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Improving work with fathers to prevent child maltreatment

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Why work with fathers?

For some people, the question 'why work with fathers?' does not need to be asked. They may take for granted that of course it is important to work with all family members to prevent child maltreatment. But for others this may not be self-evident. I start this piece, therefore, by briefly explaining why this is an important issue.

It is most important to argue the case from the perspective of what is best for children. There is now a wealth of evidence from researchers in a range of disciplines (e.g. the Cambridge psychologist Michael Lamb and the Penn State sociologist Paul Amato) that fathering is associated with outcomes for children. This works both ways. Good quality fathering is associated with emotional well-being later in life, but negative outcomes can also be linked to father effects. For example, offspring of fathers with criminal histories are more likely themselves to become offenders. The importance of fathers for children's well-being is the strongest argument for working with fathers. Even if a father is a negative influence, at the very least he needs to be properly assessed. And many men will benefit from some kind of help. Even if their current behaviour is putting children at risk there may be potential for change. For the vast majority of families, children's bonds with fathers would argue for some kind of ongoing relationship with a father in planning care for children. There are of course a small number of families where the best outcome is the complete separation of the children from a father. The focus of this paper, however, is on engaging fathers as allies in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

The category of 'fathers' is, of course, very broad. It includes biological fathers, who may or may not be living with children, adoptive fathers, foster carers, step-fathers and other men who fulfil a social father role. Particularly challenging for child welfare professionals can be the new boyfriend of a child's mother; challenging, that is, because his exact involvement in family life may not be clear. All kinds of father are relevant to the child protection process, both in providing a resource for care and in posing potential risks to children, regardless of their biological or legal status. In child welfare practice, distinctions between different kinds of father may sometimes be necessary for clarity, but they can also be unhelpful and have the effect of making professional engagement of step-fathers less likely. In this article, the term 'father' refers to any man who parents a child.

Following this mention of 'risk' and 'resource', it is important to note that most men encountered in the child protection process are not straightforwardly either a risk or a resource for children. Marian Brandon from the University of East Anglia has conducted several studies of reviews of child deaths where abuse was implicated. She has pointed out that in cases with social work involvement, there has been a tendency to crudely categorise men as 'all good' or 'all bad' when the reality is much more complex. Brid Featherstone from the Open University has noted that many of the men caught up in the child protection process will be simultaneously a risk to children, a resource for their care and also themselves be very vulnerable.

This article will give an overview of the topic of father engagement, summarising evidence about the reality of work with fathers in this context, considering the wider evidence on the effectiveness of interventions with fathers and describing specific attempts at improving father engagement in order to prevent child maltreatment.

What's it like working with fathers in this field?

There are many reasons why there is so little engagement of fathers by child protection services. Derrick Gordon from the Yale School of Medicine and his colleagues have written a comprehensive review of the factors that influence father engagement, identifying important barriers and facilitators at several different ecological levels: the individual father, family, service provider, intervention programme, community and policy.

Each one of these levels influences the likelihood of successfully engaging fathers. Fathers themselves can be very reluctant clients. Of course mothers caught up in the child protection process can also be very reluctant to engage with child welfare professionals, given that they may well not have invited them into their homes. However, with fathers there is the added dimension of parenting perhaps not being seen as their job, or at least discussing parenting with professionals being seen as something that women should do. Some men will also be defensive about behaviour that is frowned on, such as substance misuse or violence for example, and therefore avoid social workers and other family welfare professionals. Mothers can sometimes make it difficult for professionals to engage with fathers, for a variety of reasons, some justifiable and some not. Practitioners themselves can be barriers to progress. Most front-line staff in child welfare services are women. Some of them have difficult personal histories with men in general or fathers in particular, which can have an impact on their practice, as Gavin Swann's doctoral research at the Tavistock Institute found.

Beyond the personal level for practitioners, there is the powerful effect of occupational culture. My ethnographic research for my PhD, which was published in the book *Gender and Child Protection*, found received wisdom and established practices in the social work office that had the effect of maintaining the scrutiny of mothering and the relative avoidance of fathering. This occupational culture was a complex phenomenon, however. It was not that social workers were simply 'sexist'. In fact a feminist understanding of client families was ubiquitous. However, ultimately it was women who were expected to make changes in families. They were seen as ultimately responsible for their children's well-being. Particularly noticeable was that

domestic violence, even when clearly thought to be perpetrated by a man, became the responsibility of a woman to manage, by choosing her children's safety over living with a violent man. Also, expectations of fathers were generally very low.

It should be not forgotten that involving men in family services means going against the grain. In many countries, welfare regimes were established on the assumption that men would be breadwinners and women full-time mothers. Even though cultural expectations of fathers' roles are shifting in many parts of the world, some highly gendered assumptions die hard. Child welfare being ultimately the responsibility of mothers is one of these. There is a deeply rooted legacy, therefore, of men not being considered the business of child welfare workers.

The wider evidence base for work with fathers

There is generally a lack of research evidence about family welfare interventions for fathers. There is a very small – though fairly promising - evidence base for programmes specifically aimed at divorced fathers, who are most often living separately from their children. Aside from these more targeted programmes, getting robust evidence about the impact on fathers of more general family support and parenting help can be a challenge, because the numbers of men taking part in preventative programmes tend to be small and because more often than not interventions depend on lone committed practitioners rather than being supported by theoretical under-pinning and infrastructure for replication. Several reviews have noted that evaluations of parenting programmes either do not include fathers at all, if only mothers are targeted for help, or they do not disaggregate data on fathers but simply present effects for 'parents', who tend to be mostly mothers.

Where we do know about outcomes for fathers of parent training programmes, these can be disappointing. For example, Philip Wilson (University of Aberdeen) and colleagues' meta-analysis of studies of 'Triple P', one of the best evidenced parenting programmes in the world, found that changes reported by fathers were not significantly different from control groups. A rare example of a robust study with optimistic findings for fathers is the three-arm trial done by Philip and Carolyn Cowan from Berkeley. They found better outcomes from a couples' group than from a group for fathers only. This group programme included sessions on parenting, the couple relationship, three-generational relationships and stresses and support outside the family. An identical curriculum was used for the fathers' group and the couples' group.

More specifically, we know very little about the effectiveness of programmes for fathers to prevent child maltreatment. Tyler Smith and colleagues from John Hopkins University systematically reviewed the evidence and concluded that programme effectiveness is uncertain because few studies included fathers and only two studies reported father-specific results. Child abuse prevention is very challenging territory for running randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of interventions, with a great deal of resistance to randomisation from practitioners and also from many researchers – at least this is my experience of the social work field in the UK.

I certainly do not argue that RCTs are always possible or desirable. We need many different forms of evidence, including qualitative research to help us understand processes and relationships. However, some more RCTs in this field are certainly needed, given the dearth of such evidence to date. The most glaring omission in the evidence base in relation to this article's topic is that we do not in fact know from any studies whether or not involving more fathers in the child protection process would improve outcomes for children, compared to the usual practice of mostly focusing on mothers. More evidence is, therefore, undoubtedly needed. In the next section of the article I turn to some of the specific attempts that have been made to increase the amount of work with fathers in a child protection context.

Specific interventions to increase father involvement in child protection

The UK Family Rights Group ran a series of projects in the 2000s under the heading 'Fathers Matter'. These were based on action research to identify and describe the failure to engage men in child welfare services, leading to publicity, practitioner conferences and the production of training materials. A few initiatives have then moved the agenda on and attempted to increase father engagement, evaluating these attempts in some way. The first example is the training for all practitioners in child welfare services in one US state that was initiated by Diana English from the University of Washington and colleagues. They ran a half-day training course, as well as optional additional training modules which were taken up by some staff. Pre-post testing suggested gains in father engagement, according to agency self-assessment and case file review.

I then developed an evidence-based two-day training course for social workers, along with colleagues in Cardiff, the Open University and Michigan. We piloted this in Wales and again used pre-post testing for preliminary evaluation. The training course involved both awareness-raising about the importance of engaging fathers and skills training, with an introduction to motivational interviewing, using case examples of fathers for role play. Motivational interviewing is an approach to initial engagement which has considerable promise for reluctant clients. It was developed for substance misuse and has strong evidence of effectiveness in that field. It is a subtle tool for behaviour change which leads the client towards change without being confrontational. The emphasis is very much on encouraging the client to themselves identify the need for change the steps required to achieve change. The approach has not been widely used in child welfare to date, but Donald Forrester from the University of Bedfordshire is currently running a randomised controlled trial of motivational interviewing in child protection teams in England and in Wales the Integrated Family Support Services are using aspects of it. Peter Musser, a psychologist from Maryland, and his colleagues have reported success in using motivational interviewing to prepare men for domestic violence perpetrator programmes and increase their receptivity to the programme.

Although an introduction to motivational interviewing provides practitioners with some generically useful skills for initial engagement, on its own it is unlikely to bring about substantial change in practice with fathers. In our training, the skills input was preceded by a knowledge-based training day designed to raise awareness of the importance of engaging fathers. Two months after the training, we found social

workers' self-efficacy had improved significantly on every measure. Their rate of engagement of some categories of father had also significantly increased, according to the social workers' own testimony. There was apparently increased engagement of men living with children who were not putting these children at risk and the rate of engagement of non-residential fathers had doubled. Despite this positive change, there was no significant difference reported for engaging men who pose a risk to children. This finding suggests that more work is needed on this most difficult aspect of child protection casework.

In another example of an initiative to improve father engagement, the UK's Fatherhood Institute had support from the English Department for Education for an ambitious project in six local authorities. This project could be described as 'systemic' in the same sense as Adelman and Taylor's systemic approach to change in schools; that is, there was an attempt to influence the whole organisation in order to shift front-line practice. This kind of change is of course very difficult to achieve and not all aspects worked out as planned in this first project. Mark Osborn's article in this journal issue describes the Fatherhood Institute's current initiative to take these ideas forward in several European countries.

Another example of intervention at several different levels of an organisation is the doctoral project by Gavin Swann that was mentioned earlier. As senior manager in an English local authority who had a strong commitment to father engagement, he was able to put a range of measures into place to facilitate change. He worked intensively with a small group of staff on a 'co-operative inquiry'. This provided peer support and allowed attention to the personal dimension for practitioners. There were regular meetings for them to discuss their work with fathers and their emotional reactions to them, which they were encouraged to make sense of in the light of relationships with their own fathers and with other men.

It is undoubtedly important to affect organisations on a number of levels, working with management as well as practitioners. Any training needs to be followed up with support and supervision, so that change is maintained and deepened. Given the pressures on front-line practice in child protection services, these kinds of initiatives will not be easy to achieve, however. Without higher-level political support this issue is not likely to become a major priority for services. Where attempts are made to improve practice, we need more robust evidence about what works and why. To date I am not aware of any initiatives that have been evaluated using any kind of comparative design. Ideally, a cluster randomised trial would allow us to compare teams or districts that have taken part in a father engagement initiative with similar ones who have not.

What helps in engaging fathers?

Certainly change will not come without whole agency buy-in. Political and managerial support is needed to change entrenched organisational cultures. But it is the interaction between worker and client that is fundamental. Although evidence-based approaches are important, this is not simply a matter of selecting an off-the-shelf intervention. As well as intervention content, we know that style of delivery is of paramount importance. These men are very likely to be psychologically vulnerable,

even if they present as aggressive. The very fact that men are non-traditional clients of family welfare services means that they are likely to be reluctant clients and highly skilled micro-practice may well be needed just to involve them in discussion about child care, let alone take part in some kind of behaviour change programme. The kind of communication style which is likely to work is based on qualities that we might think are intrinsic to good practice in human services – i.e. it should be respectful and empathetic, whatever the family circumstances. Although these qualities might be thought to be fundamental, however, I fear they may not always be present. Donald Forrester's research has found a confrontational style to be mainstream practice in UK child protection social workers. As I noted earlier, this approach seems particularly promising for the initial engagement of fathers. I have heard motivational interviewing dismissed on the basis that the 'brand' is not needed, as this is simply good practice in people work. Maybe, but in a context where in fact a confrontational style has become routine, it may be necessary to specify the different elements of quality communication and train workers in using these.

There is nothing about respectful and empathetic communication which is specific to working with men. It is just good practice in work with people. The same could be said for most of what practitioners need to successfully engage men. However, there are some particular features of work with men for which practitioners need to be prepared. I have recently been evaluating Mellow Dads, a fairly intensive group intervention, targeted on need and in practice taking mostly fathers referred by child protection services, which is based on improving parental attachment to children (see www.mellowparenting.org). One thing that has struck me is the extra effort needed to keep the group running. Considerable work was put in by facilitators, both before the group began and in-between sessions, just to get the men to the group. There were several events which clashed with group sessions. These might also arise for mothers but are perhaps less likely to. Clashes included attendance at criminal court (where men are more likely than women to be suspects) and appointments with other services which were not necessarily aware or supportive of the men's attendance at a parenting group, perhaps again because this is simply not familiar territory.

Also, the group activities which involved more personal disclosures could be challenging. This is not surprising, as men's socialisation does not typically involve sharing sensitive personal information with friends, whereas women's friendships often do involve emotional bonding and the sharing of intimate experiences. I do not mean to suggest that men cannot talk on a personal level and in fact in the Mellow Dads group the facilitators were very skilled at encouraging them to talk. But we should reasonably expect this might be more difficult to achieve in a group of men than in a group of women. This is not gender stereotyping. It is simply acknowledging social reality.

At the same time, we should avoid approaches to work with fathers which make too many assumptions on the basis of what we know about familiar kinds of gendered behaviour. In any human services the basis of all subsequent work is a thorough assessment. Unique personal histories need to be documented and analysed before any kind of concerted help can be put in place. And diversity needs to be planned for. Ethnic diversity is just one feature of social diversity that services need to be responsive to. There are some good examples of interventions for particular ethnic

or cultural groups. The Cowan's groups referred to earlier were provided in Spanish for Mexican-American parents. Another evaluation I have done recently is of the Family Links Islamic Values course (see www.familylinks.org.uk). This takes a well-established parenting programme, the Nurturing Programme, which was developed by Stephen Bavolek, and overlays it with Islamic theology and quotations from Qur'an and Hadith. More fundamental than culturally appropriate services, however, is an individualised assessment to establish the right approach for each father. Unfortunately, the ideal service for that individual may not then be available in the locality, as this is still a relatively under-developed field of practice.

Although there may be a dearth of specialist services, there is great potential for individual workers to offer therapeutic help to fathers. In fact, if a case worker can build up a strong relationship with a family, she or he may be the very best person to engage a father in a process of behaviour change. This approach would not come for free, however, but would require training and support from organisations. There is certainly potential for better work with fathers to make a difference to children's lives, but it has to be acknowledged that the child welfare field has quite a long way to go, starting as it does from a very low base, with a deep-rooted culture of working primarily with mothers.

Suggestions of further reading

English, D.J., Brummel, S. and Martens, P. (2009). Fatherhood in the child welfare system: Evaluation of a pilot project to improve father involvement. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 3, 3, 213-234.

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Strega, S., Fleet, C., Brown, L., Dominelli, L., Callahan, M. and Walmsley, C. (2008). Connecting father absence and mother blame in child welfare policies and practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 7, 705-716.

Suggested websites

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearing House (USA) promising practice reports: <http://www.fatherhood.gov/about-us/nrfc-resources/nrfc-promising-practices>

Fatherhood Institute (UK): <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>

Working with fathers to improve children's well-being (the author's own site):
<http://workingwithfathers.weebly.com/>