

L Lost Dads: The Fathers and Family Breakdown, Separation, and Divorce (FBSD) Project

Executive Summary

Dr Ben Hine, Professor of Applied Psychology at the University of West London (UWL)
Eilish Roy, Research Assistant

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Dr Ben Hine

Professor of Applied Psychology



Dr Ben Hine, Professor of Applied Psychology at the University of West London (UWL), completed his BSc in Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London in 2010. Dr Hine went on to complete his PhD at the same institution between 2010 and 2013 where he studied the gender-typing of prosocial behaviour across childhood and adolescence, in an attempt to challenge the assumption within the literature that girls were 'more' prosocial than boys. In fact, the body of work produced from his thesis suggested that, when given a greater variety of prosocial actions to judge, children and adolescents actually gender-type some prosocial behaviours as masculine (i.e., providing physical assistance) and that boys may only display prosociality in a way that still allows them to maintain a masculine identity.

Since joining the psychology department at UWL in 2014, Dr Hine has engaged in a number of projects in the area of applied gender and forensic psychology. For example, he has explored the manifestation of gender within the criminal justice system, specifically the impact of rape myths in the progression of female and male cases through the criminal justice system. This includes two large-scale projects assessing police officers' beliefs and judgements, and rape case reviews in collaboration with the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). He has also worked in collaboration with charities Safelives and The Mankind Initiative to conduct large scale case reviews to illuminate the needs of domestic violence victims. In this area, he is particularly interested in exploring stereotypes around hidden victims of domestic abuse (specifically LGBTQIA+ and male victims).

More recently Dr Hine has begun to explore post-separation abuse, specifically in the context of high-conflict separation. This work has led him to a specific form of violence: Parental Alienation (where one parent will work to attack the relationship between their child and the other parent). This professional interest was fuelled by a revelation in 2020 whilst working on data from fathers during the pandemic that he had personal experience of these behaviours during his own parents' divorce. This has led to work with a wide range of charities, organisations, and parents, as well as reflective work on his experiences written with his father, that has begun to explore the experiences of family breakdown and abuse, including PA and the involvement of the family court system.

Dr Hine now leads the Evidence-Based Domestic Abuse Research Network (EBDARN) bringing together researchers from several UK institutions to deliver this work. He acts as a trustee to The Mankind Initiative, supporting the great work they do with male victims of domestic abuse, and is currently chair of the Male Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. He is a co-founder of the Men and Boys coalition, a network of organisations, academics, journalists, professionals, and leaders committed to highlighting and acting on the gender-specific issues that affect men and boys such as the high male suicide rate, the boy's educational crisis, and fatherhood; and he is signed with Routledge to deliver an introductory guide to issues affecting men and boys in 2024. He is also a member of the parental alienation study group, the international men and families alliance, and the change for children advocacy group.

Acknowledgements

First, I thank all the men who contributed to this project, and for sharing their stories and making themselves open and vulnerable to us. So many of the men were talking about such deeply painful experiences, some for the first time, and I only hope that we have delivered a report which accurately and powerfully reflects their experiences.

Second, I would like to thank all the organisations who supported this project directly through participation, and indirectly through advice and shaping the project, and for their tireless work in supporting these extremely vulnerable men. Their insight has been invaluable in helping to inform our understanding and, most importantly, pathways for improvement.

Third, I would like to acknowledge the relentless and tireless work of my research assistant, Eilish Roy in helping to complete this work. Without her passion, energy, organisation, and diligence, this report would not have been possible, and it is as much her work as anyone's.

Fourth, I would like to thank second research assistant Luiza-Maria Burhai for all of her help in the final month of this project in bringing this report together.

Fifth, I would like to thank the Woodward Charitable Trust for supporting this crucial work. Without their vision and passion for uncovering these seldom heard voices, we would not be here.

Finally, I would like to thank my own father. This was for him.

This project is dedicated to all of the dads we have lost; may we yet save many more.





Executive Summary

The Samaritans report that in the UK, around 800,000 people make contact every year because they are considering taking their lives. 5000 people will complete suicide. Men are 2.4 times more likely than women to do this; equating to 11 men every day. Suicide is also the leading cause of death for men under 50 and men are particularly vulnerable to suicide after separation or divorce; they are 11x more likely than women to engage in suicide ideation at this time.

There have been many studies looking at the impact of family breakdown on women; however relatively few about men; and about men as fathers. To address the question of why men are more likely to take their lives following family breakdown, we need to understand much more about the impact of breakdown and its aftermath on the mental health of fathers, and to look at these issues holistically.

This multi-study, multi-method project utilised a quantitative client case review (Study 1), a qualitative survey and interviews with fathers (Study 2), and a deliberative inquiry with organisations supporting men (Study 3) to provide the most comprehensive examination of the experiences of separated fathers to date. This study brings together material and new research from over 1,000 clients, 130 fathers, and six organisations which reveals a clear trajectory for fathers following FBSD.

Our most crucial finding is the extremely negative impact on the mental health of fathers when they (most often) become the non-resident parent (NRPs) and are therefore much less likely to have continued and stable contact with their children compared to mothers. Fathers are also less likely to seek help for their stress and poor mental health related to separation, and culturally and in the workplace, far less support is available to men as fathers, and should domestic abuse be part of the equation in the breakdown, fathers are even more overlooked and may face further helplessness, as services and society often fail to recognise them as likely victims.

Fathers also reported that they were forced to engage in extensive and draining processes even to be able to see their children (including adult children over the age of 18.) This frequently involved alienation, often through family court processes, which further traumatised men and was accompanied by further invisibility and a lack of support.

All of these experiences were shaped by negative stereotypes about both fatherhood and masculinity, which limited men's ability to seek and receive effective support.

The results from this report, alongside yearly suicide and attempted suicide figures suggest that, for a disproportionate number of men as fathers, these experiences simply become too much, and they can no longer cope; leading to suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, or, tragically, suicide itself. It is then the bereaved children who suffer from the irrecoverable loss of when their parent takes their own life.

We believe it impossible that anyone reading the testimonies recorded in this report will not be moved by the misery, devastation, and pain expressed by the fathers who courageously shared their experiences with our research team. They urgently need more understanding and support.

The resulting recommendations, therefore, recognise that, as a society, we need to act, not only to support already separated fathers but to change and reshape attitudes and stereotypes that produce such experiences in the first instance. Most importantly, we must urgently recognise the impact on the child when the presence of their father is lost, including through suicide. Put simply, we need to urgently appreciate the value that fathers have on the lives of children, regardless of whether parents stay together or separate and divorce.

Such a change would not only save the lives of thousands of men but greatly enrich the lives of our children.

Aims, Objectives, Research Questions and Outcomes

1. Aims

- To understand the impact of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) on fathers and their children.
- To understand how we can best support fathers and their children when experiencing FBSD.

2. Objectives

- Analyse and interpret quantitative information provided on post-family breakdown experiences.
- Survey and conduct interviews with fathers on their and their child(ren)'s experiences of family breakdown.
- Conduct a deliberative inquiry with third-sector providers on their experiences of supporting fathers and their child(ren) through family breakdown.
- Identify the impact of experiences (including parental alienation and post-breakdown abuse) on fathers and children.
- Identify current mechanisms (or lack thereof) of support for fathers and children experiencing FBSD.
- Identify opportunities for improvement in the provision and the societal understanding/awareness.
- Disseminate project findings to stakeholders/partners and the funding body.
- Create a nuanced and dynamic reservoir of journeys, stories, and narratives that might better inform public policy in this area, and to make associated recommendations.

3. Research Questions

- What are the experiences of fathers and children experiencing FBSD?
- What is the impact of these experiences on fathers and children, particularly in terms of mental health (including suicide)?
- What support is available, and what are the challenges of providing support within the sector?
- What improvements can be made to ensure that fathers and children get appropriate support?

4. Anticipated Outcomes

- Improved understanding of the behaviours which characterise fathers' experiences (including parental alienation, isolation, and coercive control).
- Improved understanding of the impact of FBSD on fathers and their children.
- Improved understanding of current provision and support mechanisms available for fathers and children experiencing FBSD.
- Improved insight into sector challenges in supporting fathers and their children.
- Increased insight into societal and policy-based issues (i.e., awareness and recognition).
- A robust UK empirical evidence base on all of the above to help: the commissioning of support mechanisms for fathers and children, improved legal practice, and enactment of intervention opportunities.



Key Finding

There are six key findings from this project:

1. FBSD is a deeply traumatic experience for fathers, accompanied by a wide variety of mostly negative emotions.

Fathers described various circumstances to the breakdown, from abusive behaviours on the part of their partner to relationships that had simply 'drifted apart'. Several of the fathers mentioned pregnancy and the birth of children as sources of significant strain, and the precursors of FBSD (Bateson et al., 2017; Carlson et al., 2014). This has been shown in previous research on men's experiences of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and parental alienation (PA) (Bates & Dr Hine, 2023; Dr Hine & Bates, 2023; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), suggesting that greater support for parents both during and after their reproductive journey would be beneficial (Wells, 2016).

Following FBSD, they detailed an array of negative emotions, including sadness, anger, shame, guilt, and despair, all of which have been previously evidenced (Millings et al., 2020). Due to the mixture of emotions, men described this time as a 'rollercoaster', suggesting a struggle to manage several competing feelings (Baldwin et al., 2019). This finding should be considered within the context of masculinity values such as stoicism and suppression of emotion (Connell, 2020), which may have implications for help-seeking and coping (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Oliver et al., 2005)



Prior to event

“ I would say that post-natal depression stepped in after the second child. Absolutely. It was three children under three years. Her character totally transformed. ”
(DU10PA)

“And then because we were in lockdown and then with the uncertainties of finances and lack of work and not knowing the future, big factors that were affecting the dynamic of the relationship.”
(SR23WO)

Event

“ But the official kind of divorce [...] came when she attacked me with a knife in the house. ”
(LI26PE)

“She took the children away from me [...] and she took them up to her parents and I did not get to see my children for two solid months.”
(DU10PA)

Emotions

“ And it’s only now that I’m really starting to process just how difficult that year was. It was extremely stressful. It was very painful ”
(KI09BE)

“There were times when I was in a constant state of anxiety [...] there’s always something round the corner but you kind of got to be prepared for it, so it made me become more vigilant”
(SR23WO)

“I feel like I have been totally, I feel like I’ve been put in a sack and kicked by about 20 burly men. My insides are painful as hell because of what’s happened and what she’s done to me.”
(CO19EX)

2. Many fathers experience abusive behaviour both during the FBSD event and beyond as a form of post-separation abuse; much of which involves the use of parental alienating behaviours as a form of emotional abuse and coercive control.

Some fathers reported abusive behaviour, both within their intact relationship and post-FBSD. This was reflected in client case data, with around 40% of men reporting abusive behaviour post-FBSD when approaching a support service. Critically, this supports a growing body of literature on men's experiences of post-separation abuse (Bates, 2020), particularly around legal proceedings relating to co-parenting arrangements, otherwise known as legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook et al., 2010). Indeed, men spoke frequently about how their children were utilised to exert control over them and their behaviour, again reflecting previous work in this area (Bates, 2020), and with severe consequences for both men and their children.

Several fathers spoke specifically about their children being 'weaponised' against them, describing behaviours reflective of so-called parental alienation (PA; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). Specifically, fathers detailed several recognised parental alienating behaviours (PABs; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), such as control of contact time, denigration, and manipulation of the child's opinion of the parent. This again supports growing recognition of PA as a form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018), and of the enactment of PA behaviours against fathers (Bates and Dr Hine, 2023) particularly due to their role as a non-resident parent (NRP; Bates and Dr Hine, 2023). Again, many of these experiences were specifically linked to the profound negative impact then described by fathers.



During relationship:

“When she got quite abusive, at some point things would flip and she would be out of control. That was the feeling anyway, that she’s out of control. Anything could happen. [...] I was really, really afraid. I was unable to sleep.”
(WC14MO)

“My wife falsely accused me of having tried to commit suicide in front of the children.”
(Crabby Dad)

“She was diverting money away from the family [...] I don’t know who would do that. She was stealing money from us. We could have lost the house”
(RU02CA)

“There was a verbal argument over something. [...] She didn’t like what I had said. She straddled me and began to strangle me. She was really going for it, actually.”
(PO219PO)

Post separation:

“She’d make up all sorts of false allegations and I’ve actually had to live my life by keeping evidence”
(WE04GL)

“ Even after separation, even after I’m out of the house, even after divorce, it’s still there, it’s still present and it’s still, you know, she’s still absolutely gunning for me. ”
(DU10PA)

“She’s used the children again and again and again to cause, you know, misery, consternation, anxiety. And it really does take a toll just mentally.”
(LI26PE)

“And the police come to the door. The police said your ex-partner and her partner have accused you of assaulting them and we’re arresting you. So, I ended up in a cell that night.”
(FE19LU)

Parental Alienation

“I know there’s a lot of debate from some circles whether or not parental alienation’s a thing, but I can tell you, hand on heart, it absolutely is a thing. It’s absolutely something that happened.”
(KI09BE)

“The controlling behaviour was continued until that day, but just with a different instrument which is my son”
(HH18DU)

“Of course, you try to please the resident parent. And I see my children having to do the same where they’re having to please mum because mum is not happy about dad.”
(Crabby Dad)

““ She makes it very clear to my son. She tells him that it’s not safe for him to be with me. ””
(WI13FA)

“My daughter literally came away with a couple of weeks ago, ‘Mummy sometimes calls you a bad word that begins with a’. And I was like, ‘So your mum thinks I’m an asshole in front of you. That’s good’.”
(EL12DU)

“She accused me of stealing one of their piggy banks at one stage out of their house. And that was said in front of the children.”
(LO02BA)

“There were times where [daughter] was awake at 2:00 in the morning, you know, because she was really worried about her mum, because her mum was always crying, her mom was always upset. And [daughter] didn’t know how to cope with that. [...] she was so worried about her mom, she couldn’t relax.”
(KI09BE)



3. Fathers' experiences of negotiating co-parenting arrangements are overwhelmingly negative, especially when this involves family court processes.

The worst experiences for fathers following FBSD came from negotiations around co-parenting arrangements and contact. Indeed, supporting men through these processes was the predominant reason for the fundamental existence of most of the organisations contributing to this project. Specifically, fathers described their all-encompassing despair resulting from their 'fight' for time with their children, particularly in cases involving the family court system, and where children had been purposively alienated from them. Fathers were particularly damning of family court processes and associated organisations, which they believed to be biased against them as fathers, reflecting previous work with fathers and the courts (Bates & Dr Hine, 2023). Subsequently, several of the recommendations provided by fathers and organisations relate to fundamental reform of the family court system, and wider legal and societal change, including a rebuttal assumption of shared care, and a revolution in thinking around fathering.

Instead, a multiagency approach is therefore required around societal structures and fathering both for intact and ruptured relationships, as some fathers identified the pregnancy and postnatal period as the origin of many stressful identity shifts for men, as well as added responsibilities and tensions in the relationships with their partners.

Specifically, fathers argued that a lack of extended paid paternity leave or recognition of parental responsibility or role as co-parents from health care providers set the tone for how, after FBSD, their partners and the legal system acknowledged their paternal rights and awarded them the opportunity to participate in their children's lives (Pearson & Fagan, 2019; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Echoed by professionals, men's testimonies suggest that the lack of gender-inclusive training for healthcare professionals working with fathers or social policy frameworks targeting both resident and non-residential fathers puts men at a disadvantage from the very beginning.



Experiences

“ I’m thinking of going back to court now to have a relook at the child arrangements because she’s constantly breaching them. ”
(LI26PE)

“I’ve been trying to negotiate with her and through her solicitors for the past two years, for some extra time, and it’s just been blocked constantly. So, I’m finding that impossible.”
(CH09KI)

“She had said that she wasn’t able to facilitate contact because she couldn’t bring the kids to the social services building. To be clear, the social service building is a five-minute walk from [her] house.”
(FE19LU)

“We just did it between ourselves. [...] I think we came to that fairly amicably really. [...] We haven’t felt the need to get anyone else involved. [...] I think as an arrangement it works. [...] I’m probably quite satisfied.”
(KI12CO)

“I get a text message saying, ‘You’re not getting them tonight. Try again at 8 o’clock tomorrow morning.’ Try again? You know, there’s no explanation.”
(DU10PA)

Dissatisfaction with system

“I was guilty in everyone’s eyes.”
(CO19EX)

“It felt as though it was 80/20 in her favour to begin with, and then that’s where it ended up at. [...] It just doesn’t feel as though fathers are advocated for as much as mothers within the UK law system.”

“Every allegation that was made against me is flagged as a genuine allegation. There’s no, there’s nothing there to flag those up as false.”
(KI09BE)

“I’ve spent nearly ten grand in court fees only to still be told [...] I’m not allowed to see my son”
(GR31TO)

“And at the end of it you can be missing out on your child’s life for years and no one ever faces the consequences of that.”
(GR31TO)

“ It’s very frustrating how inequitable this process is and how it very much benefits the resident parent. The resident parent basically can do whatever they want and get away with it. ”
(HA11GL)

“Mentally, it’s draining. Physically, it is also draining as well. Financially, it’s draining.”
(GR31TO)

“I’ve been accused of doing things which I’ve never done. I’ve gone to police, they’ve written it off, they say that nothing’s happened. However, she can take that into a family court and it can still be upheld. [...] I haven’t done anything, but because she’s made the allegation against me, they’ve taken that as truth and that’s now affected how I see my son.”
(GR31TO)

“I spent all my pension on it for nothing”
(AS24AI)

“They will never look at both parties equally. You know, the word of the mother will be tenfold, you know, higher and mightier than the innocent father.”
(LI26PE)

“There’s no backstop that stops the other parent that doesn’t want to facilitate that contact. There’s nothing that will actually make them do that. It’s not how the law is supposed to work.”
(DU10PA)

“I’m left feeling like [...] less than a parent because it all just really does seem to be focussed on the mother. The mother, the mother, the mother.”
(FE19LU)

“ I don’t feel like they really value both parents’ involvement. ”
(HH18DU)



4. FBSD has a hugely negative impact on fathers and children, including significant mental health issues and suicidal ideation. 13 of the 30 fathers interviewed raised having some level of suicidal ideation, while two of these fathers had made attempts to end their own life.

FBSD had a profound impact on fathers, both in relation to themselves, but also their children, and the parent-child relationship. Indeed, it is hard to state the profundity of this impact, beyond the power of the testimony provided directly by fathers themselves. However, what is evident is that this impact occurs across a variety of domains (i.e., financial, emotional, health, and mental health) and results in various 'needs'. Crucially, as noted above, fathers directly identified specific sources of anguish beyond the general distress of the FBSD event, specifically court processes (which also caused huge financial strain) and abusive behaviours by their ex-partners (specifically when these were alienating behaviours).

The biggest impact was on men's mental health, reflecting previous work on men's elevated risk following FBSD (Affleck et al., 2018; Kruk, 1991). Specifically, results highlighted the severe mental health difficulties experienced by men and pointed specifically to an increased risk of suicide (Scourfield & Evans, 2015). Study 1 showed that approximately 40% of men approaching the service had experienced suicidal thoughts, almost all fathers from Study 2 mentioned severe mental health issues and suicidal ideation, and the organisations in Study 3 spoke about the emotional support required by men to deal with these issues and thoughts. There is now, therefore, substantial support to identify separated men as an extremely vulnerable group in relation to mental health, and one which requires a dedicated system of support.



On fathers

“When you totally and absolutely love your kids and suddenly that’s taken away from you. [...] Imagine somebody [...] marched into your house and [...] take you away from your kids for no reason whatsoever. Really no reason whatsoever. It’s a tremendous shock.”

(WC14MO)

“I think I’m so busy trying to rebuild me as a person that actually having a relationship with anyone else is nowhere near on the spectrum.”

(WD17SC)

“ I confronted her with this. There was a bit of an argument. And then I took myself out of the situation and attempted to take my own life. ”

(PO219PO)

“It costs me about £2,000 every month. That’s half my salary for a flat that I literally don’t use. It’s just I’m told that I need to have a flat as a legal position. In what world would it be a good idea for me to waste that much money? Like, I could have spent that on [son].”

(WI13FA)

“I have struggled to find work that I can fit around the kids and the school day.”

(KI12CO)

“ There were a couple of times where I felt, not that I wanted to kill myself, but I felt so low that I didn’t want life to continue. ”

(SR23WO)

“So, three weeks into the month and in theory [...] it was likely I’d have my children for two more weekends. [...] I’ve got 47p with which to feed them. So, you’re on your knees.”

(DU10PA)

“ I am definitely a stress eater [...] I think I put on about ten kilos ”
(KI09BE)

“I still love her like crazy. And it had a huge toll on me when she was gone. [...] I’m just not well, mentally, like, until I see her again.”
(HA11GL)

“I cry when I don’t see her and I get really emotional about it. [...] It’s usually on a Saturday morning when I get up and I know I’m not going to see her for the day. And I’ve got no work to do and I’ve got a day of leisure that Saturdays, I’m very, very vulnerable.”
(WD17SC)

“When I had the boys, I bathed them and I was drying the little one’s hair. [...] And he looked like pretty much asleep on me. And I was just looking at him going: ‘This is the reason to stay alive. [...] This is what I need to fight for.’ And since then, [...] I’ve not had any thoughts at all.”
(SP22WI)

“She left me paying for the mortgage on the house that she was living in and paying all of her bills: gas bills, electric bills, you name it. [...] And she refused to accept that there was anything wrong with that.”
(WI13FA)

“It’s difficult to know what stopped me. [...] But it was, I again was thinking of the children. I kind of thought that [...], for me, it would be easier but for the children, it would be devastating, and what happens is they’ve got to carry that for the rest of their lives. [...] I can’t do this to them.”
(WC14MO)

On children

“Of course, they want to love both of their parents because that’s just natural and normal. You know, ‘I want to love Mum. And I want to love Dad.’ But now you don’t know what’s happening because apparently one of them is terrible, but I don’t think they’re terrible.”

(WC14MO)

“The children knew that it was difficult and [...] that I was managing this. I think my son was probably about six or seven when once he said to me ‘Dad it’s really great you’re here when mummy’s angry because you’re like a shield.’”

(WC14MO)

“I was accused of lying on top of him, which, you know, obviously didn’t happen. [...] Police turned up at his school, and just checked everything was okay. And I think that’s one of the difficulties is, you know, suddenly the children are pulled into this.”

(RU02CA)

5. Fathers struggle to seek help following FBSD, as they face both internal and external barriers to seeking support.

Significant help-seeking barriers exist for fathers experiencing FBSD, both internal and external. Most internal barriers related to either constructions of masculinity which encourage independence and stoicism (Connell, 2020) or negative and dismissive stereotypes about fatherhood (Baldwin et al., 2019), both of which limit men's ability to recognise their a) emotional and mental health needs and b) forms of victimisation (i.e., as a result of DVA or PA).

Indeed, organisations suggested that challenging these stereotypes is probably one of the most important ways to improve the circumstances of men after FBSD and many men also highlighted how things 'needed to change'. Indeed, these were also reflected when organisations and men discussed external barriers, as these stereotypes also affected the commissioning of services to

support men and their ability to reach out to friends and family.

Fathers did still disclose various ways of coping, including both informal and formal support. However, these men routinely reported difficulty in accessing services. Those who were fortunate to benefit from legal, social, or mental health support – either through private healthcare plans from their workplace or from the public healthcare system - claimed they felt huge improvements in their physical and emotional landscapes. When support was not available, this meant that men often chose other forms of coping, including increased alcohol and drug use, bad diets, and smoking. More positively, men also reported 'healthy' coping mechanisms, but these had to be developed and enacted by men themselves, rather than under direction.



Coping

“ If I didn't drink, then I didn't sleep. I was just too wired. So, that became a mechanism. ”
(KI12CO)

“Even to this day, I think eating can, for me, it can be an unhealthy coping mechanism because it's a comfort for me.”
(HH18DU)

“I started smoking for a little while, which was a habit I started during that breakdown period and post-separation and I gave that up.”
(RY05ED)

“So, sort of physical exercise, I would use that time to think about things and try and think things through when I was walking rather than thinking things through during the night and it affecting my sleep.”
(CH09KI)

“Working too much.”
(BE03WI)

Formal Support

“I thought I was going nuts. Completely crazy. So, I took myself to a counsellor and that completely changed. I explained the whole situation and explained everything that had gone on and that benefited me massively.”

(PO219PO)

“There’s just no support out there for dads and for men in particular.”

(KI09BE)

“I kind of went to the bottom of the waitlist and it took a year for me to get a call back from them.”

(KI09BE)

“Work arranged for psychotherapy for me, which was very good. Which I think probably saved me.”

(AR25DU)

“The one thing that that brought to me was the perspective that I’m not the only one going through this. I think I was very much feeling like in the beginning, this is only happening to me. And so, you felt like the world was against you.”

(HH18DU)

“I got in touch with Dads Unlimited. And they, well, the fact that I’m still here and I’m still alive, that’s down to them. But they were incredibly supportive emotionally and mentally as well, they were fab.”

(WD17SC)

“There’s an 18-month NHS waiting list to see a psychologist.”

(LO14AB)

“The other really good thing that I would recommend was Families Need Fathers and I did a Surviving Separation course. That was really helpful.”

(LO16PL)

Informal Support

“At work even. A lot of my colleagues have been very supportive.”
(AS24AI)

“Asking for help has never been my thing.”
(WC14MO)

“It’s strengthened my family bonds, so, particularly my relationship with my mum has been acutely helpful in the situations that I’ve been in. So, I have a lot of family support.”
(SR23WO)

“My sister pointed me in the right direction towards professional support.”
(HH18DU)

“But there’s only so much burden you can put on friends and people who have got their own shit going on.”
(RY05ED)

“Male pride, ey? [...] As a grown man, you don’t really wanna ask for help until maybe it’s a bit too late.”
(GR31TO)

“As a man, you just feel like you’ve got to do it on your own.”
(KI12CO)

“I was embarrassed. I didn’t want to say anything to anybody. Didn’t want to tell anybody where I was living, the way I was being controlled.”
(AR25DU)

“My parents were able to connect me with some more psychologists and psychiatrists that they knew.”
(AS24AI)

“They’ve always sort of helped me out in terms of finance and, God knows where I’d be without them, essentially, because it felt like a tight rope at that point.”
(BE03WI)

6. A holistic, life-course approach is necessary for addressing the issues facing fathers and their children following FBSD.

Due to the comprehensive assessment provided in this report across studies, data types, and populations, a more holistic view of fathers' experiences is now available for the first time. Specifically, by looking at the data provided by fathers and organisations, we can now start to identify common experiences for these men and create a broader experiential picture. Firstly, it is clear that fathers feel at a disadvantage within their intact relationships in relation to fathering, as a result of societal structures and stereotypes which minimise and limit their roles as caregivers.

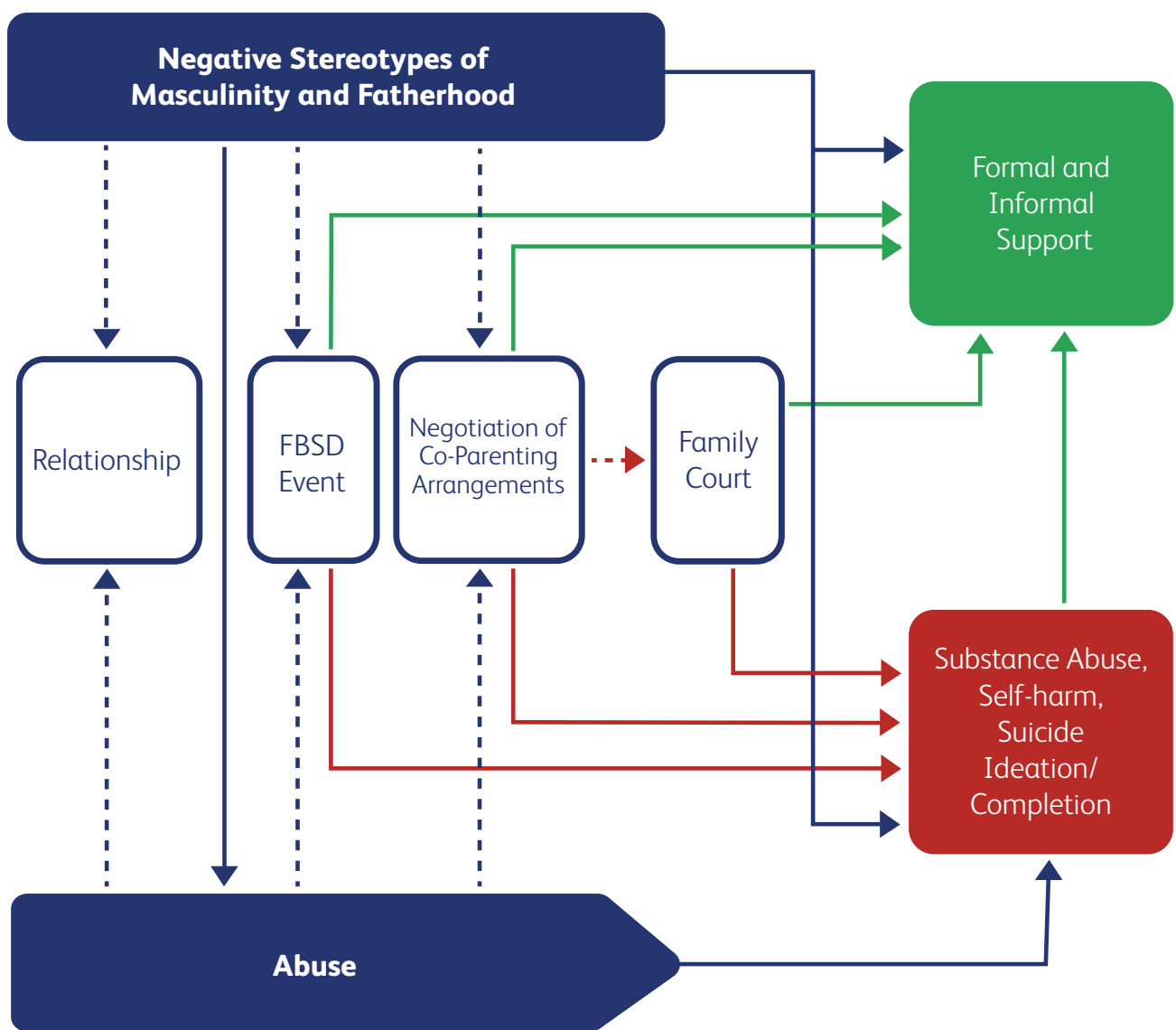
Subsequently, when FBSD occurs, fathers are placed 'on the back foot', as their involvement in children's lives and their contact with them is neither assumed nor legally enshrined (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Hakovirta et al., 2019). Fathers then feel 'forced' to 'fight' for involvement and contact with their children, leading to enmeshment in hugely draining and negatively impactful court processes, with subsequent mental and physical health implications (on top of the 'regular' strain of FBSD as a life event for either parent).

Crucially, when abusive behaviours (including alienation) are involved, all of these experiences are further exaggerated, leading to a 'perfect storm' of negative impact on an extremely vulnerable population. Moreover, the stereotypes that disadvantaged fathers within their intact relationships then influence their experiences at every turn post-FBSD – minimising their postrelationship fatherhood role, their experiences of abusive behaviours, and shaping their extremely negative experiences of court processes. Social support networks and organisations attempt to support these fathers, but this support is limited by the very same stereotypes above, as men are discouraged from seeking support, and support itself is limited due to a lack of recognition and subsequent funding. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of this process, and indications of what we need to decrease (red pathways) and increase (green pathways). Men experiencing FBSD are often left powerless, frustrated, and hopeless. Many of them end up lost – not just circumstantially and emotionally, but sometimes from existence, as they complete suicide.



Figure 1.

A holistic view of father's experiences of FBSD



Reccomendations

1. FBSD 'Triage'

- All studies showed that men are devastated following family breakdown and desperately require support, which is often not readily available, that they do not feel comfortable using, or that is not identified as being needed by men.
- They are left to deal with crushing mental health issues in isolation, which frequently progresses to desperation and suicidal ideation.
- There is therefore an urgent need for immediate intervention and care, for fathers and the family as a whole, following FBSD in the form of 'Triage' services within the community.
- Whether these are specific FBSD centres, part of the new so-called 'family hubs' network¹, or a comprehensive online resource (or all of the above), greater intervention is clearly necessary.

Legal change

“I think that the presumption of shared parenting, a rebuttable one, I think is a no-brainer.”
(DU31LO)

“I think, probably, there's a general consensus that a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting would take the heat out of the overall situation.”
(NE22NE)

“There's actually the debate going on at the moment in England, Wales, that the presumption of shared care should actually be removed from family law. So, it's, we are diametric opposed to a lot of things that are happening within the family justice system at the moment.”
(WA16WE)

“ There needs to be a legal change, that there is a presumption of shared care where safe and appropriate. ”
(WA16WE)

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme-localauthority-guide>

2. Rebuttal Presumption of 50/50 Shared Responsibility

- As shown in Studies 2 and 3, most of the issues following FBSD came from negotiations around co-parenting arrangements.
- This was exacerbated when domestically abusive behaviour was involved from the expartner, including through alienating behaviours, which were hugely mentally distressing to fathers and their children.
- Many fathers and organisations argued that much of this stress (and the opportunities for post-separation abuse) would be greatly reduced if a rebuttal presumption of 50/50 shared co-parenting arrangements² existed in the UK and Ireland.
- This would place mothers and fathers on ‘an equal footing’ following FBSD and lead to fewer distinctions between parents (i.e., who is the ‘resident’ parent) and financial disputes.

Court reform

“So, I think it’s a very, very deep, deep and dirty review of the family court system.”
(BO23YE)

“But the issues that come to us again and again and again about [...] the obstacles to that are the cost of court proceedings or even non-court proceedings where you involve lawyers. The unpredictability [...] which is a terrible breach of confidence and respect in any judicial system. The time it takes and the damage it does to relationships between parents and children [...] during that time and the distress that it causes to everybody. Lost relationships can never be restored. And on the point of costs, when we have people who have also spent well in excess of £100,000. [...] So cost, predictability, time, and distress, if they can all be cut into then it will be to the benefit of the children in those relationships.”
(NE22NE)

“The system is ripe for transformation. And, I think, there’s got to be something that we can do together to have a conversation around how do we improve the family court system to therefore improve outcomes for children and families.”
(DU31LO)

² In common law and civil law, a rebuttable presumption is an assumption made by a court that is taken to be true unless someone proves otherwise.

3. 'Root and Branch' Reform of the Family Court System

- In Studies 2 and 3, opinions of the family court system were overwhelmingly negative.
- This related to several areas, including a lack of ramifications for false allegations, inequality relating to legal aid, and a lack of mediation of a first port of call.
- There is therefore a need for a 'root and branch' reform of the family court system, which addresses the issues outlined above and fundamentally attempts to remove the adversarial and acrimonious positioning of separation wherever possible.

Triage

“Family Hubs are already using ‘single point of contact’ language for family support, so that person could be attached to separation too.”
(BA09LO, Chat Entry)

“There needs to be a national network akin to citizens’ advice bureaus. Let’s call them divorce centres or something like that, where people can refer themselves rather than running to a lawyer.”
(WA16WE)

“Somebody mentioned having a single point of contact. [...] I think it’s a great idea. An improved triage system [...] something better needs to be done about how people are directed towards services. [...] I think that includes measuring emotional readiness and finding out what people are able to engage with. [...]”
(BA09LO)

4. Increased and Reshaped Societal Recognition

- In Studies 2 and 3, fathers and organisations reported that men are chronically overlooked, not just in relation to FBSD, but accompanying experiences such as domestic abuse and parental alienation.
- They are also overlooked in relation to mental health and service needs, and both by informal and formal support networks.
- One reason for this are negative masculine stereotypes and the belief that men ‘can handle things on their own’, as well as negative stereotypes about fatherhood, which devalue the role of fathers in children’s lives.
- Increasing recognition of men as valuable parental figures in children’s lives and as potential victims of abuse and alienation would prove both directly impactful in men’s lives and aid in the commissioning and delivery of effective services.

Recognition

Finally, participants felt that there was also a more fundamental societal change that needed to occur – greater recognition of the importance and value of fathers:

“This is really difficult to do, but I think everything we’ve been talking about is, kind of, symptoms of an underlying problem, which is the kind of cultural attitudes that we mentioned before. [...] On the wish list, you’d have some sort of a campaign of awareness or just a means of publicising the benefit of fathers as parents. Because I think all of the problems that we’re encountering, sort of, stem from the fact that they’re undervalued and undervalue themselves. [...] How you do that, I don’t know. But it does feel like there’s a cultural change needed behind all of this. ”
(GA19LO)

Conclusion

This project has not only provided a comprehensive and holistic assessment of fathers' extremely negative experiences following FBSD, but it has also outlined several clear recommendations as to how to improve these experiences.

Based on the evidence put forward in this report, it is not hyperbolic to say that without serious and far-reaching reform, both societally and institutionally, we will continue to lose many, many more men to suicide.

We will also continue to deprive thousands of children of loving, 'good enough' parents, to their extreme detriment.

It is therefore now up to us all, including policymakers, politicians, and service providers, to commit to a 'new fatherhood'; one which values the role of fathers from the moment they become them, to when things break down and beyond.

There can be no equivocation; we must act, now.





Read the full report at uwl.ac.uk/lostdads



The University of
West London
St Mary's Road
Ealing
London W5 5RF

The University
of West London
Boston Manor Road
Brentford
Middlesex TW8 9GA

The University of
West London
Fountain House
2 Queens Walk
Reading RG1 7QF

Drama Studio London
Grange Court
1 Grange Road
Ealing
London W5 5QN

Ruskin College
Ruskin Hall
Dunstan Road
Old Headington
Oxford OX3 9BZ