



Engaging Fathers and other Significant Males

1. Introduction

For the purpose of this guidance the term 'father' is defined as '*any male with a child caretaking role, whether a biological father or a social father such as a stepfather or mother's partner*' (Maxwell et al. 2012:p.160). The father does not necessarily have to reside at the child's home.

'To move toward true inclusiveness in both protecting and supporting children, practitioners need to proactively assess and engage with all significant men in a child's life, understanding that some may pose risks, some may be assets and some may incorporate aspects of both.'
Strega et al. (2008: p.718)

This document seeks to pull together some of the contemporary thinking and research findings in respect of the engagement of fathers and other significant males in professional interventions. It identifies some of the challenges and barriers which can occur in frontline practice and seeks to offer some practical suggestions to support practitioners in their work with fathers.

There is evidence to suggest that it is not unusual for there to be a lack of visibility of some fathers or significant males, particularly when interventions relate to welfare or safeguarding concerns. A review of literature and evidence from Serious Case Reviews (Ofsted, 2011) highlights that fathers or significant males are far less involved or recognised than mothers when children's welfare is a concern. A point that is reiterated by Cameron et al. (2014) who suggest from the literature findings that men's lack of involvement is not due in the main to their absence or difficulties in engaging them, but from '*a strong tendency among child welfare workers to overlook fathers' involvement with their families*' (p.14). It is important to recognise that '*a child's father can have a significant, positive impact on the child's outcomes but only where he is causing no harm to the child*' (DCSF, 2010: p. 290).

It is widely recognised as problematic that there are generally low levels of engagement by professionals with both biological and social fathers. Evidence suggests that there is relatively little known about what works in engaging men. Research from Serious Case Reviews has found that there had often been too much emphasis placed on the mother's needs at the expense of a focus on the baby, child and/or young person, either during the antenatal period or after the birth. '*Mothers are seen much more frequently by practitioners, the reviews concluded that too often there had been insufficient focus on the father of the baby, the father's own needs and his role in the family*' (Roskill et al,2008).

2. Mothers as "Gatekeepers"

Mothers can be seen as "gatekeepers"; they can either facilitate or block access for both resident and non-resident fathers, and this can also apply to the contact professionals have with their children. Mothers may be reluctant to divulge information to professionals or fear they may lose their children if there is a history of domestic abuse, substance misuse or

family violence. Professionals may tend to focus on mothers and exclude or make little effort to include fathers (Ofsted, 2011). There may be cause for concern if little is known about fathers or other men in the family home, including the nature of their relationship with the mother and the extent to which they are involved with the children. Practitioners could consider the benefit of discussing with the mother the details of her support network, either by the use of an ecological map (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or the Assessment Framework (DoH, 2000). This discussion can help to identify the nature of the family context and intimate domestic partnerships, other men as carers or providers of support to the family, and how these relationships are perceived or experienced, particularly in consideration of the impact or benefits to children.

3. Recognition of men as fathers or carers

Practitioners should constantly consider the influence, roles and responsibilities of fathers and wider family members in the care of children, even before their birth, and seek as far as possible to involve them in the assessment of needs of the child and the family. A mother is generally viewed as the parent who is seen much more frequently by practitioners. The findings from Serious Case Reviews conclude that too often there had been insufficient focus on the father, the father's own needs and his role in the family. Some fathers may avoid contact with professionals, as they may feel judged as not being good enough as fathers, with a tendency to be reticent about seeking or accepting help. Fathers may consider that their involvement may highlight or exacerbate problems for the family due to their involvement with the criminal justice system and ultimately lose contact with their children.

It is important to note that the majority of fathers want to have active input with parenting their children, and most children want contact with their fathers. The need to engage fathers more in the child protection process is one of the most pressing reasons for policy and practice to address and challenge the risk of gender inequalities and gendered biases among agencies. Men need to be regarded as core to assessment and planning for children's needs, whether or not they have parental responsibility; this approach should be embedded within assessment of children's needs, early help provision and safeguarding.

4. Young fathers

There should be a joined up (multi-agency) approach to teenage pregnancy and teenage parents with every agency understanding their role within it. Young teenage parents need to be supported in an environment in which they feel comfortable and supported. Adult-centred services may not achieve this without additional teenage-focused support.

Research has shown that many of the young fathers expressed insecurity about the future of their relationships with the mother and with the child before, during and after the birth. They feared rejection by the mother and losing contact with the child. Support from the father's own family and friends was usually available but young fathers often struggled to maintain a relationship with the mother's family. When fathers attended ante-natal appointments they sometimes did not feel welcomed or involved. It is important to note that the young men expressed a high degree of anger about, and suspicion of, services. They considered that agencies 'were on women's side' and there was sense that it was only law enforcement agencies such as the police that were interested in them.

Practitioners need constantly to consider the influence, roles and responsibilities of fathers and wider family members in the care of children, even before their birth, and seek as far as possible to involve them in the assessment, planning and intervention.

This will include:

- Maintaining a focus on the father of the baby, the potential implications of his own needs and his role in the family
- Assessing the parenting capacity of both young people as parents with reference to the Assessment Framework (DoH, 2000) and Eco Map (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)
- Taking a strategic overview of the involvement of fathers in assessments of risk and safeguarding concerns, with a particular focus on unborn children and babies, in line with locally determined procedures.
- Ensuring that the quality, availability and relevance of materials and education programmes which support the development of parenting skills, especially for teenage and young parents, is of a good standard.

5. Fathers as reluctant clients

Some fathers may avoid contact with professionals as they may feel judged as not being good enough as fathers, with a tendency to be reticent about seeking or accepting help. Fathers may consider that their involvement may highlight or exacerbate problems for the family due to their involvement with the criminal justice system and ultimately risk losing contact with their children. Fathers may be concerned that parenting groups are more suitable for mothers, feeling unwelcome or self-conscious. Agencies also need to consider aspects of cultural diversity in the context of families; attitudes, values or racial stereotyping which may marginalise men as fathers need to be challenged. This factor also needs to be considered on balance with cultural values and norms which may cause women and children to be more vulnerable in the family home or community. Bayley et al. (2009) summarised best practice in engaging with fathers actively promoting services to fathers; offering alternative forms of provision; prioritising fathers within organisations; and recognising fathers' cultural and ethnic differences.

It is also important for practitioners to assess or determine a father's attitude towards the pregnancy, the mother and new born child; his thoughts and feelings and realistic expectations about becoming a parent.

6. Labelling fathers

Serious Case Reviews have highlighted how aspects of professional practice can be rigid or inflexible in approach to families. Fathers may be labelled as good or all bad, leading to attributions as to their reliability and trustworthiness. The consequences of such labelling prevented workers from taking views expressed by 'bad' fathers seriously. Fathers could be labelled as dangerous without the professional having had any direct contact with the individual, or conversely could be viewed as an asset to the family as highlighted by Strega et al. (2008).

It is noted that there has been a failure to recognise violent men in terms of their identity as a father or father figure. This failure to recognise abusive fathers may not only limit the effectiveness of support interventions for women and children, but also prevent the chance to engage with men as fathers who might offer opportunities to intervene and change violent behaviour (Featherstone, 2003 and Featherstone and Peckover, 2007).

Fathers, as well as mothers, may be intimidating and abusive to professionals leading workers to be reluctant to confront or engage with them or to purposefully avoid them for fear of their aggressive reactions. Harne (2011) cited by Holt (2014) refers to the emergent theme in the literature of the issue and complexities surrounding the parenting capacity of men as perpetrators domestic abuse. If men are labelled as violent without recognition of their role as fathers, this not only negates any chance of changing the negative aspects of these fathers' behaviours to children but also, may do little to stop them from leaving the home and moving on to new relationships with new children to perpetuate this cycle of abusive behaviour.

Where there is a concern about violence it may not be safe or appropriate for the father to be involved in meetings when the child/victim is present, but this does not obviate the need for Children's Services to work with them and enable them to participate in the assessment and planning process. Fathers, like mothers, should therefore be encouraged and supported to be involved in child protection planning and decision-making procedures provided it can be done safely. The same applies to father figures who have had a significant involvement in the child's life. If there are safety concerns which prevent their direct involvement in meetings, they should nevertheless be contacted and supported to contribute to the decision-making processes through indirect means.

Research has shown that assumptions are often made and, even if a father is considered to be a supportive partner, he might never be spoken to and his history never considered. Both parents need to be supported. The father is as important as the mother and they need support to help them to become good enough parents. However, in terms of support for violent and abusive men as fathers, this may be more about challenge, re-education, monitoring and supervision.

7. Principles of professional practice

Practitioners need to proactively assess and engage with all significant men in a child's life, understanding that some pose risks, some may be assets and some may incorporate aspects of both.

In order to do this effectively professionals need to be mindful of their own attitudes towards fathers. These attitudes may impact negatively on their perception of men within families and may lead to prejudice and stereotyping which is neither fair nor helpful.

Assessments which fully assess the role of the father/father figure within the family and are flexible enough to allow the father to participate are extremely important, as is adaptation of existing or development of new parenting programmes to ensure they are appropriate and accessible for fathers. Practical barriers to engagement of fathers could include the timing of meetings, the workforce within family services provision being predominantly female; a lacking of training on the effective engagement of men as fathers and difficulties in identifying and accessing fathers, particularly young and non-resident fathers.

The lessons about agency involvement with the parents are not just about risk factors arising from the parents' background and lifestyle; the lessons also relate to practitioners' assessments of parenting capacity. Findings have included:

- Cases where there had been limited understanding by professionals of the impact of the parents' own experience of being parented;
- Shortcomings in supporting parents both in preparing for parenthood and after the birth.

- Failure to recognise that parenting can be a stressful process for which suitable materials and education programmes need to be provided.
- The view of some fathers that agencies overlooked their experience in bringing up their older children from a previous relationship.

Practitioners should try, as appropriate, to include fathers in discussions and decisions about their children, particularly where there are concerns about their welfare or where care proceedings are in progress.

Practitioners should avoid a tendency to focus on mothers only, thereby excluding fathers from assessments and interventions and missing potential opportunities to identify how they might support a family, or indeed how they might pose a risk.

8. How to facilitate engagement

Early identification and involvement of fathers has corresponded with higher levels of engagement later on in family work.

- Practitioners should adopt a proactive approach to engaging fathers by tailoring and ensuring services are available to all fathers. This will include offering flexible hours of services for working fathers, visiting them at home, being persistent and highlighting the positive gains to children of father involvement. Positive professional attitudes towards men will further enhance engagement.
- Active targeting of fathers might be necessary. Fathers have reported that they often prefer activity based approaches which allow them to spend time with their children and take part in outdoor activities or skill based exercises. Research suggests that fathers prefer services that have been designed specifically for them which enable them to spend time with their children and access peer support. Scourfield (2013) amplifies these points further in the evaluation of an online survey focusing on the engagement of fathers in the UK to improve children's well-being.
- Adopting a 'Think Family' or 'whole family' approach which identifies and builds on family strengths and resilience can be effective in addressing the factors that can lead disadvantaged fathers to become violent. This approach assists practitioners to *"become much more sensitive, inclusive and responsive to the father's importance in family systems...particularly...when these fathers are not as visible or readily accessible as the mother"* (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008)
- Interventions which enable fathers to 'be there' with their children by empowering them to become more involved in their children's lives, particularly via opportunities for 'dad and child' time. As with family support services, fathers should be centrally involved in this assessment and planning process. Irrespective of whether they have parental responsibility - there is no legal basis for them to be excluded. The use of practical activities has been seen to have positive results.
- Strengths-based whole family interventions such as Family Group Conferences have potential for involving men more successfully.

Appendix 1 provides some practical tips for the effective engagement of fathers and other significant males in practice.

9. Summary

The risks of not engaging effectively with fathers and significant males early on in interventions are that practitioners fail to triangulate what mothers and other family members might be saying about their role, the positive contribution which they might be able to make to the needs of their children, or the risks which they might present to them.

The evidence is clear and comes from both what fathers themselves say about their experiences and also from case reviews being undertaken both locally and nationally. There is a tendency for practitioners to focus on mothers and to take at face value what mothers are telling them about the dynamics which exist, or have existed, within the family and about the impact of those dynamics, positive or negative, on children and young people. Robust assessments, however, require that information is triangulated and tested out. Engaging fathers in a positive way is critical to ensuring that assessments are balanced and rigorous, especially when important decisions need to be made about children.

Practitioners are therefore encouraged to consider how they can increase their knowledge and understanding of the men they work with in order to evaluate how men's attitudes and experiences impact on their parenting. Consequently this will help gain a clearer understanding of the protective/risk factors they may present to the child's world. Practitioners are also encouraged to make effective use of reflective supervision as a means of reviewing their own attitudes and belief systems and understanding how these might lead to particular responses, such as the reluctance to engage with a father in a family. Agencies are encouraged to review and, if necessary, consider how they can improve the inclusive culture of their organisation and practice.

10. References

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Appendix 1

Practical tips for the effective engagement of fathers and other significant males in practice

DO:

Maintain a focus on the father of the child, the potential implications of his own needs and his role within the family

- Consider the role and responsibilities of the child's father at the earliest opportunity and include fathers (resident and non-resident) early in a 'Think Family' approach.
- Discuss the nature of the mother's support networks and the role of other men as carers or providers to the child. Consider the use of an Ecological Map to facilitate this.
- Give regard to significant males being core to Assessment and Planning regardless of whether they have parental responsibility.
- Offer interventions which enable and empower fathers to become more involved in their child's life.
- Ensure that records reflect the earliest intervention, assessment of any child's needs, early help provision or action taken to safeguard the child, including the role of the child's father/other significant males during these interventions.
- Consider other specialist support provided by workers to young, teenage fathers/older fathers.
- Consider the quality, availability and relevance of materials and education programmes to support the development of parenting.

- Give recognition to fathers with cultural and ethnic differences and offer alternative forms of provision if appropriate.
- Address issues of domestic abuse and violence, and carefully consider worker concerns. Ensure robust risk assessments are undertaken and that there is good communication taking place within and between agencies about how risks will be managed.
- Appreciate the importance and potential contribution of fathers, irrespective of whether they are resident or not, or appear actively involved or not.
- Be vigilant to the mothers who act as 'Gatekeepers', blocking your access to both resident and non-resident fathers.
- Be mindful of your own attitudes and prejudices towards men, and seek appropriate support through reflective supervision and training opportunities.

DON'T:

Forget that the majority of men want active input with parenting their children and the majority of children want contact with their fathers

- Be afraid to demonstrate professional curiosity by asking/probing or challenging mothers about the father of their child and the roles of men in her/the child's life
- Assume the mother is always open or honest with us and do not feel anxious about obtaining accurate details about the father or partner
- Exclude the father; maintain a focus on him, his own needs and the role he plays in the family
- Label fathers as dangerous without the benefit of robust assessments. Engage them safely and appropriately in decision making and child protection planning processes.
- Put up barriers; professional or personal anxiety, absence of men or lack of information about them, lack of services for men, meetings held at difficult times
- Be reluctant to engage with men for fear of being groomed, manipulated or feel that you are colluding in some way with the father or partner.

REMEMBER

At all times keep your focus on the child.

This includes identifying all the significant men in a child's life early on.

Assess male parenting and, where appropriate, encourage fathers to take responsibility for meeting the needs of their children.