

Why fathers and father-figures are overlooked

There is considerable evidence that services set up to support the welfare of children disproportionately focus on working with mothers and regularly fail to engage fathers, especially if non-resident. This is true in a wide range of services including those working within the child protection arena (Brandon et al., 2011; Strega et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al. 2005).

Working together to safeguard children (DCSF, 2010) www.education.gov.uk/publications/eorderingdownload/00305-2010dom-en.pdf acknowledges that:

“ ...children’s services as a whole can still be very mother-focused and fathers can, often inadvertently, be made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable when they try to use them. Managers and commissioners should therefore make sure that their services take account of the needs of fathers and actively look for ways to engage them. (p.241). ”

The reasons for this are broad and complex but fall into four basic categories:

1) Social constructions, and perceptions, of gender and parenting

Traditional assumptions about gender roles view mothers as the primary caretakers of children and this is often reflected in social work practice. Child welfare services frequently underestimate fathers’ involvement in children’s lives and their value and impact, both positive and negative. Men may often be seen as unreliable by social care staff and their views disregarded particularly if they run counter to the view of the mother with whom the agency usually has most contact. Fathers may be dismissed as uninterested, incapable, irrelevant and inherently problematic.

Such assumptions may be shared by some mothers and also by fathers themselves.

2) Organisational and occupational systems and cultures

Agency policy may reflect lack of clarity about how important it is to engage fathers as well as mothers. While ‘parents’ may be viewed as important often too little emphasis is placed on the need to engage with both of them. Services often then tend to focus on mothers, and fathers may be marginalised. Time constraints on social work practice may also encourage the view that including fathers is time consuming and secondary. For example, social workers may have already seen one father figure and take the view that to engage another is a low priority particularly if not resident with the child, yet 25% of families known to social care have more than one father (Fathers Matter 2). Another key factor that acts as a barrier is that many staff have concerns that these men may be aggressive or violent towards them. If the problem of engagement is thought to lie with individuals or within the men themselves, agencies may not look at their own practice to identify and overcome barriers that the service is erecting, or failing to dismantle, that are inhibiting engagement with fathers.

Why fathers and father-figures are overlooked (continued)

3) Men's reluctance to be involved

The failure of fathers to engage or refusal to engage is complex and may be linked to constructions of masculinity that stress men's invulnerability and 'independence'.

Some men, who would be pleased to be involved, may fail to put themselves forward or may appear uninterested. In fact, there are numerous reasons why fathers may appear reticent, including:

- They may be waiting to be given permission to step forward and be invited to participate.
- Feeling that getting involved will cause problems with their child's mother, the benefits she receives, or other partners or children.
- They may not regard themselves as competent or important in child care.
- Many are simply unaware of the services on offer.
- Others perceive parenting programmes as being 'for mothers' and not relevant to their needs, concerns or preferences.
- Fathers may also have a perception that social care is a largely female domain and feel self-conscious or intimidated, and believe that they will not be valued or listened to.
- Some fathers will fear that raising issues, particularly critically, will lead to services' being suspicious of them. This feeling will be heightened if the agency has a critical view of them already.

Professionals who are persistent in 'chasing' men to encourage their participation may not in fact irritate them, but may actually help them see that they are important.

4) Women acting as gatekeepers between men and services

A mother whose partner uses violence or drugs, is involved in criminal activities, or is an illegal immigrant may fear his reaction to service involvement and services' reactions to him; and may fear losing their children. But there can be many other reasons why a mother may act as a gatekeeper:

- A mother may have 'internalised' messages that fathers are unimportant.
- Some may believe he can't change or fear for their own or their children's safety, whilst others may feel that he won't follow their rules in parenting the children.
- Some mothers may fear that involving him might weaken their relationship with a key worker or 'open the door' to his (or his parents') being able to claim greater contact or even residence or sole custody.
- Alternatively, a mother may be reluctant to let the father know that child welfare services are involved.
- Reluctance may stem from anger at the father for being in a new relationship or from not paying child maintenance or contributing in other ways.
- A mother may receive informal financial contributions from him and fear she will lose benefits if he is known to be closely involved with her or their child.

A mother's motivation in gatekeeping the father's involvement can be complex. We should not however make the assumption that the mother doesn't want the father to receive services, or that her views about his involvement won't change. Mothers who took part in focus groups in Fathers Matter 2 and 3 (Ashley et al, 2010; Roskill et al, 2008) expressed the view that they wanted services for fathers and, where the father had been violent, wanted him to be challenged about the impact on them and the child.

The factors above, in combination, provide powerful barriers to men's engagement within social care and overcoming them requires significant and systematic change.

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/