

## Chapter Three

Many gaps exist in our knowledge of fatherhood in Ireland. These include father's own accounts of what fatherhood actually means to them, how they 'construct' it and motherhood, and what Irish men actually do with their children? Vulnerable fathers are particularly intriguing in this regard perhaps because of their marginal status. As we have already pointed out, our sample reflects a continuum of experiences and backgrounds, from the poorest, most socially excluded fathers and families, to a middle-range group, to the least excluded. In general, the narratives of the men in our sample reflect the fact that fatherhood has been undergoing significant changes in recent years. With just one exception, the men not only demonstrated a capacity to reflect on their identities as men and fathers, but showed how such reflection was a constituent part of their identities as fathers and partners. This shows the degree to which gender has explicitly become a key organising variable in everyday life (Connell, 1995). Gender identities were (implicitly) on the agenda of their relationships, and a major focus of social intervention.

Most of the men remained rooted to at least some degree in a breadwinner and provider model of fatherhood. They were either happy to be at work, and away from the demands of family life, struggling to break free of it and spend more

# 3



What vulnerable fathers, mothers and children say about fatherhood, family life and social intervention

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active quality time with their children, or had already done so either through unemployment, marital separation, or a choice to be the primary parent. These men's identities as fathers should not be seen in a static way. The men were invariably involved in a process of development. Their own fathers were generally described as being in the traditional provider mode. Some still identified with their fathers, feeling loved, but most men felt that how their fathers had primarily showed their care was through going out to work. The men's fathers - as well as the types of problems which led to social intervention - were invariably used as a standard against which the men were seeking to become something different. This chapter considers how the men viewed themselves as fathers and the developmental process of fathering they were engaged in, and their general perception of social intervention work that was (or was not) done with them. It also includes the views of the sample of mothers and children on similar issues.

#### 3.1 Vulnerable men's development as men and as fathers

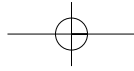
We strategically designed the interviews with men in such a way as to be able to track how they had developed, or not, as fathers. We were interested to explore the men's 'developmental pathways', that is their experiences, levels of involvement as fathers and self-definition from the time of conception and birth of their first child, both as an interesting finding about fatherhood in its own right, and as a means to understanding the impact of social intervention, and where it fitted in terms of how the men had developed - or not - as fathers. This, not surprisingly, proved easier to track for the older fathers who had more years of experience to reflect upon, but was also possible for the younger fathers.

Men's assessments of themselves as fathers could be strikingly honest:

*I was shite, pure unadulterated. I made excuses about work and everything else, but it wasn't, I wasn't there and I should have been and that's what has changed. ... They know now in no uncertain terms if they're in trouble or there's a problem that I am there. And we'll try and sort it out. You know so that's the difference. At the time, yeah, sure, I'd never make father of the year by any stretch of the imagination! Things have changed, things have changed.*

Such comments reveal the particular context out of which this data on fathers and families is being produced, that 'betwixt and between' state where the men reflect on their past identity and performance as a father and compare and contrast it with how they see themselves today. The father just quoted is typical in that going back many years he had had significant problems in his marriage, with gambling addiction and his children had been in temporary care. Past experiences of social intervention were very negative for him as he did not feel understood or supported by social workers. The most recent phase of intervention he saw as having a major influence in enabling him to become, as he saw it, a much better father. Central to this was his recognition of the impact on him of childhood sexual abuse and getting significant therapeutic help to enable him to heal. He was now in a new relationship and forging meaningful relationships with his new step-children, as well as healing his relationships with his birth children. Intervention work by a family centre worker was enabling him to learn better how to recognise his feelings and pattern of trying to control and impose himself in relationships and enabling him to communicate with his partner and children in an open, equal way. It is important, then, to do justice to the 'then' and 'now' aspects of men's stories and the role of a variety of influences on the development of their lives.

There is nothing from our data to suggest that in general vulnerable fathers love their children any less than any other men. Their struggle is in showing and applying it. Taken as a group, the vulnerable fathers we spoke to were, at various times in the past and present irresponsible, wild, violent, absent, drunk, gamblers and in other ways reckless with money, abusing drugs, careless, controlling. But they were also loving, affectionate, generous, compassionate, hard-working, caring, sacrificial, concerned, wise and supportive. Most desperately wanted to be good-enough fathers to their children and many saw social intervention as helping them to achieve that. Nor, our data suggests, do vulnerable fathers perform any less direct care for their children than the amounts that research shows men in general who are not the subjects of social intervention perform (Lewis and Warin, 2001; Kearney, et al., 2000). In some crucial respects, vulnerable fathers are the same as all fathers; they are every man. Yet it is crucial also to acknowledge that vulnerable fathers, by virtue of a level or type of vulnerability which has necessitated social intervention in their lives, do have specific needs and represent particular dangers, to their children,



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partners and themselves. Our sample of vulnerable fathers were at various times in the past and present sad, depressed, suicidal, lonely, self-harming, violently angry, fearful of responsibility, physically sick from abusing drugs and alcohol, exhausted and physically harmed from over-work, traumatised by childhood abuse or from present violence, and suffering from the injuries of poverty and the corrosive impact of social exclusion.

We do need to be careful in making such generalisations. Many of the fathers we interviewed told us of the great joy and wonder they experienced on becoming fathers. Others revealed real ambivalence, that their children were neither planned, nor wanted and the best they could expect was to grow into the relationship and fatherhood role. Yet we would expect to find the same variations in the general population of fathers.

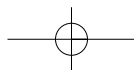
### 3.2 Becoming fathers: Birth experiences

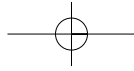
All of fathers in our sample attended the birth of at least one of their children. Those who didn't make it to all of the births mostly blamed outside pressures and poor communication as the reason they didn't get there on time. The degree to which expectations that fathers should attend births have changed, is exemplified by one man who still feels guilty because he missed the birth of his first child 10 years earlier due to being at a works night out in a restaurant. Despite he and his colleagues constant telephone contact with the hospital, he still didn't get there in time, admitting that having several drinks didn't help. One younger father was convinced that his, by then ex-partner, had been pressured by her mother into not telling him she was in labour, which he truly regretted. Another younger father had to overcome extraordinary barriers, especially lack of money, to travel 70 miles to the hospital where his partner had their child. He deeply regretted missing the actual birth through no fault of his own, but was there for his partner and baby soon after.

Without exception the men who were present found the birth experience profound:

*"I actually was a little bit late getting in for the birth, she had actually just had the child but they had't cut the cord, not yet. It was brilliant, life. But to see it is something else, it's absolutely fantastic! I would recommend it to anybody."*

[50 year old father]





They celebrated in different ways, the most common being a trip to the pub. One young father spent a whole day there and 300 pounds wetting the head of his baby daughter with his mates and anyone else lucky enough to have walked into the bar that day. The importance of being present at the birth is that it can help start men on a developmental path of active fatherhood, based on an immediate bond with the child and a strengthening of the relationship with their partner:

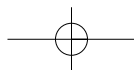
*Brilliant! Brilliant! Can't explain it like, I remember the time, the day, I remember everything, I can remember the whole day. D'you know, and the 2 of them. And there's a kind of a connection then with myself and [partner] you know, a stronger connection because I seen the child being born...*

[Raymond Jones]

The second (and less common) pattern to emerge was of stories dominated by a struggle to accept parental responsibility and even outright denial of it. Some men simply never wanted to be fathers. One father exemplified this in a narrative of an adult life which was organised around trying to prove his (traditional) masculinity. While he does recall attending all of his three children's births, because their lifestyles (heavy drinking and drug use) and the marriage (violent and unstable) were so chaotic from the outset, he has little memory of being involved with the children in the early years and can remember nothing of his 15 year old daughter as a child at all. His celebrations on first becoming a father at 19 (unplanned - "nothing in my marriage was planned") had less to do with the joy of bringing his child into the world than with having proved his manhood:

*"I thought it was great! I was going to be a dad, and it worked: I was able to make somebody pregnant! It was not a kind of a fatherhood thing, it was, I don't know. No I never looked at it like that at all."*

Such men clearly have a very significant journey to travel in developing themselves as fathers and our data shows that, while some men remain stuck or constantly struggling, social intervention contains real creative possibilities in enabling this to happen.



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### 3.3 Stepping into fatherhood

The men in our sample became fathers in more ways than conceiving their own biological children. Nine men in our sample (38%) 'stepped' into parenthood by living with a partner who already had children. Indeed, one of the men had never had a child in any way and was about to take up the care of his partner's sister who was to be accommodated with them from care and was included to amplify the lived experience and needs of such men. Some men felt that their bonding with their 'step-children' was as meaningful as if they were their own children. Dermot Casey found that his encounter with his new partner's 4 year old son Justin was the beginning of a healing relationship for him. Justin had witnessed his father abuse his mother and Dermot himself was a survivor of a very violent father:

*"[Justin] he's me son, he's me stepson right? The trouble he had with his father it's just, that's why I related so well to him, when I met him because he, he reminded me of me, you know what I mean? I actually, I was the same way like because I knew how he was feeling because I used to feel that way."*

This identification was the source of healing for not only the child, but the step-father. Becoming a stepfather was something that Dermot spoke of as having been quite 'natural' for him to do. It was as he put it quite simple, he was in love with his partner and he knew that he could not have her without the children. Dermot believed that Eve's story of living with a physically violent partner reminded him of his own mother's life and was one of the reasons they seemed to get on together so quickly, sharing an understanding of the impact of living with domestic violence.

The love and commitment in step-relationships grew from the man falling in love with the mother and accepting her children as part of being able to be with her. For some vulnerable mothers this can even be a pathway to an altogether more secure life for her and her children where they can actually be together. Joanne and her four children aged from 16 to 4 years (by three previous partners) had no stable home and the children were in care. Then she met Seamus, a 29 year old manual worker, with whose help they got a home together. According to him he took to step-fatherhood with relative ease:

*"Well I felt it from the first day you see kids. Joanne already told me what to expect being a father you know. And she said things aren't going to be totally easy you know but I like having kids around the house, roaring and shouting don't bother me at all. I bonded with them an awful lot you know. I think after about a couple of weeks like yeah the first couple of weeks they got to know me and I felt the bond. I mean it took them a while to say daddy alright you know. But they're all, they're all pretty good now. We're a real family unit now."*

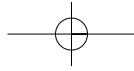
Some men are a huge resource to vulnerable mothers, that without whom the women would struggle to keep their family together. This father willingly attended every meeting he was asked to by social services to determine the placement (at home) of the children, and left no one in any doubt about his commitment to his new family. It is not the biological connection between men and children which determines the quality of the relationships, but the openness to giving and receiving love and the amount of work the parent is prepared to put into making that relationship work. The degree of commitment to the relationships and active fatherhood seems to be the key.

*"I'm not their father their actual father like you know. But I'm their real father you know, looking after them. Which I think I'm doing, to do everything right for them and keep looking after them and when they're going wrong, they must be told what to do right. Stuff like that you know, that makes a real father. ... I kiss and hug them all. And show them as often as I can. I'd tell them I love them when they're going to bed now and that, and I'd tell them I love them in the morning even if they are in a bit of a rush."*

(Seamus)

### 3.4 Constructions of gender and what vulnerable fathers do with their children

The majority of men saw the mother as the primary parent. This did not always reflect their preference but revealed the reality, as the men saw it, of how children tend to gravitate to the mother.



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*"I suppose fatherhood means parenthood it's being the second role of parenthood. Um you know I suppose motherhood is the primary role. That the way I see it or well yeah it's jointly you know it's...it's....I suppose it would be, it should be equal like."*

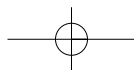
(Philip)

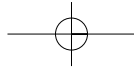
*"Because I'd say they're fond of her like, they're fond of, they're fond of the mother because like the mother's there. Like it comes from the mother, and I think that inside in the hospital with her and so often the mother rears them and the father does half but I reckon the mother comes first. It's the same thing if you go to court and you're fighting about the kids the mother will get them quicker than the father. Because it's the mother first, the mother would get them before the father first. In a family like the mother comes first because they came from her, gave birth. Like you, you've only one mother you could have a thousand fathers. You know what I mean?"*

(Jason)

*"Being a father is being there for me children. That's the way I look at it like just be there for me children they need me. I can be there for them... The mother is the one always in the house like you know with the kids like you know. Like even when I'm there now or Martha's there the kids are all Martha. You know. But like if Martha is gone out to the shops or anything like that like the small fella there now like he'd be up in her arms he'd be, I'd be sitting down he won't be near me then she'd be gone to work and it'd be daddy this daddy that. Everything'd be daddy then like you know. But eh like when Martha's there she's number one with the kids that way. She'd be number one like mammy this, mammy that like you know. I feel alright I know you know the way we were all kind of you know, it was always mammy this or mammy that..."*

(Frank Valentine)





*"Obviously I can't give them the motherly love, I give them the fatherly love. The difference is the mother you know had them in her belly for 8 months, 9 months sorry. And um it's just it's just a maternal instinct for children to have the little edge over the father for their mother and that's natural. I think every animal has that and I mean they're animals...at the end of the day."*

(Paul Smith)

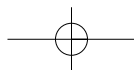
Others regarded women's greater involvement in child care as a social thing and a product of the greater opportunities there are for women to develop relationships with children while the men work to provide. Some believed that both parents should be equally important, even if the man is out working, which is part of his importance to the family unit.

*"I mean it's pretty simple, any dick can be a daddy, you know what I mean, but it takes more to be a father. I mean you've got to be there."*

(Paul Smith)

It might be assumed that the more marginal and a 'problem' the family/man the less interest he has in child care. Indeed, as shown in chapter one and throughout this report, our findings show that many social workers hold to such a view. The most marginal men in our study were in fact more likely to be actively engaged in domestic work and child care than the others. This is partly to do with their greater availability at home due to unemployment. But it also reflects two other things: the men's values in terms of how they wish to be as parents; and the impact of intervention work on the men which had helped them to get closer to and do more direct caring of their children.

The single most socially excluded category of person in Irish society is prisoners, some 99% of whom are men. Prisoners score highly on every indicator of social exclusion, including poverty, educational disadvantage, poor housing or homelessness, long-term unemployment, and estrangement from family (O'Mahony, 1998). To our knowledge, at least 5 of our sample had experienced prison. While only seeing your children once a month during a lengthy incarceration is bad enough, the big problems for such fathers begin when



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they get out, as the experience of Frank Valentine who served an eight year prison sentence for sexual offences, showed in chapter one. Yet with the help of the mother and child unit, Frank made considerable progress in applying himself to active fatherhood:

*"Well I don't know if my mates know that I love my children or not you know but I know that I do. I, I give out to them if they've done something wrong like I, you know, I do that like. But eh I, I just every night when they to go to bed like and stuff and I give them a kiss and I tell them I love them and all that like. The same thing in the mornings when they run out to school like you know I drop them down to school every morning and before they go into school I give them a kiss and all that like and do things with them and stuff like you know. I bring them swimming down to the swimming pool all the time you know. What keeps them happy and I'm happy. [Wife] will go but she won't get in the water! You know they're good kids in their own way like you know."*

(Frank Valentine)

If anything, we found the most marginal men talking down what they did in the home and with their children, such as one man who literally slept in the ditch outside a homeless woman and child unit so that he could be near his family.

**Interviewer:** What other things would you have done with the children then when they were young?

**Father:** When they were young? When they were down here [in the mother and child unit] first thing when they come home, when they come home I'd do is make sure they get their homework done. And then they can go out playing then come in and have their dinner and the whole lot. And I'd be gone then I goes away then about we'll say about half nine. I'll go away about half nine tonight. Sometimes then I could be there in the morning I could call in if I've no job on, I'd just call in and make sure the kids had gone to school and the whole lot...

**Interviewer:** When you were living together with Sandra and you had all the children like who would have done most of the housework?

Father: Well the two of us did the same. She could be doing the front room now and I could be inside washing the ware. And after that then we'd go upstairs and start making the beds together. And then work down the hall and...The kitchen would be last...the kitchen. The front room, the front room would be first, I'd be doing the ware then and the pots and the whole lot. Then we'd go upstairs and make the beds and start sweeping the rooms down the stairs and wash the clothes upstairs and down the stairs and down the hall. So in other words when you come down the stairs the whole room would be done... the hall...and then you've the kitchen, and bathroom. Well...I'm just, you do your share in everything...give a hand and all that.

Raymond Jones, a 23 year old father of two children under three, began taking drugs and drink at the age of ten, has been in prison and lived a wild and dangerous life, including stealing, driving and burning fast cars. Yet he talks passionately about his commitment to his children and has always - by his own and his partner's account - provided good care for them at times when his relationship with their mother is stable, including getting up in the night to feed and see to them:

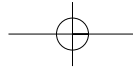
*Well it depended, you know. I didn't mind, I wanted to get up you know. If Ann was getting up I'd say stay in bed, I'll get up, that's the way I was. Because I didn't care as long as I'd the baby in me arms, then I was happy, d'you know what I mean? I don't know, I suppose it's all different for everyone like you know.*

In relation to whether this father does a fair share of the work with the children, he felt: "I do me best like, you know. I do me best for them. You can't do any more." There used to be arguments about who did what:

*but no not any more, because I just say sit down and she just has a rest or she'd tell me sit down like.*

*What used you argue over?*

*Oh, stupid things, you know what I mean, always over stupid things. Me missing all*



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*day or something like.*

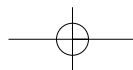
*You missing all day...?!*

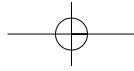
When present, marginal young fathers are capable of contributing a great deal to the household. It is their propensity to go “missing all day” and barely even see the significance of it that creates real problems (see also chapter 5). Research has shown that what men do at home is typically a contested issue, with men generally rating their involvement in domestic chores and child care as greater than how their partner’s rate it. We were keen to interview a sample of partners to establish their views of family life and constructions of fatherhood and gender roles. We have no way of objectively establishing the ‘truth’ of the claims made by respondents. What we can do is analyse men’s, women’s, as well as children’s accounts for indicators of differences and consistencies in what they said and possible reasons for them.

Raymond’s partner, Ann, represented him as a good, indeed a “brilliant” father, really valuing his contribution. But she also emphasised his unreliability. She never knew when/if she could really trust him. She herself was a vulnerable mother, a young woman with a history of drug misuse who was now receiving full-time family support in a homeless mother and child unit. The unit had also begun to work strategically with Raymond to develop them as parents together and as a family unit. Engaging men and keeping them involved in therapeutic and support work - what we call ‘holding’ men - is one of the biggest challenges professionals face in this work. Our findings suggest that the forms of work achieved by such residential or intensive day care type facilities is often necessary if the intensity of intervention work and structure that is required to develop such vulnerable parents is to be provided.

### 3.5 Working with separated fathers and families

Almost by definition intervention into the lives of vulnerable families involves dealing with relationship breakdown or the risk of it. Ten men in our sample (42%) were separated or divorced from the mothers of the children. The experiences of separated men in our sample took a number of forms. Some became the lone parent responsible for the day-to-day care

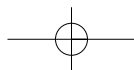




of the children while non-resident mothers had different degrees of access to the children. These men used social services and family centres to gain therapeutic support to help them develop as parents. Other men were non-resident fathers typically in custody and access disputes over their children, and the trauma of the contested separation and adversarial family law system was the main reason why their children and themselves needed therapeutic support. Whether separation was experienced in the past or the present, all the men spoke with passion about the exclusion they felt by the family law system, including social services, which they saw as cruelly sexist and anti-man/father. For one sub-sample of men their identity as separated fathers was central to how they defined themselves as service users and their struggle to be active fathers. For these men, their problem is the family law system, the fact that the courts have been so restrictive in the access given to their children that the men do not feel allowed to be meaningful active (good enough) fathers. Often their criticisms extended to social services because of their role in influencing decisions about custody and access arrangements for children.

Our findings show how, in such scenarios, family centre workers tended to play a mediating role, picking up the pieces from the strained relationship between the family members, the courts and social workers. The striking thing about these men is their anger at the injustices they feel have been done to them. This is so manifest and 'in your face' that the real danger is that all professionals see is the angry, aggressive man and not the loving, caring father. Our experience in the research interviews attested to this. The importance of men feeling listened to and affirmed in themselves and in their struggles is a feature of every father we interviewed. But it takes on particular significance for those men who feel completely excluded by the system and whose relationships with their children are under threat because of the judgements of experts.

Our interviews in these cases of contested separations highlighted the deeply conflictual he said/she said nature of accounting of the 'truth'. The narratives make clear that there is invariably a history of marital discord yet what seems beyond doubt is that in these cases it is the men who lose (custody of) their children and often their home. As a consequence many of the separated fathers have nowhere to bring the children and have reasonable quality contact since they moved out of the family home. The problem often is not just the



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amount of access per se, but where to have it, and in a place that does not cost a lot of money, be it the stereotypical McDonalds or some other commercial outlet:

*I've got limited access. I can see, listen to this, I can only see my children, the two youngest ones, 2 hours once a week on school days, 4 hours once a week on weekends. I must give my wife a week's notice, right! Now that sounds lovely doesn't it? You know what, d'you know how long 2 hours lasts? It'll take me a half an hour to get the kids back and a half-hour to take them, that's 1-hour. So basically I've got an hour with 2 children.*

Many of these fathers articulated their feeling that 'nobody wants to listen to me', and with such a depth of anger this may not be surprising, in that the anger may frighten, alienate and push people away. A number of these same fathers had become quite politicized through joining father's rights organizations where they learned that they are not alone and that 'the system is stacked against fathers'. While other men in our sample made generalisations, they tended not to position themselves as representing all men in their situation. However joining a father's rights organisation allowed men to meet other men like them and gain an even greater sense of injustice and develop a campaigning sensibility. In the research interviews these men repeatedly quoted other men's cases so as to prove the veracity of their own case. Fathers in this situation clearly have a powerful sense of not being believed. However, having become politicised in this manner brings with it a type of narrative closure. While these men tend to want to speak for all such fathers and want to change the system to prevent other men from experiencing what they have, it is more of a struggle with such men to get a personal narrative, to get beyond the man's anger to an intimate sense of him as a man and father.

Overall, however, fathers who end up in contact with family support and social services primarily due to a 'marital' breakdown and ceasing to live with their children have particular needs which services need to become better at responding to. Given that so many have been extensively excluded from their children's lives this anger has a righteous basis to it and these men's 'political narratives' (of rights/ exclusion/ marginalisation/ injustice) need to be understood within a political framework using a model of 'healing and

reconciliation work.' This in some way needs to recognize the injustice of the situation (on all sides) and move the process forward by creating space for new /alternative futures and ways of being actively involved fathers.

Yet we felt satisfied that some family support services managed to achieve this. Some men recognised a key role in father inclusive social intervention, what we are calling 'expressive work'; which involves promoting communication between fathers and children in ways that enables feelings and views to be expressed in a new open way. This helps to clarify individual needs and desires and enables the expression of emotion, be it love, anger, or sadness. For one separated father the benefits to such expressive work and of attending counseling at the family centre he expresses in terms of what they learned about *him*.

*the fact that their father, they found out eventually their father was still there, he was never gone, he was only gone from the family home, you know. That I'll always still be there for them, although I'm not in the family home and I'm missing all those little moments that they're doing, yeah. But I'm still there. Everyone's always blind to something like. Sometimes you always need somebody else to tell you something. Plus as I said...they were allowed to express themselves.*

The challenge for professionals working with men who have been marginalised through the courts /separation system is not necessarily to pinpoint where their anger stemmed from, but to intervene in the systemic cycle in such a way as to (re) engage the fathers in as actively responsible a way as possible. That is to say, in a way which treats the men with respect, in a responsible manner, and which also assesses and where necessary develops the father's capacities to be a responsible active carer. We are struck by how it is only since we did these interviews and having analyzed the transcripts that we have been able to see the extent of the journey these men are on, in a way that it was difficult to see when the man was raging in front of us. How interesting it is that we have to get distance from them to hear what they are really telling us. This applies to all qualitative research, but seems especially significant when a lot of anger and danger is being expressed. We suspect that these are precisely the same processes and dynamics that lead professionals to close off to these men and not see beyond the rage. Reversing this is crucial so that vulnerable fathers,

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mothers and children may be helped to find resolutions to their relationship difficulties which will promote child welfare.

#### 3.6 Working fathers

Fifteen of the men in our sample (63%) were working outside of the home. This is no guarantee of relief from poverty and extreme marginality in terms of such things as poor housing, crime and drug ridden neighbourhoods - the fate of some families in our sample. Generally, though, men in paid work were less socially excluded. Working men's narratives varied in the extent to which they saw themselves as active fathers, when not at work. Our data suggests that, according to their own self-assessments, father's levels of active involvement in domestic work and child care has certainly increased over time. Almost every man in our sample saw himself as more involved in these tasks and relationships than his own father was/is. Yet the most dominant pattern was for men to be the secondary carers, in the sense of time spent with children and degree of responsibility for day-to-day child care. We are anxious in saying this not to undervalue the powerful meanings that the paid work they did do 'for the family' and care they did provide, had for most men. For them, providing is what good fathers do, a crucial part of how they care. The passion with which some working men spoke of their commitment to their children made it easy to forget that they actually did not spend that much time with them because of how work limited it. What many of the men did convey was that every moment they did have outside of work was child and family centred. Equally, some men defined themselves solely in terms of their fatherhood role, even when that essentially meant being a good provider:

*"It was probably, it was probably to work hard as well and to provide and to try. Financially you know, financially at that stage I, you know, I hadn't seen that there was a whole lot of difficulty you know with I suppose being able to be a father you know. I didn't see like, it was only later on that actually I saw that there was a lot more involved!"*

(Philip)

This finding regarding the centrality of the provider role was common to all working fathers irrespective of the degree of social exclusion. As the above quote shows again, men's relationship to their provider identities was not static, but developed over time with a distinct pattern of men (particularly in their late-30s, early '40s) becoming aware of a need to get more emotionally engaged in their family. Where there was also some variation in relation to providing was in the degree of necessity attached to work. All these men were desperate to work, in the sense of being driven to it by what the sociologist Max Weber called the 'whip-hand of hunger', and what it takes to materially provide children with a decent life. But the very poorest of families are driven by a particular fear of necessity, starvation and the struggle to give their children enough just to live a dignified life.

*"I love working. I loved the job because it's so physical and what have you. [Wife] is at home full-time she doesn't work outside the home so I'm the provider paying the bills you know. So that's probably why I was doing all the hours and what have you, trying to keep the bills down and the food in and the kids happy. To have a few quid to take them out or get a video in and make enough. That's a pressure all the time, that's there, that's always there. Can you make enough?"*

The danger however is that work can become all consuming, addictive and compulsive, cutting the men off from the family. As the same man relates it:

*"When I was working up in the other place I was often coming in, I was often coming in at 12 o'clock at night or coming in at 5 in the evening and just going to sleep and then I'm back out at work again, just too much responsibility. And the responsibility didn't bug me what bugged me was I'd no time for me children. It was a 6 day week up there. The overtime wasn't optional it was compulsive (sic). When I did sign up first it was optional. They just couldn't keep their staff and what staff was left behind was getting more put onto them with everything I couldn't get off work."*

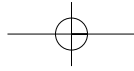
Our findings suggest that acknowledging the heroic struggles of poor parents to provide a subsistence living for their children is an essential aspect of best practice with such

### Leaving Fathers Out

families. This needs to involve 'being with' the family in their struggle in a manner in which they feel and know their difficulties are understood and being worked with in the interests of social justice, as well as support and healing. As one family centre worker put it, "we don't bring families in here to talk to them about how they feel about being hungry". Probably the single most important single thing professionals can do to include working men in their work is be sensitive to their work commitments and arrange sessions to suit the father's working hours (Walters et al., 2001). Where this happened, the men gratefully acknowledged its significance and professionals clearly articulated the challenges involved. While men in jobs generally defined themselves as providers, some were struggling to spend more time with their children. Our findings suggest that what being a more active father means to men does not necessarily involve spending less time at work. The men and their partners knew that for the family's survival they had little choice about one of them being a full-time breadwinner, and for a mixture of cultural and financial reasons it tended to be the men. Being a more active father denotes rather a greater commitment to spending quality time with children, being as involved as possible in their lives; and generally taking responsibility for their welfare. Crucially, especially for these vulnerable fathers, it meant the struggle to be a safe, good enough carer and partner.

For some of the men spending less time at work and more actual time being responsible for and interacting with the children was a very real issue and an important symbol of how they were changing. Two key patterns emerged here. Firstly, where men were called to take greater responsibility, because they had taken over the primary parenting role from their estranged partners. Some men negotiated time off work (on sick leave) to settle in with the children at the time when they took over being their resident parent and some established longer-term changes in order to see through their commitment to the children

*I feel, I feel I've grown an awful lot in regard to that I'm not afraid to talk about my feelings now. I mean even work-wise taking a Saturday off that's sacrilege! Saturday is, that's [my employer's] Sabbath day. They make more money on a Saturday than any other day and nobody, no managers get a Saturday off unless you're on holidays. And I remember thinking to meself, well sod them! You know, before that I would have been, you know, frightened to go in and even to suggest that I might take one Saturday off. But I went in with the attitude, look, this is it.*

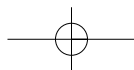


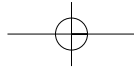
*Like you know, I have boys there that need me. I have no one to mind them on Saturday, I'm sorry I can't do it. You know, I'll facilitate you during the week whatever way I can and make up the hours, but I'm not working Saturdays and that's it.*

Having previously been excluded by the services because he was viewed as a dangerous man this father became the primary carer for three of his four children (who were on supervision orders to the Health Board). For men such as this encounters with therapeutic and support services helped them to prove to professionals and indeed to themselves that they are safe and competent fathers. This included developing themselves to a point where they reached a new integration of the worker/provider and intimate self.

This illustrates a finding that came through in many areas of our data, that enabling men to become good enough fathers is inseparable from developing them as men and reconstructing key aspects of their identities and masculinity. Changing fathers is not simply about finding ways of equipping them with techniques to manage destructive behaviours, absences and acquiring better parenting 'skills' in some limited technical sense. In every case in our sample where significant change occurred, therapeutic and support work with the men - often in tandem with their partners and children - led fathers to question the basis of their identity as men. Gaining the necessary skills to be a good enough parent involves learning about the self, including the impact of how one was parented, acquiring capacities to communicate, active listening, expressing feelings, and engaging in 'emotion work'.

This is directly relevant to the second pattern from our data which shows men consciously beginning to spend less time at work and more actual time being directly responsible for and interacting with the children. It concerns working men who were the subjects of intervention to try and help them break old patterns of over-work/work addiction and neglect of a deeper intimacy with their children and partners, and with themselves. It invariably involved men in their late-30s/40s who's eldest children had reached their teenage years (often with there being younger children also) using social intervention to gain assistance with concrete child care problems but which, often to the great surprise of themselves, involved them in reassessing their priorities, 'finding' themselves and a space in their families.





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This is typified by a father who initially sought help from a family centre with his teenage son's drug problems - "it's a nightmare, constant nightmare." But the focus of the 12 months of therapeutic and support work soon shifted onto him and his relationship with his wife. He was initially seen on his own for a couple of sessions, then with his wife and then for alternate sessions with the teenage son. The centre helped the parents and child to renegotiate their relationships, the couple to individuate, relax, and communicate better with one another. The father was over-working and drinking heavily.

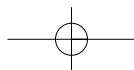
*"I was having problems with [son], I was having a problem with [wife] because of [son] and I was having a problem doing the nixers [over-working] because the money was good and then I was overtired. I was like a zombie really."*

He learned a great deal through the intervention work, such as how to

*just be normal. Hold each other, get out, socialize, talk more, share more experiences... [even] doing the homework, the housework and stuff like that, paying the bills. That's what I haven't been doing, I'm trying to work on that as well.*

*I have, yeah, yeah, I've gained an awful lot. More, more into meself as well, knowing what's going on, and you know to try and put the bad things, things I was doing wrong get rid of all them, try and get them out of me system. You see drink was an awful, drink, it takes hold of you. You're a different person and I told [wife] an awful lot of lies over the years, drinking. And through drink and I'm glad I'm off the drink now.*

For some working men it all becomes too much. Their bodies cannot withstand the physical strain any longer and they have to give it up. A crisis almost inevitably arises for such men whose entire identity has been so powerfully built around the performance based esteem (Real, 1997) they gain from the provider role. In this respect again our findings show that intervention work plays a crucial role in enabling such men to redefine their identities and make the transition from worker to active carer.



### 3.7 Mothers perspectives: Domestic gate-keeping and (re-) negotiated roles

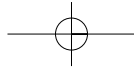
We were keen to establish the degree to which parenting roles and tasks were negotiated in the past and present. Most men represented themselves as having 'fallen into' a pattern of roles and responsibilities that were organised around traditional gender roles of women as carers and men as providers, rather than the couple having sat down and decided who was going to do what, when. Significantly, one of the reasons that many men - and women - found themselves in need of social intervention was precisely because this tacit way of organising things was not working and they had begun (re)negotiating it.

The partners of the men we interviewed expressed a variety of views about them as fathers and their own lives. The dominant theme was a sense that intervention work was enabling them to re-negotiate roles and responsibilities within the family. Some mothers could hardly have been more positive about what their men did as fathers and partners. Working class mothers spoke vividly of the importance to the household of the family wage and in deeply honourable ways about the often extraordinary efforts the men made to provide it, invariably at huge cost to his physical and sometimes mental health. We learned too about the costs to the women themselves - and of course their children - of parenting in poverty.

*"Basically I'm saying poverty is an awful lot to do with it because the main concern is putting food on the table for their children. You know I mean like, the amount of stress mothers go on around here. It's very sad very hard for them, like umm, there are people trying to put the food on the table and that's a big worry, you know."*

Given that, as we have argued, fathers were predominantly defined in terms of providing, this left mothers primarily responsible for matters domestic. Men explicitly recognised mothers as the gatekeepers of domestic work:

*No I wouldn't do housework. Well I'd clean up, I'd wash. I hate hoovering. I just don't like hoovering. I'd clean the dishes, wash now and set the table, I'd even make, make dinner. And clean up the room. Any decorations and the decorating I do.*



### Leaving Fathers Out

*... She's house-proud now, [wife], the house is spotless. I done the whole house last year because we'd a bit of a leak in the house, done an awful lot of work there.*

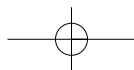
*Interviewer: And would you's have like worked out who's going to do what? Like, just talk about it like?*

*Father: Well she'd say, would I do the dinner and I'd say yeah, I'll do the dinner. If she wanted to go into town, do a bit of shopping, I'd have the dinner ready there. Or she'd do the dinner. Mostly she does the cooking.*

This exemplifies one pattern from our data where the man's role was as provider and their account of what they did with their children since they were young was largely restricted to such things as playing with them. Crucially, though, it was precisely this kind of father-absence that was being challenged and re-framed through involvement with therapeutic and support services.

While one younger mother describes an egalitarian division of the domestic labour with her partner, she also clearly feels ultimately responsible and in control of what happens.

*Well he'll do the cooking and I'll relax and I'll wash up after him, then he'll wash up after me. If we were cleaning the place I'd go upstairs and tidy upstairs while he's hoovering the kitchen. So we don't, like I don't want him to hassle me and I don't hassle him, we do, we share it, we share the jobs. We do an equal share of the housework and care. I'm the one that will get up and dress him, wash him, change nappies, make sure he's fed. But then again I get the day when I don't feel like getting up and Sean will take over and he'll do it for me you know. So I think the two of us would, like if he was tired now I'd just let him sleep on I'd just leave him in bed all day and say grand you know I'd do the cleaning over him. But this morning I did hoovering now yesterday, but today obviously he's at home so he'll clean up for me, wash the ware and Hoover the place and tidy what needs to be tidied and that like. But mostly like if I go out with Alex once a week or twice a week I go and he'd stay home and he'd clean up before he goes out you know.*

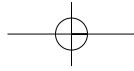


Nevertheless the mother still sees herself as the domestic gatekeeper, with the man doing things “for” her, helping out. Our findings show that involving fathers more actively in family life can have unintended consequences as it raises power and status struggles between men and women. While women generally wanted men to be more involved in domestic work, this was not without its anxieties and possible costs to themselves as they feared handing over some of the control of traditionally feminine areas to their partners. This often involved literal struggles over areas of the home, especially the kitchen, when men started to do more cooking - but often not in the way their partner managed things and liked. Thus, intensive intervention work, especially through family support services, focused on enabling couples to renegotiate gender roles and parenting responsibilities in ways which enabled women to ‘let go’ and men to find an ‘intimate’ space in the family (see, for instance, chapter 5).

### 3.8 The perspectives of children and young people

We interviewed 11 children from seven of the families. Given that our main focus was on fathers, it was beyond the scope and priorities of the research to interview a child in all 24 cases in the sample. We felt it essential, however, to include the voices of children in terms of reaching a deeper understanding of their perceptions of their fathers and what social intervention meant to them as children and any difference it appeared to make to their fathers and families. We purposively chose these 11 children as part of our in-depth case study approach through which we explored the lived experiences of a number of family forms, types of problems, social circumstances and interaction with service providers which were representative of the sample as whole. Thus the children related their experiences of a variety of problems and along a spectrum of circumstances, from relative social inclusion to extreme social exclusion and of a variety of intervention services and approaches.

The children relayed a range of experiences of their fathers and family life, which were without exception set within in the context of complex and invariably painful histories. Our findings support other research, which shows that children and young people are insightful about their own and their family's lives and able to articulate their views. All of the children

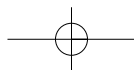


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we interviewed had experienced some kind of trauma in their lives, the most common being family breakdown and the loss of one resident parent and sometimes siblings. This invariably occurred on top of other traumas, such as domestic violence, that were a part of the family separating. Jason Dillon, for instance, was 10 years of age when we interviewed him in relation to the type of family support service he and his separating parents received from a family centre. Jason was eight when his mother and father (finally) split up. On balance, he felt it was now 'better' that they did not live together as he remembered they 'kept on arguing every night but then they were friends again in the morning.' He never really knew what they argued over since he would go to bed: 'I don't listen, I goes to bed, it was noisy.' He ended up attending the family centre because he needed to 'get cheered up,' following the separation which he found really upsetting. His dream (two years on) is still that his 'mam and dad would live together in the same house without fighting.'

All of the children we interviewed came from families where social intervention was connected to problems and levels of pain, sadness and loss which goes beyond the norms of most children's experiences. Our findings suggest that as part of developing social supports and intervention services, that actively engage with children, workers need to act as conversational coaches, facilitating young people to connect with, and express their feelings. While this applies to both genders, our findings with respect to developing good enough fathering show that there is a requirement to engage boys/young men in ways which develop their linguistic capacities in relation to emotional intelligence.

Jason's interview offered an example of how a child can become 'parentified' following parental separation. Being the eldest son, Jason became the 'man of the house' when his father moved out. With the trauma of the separation and the loss of previous security Jason began to worry for his younger brother that he 'might be kidnapped' and for his mother too that there might be a 'fire in the house at night.' Family therapy sessions at the centre helped to mediate the parental separation and to restructure the roles and responsibilities within the family. In addition to sessions involving all family members, the family worker offered herself as a 'sounding board' to Jason in individual sessions where he tried out with her what he might want to say to his parents. This all helped Jason find expression for his own sadness and anger: punching bean bags, drawing pictures and talking have all been

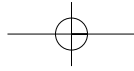


part of helping him to find the courage to tell his friends that he now lives in two homes, something he still finds difficult since the boys still 'slag him about it'. Jason was adamant that the therapy had helped to ease the sadness that all of the family was feeling but that he had become the carrier of:

*"I came here to get cheered up, I used to always cry because me da, me da used to get sad because we were leaving and he used to miss us when we went back to me ma after the weekends so me da or me ma were sad and I used to get sad about my da being sad and all. I wouldn't tell me da and me dad could usually see...I could easily see the tears in his eyes. And I'd know by me ma's voice sometimes [that she was sad]."*

The family worker also supported Jason's father in finding ways to be emotionally expressive with his son yet not to 'dump' all of his own sadness onto Jason. Jason believed that the family sessions have been good for his father, helping him to 'get over his sadness'. Advice he feels all families going through a separation should be given is: "Cheer up and don't be sad and all that, it's OK don't be sad and it'll get better soon." This typifies how all the young people in our sample regarded a core aspect of best practice as facilitating communication between them and their parents, and between siblings themselves, and allowing them as individuals to express their feelings.

Louise (13) Samantha (11) and Roy Burns (10) spoke vividly of living in extreme poverty surrounded by drug pushers, suspected sexual abusers and violence from the community, or the continual threat of it. They attended the family centre for a range of reasons, Roy was being bullied in school 'for being a good student,' while Samantha and Louise had seen a drug pushing neighbour threatening to kill their dog by shooting him in the mouth with a gun. The school had expressed concerns for Louise who was beginning to exhibit signs of becoming 'withdrawn and depressed'. Deirdre, the children's mother, herself had been assaulted in the neighbourhood and made the referral to the family centre. This use of a family support service exemplifies the negative impact on mental health, and well being of having to live in such dangerous environments. While the initial reasons for the referral were framed in terms of therapeutic supports for the mother and children, the centre went



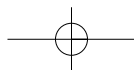
### Leaving Fathers Out

out of its way to include the father in evening time appointments and family sessions that he was only too happy to attend, 'never missing a session.'

All three children spoke about the positive effects of attending the centre. Louise, who had a previous experience of counselling, believed that what made this centre special was that 'they listened to you and didn't tell you lies' and that you could call into the centre 'whenever something terrible had happened.' Samantha commented on the way they always give you something 'nice to eat when you call in,' reflecting how the children spoke of using the centre as a resource that helped them to cope with living in such an impoverished community. For them, the centre had worked well with their father to help him relax after work and talk with them more about how he was feeling. He was an extremely hard working man, who spent long hours out of the home, to earn enough to provide for the family's survival. While attending the centre Louise disclosed having been sexually assaulted while babysitting. She had not told her parents about the abuse and her father became really angry about it, his sense of failure to protect her from it and also her sense that she could not tell him about it. The family centre helped this father to become more attuned to his own emotions and to express them with his loved ones. Having listened to their dad talking in the family sessions Roy felt the hardest part of being a father was 'working', but Louise was convinced that the hardest thing for her dad was 'worrying about them.'

*"When your kids are upset or something that's the hardest thing, he gets angry because all them little things like out on the road where they throw stones at the house and they try and get Roy and beat Roy up so..."*

*When he gets upset he does not talk about things he just tells you that he's a bit upset at the moment and goes out and comes back in a minute. He tells us but my dad rarely cries, only once I've seen my dad cry.*



The children believe that their father has begun to develop his capacity to express his emotions in a new way, something that their mother and the centre were helping him to do more of.

*"Like our dads not like other dads he's actually not because my daddy came from a very rough childhood and my ma actually taught him to love actually because his mother god forgive me nanny but she, she's very she's not like other nannies like she doesn't hug you she doesn't do anything like that so my daddy like he, he hasn't got many patience but like he'll try and tell us that he loves you and all that and then he'll just walk away until he cools down and he comes back again when he cools down, but he'd never hit you he wouldn't."*

Learning how to live a more emotionally expressive life is something the children clearly commented upon yet when asked if there was anything else they would like their father to change they were clear that they loved him just the way he is. "I wouldn't change a thing about him, no nothing." Roy spoke of the pleasure of sharing physical intimacy with his father who wrestles with him in the evenings when he gets home from work.

*"I love my dad. He always brings me outside and he messes with me like fight messing, messing and wrestling you know like. It's just getting close to me dad. Like when he's out at work all day we don't see him very much."*

The significance of professionals actually finding ways to include fathers in child and family work emerged as a key theme in the children's accounts. This was particularly so for those young people who were from families where a significant shift had occurred in the trajectory of the cases, from an initial period where the fathers were actively excluded from intervention work by health board social workers due to allegations and assessments that the fathers were unsafe, to a time where at least one professional began to involve and develop the men as nurturing fathers. Hugh (15) and the twins Victoria and Geraldine (13) had grown up living with a mother they all described as being unable to cope due to mental health problems. All three children (separately) described a childhood of violence at the hands of their mother who they alleged was also violent to their father, George. However,

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because he looked like a 'hard' man, with shaved head, tattoos and muscles, no one ever believed he was a victim of his wife's violence. According to Hugh, reflecting on their childhoods:

*"My mam was young too like she was minding us kids all day and she was complaining about that and he'd [father] come home and he said she'd be nagging him why don't you give up work? 'but who'd bring the money then?' to try and support the kids and he didn't understand it. He told me that he just couldn't understand how to mind kids he didn't know how to change a nappy he said like he didn't have a clue he was only a young fella and she used to be waiting at night time with a bar like for him in there in the door she'd turn off all the lights and she'd wait then behind the door for him with a bar and swing it at him and try to like hit him she was fierce. She'd get fierce angry like and when she got angry then like she used to like swing bars and throw things round the house, break up the house and she'd hit him and you know that was the start of it like. You know what I mean it wasn't that bad then but like she used hit us when we were small she used to beat the shit out of us like she used to hit us like, lock me up in a place in all dark just leave me on my own and she used to hit us with wooden spoons and the a metal kind of a spoon like that she'd just flake at you when she couldn't handle making a dinner if she burnt her hand she'd lash out it didn't matter, if you're only two years old you don't know. I can remember getting hit like I remember that like and getting locked up in a place in all dark."*

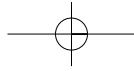
In part due to his father's sense of masculine pride and invulnerability it was not until the children's teenage years following a number of crises that social services became involved with the family. The children's mother took an overdose, and one of the twins, Geraldine, was placed in an emergency psychiatric ward following her refusal to eat, and compulsive washing of herself. Social services became involved following a referral from the hospital social worker who began the whole process of looking for a formal foster care placement for Geraldine. Her father George who had been caring fulltime for the other two teenage children was never even considered as a suitable carer, because of his appearance. Hugh believed that:

*"He always gets judged by, you know, by his looks like his tattoos, his skinhead and his earrings and he like you know he looks tough like you know what I mean. I think that's what turns people against him."*

According to the twins, "dad looks tough but he really isn't." Yet it was this 'look' that intimidated and prejudiced the social workers against this father from the very start, to the extent that Geraldine was very nearly placed in care. A new social worker took on the case and decided to assess the father's suitability to care for his daughter and she was placed with him. Yet, by that time Hugh had lost all confidence and trust in social workers and warned his father against talking with the new one:

*"He was talking to her and he said that this is the one and I said to him well it's not going to help I said because I said because all they [social workers] do is they go against us in the end they don't listen to us they side with my mother I said, don't trust them. Because they just totally side with my mother. From my experience of them, every single one of them, not one of them...you know what I mean...that probably didn't side with her the ones that I've experience with like that I can, that I know of that they were all...they all sided with my mam. So like I said to him, don't trust her [the new social worker] you know what I mean. But then [she] came up to the house then and she started talking to us and saying that, like telling my dad that he was good like and that he was doing a good job with Geraldine."*

The fact that the new social worker believed in the father and told the children so enabled them to start trusting her. The girls believed that having teenage children herself gave this social worker the wisdom needed to support their family in a real and practical way. "She used to tell our dad not to listen to our bitching, that he was in charge, he needed that confidence that he was doing ok with us." All of the teenage children were adamant that what made a 'good' social worker was a willingness to listen to what they as young people had to say. Not all had this experience. Fifteen year old Michael Keane was on a supervision order to the health board and, almost ended up in care, " because there was trouble in the house and I was taken out and put up to my dad's for kind of safety reasons, because trouble was too much in the house". His father had previously been labelled by



### Leaving Fathers Out

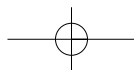
social workers as a dangerous man and unfit father, a view they came to completely reframe as the father came to be the primary parent. It had emerged that the children were victims of non-accidental injury from their mother with whom they were living. From the age of 13 Michael said he would lose control and become violent, "If something didn't go my way like" - such as not getting to watch what he wanted on the television. So far as he could remember social workers had 'always been involved':

*I don't know how they started off, but the thing about the social workers is my mam organized all of them and she, it always seemed that even though I caused some of the trouble they'd always be on her side and I'd never get a say. I'd tell them what she did and they wouldn't listen to me and that's the truth because I think she got to say her story first, and I think that made a difference like. ... She'd ring them up and tell them everything I'd done and they'd talk to me about it and they'd know already that I'm lying because you know it sounded so convincing.*

It was against the background of feeling unheard and blamed for everything that Michael really appreciated the individual work that was done with him at the family centre.

*the thing about [family centre] is I had a separate kind of a separate person to talk to and she'd [mother] no contact with him. And I found that very helpful because it gave me someone to talk to without them not taking anything in. Because that's what had happened with the social workers. They'd just talk to me and they'd know they wouldn't listen because they'd know I'm lying like.*

He insists that he wasn't lying but that, "they weren't listening", so much so that he described social workers as his "jailers". While blaming his mother as well as social workers for his troubles, he did not completely exonerate his father, although he regarded him as a good enough parent. He felt that this was how his father had always been and that social work involvement and a parenting course at the family centre had little impact as it didn't need to have. His father took a very different view, feeling that social intervention had enabled him to find the confidence and abilities to take full responsibility for his children (see also chapter 4).

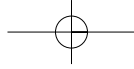


This typifies how strongly these young people felt that social workers needed to believe men, and not just judge them on the basis of their looks or other assumptions about fathers which regards them as of little significance to children, especially compared to mothers.

*“When I seen her [new social worker] and started talking to her it took me two or three times to talk to her and then I started copping on, she’s sound like you know what I mean. She listened she listened to both sides of the story which was the main thing. She listened to me dad you know what I mean and she had to listen to my mother too. And she kind of saw what happened, she kind of listened to my mam and she was watching my mam you know what I mean, she kind of knew then that my mam wasn’t like wasn’t well. But she asked my sisters and me, which was the main thing that convinced us.”*

### 3.9 Concluding remarks: Developing fathers?

Our findings suggest that like all men, vulnerable fathers have a capacity to develop through the life course. When social intervention does engage (well) with men, a crucial dimension of it is about developing them and their capacities for ‘intimacy’ as fathers and partners. This is an important finding and not as obvious as it at first sounds, given the very limited portrayal of fathers and intervention work in the literature. It shows how intervention is not simply about rendering men ‘safer’ or more responsible, as for instance, good providers. At its best it is about something much deeper and richer in how it helps men - as well as women - acquire skills and capacities to be good-enough parents and partners. Men differ in terms of their needs for particular kinds of therapeutic and support work, as we shall show in subsequent chapters. Our data suggests an important distinction between parenting ‘skills’ - in the sense of nappy changing, cooking, housework - and ‘capacities’ in the sense of emotional engagement, loving, equal, open communication. We fully recognise that the kinds of developmental intervention work we are referring to happens in only some cases and that many fathers are excluded from intervention (by themselves and professionals) and not made accountable or given the opportunity to develop themselves as fathers. But when intervention work does go on with fathers, our research demonstrates the scope there is for intervention work to act as a developmental



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resource for fathers and families, and the full weight of the loss there is for men, children and their families when this does not occur.

