

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 professionals who sometimes focus almost exclusively on the quality of care children receive from their mothers / female carers. *Hidden Men: NSPCC 2015*

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

Identifying the men in the child's life

When birth fathers are cohabiting with the mother and child, it is relatively straightforward to achieve this, but practitioners should also be mindful of the importance of identifying fathers when they are not living with the child, as well as identifying new male partners in the household. This requires additional, but important, work by practitioners.

- Be curious about any new adults who have significant contact with vulnerable children, ask more questions about them.
- Always clarify who the members of a household are each time you visit a family.
- Be explicit with mothers about the importance of speaking to the father and including him in the process, while also ensuring that she would not be put at risk;
- Speak separately to the father rather than gathering information solely through the mother;
- Arrange separate home visits if necessary to explain the relevance of his involvement with the child, communicating a willingness to include him in decisions.

It can be difficult to get mothers to open up and discuss their partners' involvement in their children's lives, especially when the relationship between parents has broken down. Mothers may not wish the fathers to be involved. Where you have concerns always discuss further within supervision, with managers or with the safeguarding team.

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.

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 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;
- 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;
- Consider the quality, availability and relevance of materials and education programmes to support the development of parenting;
- 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.

At all times keep your focus on 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.