

working with families. The mothers felt isolated and that their needs were rarely met within the community, and that their reactions to the births had been different from their partners. Because the project had involved only interviews with the mothers, it reflected their feelings and their perceptions of the fathers' responses.

An increasing awareness developed of how little was known of the reactions of the fathers in these circumstances particularly in the very early days following the birth.

It was found that when research was conducted (Blacher 1984), the findings were based on clinical observations of small samples and interviews with the mothers. Meyer (1986) suggests that amid the explosion of research into the role of the father in society as a whole and the family in particular, the fathers of children with special needs have been relatively ignored. An assumption was made that what was good for the mother was good for the father (Meyer 1986). McConachie (1986), is aware that the roles of separate members of the family are liable to be obscured unless each is interviewed separately and few researchers have interviewed the fathers of children with special needs on their own. Collins (cited Meyer 1986) suggests that a major reason for this is that fathers are inaccessible during the day and in order to observe fathers, researchers would have to work unsocial hours during the evening and at weekends.

Literature on the subject is sparse (McConachie 1986, Hornby 1991, Rodrigue, Morgan and Geffken 1992). From a review of 24 studies in America, it was found such fathers were rarely consulted and discussion papers 'allot a page or so to fathers as an aside' (McConachie 1986, page 43). One can understand why fathers must feel second-class parents (Lewis 1986).

Consequently in 1991, the researcher set out to redress the balance a little and to investigate the feelings of the fathers of these same children at the time of their birth.

Early considerations

A major consideration when planning the enquiry was the restricted size and constitution of the study group. Of the nine families originally contacted, it was only possible to

interview seven fathers. (One family had left the area and in another, only the mother remained.) Having acknowledged that the sample was small and located within a unitary authority, it was still felt that the interviews would provide information directly from the actual evidence source of this research, i. e. the fathers, and that first-hand responses would provide the possibility to formulate hypotheses based on their personal reflections and recollections.

Before embarking on this in-depth study, careful thought was given to the method of approaching the fathers and indeed, whether the approach would intrude into areas of their lives which were wholly private. This concern arose because during the interviews with the mothers, some became very distressed when discussing the events of the early weeks and it was felt that fathers may exhibit similar feelings and become embarrassed. Secondly, many of the mothers commented on the father's inability to discuss the child with them. One mother stated, "He was very upset, and he's never said much since. "

Several approaches to making the initial contact were considered, e. g. telephone calls, visits, informal notes, but it was decided to approach the fathers formally by letter - the wording of which would emphasise the academic aspect of the study and the lack of information on the subject. It was hoped that as the researcher was known to the families, she would not be perceived as 'a prying individual interested in research for its own sake' (A father 1991). The letter included a tear-off slip which the fathers were asked to return only if they were prepared to talk. Despite the initial fears, all seven were returned but in five cases the fathers stressed that they would speak to the researcher only because they knew her.

As the fathers were not accessible during the day, the interviews were arranged for the evening (at around 8.00 p. m.). The interviews took place in the home and the responses were recorded in note form as it was felt that the presence of a tape recorder could have been intrusive. Both the length of the interviews (between two and three hours) and the apparent ease with which the fathers spoke, surprised and moved the researcher. This could be attributed to the fact that at last they felt that someone was listening to them (Cunningham and Davis 1985).