**Practice Note for all SCT Practitioners,** Managers**and Staff: Engaging Fathers**

Fathers whether resident or non-resident, involved or absent, or father figures such as step-fathers, have a significant role to play in the life and development of their children. This can be in terms of the care they provide and how they can influence their outcomes. For those Fathers that are positively involved in one capacity or another with their child, research suggests that there is an overall protective and positive effect. This relates to social, educational, behavioural, and psychological outcomes – throughout infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Despite these positive influences, Fathers can have, they can sometimes be forgotten by professionals who focus almost exclusively on the quality of care children receive from their mothers or female carers.

The purpose of this practice note is to outline why engagement with Fathers (step-fathers, father-figures) is important supported by findings from local and national research. It illustrates how using our Practice Framework and Model particularly cultural genograms can be used when working with fathers to strengthen the quality of our engagement with them as part of the assessment process and decision making. Finally, how using reflective supervision to think about our work with Fathers, whilst considering good practice points and links to further reading will help demonstrate better engagement with Fathers.

**Why is the engagement of Fathers important?**

Engaging Fathers is important because they play a significant role in the lives of their children, which will have a positive impact on the outcomes for children in and is associated with better educational, social and emotional outcomes for children, including’’ (Adapted from Engaging Fathers, published by DfE)’.

By considering who the child or young person may view as their father figure, which may include birth father, step-fathers, grandfather and/or other males that have played a significant role in their life will also promote a wider understanding of the children’s paternal family, that may form part of the child or young person’s support network.

In circumstances where a Father is absent and not involved, either by his own choice or is left out by others, a child will continue to have a mental space marked ‘Father’ that remains with them. Children and young people are likely to fill this space with their own ideas, or the ideas of those who influence/care for them, which will impact on their sense of self, and concepts of culture and identity. It is therefore important the we not only create opportunities to involve Fathers as much as possible, given the significance of their impact on their children, but also include their views in assessments, plans and reviews.

Local and national research highlights that engaging Fathers, particularly understanding the role of men in children’s lives is also a familiar feature of Serious Case Reviews in the cases of Daniel Pelka (2013), Peter Connelly (Baby P - 2007) and Hamza Khan (2013). In all these children’s cases, their biological Fathers were not involved as part of their children’s assessments, plans and meetings. Significantly, additional support and resources from their Fathers and paternal family was missing from their children’s lives.

In some circumstances issues surrounding whether a father figure has Parental responsibility (PR) have arisen and has been a barrier to engaging Fathers and when discussing or sharing sensitive information relevant to children. Managing this issue sensitively to understand the role a father plays by working with the carer/Mother to focus on what is in the child’s best interests is required.

Research repeatedly shows that child protection work tends to focus on mothers, with Fathers having a peripheral presence in records on children’s case files, assessments, plans, reviews and meetings such as child protection conferences. This has given rise to descriptions of Fathers not being consistently visible in our work and reinforces the concept that their views are not valued or valid. This is also echoed nationally where male figures are often absent in recording, assessments and care plans. Fathers commitment to their child’s education and their involvement with schools are associated with children’s better behaviour at school, including reduced risk of suspension or expulsion. Early childhood play with a father contributes later in life to a teenagers’ sense of self-worth and teenagers who feel they matter to their Father or stepfather typically have significantly better mental health (Lineham, 2014)

In 2019, research in Sandwell explored Social Workers practice with Fathers in the Single Assessment process and how they supported Fathers involvement within this. Findings indicated that sometimes there was a disconnect between the intention to complete a holistic assessment inclusive of Father’s involvement and the reality, as Fathers are less likely to be consulted about the referral and assessment at the initial stage. The research suggested that this was predominantly based on information held about the Father and the perceived risk he may pose, as Fathers are mostly referred to as ‘perpetrators’, and posing risk to mothers or the children and their level of involvement by Social Workers in the assessment depends on the level of risk they pose. Findings highlighted the higher the perception of the risk posed by the Father, it was more likely that they were excluded from the assessment process. By working with Fathers looking at how they justify their behaviour, helping them unpick their own narrative and understand the harm they are causing, whilst balancing this with interventions that bring forward protective factors while keeping the risk under control (Williams, 2019).

In Sandwell, we recognise the importance of engaging fathers, and where there are barriers to engaging fathers due to a level of risk they pose to their child or family, that safety measures are implemented to ensure we receive safe engagement from fathers. Our Practice Framework and Model can be used to strengthen our engagement with Fathers, including strategies and tools that can be used to develop our skills, including the voice of Father’s and how this is used.

**How using the Practice Framework and Model strengthens our engagement with fathers**

Engaging Fathers needs to be part of the processes we follow whenever we undertake assessments, plans and reviews (see Doing and Thinking wheels in Practice Note Practice Framework and Model). At the same time as following these processes, the Practice Framework and Model helps us to think about their level of participation and promotes the stance that fathers must be involved in assessments and family interventions. By ensuring that the details of father’s are obtained at the earliest opportunity, enables practitioners to complete basic genograms in the first or second visit to a family will ensure practitioners have a better understanding of relationships for the children, which will provide a view of how significant those relationships are at that stage in the child’s life (See Practice Note on Genograms).

Using Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS supports us to recognise the importance of the different aspects of the identities of the Fathers that we work with and their extended family network. They help consider whether any adjustments need to be made to practice, whilst considering individual cultures, whether an interpreter or advocate is required to ensure that we have meaningful engagement from Fathers throughout our involvement in their children’s lives. One of the ways our Practice Framework and Model helps is by using the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS (John Burnham, 2013) within your discussions with Fathers. This acronym relates to Gender, Gender Identity, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality and Sexual Orientation (Burnham 2013).

Developing a good understanding of father’s culture and identity, and how this may impact on their parenting style, will strengthen the Father’s voice throughout our involvement. In some cases, non-resident, black, ethnic minority and white working-class fathers are all likely to face particular circumstances and pressures, which need to be understood and assessed. Completing a cultural genogram with a Father will strengthen an understanding of their own family history and functioning, cultural and traditional practices, and how the roles of fathers may be perceived dependant on individuals’ culture and ethnicity (see Practice Note: Cultural Genograms). This results in practitioners becoming more attuned and sensitive to Fathers from different backgrounds, which allows them to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with Father.

Using Cultural genograms as part of our work with Fathers from different backgrounds is another part of our Practice Framework and Model that improves our engagement from Fathers. It is an important part of our relationship-based approach to ensure that when we build our relationship with the family and undertake our work with them, that our understanding and analysis of the family’s culture and identity is integral to the assessment, planning and intervention with them (See Practice Note on Cultural Genograms).

Creative approaches to working with Father’s include developing an impact chronology, which supports them in understanding their children’s journey through services, and any significant events that their children have experienced, and the impact these have had upon them. By completing these with Father’s, practitioners will need to utilise relationship-based approaches, working with Fathers to build trust, and rapport.

By using the Relationship based Building Blocks (See Practice Note: Intervention Aids), practitioners can think about how we consult Fathers in the initial rapport building stage, highlighting the importance of their role and contributions to the child and young person, and adjusting practice to ensure that they feel part of our involvement. Most children’s Social Workers are female and may have emotional responses to men that are influenced by their own childhood and experiences, as they may fear men who are hostile or even violent. Being open and honest with Fathers about how their involvement benefits their children is essential as part of building an open, and trusting relationship with fathers, as they are more likely to engage with our involvement if they understand why their presence benefits their children.

At the heart of our practice, working in a strengths-based way encourages practitioners to identify both strengths and resilience where risks are identified in relation to their Fathers behaviour and/or in their extended family network including their paternal family. In some circumstances, it can be more harmful for father’s engagement in the lives of their children due to abuse, which can trigger deep emotional responses to children and young people who may have experienced significant trauma. In some cases, children and young people are not encouraged to have contact with their fathers, due to significant risks. Practitioners must acknowledge that even in cases where there are risks associated, the right type of support, robust risk assessment and safety planning could enable Fathers to be part of their children’s lives.

When working with fathers we need to continuously reflect on our responses to Father’s who are from backgrounds different to our own, unless managed effectively, this may act as a barrier to effectively working with them. Using the Practice Framework allows us to reflect on our own relationships, potential bias, and our experiences of parenting, and involvement from our fathers or father figures. By considering how power dynamics and gender of practitioners may contribute to the level of engagement from Fathers, we acknowledge that Social Work practice is predominantly a profession where there are majority female practitioners. The role of gender when working with Fathers may act as a barrier to effectively engaging Fathers, who may feel that practitioners may not always understand their perspectives, as they are female. By working with Father’s to address this, being open and transparent about gender roles, and reflecting on how individual interpretations of fatherhood are influenced by personal history, culture, ethnicity, faith, and social circumstances.

Practitioners will encounter many Fathers who may have experienced trauma, however, they are not always easy to identify, so it is important for our approaches to be trauma-informed to provide reliable and effective services for all fathers. Practitioners must remain mindful that Fathers may have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences throughout their own childhoods, which may have increased risks throughout their lives, and through to adulthood (See Practice Note on Trauma Informed Practice). By building relationships, and trust between Fathers and practitioners may encourage more meaningful engagement, and identifying the right interventions with our fathers, using language and communication styles that are tailored to them.

Working with Fathers to create safety plans for children, young people and their families, means that children and young people could be afforded additional safety measures by using resources within the family (See Practice Note on Signs of Safety). Whilst practitioners will consider whether there are any risks posed to children from their Fathers or their extended family, risk assessments will enable practitioners to make informed decisions about balancing the needs for children to have involvement from their Fathers, whilst also implementing safety measures that mitigate or reduce such risks. An estranged father may be able to provide the protection and stability that the child needs.

**Using reflective spaces such as supervision to consider Engaging Fathers**

Supervision discussions may explore the relationship dynamics between Fathers and practitioners, thinking about how power dynamics and gender of practitioners may contribute to the level of engagement from Fathers. Reflective supervision discussions between practitioner and Team Manager can support them to identify any barriers to effectively engaging with Fathers, the impact of this on children and young people, and the strategies that could be used to work towards more meaningful engagement. Use reflective spaces such as supervision to consider the quality of the relationship being developed. Practitioners could be encouraged to critically reflect on their approaches to working with Fathers, and what their involvement with fathers looks like. Practice learning workshops will assist by encouraging open discussions and sharing knowledge around the Practice Framework and Model, developing Cultural Genograms and working with Non-engaging families.

**Good Practice Points:**

* All agencies working with children and their families should consider the role of Fathers and men in the households, and those who are non-resident, both in assessments and when providing services.
* Being explicit with mothers about the importance of speaking to the father and including him in the process, while also ensuring that she or the children would not be put at risk particularly where there are concerns such as domestic abuse etc.
* Arranging separate home visits if necessary to explain the relevance of his involvement with the child, communicating a willingness to include him in decisions.
* Think about how power, gender relations and personal experience (for example, of your own father, partner or being a father) may shape your perspective and influencing your practice in relation to fathers.
* Use reflective spaces such as supervision to consider the quality of the relationship being developed.

**How to evidence work on the file**

* All work created with Fathers such as genograms, cultural genograms, can be recorded onto LCS (in accordance with Practice Standards)

Ensure that father’s, step-father, father figures views are included within the children’s assessments, to demonstrate how these are shaping the child/family’s plan.

Recording case notes to evidence that fathers have been invited to meetings regarding their children via telephone call/letter/email.

**Further Reading and References**

* Practice notes relating to Signs of Safety, Relationship Based Practice, Trauma Informed Practice, Cultural Genograms and Impact Chronologies.
* Read the Practice Framework and Model Booklet and Sandwell Practice Standards.
* Access Practice Learning Workshops on the Practice Framework and Model, Cultural Competence, Cultural Genograms and Impact Chronologies.
* <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2017/july/working-effectively-with-men-in-families-including-fathers-in-childrens-social-care-frontline-briefing-2017/>
* <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1341/learning-from-case-reviews_hidden-men.pdf>
* <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/19/working-fathers-key-advice-research/>
* <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/good-practice-fathers-children-and-family-services>
* <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ECJ_p70-76_8-safeguarding-The-risk-of-excluding-fathers.pdf>
* Sandwell Childrens Trust Research completed by Natalie Williams, Social Worker as part of dissertation: *An Examination of Father’s Involvement in the Single Assessment Process*, September 2019.

**Date of Practice Note:** September 2021

**Date to be reviewed:** September 2022

**Authorised by:** Beyond Auditing Practice Development Team: Faye Walker and Pauline Dunkwu.