Pan Bedfordshire

Engaging with Fathers, Male Partners or Carers Guidance

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout this document whilst we will refer to fathers please bear in mind that this guidance will also be relevant to any significant males in the family. This document seeks to bring together practice guidance in respect of the engagement of fathers and other significant males in interventions. It identifies some of the challenges and barriers which can occur in frontline practice and seeks to offer some practical suggestions to support practitioners in their work with fathers and other males in the family.

Men play a very important role in children's lives and have a great influence on the children they care for. Despite this, they can be ignored by practitioners who sometimes focus almost exclusively on the quality of care children receive from their mothers and female carers. 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.

This is not a 'new' issue that fathers or significant males are far less involved or recognised than mothers when children's welfare is a concern. It is therefore important to recognise that 'a child's father (male carer) can have a significant, positive impact on the child's outcomes.

Research evidence suggests that effectively engaging fathers in any safeguarding work has a positive effect on children's outcomes, including:

- Improved educational attainment
- Improved cognitive development
- Better emotion regulation
- Positive effect on behaviour
- Improved social competence
- Better self-esteem.

The research also suggests a reduced need for statutory service support and better outcomes for all family members (Bateman, Darwin and Galdas, 2017).

2. LEGISLATION RELATING TO MEN'S VIEW AND ROLE.

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 father, they should be involved in the assessment and have an active part in the decision making for that child.

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 practitioners refer a child, they should include any information they have on the child's developmental needs, the capacity of the child's parents or carers to meet those needs and any external factors that may be undermining their capacity to parent. This information may be included in any assessment, including the early help assessment..." (Para 20 page 17)

The need to work with both parents continues throughout the process of any case, from early help to child protection.

It is important to note 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. Make sure fathers and those with parental responsibility (including those who are not directly involved in mothers' and children's lives) know about concerns about their child.

3. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE REVIEW "THE MYTH OF INVISIBLE MEN (2021)"

The skills and knowledge held by practitioners who work with children and families can and should be used when working with men. Approaches to engagement, to interviewing and to listening should be the same for both women and men. Exploring their histories, where they draw their support from, how they see their futures – again, this is common ground for those working in the field and applies to both men and women. The evidence from this review suggests that there is insufficient evidence that practice with men has these characteristics. There needs to be an equitable approach to engaging men and women, recognising there may be differences in how a practitioner enables engagement.

As a consequence, extra steps are needed if practitioners to be more effective in working with fathers and male partners – especially with those where other evidence would suggest they might present a risk to their children. Finding, engaging, assessing and working with these men is often not easy and some of them very actively do not want to be found. Some have deep seated feelings about many state agencies, some will lie, threaten or act aggressively to staff. Some will simply absent themselves from working with practitioners and from any sense of responsibility for their children.

An assessment is not an assessment if it does not include (or has at least made every effort to include) the father and any intervention must address both the support needs of, and the risk presented by, male carers. Supervisors and those overseeing front-line practice across the system need to ensure that the assessment and engagement of fathers is evident within the work of their staff.

For those babies subject to Child In Need and child protection planning and those plans and associated meetings must maximise the engagement of fathers whenever possible – with necessary safety planning when required. Child protection conference chairs and independent reviewing officers have a key leadership role in overseeing this work operationally and ensuring plans speak to the needs and responsibilities of fathers.

There is some evidence and research through Serious Case Reviews that for some men they may remain 'hidden' or 'invisible' because of practitioner fear and anxiety. This is understandable as some men can be scary, physically intimidating and verbally aggressive. The wish to avoid contact with them, to not pursue them proactively if not living in the household or resident but frequently 'unavailable' is an understandable human response. This therefore means that all safeguarding agencies through their supervision and line management arrangements need to ensure that the possibility of avoidance driven by fear is openly acknowledged and discussed as needed. All practitioners need to feel able to raise these anxieties without hesitation and without there being a sense, real or otherwise, that their anxieties will not be taken seriously. Co-working and reflective supervision and discussion can make a significant contribution. Joint visits are also important and whilst these may place a demand on resources, they remain invaluable in enabling front-line staff to carry out what is often challenging and anxiety-provoking work.

4. RISK FACTORS FOR HIDDEN MEN IN CASE REVIEWS

From analysis of case reviews, two categories of 'hidden' men emerged:

- men who posed a risk to the child which resulted in them suffering harm
- men, for example estranged fathers, who were capable of protecting and nurturing the child but were overlooked by practitioners.

Case reviews have highlighted the issue of practitioners not identifying and/or assessing key men, such as fathers, mother's partners, involved in the care of children who died or suffered harm. In these reviews, children died or suffered serious harm in a number of different ways:

- physical or sexual abuse by the mother's partner
- killed by a father with mental health problems

Lack of information sharing between adults' and children's services -
Practitioners involved with men who are fathers, such as substance misuse workers and probation officers, may not share information about potential risks with other practitioners supporting the children and partners of those men because they are unaware that they are a parent or carer of their own or other children. Consequently, practitioners depend entirely on parents to share this information, which they may or may not do.

Relying too much on mothers for essential information -
Practitioners can be reluctant to judge the decisions parents make about their personal and sexual relationships. However, to ignore the risks that might be posed to the child(ren) by men who are in short-term, casual relationships with the mothers could be significant for the child(ren).

Overlooking the ability of estranged fathers to provide safe care for their children -
Failing to identify and/or engage with fathers ignores their fundamental importance in a child's emotional and psychological development. When a vulnerable child's needs are not being met by their mother, an estranged father may be able to provide the protection and stability that the child needs.

5. LEARNING FOR IMPROVED PRACTICE

Identifying the men in the child's life:

- During pregnancy and after birth, make active enquiries about the child's father, the mother's relationships and any adults in contact with the child. Record these details with a purpose and whether these adults have any potential strengths/assets, inherent vulnerabilities or risks that may need to be assessed or supported, e.g. mental health problems, substance misuse, care and support needs or a previous history of children being removed or harmed.
- Identify and carry out checks on any new adults who have significant contact with vulnerable children. Always clarify who the members of a household are each time you visit a family.
- Be aware that some individuals will have a number of aliases. Try to find out what these are and carry out checks accordingly. You might also receive names which are incorrectly spelt. Make sure you carry out checks which allow for different spellings of a surname.
- In an assessment, always put the child's needs before those of an adult.
- It can be difficult to get mothers to open up and discuss their partners' involvement in their children's lives. Supervisors should support practitioners to find ways to engage with mothers and build trust.
- Supervisors also need to offer guidance and training on working with fathers and male carers, monitor fathers' engagement with services and evaluate how effective direct work with them is.

Involving fathers:

- During pregnancy and after birth emphasise to parents how crucial the father's role is to the child's wellbeing.
- Encourage fathers to attend ante-natal appointments and classes. Make appointments for times convenient to them, such as evenings.
- Involve fathers and male carers in assessments. Ask them directly about things such as how much they drink and if they take drugs. If the level is risky then discuss support services.
- Make sure fathers and male carers, including those who are not directly involved in mothers' and children's lives, know about concerns relating to their child. Consult them about plans, invite them to child protection conferences and include them on core groups.

Men as protectors:

- Estranged fathers and ex-partners may be able to give crucial information about a mother and her children. Likewise, the siblings of an at-risk child can give insights into family dynamics and important people in their lives.
- Explore the potential of estranged fathers to offer protective care and stability.

6. MOTHERS AS GATEKEEPERS

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:

- Reluctance about letting the father know that child welfare services were involved;
- Letting benefit agencies know the identity of the father;
- Fear that the father may gain custody;
- Anger at the father for being in a new relationship;
- 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 practitioners; for fear that they may lose their children, 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. 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.

7. WHAT MEN SAY?

Involving men early on:
some men, particularly non-resident fathers, felt that practitioners delayed involving them. When practitioners 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.

Getting in early:
most men appreciated when practitioners met or phoned them before the initial child protection conference. This can be a chance for practitioners and fathers to sound each other out and at least begin to build a working relationship. However, it was also important that practitioners 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 practitioner 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. Practitioners 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 practitioners doing what they said they would do, replying to messages in reasonable time, and being straight with men. Building trust with practitioners took time and this was very difficult when there were lots of changes of worker, or when practitioners did not keep men updated about assessments and plans.

Balancing criticism and praise:
men wanted practitioners 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 practitioner or withdraw from the safeguarding process. Focusing on strengths as well as problems made it more likely that a father and practitioners could work together.

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

Not 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.

Not being labelled as 'difficult':
this was one important way in which men felt unfairly treated by practitioners. 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 practitioner talked to fathers, how child protection conferences were organised, and how practitioners 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 practitioners:
there were clashes between men and practitioners over how each expected time to be given and spent. Many men felt that practitioners 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, practitioners saw them as 'disengaged' or as not caring about their child.

For practical tips on effective engagement of fathers and other significant males please see Appendix A on page 8.

8. 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/toiletries in the home?
- Ensure accurate information for example, telephone numbers and addresses for the father (and other males) and their 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 child's 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)

9. 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.

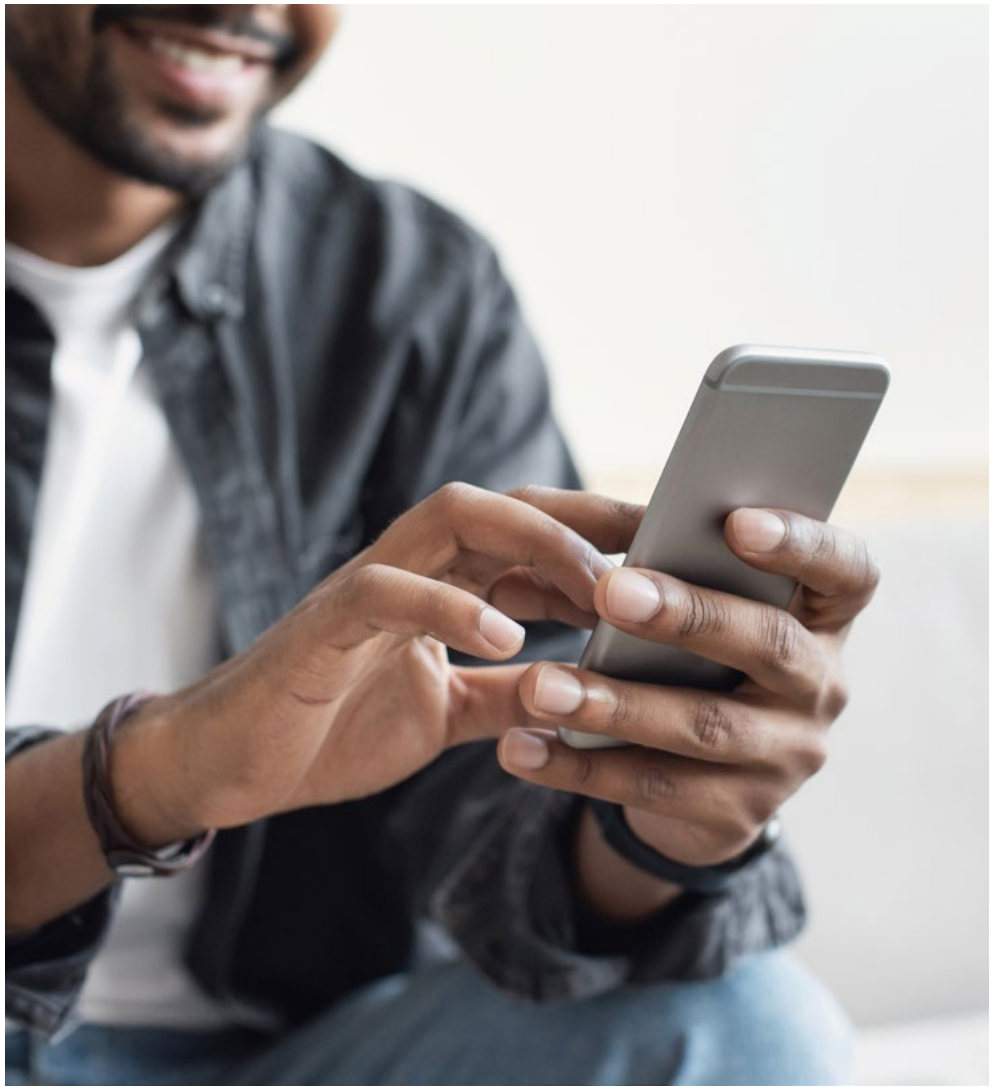
Be explicit that violence to women is unacceptable. Inform men about the impact of their violence on the child. Respect men who want to change and secure and monitor their engagement on perpetrator programmes.

Assess risks, causes and complications surrounding the violence and pay attention to the stressors in the family. For example, see:

Bedfordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership – MARACs.

CAADA/Safelives Dash risk assessment.

10. 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)

11. SUPPORTING PRACTITIONERS

- 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

- 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)

Finally, at all times keep your focus on the child. This includes identifying all the significant men in the child's life early on. Assess male parenting and, where appropriate, enable fathers to take responsibility for meeting the needs of their children.

APPENDIX A

Practical Tips

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

DO:

- ✓ Start your involvement with the family early and 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 a 'Think Family' approach in Early Help 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, Be Curious;
- ✓ 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 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 all 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 practitioners' attitudes and prejudices towards men, and seek appropriate support through reflective supervision and training opportunities.
- ✓ Practitioners need to understand masculinity and contemporary fatherhood in order to assess fathers and wider family dynamics accurately. Cultural ideas about 'manliness' and fatherhood are deep rooted and vary across cultures, ethnicities and class.
- ✓ Non-resident, black, ethnic minority and white working class fathers are all likely to face particular circumstances and pressures. These need to be understood and assessed.
- ✓ Be prepared to engage with men and support them to develop their parenting skills and address any addictions, mental health problems or violence. Empower marginalised fathers to be a better resource for their children.
- ✓ Recognise the value of fathers to children. Involve them (where safe) in every aspect of direct work.
- ✓ Involve the father and paternal extended family at the earliest possible opportunity. Family Group Conferences are an excellent vehicle for identifying and engaging wider family networks. FGCs should be used as early as possible within the assessment stage.
- ✓ Adopt 'due diligence' in locating absent fathers. Finding absent fathers should become a practice expectation. It requires persistence, curiosity and creativity.
- ✓ Think about how power, gender relations and personal experience (for example, of your own father, partner or being a father) may be shaping your perspective and influencing your practice.
- ✓ Be respectful. Notions of respect and disrespect can have particular relevance for men. When practitioners communicate respect they are more likely to engage the father and keep him involved.
- ✓ Be consistent. Practitioners should be consistent in what they say and how they behave towards fathers. Be consistent in what you say to fathers and about fathers in reports (Brandon et al, 2017).
- ✓ Recognise that many fathers are vulnerable and may withdraw or become threatening as a form of defence. Most children want to maintain a relationship with their fathers, even if they are or have been abusive.

DON'T:

- ✘ Be afraid to demonstrate practitioner 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 and do not feel anxious about obtaining accurate details about the father or her 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 such as;
  - practitioner 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.

APPENDIX B

Resources Working with Fathers

There are some useful resources below for practitioners working with Fathers and engaging them in the care of their children:

Fatherhood Institute
http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/

Young Dads Collective
https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/young-dads-collective

Dads House
https://www.dadshouse.org.uk/

Families Need Fathers
https://fnf.org.uk/

Future Men
https://futuremen.org/

Fathers – resources for practitioners

Fathers matter a great deal to children; they play a significant role within the family, whether or not they are resident, and increasingly want to be fully involved in their children's upbringing. Despite this, many children and family services are still predominantly mother-focused and often struggle to engage with fathers as a result. Services need to look at how they can change this or they will fail to meet the needs of children and families.

The 'Dad Test Guide' aims to help health, family and children's services, schools and third sector agencies identify how they can engage more effectively with fathers. It explains why supporting father involvement is crucial to the well-being and educational development of children. It contains a simple 'Dad Test' to help managers and practitioners start to assess how father-inclusive their service is, with ideas for small changes they can make to meet the needs of both parents more effectively.

Practitioners know that mothers are important. What is less well understood is that when dads are positively involved, children do better in all sorts of ways.

The Fatherhood Institute has produced a series of 'Why dads matter' five-minute digests which can be downloaded and shared:

- Five-minute guide 01 – Dads during pregnancy and birth
- Five-minute guide 02 – Dads in the early years
- Five-minute guide 03 – Dads in the school years
- Five-minute guide 04 – Dads and older children
- Five-minute guide 05 – Different types of dads.

Bringing Fathers In is a series of smart, punchy, evidence-based information sheets backed up with a series of online research summaries.

The information sheets are free to download, and designed to print in A3 format for use as posters – or in A4. They, and the supporting research summaries, are intended for an international audience of health, education and social care practitioners, policy makers, programme managers and designers, researchers and evaluators. Topics include:

- 'why' to engage dads
- 'how' to engage dads effectively
- topic sheets backed up by free online research summaries.

Working effectively with men in families - including fathers in children's social care. Produced in July 2017 by Professor Brid Featherstone and published by Research in Practice summarises other research and work in this area. It describes differential approaches as they apply to early help and statutory intervention.

'Counting Fathers In': Men's experiences of the child protection system. Norwich. Developed by Marion

Brandon and colleagues at the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia looks specifically at men's experience of the child protection system.

'Developing an approach to include fathers in children's social care' – Dr Gavin Swann

'Working with fathers in child protection: lessons from research', Jon Symonds, Community Care Inform, July 2014 updated Feb 2018.

'Good practice with fathers in children and family services' – Gary Clapton, University of Edinburgh June 2017

Luton Practice Framework 2021

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