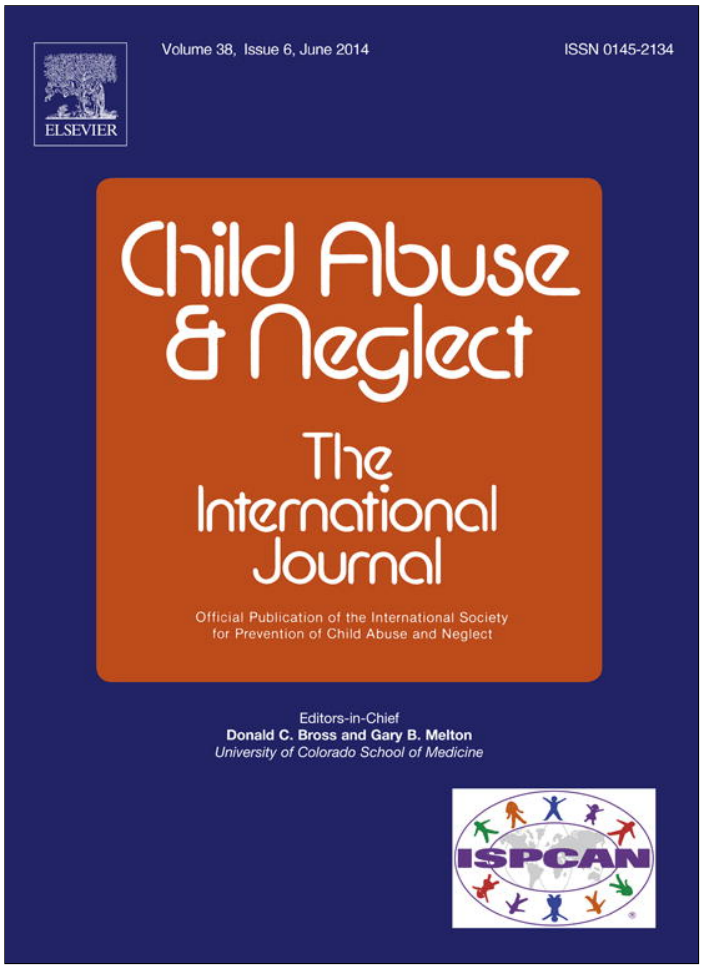

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Working With Fathers to Safeguard Children

Mark Osborn *
Fatherhood Institute

Failure to work with fathers around the child occurs regularly

For many years it has been known that social care agencies do not work particularly well with fathers and father figures in the field of child protection. Over a period of several decades, this issue has been highlighted as a key concern in inquiries, serious case reviews, and analyses of serious case reviews. The emerging evidence shows that children's safety and well being would be promoted if local safeguarding agencies adopted stronger strategies, policies, procedures, and practices for engaging with, assessing, and supporting men both as risks and resources in the lives of their children. Greater inclusion of fathers in the child protection process is not a concession to the rights of fathers, and it will not necessarily increase levels of risk to children, mothers, or staff. The opposite is true if there is greater assessment, improved focus, and more robust risk management.

The Fatherhood Institute is a charity in the United Kingdom which was founded in 1999 in response to the wealth of research emerging about the impact that fathers have on the welfare and development of children. The Fatherhood Institute ran a safeguarding project in 2011–2013, with input from another national charity, the Family Rights Group, which works in an advisory capacity to support families who are involved with social care services. This project worked with six local authorities to focus on improving the engagement with fathers in safeguarding work. Local authorities in the United Kingdom have a responsibility to ensure that children are protected from harm and to safeguard them from potential risk of harm. In each of the six authorities, we reviewed policies, procedures, and practice to establish a structural view of how fathers are engaged. The audit involved studying 20 case

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mark Osborn, Fatherhood Institute, Unit 1, Warren Courtyard, Savernake, Marlborough, Wiltshire, England SN8 3UUJ. Electronic mail may be sent to M.Osborn@fatherhoodinstitute.org.

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files in each authority to determine how effectively fathers had been included, assessed, and involved in the child protection process. Following this analysis, recommendations were made to the local authority who agreed to the actions that they would implement to address the recommendations. The project then provided training to support the changes that were being made.

This approach is being further developed through a new project funded primarily by the Daphne III European Union funding stream. The work is taking place in the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Finland, and Romania. This work involves taking the lessons we learned in the former project and developing a more robust approach. One of the significant changes is involving local staff in the case file auditing process. This process allows them to appreciate not just what is happening, but how, when, and where problems occur. Through this process we aim to identify further issues to be addressed that will improve engagement of fathers and develop better practice.

The Need for a Whole System Approach

Previous research, initiated by the Family Rights Group, highlighted the importance of engaging with and assessing fathers and father figures systematically. This research provided strong evidence for the need to go beyond describing the nature of the problem and to seek systematically to address the underlying reasons for poor engagement of fathers by social care agencies. 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 institutionalized and is likely to result in professionals overlooking men and communicating to them that their participation is optional or undesirable. As Jonathan Scourfield identifies in his article in this journal, it is the "interaction between client and worker that is fundamental." It is the culture of the organization, however, that will determine the nature of that interaction and whether that interaction occurs. The failure to work effectively with fathers will not be solved by just focusing on the practice of individuals. Training staff is an essential component, but the policies, procedures, and working environment must also be addressed to support individuals to carry out this work effectively.

Working with men who may be aggressive, violent, abusive, reluctant, or evasive is not easy or straightforward. It is challenging and requires an organization to be openly supportive to staff members when they tackle this work. If we acknowledge that staff need to have improved confidence and capacity to do this work, it is also incumbent upon organizations to ensure that the working environment is fit for this purpose. The approach that we have developed is built upon the concept that trying to improve practice in this area of work requires changes that effect strategy, policy, and practice.

In examining case files for the audit, information illustrative of the key points to be made was collected and collated. Fairly consistently across local authorities, contact details were not always being collected and recorded, fathers were not invited to conferences as frequently as mothers, and greater levels of support services were targeted at mothers. By extracting this data from the files, a snapshot of what is going within practice was composed. However, it is only when we drill down into the detail of individual cases that we can see more clearly

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how the exclusion of fathers is occurring and why it is detrimental to the whole process of child protection.

A Cultural Blind Spot

The vast majority of the work that happens in child protection takes place with mothers. Contact, engagement, and practical and emotional support for fathers does occur, but it occurs much less frequently than it does with mothers. There are significant cultural reasons why this is the case, but failing to work with both the parents of children, particularly vulnerable children, is less effective and inefficient. As stated in a 2011 analysis of serious case reviews conducted by Ofsted, the organization that has responsibility for inspecting the quality of child protection work in England, "the father is just as important as the mother."

This statement is worth dwelling on for a moment. This statement is practical, not merely a theoretical concept. How many of our services would be able to hold their hands up to indicate that they put this into practice? When conducting the case file audit in one authority, we came across two case examples, one immediately after the other, that illustrated an imbalance.

In the first case, there was an exemplary example of social work practice. A teenage mum who had not been in her child's life for two years had moved to another area of the country, and the social worker followed up many leads and old addresses to try to find her. Being unsuccessful in this endeavor, the detective work continued through contacts with a practitioner who worked with a sibling of the young mother. Finally she was tracked down, contact was made, assessments were carried out, intervention took place, and eventually the young mother came back into the life of her child.

The next file audited also involved a teenage pregnancy. In this case, the young father was living around the corner from his child but was not in contact with the child. He had expressed concerns for the child's safety. There was, however, no record of any assessment, no intervention with him, he was not invited to meetings or conferences, and he was not included within the core group. No reasons for these exclusions were recorded. The same level of input was not applied to working with him as in the previous case. I suspect that a key factor was that, as much as we like to think of ourselves as impartial, nonjudgmental, 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 the cultural blind spot that we have when it comes to fathers and fatherhood.

We Do Not Live in a Fatherless Society

First and foremost, we must accept that the fathers of children exist. This statement may seem foolish, but we frequently hear or read about social anxieties relating to *fatherlessness.* Across the length and breadth of the country, staff who are employed to deliver services for families are frequently under a misapprehension that they are primarily working with one-parent families. Yet, fathers have a significant impact on the welfare, development, and outcomes of their children whether they live with them or not. Our fathers are a reference point for children and adults regardless of whether their influence is positive or negative,

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whether they are regularly involved in routine care of their children, or whether they never have contact.

In both our projects, the audits have revealed that this oversight is occasionally reinforced by policies, procedures, and working documents that erroneously reference *parent* instead of *parents*, or the more effective *mother and father*. Fathers who are not in our line of vision are often ignored. If it is believed that a father is detrimental to the well-being of his children, efforts are undertaken to move him out of the family picture. Although there will be times when this is necessary, moving risky men out of the picture does not remove them from the equation; it merely shifts our focus. Indeed, when fathers are not effectively engaged, the behaviors continue, and they rarely end their involvement with children.

Even when there is a recognition that professionals are working with a two-parent family, expediency is often taken as mitigation to solely work with just one parent (the mother). Our cultural blind spot kicks in at a collective level, and *mother* overrides. Explicit use of language, however, challenges this blind spot. To try to ensure that fathers are incorporated in greater numbers, changing the word *parents* to the phrase *mothers and fathers*, is effective.

Once the mindset has been changed so that fathers are included, challenges still exist. Failure to engage with men is frequently explained by their unwillingness, and indeed, many men (and women) are not at all keen to engage with services. They may be wary of authority or feel "family work" is women's business. Alternatively, men may think they have nothing to contribute and feel awkward talking with social care practitioners.

Thus, how practitioners and their organizations approach men is important. Analyses of serious case reviews identify that there are shadowy men who avoid being seen, but these case reviews also show a need for services to be more proactive in trying to work with fathers. By following the child protection process to look at key points about how involved the birth father and any other father figures have been, we could begin to identify points at which the process could be improved.

It was not uncommon to find in a file that the father's contact details are incomplete or out of date. Over the eight local authorities with which we have worked, the father's contact address is not recorded in just over a quarter of the cases. This may or may not come as a surprise to practitioners who are used to meeting with reluctance to give out this information and/or fathers who are difficult to track down. What is interesting is the difference from one authority to another: in one area 100% of the contact details were collected, and at the other end of the spectrum, only 60% were collected. This difference is neither accidental nor a statistical anomaly. It is also not about the quality of the staff in those authorities. It is the systematic approach and the shifting of cultural norms that makes the difference. In the former area there has been a proactive approach over the last few years to improve engagement with fathers. This effort has led to the situation where they now almost always collect the fathers' details. In areas and organizations where there is a proactive and determined attempt to create a more father inclusive service, more fathers are engaged. From this finding, it is possible to accept that there are actions that we can take to bring more fathers into our frame of work.

There are key factors that will enhance the rate at which contact details are collected. Foremost among these is an acknowledgment that the father's engagement is presented from the start as expected and important. If professionals proactively seek out the fathers and expect

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to collect their details and the referral forms and other documentation that explicitly requires this information, change will follow. In particular, the goal should be to ask for the mother's and the father's details rather than wanting the parents' details, or even worse, the parent's details. This proposal is not meant to suggest that practitioners spend more time on paperwork and filling in forms; rather, this proposal is about the efficient use of paperwork to support effective practice and to save time in the long run.

When Exceptions Become Commonplace

In the procedures of all the authorities, there was a requirement to engage with both parents and clear guidelines about when and how it may be necessary to exclude a parent from a conference. It was also recognized that exclusion would occur only in exceptional cases, and thus, occur rarely. In our audit, we found that exclusion occurred frequently. Overall, only 55% of fathers were invited to attend conferences. In some cases, there were clear decisions to exclude the father from the proceedings because of violence or threatening or disruptive behavior. In the majority of case files, however, it was hard to determine how the decision to exclude the father from the conference was made. In many cases, the decision not to invite the father appeared to have been taken because of the lack of contact details. It is completely understandable that some of the men whom social workers try to contact can be difficult to trace, but it is also apparent that where there is a culture to proactively collect fathers' contact details, a much higher percentage of details are collected. It is important to see this as a collective responsibility for a local authority. There needs to be an explicit culture within organizations which supports and expects that all fathers will be included, except in exceptional circumstances. The fathers' engagement has to be actively pursued from the start as expected and important, and this expectation needs to be supported throughout the child protection process. If this is made explicit within policies and procedures, it will be more likely to happen.

In one of the audited case files, the birth father was involved through a telephone conversation at initial assessment but was not involved in the core assessment. Much work was done with the mother to try to improve her parenting skills without any great success. The father was not invited to any case conferences. His previous domestic violence was discussed at conference, but there was no discussion of his parenting capacity or any strengths, despite the fact that he had another child living with him. Several months after the most recent review case conference, the child moved in to live with her father.

This case example is not exceptional, as we frequently came across cases where the father was not involved in the early stages and became involved much later, often when the situation had reached crisis point. Better engagement with fathers is likely to result in better risk assessment, a reduced burden on mothers, enhanced resources for the care of children, and better risk management. Intervening early with fathers, before there is a crisis, makes it easier to support them to develop appropriate parenting styles. It may also avert crises, and serious case reviews evidence that it may prevent the deaths of children.

A component of the audit was noting from the conferences the involvement of the father, the potential risks he presented, and strengths and resource he may bring. When looking

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at what had been discussed during the case conferences, there was a distinct lack of assessing the fathers' strengths. Clear evidence of full discussion of strengths and potential positive resource of the birth father was available only in 16% of the case files. The tendency to focus on risk without also assessing potential resource has consequences in the levels and types of support offered to fathers and their level of inclusion in the process.

Unfair Burdens Placed on Mothers

The child protection plan proved to be a frequent site where the inequality of safeguarding work played out. These documents create an agreement between key people to make the changes necessary to improve the well-being of the child. In the case files there were repeated occasions where the father was left out of this agreement and an unfair – and occasionally unreasonable – burden was placed on the mother.

In one case, concerns were raised because both parents had been witnessed being aggressive toward their child. The parents were living separately because of previous domestic violence by the father. The child was residing with the mother. Both parents attended the initial conference, and the child protection agreement included contact arrangements for the father to see the child. However, only the mother was expected to sign it, and within the plan, no clear expectations were placed on the father. In this case, by not requiring him to put his name to the agreement, he is not drawn into full responsibility for keeping the child safe. It is seen as the mother's sole responsibility to make the positive changes necessary. By not requiring him to sign the document, there was an implication that he is not a responsible party. It is the mother who is deemed to be taking on the parenting role and the father who is seen as an outside influence for whom she will take responsibility.

In another case, the parents were in a relationship but not living together because of concerns about the father's domestic violence. There was an agreement following the initial conference that placed an expectation on the mother to keep the child safe from witnessing violence. Despite attending the conference, the father was not party to the agreement, nor were any explicit expectations placed on him. In this case, the responsibility was even more explicitly placed upon the mother to be responsible for the father's behavior. By not requiring the father to be party to make changes, the requirement to manage his behavior was placed upon the mother's shoulders. A fundamental issue within domestic violence is the perpetrator's desire to control and have power over the victim's behavior. The idea that the victim of domestic violence should be put in charge of managing the perpetrator's behavior without his formalized agreement is absurd. Presumably those involved within the conference are no strangers to the issues of domestic violence, and therefore, one must ask why they would create such a situation? We have to recognize that this incident is not an individual case of poor practice. The failure here was threefold:

(a) an unrealistic expectation upon the mother to be responsible for managing the father's behavior, further exacerbated by the lack of his explicit agreement;
(b) the lack of making the father solely responsible for his own actions; and
(c) the lack of recognition that both parents must be responsible for the parenting of the child, which is reflected in the misreading of the word *parent* as *mother*.

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A final example of the failure to be inclusive within child protection plans involves a case where the father hit his child, and the agreement was signed by both parents. The agreement required the mother to protect the children and not allow the father to have unsupervised contact with them. The plan does not place any direct expectations on him concerning his behavior.

In all three of these case examples, the father was excluded from the process, and the burden of responsibility was unfairly placed upon the mother. These are not isolated cases, and it is important not to view them as examples of an individual's poor practice. These failures are symptomatic of our cultural inability to apprehend that *the father is just as important as the mother*.

Learning Lessons and Taking Action

It is apparent that the failure to work with fathers and other men around the child is occurring regularly. The ubiquity of this problem also suggests that it is not about a failure of individual practitioners to manage their work. A recent serious case review that was widely publicized in the United Kingdom illustrates our cultural failure to address this problem. The *analysis* section of the review identified that the engagement, assessment, and recording in relation to the father figures was poor. It was further acknowledged that this was a frequently recurring problem. Having analyzed the case and found this issue to be common, the reviewers proceeded to highlight it in the *findings*. Identifying a weakness and then noting it as a finding is important; however, it is not enough. There is no mention of the issue in the *lessons learned* or *recommendations* sections. In addition to recognizing the issue, steps must be taken to address it.

Indeed, there are actions that can be taken that will change practice, if the commitment is there. The reasons for failing to include fathers are diverse and collectively complex, however, some of the practical steps that can be taken to practice father inclusivity are less so. Father inclusion can be improved when the father's engagement is presented from the start as expected and important, and it should be demonstrated through referral forms and all other relevant paperwork. Engagement will be more likely when forms requiring information from parents are designed with an assumption that the father's views are required. If fathers are signed up systematically when the child is registered and are proactively included, they are more likely to be involved throughout the child protection process. In a proactive approach to include fathers, professionals need to explain clearly why they want to meet and to acknowledge the father's role as a parent or carer and their expert knowledge about, and concern for, their child and family. Assessments of fathers' and their needs should be carried out as robustly as they are for mothers, and services need to regard interventions as being as much for fathers as for mothers. Thus, efforts to provide services should proactively encourage fathers to attend and should record and review attendance by gender. Also, the benefits to children of fathers' positive participation need to be repeatedly emphasized to all stakeholders.

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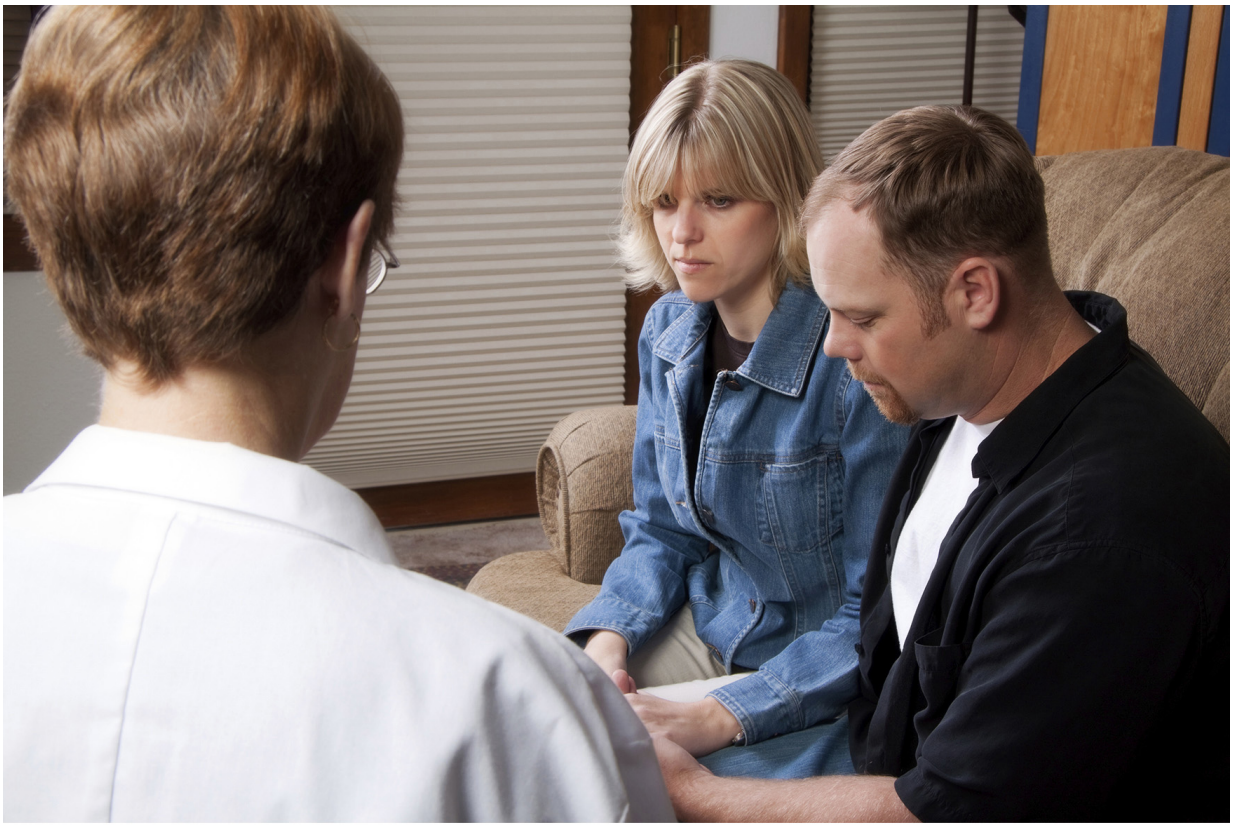

Photo courtesy of the Fatherhood Institute

Improved engagement of fathers and father figures is a vital issue, and serious case review after serious case review highlights the fact that children are dying in our country when we do not assess and work with fathers and father figures effectively. Because this issue is embedded within our cultural perceptions and beliefs, it will take a committed and determined approach to bring about change. If we accept that practice will not significantly change unless we take steps to improve it, then we must direct effective performance management toward this area of work to ensure that change is happening and to support that change. Policies and procedures should explicitly support this process with close attention paid to how effectively this work is happening. Focus needs also to be brought to both ends of the safeguarding process. At the start, student training needs to appreciate and analyze the role and implications of gender. At the end, inspection criteria should consistently include audits of father inclusivity.

Keywords: fathers; men; masculinity; child maltreatment; safeguarding

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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Suggested Websites

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Fatherhood Institute. http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org