



## **Engaging Fathers and Other Significant Males**

### **1. Introduction**

For the purpose of this guidance the term 'father' is defined as any male acting in a paternal capacity including birth fathers, and social father such as a stepfather or mother's partner. The father does not necessarily have to reside at the child's home.

This document identifies the complexity, challenges and barriers which can occur in frontline multi-agency practice and seeks to offer some practical suggestions to support practitioners in their work with fathers.

It is not unusual for there to be a lack of visibility of fathers or significant males when interventions relate to welfare or safeguarding concerns. As a result, assessment of risk and need for children can lack accuracy and nuance.

### **2. Parental Responsibility (PR) and fathers**

A father with parental responsibility (PR) has several legal rights and obligations in ensuring the wellbeing and safety of their child. Where the father with PR does not live with the child, then the other parent must consult with them when making important decisions about the child's life. Routine decisions do not always require the consent of the other parent, even if they also have parental responsibility.

### **3. 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. 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 using 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.

#### **4. 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 Local Safeguarding Child Practice Reviews, including 'The Myth of Invisible Men' (Child Safeguarding Practice Review National Panel September 2021), show that too often there had been insufficient focus on the father, the father's own needs and history 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 many 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.

A father with parental responsibility has several legal rights and obligations in ensuring the wellbeing and safety of their child. Where the father with parental responsibility does not live with the child, then the other parent must consult with them when making important decisions about the child's life. Routine decisions do not always require the consent of the other parent, even if they also have parental responsibility.

#### **5. 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, including pre-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, behaviour, history, 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.

## **6. 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 cause women and children to be more vulnerable in the family home or community.

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.

## **7. Labelling fathers**

Local Safeguarding Child Practice 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 that are faulty.

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. 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 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 multi-agency 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 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.

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, education, monitoring and supervision.

## 8. Principles of professional practice

Working Together 2023 four principles of practice with parents and carers:

- Effective partnership – strong, trusting and cooperative relationships that is alert to and recognise when parents and carers may not be acting in the best interest of the child and they may be exposed to abuse, neglect or exploitation as a result
- Verbal and non-verbal communication should be respectful, non-blaming, clear, inclusive, and adapted to needs
- Practitioners empower parents and carers to participate in decision-making to help, support and protect children
- Practitioners involve parents, carers, families, and local communities in designing processes that affect them, including those focused on safeguarding children

Working Together 2023 Multi-agency practice standards:

- an unrelenting focus on protection and the best outcomes for children
- creating learning cultures in which practitioners stay up to date as new evidence of best practice emerges
- creating an environment in which it is safe to challenge, including assumptions that relate to ethnicity, sex, disability, and sexuality
- supporting practitioners with effective supervision as determined by their regulatory body in which they can critically reflect on their findings and strengthen their analysis
- practitioners to understand the impact of their decisions on the child and family

**These principles and practice standards mean that practitioners must 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. These attitudes may impact negatively on their perception of men within families and may lead to prejudice and stereotyping which is neither fair nor effective in securing best outcomes for children.

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 services, that includes input on design and impact reviews by children and families, to ensure they are appropriate and accessible for fathers.

## 9. How to facilitate engagement

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.

- Adopting a 'Think Family' or 'whole family' approach which identifies and builds on family strengths and resilience can be effective in understanding and safely managing

contextual factors that can lead disadvantaged fathers to harm children, including violence.

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.

## **10. 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.

There can be 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 require that information is triangulated and tested out. Engaging fathers in a positive way is critical to ensuring that assessments are balanced and rigorous, 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 to evaluate how men's attitudes and behaviours, and experiences impact on their parenting. 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 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.

## **11. References**

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. London, Harvard University.

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Featherstone, B. and Peckover, S. (2010) *Fathers Matter: Resources for Social Work Educators*. London, Family Rights Group.

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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, history 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 safely 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 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 safe or 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 safety and wellbeing of 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.**

Updated April 2025