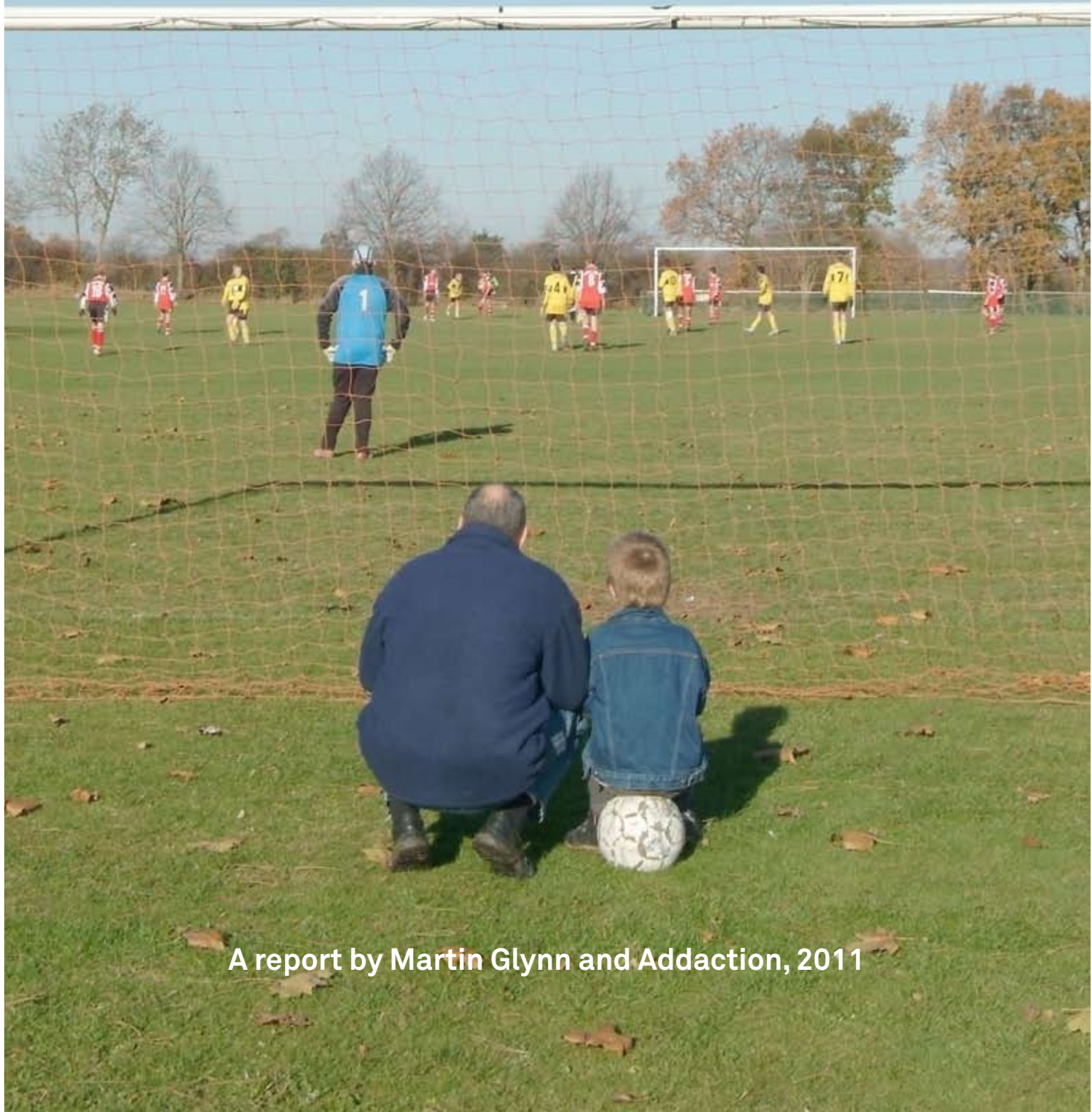


# Dad and Me

Research into the problems caused by absent fathers.



A report by Martin Glynn and Addaction, 2011

**'As a child, I did not understand why  
As your daughter, I felt unwanted and that I was to blame  
As a youth, I was abandoned by a man I felt loved me  
As a young woman, I need guidance and protection  
As your daughter, I want your love and security  
On the inside, I feel insecure, unhappy  
A piece of the jigsaw is missing  
On the outside, I feel confident  
When I look at my life, I think of you and why  
Who I was, was a young girl who struggled without you  
Who I am is a woman who had one chance to speak to you  
Who I want to be is a good person and a role model to others who struggled like I did  
What I want in life is contentment and peace of mind  
What I need right now is forgiveness for all the things I said, and a hug  
So finally Dad, I want to say I didn't understand why  
Plus, I struggled with addiction and survived and you were by my side  
Now you have gone, I'm glad we had one time together to put the pieces of the jigsaw together  
RIP, Dad'**

Service user at Addaction Brent, London 2011.

**'As a child, I wanted to know what you looked like  
As your son, I was angry at those who had a dad  
As a youth, I was disrespectful and out of control  
As a young man, I needed guidance  
As your son, I wanted to know what having a dad was like  
On the inside, I feel calmer but still traumatised  
On the outside, I feel I still wear the mask, but it's slipping  
When I look at my life, I wish you were still in it  
Who I was, was a mirror with no reflection  
Who I am is a wise man with scars  
Who I want to be is calmer and at peace  
What I want is balance and light  
What I need right now is clarity and reassurance  
So finally Dad, I want to say goodbye, as it's over now.  
RIP.'**

Service user at Addaction Brent, London 2011.

## Foreword

If we are to tackle the problems in our communities, we need to look at the reasons behind those problems; rather than making excuses or assumptions.

In this report, we look closely at the impact a father's absence has on his children's lives. The negative effects of his absence manifest in all kinds of ways; through anti-social behaviour and criminal activity, and sometimes through heavy drinking and drug use. We see the effects of the latter in Addaction's services every day, and it's one of the reasons I believe that 'father deficit' should be acknowledged as a public health issue.

And if we are to find solutions to the problems that father deficit causes, we need to listen closely to what communities say; to what they feel should be done; and we should fully engage them in the delivery of support.

What's more, we need to use every tool at our disposal to ensure that affected young men and women are given what they really want - help to make positive changes in their lives, and an opportunity to contribute in their local communities.

Simon Antrobus,  
Chief Executive of Addaction

## Introduction

I interviewed many young people with absent fathers for this report. The reasons why were different, but the effects of his absence were common to all, and cannot be underestimated or ignored. It affects his children on every level; from their education, their self esteem and happiness to their ability of become a parent themselves.

It also deeply affects their notion of self, and many develop a swaggering, intimidating persona in an attempt to disguise their underlying fears, resentments, anxieties and unhappiness. It's a persona that is all too common among Addaction's service users, young people who have become involved in risky, anti-social and often criminal behaviour.

In fact, I feel that the need for a 'father' is on an epidemic scale and should be treated as a public health issue

Therefore, to successfully address the issues raised in this report, we need to find that the solutions that are complex as the issues themselves, longitudinal and requiring of constant evaluation. If these issues are not addressed, the long term implications are serious, and without the right kind of early interventions, a young person's problems can become entrenched.

We need to create cost-effective, coherent, strategic and multi-faceted support. The sheer weight and scale of the problem means that, by doing this, we can push the agenda forward and improve policy. It also means that we can bring lasting change in the lives of thousands of young people

Martin Glynn

*Martin Glynn is a lecturer in Criminology at the Centre for Applied Criminology, Birmingham City University. Martin was the recipient of University Research Development Fund Bursary, as well as being a 2010 Winston Churchill Fellow.*

# Executive summary

- **Young people subjected to ‘father deficit’ are often isolated, unsupported and likely to partake in negative behaviours, such as crime or substance misuse.**

The young men and women interviewed for this report firmly believe that their father’s absence had played a key role in their use of drugs and alcohol. This hypothesis is supported by polling, with respondents agreeing that young people who grow up without fathers are more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour (80.3 per cent), crime (76.4 per cent) or take drugs (69.1 per cent).

- **Young people subjected to ‘father deficit’ lack a positive image of themselves, causing problems that can manifest themselves differently according to gender.**

Respondents to polling believed that growing up without a father makes a person more likely to lack confidence (75.9 per cent) and feel insecure (90.1 per cent). The young men and women interviewed for this report commonly described feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, with gender roles often becoming caricatured as a reaction to this ‘lack of identity’.

- **Young people subjected to ‘father deficit’ describe a daily struggle with their emotions, and a frustration at not having the opportunity to resolve negative feelings.**

The young men and women interviewed as part of this report gave detailed examples of how they struggled with complex emotions because of their father’s absence; with a number experiencing eating disorders and self harm as a result.

- **Young people subjected to ‘father deficit’ need to establish trusted links with older generations, and express a need to engage with positive, older role models in their communities.**

Those interviewed for this report described how their father’s absence had denied them the chance to learn ‘life lessons’ from an older generation and were keen to establish links with older, respected figures in their communities. Support agencies should invest in mentoring programmes, and other methods of creating and establishing such links.

- **Young people subjected to ‘father deficit’ are rarely held accountable for their actions.**

As older role models are often lacking, young people with absent fathers are often unwilling to alter self-destructive behaviour, and can be unresponsive to any suggestions of change.

- **Young people need a ‘safe space’ in which to work through negative emotions.**

Those young people interviewed for this report expressed a clear desire to be listened to, but found it difficult to work through their emotions at home or among friends – often resulting in their problems being left unexamined.

- **Young people must be involved in the design of support services.**

Services are most effective when young people feel they are being provided with their concerns and lifestyles in mind. From the point of inception, service design should include input from the young people themselves to ensure this happens. By doing so, they will demonstrate a level of cultural competency, co-operation and trustworthiness.

- **Collaborative, multi-agency support must be provided in order to tackle ‘father deficit’ issues.**

Young people’s problems are often wide-ranging and complex, and require a network of support; provided by a number of agencies. For this support to be effective, agencies should establish close partnerships and share best practice.

- **The importance of community activities must be recognised in helping absentee fathers fulfil their responsibility as positive male role models for their children.**

Agencies should look at creating community activities to help absentee fathers spend time with their children, allowing them to share experiences, bond and develop positive methods of contact.

## About the research

A qualitative study surveyed 48 young people from Addaction services in Liverpool, London and Derby. These young people were drawn from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds and social classes, and were all aged between 16 and 25. The group was evenly split between genders (26 being male, 22 female). The identities of all participants have been kept hidden in this report.

In addition, a quantitative survey was commissioned by Addaction through Survation (an organisation specialising in market research) to support the qualitative research. 1000 young people aged between 16 and 25 were surveyed using a bespoke questionnaire, put together by Addaction. The sample was divided equally across gender and age, and was aimed at a general cohort of young people; not necessarily those who were in contact with drug or alcohol treatment services.

A copy is included at the end of this report, including a full summary of the Survation results.

## What do we mean by ‘father deficit’?

Addaction runs a number of services specifically designed for young people encountering problems with drugs and alcohol. In the charity’s experience, many of these young people share similar frustrations.

They are growing up in communities where they feel marginalised, undervalued and frustrated at their lack of social status. Without proper guidance and support, their world view can become distorted, leading them into both anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

This support has often been lacking because many of the young people have grown up without a father in their lives. Many cite this absence – or ‘father deficit’ – as being directly linked to the problems they have encountered; their poor opinions of themselves, and a cause of their involvement in substance misuse.

## Methodology for qualitative study

Participants were interviewed in un-structured and semi-structured group interviews, with issues around confidentiality being discussed and agreed at the beginning of each session. Each of these sessions lasted approximately three hours, and ended with a debriefing that helped bring closure for participants, and a positive end to each set of discussions.

Participants’ rights were re-negotiated and brokered throughout (something which was supported by Addaction staff members). This was in line with the model set out by pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire in 1970, where interviewees are considered part of the research, rather than simply passive recipients. By approaching the research in this way, participants were shown how they had a level of control throughout the interview process, and a strong foundation was created upon which trust between the researcher and participants could be built.

In one instance (London), the number of participants was larger than expected. Here, participants were split into smaller after an initial discussion, which were then reconvened so that all groups could share experiences.

The research from these interviews was then triangulated with two other studies by the author of this report, again looking at the impact of ‘father deficit’. The first (conducted as part of a 2010 Winston Churchill International Travel Fellowship) looked at how models of good practice had created stronger communities in Baltimore, USA. The second looked at the role of prison-based Therapeutic Communities in enabling black male prisoners to articulate experiences that had contributed towards their offending behaviour.

## Poems

As part of the qualitative research, participants were asked if they would like to write a poem about their experiences. A template was provided to help them do this, and is included at the end of this report.

## Grounded Theory

The data collected in qualitative study was coded using an form of Grounded Theory, adapted from the work of Kathy Charmaz (author of Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis (Introducing Qualitative Methods series), Sage, 2006).

Charmaz’s Grounded Theory model sets out systematic yet flexible guidelines for analysing qualitative data to ‘construct theories grounded in the data itself’, from which one can build a narrative.

## Keepin’ It Real

Participants in the qualitative research expressed a desire for the researcher to be sensitive toward their vulnerabilities around the’ issues being discussed. The term used by participants to describe this type of interaction was ‘keepin’ it real’.

Not only did ‘keepin’ it real’ build trust, it created a ‘safe space’ in which young people could share their feelings without judgment; reported as a rare occurrence by many.

## Off The Record

While the majority of participants in the qualitative research responded well to the group setting, some felt vulnerable and restricted because of it, and were concerned that sharing experiences in this manner would affect their standing among their peers.

For this reason, several participants did not open up fully in the group setting and, instead, a number of ‘off the record’ conversations were conducted with participants, with an agreement that their accounts would be presented as part of the final research.

# Overall Findings from the research groups

## 1. Young people subjected to 'father deficit' are often likely to partake in negative behaviours, such as crime or substance misuse.

Responses to the quantitative survey associated many negative attributes to a father's absence. Affected young people were more likely to feel angry or violent, or be involved in anti-social behaviour and crime. They were also more likely to feel less secure, confident or happy.

Children of absent fathers were seen as more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour (80.3 per cent), crime (76.4 per cent), or drug use (69.1 per cent).

## 2. Young people subjected to 'father deficit' lack a positive image of themselves, causing problems that can manifest differently according to gender.

While results of the quantitative survey suggested that young men are affected more than women by having an absent father (with a ratio of 6:1), a poor self-image was common to all those who participated in study groups, regardless of gender.

Many participants reported feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness as a result of their father's absence. Often, this was referred to as a 'lack of identity' and as a consequence; many had attempted to establish a 'street persona' made up from exaggerated characteristics of strength and resilience.

For many young men who base their sense of self on a flawed relationship with their father, the result can be something the sociologist James Messerschmidt (Masculinities and Crime, Rowman & Littlefield, 1993) refers to as 'counterfeit masculinity', where the male gender role is simplified into little more than a caricature of strength, anger and violence.

Young women can experience a similar exaggerated construction, acting out a skewed version of femininity which prioritises the use of sex and relationships with men above all else.

These distortions of identity often go on to form a basis for anti-social behaviour, which in turn can lead to criminal behaviour and drug or alcohol misuse.

Many of the young women interviewed spoke about there being a lack of sensitivity toward young women struggling with a lack of fathering, and how it is seen as a 'father/son' issue.

## 3. Young people subjected to 'father deficit' describe a daily struggle with their emotions, and a frustration at not having the opportunity to resolve negative feelings.

Participants in the qualitative study groups had difficulty understanding the complex emotions they were experiencing. These difficulties could manifest in extreme ways, and a number of the participants had begun to self harm, or had experienced eating disorders, as they struggled to control negative feelings.

89 per cent of responses to the quantitative questionnaire felt that talking about 'father deficit' was essential, and a need to have a 'safe space' to work through these issues was expressed by all participants in the qualitative research. This 'safe space' was described as being an informal environment, where they could talk, listen, learn and share their experiences; away from family, school or their peer group.

## 4. Young people subjected to 'father deficit' expressed a need to engage with positive, older role models in their communities.

Those interviewed in the qualitative study spoke about how their father's absence had denied them of the chance to learn life lessons from an older generation and they positively sought to re-establish an 'intergenerational link'.

In the quantitative study, 82 per cent of respondents believed that another male family member could be seen as a replacement for an absent father. 47 per cent felt the role could be filled by a mother's new boyfriend and 30 per cent felt that someone with 'street credibility' could be an effective replacement.

## 5. Young people subjected to 'father deficit' are rarely held accountable for their actions.

Young people who share common experiences around 'father deficit' also have pronounced feelings of inadequacy, brought on by a perceived inability to address personal problems. They also have few (or even no) older role models from who they are willing to take advice and guidance. The net result is a kind of unchallenged 'internal oppression', which leads to a withdrawal from society and positive social interactions, and an unwillingness to interact with others.

Self-destructive in nature, these views often remain in a kind of 'unalterable denial' that is unresponsive to any suggestions of change. Any such challenges dwindle; resulting in little or no accountability of an individual's actions or behaviour.

# Findings of the qualitative research by location

## Liverpool

Participants talked openly about feelings of rejection, and many felt that they were being punished for mistakes that were not of their own making. This led to feelings of deep resentment and bitterness towards their fathers. A need to feel loved and treated respectfully was prevalent in all of the participants' accounts.

Often, the experiences being shared were harrowing. One young woman talked about how she had self-harmed, and the young men in the group talked about feelings of anger and violence.

Several of the young men in the Liverpool group were themselves fathers. They talked openly about the difficulties they had in fulfilling this role, and how these struggles were often rooted in not having their own father's support.

One young man talked about his own child and how inadequate he felt in not being able to parent adequately. He felt he was seeing the same cycle that had affected him, with his father's inability to parent, now affecting his own child. The desire to break this cycle was strong, but his inability to do so caused the young man a great amount of anguish.

All participants were frustrated at their current situation, but felt it was somehow inevitable because of their fathers' absence, and a lack of positive values being provided to them as they were growing up. This was also cited as a contributing factor to any criminal activity participants had been involved in.

## Brent, London

In this instance, participants included parents, who shared their own stories. Emotions ran high and at times, the atmosphere during the discussions became tense. Many of the young people found it difficult to articulate their thoughts and feelings without becoming upset or angry.

Many similar themes emerged to those discussed in Liverpool, with many feeling resentment and anger towards absent fathers. Also discussed were issues of physical abuse, neglect and family conflict.

In addition, the group spoke about the attraction of joining a gang and a central theme was that of keeping a 'code of the streets', an implicitly agreed set of rules and behaviours whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. Perhaps surprisingly, this 'code' was referred to be by parents as well as the young people present.

As with Liverpool, many participants felt they were carrying a burden because of their lack of fathering, and had little opportunity to reflect on this, or find a way of working through the problems it had created.

## Derby

A key finding of the Derby session was how a father or family's absence affects foreign nationals. In this session, two young men from Slovakia talked about being separated from their fathers and how this had led to pronounced feelings of vulnerability; feelings that they had sought to deal with through the use of drugs, and through presenting an inflated sense of their own masculinity.

They also felt that, in some instances, the cultural mores of their home country clashed with those of the UK, and this compounded feelings of being displaced. Both spoke fondly of their fathers, but felt their absence denied them a sense of guidance and support, to help cope with these feelings.

# Recommendations in detail

## 1. Young people need a 'safe space' in which to work through negative emotions.

89 per cent of respondents to our quantitative survey expressed a desire to be listened to, and from both that and our qualitative research, it is clear that young people with absent fathers find it difficult to cope with a range of complex emotions. They also find it difficult to work through these emotions at home, or among friends – often resulting in these problems being left unexamined.

Therefore, agencies should provide informal environments, where young people can talk, listen, learn and share their experiences; away from family, school or their peer group.

## 2. Young people must be involved in the design of support services.

Young people felt that too many support services weren't suitable for them, and hadn't been designed with their concerns, cultures and lifestyles in mind.

From the point of inception, service design should include input from that service's target client group. In this case, young people would inform everything from the design of the building to opening times, and the approach of staff.

By doing so, service providers would also demonstrate a level of cultural competency, cooperation and trustworthiness.

## 3. Collaborative, multi-agency support must be provided in order to tackle 'father deficit' issues.

Agencies that support young people and absentee fathers should explore and develop stronger partnerships with each other. They should share knowledge and continually research the issue, reviewing that research and expanding the evidence base. Through the creation of a national steering group, they should develop better resources and information, and seek to influence national policy and practice. This would be especially prescient, as evidence based practice is becoming central to the commissioning of support services.

## 4. Young people need to establish trusted links with older generations.

Those who took part in the focus groups were determined to be good parents themselves; something that was backed up by polling (81.5 per cent of respondents believed that young people growing up without fathers were more likely to become better parents because of their experiences).

Participants stated that, to achieve this, they required guidance from older generations, and to learn from that generation's experiences.

These experiences often lay outside the remit of support services. Therefore agencies should invest in mentoring and other methods of creating links between young people and older role models, as a way of adding value to their existing provision.

## 5. The importance of community activities must be recognised in helping absentee fathers fulfil their responsibility as positive male role models for their children.

Community activities based around sport, the arts and outdoor pursuits provide an opportunity for young people and absentee fathers to share time together, share experiences, bond and develop positive methods of contact. These activities should be given a greater focus, and links should be established between providers of such activities and support agencies.

# APPENDICES

Results of quantitative survey conducted by Survation.

*How is a young person affected if their father is absent from their life?*

They are more angry				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	68	58	126	12.6%
Sometimes	281	270	551	54.8%
Every once in a while	99	123	222	22%
Rarely	29	46	75	7.4%
Never	12	20	32	3.2%
Total	489	517	1006	100%

They are more likely to be involved in crime				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	58	47	105	10.6%
Sometimes	182	189	371	37.4%
Every once in a while	137	146	283	28.4%
Rarely	75	99	174	17.4%
Never	29	33	62	6.2%
Total	481	514	995	100%

They are less confident				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	55	54	109	10.9%
Sometimes	270	266	536	53.4%
Every once in a while	105	112	217	21.6%
Rarely	40	65	105	10.5%
Never	16	21	36	3.6%
Total	486	518	1003	100%

They are less happy				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	74	68	142	14.2%
Sometimes	197	203	400	40.1%
Every once in a while	160	158	318	31.8%
Rarely	37	67	104	10.5%
Never	14	20	34	3.4%
Total	481	516	998	100%

They are less secure				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	80	111	191	19.1%
Sometimes	245	257	502	50.1%
Every once in a while	114	95	209	20.9%
Rarely	30	39	69	6.9%
Never	15	15	30	3%
Total	484	517	1001	100%

They are more likely to drink alcohol				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	51	44	95	9.6%
Sometimes	181	152	333	33.5%
Every once in a while	159	170	329	33%
Rarely	63	113	176	17.6%
Never	28	34	62	6.3%
Total	482	513	995	100%

They are more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	73	59	132	13.2%
Sometimes	204	214	418	42%
Every once in a while	118	132	250	25.1%
Rarely	63	80	143	14.4%
Never	21	32	53	5.4%
Total	479	517	996	100%

They are more likely to use drugs				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	37	38	75	7.6%
Sometimes	166	137	303	30.6%
Every once in a while	146	161	307	30.9%
Rarely	96	132	228	23%
Never	36	43	79	7.9%
Total	481	511	992	100%

They are more independent				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	95	85	180	18.1%
Sometimes	223	249	472	47.2%
Every once in a while	104	120	224	22.4%
Rarely	45	145	90	9%
Never	16	16	32	3.2%
Total	483	515	998	100%

They are more likely to have an eating disorder				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	20	17	37	3.7%
Sometimes	104	106	210	21.1%
Every once in a while	137	142	279	28.1%
Rarely	165	204	369	37.2%
Never	51	48	99	10%
Total	477	517	994	100%

They are more likely to be a better parent themselves				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	70	84	154	15.4%
Sometimes	174	237	411	41.2%
Every once in a while	133	116	249	24.9%
Rarely	79	63	142	14.3%
Never	28	15	43	4.3%
Total	484	515	999	100%

They are more likely to be violent				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	41	33	74	7.5%
Sometimes	165	151	316	31.8%
Every once in a while	160	147	306	30.9%
Rarely	82	142	224	22.6%
Never	31	41	72	7.3%
Total	479	514	992	100%

They are more likely to self harm				
	Male	Female	Total	
Almost always	28	30	58	5.8%
Sometimes	143	140	283	28.4%
Every once in a while	146	151	297	29.8%
Rarely	127	146	273	27.4%
Never	38	47	85	8.6%
Total	482	514	996	100%



## Focus group questions:

1. Describe the relationship with your own father
2. What was/ is the biggest barrier when relating to your own father?
3. How did the relationship with your father affect the way you are now?
4. What can a father do to take care of his children when he's not in the home?
5. How do you deal with your feelings in relation to your father?
6. Do you share your feelings with other people?
7. If you could speak to yourself aged 5, what would you say?
8. If you could say anything to your father, what would it be?
9. Final thoughts.

## Template for interviewees' poems

Dear Dad

As a child, I:

As your son/ daughter, I:

As a youth, I:

As a young man/ woman I need:

As your son/ daughter, I want:

On the inside, I feel:

On the outside, I feel:

When I look at my life, I:

Who I was:

Who I am is:

What I want to be is:

What I want in life is:

What I need right now is:

So, finally Dad, I want to say:

## Further reading

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**'As a child I look up to you  
As your son, I want to say I love you  
As a youth, I admire you  
As a young man, you're by my side  
On the inside, I feel happy that you're in my life  
When I look at my life, I cherish every moment  
Who I am is a young man, starting to grow as a person  
Who I want to be is someone that makes a difference  
What I want in life is success, and not just material things; love  
What I need right now is guidance to the right paths in life  
So finally Dad, I want to say I love you with all of my heart'**

Poem by Service user at Addaction Liverpool, April 2011.

**'As a child I did not understand why  
As your daughter I felt unwanted and I was to blame  
As a youth I was abandoned by a man I thought loved me  
As a young woman I need guidance and protection  
As your daughter I want your love and security  
On the inside I feel insecure, unhappy  
A piece of the jigsaw is missing  
On the outside I feel confident  
When I look at my life I think of you and why  
Who I was as a young girl who struggled without you  
Who I am is a woman who had one chance to speak to you  
Who I want to be is a good person and a role model to others who have struggled like I did  
What I want in life is contentment and peace of mind  
What I need right now is forgiveness for all the things I said and a hug  
So finally Dad, I want to say I didn't understand why. Plus, I struggled with addiction and survived and you were by my side  
Now you have gone, I'm glad we had one time together to put the pieces of the jigsaw together  
RIP Dad'**

Poem by Service user at Addaction Brentl, April 2011.

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