

# Making the *least* of fathers: Five common mistakes

## MISTAKE

1

Using the word 'parent': you might believe that's inclusive, but it's not.  
> 'Parent' is commonly heard (and used) to mean 'mother'. In the UK, when an invitation was addressed 'Dear parents' 20% of fathers attended a post-birth home visit. When the wording was changed to 'Dear mum and dad' and the hope that both would attend was made clear, 80% of the fathers came.

## MISTAKE

2

Failing to invite fathers because you assume they 'won't turn up', 'aren't uninterested', 'aren't there' or will be 'trouble'.  
> In the US, midwives supporting teenage mothers and assessing their parenting capacity to be 'good' or 'very good', judged the babies' fathers' parenting capacity to be 'poor' – without ever meeting them.

## MISTAKE

3

Engaging with dads *only or mainly* through an add-on, separate service.  
> Sending dads off to a separate service 'models' their exclusion/rejection by mainstream services. Separate services are also vulnerable to cuts when times are hard; and the evidence is clear that whole-agency engagement with fathers as part of mainstream family practice is the only way of reaching substantial numbers – and delivers the greatest benefits to mothers, children and fathers themselves.

## THEY SAID IT:

Involved fathers and father figures can serve a protective role in the lives of at-risk children and can contribute to positive developmental outcomes. 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.

## MISTAKE

4

Blaming fathers when they don't engage or are dissatisfied with an intervention.

> Perceiving the fathers as 'the problem' allows a service to avoid reflecting on their own ways of working. In the US, when a prenatal course was not rated highly by fathers, it was redesigned. Afterwards, fathers gave and received more support, took on more housework, were more likely to 'reason' with their partner than enter into arguments, and reported improvements in their relationship.

## MISTAKE

5

Tolerating fathers' lack of engagement.

> In the UK, a service for adolescents suffering from mental health problems has very high father/mother participation for no other reason than that the whole team believes in the importance of engaging with the dads and follows them up when they don't appear.

To download other 'Bringing fathers in' resources and access relevant links and references, go to:  
[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2014/bringing-fathers-in-resources-for-advocates-practitioners-and-researchers/](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2014/bringing-fathers-in-resources-for-advocates-practitioners-and-researchers/)