

# Developing rich descriptions of fathers and father-figures

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## Practice guide

Evidence shows that at the time of birth, 86% of babies are living with both biological parents. At the age of 5, that figure only falls to 77%. In most families where the parents don't live together, fathers see their children regularly – and in many cases, the child will move between households, spending substantial chunks of time in each. Only 6% of children at age 5 neither live with nor meet with their birth father.

Taking this into account, it becomes clear that sometimes the language we use to describe parents can be unhelpfully simplistic.

Take the term 'non-resident', for example, which people often use automatically when talking about fathers who don't live with their child's mother – even fathers who spend a lot of time with their child, including having them to stay overnight regularly.

Or the term 'single mother', which is often used to describe any mother whose child's father doesn't live with her – again, even if the father is in fact highly involved.

Below we set out some alternative ways to think about and describe the fathers and father-figures you encounter in your work, with a view to more accurately reflecting their roles and involvement.

## Categories of father-child relationship

One component of a rich description about fathers and father-figures is to define the nature of their relationship with the child. The more specific you can be, the better.

Term	What it means
Birth father	A birth father is biological father to a child, or believed to be a biological father, or a man otherwise named on a birth certificate.
Adoptive father	An adoptive father has legally adopted a child i.e. is named on an adoption certificate, as distinct from a foster father or male legal guardian. He is not biologically linked to the child and is therefore in one sense a 'social father', but his legal relationship to the child is more like that of a birth father, so he is placed in a category of his own.
Social father	<p>The 'social father' category includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a stepfather – a male cohabiting (or former cohabiting – and married or not) partner of a child's birth/ adoptive parent (usually mother), who is not himself a birth or adoptive father to the child.</li> <li>• a foster father or other male guardian (including relatives/ kinship carers and legal guardians such as Special Guardians).</li> </ul> <p>A social father may or may not be resident with the child full-time; he may or may not have Parental Responsibility, and he may or may not be referred to as a stepfather (by himself or family members).</p> <p>There is no official definition of 'stepfather', and it is common for people to think of 'stepfathers' as needing to be married to the mother in order to 'qualify' for the label. A man playing a 'stepfatherly' role may also be referred to as the 'mother's partner' or 'mother's boyfriend'. Such fathers' involvement and emotional connection with a child may vary greatly. Some, including those who don't have Parental Responsibility, remain involved in a child's life after divorce/ separation, despite lacking a biological relationship.</p>

## Categories of co-residence and care

Another key component of a rich description is to describe where everyone lives and their level of contact.

We recommend using the term **Co-resident** to describe parents who share a household. For those who don't, we recommend the term **Own Household Parent (OHP)/ Mother (OHM)/ Father (OHF)**, alongside a qualifying description, as set out in the table below.

This recognises that co-residence *with the child* is an important aspect of parent-child relationships – and that this may not go hand-in-hand with co-residence with the other parent.

Term	+qualifier (‘with...’)	What it means
Co-resident mother/father		Sharing a household with the child and other parent
Own-Household Mother (OHM)/ Father (OHF)	Sole care	Sharing a household with the child, who has no contact with the other parent
	Majority care	Sharing a household with the child, who stays in the household most nights
	Equal care	Sharing a household with the child, who stays in the household for half the time
	Minority care	Sharing a household with the child, who stays in the household less than half the time
	Daytime-only care	Living in a separate household, and meeting the child without them staying overnight
	Virtual-only care	Living in a separate household, and remaining in contact with the child via phone, video calls etc

## Using these terms

If you pay attention to all men around the child, using labels that more accurately describe everyone's relationship to the child, and their level of co-residence/care, you can develop more sensitive descriptions of a child's lived experience of being parented.

Here's an example:

### DON'T SAY

Mustafa lives with his mum - a single mother - and her boyfriend. The father is non-resident.

*Here, it's not clear whether Mustafa has contact with his birth father, and the term 'single mother' suggests his mother is the only significant parent. We also discover nothing about the social father.*

### DO SAY

Mustafa lives with his birth mother - an own household mother with majority care - and the mother's partner, who does not have PR and has been co-resident for the last six months. The birth father is an own household father with minority care (2 overnight stays per week on average).

*Here, it's clear that there are two men with significant, ongoing involvement in Mustafa's life; that he moves between households; and that the mother's boyfriend is relatively new on the scene. This allows us to see immediately that there are three adults whose parenting capacity, and individual and collective behaviours, experiences and perspectives, are of interest.*