The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 13 March 2014

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
5th Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Michelle Campbell (Fife Gingerbread)
David Drysdale (Fathers Network Scotland)
Robert Hall (Familyman Playgroup)
Ewan Jeffrey (Gay Dads Scotland)
Thomas Lynch (Dads Rock)
Neil McIntosh (One Parent Families Scotland)
Clare Simpson (Parenting across Scotland)
Kenny Spence (Edinburgh Lone Fathers Project)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 13 March 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Margaret McCulloch): Welcome to the fifth meeting in 2014 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Please set any electronic devices to flight mode or switch them off.

Today's first agenda item is a decision on taking business in private. The committee is asked to agree to take item 3, on our inquiry into having and keeping a home, in private, at this and future meetings. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Fathers and Parenting

09:31

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence-taking session on our fathers and parenting inquiry. We will start with some introductions. At the table are our clerking and research team, the official reporters and broadcasting staff. We are also supported around the room by the security office.

My name is Margaret McCulloch, and I am the committee's convener. I invite members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn.

Robert Hall (Familyman Playgroup): I am chairman of the familyman playgroup in Hamilton, and I have a 15-month-old daughter.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston, and I have no children.

Neil McIntosh (One Parent Families Scotland): I am from One Parent Families Scotland. I look after our children and lone-parent fathers services.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

Michelle Campbell (Fife Gingerbread): I am a volunteer development co-ordinator for Fife Gingerbread.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am a member of the committee, representing North East Scotland.

David Drysdale (Fathers Network Scotland): I am national development manager for Fathers Network Scotland.

Kenny Spence (Edinburgh Lone Fathers Project): I am the joint manager of the Edinburgh lone fathers club. I also manage the men in childcare project and Gilmerton child and family centre.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and deputy convener of the committee. I do not have children either, but I do have a father.

Thomas Lynch (Dads Rock): I am from Dads Rock, and I do have a child—I saw him this morning.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Madainn mhath. I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Clare Simpson (Parenting across Scotland): I am from parenting across Scotland, which is a partnership of nine charities: the Aberlour Child Care Trust, Capability Scotland, Children in Scotland, Families Outside, Children 1st, One

Parent Families Scotland, Relationships Scotland, Scottish Adoption and the Spark.

Ewan Jeffrey (Gay Dads Scotland): I am from Gay Dads Scotland, and I have an adopted 27-year-old son.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I am a member of the Scottish Parliament for North East Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you all very much. Last week, fathers came along and gave us their experience of bringing up their children. Committee members will be asking you questions.

My first question is whether your support groups are aimed at fathers and parents with infants as well as those with older children. Do your groups offer support for new parents, too?

I should add that, if anyone wants to ask a question, they should indicate to me or the clerk, and we will add you to the list.

Thomas Lynch: When we started the Dads Rock playgroup, we were just looking for somewhere to take our kids, who were toddlers. It is a pre-school playgroup, and we have kids from age zero up to the age of five or just about six. We like to say that our playgroups are a broad church for any dad or male carer to come with their kids. It is important to have that mix.

Because of the success that we have had and how our groups have grown, we keep talking about splitting the groups and segregating different ages of kids, because so many people are coming, but perhaps we would lose something by doing that. Some dads come with very young babies. Those dads are coming for themselves. There is very little that babies will do in a playgroup, but the dads want to come and be with other dads.

Kenny Spence: We have parents with babies as young as six weeks, with children of all ages up to five and with older siblings. We have also done some work with the health visitors who work with dads before the birth of their child. There is not an awful lot out there to support dads pre-birth, so we have done some work with the health visitors on that. There is a mixture of younger and older children in the group. The main prerequisite for membership of the group is a child of three years or under, as our funding was initially surestart funding.

Neil McIntosh: Our groups work with lone-parent and contact fathers, and they can have children of any age although they are usually of school age. Fathers gain a lot of peer support from one another during group work, and fathers with younger children sometimes gain a lot from the experience of fathers who have older children.

The Convener: That is excellent.

Michelle Campbell: Fife Gingerbread has several projects that support lone-parent mothers, lone-parent fathers and lone-parent kinship carers. The teen parent project provides support to teen parents aged between 16 and 19. It encourages both females and males to attend mellow baby classes and parenting programme classes, and it is well attended by lone fathers who are actively involved in baby massage, learning about baby weaning and developing healthy eating. We also have the gateway project for families, which provides family learning and addresses family issues in the community. It works with lone dads and lone mothers, or with both dads and mothers together, and the family learning aspect helps parents to become involved in their children's lives through education.

The Convener: How do people find out about your organisation?

Michelle Campbell: Ours is a charitable organisation and the referrals come through self-referral as well as through social work, health and housing. It is publicly advertised through the website, flyers, the media and schools.

The Convener: That is great.

Robert Hall: Like Thomas Lynch's project, our group was set up primarily to allow dads to spend quality time with their children. That is why I started going to the group. I then took it over when the gentleman who started it left, and it has turned into a network of support as well. I am a new father of 15 months and I find it useful to have other dads there who have older children. I can speak to them about how they deal with certain issues and about what is normal. A lot of the dads who have babies are helped in that way. The youngest baby was three months old when their dad started to come to the group, and with a baby of that age it is less about the playgroup side of things than about coming along for the contact, getting the chance to speak to other dads about what it is all about and picking up handy hints and tips. That is very useful.

The Convener: That is excellent. Alex Johnstone will begin our questions.

Alex Johnstone: Last week, we had a number of men here to talk about their experience. They talked about early years provision and there was a suggestion that, although antenatal classes are often aimed at both parents, much of the postnatal support is mother centred. Do the organisations that you represent take a more balanced approach? Do you think that there is a problem with the support for young children being mother centred?

Thomas Lynch: There are some great services in Scotland. The dads-to-be resource that was developed by some of the people who are sitting round this table is an antenatal course for dads, and I do not understand why it is not being offered throughout Scotland. There is a little pocket in West Lothian where somebody from the national health service has been delivering the course for 10 years. I went to it, and it is an amazing course that involves a mix of dads from all walks of life. Why is it not available across the whole NHS?

I went to antenatal classes because I wanted to be an active, involved dad, but the provision is crap—it is really rubbish and embarrassing. I have spoken to dads who have been asked to leave antenatal groups because of the embarrassment for the mothers and because it was perhaps not appropriate for them to hear some stuff. It seems that there is a secret in the NHS that it does not want to be honest about childbirth or to tell people about the trauma that could come from it; rather, it wants to tell people only all the nice stuff and show a video from the 1970s. There are some great services, but some stuff needs to be thrown out and started again.

I definitely think that services are mummy-centric. We need to be careful about how we rebalance them, but we need to start by saying, "Let's try to get the dads seen." As a new dad, I felt invisible; I felt that nobody spoke to me. I looked for young dads in Edinburgh, and I asked the NHS where I could find young dads and the ages of dads when their kids were born. The NHS said that it did not record the ages of fathers when kids were born, but it recorded the ages of mothers. I said to it, "Okay. So how no? When will you change that?" It has never replied.

The NHS is a juggernaut, and changing that will be really difficult. However, you guys need to influence that. Indeed, we all need to influence that, because we want society to be better. That is why we are here. There is an absolute reason why mums have been focused on and so much energy has been given towards them, but it is now time to redress that balance slightly.

Alex Johnstone: Do you think that the NHS simply feels that it is not its job to support fathers in that position?

Thomas Lynch: Sometimes. I sometimes think that the NHS does not care about certain pockets of society. I took time off work and went to all the antenatal classes. Other dads were at those classes, but a whole raft of parents were not at them. I think that the NHS wrote something 20 or 30 years ago and never really bothered. With the best will in the world, I think that the midwives and health visitors all mean well and have a great attitude, but there are simply not enough of them.

When I went to the classes, I was in a group of eight. I understand that, in Edinburgh currently, parents are generally in a group of 20 or 30 in a room. That is not a class; it is a lecture.

I just do not understand why, in such a small country, we have so many inconsistencies in the delivery of the service. To me, antenatal and postnatal services are not rocket science. I used to be a volunteer counsellor at a postnatal depression service in Edinburgh, and I used to get all the dads. When a man who was suffering from postnatal depression came in, he would be sent to me, because I am a man. What dads feel is underreported. I remember being a new dad and feeling quite stressed and anxious; I would not say that I was depressed, but I definitely did not know where to go or whom to speak to. I then found David Drysdale from Fathers Network Scotland, which helped.

We have a long way to go.

Neil McIntosh: I agree with Thomas Lynch. In our experience, the fathers to whom we spoke before we wrote our submission told us that the early years services were inconsistent across the country. In some areas, there is really good practice that fathers value, and they would like that to be available to other fathers.

Another issue is that not a lot of men work in the early years services. The fathers to whom we spoke said that they would like us to encourage and promote more men working in those services.

Clare Simpson: There are a couple of points, one of which is that there is a perception that parenting is a mother's job. That is very much reinforced by our system of parental leave in this country. Women are entitled to far greater parental leave, and men do not get paid parental leave. Men are generally much more active in their children's lives and are able to be so, and active in the early years and the early years services.

I draw members' attention to the additional evidence that was submitted by Gary Clapton of Fathers Network Scotland, on the father proofing of materials, as I think that the portrayal of who is a family is a consistent problem. Generally speaking, that is mother and one or two children or whatever.

There is one thing that the committee could proactively do, and I hope that it will. Just the other day, I sent a letter to the Scottish Government about the childcare provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. In April, the Scottish Government will run an information campaign about those provisions. I would really like to see the campaign portraying not just mothers dropping children off at the school gate, but a more varied picture of family life that puts forward the idea that childcare is not just women's responsibility but a

whole-family responsibility and that lots of men drop their children off at school.

09:45

As Neil McIntosh said, a lot of the people who work in early years are women, which is often quite difficult for men coming into that area. Parenting across Scotland has a website that provides information for parents. After a bit of research, we found out that fathers thought that there was relatively little information for men. The website was not particularly marketed for men. However, we subsequently put information for dads on the website. I know that not all men like football—I would be stereotyping to suggest that they do—but we ran a marketing campaign that included advertising in football programmes. We said that our website included information for fathers and our monitoring showed a large rise in visits to that part of the website.

There are probably more things that could be done to reach more men; for example, we could think about the places that they go to and portray men as an integral part of the family. That would enhance their involvement.

David Drysdale: I will give a little perspective on all this, because I think that there are many examples. At last week's meeting, I imagine that the committee heard examples of worst practice. I believe that there is something in our culture and society that is against men. It is unconscious, but there is evidence of it. In Fathers Network Scotland we have worked with a number of antenatal agencies, including NHS Lothian, the National Childbirth Trust and other national health service antenatal practitioners. We worked on the dads-to-be pack.

Kenny Spence and I worked on the NHS Health Scotland "Ready Steady Baby!" pack, which goes out to anyone who is pregnant, and it speaks only to women, although it mentions that they might have a partner. It has a couple of clauses that say that if you are a dad—the partner—this is what you could be doing, but generally it is talking to women. All the imagery is about women. However, what I want to offer, rather than picking out and naming, shaming and blaming people across the board, is that if we can get antenatal right, as Thomas Lynch said, we can engage fathers at the very beginning. Too often, fathers think that antenatal services are not for them, that they are not meant to be involved and that they are a spare part. Lots of negative messages come up through the imagery and language that is used around the services.

Again, I direct anyone who has not looked at it to the "Where's Dad? Father-Proofing Your Work" paper by Gary Clapton, which is a wake-up call about how we talk about the whole family and children. I believe that we want to be the best country to grow up in and that we want to get it right for every child. We know that fathers are an important part of a child's life, so when we are systematically excluding them, we are not getting it right for every child.

Robert Hall: Three of our dads were here last week giving evidence. Certainly, they and more of the dads in our group felt excluded from the process of antenatal and postnatal care. Having been through that myself, I feel the same as they do about it.

Lots of things can be done to make the process better in that regard. For me, the process was very much about, "Stand in the corner. Don't say anything, don't move, don't touch anything and it'll all be fine." That is great and perhaps some dads are happy with that, but others want to be involved in the care of their children and with every aspect of the process. It is difficult for someone to be told that they cannot attend workshops for postnatal care because that might upset mums. It reduces their ability to assist in the whole process of supporting their wife or partner.

Breastfeeding was horrendous for me because I knew nothing about it. I was not allowed to go to the workshop or attend a support group. I could not go to any of that sort of stuff and I am in the unique position of working for the health board in which my child was born. I still cannot get access to that sort of information. Even the information that we got in the hospital—the booklet that you get when your baby is first born—had only a short paragraph about dads and then everything else was to do with ladies.

Right from the get go, dads get the feeling not that they are less valued but that they do not count much. It is then difficult for dads who want to be involved, because they wonder why they should but they want to. They keep pushing at it, but it does not seem to make any difference. That is frustrating for many dads. What comes out of my group is a great frustration about the whole process. We feel undervalued. We are not trying to replace mums in any way, shape or form but we want to provide the best support that we can for our children and partners or wives, whatever that happens to be. That is stressful in its own right.

The Convener: It sounds as if you are on the outside looking in.

Robert Hall: Absolutely. We are just not involved in that part of the care at all when we really want to be. I am very hands-on and lucky that the NHS has allowed me to work compressed hours so that I can get a whole day on Wednesday with my baby to take her swimming and do other things with her. I am proactive in that way and

want to do it. However, that is not the message that comes out of the care. As Thomas Lynch said, it is more to do with the fact that more staff are needed—I understand that because I work in that area—but they need to engage with dads because they are part of the support mechanism.

Kenny Spence: We are at a fortunate time in our understanding of babies' development. We now know that 80 per cent of the brain is developed before a child is four years old. Therefore, many of the things that they need to learn happen before then. If we think that it is early enough for a father to become involved at six months or a year, that is six months or a year too late. We know that the first few months are absolutely crucial.

All sorts of research has been done about fathers bonding with the children as well as the mothers do. We should promote that, because we now know that the more adults who talk to a small child, the better the child's speech and language will develop. If the mother and father both talk to the child, the child's language will increase exponentially in comparison to what happens if only one of them does. The parents do not necessarily have to live together, but being involved is important. If the dad is involved for the first three years of the child's life, he is likely to stay involved all the way through. We need to promote that.

The less input that children have in the early period of their lives, the more likely they are to fall behind. A lot of work that has been done on postnatal depression shows that, if a child's parent is postnatally depressed, another adult that is not postnatally depressed being around the child can increase the child's chances of smiling and responding completely naturally. The University of Edinburgh has done a lot of research on that.

The earlier that we can get dads involved—from pre-birth ideally, but certainly postnatally—the better. Part of the difficulty in some ways is that we set up the early years collaborative and got 700 people together from throughout Scotland but the stretch aims were initially based on maternal health and maternal outcomes. It took quite a bit of lobbying to say that it is about both parents. Even our starting point for doing better in the early years was based on the premise that we have been talking about, which is that fathers are not necessarily involved or included.

Father proofing and everything else that we have been talking about must be a priority for us because, if we do not mention men and fathers specifically, they will not be included. That is one of the fundamental things that we need to get right. We also need to have a conversation with the NHS and say that the postnatal services must be for both parents because that is in the child's interests. It is not necessarily about being in the dad's interests. It is in the child's interests that we get it right.

The Convener: As you were talking, I was thinking about when I was having my children. Fathers were very much excluded. I suffered from postnatal depression and it would have been helpful if my husband had understood exactly what I was going through and could have helped. It would be much more helpful to mothers who are going through postnatal depression if the fathers were included and knew exactly what the journey was like for the mother from the start. That is really important.

Thomas Lynch: Oddly enough, I agree with everything that people have said. From speaking to our parents, I find that all that they want is a wee bit of support. They do not want charity or the nanny state; they just want a bit of support and a bit of a hand.

We have a huge opportunity to do something and to make a change. We are continually on the cusp of being a bit brave—let us just do it. I am convinced that we can find the money if we really want to. I know that some parties have stolen the words "transformation" or "revolution", but whatever word we want to use, it could happen. If we did that, we would send a direct message.

We just need to produce some positive images of fatherhood, which is what we try to do at Dads Rock. We use any opportunity to show a dad having a laugh or rocking out with their kid, because we need to get rid of the image of a family being a mum and kids. I understand why we have ended up like that, but we now have a great opportunity to do something about it.

David Drysdale: I echo what has been said. The issue is not about fathers' rights or about the situation not being fair; it is about the health of our children, families and communities. I believe that that is the crucial thing. If we are really concerned about doing the best that we can for children and families, we have to start taking note of this stuff.

Alex Johnstone: Before we leave the subject and move to another line of questioning, I want to reflect on two aspects of what we heard last week. We heard that one thing that excludes men from the lives of their children in the early years is availability—in some circumstances, men are not welcome—and that there is also the issue of take-up in that, unfortunately, many men choose not to become involved. We also heard that many men who take young children to classes where predominantly women take their children feel socially excluded from those groups. Will you comment on that experience?

The Convener: There are hands up everywhere, but David Drysdale was first.

David Drysdale: Yesterday, I heard a great story from a dad who had come from Fife with his partner and daughter. He told me that he had gone to a parent and toddler group and had been refused entry because he was a man, so he had to take his daughter to the park to play.

Robert Hall: The guys who were at the committee last week had issues with that. Before I went to my current group, I went to two parent and toddler groups. In the first, I was not spoken to by anyone at all for the whole period I was there and, in the other, I had 24 mothers trying to do everything for me. Neither was particularly helpful, although the second group was certainly a lot friendlier. People even offered to change my baby's nappy and I had to say that it was fine, because I did it in the house and elsewhere.

It is difficult and there seem to be two extremes. Some people are really friendly and desperate to do everything for you, which is not what I want; I just want to spend time with my daughter and if she needs changed or fed, I will change and feed her. I do not need somebody else to do that for me. I would maybe employ a nanny if I could afford one. At the first group, nobody came and said hello or spoke to me for literally an hour and a half. They did not make me feel welcome at all.

It is certainly an issue and a problem, which is why, now that I run a group, I try to ensure that it is as friendly as possible. When somebody new arrives, I welcome them personally and say that they should feel free to mingle with the other dads and have a chat to see who is who and what they are doing. I actively encourage engagement with other dads, because that is the whole point of having a dads group.

Alex Johnstone: Maybe the test will be when a mother turns up.

Robert Hall: It is a dads-only group, but when, as occasionally happens, a mum comes along, she is made more than welcome, because that is how it works. A lot of the people who come to run our play and craft activities are ladies and they are also made more than welcome. We will make them coffee and give them biscuits—we will feed anybody; we are guys, so that is how it works. Inclusivity is the key. If you go somewhere and you do not feel welcome, you just will not go back.

10:00

The Convener: That is true.

Kenny Spence: As well as managing the dads club, I manage the men in childcare project, in which we try to get men working in early years. Initially, it was quite difficult. We decided to put the guys into a full-time course at college, but only one of the six stayed, so we decided to set up men-only courses. We have now had about 2,000 guys attending some training either to work in childcare or to learn about better parenting and understand child development. Guys are interested. If you put something out there that they can attend, they will be interested in it.

I do not know the best way to target postnatal groups. I think that we have discovered that the way to target parent and toddler groups is to make them dads-only groups. Similarly, the dads club is a dads group and men will come to it to be around men. I think that that is the way to work it. I do not know how to tackle postnatal support—I guess that that is the next nut to crack.

Guys are certainly interested and have come to the courses. Every time we put advertisements in the paper, they phone up and say that they would like to attend the training. There is a level of interest out there. The issue is how we do the next bit, which is the postnatal and prenatal stuff.

The Convener: That is excellent.

Thomas Lynch: This always reminds me of the sketch in "The Two Ronnies", which I think was called "The Worm that Turned", where the world was flipped upside down: the women were these very dominant beings and the men wore dresses and had to be very cap in hand. That is kind of where we are. We are hearing that dads find it funny to go into a group full of women. I do not think that it is just dads who find it funny; I have spoken to mums who find going to playgroups intimidating. That is just how people are. Unfortunately, people are sometimes a bit cliquey and separatist, because they do not want to be too friendly. My wife had that experience when she went to playgroups.

We set up Dads Rock because we had had the same experience. We wanted something that would be fun, positive and friendly. It is interesting that when, as Robert Hall mentioned, we get women coming to speak to the dads or to do craft stuff, a lot of them say that it is quite intimidating to be surrounded by all these men, with all the kids in the room. There is just a different energy.

I love the fact that at my son's nursery there was a male nursery worker and that my son's first schoolteacher is male. You can ask, "What's the difference? What difference does it make if it is a man or a woman?" It is a really hard thing to put your finger on. There is just a different energy in the room. You expect there to be the same balance that we have in society. We have a mix of men and women in society, so why are only 2 per cent of the early years workforce men?

Kenny Spence's initiative is amazing. The more money we can throw at programmes like that and the more we can do to build that kind of

confidence and resilience, the better, because it is a good thing to do.

Michelle Campbell: The teen parenting project that covers Fife works predominantly with teen mothers, and it has been a real challenge getting teen dads involved. It is all to do with sheer intimidation; the teen dads feel that they will be judged. We have had to work really hard to include dads by creating activities such as football clubs or dads-only groups. In Buckhaven, for example, there is the Fife Dad Rocks group. Given the vulnerable group that we work with, this has proven to be a challenge, and we just have to keep working smarter and harder to try to integrate dads with, for example, the antenatal classes.

David Drysdale: After reading Gary Clapton's paper, "Where's Dad?", I have been intrigued as to why fathers are systematically not in the picture in the language and the images that are used. My personal take on this is that in our culture we believe that men exist on a spectrum from useless at best to, at worst, violent or abusive—in other words, a risk.

For me, that explains a lot. People do not want to engage with dads because they are seen as a potential risk. It is such a one-dimensional view of men. That attitude is what underpins the issue, and it exists not only in the culture of organisations but in the hearts and minds of everyone, including dads. I can give you a couple of examples to illustrate that.

Last year, I was walking in the park with my family and my son. A little girl fell off her scooter when she was going downhill and started crying. Her mother was about 100 yards further down the hill, but the girl happened to fall right beside a young man. He looked towards the mother and started to step back. Why on earth would he not go and pick up the child? I believe that it was because he did not want to be seen as a potential risk to that girl—you know, to have people saying, "What are you doing touching that girl?" Many men have told me that they have been told, "Please don't come near my children" or, "What are you doing in a nursery?"

Kenny Spence might be able to give you more detail on the other example, which concerns a young man who had brought up two children on his own and was wonderful with them. He was unemployed and, when they started school, he wanted to get a job. It was suggested that, because he was so good with his kids, he should sign up with the men in childcare project. He was thrilled at the prospect, because he had loved bringing up his own kids and knew that he would be good at it. However, the next time the person who had made the suggestion saw the man and asked him how it was going, the man said, "I'm not going to do it." It turned out that he had been down the pub with his mates, and they had started calling him a "paedo".

This stuff is inside us. It is not the fault of the NHS or anyone else; it is in our culture. Having more positive examples is important, and we should take an approach in which men are seen as assets to the family rather than as risks. Let us start looking at men and fathers as an asset to mothers who are going through postnatal depression; as part of the family; and as a resource.

Neil McIntosh: Going back to Alex Johnstone's point about the different types of services for mothers and fathers, I point out that One Parent Families Scotland has been running services for lone-parent fathers for 12 years. When we evaluated our early years early action project in 2012, we found that fathers felt that the peer-support groups that we offer men and their children was the most successful factor, and that it improved outcomes for the children of those lone-parent fathers. In preparing for today's meeting, we contacted those fathers, who said that there should be more services of that nature across Scotland. At the moment, we operate only in Edinburgh, Dundee, Falkirk and North Lanarkshire. I am aware that other services, such as Dads Rock, operate in various places, but the services that are available for fathers, especially lone fathers, are sporadic.

The Convener: How do you contact and reach out to the lone fathers?

Neil McIntosh: We operate in a similar way to Fife Gingerbread, in that we get referrals from social work, health and education. Our outreach service is also proactive, and we go to the places where dads are and speak to them. We have knocked on doors to tell people about our services, and we will go to football grounds and other places where there are groups of men.

The Convener: What response do you get from men when you chap on their doors or go up to them at football grounds?

Neil McIntosh: When we are out and about, we wear clothing that identifies us as part of the group. If people know that, it is okay. Sometimes, however, we can be viewed with suspicion, because some fathers assume that we are social workers, and we have to explain that we are a different service that is here to support them and to introduce them to other fathers and their children.

The Convener: When you get past that barrier and tell them about your service, how do they respond?

Neil McIntosh: Normally, our children-and-fathers worker, who is male, meets them one to

one and finds out what the issues in the family are and what kind of problems the child is facing. They then put together an action plan using the safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included—or SHANARRI—indicators from the getting it right for every child model to conduct a baseline assessment of the family and the support that it needs.

After that one-to-one work with the father, we introduce him into our groups with other fathers and their children. They normally take place on a Saturday, when we go out and undertake some low-cost, sustainable, healthy, learning-type activity with a group of, say, eight or nine fathers and their children.

They might then move on to a specific parenting programme that we run. One such programme called mellow dads, which we run in Falkirk in partnership with Mellow Parenting, is already proving to be quite successful; in fact, seven fathers have just signed up to take part in it.

The Convener: Thank you—that is excellent. We move on to healthcare and education.

John Mason: The discussion has been fascinating so far. It has been quite general, and we have concentrated on the early years. I want to think about schools. The NHS has been mentioned already so perhaps we can come back to that later.

It has been suggested that it is difficult for fathers to engage with schools, especially if the parents are not living together, as the school will almost inevitably refer to the mother even though there is legal provision in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and so on that suggests that both parents should be involved. Is that the case in your experience? Is that what people are finding?

If it is particularly appropriate for your organisation, are you already engaging in trying to change schools? What should we be doing in that area? I take the point that has been made that, if we start at the antenatal stage, everything will work through gradually, but I think that we also need to tackle the middle of the system.

Kenny Spence: One of the difficulties that we have in Scotland is that 40 per cent of primary schools have no males in them at all. There are 129 schools in Fife, and 109 of them have no men or only one man.

I did some research with the universities to find out whether there is a problem with mentoring for teacher training and whether not enough men are applying. I found out that in Strathclyde, for example, more men are applying but fewer have been getting in during the past four years. Men are applying to get into teaching, but we have not done the same thing with teaching as we have with early years. We need more men in teaching.

It is already hard enough. When my daughter was at school, the engagement that I had with the school was one evening a year, or one evening per term, depending on the school, when I was invited in to hear how she was doing. Other than that, there was not an awful lot of contact. Schools are not necessarily the most open of places for either parent, but an estranged dad often does not get the information.

John Mason is right, however, that there is a legal responsibility. When Families Need Fathers did a poll, it found that a lot of schools were still not fulfilling their legal responsibilities. There is still a problem.

There is also a problem for society in the fact that there are not enough men in schools anyway. If a little girl was brought home from hospital and she just had her dad and her dad's friends, if when she went to nursery it was all men, and if when she went to primary school it was all men, what kind of a little girl would she grow up to be? Yet we think that that is okay for our little boys. That is an indictment of us, and we should be addressing it.

John Mason: Has the problem got worse over the past 40 or 50 years, not just in the past few years, or has it always been the case that primary school teachers were mainly women?

Kenny Spence: No, it is definitely getting worse. The problem is increasing, as is the percentage of schools that have no men.

It is often argued that, if men come in, they will go into promoted posts. I do not know whether that is a spurious argument but, in any case, to have no male teachers so that there are not male headteachers is not a very good argument. The universities have some responsibility in the first instance to recruit more males to their teacher training courses, and the schools have a responsibility, if they have no men, at least to start to get some.

10:15

John Mason: When I was a councillor, I did a lot of interviewing for headteachers for primary schools. We were so desperate to get men that sometimes we would try to guarantee that one out of six of those interviewed was a guy, but very often we could not do it because they either were not applying or were not appropriate.

Michelle Campbell: We have experienced issues in education with, in particular, lone dads when issues in the household are affecting the children's wellbeing and schooling. Dads find it very difficult to approach schools, because they are predominantly staffed by females and it is

extremely challenging for them to bare their vulnerabilities to females. They often come to our organisation when the crisis is extreme.

One father who I supported is a lone dad of two boys. He had to relocate from Edinburgh to Cupar, which is in a rural area in Fife. He did not know the area. One child was entered into a primary school and another child was moving up into primary 1. Given that the school did not know the situation and the dad felt reluctant to speak to the teachers about it, the education authority allocated a place at another primary school to the youngest child, so the boys were separated.

The dad was also trying to work, which creates huge stresses for a lone dad in a rural area that has a lack of services. He tried to speak to the education authority, but his words fell on deaf ears. It was only when he came to Fife Gingerbread that we spoke to the head of education. To have the young boy placed in a primary school with his brother, the dad literally had to give his full story and explain why he was a lone parent and why he had no additional support and networks in the area. I think that, if there were more male role models through schools employing more male teachers, dads would be more open to discussing their issues, particularly issues about vulnerability.

Ewan Jeffrey: A common topic of discussion at our groups is that, when someone's child is at school, two things happen. First, if an issue arises, the school always phones mum first, regardless of what is in the note. Secondly, not all of our members are separated, but for those who are when parent-teacher evenings are held it is sometimes quite difficult for them to get a separate parent-teacher session if mum says, "You're not to speak to dad." Mums are either given that right or the school says, "We'll have to check with mum first whether we're allowed to speak to you." That is not a gay issue; it is a parenting issue.

Some schools tend to give a default, unthinking emphasis to the mother's position and—although, as far as I am aware, it is against the law—accept a veto from the mother about speaking to the father. Although not a lot of our outcomes are unhappy ones, in the small minority of cases that they are it is another devastating aspect of the marital breakdown. That applies to straight couples as well as to couples in which the father is gay. Schools are not as sympathetic as they need to be to the position of separated or divorced fathers.

I do not know whether you will come on to this, but there is an issue that affects gay fathers in relation to homophobic bullying in schools. I mark that as a possible discussion topic for later.

The Convener: Okay, we will bring that up later.

David Drysdale: There are many answers, and many places to start. Systemically, men are often not engaged with schools, especially if the parents have split up, because children are seen as women's business. We have heard many such stories, and Children in Scotland and Families Need Fathers Scotland are currently working in that specific area.

Kibble Education and Care Centre runs a school in Paisley for around 1,000 boys. The centre looked at its staff and found that approximately 80 per cent were women, and thought, "Hang on—what these troubled boys need more than anything else are good male role models." Kibble ran a big campaign over several years to recruit men from traditional industries to the childcare sector. It took a great effort, but the results were great.

Suddenly, Kibble was recruiting men who had not been thinking about such a profession for the reasons that have been mentioned—notions such as, "What are you doing as a man around children? There must be something dodgy about that." Kibble gave men permission, in a sense, to examine those ideas and inquire about alternative careers. We need to start giving men permission to get into those places, because they are needed.

The Convener: We will go back to Ewan Jeffrey—I have a question first, and then you can speak about the issue of bullying, which you wanted to raise.

Are there extra challenges for gay couples who want to adopt a child or who have a child through surrogacy? Are barriers and obstacles put in their way?

Ewan Jeffrey: I am not well qualified to answer that question, because the majority of the men whom we support have been in traditional marriages for 10, 20 or 30 years, having entered into them at a time when societal attitudes were completely different.

Some couples in our group have subsequently got married, so in those families there are two gay dads who originally had children by female spouses. The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, which permitted gay adoption rather than just adoption by one person who may happen to be gay, is quite a recent piece of legislation, so there is not a great population of gay adoptive parents.

There is a small population in Scotland of people who have adopted through surrogacy, often abroad. I know one couple who have a daughter who is just about to go to university whom they adopted through surrogacy.

Issues affecting gay adoptive parents are still early in the evolutionary process, so there is only so much that our group can do. I get quite a lot of

inquiries from people who are considering adoption or saying that they have just adopted, and I refer them to our contacts at the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, who I was in contact with during the passage of the 2007 act.

I cannot answer the question authoritatively.

The Convener: Do you want to talk about the other issue that you wanted to raise?

Ewan Jeffrey: There are two big issues. There is the big issue of general homophobic bullying in schools, but because we are discussing parenting it is more appropriate for me to focus on children who are bullied at school primarily because one of their parents is gay.

An unacceptably large amount of homophobic bullying takes place in schools. Equality organisations, such as Stonewall, are running general campaigns against that. Our experience as a parenting group is that it is quite common that, once the word is out that a dad is gay, their child is bullied or an attempt is made to bully them. We counsel fathers that bullying is, unfortunately, a part of school life but that a bully will pick on any difference, so that is not a reason not to come out to your children. For example, the bully might pick on your child because they have red hair or the wrong trainers in much the same way as they might bully a child because their father is gay.

The reaction of schools to such bullying is important. We have had reports of both excellent and fairly pathetic mealy-mouthed interventions. In excellent interventions, the matter is dealt with straight away and sometimes an incident is raised at school assemblies but without naming the individuals involved. In other cases, the response is simply, "What would you expect?"

John Finnie: Ewan, your written evidence talks about societal change affecting the profile of your members. Traditionally, there has been, if you like, a hiding of the situation. As a result, will the adoption of a more liberal approach be delayed? I know that that is sometimes seen as an offensive term. I suppose what I am saying is the fact that the problem was hidden in the past creates a problem that in turn must be addressed.

Ewan Jeffrey: It is a bit like saying, "Wait for the bigots to die." An enormous and very welcome societal change is taking place. We counsel dads who come to us that society is not the same as it was when they were young. For example, they think that their children will be bullied automatically or will not accept that their parent is gay because they are carrying in them the old homophobia, but young people do not carry the same degree of—or any—homophobia. Does that answer your question?

John Finnie: It does. Thank you very much.

Marco Biagi: I want to move away from the Gay Dads Scotland perspective and open up the discussion to others. Ewan Jeffrey's contribution referred to the playground experience. Have other dads had any playground repercussions from, for example, picking up their child after school? Are there any equivalent experiences?

Thomas Lynch: My mum says that I am retired, but in fact I have taken redundancy from a large banking corporation. Therefore, I am doing more of the drop off at and pick up from school duties. My experience is similar to that alluded to by Clare Simpson in that the whole family is involved in dropping off the kids, including granddad, auntie and a whole mix of other people. It is not uncommon for lots of men to stand around trying not to speak to anybody in the playground and generally looking uncomfortable, and for the mums to stand in their little groups.

I have not experienced any difficulties and I have not heard our members mention any either. My son will often say to me, "Why does mummy not pick me up more than you?"

Robert Hall: My experience is similar. My daughter is only 15 months old so she is not at school. However, I am buoyed by the fact that when I dropped her off to the local nursery at about five or ten past 8—that was before I started to work compressed hours—seven or eight other dads were dropping off their children, too. I have seen only two or three mums on the four or five occasions that I have done that, so it appears that dads are mostly doing that. I had expected to find that to be almost the polar opposite.

That is nice to see: the whole point is that you want to be involved with your kids and do these things. I have lost that role because I work my compressed hours, but I get a Wednesday off, which is better. Before that, it seemed to be mostly dads that were dropping off their kids, which was nice to see.

The Convener: Christian, do you want to ask a question relating to that or move on to another question?

Christian Allard: I want to move on to another question. I covered—

The Convener: Sorry—Clare Simpson wants to come in on this issue.

10:30

Clare Simpson: It was about something that Ewan Jeffrey said. It is a quick point—I know that we are moving on from the subject.

Although, to an extent, homophobic attitudes have moved on, nonetheless they still exist. One of our organisations, which deals with counselling,

is attempting to move from where it is because the venue that it was using would not provide counselling for gay couples. I have just thrown that in as another example of how difficult it can be for gay couples with children.

Christian Allard: I have a couple of questions on two subjects. One subject is minorities. I think that we have dealt with some, but there are others. Some of your organisations do not get fathers coming to your groups and there was something in evidence about a father who ended up in prison. Does anyone have feedback on how that works?

There may be other minorities that we have not talked about yet—for example, fathers who lose their jobs, are isolated, have problems of residency or do not have a spare bedroom. Maybe some of you want to talk about those situations.

Clare Simpson: I put something in my evidence about fathers in prison because they are a pretty large group who are not often considered. The Scottish Prison Service estimates that 48 per cent of its population are parents, and 17,000 children in Scotland are affected by a parent's imprisonment, so it is a fairly significant group.

There are a number of issues, one of which is that it is estimated that reoffending can be reduced by up to six times in prisoners who have contact with their families. Even the most conservative estimate, which is the Ministry of Justice estimate from a couple of years ago, is that there is about a 39 per cent reduction in reoffending. Obviously, that figure is to do with the parent, but we should look at outcomes for children as well, because children are seen to want to have contact with their parents.

There is great inconsistency at the moment in the prison estate in Scotland. In October last year, there was a letter from the SPS to all the governors talking about its new parenting outcomes and what it would like to achieve for parents. More visiting centres are suitable for children now, although we would welcome even more visiting centres for children.

It is very difficult, where a father has previously been non-resident and where there are estranged or strained relationships, for a child to visit a prison; there can be no one to take them to visit their father. Families Outside told me yesterday that it has been supporting a lone-parent dad who had sole custody and who has gone in for a prison sentence. The relationship between that father and his child was very good, but the maternal grandmother has taken over care of the child and there is a degree of animosity, so the maternal grandmother will not take the child to visit the prison. Families Outside has been trying to put in place arrangements, but there are no funds or support mechanisms for it to do so.

The problems are consistency, access and information. On information, we need to remember that, generally speaking, prisoners have no access to websites that might help them.

A number of very encouraging things are going on; parenting programmes are taking place and the Scottish Pre-school Play Association goes into Dumfries prison and Dads Rock goes into Edinburgh prison. There is educational work around things like parenting apart, parenting programmes, communication and relationships. Such programmes improve relationships on the parenting level, but they also improve the offender's chance of establishing a more settled life and relationships with their families when they go back into the community.

Kenny Spence: I did some work in Edinburgh prison a few years ago. The best work that I have seen in Scotland went on in Shotts prison, with videos of fathers reading stories to their children going back and forth. That is an excellent example. The Scottish Prison Service has been very open to any engagement with dads who are in prison and I can only commend it for that.

On fathers who have difficulty with residency or with becoming the sole parent for their child, I add that I also work in a child and family centre—a children's centre—and we have a lot of situations in which there is conflict between parents, one of whom might not be managing to parent well. In my experience, it is much more difficult for children's hearings and social workers to agree that the dad is the best parent to take the child. If they do decide that, the dad usually has a lot more hurdles to jump than the mother would, with more supervised contact, more visits and a longer process of rehabilitation to ensure that he can actually do it. I am not saying that the process is too long; it is just that there are differences between and inconsistencies in terms of what is expected of the dad and what is expected of the mum.

Our dads worker has done a lot of support work with dads to make sure that they go to hearings, case conferences and so on. It is essential that somebody is there to advocate on behalf of the guys, because otherwise a lot of them would just give up. That advocacy is essential to ensuring that they manage to get and keep their child, and parent them.

Michelle Campbell: I have long-term experience with a family in Fife. The mother was referred to us when she became a lone parent because her husband was put in prison for four years. I suppose that the support that was offered was dual support. The mother felt a lot of frustration and anger towards the father. What happened was unfortunate and it had an enormous impact on the family. The mother was

also caring for two disabled children, and the dad had been the main carer in order to allow her to work. She then considered herself a lone-parent mother, but the dad, when he was in prison, considered himself to be a lone-parent dad. The support mechanisms for him in prison were extremely limited, because there is a lot of gatekeeping in relation to who can go in and support dads, where referrals come from and who they can go to. Families Outside was extremely valuable to the mum in the community and the dad in prison, as were the other organisations that supported the family.

The supports that were put in place included counselling for the children to help them to understand why dad was where he was and why they had lost the male role model in their family. It was devastating, because social work services was involved with a family that had never had social work in their lives before. The police were also involved, and the family had never had a police presence in their lives before. They had had clinical psychologists to help with the children, and that support was increased. In addition, Penumbra was brought in to help the children with their emotions.

Three and a half years of work went on with that family. We had a lot of dialogue with Routes Out of Prison as well as with Families Outside, and they gave the dad a lot of support when he was preparing to be released. However, the parenting support through Fife Gingerbread, Penumbra and other agencies had to be really joined up for the family, because they were coming back together again, although there was still a lot of resentment. That is quite a success story, but it was a real challenge for those years.

Neil McIntosh: This follows on from the point that Michelle Campbell has made. Christian Allard spoke about working with minority groups of fathers; single fathers are a minority. Only 8 per cent of single parents in Scotland are single fathers, and they face significant barriers—all single parents do, whether they are mums or fathers.

The media portrayal of single parents is terrible and a lot of it is very inaccurate. At One Parent Families Scotland, we would like single parents—mothers and fathers—to be recognised for the good job that they do, rather than their being condemned in the media.

The Convener: We will move on. John Mason will ask about jobcentre input.

John Mason: This will follow on, in a sense. A specific matter that came up last week was jobcentres and the Department for Work and Pensions. I have to confess that I am not a huge fan of the DWP in any respect, which is maybe a bit cruel. The suggestion has been made that the DWP tends to assume that single parents are mothers, and that it is not particularly adaptable to single fathers. It has been suggested that the DWP would help a single mother more than it would help a single father. Is that people's experience, or is experience patchy in that regard?

Neil McIntosh: I would agree with that. The fathers to whom we have spoken over the past few weeks—especially separated fathers—would echo that.

John Mason: Jobcentre staff might help a woman to find a part-time job that would fit in with schools, but they might not do that for the father.

Neil McIntosh: Yes—that is something that some of the fathers whom we work with face. When parents have split the care of the child 50:50, the benefit payments sometimes go to the mother and the father is left with nothing. Dads have come to us who get their kids at the weekend but they do not have any money—and I mean no money. We have to refer them to food banks so that they can get food for the weekend to feed their kids. I am not saying that everything should be split 50:50. At One Parent Families Scotland, we believe that everything should be decided based on the best interests of the child, but consideration has to be given to the matter that John Mason has raised.

John Mason: Is the DWP just following the courts, or is it making decisions itself?

Neil McIntosh: I am not sure about that.

Michelle Campbell: I think that the DWP is following legislation. I do quite a lot of work with Jobcentre Plus, Triage Central and Working Links. The legislation comes up all the time. I have attended joint meetings with lone parents—male and female—in the jobcentre. The job searches that they are expected to do are not really intended to meet their skills, but are intended to get them off benefits, and that is it. There is a "make work pay" calculator to ensure that it is affordable for people to work, but the DWP still has to meet targets. If it is specified on someone's jobseekers allowance that they are a lone dad, lone mum or lone kinship carer, they have to meet the demands of Jobcentre Plus, and they have to satisfy it with evidence, otherwise they are sanctioned. Jobcentre Plus is just following legislation.

Neil McIntosh: There is a single father—a lone father with full custody of his child—with whom we have been working recently. He is reaching the stage at which he is being told that he is ready to go back to work, so he will come off a particular benefit to go on to jobseekers allowance. His child had been in the care of the mother and, due to a number of issues, was taken into the care of social

work services. The father fought to be able to look after his son, and that happened. However, because of the traumatic experience that the child went through, the father feels that he needs to be available to support his child much more, for example to attend weekly meetings at school to see how the child is doing in his education. The father feels that he is not ready to go back to work because of his caring responsibilities. That is just one example. Again, that is something that single fathers—as well as single mothers—face.

10:45

Michelle Campbell: We can go on and on about this, but a single father with no support network does not have the back-up of there being somebody else who is able to go and pick up the kids from school so that he can attend a jobcentre appointment at 10 to 3 in the afternoon. He is the only person who can pick up the children. He may be called to the school because of the child's behaviour and if he misses an appointment at the jobcentre because of that, he is sanctioned. I am thinking about a particular child who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Tourette's and is in behaviour support at a Fife primary school. The dad is called regularly to come and pick up his child. What is the priority? Should he go and get the child who is kicking off at school or attend the jobseeker appointment? If he does not attend the jobseeker appointment, he will be sanctioned. He was sanctioned for four weeks, and lost benefits for those four weeks, which results in debt.

Siobhan McMahon: We talked about societal changes earlier—you mentioned those changes in relation to gay dads in particular. Do the groups do any work with the wider family, particularly granddads, on the subject of changes in the carer role? We heard last week that there are a lot of negative connotations when a man takes the lead in caring for their child and that the wider family in particular cannot accept that that is the case. Do any groups engage with the wider family—granddads in particular—in those situations?

Kenny Spence: Through child and family centres, we work with a lot of granddads and other relatives who have taken kinship care responsibility for a child. That has increased by about 30 or 40 per cent since the recent legislation. It is very common to have grandfathers, grandmothers, aunties, uncles and so on coming in who have kinship care responsibility for a child. We provide a lot of support for them.

Clare Simpson: Some of the organisations that are part of our partnership do that type of work. I will talk about two in particular: Children 1st, which has a relationship with and offers support for kinship carers, and Relationships Scotland. Relationships Scotland runs a number of parenting apart classes in a number of areas throughout Scotland. Some of the classes have been run in association with some fathers' groups.

In parenting apart classes, people who have separated will quite often be in separate groups but they will work through what the best outcomes for the child will be. The classes try to get parents to put the outcomes for the child centre stage, because it has been shown that conflict is bad for children and their outcomes, whatever the composition or make-up of the family structure, whether the family is still together or separated. Some of the groups, particularly some of those that have been run down in Lanarkshire, have been run with some grandparent involvement as well.

I know that Children 1st is one of the main support agencies for kinship carers and it has a kinship care helpline. Again, that involves working with grandparents, but there is probably a certain amount of work to be done on changing those attitudes, which I think that some of our agencies are engaging with.

Michelle Campbell: The kinship carers whom we have supported—lone granddads and lone grans—lose their identity. They lose what they thought they were aiming for in their retirement. We have given support to kinship carers recently through our gateway project. The project has offered a male kick-about and the kinship granddads have come along to that with their grandchildren—their grandsons and their granddaughters. That initiative is being supported now by volunteers—the granddads or the dads who are involved in the kick-about. They are keeping it going and it is well attended.

David Drysdale: This is second hand, but I heard Gary Clapton talk yesterday about social work and how fathers are often excluded when a family is broken up. The obvious point to make is that, if a father is not engaged, we lose half of the kinship caring network. If a man is ostracised by the family or not included, what happens to his parents and his brothers and sisters?

The Convener: Do members have any more questions?

Christian Allard: If we are finishing, I would like to end by talking about the present and the future. Last week, we talked about gender stereotyping and how early it can happen. I want to reflect on that and get the witnesses' opinion on it. How do your organisations try to combat stereotyping in the choice of toys and in role playing? Is the traditional role of the father and the mother the main cause of the problem that we have unveiled? How far should society go to address the issue? Should we go for total gender neutrality?

Thomas Lynch: I was recently asked whether I wanted to spend money in a certain American shop for toys for our kids. As much as I love buying toys and cool stuff for kids, part of me just could not do it because of the whole pink and blue thing. There is a good campaign on Twitter called let toys be toys, which absolutely has a point. I cannot say that my son loves playing with dolls and hoovers, but I know from being in playgroups that kids generally do not care and that a lot of boys in playgroups love prams. They will go for anything that they can push and that has a baby in it.

You make a good and important point, but it is difficult to tackle the issue. My boy told me that he would not wear a pink T-shirt. We have never tried to segregate colours, so he must have got that through the media and from watching television, although maybe I should not have allowed him to watch so much TV. Gender stereotyping is part of our culture, so it will take a long time to do something about it. One of the dads that was at the committee last week said that they do not think that we should have segregated groups and that we should just have groups. I absolutely agree with that. I would love to be able to say that parents just go to groups, but the reason why Dads Rock and Robert Hall's group started is that we first need to do that, and then perhaps we can come back together.

There is now a lot of interest in toys and gender stereotyping and a lot of knowledge about what to do, what not to do and what we want for our kids. We need to give kids free choice and free play. We have a play strategy and the United Nations has talked about a right for kids to play—that means free play, not boys' play or girls' play.

Kenny Spence: It is an interesting question for me, because I have spent 25 years working in the non-stereotypical occupation of childcare. For a long time, I was the only man doing it, which is why I started men in childcare—basically it was so that I could have more men and more pals alongside me.

In my 25 years of experience, I have found that children gravitate towards the toys that they want to play with. Generally speaking, when the guys who are at my work—there are now seven of them—are outside, they are the ones who are kicking a ball and, in the main, it is the little boys who are kicking the ball. That is not exclusively the case, but it is generally what happens. The guys are the ones who are likely to be involved in the more rough-and-tumble play. It is really too early to have a gender discussion about the early years workforce, because there are so few men around. It is difficult to talk about what kind of men we need when only 4 per cent are male—we just need more men in there.

Although 50 per cent of the children are boys and 50 per cent are girls or thereabouts, there is no need to sort out the toys. The children will sort them out: little boys will sit down and play with dolls and little girls will sit down and play with castles.

A lot of work has been done in Sweden. Part of it showed that girls did better than boys after turning 10 years old, whereas up to 10 years old girls did not do as well as boys. A woman decided to separate boys' play and girls' play so that girls would do better even earlier.

Germany has acknowledged the problem and now has a boys day, because boys are much more likely to be put into care, be put into a school for children with behavioural difficulties, be assaulted or commit suicide. The outcomes for boys are much worse than the outcomes for girls and Germany has now realised that we need to pay much more attention to boys.

If we are talking about looking at gender from that perspective, paying more attention to what happens with boys is a great idea, but children pick toys themselves and they are quite happy to do that.

Christian Allard: Is there a place for a traditional father figure, or should we move on from that?

Kenny Spence: I am very much a traditional father. My daughter gave me this "Daddy Hugs" book for Christmas. She is 18 and she is training to be a primary teacher, so the apple did not fall very far from the tree. That shows that if you put it in, you get it back.

I am very much a traditional father and I am very happy with that, although as I said I have a non-traditional role.

Clare Simpson: I think the Joseph Rowntree Foundation did a bit of research into Asian fathers in the Loughborough area. Interestingly, they all said that they wanted to be different from their fathers and that they felt that they were different from other fathers. Presumably they were not that different, but they all said that they wanted to be.

There is a real change in how men see the role, which is important for women's politics as well. If men take up flexible working more—at the moment their requests for flexible working are refused twice as often as women's requests—that would allow them to help more with the housework, which I would certainly welcome in my house. It works both ways. If we are integrated as families we need to allow men to have that space. That needs to happen and that needs to change.

There is space for men's groups and women's groups. People have asked whether all parents' groups should be open to men and women.

Sometimes there are good reasons that groups are not open to both, such as issues about feeling comfortable. Robert Hall has a dads-only group. As a single parent in an antenatal group I welcomed the women-only space, but I accept that there needs to be space for fathers in antenatal groups.

The thing that I really wanted to say—I moved on to other things—was about the education system. We have talked a little bit about toys. There is a programme called roots of empathy that addresses very early on the attachment bond. It brings babies into schools where both boys and girls see the importance of how babies react. That is a very interesting and important thing that happens in the early years. It is being rolled out throughout Scotland and I would like to see it in more schools.

In the teenage years, in the personal health and social education bit of curriculum for excellence, there are opportunities around parenting that some of the evidence has identified. That is particularly important at the moment. There is a lot of evidence on sexting, bullying and cyberbullying. Some surveys have shown that a number of girls think that it is perfectly acceptable to be hit in a relationship and there are some unpleasant throw-back male attitudes to that. We need to address that through the education that we offer our children and teenagers, and ensure that ideas of gender equality and what good relationships are about are addressed at that point.

11:00

David Drysdale: Gender stereotyping is a symptom and not the main cause. We want to celebrate differences between men and women—there are many differences, as we know—and celebrate the different types of dads that are out there. We are not trying to prescribe what a dad should be. If it works out that a man is in a full-time job and the mother is at home, that is okay, and the opposite applies: it is okay if the woman wants to be the full-time breadwinner and the man is taking care of the child.

We want to celebrate how a family works. It is wonderful to hear Ewan Jeffrey expressing his voice on gay dads, because a few years ago we would not have heard that. We are not saying how men should turn up as fathers; we want to support them to be the best dads that they can be.

Robert Hall: In our playgroup we have a wide variety of toys for the kids to play with. We specifically bought a good range of things for them to play with. The kids do not stick to their stereotypes and neither should they; that is the whole point. The most popular thing for the girls is a ride on the tractor, which they think is fantastic. The boys will play with dolls and prams—all those different things. In general, the kids pick toys and play with them. It is whatever interests them at that moment. Actually, that is not true. Usually what interests them is whatever some other kid has, which they take off them. That is just one of those things.

It is difficult to quantify the traditional dads issue. I wanted to be different from my dad. He had very little to do with my care when I grew up, which was probably because it was the ’70s and that was what you did: he went out and worked and whatever else. I know from my mum that my dad bathed me once in the entire time that I was young. I did not want to be anything like that. I have to be fully involved in the care of my child because I want to be. I do not want to be someone who goes out to work in the morning, comes home at night and sees my child for an hour before they go to bed. I want to be fully involved and I challenge the traditional dad role these days. It is what you make it.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That nicely concludes the public part of today’s meeting. I thank the witnesses for coming along.

Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 20 March and will include further oral evidence on our inquiry into fathers and parenting.

11:02

Meeting continued in private until 11:23.

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