



FI Research Summary: Reducing Violence in Children's Lives

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

- A review of child welfare practice in a number of countries found systemic overlooking of fathers and father-figures in the lives of children at risk (Zanoni et al, 2013).
- Overlooking fathers and father-figures in child protection contexts has been linked with severe child maltreatment and deaths (OFSTED, 2011; Brandon et al., 2011).
- Child welfare workers in many countries tend to have negative stereotypes of men in families in which children are at risk, assuming the fathers to be uncommitted and uninvolved parents, and unable to cease drug use (Zanoni et al, 2014).
- Simply excluding an abusive father is insufficient: when excluded from a household, abusive men typically continue their behaviour with new partners; and when an abusive man leaves a family, he normally continues to interact with between 6-10 children or step-children (Scott and Crooks, 2004).
- Where fathers have behaved abusively, It is both unfair and impractical to focus attention on the mother and make her responsible for keeping her children safe (Zanoni et al, 2013).

WHAT USE ARE DADS IN FAMILIES WHERE CHILDREN ARE AT RISK?

- Fathers and father figures can serve a protective role in the lives of at-risk children and can contribute to positive developmental outcomes (Zanoni et al, 2013).
- Many fathers in child protection families become or already are committed and involved parents who have engaged in substantial personal change, including ceasing to misuse substances (Zanoni et al, 2014).

- Better engagement with fathers and father-figures in families where children are at risk is likely to result in better risk assessment, reduced burden on mothers, enhanced resources for the care of children and better risk management, leading to reduction of harm (Zanoni et al, 2013).
- The involvement of the father in the life of a family is associated with lower levels of child neglect, even in families that face other factors, such as unemployment and poverty (Gaudin and Dubowitz, 1997).
- Fathers who nurture and take significant responsibility for basic childcare for their children (e.g., feeding, changing diapers) from an early age are significantly less likely to sexually abuse their children. It is thought that a secure attachment developed through such activities reduces the likelihood of this kind of harm (Pruett, 2000).
- The father-child relationship is especially important in disadvantaged families where children suffer more from a poor relationship with their father and benefit more when this is good (Dunn, 2004).
- Even fathers who behave very negatively may hold vital information about their children (Brandon et al, 2011).

HOW ARE FATHERS BETTER ENGAGED WITH IN FAMILIES WHERE CHILDREN ARE AT RISK?

- Challenge your own assumptions (and those of your colleagues, staff and associated agencies): The assumption that fathers in such families are absent or unimportant needs to be challenged, as does the stereotype of the men as dangerous, non-nurturing and incompetent carers. Each man's ability to parent should be assessed without bias; and as standard practice (Zanoni et al, 2013; Featherstone et al, 2007).
- Adopt a 'top down'/bottom up approach: obtain commitment from senior management to commit resources and to support front-line staff to engage better with fathers and father figures. Simultaneously, train front-line workers to understand the benefits of engaging dads and the risks associated with not doing so, and to feel skilled and confident in this work (Fatherhood Institute, 2013; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).
- Emphasise their fathering role when engaging with men who use violence or behave in other abusive ways: there is evidence that for some men, receiving consequences for their abusive behaviours and focusing on their role as fathers can act as powerful motivators for change (Scott and Lishak, 2012; Sheehan, 2006; Hall, 2004; McLean et al, 2004).
- Think of problematic men as vulnerable and seek to meet their needs: Like maltreating mothers, maltreating fathers are typically 'troubled' individuals, with a history of victimisation in their families-of-origin (Pittman and Buckley, 2006). They also tend to be isolated with few emotional and instrumental supports and weak ties to social networks (Coohey, 2006).

- Think twice before excluding fathers from children’s lives: Severing all contact between a father and his child, should not be enacted lightly. Children who see little or nothing of their fathers tend to demonise or idealise them (Gorrell Barnes et al, 1998) and suffer substantial distress, anger and self-doubt (Fortin et al, 2006; Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000) as well as increased health complaints (Reiter et al, 2013).
- An example of good practice: In Buffalo, USA, new mothers and fathers were informed about the risks of shaking babies, given strategies to deal safely with, for example, persistent crying and urged to sign a ‘commitment statement’ acknowledging receipt and understanding of information. Rates of abusive head injuries occurring in the first three years of children’s lives almost halved over the five-year-study-period (Dias et al, 2005).

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