DIRECTIONS

Improving work with fathers to prevent child maltreatment

Jonathan Scourfield*
Cardiff University, UK

Fathers should be engaged as allies in child abuse and neglect prevention

For some people, the question of "why work with fathers?" does not need to be asked. They may take for granted that of course it is important to work with all family members to prevent child maltreatment. For others, however, this may not be self-evident. Thus, this article begins with a brief explanation of why focus on fathers.

It is most important to argue the case from the perspective of the best interest of the child. There is now a wealth of evidence from researchers in a range of disciplines (e.g., psychologist Michael Lamb and sociologist Paul Amato) that fathering is associated with outcomes for children. Good quality fathering is associated with emotional well-being later in life, but negative outcomes can also be linked to father effects. For example, offspring of fathers with criminal histories are more likely themselves to become offenders. Even if a father is a negative influence, at the very least he needs to be engaged so that he can be properly assessed. There is also the possibility that he could benefit from services. Indeed, even if a father's behavior is putting his children at risk, there may be potential for change. For the vast majority of families, ongoing relationship with a father in planning care for children is desirable. There are a small number of families for which the best outcome is the complete separation of the children from the father. The focus of this paper, however, is on engaging fathers as allies in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

The category of *fathers* is very broad. It includes residential and non-residential biological fathers, adoptive fathers, foster carers, step-fathers, and other men who fulfill the role of a *social father*. In child welfare practice, distinctions among different kinds of fathers may

* Correspondence to: Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, 2.30 Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, England CF10 3WT, UK.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.05.002

DIRECTIONS

sometimes be necessary for clarity, but they can also be unhelpful and have the effect of making professional engagement of non-biological fathers less likely. In this article, the term *father* refers to any man who parents a child.

Fathers can be a resource for care, but they can also pose potential risks to children, regardless of their biological or legal status. It is important to note that most men encountered in the child protection process are not straightforwardly *either* a risk *or* a resource for children. Marian Brandon from the University of East Anglia has conducted several studies of reviews of child deaths where abuse was implicated. She has pointed out that in cases with social work involvement, there has been a tendency to crudely categorize men as "all good" or "all bad" when the reality is much more complex. Brid Featherstone from the Open University has noted that many of the men involved in the child protection process are simultaneously a risk and a resource to children and that they themselves are often very vulnerable.

This article provides an overview of the topic of father engagement. It summarizes evidence about the reality of work with fathers in this context and considers the wider evidence on the effectiveness of interventions with fathers. This article also describes specific attempts to improve father engagement for preventing child maltreatment.

What is it Like Working with Fathers in This Field?

There are many reasons why there is so little engagement of fathers by child protection services. Derrick Gordon from the Yale School of Medicine and his colleagues have written a comprehensive review of the factors that influence father engagement. In the review, they identify important barriers and facilitators to father engagement at several ecological levels: the individual father, family, service provider, intervention program, community, and policy.

Each one of these levels influences the likelihood of successfully engaging fathers. Fathers themselves can be very reluctant clients. Mothers caught up in the child protection process can also be very reluctant to engage with child welfare professionals, particularly when allegations of abuse or neglect have been made. With fathers, however, there may be the added potential obstacles of their not seeing parenting as their responsibility, and thus, fathers may view discussing parenting with professionals as being something that women should do. Some men can be defensive about behavior that is frowned upon (e.g., substance misuse, violence), and they may therefore avoid social workers and other family welfare professionals. Mothers can also make it difficult for professionals to engage with fathers for a variety of reasons, some justifiable and some not.

Practitioners themselves can be barriers to progress. Most front-line staff in child welfare services are women. Some of them have difficult personal histories with men in general or fathers in particular, which can affect their work, as Gavin Swann found in his doctoral research at the Tavistock Clinic.

In addition to personal-level factors, the occupational culture of child protective services can effect engagement of fathers. My ethnographic research published in *Gender and Child Protection* found received wisdom and established practices in the social work office that had the effect of maintaining the scrutiny of mothering and the relative avoidance of fathering. This occupational culture was a complex phenomenon. It was not that social workers were simply sexist. In fact, a feminist understanding of client families was