



BCP Children's Services.
Engaging with Fathers, Male Partners or
Carers.
Guidance for BCP Practitioners.

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Produced By	Tracey Newcomb

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1. Introduction and Definition

For the purpose of this guidance the term 'father' is defined as 'any male with a child caretaking role, whether a biological father, stepfather or mother's partner' (Maxwell et al. 2012: p.160). The 'father' does not necessarily have to reside at the child's home. The guidance seeks to bring together some of the research findings in respect of the engagement of fathers and other significant males in interventions.

2. Fatherhood in context

The position of fathers in children's lives has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Although most children still live with both their parents, family structures are much more varied. For example, the number of families with dependent children headed by a couple fell from 92% in 1971 to 78% in 2011.

When couples separate, children are more likely to live with their mother. This has implications for children's relationships with their fathers. In 2011, 92% of lone parents were women, compared with 8% who were men.

When parents meet new partners, children tend to have a new 'father figure' to negotiate a relationship with. Results from the General Lifestyle Survey for 2011 found that 85% of step-families with dependent children included children from the mother's previous relationship, whereas only 11% included children from the father's previous relationship. Consequently, children are less likely than in the past to live with their birth fathers, and more likely to live in reconstituted families.

This document seeks to identify some of the challenges and barriers which can occur in frontline practice and to offer some helpful suggestions to support practitioners in their work with fathers.

3. So why is this a concern for us?

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.

Social work audits often identify that the focus of social work is with the mother or female care giver. The role of all agencies (including those providing support to parents just after the birth of a child, regardless of the number of children in the household) should include asking about both father and mother about the level of support they require.

Philip, Clifton and Brandon 2017 in their recent research found that men involved in their study said the following issues were unhelpful about the safeguarding system:

Being included late: some men, particularly non-resident fathers, felt that professionals delayed involving them. When professionals were concerned about the mother's care of the child, fathers felt that they were not taken seriously or supported

to become more involved. In five cases, a father was only approached to take on care of their child when the local authority was about to start court proceedings.

Being seen as a 'last resort': was frustrating and often made it more difficult for fathers to organise being able to care full-time for their child.

Being labelled as 'difficult': this was one important way in which men felt unfairly treated by professionals. If men get angry or upset they can quickly find themselves kept at arm's length from the child protection process and their child. If men challenge this, it could make things worse.

Not getting a fair hearing: when there were allegations of domestic abuse, or conflict between fathers and mothers over what happened to a child, men felt that their perspectives were not always taken seriously. This was linked to how and when the professional talked to fathers, how child protection conferences were organised, and how professionals handled allegations of domestic abuse. This issue of fairness was talked about by men who accepted responsibility for abusive behaviour and by men who felt wrongly accused.

Lack of flexibility from professionals: there were clashes between men and professionals over how each expected time to be given and spent. Many men felt that professionals were not prepared to negotiate over how meetings or visits were arranged, or that there were double standards over things like being on time or being flexible. This had important consequences for men, because if they did not go to meetings or fit in with the child protection plan, professionals saw them as 'disengaged' or as not caring about their child.

A number of serious case reviews identified professional cultures within some of the agencies which potentially mitigated against effective safeguarding. Challenging and changing cultures is far from straightforward, and requires deep understanding of the issues, creative thinking, and engagement with practitioners and management to identify ways of moving forward. This complexity was reflected in the recommendation in relation to barriers to engaging fathers.

"The LSCB should convene a working party to explore the barriers to midwives and health visitors gathering information about fathers within families and supporting them. Through imaginative and mature multi-agency discussion, the working party should actively look at ways in which any culture not to engage with fathers can be challenged."

This is not a 'new' issue with a review of literature and evidence from Serious Case Reviews in 2011 (Ofsted, 2011) highlighting that fathers or significant males are far less involved or recognised than mothers when children's welfare is a concern. This point 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'. 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'.

National research from Serious Case Reviews has found that there had often been too much emphasis placed on the mother's needs and mothers 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.

Brandon et al 2016 in their tri-annual review of Serious Case Reviews highlighted that there needs to be a role of all professionals to challenge cultures within their own organisations.

It is widely recognised as problematic that there are generally low levels of engagement by professionals with fathers and males. Evidence suggests that there is relatively little known about what works. Within audits and SCRs there has been a consistent theme of a failure to engage with fathers.

4. Legislation relating to men's views and roles

The Children Act 1989 introduced Parental Responsibility in (s3) as 'all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property'. Detailed and explicit definition as to what this encompasses was deliberately avoided. But it clearly states that parents will have equal and enduring parental responsibility for their child before and after separation. However, often it is important that although this is a legal status, if a child views an adult as their father, they should be involved in the assessment and have an active part in the decision making for that child.

We must also note that Working Together to Safeguard Children refers throughout to parents not mothers in isolation and defines the statutory guidance to gain parents' views and to understand their capacity to provide care.

"When professionals refer a child, they should include any information they have on the child's developmental needs and the capacity of the child's parents or carers to meet those needs. This information may be included in any assessment, including the early help assessment" Paragraph 20

The need to work with both parents continues throughout the process of any case, whether at the stage of early help, child protection or being looked after.

It is important to note and consider 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 safeguarding 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 all assessments of children's needs, early help provision and safeguarding.

5. Assessing Risks to Children and Young People

'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)

Every assessment should be child-centred and take account of their wishes and views as well as their assessed needs. Where there is a conflict between the expressed views or needs of the child and their parents/carers, decisions should be based on a holistic assessment of all the information and made in the child's best interests.

6. Engaging fathers in child protection services

Studies repeatedly show that child protection work tends to focus on mothers, with fathers having a peripheral presence in case files, child protection conferences and home visits. This has given rise to a series of descriptions of fathers as 'invisible' (Strega et al, 2008); 'ghosts' (Brown et al, 2009), or 'shadows' (Ewart-Boyle et al, 2015). When fathers have perpetrated domestic violence, they may ensure they are not present during home visits, or their involvement in the family might be hidden by mothers for fear of reprisals or of having the children placed in care (Dominelli et al, 2010).

In an audit of six local authorities, Osborn (2014) reported that fathers were invited to child protection conferences only 55% of the time, and in a study of child protection case files, Baynes and Holland (2012) found fathers were contacted by social workers prior to the child protection meeting in only 25 out of 40 files. Interestingly, resident fathers were more likely to be invited, but less likely to attend, whereas non-resident fathers were less likely to be invited, but more likely to attend.

Practitioners therefore must (unless there are risks) invite fathers/significant male care givers to meetings about children. Where parents are separated and it is therefore difficult it may be necessary to think creatively about how both parents can still participate and be heard.

7. Mothers as 'Gatekeepers'

It is helpful for us to acknowledge that mothers can either facilitate or block access for both resident and non-resident fathers. Malm et al. (2006) found that only one third of mothers identified the father when asked. There were several reasons for this including:

1. Reluctance about letting the father know that children's services were involved;
2. Letting benefit agencies know the identity of the father;
3. Fear that the father may gain custody;
4. Anger at the father for being in a new relationship;
5. Fear of the father's reaction, particularly if there had been a history of domestic abuse.

Mothers may also be reluctant to divulge information to professionals where; they fear that they may lose their children, they do not wish to include fathers if there has been

a history of abuse or conflict between them or may be unwilling to involve fathers in what they perceive to be 'their territory' (Ferguson & Hogan 2004). Of course, in some cases the mother may be perfectly justified in her fear. It is the case however, that not all mothers restrict access to fathers. Roskill (2008) found many women expressed strong views that the involvement of men with children's services was very important.

8. What do Men Say Helps Them Engage?

Getting in early: most men appreciated when professionals met or phoned them before the initial child protection conference. This can be a chance for professionals and fathers to sound each other out and at least begin to build a working relationship. However, it was also important that professionals were consistent in what they said to fathers, and what they said about fathers in reports.

Paying attention: men found it easier to build trust with a professional if they took time to understand his situation, took his views as seriously as those of mothers, and were not judgmental of him as a person.

Professionals need to be genuinely interested in fathers' lives and in what makes being an involved father harder or easier for each individual man.

Being reliable: this involved professionals doing what they said they would do, replying to messages in reasonable time, and being straight with men. Building trust with professionals took time and this was very difficult when there were lots of changes of worker, or when professionals did not keep men updated about assessments and plans.

Balancing criticism and praise: men wanted professionals to be honest about their concerns, but also to look at the whole picture of what a father could offer. It was easier for men to accept criticism if there was also some recognition of positive factors. When men only felt criticised, they were more likely to reject the professional or withdraw from the safeguarding process. Focusing on strengths as well as problems made it more likely that a father and professionals could work together.

Direct support for fathers: when men spoke positively about professionals, they said that the professional had 'helped'. What men found helpful was some kind of practical support for them as fathers, but also when a professional had listened and taken account of their particular situation. Men who had a more positive experience spoke about professionals helping with housing, advice on welfare benefits, or in building good relationships with local children's centres.

9. Practical tips in engaging males

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

DO:

- Start your involvement with the family with the expectation that the father has a role to play in any plan or intervention;
- Listen to the child, gather their views and be guided by the relationship that they want to have with their father;
- Consider the role and responsibilities of the child's 'father' at the earliest opportunity and include fathers (resident and non-resident) early in Early Help services and Children and families assessments;
- When discussing the nature of the mother's support networks, actively enquire about the role of other men as carers or providers for the child. Consider the use of an Ecological Map to facilitate this;
- Give regard to significant males being in all 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 all interventions;
- Consider other specialist support or services provided by workers for young, teenage fathers/older fathers;
- Serious Case Reviews have highlighted that parents in those cases often have different GPs and accessing services across Local Authority boundaries. It is important to contact services (including GPs) providing support who are located in other Local Authority areas;
- 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 or not they are resident, or appear actively involved;
- Be clear about the role of fathers in Safety Plans making sure their role is clear, specific and realistic, ensuring they understand the role we are asking them to undertake;

- Be vigilant to the possibility of mothers acting as 'Gatekeepers', blocking your access to both resident and non-resident fathers;
- Be mindful and be prepared to challenge your own and other professionals' attitudes and prejudices towards men, and seek appropriate support through reflective supervision and training opportunities.

DON'T:

- 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 safeguarding 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.

10. Conclusion

As practitioners and professionals, it is really important to keep the focus of our work on the child/ren. However, the role of a child's care giver/significant other is also key to understanding their family context.

This focus includes identifying all the significant men in a child's life as early as is possible. If the information is not readily given early on, keep revisiting it, rather than simply accept that they are absent, fathers often tell us they never knew we were involved!

Explain to mothers why it is important for children, help to ease their anxieties if they have them.

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

Additional good resources for practitioners can be found here...

<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/good-practice-fathers-children-and-family-services>.

<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/19/working-fathers-key-advice-research/>