

# FATHERS OVER THE GENERATIONS

## RESEARCH BRIEF

### Introduction

This study looked at how fatherhood is changing over the generations and how fatherhood is affected by migration. It covered three groups: the Irish who came to Britain in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish who came in the 2000s, and a group of white British.

### Key findings

- Across the generations men believe that fatherhood is changing
- Fathers today are seen as being much closer to their children
- Younger children particularly appreciate feeling close to their fathers
- Fathers tend to do 'boys things' with their sons, and enjoy sports in particular
- The time fathers spend with children is limited by fathers' career commitments, by having to work long hours, and by employers' inflexibility
- 'Hands on' dads put their own careers on hold and typically have partners who work full time and have higher earnings
- Being a migrant (Irish grandfathers and Polish fathers) makes fatherhood hard because of the type of work and hours they do
- Sons of Irish migrants did well at school and in their work and are upwardly mobile, but are similar to their own fathers in being driven by their jobs
- Polish fathers are overqualified for the jobs open to them in Britain and are downwardly mobile but have high educational aspirations for their children
- Polish fathers are keen to protect their children's cultural heritage
- Some fathers are more involved in childcare, but they are shift workers, work part-time or are 'stay at home' dads
- Younger children especially are unhappy about their fathers having to work so much



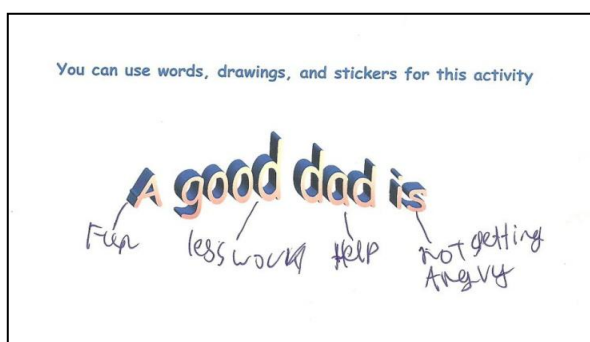
## The study

In each of our three groups – Irish, Polish and white British - we had ten families. In each family we interviewed grandfathers, one of their adult sons and one of their sons aged 5-17. Altogether we did 89 interviews. Most families were living in London or the South of England, but Polish grandfathers were in Poland. We asked grandfathers and fathers to tell us the story of their lives, their relationships with their own fathers and their experiences of being a father. Among the youngest generation we interviewed those of secondary school age, but for children of primary school age we had a mix of questions with drawings, sticker charts and visual materials.

## Is fatherhood changing?

There is agreement across the generations that today's father is more involved with his children than earlier generations. Some drew attention to the economic changes surrounding parenting:

'My dad couldn't have provided the sort of money that I was able to provide for my children, and I'm not able to provide the sort of money that [my children] are able to provide [for their children].' (white British grandfather)



Some focused on the changes in children's lives: 'Children are very busy here, really very busy. Soon they won't have time to breathe.' (Polish father)

Grandfathers thought some of the changes were for the worse, especially Polish grandfathers. They felt that fathers had lost their authority and respect:

'Before parents brought children up, now children bring parents up. Today everybody is equal.' (Polish grandfather)

Others were more accepting of this change:

'If [wife] is not keeping up with [grandson] he'll turn round and say 'Oh come on, granny, keep up!' ... You know if I did that to my grandmother, I would have got a backhander. But you accept that and it's amusing.... So times [they] change.' (white British grandfather)

## Fatherhood in practice

Fathers' jobs limit the time they have to spend with their children and in the responsibility they take for their care. Childcare is still very much the work of mothers and 'hands on' fathers are exceptions rather than the rule.

Fraser, a white British father with three children aged between 7 and 12, is typical of the work-focussed fathers. He held a senior position in a charity and pointed to the conflicts between his career ambitions and his desire to be a good father:

'I don't like admitting it, but I think there is a challenge between the fact that I'm hugely ambitious – which demands an enormous amount of my time and energy - and I want to be a great father. And those two do pull in different directions... you certainly can't spend unlimited periods of time with them in their free time.'

Hugh, a white British father with three children aged between 8 and 17, made a similar point when he reflected on the long hours he put in to reach his prestigious position in the law. While he said he was trying to find a better work-life balance by using his seniority to reduce his

workload, he was averaging a 10 hour day and had a long commute. He admired fathers:

'who seem to have [an] endless amount of time to play with their (pause) to do things with their children. And I've always felt that I haven't done it, and I probably have done it more than I feel, but I've always felt that.'

Hugh's son was content with the time he spent with his dad and did not feel he had missed out.

Those who took most care of their children on a daily basis were fathers who did shift work, in one case a father who was self-employed, and another who had a supportive line manager who allowed him time off in the school holidays, and flexibility in his starting and finishing times. These options were available because of the nature of the work and because the fathers were not career-minded at the time.

What is also striking about these households is that the mothers tended to be in higher earning jobs and hence took on the role of main breadwinners. Thus, the price of fathers being highly involved in childcare meant that men put their careers on hold, at least temporarily, or where part-time or flexible hours were possible. Becoming a hands-on father under these conditions may not be feasible for many fathers who find themselves in different situations.



### A 'hands on' dad

Paul, white British, has two children aged 8 and 5. He stopped work to become a full-time carer. When he had his first child Paul worked in a factory. He and his wife both worked shifts and were able to share the care of their son alongside some additional childcare: 'So it was just working as a partnership as a team, like we do'.

When their son was three and his wife pregnant with their second child, Paul and his wife decided that following paternity leave he should give up work to look after the children while his wife went back to her job. As his wife was earning more money than he was 'it just made sense'. For the next four years Paul was a full-time 'home dad': 'it's the best job I've ever had. ...testing but so rewarding'.

When interviewed Paul was working 16 hours a week. The hours were flexible and together with the flexibility that his wife had been granted in her job they could 'box and cox' childcare between them. Only now that he was working had he become aware that although he had wanted to be a home dad and derived much pleasure from it, he had missed the company of adults. When he went back to work Paul felt his confidence increase through knowing that the money he earned was going towards paying 'the food and the bills'. As his children got older, he also considered it important to pass on the work ethic:

'It's good modelling to show your kids that you have (pause) to have the nice things and to have the good things you have to work hard to get them... But, yeah, work is important. And trying to get them to understand that being a house husband as well, that was work.'

## Migration and Fatherhood

The story of how fatherhood was affected by migration is much the same for the Irish grandfathers and the Polish fathers. Coming to Britain, finding work in tough manual jobs, and taking on as many hours as they could in order to maximise their income and provide for their families – all this shaped fatherhood.

### The Irish

The Irish grandfathers came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s as young single men. They suffered considerable disadvantage. They entered adulthood early, without educational qualifications, and little material support. They found employment in Britain in dangerous manual jobs and sent back money to their families in Ireland. Many suffered discrimination. It was typically their sons who talked about this, not the older generation:

‘But obviously if you’ve arrived and you’ve got a very strong Irish accent (pause) you know so times must have been really quite difficult for people.... if you’ve arrived from Ireland by boat and you know you’ve got nowhere to stay, you’re walking around, you’re knocking on the doors, rooms for vacancies, and people turning you away... how must you have felt.’ (Irish father)

The grandfathers married Irish women, but they often found it difficult to find suitable housing when they started a family. As the main breadwinners in their households, they were driven by the need to work hard:

‘We needed the money sort of thing, so I used to work as much overtime as I could. Things were hard bringing a family up when you don’t have much money.’ (Irish grandfather)

As fathers, this generation was unable to play much of a part at home because of their long hours and, because of their own lack of

schooling, was often unable to help their children with school work. Instead they looked to their wives, Catholic schools and religion to help bring up their children.

The Irish grandfathers did not pass on their own disadvantages to their sons, but gave them stable, if not materially well-off childhoods. They passed on a strong work ethic. The result was that their children did well in education and in their employment careers and enjoyed upward social mobility. However, because of their high commitment to their careers second generation Irish men, like their own fathers, were limited in the time they had to devote to parenting. This second generation Irish father who had three young children was the son of a construction worker. As a manager in a large bank, he thought he was ‘a bit more engaged than my own father’ but, like his father, did very long hours: ‘I was leaving the house at half six, and I was walking back into the house at nine or ten o’clock at night.’



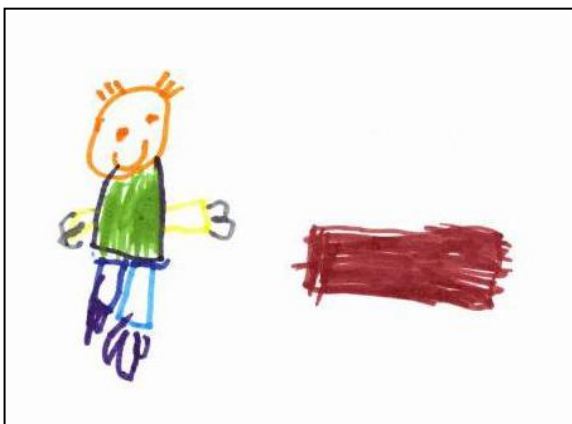
### The Polish

For the Polish, life was also very much about work and, like the Irish migrant grandfathers, they had to do long hours in tough manual jobs to provide for their families. Unlike the Irish, they came from different backgrounds, in particular having benefited from the rise in education opportunities under state socialism in Poland. Most had completed upper secondary level school or been to college or

university. During the political and economic instability of the 1990s, the Polish fathers' employment prospects became increasingly insecure, with many working very long hours for low wages.

Many migrated and found low skilled jobs in Britain for which they were overqualified. This created downward mobility. But being better educated than a comparable group of white British workers was a source of pride and reassurance. A woodwork teacher who became a self-employed handyman commented:

'I think that the jobs that we do, even though they are often below our qualifications, we are better at what we do, more valuable, better prepared than others and we try to show this.'



As well as knowing they had qualifications, Polish fathers were also in some instances comforted by the fact that, like many Poles, they had built their own houses in Poland. This gave them the possibility of returning in the future, but also created a desire to buy property in Britain.

For the new Polish migrants, being a 'hands on' father was rarely an option. Being the main breadwinner was crucial to their families' survival, given low wages and the high costs of housing. Expensive childcare also made it difficult for both parents to work.

Employers offered them no flexibility in their working hours to support them with childcare and often exploited their poor knowledge of English and welfare rights. Rather, the priorities of the Polish fathers were to hang on to their insecure jobs and work as hard as they could.

Unable because of poor English to help with children's academic studies, Polish fathers saw a key part of their role as helping their children keep their Polish heritage. They took them to Polish Saturday schools and a variety of Polish cultural activities. They made sure their children retained close ties with Poland, sending them to stay with family in Poland in the holidays. In order to promote their children's educational opportunities as well as preserve their religious attachment they sent them to Catholic schools. Fathers also saw it as their job to safeguard their children from discrimination and the dangers of life in a big city and consumerist values. Protectiveness had other purposes also; it helped to keep alive Polish language skills and their Polish identity, which they considered particularly important should the family return to Poland in the longer term.

## Children's Views of Fatherhood

### Time with dad

Children and young people told us that their dads spent little time with them during the working week. Nine year old Alfie said he set his alarm for 6.00 each morning so that he could have breakfast with his dad before he left for work at 6.45, and talk about 'Stuff like what we're going to do today, and what challenges we have.' Similarly, in the evening, dads often came home too late to have a meal with their children. Hendrych, aged 12, described his dad's work routine as a lorry driver:

'He leaves on Monday and comes back on Friday, which is annoying. He spends time with us on weekends, so he makes up for it.'

In most cases, the weekends were the times that children saw most of their dads. Sixteen year old Myles took it as given that his dad worked long hours, and was rarely home before 9.00 p.m. but said his family waited to have dinner with him. Because he stayed up late, Myles felt he did not miss out. Those dads who worked shifts or flexible hours were often around more during the week, to take children to or from school, or to after school activities, often fitting in with mothers' work schedules.

### Shared activities

Dads took part in a variety of activities with their children, both individually and as a family. Activities younger boys said they did with their dads included going to the park, playing games, rough and tumble, and playing with toys, going for walks, riding bikes. They reported that dads did some childcare - looking after them, helping with homework, bath time and putting them to bed - but that washing up, cleaning, cooking, tidying up were mostly done by mum.









Teenagers said they spent their time doing things with friends outside the family, but though this might mean less time with their dads, in most cases they thought their relationships with their dads had become stronger over time. Older children shared 'more adult things' with their dads such as listening to music, watching films or television together, in one case having political discussions. Some mentioned dads providing them with help, guidance and encouragement about schooling and careers.

Younger boys also said that sons spent time with their dads on 'boy things' and daughters with their mums doing 'girly things'.

Polish boys talked about doing outdoor activities with their dads, and building and making things with them. Hendrych, a Polish boy aged 12 said:

'We both like repairing things, which is not always good. If it's cold outside and we have time after we clean the house and so on, and there is nothing on TV, we sit down with our models. I have some plane models. So I like doing this with him. And one more common interest – computers. ....Because dad was a car mechanic and he teaches me how engines work.'

Use the star stickers to show what mums and dads do

Activities	Mums	Dads
 Cooking/baking	★	
 Helping with homework	★	★
 Household cleaning	★	
 Washing up	★	
 Looking after children	★	
 Tidying up	★	
 Mending clothes	★	
 Putting children to bed	★	★

Virtually all the boys we interviewed were involved in some kind of sporting activity with their dads – football, swimming, cricket, tennis – either playing, being coached by dad or watching a sport with him. As 17 year old Owen suggested, his interest and love of sport was strongly influenced by his father:

'Cos I'm the only son, I think he wants to – he wanted me to do what he done, like play football and be sporty.'

## Talking and physical affection are important

Children and young people valued family time and time alone talking with their dads as much as doing things with them. Ten year old Ivan said it felt:

'really, really good being alone with dad ... we talk about lots of stuff, like what he is doing at work and what I am doing at school and stuff like that.'

Younger children especially mentioned enjoying their dads giving them a cuddle or a hug. Some said they would hug their dad as a way of saying sorry, or thanking them. Many talked of getting upset when their dads shouted or got angry, but only one said that he was scared by this. Indeed anger was something some fathers expressed guilt about, saying they worried about losing their tempers, especially when they were tired after work.

## Sons worry about dads working long hours

While sons typically saw their dad as the '*guy that brings the money in*' and welcomed the material things his money could buy – toys, computer games, and holidays - at the same time they were concerned about their dads working too much and getting stressed by their jobs, especially the younger children.

Some described dad coming home after a long day '*grouchy*' and too tired to play with them. Feliks, a 10 year old Polish son, asked what it means to be 'a good dad' said:

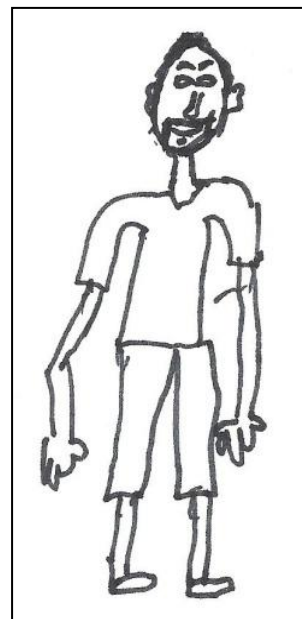
'not to go to work so often because he always goes to work and we see him very little. He went to work at 3 am today and he is still not here. Sometimes he's away for so long that I worry about him.'

His concern for his dad led Feliks to say that he wanted to be a lorry driver when he grew up in order to be able to sit beside his dad:

'Because if something happened to him, I could call the ambulance. And if something happened to me, he could call.'

Rory, an eight year old son of a second generation Irish father, showed great concern about his father working so late, recounting at length a particular occasion when his father had stayed at the office all night:

'I went in when my mum was up I went into her room and I still couldn't find dad. And when I got back from school he had just arrived back home from work. He had been stuck there – there had been an argument ... he just looked really tired.'



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The team wishes to thank the participants in the study. All names have been changed. Illustrations were provided by the study's young participants.



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