathfinder initiative at the end of 2006.

Ten English local authorities and around 50 boarding schools (both state maintained and independent) signed up to trial the scheme, and the Thomas Coram Research Unit at London University's Institute of Education was commissioned to carry out an evaluation. The findings, published in January 2009, showed that where the right children were selected and properly supported, attending boarding school could open up significant new opportunities and help to resolve often difficult and complicated situations at home. But where children or parents were ambivalent about the placement, where the child had very challenging behaviour or the local authority was not able to offer adequate support between term times, there was a high chance of placements not being made or breaking down.

The Boarding Pathfinder got off to a slow start. This was partly because the 10 pathfinder authorities were developing processes for identifying and assessing suitable children, finding out what boarding schools could offer and attempting to raise awareness of the scheme among social workers and others who might refer a child for placement. Over the 22 months of the evaluation just 76 young people were assessed for suitability by the 10 pathfinders, and only 17 of these actually took up a boarding place (many of them towards the end of the evaluation period).

Sarah, aged 15, was a success story. She began attending a coeducational boarding school at 14, funded jointly by children's services, an educational trust and her mother, who paid for the uniform and travel costs. Sarah had been missing school, getting drunk, falling out badly with her mother and was well on the way, in her own words, to "ending up in juvy" (a young offender institution). A family support worker had been assigned to visit and work with Sarah every day, in an attempt to prevent the need for her to become looked after. Attending boarding school provided structure, new opportunities, and a realisation that she could actually do very well at some school subjects. She returned to stay with her mother most weekends, and their relationship improved considerably. Sarah commented: "Mum said that she's going to miss me when I go back [to school] ... normally she can't wait to get rid of me".

Tom, on the other hand, had "actively sabotaged" the possibility of attending a boarding school. With hindsight, his key worker felt that Tom had not been adequately prepared and shown what boarding school would be like, nor had children's services taken sufficient account of the complex and turbulent relationship between Tom and his mother.

Careful assessment of the child's needs, good matching with an appropriate school, close involvement of the child or young person and their family in the decision and choice of school, and the provision of support during school holidays (and at weekends if necessary) were all key to successful placements. The personalities and social skills of individual young people also influenced their ability to cope with a boarding school placement. For most of those whom local authorities considered placing through the Pathfinder, boarding school was not an option that had ever been considered or experienced by other members of their family, and was thus not part of their cultural background.

Another factor that was likely to impact on the outcome of the placement was the young person's prior experience of, and engagement with, education. They needed to be willing to try and make a success of boarding school, even if they were not academically high achieving.

Since the evaluation reported, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has announced an extension to the scheme by making £10,000 available towards start-up costs for another 50 local authorities in England, and providing resource materials on a national website. Charitable educational trusts that have a long history of supporting vulnerable children in boarding school, such as the Royal Wansstead Children's Foundation, Frank Buttle Trust and Joint Educational Trust, are backing the scheme but are frustrated that so few children seem to be being considered. The way forward is likely to involve a greater role for other agencies in helping to identify suitable children, perhaps at an earlier stage before problems escalate to the point where boarding schools find it difficult to cope with their needs and behaviour; and joint funding and support packages to share the costs. Children's Trusts should be particularly well placed to bring together the different players.

Whilst boarding school is never going to be an appropriate solution for many of the children and young people with whom local authorities work, it can provide a valuable addition to the range of options available for supporting children and families who are experiencing difficulties, and has the potential – in the right circumstances – to make a significant difference to a child's life both currently and in the future. As Sarah put it: "this school has basically like changed my life".

June Statham is Professor of Education and Family Support at the Thomas Coram Research Unit. She has a particular interest in services that support children and young people with additional needs. The full report of the Boarding Pathfinder for Vulnerable Children evaluation by Claire Maxwell, Elaine Chase, June Statham and Sonia Jackson is available on <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR070.pdf> and the research brief on www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RB070.pdf. A summary of the findings written for young people can be downloaded from <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/711>



We'll be looking at ideas, policies and practice that can really make a difference to the lives of children and young people over the next few months in the runup to this year's Children in Scotland Annual Conference 'Life in the fast lane: the road to better outcomes'. If you know of anything that deserves to be shared more widely, let us know – email tfrancis@childreninscotland.org.uk