



Are all fathers in child protection families uncommitted, uninvolved and unable to change?



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ABSTRACT

Although much is known about 'parents' in child protection families, very little research has specifically examined fathers in these families. The scant extant research indicates that child welfare workers in many countries tend to have negative stereotypes of these men, assuming them to be uncommitted and uninvolved parents, and unable to cease drug use. The present study sought to add to the knowledge about fathers in child protection families, and to investigate whether or not there was support for these negative stereotypes within this sample. Study participants were 35 fathers associated with a parenting program in Sydney, Australia, who completed quantitative demographic, family and psychological measures. In addition, a subset of nine participants provided life story qualitative data. Findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that, in contrast to the negative stereotypes, these fathers were typically committed and involved parents who were no longer abusing substances. They experienced considerable psychological distress as a result of having their children removed, and fathers with custody of their children reported the best psychological well-being. Study participants were shown to have similar demographic, family and psychological profiles to those found in child protection populations elsewhere in Australia and in other countries, suggesting that these findings may have wider relevance. This study highlights the importance of child welfare workers engaging with and accurately assessing fathers without preconceived assumptions, as it is possible that some fathers are viable placement options for at-risk children.

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1. Introduction

Parents are the primary perpetrators of child maltreatment (Gilbert et al., 2009; Lamont, 2011). Therefore, understanding the profiles and life situations of parents in child protection families is an important step towards knowing the best ways to keep children safe. However, most research on child protection parents has been conducted with mothers, or else mother and father data are combined and reported under the gender neutral terms of 'parents' or 'caregivers' (Stith et al., 2009). Consequently, little is known about fathers in child protection families worldwide (Bellamy, 2009; Cameron, Coady, & Hoy, 2012; Stith et al., 2009). The term 'father' as used here refers to a biological father or any adult male who plays a fathering role in the life of a child (Scourfield et al., 2012). The extant research on child welfare fathers is scant, but indicates that a generally negative stereotype of these men exists in many countries (Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & McColgan, 2013; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005; Smithers, 2012). They are assumed to be uncommitted, uninvolved and unable to change. These stereotypes seriously hinder the engagement of fathers by child welfare services, with

profound consequences for the safety and well-being of vulnerable children (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey & McMaugh, 2013). To inform and encourage father engagement in child protection, there is a need for a deeper understanding of these men and the life issues that confront them (Cameron et al., 2012; Dubowitz, 2006, 2009; Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivée, & Trocmé, 2008). The present exploratory Australian study sought to address this gap in knowledge using both quantitative and qualitative data.

1.1. Characteristics and risk factors of parents in child protection families

A substantial international body of research describes the typical characteristics of, and risk factors associated with, parents involved with child protection services. The list of risk factors includes young parental age, low educational attainment, not being in the workforce, receiving welfare payments, poverty, minority ethnicity, a psychiatric history, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, single parenthood, and large family size (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Sedlak et al., 2010; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Stith et al., 2009). In the UK, the factor most strongly associated with risk of child maltreatment investigation and registration has been socioeconomic deprivation (Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). In Canada, local areas with higher unemployment rates and higher percentages of indigenous populations have been found to

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have the highest incidence of child maltreatment, with these two factors alone accounting for 35% of the variance in child maltreatment rate (Krishnan & Morrison, 1995).

Although Australian child protection services do not routinely provide information on the characteristics of parents (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker, & Horsfall, 2010), some state-based studies demonstrate that child protection parents in Australia display similar demographic and family characteristics to those in other countries. For example, a study on the associations between the number of child protection reports and characteristics of local government areas in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) found that reporting rates were significantly and positively related to the number of families of indigenous origin, rates of single parent families, levels of unemployment and receipt of government benefits, and not having post-school qualifications (Nivison-Smith & Chilvers, 2007). These four factors explained 85% of the variance in child maltreatment reporting rates, with percentage of the population that is indigenous being the factor most strongly associated with rate of reporting in NSW.

Parents in the child protection system in the adjacent state of Queensland have also been studied. Of 847 households where a substantiated incident of child maltreatment was recorded, indigenous households were significantly over-represented, comprising 21% compared to 3% in the Queensland adult population (Department of Child Safety, 2009). Households with substantiated cases of child maltreatment were also over-represented in areas of relatively greater socioeconomic disadvantage (Department of Child Safety, 2009). An analysis of parental risk factors for 695 of the 847 households found that a current or previous drug and/or alcohol problem was the most common parental risk factor for child maltreatment in Queensland, occurring in nearly half (47%) of these households (Department of Child Safety, 2008).

1.2. Stereotypes of fathers in child welfare families

In the context of these known characteristics and risk factors of parents involved in the child protection system, qualitative studies of child welfare practitioners and fathers have highlighted the existence of negative stereotypes of fathers within child welfare practice (Coady, Hoy, & Cameron, 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2005; Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2013). Fathers are often assumed by child welfare workers to be irresponsible, uncommitted, uninvolved, uncaring, non-nurturing, unable to cope, and unwilling and unable to change (Bellamy, 2009; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; O'Hagan, 1997; Scourfield, 2001; Storhaug & Øien, 2012). Men's involvement in at-risk families has been characterized as fleeting and inconsistent, as they are often believed to irresponsibly father numerous children with different women (Bellamy, 2009; Polansky, Gaudin, & Kilpatrick, 1992). It is also presumed that these men lack commitment, and are less emotionally attached, to their children (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; O'Donnell et al., 2005; Scourfield, 2001). Furthermore, fathers in child welfare families are often expected to lack the competence and desire to contribute to daily child care, relegating child caring responsibilities to the mother (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Scourfield, 2001; Smithers, 2012; Storhaug & Øien, 2012).

Due to these assumptions, fathers are often considered insignificant and irrelevant in child protection work (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; O'Hagan, 1997; Scourfield, 2001; Storhaug & Øien, 2012). They are rarely considered as placement options for children maltreated by their mother, with non-resident fathers in particular often being overlooked (Brown et al., 2009; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Featherstone, Rivett, & Scourfield, 2007). Those fathers who want custody are frequently treated with suspicion, even if they were not involved in their child's maltreatment (Brown et al., 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2005; Smithers, 2012). Fathers involved in the child protection system have complained that workers do not listen to or believe them (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004;

Smithers, 2012; Storhaug & Øien, 2012). They believe they have to overcome more obstacles and demonstrate their commitment in ways that mothers do not, and men who have any criminal history are especially susceptible to harsher treatment (Cameron et al., 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2005). Finally, it is often assumed that fathers will not and cannot give up drugs and alcohol, even if a father insists he has been drug-free for years (Storhaug & Øien, 2012).

1.3. Existing research that challenges these stereotypes

The few qualitative studies that exist on fathers in child welfare families, however, tend not to support these stereotypes. For example, an Irish study based on interviews with 24 fathers involved with social services and family support agencies, 12 partners and 12 children, found that the men were active and committed fathers, according to their children and partners (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). Similarly, a qualitative study of 18 fathers involved with one child welfare agency in Canada found that many fathers were heavily involved in the everyday care of, and were strongly committed to, their children and that this commitment motivated them to make positive changes in their lives (Cameron et al., 2012). A deep sense of responsibility for and commitment to their children was also found in a study of seven fathers who were, or had recently been, in contact with child welfare services in Norway (Storhaug & Øien, 2012). In addition, a study of children 'home on trial' in the UK found that single fathers provided placements that were stable over time and that no safety issues were identified by case workers (Broadhurst & Pendleton, 2007). None of these studies found evidence to support existing negative stereotypes.

Furthermore, there is some research that challenges the assumption that fathers in child welfare families are not emotionally invested in their children. One Canadian study of 18 fathers involved in child welfare described fathers' distress on being separated from their children (Cameron et al., 2012). In addition, an Australian study of five homeless fathers found that these fathers reported feeling angry, frustrated, helpless and hopeless due to having their children taken from them (Bui & Graham, 2006). They felt that they had lost their role as a parent, a sense of purpose in life and their identity, leading to considerable psychological distress and an overwhelming sense of loss (Bui & Graham, 2006). Another study of 40 homeless fathers in Australia found that children were very important in the lives of these men, and not being able to parent their children caused ongoing distress, frustration and a sense of disempowerment (Barker, Kolar, Mallet, McArthur, & Saunders, 2011).

1.4. Reconciling the contradictory findings in past research

How can the incongruence between child welfare workers' negative stereotypes of fathers in child protection families, and extant research suggesting these stereotypes are not accurate, be explained? In attempting to resolve this issue it is important not to dismiss the frontline experience and reports of child welfare workers who have consistently found men to be challenging clients. Workers have stated that many men actively avoid contact with them, are hostile and threatening, are easily angered, are not interested in having their children living with them, have current substance abuse issues and that few fathers avail themselves of the services offered to them (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Zanoni et al., 2013).

One possible explanation for the contrast between workers' experiences and findings from studies with child welfare fathers is that workers and researchers tend to be in contact with different groups of men. Child welfare workers interact with the whole child protection parent population, dealing with men from a wide variety of family contexts. In contrast, the few small-scale qualitative studies with child welfare fathers have been conducted with men who are currently receiving, or have received, support services (Barker et al., 2011; Bui & Graham, 2006; Ferguson & Gates, 2013; Smithers, 2012; Storhaug &

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