The risks of excluding fathers

You would think that the value of fatherhood is slowly become recognised. Yet, if you dig down into practice, there is increasing evidence that fathers are being overlooked and children are being put at risk as a result. Tim Linehan reports.

The debate about fatherhood is in constant flux. The public, professionals and politicians pay lip service to the importance of fathers to their children and the next minute act against the defining principles and practices. They embrace the broad concept of involved fatherhood, but when it comes down to policy formulation day-to-day practice, active resistance can set in. The problem is caused by seeing ‘fatherhood’ and ‘motherhood’ in opposition to each other: if one party gains, the other must lose.

And although in individual cases, notably during separation, power struggles are played out between parents, even in that context, substantial father-involvement normally benefits mothers, whose own relationships with their children are enhanced by it.

When it comes to safeguarding, these issues become all the more critical. An Ofsted overview of Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) reported that a contributing factor to children’s abuse and death was ‘the failure to take fathers and other men connected to the families into account in assessments; rigid thinking about father figures as all good or all bad; and the perceived threat posed by men to workers.’ The follow-up report which looked at SCRs between 2007 and 2009 repeated this argument, adding that: ‘while the father, stepfather, or mother’s partner might pose a risk to the child’s safety, he may, on the other hand, act as a protective presence, or have important information and insights into the children’s safety.’

These claims don’t mean that the father in question is necessarily capable of caring for a child, indeed, he may be violent and constitute a risk to the child. However, including fathers and father-figures in the child protection process is a necessary part in managing that risk and securing a safe outcome for the child.

This means that if services, including schools, are going to establish a safeguarding process that will protect children from abuse and neglect, they need to engage fathers. The evidence is that they are failing to do this.
Images of fatherhood

If local authorities and services for children are going to engage fathers, they need to market to them. Yet a recent analysis in Scotland of materials for parents – in other words mothers and fathers – revealed that fathers were either absent or portrayed as incompetent or as a risk.

Last month, Gary Clapton, a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh, was asked to give a presentation to the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee which was running an inquiry to the services and support groups for fathers. The inquiry investigated social attitudes towards lone and unmarried fathers as well as parental rights and responsibilities for fathers. Clapton’s research specifically looked at the way fathers are depicted in publicity materials advertising local authority family services.

In his evidence to the Scottish Parliament, Clapton noted that although nearly 80 per cent of children in Scotland live with two parents, most of the images only depicted mothers with children, and that most of the written messages were addressed to mothers. Clapton says this creates three problems. Firstly, it presents fathers as optional in children’s lives and as having no positive contribution to make to their wellbeing. Secondly, it reduces the likelihood of the father’s family and friends being brought into the frame – a potentially important resource. Thirdly, it overburdens mothers who are made unfairly (and often impossibly) responsible for supporting children financially, practically and emotionally, rather than promoting shared responsibility. And finally, it dissuades fathers from taking up services and participating in important interventions, and pushes them to accept a diminished role in the life of their families.

In his analysis, Clapton argues that, when fathers are rendered invisible, the message is that they are optional. But worse: he found that where fathers are depicted, for instance in case scenarios and examples, this is almost always negative. Fathers are overwhelmingly portrayed as violent, physically and sexually dangerous to their children and as alcohol or drug users. This means that social workers and other key personnel are in fact being actively trained to reject the men in children’s lives.

It’s interesting that the materials Clapton examined are intended to be marketed to families, 80 per cent of which, as he notes, are made up of a partnership of a mother and a birth father or father-figure. Not only are the men marginalised, but failure to engage with them can mean that costly services are procured when in fact, familial care may have been a better (and cheaper) alternative.

Clapton says: ‘It’s disturbing that services that should be trying to support families are alienating them by presenting fathers as dangerous or violent, or else not ‘facing’ them at all. It’s not just the images that will put off men from getting help and contributing to their children’s lives, and make them feel like pariahs, it suggests an antipathy towards father involvement within the culture of these services that has not kept pace with societal changes and expectations. And that is very worrying indeed.’

The fatherhood audit

Research shows that both fathers and mothers impact on their children’s development – sometimes in similar, and sometimes in quite different, ways. The combined influence of fathers and mothers is also important. Taking action to include both parents in the life of the school and in their children’s learning can make a significant and positive difference to children’s achievements, motivation and self-esteem.

Initiatives to engage fathers so that children can get the most out their parents’ involvement have, until recently, been rare. There is a risk that if engagement at this broad level is so poor, then disengagement where children are in trouble is almost inevitable.

Earlier this year, Dr Mark Osborn, safeguarding programme manager at the Fatherhood Institute, published an evaluation of the Fatherhood Institute’s work with six local authorities, drawing on 120 case studies in order to audit the involvement of fathers.
Osborn acknowledges that some men are dangerous or difficult to work with but makes it clear that wherever possible, a father’s involvement in the safeguarding process should be seen as an essential part of a process to find the best solution for children. This is not about fathers’ rights: if a culture is to be truly child-centred and all possible steps are to be taken to ensure children’s safety and deliver services, at schools and elsewhere, that are in their best interests, then the culture of education, health and family services needs to change. As Osborn says: ‘The failure to engage effectively with men is not just a matter of individual workers’ practices. A service culture that underestimates men’s impact on children and their capacity and willingness to change can become institutionalised and is likely to result in professionals overlooking men and communicating to them that their participation is optional or undesirable.’ By excluding men, you are giving out a message that they don’t matter, in all probability confirming their own worst fears and giving no space for their reform.

It’s not just about changing behaviour. Sometimes fathers have vital information that can protect a child but if their views are not canvassed, then that information will never come to light, and that can result in abuse, injury and even death of a child.

**Changing culture**

Culture change is never easy to achieve. It means taking an organisation-wide approach to including fathers and working with other agencies and joining up principles; it means starting with a belief that fathers matter too, and engaging them in the early years sector, schools, social services and health services. Involving fathers, for example, only in safeguarding, will not work unless engagement in other areas is also woven into practice. This goes for schools as much as it does for other services. Engagement leads to participation and acceptance, and the greater involvement of fathers in children’s lives, as research tells us, helps them fulfil their potential. This requires a systematic approach, information gathering and sharing, and recording information carefully, all of which become particularly important when there are concerns about the welfare of a child.
## Ten top tips for father-inclusive practice

1) **Look at the world from the child’s point of view**  
All staff should engage with biological fathers because they matter to children – including to children who rarely or never see them.

2) **Recognise and support father-figures**  
Father figures have a huge impact, but hardly anyone helps them think about their difficult role. You don’t have to choose between them and the biological dad. Support them both!

3) **Have high expectations of fathers**  
Don’t assume: investigate. Value the positive. Challenge the negative – and be intolerant of fathers’ slipping out of children’s lives.

4) **Carry out a male involvement audit**  
Audit the dads and men who use, are touched by, and work in your school/service(s). Also audit staff attitudes and practice in engaging with dads.

5) **Review your child/family registration forms**  
Routine collection of fathers’ and father-figures’ details – and contacting them systematically – is vital. Sometimes, when asking mothers for this information, you may need to explore why this is important, and address concerns.

6) **Invite dads personally to specific activities**  
Especially educational activities – and follow up regularly if the dads don’t show: write, phone, text. Include non-resident fathers and ensure your service is inviting (are there positive pictures of dads around?) and accessible (is it offered at times working dads can make?).

7) **Limit your use of the ‘p’ word!**  
P is for Parent and most fathers don’t feel included when it is used. Whenever possible, say (and write) ‘mums and dads’ or ‘fathers and mothers’.

8) **Tell dads how their involvement benefits their kids**  
Fathers are most likely to come to your service(s) if they understand why their presence benefits their children.

9) **Lead from the top**  
This ensures a ‘whole team’ approach (work with fathers should never be the responsibility of just one staff member) and only succeeds when senior management’s expectations are robust, and staff understand why it’s important and the basics of how it’s done.

10) **Be intolerant of failure to engage with dads**  
Take the stance that men have to be involved in assessments and family interventions for the sake of their children; refuse to accept a referral without reference to the biological father and to any key father-figures. Raise the topic in team meetings and supervision, so it becomes everyone’s business.

Top tips adapted from the Fatherhood Institute

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The audit carried out by the Fatherhood Institute revealed that local authorities routinely did not record information about fathers. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the light of the Gary Clapton’s research, Osborn’s research showed that contact, engagement and emotional support were less common for fathers than with mothers, flying in the face of Ofsted’s conclusion of its analysis of serious case reviews that ‘the father is just as important as the mother’ in child protection.
In the local authorities that the Fatherhood Institute worked with, the father’s contact address was not recorded in just over a quarter of the cases. More pertinently the difference between local authorities was significant, scotching the argument that fathers sometimes ‘disappear’ and become untraceable. In one local authority, the contact details of all fathers were collected, in contrast to the lowest performing local authority in which only 60% were collected.

In the local authorities investigated by Osborn, only 55% of fathers were invited to take part in conferences. In some cases, this was a conscious decision where, for example, a father was considered to be a risk, or where his behaviour was considered disruptive, but very often it was hard to determine how the decision to exclude the father was reached and very often it appeared simply that he had been excluded by default, because the local authority had not collected contact details. In one case, a father was involved through a telephone conversation but was not involved in the core assessment. Perhaps, given these findings, it’s not surprising that a full discussion of strengths and resources of the birth father was apparent on only in 16 per cent of the case files.

Osborn highlights that change is brought about not by quirks, or the individual performance of particular staff, but by ensuring that policies and systems are in place and that a culture that recognises the importance of fathers is promoted: ‘If professionals proactively seek out the fathers, expect to collect their details and their referral forms and other documentation are set out to ask for the mother’s and the father’s details rather than wanting the parents’ details or even worse, the parent’s details, then change will follow.’
**Double standards**

Osborn gives two examples to illustrate different approaches to mothers and fathers. The first case concerned a teenage mother who had moved to another area of the country and had not been in her child’s life for two years. The social worker turned detective, found leads, waded through old addresses to find her, to no avail. However, a practitioner who worked with one of the siblings of the young mother was discovered and finally the mother was tracked down. Procedures then kicked in: contact was made; assessments were carried out; support was provided and eventually the young mother got back in touch with her child.

By contrast, the next file involved a teenage father. In this case, the young father lived around the corner from his child but was not in contact with the child, although he had expressed concerns for the child’s safety. There was, however, no record of any assessment, no intervention with him, he wasn’t invited to meetings or conferences and he was not included in the core group. No reasons were given for his exclusion.

Osborn describes another case where both parents had been witnessed being aggressive toward their child. The parents were living separately because of previous domestic violence by the father and the child was residing with the mother. Although both parents attended the initial conference and the child protection agreement included contact arrangements for the father to see the child, only the mother was expected to sign it. In this case, by not requiring him to put his name to the agreement, he is effectively being exonerated of all responsibility for keeping the child safe, leaving the mother as sole responsible parent with the implication she is responsible for the father’s behaviour. Not only is this placing an unreasonable burden on the mother, it is clearly poor safeguarding practice.

As Osborn says: ‘…much as we like to think of ourselves as impartial, non-judgemental and upholding equality in our everyday lives, we do not view fathers as “just as important” as mothers in the lives of their children. If we are to improve the way in which fathers are involved in families, we must address a cultural blind spot that we have when it comes to fathers and fatherhood.’

Even where fathers have poor parenting skills (or worse), they can provide a reference point for children, and an understanding of who they are and how they feel about themselves, says Osborn. That in itself ought to be reason enough to invest more effort in supporting relationships between fathers and children. Yet as well as the negative portrayals of fathers, services and policies reference fathers, preferring the singular term ‘the parent’ rather than ‘parents’ and seldom using ‘mother and father’. These exclusive terms are all small steps on the longer road to exclusion.

One of the risks of excluding fathers is that it is difficult to assess whether they are a risk to a child or not, and simply leaving them out of the picture altogether is a way of ignoring risk rather than managing or even resolving it. As Osborn says: ‘Moving risky men out of the picture does not remove them from the equation; it merely shifts our focus. When fathers are not effectively engaged, the behaviors continue, and they rarely end their involvement with children.’

“If we are to improve the way in which fathers are involved in families, we must address a cultural blind spot that we have when it comes to fathers and fatherhood.”
A new model of engagement

The cases of Daniel Pelka, Peter Connelly (baby P) and Hamza Khan have all been highlighted in serious case reviews as examples where fathers or father figures were not engaged with the child protection process with devastating and tragic effect. There are serious risks to children of not engaging fathers. Most often, though, the impact will be felt in less obvious ways – the disappointed child who fails to reach full potential; the reduced performance at school and the impact that has on future life chances; the alienation of a troubled child who feels abandoned by an absent father.

Safeguarding though is not just about emergency protection; it’s about the way that services are marketed; about the portrayal of fathers and the failure to recognise how children’s lives can be enriched by reaching out to ensure that their fathers are engaged in their lives.

As Adrienne Burgess, Chief Executive of The Fatherhood Institute, says: “Fatherhood is not an option. It’s not about parents’ rights, it’s about making sure that we offer children the best opportunities in life and that means including fathers in all aspects of their lives. The benefits go beyond the undoubted good for children, it will also help us to build a fairer and stronger society in which mothers will benefit. We need to build a more strength-based approach towards supporting children and that can only be achieved when we fully understand and integrate the benefits fathers bring to their children.”

Engagement with fathers in safeguarding results in:

- better risk assessment
- a reduced burden on mothers
- better resources for the care of children
- better risk management.
- intervening early with fathers, before there is a crisis,
- making it easier to support them to develop appropriate parenting styles
- preventing serious harm and even the death of children, according to serious case review evidence

What are the gains for children of engaging fathers?

The educational benefits of engaging fathers are well established, but a whole-school approach to engaging fathers will also result in better pastoral care and support for disadvantaged children.

Positive father involvement in their children’s learning is associated with better educational, social and emotional outcomes for children, including:

- better examination results
- better school attendance and behaviour
- less criminality
- higher quality of later relationships
- better mental health.

These associations are independent of and additional to those related to the involvement of mothers. Both mother and father involvement are important for children and one is not a substitute for the other.

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