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Fatherhood Institute research summary:

Fathers' impact on their children's learning and achievement

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Introduction

Major studies across the world which follow families over time have found fathers' involvement with their children linked with their higher educational achievement and higher educational /occupational mobility relative to their parents (Sarkadi et al, 2008; Flouri, 2005; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). For example, in the UK, fathers' involvement with their 7 and 11 year old children is linked with their better national examination performance at age 16 (Lewis et al, 1982) and their educational attainment at age 20 (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004). This is as true for daughters as for sons, across all social classes – and whether the mother is highly involved too, or not.

Children of involved fathers are more likely to live in cognitively stimulating homes (Williams & Sternberg, 2002) and fathers' commitment to the education process also matters. In 1992, British sociologists Dennis & Erdos found unemployed fathers' support for their children's education strongly connected with those children's escape from disadvantage. More recently, a father's interest in his child's education, particularly at age 11, has been found to have more influence than family background, the child's personality or poverty on education success (Hango, 2007). Blanden (2006) found low fatherly interest similarly predictive – in the other direction: a father's low interest in his son's education, for instance, reduces his boy's chances of escaping poverty by 25%.

Several reliable studies (for review, see Goldman, 2005) have shown high levels of interest by a father in his child's schooling and education, his high expectations for their achievement and his greater direct involvement in their learning, education and schools (see also Roopnarine et al, 2006) associated with children's better exam / test / class results; higher levels of educational qualification; greater progress at school; better attitudes towards school and higher educational expectations. And this isn't just true for middle-class families: whatever the father's education level his interest and participation pay off for his children.¹

Levels/trends in fathers' involvement in schools

US research (National Center for Fathering, 2009) reports that while 32% of fathers never visit their child's classroom and 54% never volunteer at school, the trend for their involvement is upward. Over the past 10 years the percentage of fathers taking their child to school has risen from 38% to 54%; attending class events from 28% to 35%; visiting their child's classroom from 30% to 41% and volunteering at their child's school from 20% to 28%. Attending parent-teacher conferences is up from 69% to 77%; attending school meetings from 28% to 35%; and attending school-based parents' meetings from 47% to 59%.

¹ McBride et al (2004) found father involvement in school settings mediates the relationship between school, family and neighbourhood factors and academic outcomes. This study is particularly interesting in that it not only looked at fathers' involvement in terms of activities ('volunteering', 'going on school trips') but also measured frequency of fathers' 'talks with school officials' as well as their 'talks with the child' about events and activities at school. All were associated with better child achievement (see also McBride et al, 2005).

While similar 'trend' data are, surprisingly not yet gathered in England², a South Lanarkshire online survey of 177 men (Henderson, 2007) found 86% of this self-selected sample reading with their children, 60% helping 'often' with schoolwork and 77% 'often' attending parents' night. And Peters et al (2008) found British mothers only a little more likely than fathers (53% v. 45%) to say they feel 'very involved' in their child's education.

Trends mask important differences: in a low-income US sample, more than 50% of the fathers had no contact with their kindergarten child's teacher; and in infants school only 10% of family-school communication was with fathers (Rimm-Kaufmann & Zang, 2005).

Factors associated with two-parent fathers' greater school involvement include mothers' (high) school involvement, fathers' (high) education level and the presence of a step-mother. For non-resident fathers, mothers' education level and whether child support is paid are additional factors (Nord et al, 1998).

The widespread failure of non-resident fathers to engage with their children's schools - 31% of the non-resident fathers who have contact with their children go into their schools, compared with 75% of fathers who live at home (Nord et al, 1998) - may be contributing to school failure in this group. However, it would be wrong to assume that non-resident fathers are unwilling. A UK survey (Peters et al, 2008) found 70% of two-parent-family fathers and 81% of non-resident parents (mainly men) wanting to be more involved in their children's education. School processes that fail to include non-resident fathers and staff anxieties may be key (Burgess, 2009; McBride et al, 2000; Lloyd, 1999; Fletcher, 1997).

Fathers v. mothers: involvement in education

While at first sight gender is the primary driver in fathers' lesser involvement with children's education, more subtle research suggests that the picture is more complicated. The major determining factor may be working hours. A number of studies have found little or no difference between mothers' and fathers' reading with children, helping with homework, helping out in classrooms or feeling involved in schooling, once the parents' working hours are taken into account (Peters et al, 2008; Williams et al. 2002).³

However, because many more UK fathers than mothers work fulltime; and because there are so few men working in childhood services, libraries, schools and nurseries which almost never employ systematic approaches to drawing fathers in; and because adult men's reading choices rarely reflect the kind of reading done in school, far fewer males than females 'model' interest in

² With political will, such data could be easily gathered in England: bodies that gather data on 'parental' involvement or contain that measure in school assessment would simply have to disaggregate the 'parent' data by gender. In fact by not doing so they may be acting unlawfully, in light of the Gender Equality Duty in the Equality Act, now in force across Britain

³ Although fathers are involved more often than mothers in particular out of school learning such as building and repairing, hobbies, IT, maths and physical play (Goldman, 2005).

literacy or interact with children in literacy activities, in the home or out of it.. This, it has been suggested, may contribute to declining rates of school achievement in boys (e.g. Trent and Slade, 2001, Wragg et al., 1998), an effect which may be exacerbated by the well documented tendency of both mothers and fathers to verbalise, sing songs and rhymes and share books less often with boys than with girls from infancy onwards (DCSF, 2008).

The care/education 'nexus'

A key predictor of fathers' involvement in children's learning is having been involved in their care very early on (Goldman, 2005). In the US fathers' greater involvement in routine childcare is associated with children's higher school grades (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999). A study of families with disabled children found them more likely to display interest in literacy materials and in adults who use literacy materials when their fathers were involved in child care and household routines, as well as engaging them directly in play and visiting (Barnes, 2009).

When parents share care more equitably, fathers engage in more early literacy activities with their young children than in families where childrearing tasks are divided traditionally by gender (Ortiz, 1996). Such parents are also more likely to share similar attitudes toward childrearing and to resolve family conflicts calmly and with compromise. This greater 'co-parenting' (as it is called) may in part explain the positive educational effect of high father involvement in childcare: Yeung (2004) found a one-point increase in fathers' co-parenting behaviour associated with an almost four-point increase in children's academic test scores. In fact, fathers' co-parenting was second only to their education level in predicting good educational outcomes for their children – and both proved more important than the fathers' income.

Fathers' earnings and education

This does not mean that fathers' income is insignificant. Fathers' earnings are linked to their children's educational attainment (Ermish & Francisoni, 2002) and have been found to predict, among other things, sons' years of schooling (Yeung, 2004). But it's not fathers' earnings but family earnings that count: studies that have compared the impact of fathers' and mothers' earnings have found them to be equally influential on children's education success (for review, see Yeung, 2004).

The father's own education level is also important (Yeung, 2004) and is of course linked to his income: better educated fathers tend to earn more. Interestingly, when a recent UK study found mothers' education levels more predictive than fathers' of academic success for girls in particular, this was pounced on as evidence of fathers' non-significance (Roberts, 2010). In fact, as we show in this paper, fathers' influences are many and various; and there were substantial limitations in that research, which did not measure 'couple effects' such as the likelihood of men with well-educated partners being more supportive of girls' education.

There may also be small genetic effects: cleverer fathers/mothers = better educated fathers/mothers = cleverer children = better educated children (Pleck, 2010). However, what is almost certainly most significant is that a father's education (like a mother's) affects his

behaviour in ways that are vital to his children's cognitive development, as well as enabling him to provide them with better material and educational resources (Yeung, 2004).

Children's behaviour at school

Fathers' (higher) commitment to their child's education and their involvement with the school are also associated with children's better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion (for review, see Goldman, 2005). Children's school behaviour is strongly linked with their educational attainment; and fathers' influence on that behaviour is not only significant (Lloyd et al, 2003); Velleman, 2004; Jaffee et al, 1990) but may at times be more significant than mothers': for instance, fathers' harsh parenting is more strongly linked to children's (especially boys') aggression than is mothers' harsh parenting (Chang et al, 2003).

Conversely, high father involvement (as measured by reading, disciplining, taking on trips) is associated with fewer child behaviour problems and lower criminality and substance misuse (Sarkadi et al, 2008; Flouri, 2005; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004) all of which tend to be played out in school and impact on achievement. Children also tend to do better and behave better when they have high levels of self-esteem, self-regulation, self-efficacy etc. The quality and quantity of fathers' parenting impact strongly on these and other significant measures of adjustment (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

These effects are not limited to fathers in two-parent families. In separated families, a number of studies have found that where non-resident fathers are more than 'McDonalds Dads' and spend sufficient time with them to engage in a wide range of everyday activities with them, the children tend not only to achieve better at school but to be subject to fewer suspensions and lower drop-out rates (for reviews, see Fabricius et al, 2010).

Earlier, we mentioned the impact of 'couple effects' on children's educational outcomes. These also apply, of course, to children's behaviour – and from there to school adjustment. For example, Cowan et al (1994) found aggression/bad behaviour in children directly linked to their parents' fighting; and Sturge-Apple et al (2006) found that fathers who withdrew unhappily from their partners also tended to become emotionally unavailable to their children, which was connected with their aggressive/delinquent behaviour and poor school adjustment.

When parents separate, no, or very low, father-child contact can exacerbate bad behaviour, not least because it contributes to difficulties with peer relationships including bullying (Parke et al, 2004; Berdondini & Smith, 1996) and causes children considerable distress, anger and self-doubt which often persist into adulthood (Fortin et al, 2006; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 1998)). When fathers' absence leaves mothers with more parenting or financial stress, children's behaviour is further negatively affected (McLanahan, 1997; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).

A study that investigated the impact of father involvement on children born to teenage mothers (and took account of maternal risk factors) found greater father-child contact related not only to fewer child behaviour problems, but also to children's higher reading scores (Howard, Lefever, Borkowski & Whitman, 2006).

Brain development

Up to 80% of children excluded from school in years 10 and 11 have problems that can be traced back to poor literacy levels in years 3 and 4 (Bulpitt, cited by Lloyd, 1999).

Where do fathers fit in? Numerous studies demonstrate that language exposure in very early life has a significant effect on later verbal skills (Clark, 2009). It is therefore not surprising to learn that:

- High quality (sensitive/supportive) and substantial father involvement from the month following birth is connected with a range of positive outcomes in babies and toddlers⁴ including better language development and higher IQs at 12 months and 3 years (Yogman et al, 1995; Magill-Evans & Harrison, 1999)
- The 'IQ effect' continues: a significant relationship is found between positive father engagement at age 6, and IQ and educational achievement at age 7 (Gottfried et al, 1988); and between high father involvement at age 7 and IQ at age 7 (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004) and at age 11 (Nettle, 2008)
- The social class effect is substantial: Nettle (2008) found highly-involved middle-class fathers having a greater (positive) impact on their children's IQs than highly-involved working-class dads.

It is interesting to note that two-parent-family-fathers who spend little time with their children at age 7 do not impact on their IQ level at all. Their (non) impact is the same as that of totally absent fathers (Nettle, 2008). Among other things, this casts doubt on the validity of crudely comparing outcomes in father-present v. father-absent homes: variations in the degree of involvement by fathers, whether living with their children full time or not, need to be taken into account.

Fathering quality and educational attainment

Fathers' affection, support, warm-but-firm parenting style and high levels of parental sensitivity⁵ are strongly linked with their children's better educational outcomes. In addition to the IQ effects noted above:

⁴ Controlling for mothers' behaviour, fathers' positive engagement in the month following birth has an independent association with infants' cognitive functioning at one year (Nugent, 1991). Early paternal *stimulation* is correlated with infant boys' mastery motivation (Yarrow et al, 1984); paternal *sensitivity* with both sexes' higher linguistic/cognitive capacities at 18 months; and paternal *involvement* with infants' sensorimotor development (Wachs et al, 1971).

⁵ Fathers who exhibit 'parental sensitivity' generally function as a supportive presence, respect their children's autonomy and exhibit low levels of hostility towards them. This is more often found in men who were older when they first became fathers, hold less traditional child rearing beliefs and report more intimacy with their children's mothers (NICHD, 2000).

- "School readiness" in young children is associated with high levels of paternal sensitivity, over and above mothers' sensitivity (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008).
- Fathers' support for their children's autonomy has been found, (controlling for a range of variables) to be significantly and uniquely associated with higher levels of reading and mathematics achievement among Grade 3 boys (Belsky et al, 2008).
- In a sample of African American families, fathers' authoritarian parenting style (rigid and bossy) was connected with poorer vocabulary and receptive and other skills in their children. In this study, fathers' parenting carried the weight of influence over mothers' parenting for facilitating both child academic skills and social behaviours (Roopnarine et al, 2006)

The subtlety of fathers' impact is illustrated by the finding that when fathers perceive their children to be capable of a task, this is linked not only with the children's positive perceptions of their own abilities, but also with the degree to which they value the task (Bhanot & Jovanovic, 2009).

Fathers and literacy

Although the quality of studies can be variable (Clark, 2009) research has found that:

- Around 1:3 fathers of young children read with them at least several times a week (for review, see Clark, 2009), including in a sample of very low income US fathers (Duursma et al, 2008). However, in this last study, 38% of the fathers reported reading to their toddlers no more than once per month, with more than half of these never reading to them at all (compared with only 4% of mothers who 'never read').
- In another study, a greater proportion of unemployed than employed fathers were found reading to their children every day (19% v.15%), although a larger proportion (8% v. 3%) did not read to them at all (Jones & Smith, 2008)
- The vast majority of resident fathers are involved in their children's literacy, even while they are rarely visible to family literacy programmes. In one well conducted study, only 7% of the fathers were not involved in children's literacy at home in any way (Morgan et al, 2009).
- British children say their fathers are the second most important people in their lives to inspire reading - second only to mothers (Clark et al, 2009)
- When asked who taught them to read, children mention fathers third, behind mothers and teachers (Clark & Foster, 2005)

- Fathers' reading habits can have a substantial influence on their sons' reading interest, levels and choices (Lloyd, 1999)⁶
- Frequency of fathers' reading to 1-2 year olds is linked with their greater interest in books later (Lyytinen et al, 1998)
- Time spent by fathers in reading to very young children is the strategy most consistently associated with their emergent literacy outcomes (Clark, 2009)
- One study with low income families, found fathers' reading to children connected with their cognitive but not language development – unless the father had at least a high school education (Duursma et al, 2008).
- Another (very sophisticated) study of low-income rural US families found fathers' education and vocabulary when reading picture books related to their infants' more advanced language development at 15 and 36 months (mother vocabulary was less influential) (Family Life Project Investigators, 2010)
- A positive relationship has been found between fathers' own literacy use and children's reading test scores (Gallimore et al, 1991)

While within-gender variation is enormous, and parents' vocabulary use is far more powerfully affected by their education level than their sex, some studies suggest that fathers' verbal interactions with their children may differ from mothers'; and that this may sometimes be to their children's advantage. Fathers have been found to use different and longer words with their children (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006); and also more abstract words (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Topics may also vary by gender, with mothers referring more frequently to emotions (this has been found to predict children's emotional understanding) and fathers more often using causal explanatory language, which predict their children's theory of mind (LaBounty et al, 2008).

Fathers v. mothers: influence on attainment

Given that mothers in the UK still assume overriding responsibility for children's education (e.g. West et al., 1998), very probably largely as a result of shorter hours in paid employment, one might expect mothers' influence to be greater. It is therefore surprising to learn that the findings vary, with no consistent pattern emerging. In some studies fathers are found to be more influential; in others, mothers; and in yet others, parental influence seems to be equivalent. Parents' influence can also vary by gender-of-child. The main message is that both fathers' and mothers' input is important, separately from each other and together (Pleck, 2010).

- Both fathers and mothers, separately and together, impact on their children's mathematics achievement in part through the gender stereotypes they hold about their

⁶ Daughters were not included in this study

sons'/daughters' likely abilities in this area. Both parents tend to underestimate their girls' (and overestimate their boys') capabilities⁷, although fathers' estimates are more closely aligned than mothers' to their children's actual capabilities in maths (and also, incidentally, in literacy) and are less skewed by beliefs about gender (for review see Bhanot¹ & Jovanovic, 2005).

- The amount of limit setting by both parents and the amount of conversation they engage in together, the higher their children's achievement (Scott, 2004).
- 'Is one good parent enough?' asked Ryan and colleagues (2006). In a low income sample, and controlling for parent demographics and income, the cognitive development of two year olds was highest when both parents were supportive.
- The benefits continued. Low income fathers' and mothers' joint supportiveness of their two-year-olds were found to correlate (independently of other effects) with the child's language and arithmetic scores just before starting school at age 5 (Martin et al, 2007).
- Children in middle school who are securely attached⁸ to both parents are perceived by teachers to be competent than children who are securely attached to just one parent (Diener et al, 2007)
- Both fathers' and mothers' support for their children's autonomy is independently associated with boys' (but not girls') improved reading/arithmetic scores between ages 6-8 (Belsky et al, 2008).
- The strength of fathers' impact may vary in relation to mothers' employment: one study found that in dual-earner families, fathers' vocabulary use was more influential than mothers' on very young children's language development (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006)
- The strength of fathers' impact may vary in relation to mothers' supportiveness: children's school readiness is particularly strongly linked to fathers' supportiveness when mothers score average or below on supportiveness (Martin et al, 2010).
- A study of middle class Israeli parents' writing with their children showed great similarity in spouses' guidance styles and a significant correlation between both fathers' and mothers' guidance and children's early literacy. Mothers, possibly because of greater time spent with children and in their schools, scored slightly higher than fathers on both the writing and the more general guidance measures (Aram, 2010).
- In low income communities, fathers' influence has been found to be more significant than mothers' for boys' (but not girls') escape from disadvantage (Blanden, 2006).

⁷ Their parents' perception are connected with girls' lower, and boys' higher, achievement in maths

⁸ Feel consistently loved and valued

- However, in a wider sample of children born in 1970, fathers' interest in their children's educational outcomes at age 10 predicted educational attainment in their 26 year old daughters, but not their sons (Flouri, 2006).
- Fathers exert greater influence than mothers on boys' educational choices with mothers' influence more powerful for daughters (Dryler, 1998).
- Fathers' risk-avoidance behaviour⁹ has a positive impact on sons' (but not daughters') educational attainment (Yeung, 2004).
- In hierarchical communities, fathers' influence may be more powerful than mothers on children of both sexes.¹⁰

Interventions: effectiveness

Given that children's achievement in low income households is strongly related to their parents' years of schooling (de Coulon et al, 2008) and not to their parents' adult learning (Sabates & Duckworth, 2009) extending years of schooling among poorer families is key to enhancing the educational achievement of their children, when they have them.

As for direct interventions with men who are already parents, the first step in increasing their engagement in a school or nursery setting is to work with the staff to motivate and equip them to encourage father/male involvement as part of parent involvement. A randomised controlled trial of such an intervention in two large prekindergarten 'at risk' US programme sites found an increase from 5% to 23% in fathers' participation in parent-involvement activities in the intervention site over a six month period. No increase in fathers' participation was found in the comparison site (McBride et al, 2000).

Since almost all fathers of young children are involved in their children's literacy and other educational development at home (particularly relating to school activities – Ortiz, 2001) even when they are not sure how to help (Karther, 2002) it is important that interventions acknowledge this and build on the fathers' existing knowledge, skills, cultures and participation (Morgan et al, 2009) rather than approaching fathers as if they aren't involved at home and aren't interested.

Both mothers and fathers of young children in very low income households tend to prefer assistance with their children's literacy to be delivered by flexible home visiting rather than through centre-based activities to (Morgan et al, 2009). One project recorded difficulties in sustaining fathers' interest and participation in a twice-weekly centre based literacy intervention which required huge commitment on the part of the fathers (Saracho, 2007). Ortiz et al (1999)

⁹ Such as wearing seatbelts, having savings, and having car insurance.

¹⁰ Ang (2006) found Asian fathers' (but not mothers') approval, closeness and sympathy with their children associated with positive teacher-child relationships for both boys and girls.

recommend supporting fathers to integrate learning activities with their children into natural daily routines (travelling together, telling/reading bedtime stories, watching television, reading newspapers and magazines).

That said, drawing fathers in to nurseries/schools can be achieved – and has delivered very positive results:

- In the UK, systematic inclusion of very vulnerable fathers in an Education Action Zone primary school resulted in some remarkable turnarounds in father-child relationships, including among non-resident fathers, accompanied by substantial improvements in some children's school behaviour, interest in school and school achievement (Mantle et al, 2006)
- Goldman (2005), among others, has documented well attended 'dads clubs' activities within schools resulting in behaviour/educational progress among individual children.
- In 2009, the Fatherhood Institute/Campaign for Learning Dads in Demand scheme <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=12&cID=1127> run in North London targeted underachieving children by drawing their mainly black and ethnic minority fathers in to make animated films with them in ten one-hour sessions, during which fathers were also equipped with new skills to support both their own and their children's learning. The evaluators identified Dads in Demand as contributing very significantly to the increased percentage (from 15% to 73%) of children achieving National Curriculum expected progress over the academic year; and the from 10% to 54% increase in those who exceeded National Curriculum expected progress in that year. Children's motivation and parental support at home also increased significantly, with 23% of the children making two years' worth of progress in the single year.

Kensal Rise Primary School targets fathers, including non-resident fathers, whose children have educational and/or emotional difficulties through the school's Behaviour Improvement Project. The child's main carer is asked about other family members. Details of non-resident fathers are obtained where possible. The school then contacts both resident and non-resident fathers and, among other things, encourages them to be involved in their child's work at school through regular discussions with the teacher and progress reports.

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=12&cID=720>

At **Coopers Lane Primary School** a general outreach programme, 'Dads Matter' has successfully increased fathers' presence around the school, and participation in their children's education. Sessions with fathers have included how to help with reading and homework and schemes to support father-child involvement at home.

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=12&cID=720>

Fathers' Story Week is run by the Fatherhood Institute in the UK, in partnership with a wide variety of educational and charitable organisations, to help schools engage more effectively with fathers. Timed to coincide with Fathers' Day each year, Fathers' Story Week provides opportunity for primary schools, nurseries, pre-schools and Children's Centres to get fathers and children working and spending time together in support of the children's learning and development. In

2010, the first Fathers' Story Week engaged over 2000 primary schools, nurseries, children's centres, pre-schools, childminders and even prisons, who ran 'taster' events to welcome dads into schools, including a 'Teatime Tales with Dad' cookery-and-reading session in Kent, a 'Real Men Read' week in Pontypridd, South Wales and a 'Dads Discovery Day' in Hull. In London one nursery planned a week of events including a session with a professional coach from Arsenal football club. Resources to encourage fathers' participation throughout the year are provided free, and in 2011 schools will report back on their engagement with dads subsequent to the 2010 Fathers' Story Week – and map out their plans for 2011. See <http://www.fathersstoryweek.org/about>

Real Men Read seeks to help bridge the gap in literacy development and education for male students by establishing an environment where boys have the chance to socialize and interact with one another while interacting with books. RMR validates their interests, offering choice and establishing positive male interactions with male volunteers who read to a classroom of kindergarten, 2nd, 5th, or 7th graders for one hour each month. See: <http://www.realmenread.com/>

Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) is an award-winning US family literacy programme held at libraries, early years centres, nurseries, primary schools, churches etc. Fathers receive a pack containing reading log, tips for reading aloud and recommended book lists. During four weeks the dads document time spent reading to their children and the number of books read. Collaborating with a public library encourages fathers to sign up, familiarizes them with the library, and provides access to free books to use in the programme, as well as books in languages other than English. More than 7,000 fathers have participated so far and statistically significant increases pre/post intervention include time spent reading to children, number of books read, level of involvement in children's education, amount and quality of time spent with children, and level of satisfaction with the father-child relationship. The percentage of fathers reading to their children three or more times per week increased from 53% to 80%. Contact s-green@tamu.edu
http://fcs.tamu.edu/fcs_programs/2009briefs/fred-2009-brief.pdf

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