



Norfolk Safeguarding
Children Partnership

TOOLKIT

Talking to fathers and father figures

**Keeping Fathers in Sight: good
practice toolkit for engaging and
working with fathers**

2023 Edition







Keeping Fathers in Sight: good practice toolkit for engaging and working with fathers



The view of the CSPR Panel is that... ..fathers are equally important [as mothers] and that including fathers should be a mantra of safeguarding practice – this is the cultural shift Norfolk is aiming for.”

**Norfolk Child Safeguarding Practice Review
AK 2023**



The expectation of all NSCP partners in Norfolk is that fathers will engage: this may take several times of asking and offering support, but we should be making it clear that it is normal and expected that fathers need and get support in their role as parents and that fathers are equally as important as mothers.



Ten tips for engaging with fathers and helping them to accept and seek support:

- 1. Be aware of your own assumptions, prejudices and personal biography that may influence your view of fathers. (Consider how your experience of your own father / partner influences your practice).**
- 2. Commit to the empowerment of marginalised fathers.**
- 3. Be empathetic to fathers. This is not always easy when working with men who are abusive, but the likelihood is that he feels far more threatened than you.**
- 4. Focus on the benefits for the child if he works with you and use a strengths-based approach; men respond well to praise.**
- 5. Create opportunities to engage fathers so that they do not feel trapped or cornered (text messaging is often more comfortable for men than receiving a phone call as it allows them time to consider their response and therefore to feel that they have a level of control).**
- 6. Building trust is essential and this can be done by:**
 - Listening to fathers and providing them with an opportunity to tell their story. Even if what they say does not fit with what you have heard or the evidence that you have, fathers need to be heard. Rely on feminist theory: if individuals (men or women) are not heard, they are placed in a subordinate position, and this will result in a poor relationship with you. Be non-judgemental when you listen to them: this does not mean that you have to agree with what you are hearing, but it does mean that they are being treated with respect.**

- **Be respectful. Respect has a particular relevance for men. This is evident through popular culture about respect and disrespect in the masculine worlds for example, in sport and music. If practitioners communicate respect throughout their interventions then they are more likely to engage the father and keep him involved in their intervention.**
- **Do not present them with accusations from the mother about their behaviour at the outset as this will not facilitate an open relationship with you.**
- **Exhibiting confidence and communicating that you have expertise and experience in supporting fathers so that they have confidence and feel safe and contained by you.**

7. Normalise the idea of fathers being supported by organisations. Help them to feel that you understand that things are difficult for them in the same way that things are difficult for many fathers.

8. Be open, honest and transparent with them and clearly set out what you want from them.

9. Be prepared to understand the issues that uniquely affect individual fathers. For example: non-residential, Black, ethnic minority and white working class fathers all have unique circumstances and pressures that need to be understood and assessed. Be culturally curious and talk with the father about what it means to be a father from his cultural perspective. What is the father's role, what are his responsibilities, what additional stressors exist (e.g. racism, poverty and marginalisation), how would he define fatherhood from his specific perspective?

10. Be persistent. It may take several times of asking and offering support, but we should be making it clear that it is normal and expected that fathers need and get support in their role as parents. This may involve finding different ways of asking questions and offering support.



Fathers want to do the best for their children although they may not always appreciate what this entails. This aspiration can be helpful in encouraging them to accept support. Explaining how your engagement with them will improve outcomes for their children will gain reduce some of their resistance. Tell them about the benefits for their children. Fathers will be more interested in benefits for their children than in benefits for themselves. If men need support (e.g. parenting skills, mental health, alcohol or drugs etc.) they are more likely to accept it if they understand how this benefits their child. This also takes the focus away from them thinking that they are being seen as failing or at fault and draws them to see how their engagement will benefit their child.

All men are different with different views, perspectives and ideas about the world, however, all boys and young men grow up under the influence of hegemonic masculinity; understanding that this casts a shadow over all men will help when engaging with fathers and father figures. Whilst there is a high level of diversity in how men experience and exhibit their own masculinity, there are some basic myths about men that need to be busted. Practitioners should work on the basis that:

1. Men like to talk.
2. Men are frequently anxious about being in a position where they feel vulnerable and believe that others might see this as weakness and use this against them.
3. Men want to talk about the difficulties that they are having, their concerns, their fears, anxieties.
4. Creating the conditions where men feel safe is not complicated and may only take five minutes (although it may take much longer).

Aggression from men frequently comes from feelings of vulnerability, frustration and not knowing how to communicate more effectively. A significant number of men have been conditioned to ignore and suppress their emotional literacy and find it hard to express fear, anxiety, sadness and nuanced emotions. Men may also find it difficult to ask for help and support through a belief that they should be able to manage on their own. Asking for, or being offered help may be viewed by them as a weakness and failure. This can result in fathers expressing disinterest rather than exposing their feelings of vulnerability. It may also result in triggering a fight, flight or freeze response.

Using a strengths-based approach works well with all parents. In the UEA research Counting Fathers In, the researchers found that despite the implementation of strengths-based approaches in the participating authorities, most men felt that the focus of the child protection process was on their failings.

Where you have concerns about violence and risk, ensure that you have discussed this with your line manager and that you have planned for your own safety and well-being. Ensure that any necessary safety plans for child and mother are in place and adhered to. If you have a difficult experience with a father do not treat this as normal and discuss this with your line manager.





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