

# Understanding the experiences of Asian fathers in Britain

Findings  
Informing change

September 2009

Researchers and policymakers have a limited understanding of family life and parenting among minority ethnic populations in the UK. The views of fathers and mothers from four religio-ethnic Asian 'groups' contributed to this detailed qualitative study: Bangladeshi Muslims, Pakistani Muslims, Gujarati Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs.

## Key points

- There was great consistency across age, migration and educational status in the ways men talked about what it means to be a father. For all but one, this was an anticipated event and a large part of their identity.
- Religious and ethnic identities were important in raising children, but there was great diversity in how men performed their fathering role in practice.
- Fathers contributed to their children's upbringing directly, as role models, through other people, and in indirect ways such as planning. Several fathers who spent little time with their children were nevertheless very involved in their lives.
- Fathers from all four groups consistently saw earning income as an integral responsibility for fathers.
- Many fathers regularly contributed to feeding, bathing and other personal childcare tasks. There were also examples of men providing sole childcare in all four groups. However, mothers usually retained responsibility in this area.
- Fathers who worked long hours were not necessarily absent from personal care-giving, but were more likely to devote 'quality time' at home to activities like playing and reading.
- Many fathers wanted to have a close relationship with, and be a 'friend' to, their children and actively distanced themselves from what they saw as the 'typical Asian father', characterised as remote and authoritarian.

## The research

By Sarah Salway and Punita Chowbey, Sheffield Hallam University, and Lynda Clarke, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

# Background

Despite a strong interest in families among policymakers and researchers, there is limited understanding of family life and parenting in minority ethnic populations in the UK.

This study explores the patterns and experiences of fathering young children (3 - 8 years) among four Asian religio-ethnic groups: Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims, Gujarati Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs. The study found both similarities and differences across the four groups as well as with prior findings for white British fathers.

## Being a father

There was great consistency across age, migration and educational status in the ways men talked about what it means to be a father. Being a father was an important part of the identity of all but one of the men interviewed. The study identified four major dimensions of the fathering role:

- material provider;
- nurturer and protector;
- link to the outside world; and
- direct personal care-giver.

Fathers, along with mothers, recognised the responsibility and commitment associated with 'being a father'.

**"That's my responsibility. It's my life. When you are single, you can do anything you want. But since he was born, I'm always, as I say, worried about him. I have to go and pick him up, make sure, this and that, all these things."**

**(Gujarati father, India-born, 40-49 years, degree)**

Though income-earning arrangements differed considerably across the four groups, the 'material provider' dimension of the father's role was largely uncontested by all respondents – and for several men was the most prominent part of 'being a father'.

The duty of a 'nurturer and protector' was to ensure a child became a 'good citizen' (honest, respectful to elders and self-sufficient) and, in most cases, a 'dutiful child'. Mothers and fathers tended to share responsibility for a child's development, support and protection.

The 'link to the outside world' dimension was connected with fun and excitement. It also involved introducing the child to people and practices and providing, particularly for boys, a place within the wider religio-ethnic community. Fathers often seemed to have greater responsibility than mothers in this area.

Fathers tended to see being a 'personal care-giver' as less integral to their role. However, views varied: some

saw it as important and others distanced themselves from it. Even where fathers engaged in a lot of day-to-day personal childcare, mothers generally retained the *responsibility* for this and were found at fault if standards slipped.

## Father-child relationships

Although many believed a mother's bond is superior, the great majority of fathers aspired to, and had, close and loving relationships with their children. This is in contrast to many respondents' relationship with their father, or an imagined 'typical Asian father', seen as distant and authoritarian. These findings mirror those from recent work with White British fathers that emphasise an increasing ideal of intimacy between fathers and their children.

**"It's probably one of the best things you can have. Loving somebody and to have that love there and somebody to love you back."**  
**(Pakistani father, UK-born, 20-29 years, educated to A' level)**

A further strong theme in the interviews was the enjoyment and pride gained through day-to-day fathering. However, fulfilling fathering commitments and responsibilities, particularly juggling work and direct contact time with children, was stressful for some.

Though generally confident about their capabilities as a father, a few respondents did lack self-assurance: notably when taking care of small children, and not providing sufficient 'quality time'. Interestingly, several fathers, who had a strong sense of involvement in their children's lives, expressed a sense of being 'unusual'. Some of these fathers felt undermined by other people and downplayed their contributions in order to escape disapproval. In reality, however, the researchers found that these fathers' perceived 'break from tradition' was far from exceptional.

## Fathering practice

Despite common understandings of what it meant to 'be a father' and aspirations for their children, there were large differences in how fathers contributed to their children's upbringing. While the majority provided financially, contributions to childcare varied widely.

Across all four groups, the study found both examples of fathers providing sole personal care as well as those who contributed virtually nothing in this area.

The 'nurturer and protector' and 'link to the outside world' dimensions of being a father were broad and implied diverse and inter-linked actions, including:

*Supporting education:* A desire for children to achieve academically, and recognition of the importance of a father's contribution to this, was common. Most fathers were doing a lot in this area.

*Providing social, cultural and religious resources:* These Asian fathers equip their children with religio-cultural values and resources that most white British parents do not need to provide: most respondents wanted their child to develop a religious and ethnic identity alongside a British identity.

Parents aimed to preserve valued cultural norms and protect children from perceived undesirable 'majority culture' influences.

**“He will learn about Bangladesh but before he must learn about this country. Because this is his country, he will live here, grow up here. He will be British-Muslim, not Bangladeshi.”**  
(Bangladeshi father, Bangladesh-born, 30-39 years, degree)

*Supporting emotional development, providing discipline and guidance:* Parents didn't want children to hide things and be led astray, and having a close and open relationship with both mothers and fathers was also felt to contribute to emotional development.

*Protecting and promoting a safe environment:* Many fathers expressed general concerns about risks to their children and contributed to promoting a safe environment within and outside the home.

*Family networks:* The importance of family ties and the desire for children to be well-integrated in family networks was common and often linked to fathers' promotion of religious or cultural values. Fathers' contribution to the above five areas varied considerably across different families. In part this reflects the fact that both mothers and fathers were commonly held responsible, so a variety of arrangements could be regarded as acceptable. However, there was also significant variation in terms of what level and types of contribution were felt necessary to raise a child well, regardless of who was expected to deliver them.

Fathers had many ways of being involved in their children's lives:

- Direct face-to-face engagement, telephone contact, and leaving notes.
- Significant indirect contributions: information gathering, monitoring, planning and organising.
- Role modelling to instil desired behaviours or values in the child.
- Via other family members, particularly the mother and grandparents, by monitoring, identifying needs, and delegating tasks.

That said, the extent of fathers' involvement in different aspects of parenting did vary. Some fathers contributed across the board, others took a more specialised role,

and a few were marginally involved. It was also evident, however, that many fathers had moved between fathering arrangements over time, often prompted by external factors, rather than being fixed in a particular fathering 'type'.

## Influences on fathering

In common with recent work on white British fathers the study found that fathers were more likely to play an active role, rather than just provide materially, when they had a mutually supportive relationship with their wives. Children's expectations also influenced their fathers' behaviour.

Conversely, such 'non-traditional' inputs could be constrained by gender stereotypes regarding appropriate paternal behaviour, especially by the wider family. Contributions to care-giving were most common where mothers were also working, reflecting a shift in ideas of what fathers should be doing for their children as well as the practicalities of who was available to do what. In some households, particularly among Sikh and Gujarati respondents, grandparents' attitudes and contributions to childrearing significantly reduced fathers' input to personal care and some aspects of 'nurturing and protecting'. That said, grandparental help did free fathers to earn the family's income.

Working hours and conditions limited the time fathers could spend with their children (particularly for those in low paid, inflexible jobs; those with long commutes; or those in career-focused professional roles). However, whether or not fathers found ways of being 'involved' seemed to relate more to individual motivation and creativity than to their work. While some fathers saw little option for combining work and time with their children, others found ways of contributing to, and keeping involved with, their children's lives.

Similarly, while paternal grandparents and the wider religio-ethnic community were mentioned as obstacles to men taking on wider parental roles, some fathers confidently challenged such norms and sought to transform the content and meaning of fathering.

Gaining enjoyment and confidence through interaction with their children, and seeing it as part-and-parcel of being a father, was clearly evident in many of the interviews.

## Services and resources

For the majority of the fathers in the study, locally available family support services had no obvious impact on the way they were fathering their children and few expressed a need for support. Most felt that they could access the information they needed via family and friends or from the internet and books. Many felt that parenting came naturally and knew little about the Sure Start early years programme and other public services. Most

fathers aware of such resources found them unattractive, dominated by women or thought that activities on offer were overly restrictive.

However, many respondents did take their children to activities at local ethnic community centres, indicating that fathers will engage with organised services where they perceive them to be beneficial.

Fathers generally had a positive attitude towards and experiences with schools and felt that teachers encouraged their engagement. However, some lacked the confidence to support children with homework and had limited understanding of the UK educational system.

## Implications for policy and practice

These findings suggest that policy and practice aimed at supporting Asian fathers appreciate and address the following:

- Great diversity in fathering exists within and between groups. Cultural knowledge is important when gathering information and offering appropriate choices. However, practitioners and services must avoid stereotyping the needs or preferences of minority ethnic individuals.
- The transmission of language, religion and cultural identity is important to fathers and felt to be a struggle in UK society.
- Protecting children from, and helping them to weather, racial exclusion is a significant concern.
- Transnational families may face particular constraints and some fathers spend long periods away from children.
- Childrearing arrangements must often be understood within the context of the wider family. Alternative ways of sharing family responsibilities should be respected rather than imposing particular expectations on fathers.
- Services must recognise, and sometimes challenge, gender stereotypes that constrain men's fathering behaviour.
- Some fathers, particularly migrants to the UK, may require additional support to navigate services.

- Many fathers have poor knowledge of statutory family support services and perceive them as unattractive and intended for mothers.
- Partnerships between community-based organisations and places of worship used by fathers and their children may be fruitful.
- A focus on activities for children that promote educational attainment, positive religious and ethnic identity, Asian language competency, and respect for community and authority figures, may be more attractive to fathers than 'fathering skills' per se which are perceived to come naturally.
- Many fathers are actively engaged in their children's lives without any obvious formal support. This suggests a need for greater clarity regarding the objectives and focus of interventions for these fathers.
- Supporting educational achievement is a central concern for most Asian fathers. Schools can build on these generally positive attitudes
  - More flexible timings for teacher-parent meetings, better English language support, and efforts to empower less confident fathers are needed
  - Schools must also respond to Asian fathers' desire to equip children for life as members of both their religio-ethnic community and wider UK society.
- Efforts to increase the time fathers have in direct contact with their children must recognise the varied working conditions of Asian men and the pressures they face from family and consumer society to earn and accumulate materially.

## About the project

The study, carried out in East London and Sheffield between May 2006 and April 2008, was undertaken by Sarah Salway and Punita Chowbey (Sheffield Hallam University) and Lynda Clarke (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine) with a team of community researchers.

Phase one employed a range of tools (interviews, focus group discussions and observation) and involved over 80 informants. In Phase Two, in-depth interviews were conducted with 59 fathers and 33 mothers.

---

## For further information

The full report, **Parenting in modern Britain: Experiences of Asian Fathers**, by Sarah Salway, Punita Chowbey and Lynda Clarke, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

[Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)