



Norfolk Safeguarding
Children Partnership

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

2023 Edition



Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Organisational principles of good practice for engaging fathers	6
3.	Parental Responsibility	8
4.	Assessing and managing risk	9
5.	Collecting information and fathers' contact details	10
6.	First contact with fathers	11
7.	Fathers and meetings	12
8.	Maintaining engagement with fathers	13
9.	Family Networking	14
10.	Skills, knowledge and attitudes for practitioners	15
	References	18



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**



1. Introduction

The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report [The Myth of Invisible Men](#)¹ sets out the need for all partner organisations work with fathers: *“much more must be done to offer the necessary support, challenge and engagement with the men with whom they work or with whom they should be working”*. The evidence that this needs to be done is extensive and irrefutable. Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership expects all organisations working with children and families to improve their engagement with fathers and to develop good practice in this crucial area of safeguarding. This partnership good practice guide sets out what is expected of leaders, managers and practitioners to bring about the necessary change. Within this good practice guide, reference to fathers includes those captured in Section 576 of the Education Act 1996 which defines ‘parent’ as

- all natural parents, whether they are married or not
- any person who, although not a natural parent, has parental responsibility for a child or young person
- any person who, although not a natural parent, has care of a child or young person (having care of a child or young person means that a person with whom the child lives and who looks after the child, irrespective of what their relationship is with the child, is considered to be a parent in education law).

Fathers are a point of reference for all children as they grow up and they have a significant impact on the health, safety, wellbeing and life chances for those children. This is true if those fathers are positively involved or are a negative influence, and also when they are described as absent from their children lives. It is imperative that all organisations that work with children and families understand and act on this at all levels of their service provision.

As well as biological fathers, stepfathers, adoptive or foster fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers or a new partner may act as a father figure to a child. No two fathers are the same and will have diverse personal and social contextual factors² it is therefore important to understand how these influences may impact on their experience and understanding of fatherhood.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1017944/The_myth_of_invisible_men_safeguarding_children_under_1_from_non-accidental_injury_caused_by_male_carers.pdf

² E.G social GRRRAACCEEESSS (gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality) <https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-GRRRAACCEEESSS-and-the-LUUUTT-model.pdf>

Not understanding the impact that the father has, whether he lives with the child, lives in a separate household, and even when he has had no apparent presence in his child's life means that we are not fully understanding that child's lived experience. This requires that we seek out, engage, assess and, where possible, work with fathers. Statistically it is uncommon for fathers not to be involved in their children's lives particularly when they are very young: over 96% are having regular contact at this time³. It is essential to make contact with all parents if we are to understand the lived experience of children. When babies are born to same sex couples (statistically this is uncommon, approximately 0.1%⁴) it is just as important to engage with both parents.

Father inclusive practice does not mean that all fathers have to be involved in everything, nor does it mean that he has to have more contact with the child; it does mean that we should always understand how the father influences a child's lived experience. To achieve this, we cannot solely rely on the mother or other family members to tell us about this, we have to hear the father's voice. This does not minimise nor diminish the role of the mother or other important family members or carers but brings more to our understanding. Listening carefully to fathers' narratives is important to create nuanced and balanced assessments of fathers, family life and the child's experience. Empathic listening is accepted as an effective way of engaging mothers, helping to reclaim identity, or improve self-efficacy; practitioners need to apply the same curiosity and skill to facilitating and hearing men's stories.

Fathers, like mothers, can bring both risk and resource to the lived experience of the child; supporting children demands that the family dynamic is understood to create the most responsive and positive network to nurture children. [The Family Network Approach](#)⁵ is an integral component to Signs of Safety practice. Young people grow more resilient and are more likely to achieve better outcomes when they have the support of a naturally connected network. This can only be done when all components of the network are fully acknowledged including the paternal links.

Inclusive practice with fathers should never mean creating more risk to the child or the mother. The opposite should be the case in that to effectively manage risk we must assess and analyse it which necessitates engaging with the father to learn more, create a holistic picture, and provide the necessary challenge and support to all parties. Over-reliance on the mother to provide a holistic picture and to be responsible for the well-being and safety of children is unfair, impractical and can lead to a higher level of risk for both mother and child/ren.

³ *Where's the Daddy: Fathers and father-figures in UK datasets* Goldman and Burgess (2018) <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Wheres-the-daddy-Full-Report.pdf>

⁴ *Who's the bloke in the room? Fathers during pregnancy and at the birth in the United Kingdom* Burgess, A. & Goldman, R., (2018). Contemporary Fathers in the UK Series. Marlborough: Fatherhood Institute

⁵ <https://norfolkscp.org.uk/people-working-with-children/norfolk-signs-of-safety-and-family-network-approach>

Working with men who are understood to be violent or aggressive is challenging for all practitioners and it is essential that they are robustly supported by their organisations to carry out this work effectively. It is incumbent on line managers to ensure that all staff feel safe and supported. Research evidences that practitioners may not readily share their concerns and anxieties about working with fathers unless prompted by others to do so. Anxiety when working with men can be culturally engrained and may not be something that individuals reflect on without a supportive environment in which this can be explored and understood. A systemic trauma informed and resilience-oriented approach is necessary to encourage staff to reflect on and understand how this affects their practice⁶.

⁶ *Breaking Down Barriers: Developing an Approach to Include Fathers in Children's Social Care* PhD Thesis Gavin Swann (2016) <https://www.york.ac.uk/media/spsw/documents/mrc/Gavin%20Swann%20Thesis.pdf>
<https://norfolkscp.org.uk/people-working-with-children/nscp-priorities>



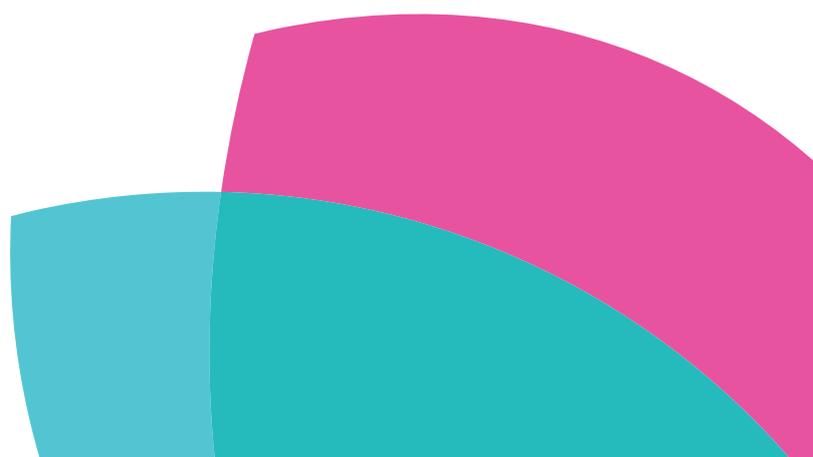
2. Organisational principles of good practice for engaging fathers

The following principles have been drawn from the evidence and research base acknowledged in the References section below.

1. Recognise the value of fathers to children (children still place value on fathers when they are not visible in their day to day lives). Involve them (where safe) in every aspect of direct work.
2. Understand the value of a more gender differentiated approach in order to understand the different experience of motherhood and fatherhood and design or adapt services that respond supportively to this.
3. The culture of services should promote greater father engagement by offering flexibility and responsiveness. This includes the timing of meetings to account for both parents' availability and adapting the means or frequency of communication.
4. The inclusion of fathers needs to be a routine organisational and cultural expectation from the outset. Persistence is needed at practitioner level and time should be allowed and invested at policy and organisational level to facilitate this. Time and timing are essential to the engagement and inclusion of fathers.
5. Practitioners, organisations, mothers and even fathers often still assume that the mother-child relationship is primary or overriding other relationships. Fathering can be seen to be more contextually sensitive than mothering⁷ particularly in terms of contact and involvement with their children, and encouraging responsible fathering requires additional support and validation from organisations and practitioners. If that is not forthcoming, there is a risk that fathers who lack confidence may withdraw or fail to engage.

⁷ Brandon, M., Philip, G., & Clifton, J. (2017). 'Counting Fathers In': Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System. University of East Anglia.
https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/68000/1/Published_report_2017.pdf

- 6.** Early and direct contact with men is a key aspect of engagement. This includes the importance of communication and relationship building outside of formal meetings, and relates not only to birth fathers, but also to all and any men connected to the child. This early engagement needs to be an expectation from managers and practitioners, and staff need to be supported in being persistent and creative in their practice from the earliest opportunity.
- 7.** Fathers' attendance and involvement in meetings and conferences should be clearly recorded: the term 'parents' may not accurately capture which parent, or which man, attended. Recording reasons for men's non-attendance is essential to reduce their invisibility and to be able to review flexibility in practice and efforts to include them.
- 8.** Where there is a plan to support children, set clear expectations for fathers to contribute and share responsibility and accountability. Such expectations should include explicit recognition of the value of each specific father to his child, based on the resources he offers, or could be supported to offer. Men's needs and capacities as parents must also be explicitly considered.
- 9.** Working with fathers who are violent or abusive is challenging and organisations must ensure that staff feel safe (physically and emotionally) and supported with the necessary skills and practical supports to include fathers.
- 10.** Practitioners, managers and organisations should consistently question and challenge the invisibility of men in children's lives in all aspects of service delivery and design.



3. Parental Responsibility

There has been much confusion in the past about the role that Parental Responsibility (PR) plays in safeguarding practice. DfE provides valuable guidance for schools and local authorities⁸ which forms the basis for this current guidance. This guidance should not be treated as a complete and authoritative statement of the law.

The Government guidance highlights that “School and local authority staff must treat all parents equally, unless a court order limits a parent’s ability to make educational decisions, participate in school life or receive information about their children” and treating all parents⁹ equally should be applied by staff from all organisations working with children.

When a parent does not have PR and staff are concerned about what information can be shared, they should check with their line manager rather than assume that sharing is not possible. As highlighted above, **the lack of PR should never prevent or inhibit the assessment of, nor engagement with, a father.** Neither should the lack of PR be used as a reason to not offer appropriate challenge and support to fathers. There will be times when a father is considered too dangerous to work with, but this is not related to his PR.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility/understanding-and-dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility#introduction>

⁹ See definition of parents in Section 1 above



4. Assessing and managing risk

When fathers present a risk to their children and/or to their partners it is essential that any organisations working with those men understand those risks, create plans to manage the risk which includes how to work with those men to reduce the level of risk that they pose to others¹⁰. Fully appreciating the risks requires input from the father to ensure a full and fair picture about his history and experience. Robust risk assessment will appreciate the harm to children if they do not have contact with both parents and will focus on management of risk not merely avoidance of risk. Limiting risk management to keeping fathers away from their children does not effectively address the risk that they pose as absence may harm their children, increase risk to their partners (or ex-partners) and may create a level of risk for other, new potential victims. [The Counting Fathers In](#)¹¹ study (Brandon et al 2017), which focused on understanding men's perspective of the Child Protection system, highlighted the need to hold fathers accountable for their behaviour:

“Including fathers has to involve holding them directly to account for abusive or harmful behaviour, whilst, where possible maintaining some level of involvement and access to appropriate services or intervention. Adopting an authoritative and empathic stance in which men are directly challenged and given genuine opportunities for change is one of the most pressing and difficult issues for social workers and managers. Our study indicates that such an approach is more likely to be successful where a working relationship has been established. Without some level of mutual trust and recognition, authoritative communication is more difficult and men are more likely to be defensive or avoidant.”

Unless this approach is taken, work with families where there is abusive and violent behaviour will continue to place an unfair and unrealistic burden on women and mothers¹².

¹⁰ <https://www.childprotectionprofessionals.org.uk/expert-domestic-abuse-risk-assessment-on-fathers-who-are-perpetrators-of-domestic-violence/>

¹¹ https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/68000/1/Published_report_2017.pdf

¹² Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021) *The myth of invisible men: safeguarding children under 1 from non-accidental injury caused by male carers (PDF)*. London: Department for Education

5. Collecting information and fathers' contact details

When families appear at an organisation's front door, there is an expectation that father's details will be collected and recorded. It is not enough to have a family contact telephone number and address; it must be clear that there are contact details for both the mother and the father. If a referral comes from another organisation without father's contact details, then the referrer should be asked to provide these. All referring agencies should ensure that they include contact details for the father and not assume that these are not necessary. All fathers have a significant input into outcomes for children, will be impacting on their child's daily experience, and must not appear invisible to services. This includes fathers with whom children never have any contact as they will still impact on their child's sense of self and identity. When fathers are not visible to practitioners, those professionals should be persistent in trying to trace them and should keep a record of their attempts so that the myth of invisible men does not continue. Research evidence is clear that it is very unusual for a father to not be involved¹³, and it is also frequently the case that there may be multiple fathers involved as in Norfolk's SPR Case AK.

There may be many barriers to collecting fathers' details, but these are rarely insurmountable. It is expected that all professionals will persist and be creative in finding out his contact details and communicating with him. Whilst a mother is not required to provide contact details for the father, it is important that as practitioners build rapport with the mother and develop trust that they continue to ask for his details and explain the need to do this for the benefit of the child and continue to seek his details with other organisations who work with the family. As with mothers, it is important to ensure that records of contact details for fathers are regularly reviewed and kept up to date.

¹³ <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/majority-of-fathers-continue-to-see-their-child-after-separation-study-finds/>
Brandon, M., Philip, G., & Clifton, J. (2017). *'Counting Fathers In': Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System*. University of East Anglia.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/birthsbyparentscharacteristics>

6. First contact with fathers

Fathers are frequently labelled as hard to reach and whilst we can improve the numbers whom we work with we may not reach all fathers. Virtually all fathers want the best for their children. Some fathers may not be good at expressing this and may appear disinterested, reluctant or aggressive when we first approach them. It is essential that a trauma informed approach is employed to understand their presentation and facilitate good engagement. Alongside this, practitioners need to understand how masculinity will impact on a father's willingness and capacity to engage and use this knowledge to work alongside him. Fathers may not initially respond to requests to make contact. It is common for fathers to think that services only really want to talk to mothers and may not appreciate the importance of their voice being heard by professionals. Persistence is often necessary to draw fathers in along with a clear communication of why we want to meet with them and the importance this has to their children. A refusal to make contact should not be seen as a lack of interest in being involved in his child's life, but as a lack of interest in working with us as professionals and services: it is incumbent on us to ensure that the father sees the benefit of this and that we continue to make contact with him throughout the time that we work with his child.



7. Fathers and meetings

When there is a meeting to discuss a child, both parents should be invited unless there is a clear, recorded reason why this should not happen. As with all communications it should be explicit that the father is expected to attend; generic invitations to “parents” can be read as applying to the mother. When it is unsafe for both parents to be present at the same time, staggered or separate meetings should be considered. Lack of attendance by a father should not be accepted as normal and the reason for non-attendance recorded. Lack of interest suggests that we have not made it clear what the value of the meeting is, rather than an assumption that it is a lack of interest in what is best for his child. A flexible approach should be taken to enable working parents to be present at meetings, whenever possible. If a father does not attend a meeting, every effort should be made for him to attend any subsequent meetings. It is important to include fathers early in our work with families. Research highlights timely and direct communication with fathers as a factor that improves the chances of building a constructive relationship with him¹⁴.

If there is a possibility that either parent will feel uncomfortable in the meeting, this should be addressed prior to the meeting by conversation with that parent to ensure that they are able to communicate their discomfort in a constructive and practical way.

If any plans are made during the meeting set clear expectations for fathers to contribute and share responsibility and accountability. Such expectations have to include explicit recognition of the value of each specific father to his child, based on the resources he offers, or could be supported to offer.

Following the meeting, there should be clarity about how the father will receive feedback or notes from the meeting.

¹⁴ Brandon, M., Philip, G., & Clifton, J. (2017). *‘Counting Fathers In’: Understanding Men’s Experiences of the Child Protection System*. University of East Anglia.

8. Maintaining engagement with fathers

Even when a practitioner does not have a good working relationship with a father they should persist with recording as full a picture as possible of men's lives and circumstances, including family history, past and current involvement in the child's life, physical and mental health, and current housing and work situation.

It is important to review the visibility of fathers in all records including when he has not been involved in any of the practitioner's or organisation's work with the family. In these circumstances the lack of involvement should be understood, evidenced and recorded. Minutes or Quality Assurance documents which rely on the term 'parents' may not accurately capture which parent, or which man, attended. Greater understanding of the lack of involvement and the reasons for this will help to reduce the invisibility of men in universal and targeted service provision. As highlighted in principle 7 above, it is important to maintain an appreciation of the perspectives and input of all parents and not just the one with whom the organisation has the most contact.

Father engagement should be regularly reviewed and assessed by practitioners and in supervision to ensure that changes in relationships are acknowledged and therefore the child's lived experience is understood.



9. Family Networking

Including fathers is cornerstone of the Family Networking approach in Norfolk.

The principles of Family Networking are:

1. Every child/parent has a family and/or network and they can be found if we try
2. A meaningful connection to their family or network helps a child develop and maintain a sense of belonging
3. The single factor most strongly connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connection to their family and/or network

Without engagement with fathers and the appreciation of the paternal network, there will only be a partial view of the resource that is available to children. Paternal networks can also be valuable in helping to facilitate engagement with fathers and building positive relationships between children and their fathers.



10. Skills, knowledge and attitudes for practitioners

The Myth of Invisible Men highlighted that the failure to effectively engage with fathers is a cultural issue and to bring about the change that we seek in Norfolk, all practitioners need to apply a range of skills, values and attitudes to their practices to become more father inclusive. Improving practice in this area is not about the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, it is about our systemic approach. Cultural change can only happen when individuals and organisations commit to improving the system.

Skills

Critical skills (required to make services accessible and responsive to the needs of fathers) includes the ability to:

- critically reflect on your own practice
- critically examine your organisation's structures and processes to identify areas where a more father-inclusive approach can be adopted
- consider how unconscious bias may be influencing your own and your organisation's engagement with fathers
- promote father-inclusive practice within your own and other agencies
- promote the benefits of a 'team' approach to parenting within your own and other agencies
- model effective, respectful and inclusive communication when working with fathers including:
 - verbal and non-verbal communication,
 - listening, empathic responding,
 - non-judgemental paraphrasing,
 - summarising,
 - questioning,
 - effective conflict resolution,
 - assertiveness,
 - use of humour,
 - tact and sensitivity
- value and work inclusively with the client whilst considering the full range of possible influences in their lives and the impact of how these interrelate.
- Be persistent:
 - Persist with identifying a child's birth father and other men involved in raising the child. This will often involve building trust with mothers and being creative, empathic and persistent with the wider family network.

- Persist with recording as full a picture as possible of men's lives and circumstances, including family history, past and current involvement in the child's life, physical and mental health, and current housing/work situation.
- Persist with updating men's contact details and changes in circumstances.

Knowledge

There is a robust body of evidence regarding fathers and fatherhood: it is important that all practitioners. Understand the role of the father and the impact this will have on the outcomes for his child ([The Fatherhood Institute website](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)¹⁵ provides a valuable resource to access the international evidence base). All practitioners working with children and families should:

- Understand the impact that all fathers have on their children's lives and their outcomes.
- Recognise the value of fathers to children (children still place value on fathers when they are not visible in their day to day lives) and the need to involve them (where safe) in every aspect of direct work.
- Think about how power, gender relations and personal experience (for example, of their own father, partner or being a father) may be shaping their perspective and influencing their practice.
- Recognise that many fathers are vulnerable and may withdraw or become threatening as a form of defence. Most children want to maintain a relationship with their fathers, even if they are or have been abusive.
- Understand masculinity and contemporary fatherhood in order to assess fathers and wider family dynamics accurately. Cultural ideas about 'manliness' and fatherhood are deep rooted and vary across cultures, ethnicities and class.

¹⁵ <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org>

Attitudes

At an individual level, a practitioner's experience with, and assumptions about, men and fathers will impact on their capacity to work with them from a strengths-based perspective. Having a healthy view of the capabilities of men to build relationships is fundamental. Recognising that men have the ability to:

- Have a genuine and expressed belief in the value and importance of;
 - the role of fathers and mothers in their children's lives
 - a team approach to parenting
- Recognise the responsibility of both mothers and fathers to adopt child focussed viewpoints
- Value the experience, skills and knowledge fathers bring to fathering
- Reflect on how language and other communication media can be (more) inclusive of fathers
- Be prepared to engage with men and support them to develop their parenting skills and address any addictions, mental health problems or violence and understand any root causes of these behaviours. Empower marginalised fathers to be a better resource for their children.
- Adopt 'due diligence' in locating fathers who are considered "absent". Finding all fathers should become a practice expectation. It requires persistence, curiosity and creativity.
- Be consistent. Practitioners should be consistent in what they say and how they behave towards fathers. Be consistent in what you say to fathers and about fathers in reports
- Be respectful. Notions of respect and disrespect can have particular relevance for men. When practitioners communicate respect (verbally and nonverbally) they are more likely to engage the father and keep him involved.
- Recognise that men have the ability, with appropriate support, to:
 - form lasting and healthy attachments with their children and learn to adapt and change as their children grow
 - relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally
 - make day to day decisions that meet the needs of their children and work as an active and effective member of a 'parenting team'

As always in safeguarding practice, it is essential that we are constantly assessing, analysing, and managing risk, but all of the above are compatible with, and should enhance, risk management.

References

Australian Government Dept of Social Services (2022)

Father-inclusive practice guide

<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/father-inclusive-practice-guide>

Brandon, M., Phillip, G. and Clifton, J., (2017) Counting fathers in: Understanding men's experiences of the child protection system. Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia. Available from: https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/68000/1/Published_report_2017.pdf

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021) The myth of invisible men: safeguarding children under 1 from non-accidental injury caused by male carers (PDF). London: Department for Education https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1017944/The_myth_of_invisible_men_safeguarding_children_under_1_from_non-accidental_injury_caused_by_male_carers.pdf

Darwin Z et. al (2021) Good practice guide Involving and supporting partners and other family members in specialist perinatal mental health services

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33510656>

Featherstone, B. (2017) Working effectively with men in families – including fathers in children's social care: Frontline Briefing <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2017/july/working-effectively-with-men-in-families-including-fathers-in-childrens-social-care-frontline-briefing-2017>

Swann, G. (2016) Breaking Down Barriers: Developing an Approach to Include Fathers in Children's Social Care PhD Thesis

Swann, G. (2017) Working Effectively with Men in Families: Practice Pointers for Including Fathers in Children's Social Care, Frontline Tool. Available from: <https://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/frontline-resources/working-effectively-with-men-in-families--practice-pointers-for-including-fathers-in-childrens-social-care-frontline-tool-2017/>

The Fatherhood Institute

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org>





Norfolk Safeguarding
Children Partnership

