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East Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership

Quality Assurance Sub-Group

Report of Appreciative inquiry into engagement of fathers/male carers in safeguarding practice 21/03/23

## Method

* 1. Ten cases were selected as stand out examples of good engagement with fathers/male carers where they potentially posed a risk to the child, and successful engagement by services reduced that risk, and/or they were successfully engaged to ensure the child was protected. Auditors and front line practitioners were sent the child details and an audit tool, which was based upon recent national and local learning from [case reviews](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/learning-from-case-reviews/unseen-men?utm_source=Adestra&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Unseen%20men%3A%20learning%20from%20case%20reviews&utm_campaign=20220926_KIS_CASPAR_September26) and [The Myth of Invisible Men](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1017944/The_myth_of_invisible_men_safeguarding_children_under_1_from_non-accidental_injury_caused_by_male_carers.pdf).
  2. Auditors reviewed agency records to complete the audit tools in advance of the meeting. These were used to collate a summary of findings which was shared for use at the audit meeting. A summary was shared of the key factors that supported good practice and challenges to outcomes that front line practitioners provided before the audit meeting.
  3. The audit meeting was held virtually and entailed discussion with front line social care practitioners involved in the cases, and the auditors sharing their knowledge of the cases. Participants discussed the cases in two groups to identify key factors which had supported good engagement, impact on outcomes for the child, learning points to take forward for the child, and learning points to use in future cases. Auditors reflected upon the findings from the audit meeting and identified key themes and recommendations.
  4. The Ofsted grading system was not used to formally grade the cases but instead focussed on identifying the learning that could be cascaded widely to practitioners and managers.
  5. The fathers/male carers involved were contacted before the audit to ask for their views on their involvement with agencies and this would be fed back at the audit meeting. Disappointingly, none of the fathers/male carers completed the survey or contacted us to provide feedback.

## Case characteristics

* 1. The cases selected involved children aged 6 months - 15 years old at the time considered in this audit. All the children audited had multi-agency involvement and had been subject to social care involvement.
  2. The children had experienced physical harm, parental substance misuse, parental mental health, neglect and domestic abuse. In accordance with the normal audit process the children lived in a variety of areas around the county and had a range of cultural backgrounds. Five of the children were female and six were male.
  3. Six out of the ten cases were discussed in the meeting. Four practitioners were unable to attend the meeting but the information they and the auditors provided has been included in this report.

## Summary of Findings

* 1. Overall, the audit highlighted the passion, dedication, skill, and tenacity of the professionals working with the families. The social care professionals involved in the meeting went above and beyond to make sure the father/male carer were involved.
  2. Each case showed the importance of building strong relationships with father/ male carers. The need for fathers to be heard, professionals to be transparent, creating shared goals with the professionals and celebrating their achievements were a few ways professionals engaged them.
  3. Father / males carers are often seen as a risk or a resource to the child or family and being labelled early on when agencies are involved can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.
  4. The need to consider the father/male carer at all key points of assessment and planning, regardless of whether they hold parental responsibility was recognised as important.

## Key Themes that enabled good practice

*Assessment:*

* The importance of having a full understanding of how the father/male carer fits within the family structure as well as their story (childhood, history of being parented, relationships and trauma).
* Knowing what the relationship dynamic is between the adults and parents within the family to be able to support them fully.

*Relationship based practice:*

* Being authentic and professionally curious is key.
* The importance of explaining decision making to the father/male carer. This is instrumental in making sure the necessary changes can be successful for the child.
* Making it clear to father/male carers that professionals are here to listen to them. Active listening can help determine the type of intervention that is needed and help to introduce any changes by identifying and addressing the concerns family members have.
* The need for professionals to advocate the father’s role in the family and celebrate their achievements. This gives fathers confidence in parenting and empowers them.
* Creating a safe space for father/male careers to speak openly and honestly with professionals.
* Not jumping to conclusions.
* Ensuring regular communication with fathers/male carers and keeping them updated on any developments.
* Making sure that the balance is right when being supportive, but not so much that they become dependent.
* Taking the time to make sure fathers/male carers understand the information they have been given and the impact this has on the relationship between the professional and father/male carer.

*Specialist support:*

* Cases that involved Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) allowed professionals to build trusting relationships with fathers/male carer given the intensive nature of the support FDAC provide. They were able to build a relationship where they could respectfully challenge behaviour but also highlight the fathers’ strengths.
* Use of independent advocates in court proceedings.

*Consideration of father/male carer role*

* Tailoring support to fathers’ when what is on offer does not fit what they need.
* In one case the father had been estranged from the child, so the social worker took a “gentle approach” to develop the father’s engagement.
* Foster carers being on board with inclusion of fathers and facilitating contact.

## Overcoming barriers to achieve good outcomes

* Father/male carers who already have a negative view of the Local Authority and Children’s Services. This can be a difficult barrier to overcome but the audit highlighted the importance of reminding the father/male carer that they have the same goal – keeping the child safe and secure. It’s important to understand and take into consideration their motivation and preconceptions.
* It was acknowledged that when fathers are engaged with agencies they are often represented in terms of risk or viewed as a perpetrator. Professionals should recognise the effect these labels will have on fathers/male carers.
* Building trust takes time. It was recognised in the meeting that time is a barrier but it is important to use time creatively. Professionals need to make time to engage the father.
* Distance was a challenge in one case. The father was based in another country and did not speak the language. They were able to use interpreters which the father was confident using. The social worker spoke to the father about the language and ethnicity barrier. They worked together with the foster carer to overcome the distance barrier by allowing the father to facetime with the child and acknowledging attachments can be built in several ways.
* The mother was a barrier in one case. The mother did not allow the father contact with the child and professional curiosity of the social worker enabled the father to be involved.
* Animosity between the parents can cause challenges but the social worker in one case thought outside the box and tried different approaches to engage both parents, and recognised that parents will have different versions of the truth. The social worker considered hybrid conferences, parenting app, and set up a WhatsApp chat between the parents and the social worker.
* Recognising service delivery does not always fit into the father’s schedule and employers are not necessarily supporting engagement. A social worker in one case made sure to update the father at the beginning or end of the working day and arranged meetings to suite the family’s schedule.
* Father’s own parental roles models may have had an effect. They may not be aware what good parenting should look like.
* Social work tends to focus on mothers, potentially resulting in fathers/males feeling like Social Workers are colluding with mother. It is important for fathers to know that workers are neutral, but also need to be able to challenge.
* Where fathers/males carers present a domestic abuse/substance misuse risk, there can be a potential tendency to practice in a risk averse way there is so much risk aversion way which can result in non-inclusive practice.
* It was noted on the ESCHT and Primary Care records there is little information about the fathers on the child’s record. Separated parents create issues on the record, this is an organisational barrier.

## Learning from the audit

* 1. Skills to engage fathers/male carers are the same skills used to engage mothers.
  2. To give regard to significant males in all assessment and planning, especially when they have parental responsibility.
  3. The importance of cultural sensitivity, professional curiosity and creative thinking when engaging fathers.
  4. The use of independent advocates to support engagement can be beneficial for fathers/male carers.
  5. MARAC to assess engagement of males/perpetrators within case referrals, and ensure correct signposting to services.
  6. Making sure fathers/ male carers, with parental responsibility, receive important information about their child from schools, hospitals, health etc (challenges especially if the child lives separately from mother), to promote their engagement. It was recognised that not all recording systems have the facility to record more than one adult with parental responsibility.
  7. Challenging the myth that male workers are needed to engage fathers/male carers. Most of the cases selected involved female workers and they successfully engaged the fathers/male carers.

* 1. Challenging unconscious bias around labelling fathers/male carers as a risk or perpetrators, and the impact this has on relationship building with the adult and outcomes for the child
  2. Tailoring the support which is on offer when what’s offered doesn’t ‘fit’. Tailoring support encourages engagement.

## Recommendations

* 1. The need for agencies to invest time to consider how fathers/ male careers are being assessed and engaged.
  2. Promote the good practice and learning from this audit in a briefing that can be shared with agencies.
  3. Social Care to consider reviewing the support Newly Qualified Social Workers receive when completing Section 7s as legal advice is not currently given.

Neil Bates

Chair of ESSCP QA Subgroup

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