



Working effectively with men in families

- practice pointers for including
fathers in children's social care

This guide draws on various sources, principally:

- > 'A Good Practice Guide to Engage Fathers' by Gavin Swann (2015), developed in the course of a Master's degree, in *Breaking Down Barriers: Developing an approach to include fathers in children's social care*.
- > The Research in Practice Frontline Briefing *Working effectively with men in families* (Featherstone, 2017).
- > New research by Marion Brandon et al (2017, in press) '*Counting Fathers In: Men's experiences of the child protection system*'.
- > Karen Bateson et al (2017) 'Engaging fathers: Acknowledging the barriers', *Journal of Health Visiting* 5 (3) 122-128.

Fathers in child protection are rarely either 'all bad' or 'all good'. Fathers are important to children, and (like mothers) most present a combination of positive and negative factors. Men and social workers need to recognise and work with this so that, wherever possible, children can stay safe and be involved with their fathers.

Brandon et al, 2017

Expectations about fatherhood have changed. Active involvement throughout pregnancy and childbirth, and shared caregiving once a baby arrives, are now the norm. While most men embrace these changes, evidence shows many are not well prepared for the impact of parenthood, especially if they did not have a strong father figure in their own lives (Bateson et al, 2017).

Ideas about 'being a man' and what it means to be a father are also deep rooted and vary across culture, class and ethnicity. Practitioners in social work and family support need to be curious about masculinities and about individual men in order to assess them and their role in wider family dynamics. Non-resident, black, ethnic minority and white working class fathers all have particular circumstances and pressures that need to be understood and assessed (Swann, 2015).

Research highlights the hugely constructive role fathers can play in a range of child and family outcomes (see Bateson et al, 2017). However, when in contact with practitioners – from midwives and health visitors in a child's early weeks through to child protection social workers – men say they feel overlooked, both as a resource for their children and in terms of the difficulties they might be facing with health, housing, money or relationships (Bateson et al, 2017; Brandon et al, 2017; Hogg, 2014).

Engaging fathers

Expect fathers to be involved and persist with contacting them. Fathers and social workers are suspicious of each other and it is too easy to give up or assume the father isn't interested.

Brandon et al, 2017

- > **Be respectful.** Notions of respect and disrespect have particular relevance for men. If social workers can communicate respect they are more likely to engage and involve men.
- > **Be consistent** in what you say and how you treat fathers. Above all, be consistent in what you say *to* fathers and what you say *about* them in written reports. And if fathers are expected to be on time for meetings, so should you be.
- > **Be reliable.** Do what you say you will do. Respond to messages in reasonable time. Keep fathers up to date on what's happening.
- > **Be available.** Men's experience is that social workers can be difficult to contact and 'hard to reach'. This makes it hard to develop trust or build a relationship.
- > **Be honest** with both parents about the father's involvement in practice activities. Be honest about concerns *and* willing to work with the positives.
- > **Be empathetic.** Listen to the father's perspective. Recognise that many fathers are vulnerable and will either withdraw or be threatening as a form of defence.
- > **Be flexible.** Take into account where a father lives and the distance he has to travel when inviting him to meetings or child protection conferences. Try to schedule around fathers' (and mothers') work commitments.
- > **Be aware.** Consider how power, gender relations and personal experience (of your own father or partner, or of being a father) may be shaping your perspective and influencing your practice.
- > **Be knowledgeable.** Know the law in relation to fathers and paternal responsibility.
- > **Be safe.** Work with your supervisor and your team to develop safety plans, strategies and approaches when engaging violent or abusive men. Do not minimise domestic violence.

(Ashley (ed), 2011, Hahn (ed) 2011, Asmussen and Weizel 2010, Fatherhood Institute 2009, all cited in Swann, 2015; Bateson et al, 2017; Brandon et al, 2017)

Finding absent fathers

'Due diligence' in finding absent fathers needs to become a practice expectation (Swann, 2015). This requires persistence, creativity and curiosity and, above all, time to investigate multiple fathers, any of whom might be a risk and/or resource.

Brandon et al's (2017) study of fathers in the child protection system found that they were rarely entirely absent. Most wanted to stay involved in their child's life and were 'doing things to try to keep being fathers'. They also found it frustrating to be seen as a 'last resort' and contacted only at the start of care proceedings.

- > Always identify whether a man is living (or visiting) the family home. Check the basics, for example, are there men's clothes in the home?
- > Ensure accurate information (for example, telephone numbers and addresses for the father and his extended family) is recorded on case files.
- > Mothers frequently 'gate-keep' (withhold) a father's identity. Don't give up. Ask at every meeting, challenge her non-compliance and explain the benefits of contact with the father.
- > Locate a copy of the birth certificate.
- > Ask the maternal and paternal extended families.
- > Contact the GP. (Research suggests that if men have a problem they're most likely to tell their GP, men tend to use the same GP as their partner and men rarely change their GP.)
- > Speak to the practice network around the child. Does the school, health visitor or Children's Centre know the father's name? Does the midwife, maternity unit or hospital? What about the local community police officer?
- > Make checks through the local authority (for example, the Council Tax Team), Department for Work and Pensions, Inland Revenue or Child Support Agency.

(Hahn (ed) 2011, Fatherhood Institute 2009, Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006, Featherstone et al 2010, all cited in Swann, 2015)

Engaging and assessing men

- > Aim to involve fathers (where safe) in direct work and to empower marginalised fathers to be a better resource for their children. Be prepared to offer practical support (for example, housing or benefits advice) and help to address addictions, mental health problems or violence.
- > Involve the father and his extended family at the earliest opportunity. Think about using Family Group Conferences (see www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences) to identify and engage wider family networks.
- > Take time to understand a father's situation and views. What does being a father mean to him? What additional stressors (for example, poverty, immigration status) is he facing?
- > Every father needs to learn parenting strategies for managing children's behaviour and managing his own anger. Offer guidance on discipline and boundaries. Help him understand the roots of his anger and establish an agreement over what is acceptable discipline.
- > Don't be impersonal. Address fathers by name. Research suggests men respond to individual attention, so write to 'Mr Smith' rather than 'Dear Parent'. Find out whether a father may prefer to communicate by email or texting.
- > Be adaptable. Adapt your practice to different situations (for example, married fathers, co-habiting fathers, young fathers, non-resident fathers, imprisoned fathers, no recourse to public funds fathers or fathers with no immigration status, multiple fathers, boyfriends and stepfathers). If a father is in prison, aim to visit him there.
- > Develop the quality of the working relationship. Aim to build trust. Provide fathers with opportunities to tell their story and reflect on their own experience of being fathered. A father needs to know (if he's worried for the welfare of his children) the social worker can be an ally.
- > Use strengths-based approaches. Balance criticism and praise, and recognise strengths as well as problems. '*When men only felt criticised, they were more likely to reject the social worker or withdraw from the child protection process*' (Brandon et al, 2017).
- > Where it's safe to do so, aim to talk to parents together (while giving both parents the opportunity to be seen alone).

When assessing a father's role, explore areas such as:

- > His role in maltreating or protecting the child.
- > His views on the safeguarding/child protection concerns and what he might have done to prevent the issues occurring.
- > How he perceives the emotional and developmental needs of the child.
- > His views on discipline, aggression, anger and controlling or manipulative behaviour.
- > His relationship with the mother or current partner.

With non-resident fathers, explore:

- > The kind of relationship he has with his child and whether he might offer a suitable alternative placement.
- > His current living and contact arrangements.
- > His 'fit' within the family system.

The involvement of other men in a child and mother's life must be included as part of the assessment. Equally, fathers may well have other children with another mother. Acknowledge how practically, emotionally and financially difficult it is to manage these intersecting family relationships.

(Ashley (ed) 2011, Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006, cited in Swann, 2015; and Brandon et al, 2017)

Where there is a history of violence and/or domestic abuse:

- > Ensure there is a safety plan for the child, mother and practitioner before engaging a man known to be violent. Recognise the barriers for survivors of domestic violence accessing services and plan responses accordingly.
- > Be explicit that violence to women is unacceptable. Inform men about the impact of their violence on the child. Respect men who want to change.
- > Assess risks, causes and complications surrounding the violence and pay attention to the stressors in the family. For example, see:
 - Barnardo's Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Matrix:
www.barnardos.org.uk/Barnardos_Domestic_Violence_Risk_Identification_Matrix.pdf
 - CAADA/Safelives Dash risk assessment:
www.safelives.org.uk/practice-support/resources-identifying-risk-victims-face
- > Provide evidence-informed perpetrator programmes which pay attention to parenting.

(Ashley (ed) 2011, Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006, cited in Swann, 2015; Brandon et al, 2017)

Engaging men in child protection

- > Always investigate the father's involvement in cases of child maltreatment. Be honest about the problem and identify actions that need to be taken. But recognise and be willing to work with the positives.
- > Get the full picture. Listening and getting the full picture of a man's life is vital for understanding what he can do as a father and for making a child protection plan that involves him in a fair way.
- > Be fair. Where there are domestic abuse allegations or disputes between parents about what's happened, men often feel their views aren't taken seriously. Fairness is consistently raised as an issue, both by men who accept responsibility for abusive behaviour and men who feel wrongly accused.
- > Try not to label men as difficult, as it's one way in which men feel unfairly treated. If men get angry or upset, they often find themselves kept at arm's length from the child protection process and their child.
- > Phoning or meeting with the father before an initial child protection conference can be a chance to begin a working relationship. Fathers should also be given an opportunity to meet with the Chair before and after the conference.

(Swann, 2015; Brandon et al, 2017)

Supporting social workers

- > Abusive men can be controlling and manipulative. They often display these behaviours through a sense of entitlement and narcissism. Managers should ensure practitioners are properly supported through meaningful supervision, local authority procedures, training and safety planning so they are not disempowered by controlling men.
- > Use reflective one-to-one or group supervision to explore cases, develop hypotheses and reflect on assumptions in working with men. See the Research in Practice tools for developing reflective supervision at: www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/practice-tools-and-guides/reflective-supervision-resource-pack-2017
- > Complications arising from parental conflict can be very problematic for practitioners. Couple work can elicit daunting and powerful feelings, which have the potential to undermine a practitioner's confidence. Providing training in techniques to navigate parental conflict (for example, training in family therapy) while remaining focused on the child will be particularly beneficial.
- > *'Maltreating fathers typically do not seek intervention voluntarily, nor are they intrinsically motivated to change their parenting style'* (Scott and Crooks, 2004). In response, social workers need a clear framework and tight boundaries to guide their interventions. These may include joint work with:
 - The criminal courts and Probation Service (in terms of injunctions, community orders, etc).
 - The family courts (in private proceedings in relation to Section 7 reports, injunctions, contact orders and Prohibitive Steps Orders, and application of MARAC and MAPPA processes).
 - The voluntary sector (to support survivors to escape domestic violence and maintain separation).
 - The police (Community Safety Teams and Child Abuse Investigation Teams).

(Hahn (ed) 2011, Asmussen and Weizel 2010, Fatherhood Institute, 2010, cited in Swann, 2015)

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Author: Gavin Swann with Research in Practice

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