

## Engaging fathers in safeguarding

**For the purpose of this guidance the term ‘father’ is defined as ‘any male with a child caretaking role, whether a biological father or a social father such as a stepfather or mother’s partner’ (Maxwell et al. 2012:p.160). The father does not necessarily have to reside at the child’s home.**

Fathers can make a unique contribution to the family system and have the potential to significantly impact their children’s health and development especially when involved at the earliest opportunity.

We know that effective protective practice requires professionals to understand the lives of children, and the experience and perspectives of both parents. Assessment of a father’s parenting capacity is as important as the assessment of the child’s mother’s parenting capacity. It is therefore essential that practitioners look to work with fathers including those who are not living at the child’s home and potentially viewed as absent.

The National Panel report: The Myth of Invisible Men (2021) looked at serious incidents in which men were the perpetrators of physical abuse towards babies. Although this includes male carers and stepfathers, it was predominantly the birth father who was suspected or known to have seriously harmed or killed an infant child. The research suggests that in the majority of cases where babies have been injured or killed, men were the perpetrators, but that services do not maximise opportunities to identify and respond to the risks which some men present. Practitioners should ensure that they are curious about other males within a child’s household, the role they play in caring for the child and the dynamic in their relationship with the child’s mother and estranged father.

### **At all times keep your focus on the child.**

It is essential to ensure that a child’s voice and lived experience is captured throughout all professional contacts. This includes identifying the child’s father and all the significant men in their life as early as possible.

### **Identifying the men in the child’s life**

When birth fathers are cohabiting with the mother and child and or unborn, although it is relatively straightforward to identify and engage with them practitioners do not always do this. Practitioners should also be mindful of the importance of identifying fathers when they are not living with the child, as well as assessing male partners in the household.

#### **Practitioners should:**

- Be curious about any new adults who have significant contact with children, ask more questions about them;
- Always clarify who the members of a household are each time you visit a family and record any changes in family dynamics/structures;
- Be explicit with mothers about the importance of speaking to the father and including him in the assessment process, while also ensuring that neither she nor her child(ren) are put at risk;
- Speak separately to the father rather than gathering information solely through the mother;

It can sometimes be difficult to support mothers to discuss their partners’ involvement in their children’s lives, especially when the relationship between parents has broken down. Mothers may not wish an absent father to be involved.

**Where you have concerns always seek advice from your organisations Safeguarding / Officer Team, discuss within supervision, and / or with managers**

### What do men say helps them engage?

**Getting in early:** most men appreciate when professionals engage them and involve them in decisions about their child.

**Paying attention:** fathers and other male figures have found it easier to build trust with a professional if their views were taken as seriously as those of mothers, that professionals were not judgmental of him as a person and took time to understand his situation. Professionals need to be genuinely interested in the lives of fathers and understand what barriers may exist which makes being an involved father harder or factors which make it easier for the individual.

**Being reliable:** this involves professionals doing what they said they would do and being open and honest with men. Building trust with professionals takes time and this can be difficult when there are lots of changes of workers, or when professionals do not keep fathers updated about assessments and plans.

**Balancing criticism and praise:** fathers want professionals to be honest about their concerns, but also to look at the whole picture of what a father can offer. It is easier for men to accept professional concerns if there is also some recognition of positive factors. When men only feel criticised, they are more likely to reject the professional or withdraw from the safeguarding process. Focusing on what is working well, what professionals are concerned about and what needs to change will make it more likely that fathers and professionals could work together.

**Engage with Men in Safeguarding Processes :** It is important for professionals to engage with men and involve them in decisions about their child and safeguarding processes . Meeting with men prior to all safeguarding meetings including Child Protection conferences is essential. This can be a chance for professionals and fathers to begin to build a working relationship. It is also important that professionals are consistent in what they say to fathers, and what they say about fathers in reports.

**Direct support for fathers:** Research has shown that when fathers spoke positively about professionals, they said that the professional had helped. What fathers found helpful was:

- practical support for them as fathers
- professionals to listen and take into account their particular situation
- fathers who had a more positive experience spoke about professionals helping with housing, advice on welfare benefits, or building good relationships with them.

### Practical tips for the effective engagement of fathers and other significant males in practice.

#### Do:

- Start your involvement with the family with the expectation that the father has a role to play in any plan or intervention;
- Consider completing a cultural genogram/family networking – who is in the family, who is estranged, what the dynamics are?
- Listen to the child, gather their views and be guided by the relationship that they want to have with their father;
- Consider the what role the child's father can play in their life at the earliest opportunity and include fathers (resident and non-resident) early in a 'Think Family' approach in Early Help assessments;

- When discussing the nature of the mother's support networks, actively enquire about the role of any other men as carers or providers for the child;
- Give regard to significant males being involved in assessment and planning regardless of whether they hold Parental Responsibility;
- Offer interventions which enable and empower fathers to become more involved in their child's life, where it is safe to do so;
- Consider the quality, availability and relevance of materials and education programmes to support the development of parenting for fathers.
- When assessing fathers, consideration must be given to concerns regarding domestic abuse and the impact of this on the safety of children.
- Ensure robust risk assessments are undertaken and that there is good communication taking place within and between agencies about how risks will be managed;
- Appreciate the importance and potential contribution of fathers, irrespective of whether or not they are resident, or appear actively involved;
- Be vigilant to the possibility of mothers acting as 'Gatekeepers', blocking your access to both resident and non-resident fathers;
- Be mindful and be prepared to challenge your own and other professionals' attitudes and prejudices towards fathers and other male figures, and seek appropriate support through reflective supervision and training opportunities.

**Don't:**

- **Be afraid to ask questions:** You should ask, probe and / or challenge mothers about the father of their child and the roles of the father and any other men in her/the child's life (see the [NYSCP Practice Guidance on Professional Curiosity](#));
- **Assume the mother is always able to be open or honest .** You should not feel anxious about obtaining accurate details about the father of the child, their partner or any other significant males in the family support network;
- **Exclude the father:** You should maintain a focus on the father as part of the child's support network, understand what contribution they make to the child's life and that of the family, understand what contribution the father can make in the future;
- **Label fathers as dangerous:** You should undertake thorough and robust assessments and this should include identification of whether a father represents a risk to the child, mother, wider family or any workers or professionals. Engage fathers safely and appropriately in decision-making and safeguarding planning processes;
- **Put up barriers, have professional or personal anxiety:** In the absence of fathers, or where there is a lack of information about them, be professionally curious. Explore ways for services to meet the needs of fathers to support the process including arranging meetings at times they are able to attend;