

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, shirtless, looking down at a newborn baby lying in a hospital bed. The baby is wrapped in a white blanket and is looking towards the man. The background shows a hospital bed with a blue blanket and a wooden headboard.

**Opportunities for
advocacy and
service
delivery to
enhance fathers'
involvement**

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COVID-19: Locked Down and Let Down

Research findings - UK

Families have had to adapt rapidly to changing and uncertain circumstances, with scarce information, mixed messages and a reduction in services.

- Fathers and other co-parents absent from antenatal care and information, labour and birth.
- 85% Professionals report mothers being distressed by the restrictions **placed on fathers**

Around 30% of new mothers felt lockdown had a very negative impact on them

83% parents said no birth prep/antenatal classes were planned

80% of fathers were not allowed to attend scans, and no video option

84% said they have felt less able to support mum than they would have liked

“I’m scared for my child. I’m scared for my partner.. I’m scared that if I lose my job I’ll not be able to pay rent. I’m scared of going homeless and having nowhere to go. I am terrified.” Expectant Father

COVID-19: A new opportunity?

Fathers have been able to spend more time with their babies and partners:

- During lockdown fathers have nearly doubled the time they spend on childcare.
- On average, fathers are now doing some childcare during 8 hours of the day, compared with 4 hours in 2014/15.

Around 40% of new mothers said they felt lockdown had a *positive impact* on their experience.

They valued the privacy, **having a supportive partner at home**, less visitors and having more time to focus on their baby.

This made them more confident and they breastfed for longer as a result.

COVID-19: A new opportunity?

- **Greater partner support:**

- Fathers at home for longer after the birth.
- More time to support breastfeeding and maternal recovery from both an emotional and physical perspective
- This shared care was felt to increase bonds between partner and baby and strengthen the new parent relationship

“In addition to enjoying so many special moments together seeing our baby develop, having 2 of us here all the time means there's much more time for me to focus on breastfeeding our baby”

New mother.



Building Back Better

- ‘Fathers at home’ are more ***visible***:
 - New opportunities to directly engage with them *alongside* the mothers and *on their own* if required.
 - Fathers can be great advocates and ‘on the ground’ supporters.
 - Fathers can support the use of the technology and learn new ways to support breastfeeding.
 - Fathers who missed the key early moments due to exclusion can benefit from support around building strong connections with their child, such as solo-care. Mothers whose partners do more childcare are more satisfied!
 - Opportunities to access flexible working can support the changes within family behaviour we have seen this year.
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Building Back Better

- **Key questions for practice:**

- **Do you know who the fathers are?**
- **What is your offer to them and their family?**
- **What stands in the way of direct engagement?**

- Online and telephone support is likely to remain as a core support mechanism for some time.
- Although some mothers felt supported by the online delivery of support, others struggled, finding online support impersonal, inaccurate or difficult to access.
- Use of camera phones/Zoom for consultations can improve fathers' knowledge of breastfeeding, particularly how to deal with difficulties. A father holding the camera would imply he is listening!



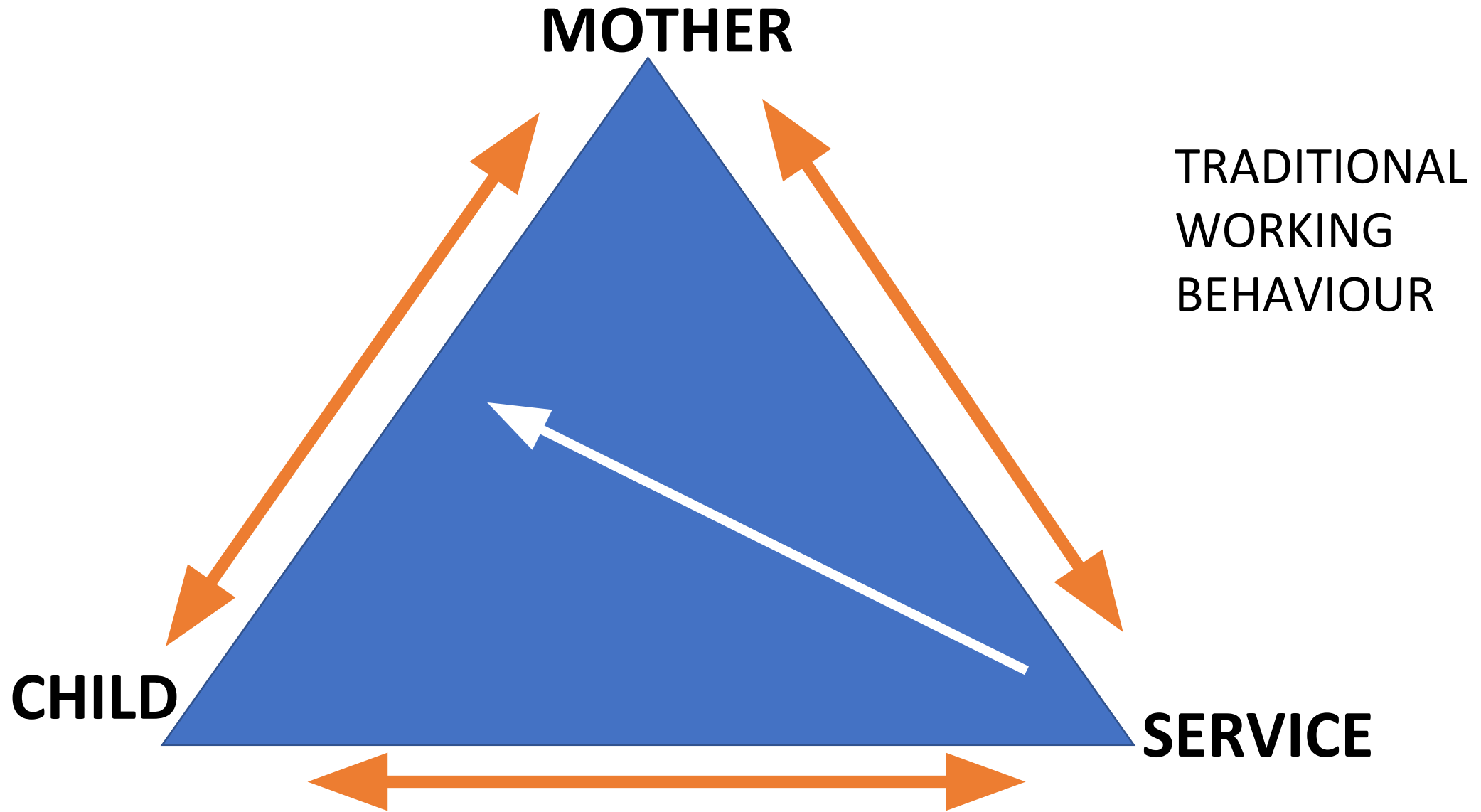
Key Messages

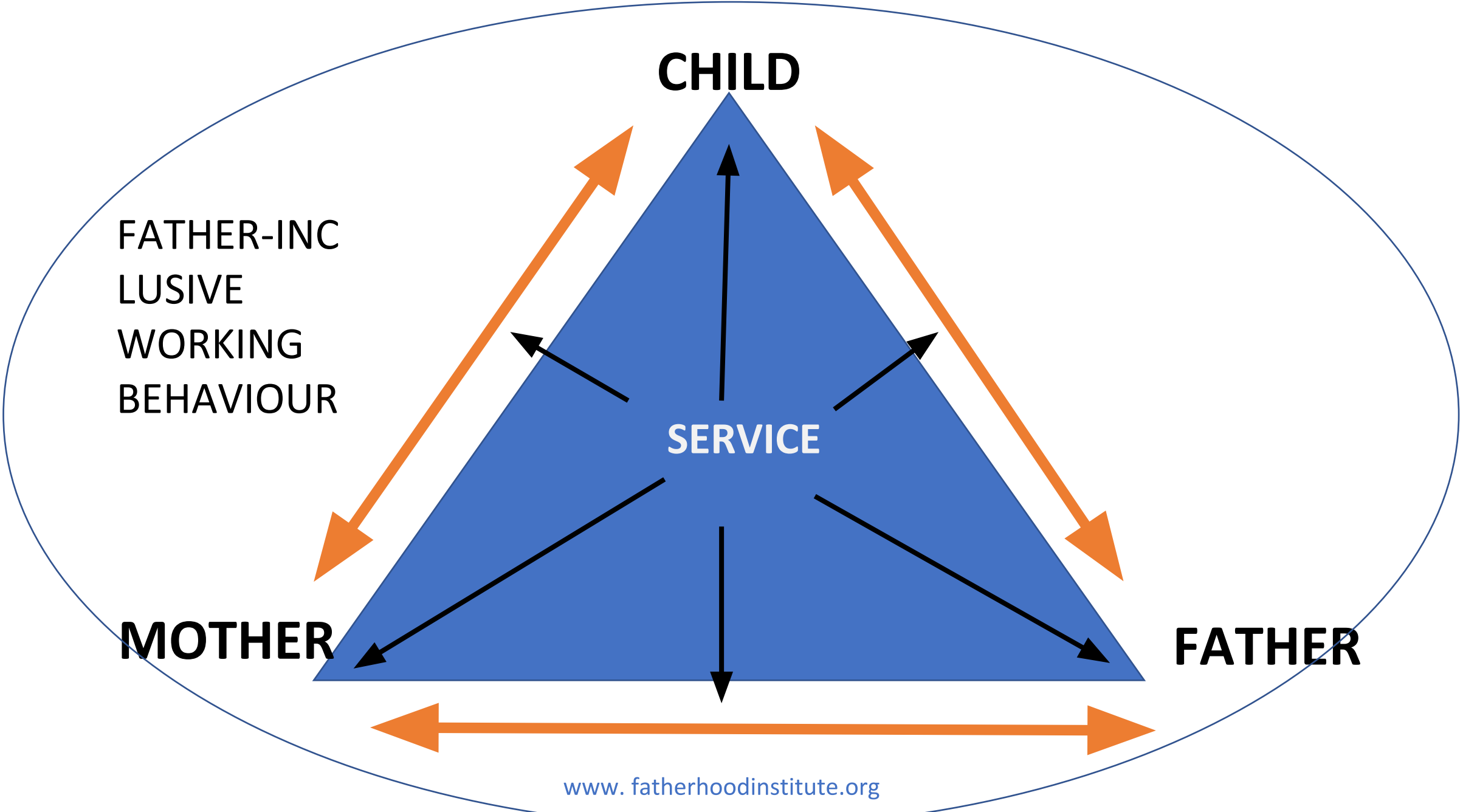
- COVID-19 has seen a migration of fathers back to the home
- Their involvement has been valued highly by the mother
- Mothers rate maternal health services better IF they see that the service has involved with the father
- Fathers typically desire to be well informed and engaged with.
- COVID has given us opportunities to work differently – Fathers are more ‘visible’ at home, have their own unique experiences and requirements.

Engaging fathers in Health Care Services

How different elements of the healthcare system can be utilised to engage fathers and facilitate shared care within the couple relationship







Checklist for Services

Do you specifically invite mother and father (avoiding the word 'parents')?

Do your handouts, publicity and promotional material address fathers' role, support for mother, father-child relationships and own transition to parenthood?

Are fathers actively engaged during the engagement?

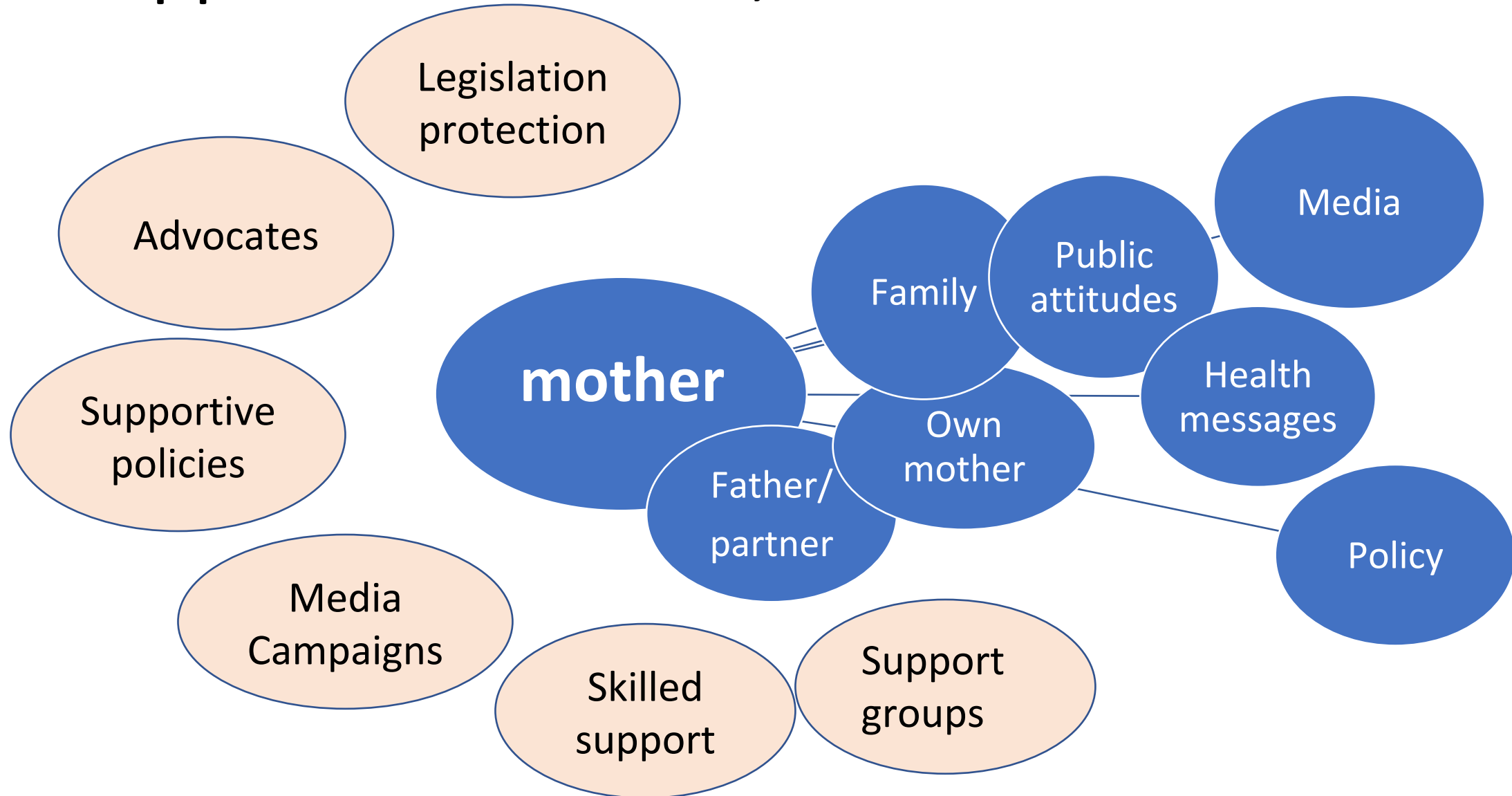
Do you time visits, appointments and sessions so that both parents can attend?

Does your information mention breastfeeding as family teamwork?

Does your work promote the importance of the bonds between babies and other family members, fathers in particular?

Do you offer father-only/mother only groups only when appropriate?

Supportive Attitudes, Societal Norms.



Conclusion

- The role of the father, and what we believe they are and do, sits within complex, and often competing, frameworks and discourse around gender equality, public policy, masculinity and social and cultural norms, and as the role of the father in families has changed over time (and so has our understanding of his influence) , public policy and the offer to families has failed to 'catch up' or represent the realities of family life.
- The restrictions during the pandemic has required us all to work, and live differently. While many important services have been reduced, there are opportunities to work differently with the family around the mother, and build upon new relationships with the father.

Brown & Shenker (2020) Experiences of breastfeeding during COVID19: Lessons for future practical and emotional support <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/mcn.13088>

Also, useful summary here: <https://theconversation.com/breastfeeding-during-lockdown-how-coronavirus-had-a-devastating-impact-on-some-new-families-146159>

Babies in Lockdown: listening to parents to build back better (2020). Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent-Infant Foundation. <https://www.home-start.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=582bdd56-8950-452d-8b2e-52348a5788d9>

Brown. A. (2017) Breastfeeding as a public health responsibility: a review of the evidence. J Hum Nutr Diet. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jhn.12496>

Howl, J. (2019). Engaging Fathers in the Perinatal Period to Support Breastfeeding <https://www.wcmt.org.uk/sites/default/files/report-documents/Garratt%20J%202017%20Final.pdf>

Fatherhood Institute Research Summary: Fathers and Breastfeeding. 2007
<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/FI-Research-Summary-Fathers-and-Breastfeeding.pdf>



FAB Fathers and Breastfeeding

