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FATHERS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research aimed to find out more about the role fathers play in the lives of their children with autism, alongside mothers. To best support families, services need to understand the contribution of both parents. An online survey asked fathers about a range of issues, including day-to-day parenting responsibilities, the stresses involved, employment, sources of support and ways of coping. 306 fathers completed the survey and some of the main findings are given below.

Caring

Many fathers were highly involved in the day-to-day care of their children with autism. Around half were “mainly” or “equally” responsible with mothers, for children’s morning and bed-time routines and managing sleeping problems.

Play and leisure

Fathers were very much involved here too. Three quarters of men played or spent leisure time with their children with autism “every day” or “several times a week”. Amongst the most frequent play/leisure activities reported were rough and tumble play, looking at books, computers and going for walks.

Education

Many fathers played a significant role in their children’s education and learning. Just under half had helped their child with homework “many times” during the previous year and over half had attended a number of school meetings during that time. One of the biggest barriers to becoming more involved with schools was that most meetings took place during the working day.

Employment

Fathers very often made a key financial contribution to family life, with 85% of men in paid work, of whom 62% worked full-time. Fathers were asked if having a child with autism had affected their employment in any way. Half had changed their working pattern to some extent (to part-time work, shift work or self-employment). Four in ten men reported some loss of income, often due to opting to work fewer hours.

Stress

Fathers were asked how much stress they experienced overall and what caused them stress. Over half felt stressed for “quite a lot” or “most of the time”. The major causes of stress were: worry about the future, managing children’s behaviour, not getting a break, concern about family finances, not enough services and lack of rest caused by children’s sleeping problems.

Ways of coping

Fathers commented on strategies they found helpful by choosing from a list of statements. Two of the main approaches were ‘focusing on the positives’ and ‘coming up with ideas for what to do’.

Support

By far the greatest source of help for most men (over 4 in 5) came from their partners. Other significant sources of help were children’s grandparents and other children in the family. Just under half of fathers received no support from paid workers and most men felt that professionals did not sufficiently recognise the importance of their fathering role.

Father-child relationships

Despite sometimes challenging experiences, there was also a strong focus on father-child relationships in the survey and on children’s positive individual qualities.

WHAT NEXT?

These findings have implications for services. Professionals need to become more aware of the important role fathers play alongside mothers in the lives of children with autism and they need to find more effective ways of giving support to both parents. Therefore, summaries of findings will be sent to relevant organisations in Health, Social Care and Education and will be published in parent and professional publications, as well as in the academic literature.

Some of the findings detailed above are taken from an article that will be published in 2017.

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