

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN WORKING WITH FATHERS

# Qualities and Understanding

### Warmth and empathy

The qualities staff must have if they are to engage well with dads are largely the same as they would need for any direct work with families – good listening skills, empathy, commitment, etc. The problem is that often, workers display these qualities more readily with female service users. There can be many reasons for this including inexperience, negative experiences with men, negative views of men, lack of awareness about fathers' impact, and a belief that the 'essential' work should be done with mums.

### Acknowledging dads' diversity

There are all sorts of different types of fathers, with many different needs to address. For example there are very young dads, unemployed dads, dads who don't live with their children full-time, lone dads, ex-offender dads, gay dads, Muslim dads – and even within each of these groups, individual men will vary substantially. It's important to think about differences and similarities between fathers and mothers too.

### Understanding where dads 'come from'

Generalising can be dangerous, but it's important to be aware that many dads do come to parenting from a 'different place'. Many see the mum as the 'expert' and take their lead from her; most spend less time with their children than she does and will have received less information about children and child development.

Dads may also be:

- More socially isolated as parents
- Less aware of what services are available
- Likely to assume (usually rightly) that services are 'for women'
- Uncomfortable being the 'only bloke at the toddler group'
- Wary of being judged as an inadequate or risky parent
- Uncomfortable showing vulnerability or uncertainty.

### Rapport, respect, relaxation and reliability

It's important for staff to be able to build a relationship with fathers by listening to their stories, and tuning in to their experiences and concerns. Comfort with expressions of emotion (especially anger, pain and vulnerability) is also important. Respect is vital, and is rooted in genuinely valuing what men can offer to children. Most men respond well to workers who are relaxed and 'real', and as they are often distrustful of services, you should be reliable and always do what you've said you'll do.

### Solutions and strengths

Staff should be able to help the father see where he wants to get to, and develop practical plans to get him there. Identify his strengths and build on these, rather than trying to 'shame' him into action.

### Holistic approach

It's important to help the father on practical and emotional levels, to build his confidence as a parent, improve his relationship with his child's mother, and boost his communication skills.

### Understanding gender and power

Most men retain power in their families, but can also feel unconfident and marginal as parents. It's important to challenge men's abuse of power and control. It can also be useful to challenge both parents to rethink their roles beyond the confines of gender stereotypes.

### Engaging with mothers on fatherhood

Supporting father-child relationships involves more than working with fathers – it affects how we engage with the whole family. Sometimes you'll need to encourage mothers to think differently about fatherhood, supporting them to understand fathers' importance to children. Often this means helping them work through pain, disappointment and anger. Some mothers may need support to try to involve fathers who have slipped out of children's lives, and children too may need help to explore feelings around 'absent' or 'difficult' dads.

For all the references in this document, see our **REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY** online resource at [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2013/engaging-with-men-in-social-care/](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2013/engaging-with-men-in-social-care/)