



Professional curiosity (series of 4 articles)	Bexley Safeguarding Children's Board
3. Inclusion of fathers and male partners	September 2017

It is widely recognised that early positive involvement of fathers and male carers, and male friendly approaches can help improve their engagement. However, organisational cultures and systems can hinder their involvement and this has been highlighted in a number of serious case reviews - *“Preconceived ideas about fathers as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ influences potentially whether they are involved in assessments regarding their children. This means that important information about risks may be lost”* ([Department for Education, 2016](#)).

Fathers are important to children, and (like mothers) most present a combination of positive and negative factors. Research highlights the hugely constructive role fathers can play in a range of child and family outcomes. However, when in contact with practitioners, men say they feel overlooked both as a resource for their children and in terms of the difficulties they might be facing.

Identifying absent fathers



- Always identify whether a man is living or visiting the family home. Check the basics, for example, are there men's clothes in the home?
- Mothers frequently 'gate-keep' (withhold) a father's identity. Don't give up. Ask at every meeting and ask the extended families.
- Ensure accurate information e.g. telephone numbers and addresses for the father and his extended family is recorded on case files.
- Speak to the practice network around the child. Does the social worker, midwife, health visitor, children's centre or school know the father's name?
- Where a decision has been made to exclude the father/male care giver, ensure there is a clear record of the reasons for that decision and how the decision was made.

Engaging fathers

Be respectful: Notions of respect and disrespect have particular relevance for men. If workers can communicate respect they are more likely to engage and involve men. Solution-focused approaches, concentrating on strengths and showing how a man can influence a child's development, tends to be a more successful approach.

Be consistent: in what you say and how you treat fathers. Above all, be consistent in what you say *to* fathers and what you say *about* them in written reports.

Be reliable: Do what you say you will do. Respond to messages in reasonable time. Keep fathers up to date on what's happening.

Be available: Men's experience is that workers can be difficult to contact and 'hard to reach'. This makes it hard to develop trust or build a relationship.

Be honest: with both parents about the father's involvement in practice activities. Be honest about concerns *and* willing to work with the positives.

Be empathetic: Listen to the father's perspective. Recognise that many fathers are vulnerable and will either withdraw or be threatening as a form of defence. Men are often more powerfully

motivated by the desire to be a good father. A good starting point for engagement is to ask them, “What does it mean to be a good father?”

Be flexible: Take into account where a father lives and the distance he has to travel when inviting him to meetings. Try to schedule around fathers’ (and mothers’) work commitments.

Be aware: Consider how power, gender relations and personal experience (of your own father or partner, or of being a father) may be shaping your perspective and influencing your practice.

Be knowledgeable: Know the law in relation to fathers and paternal responsibility. [Click here](#) for further information or see [Parental responsibility: guide for schools and local authorities](#).

Be safe: Work with your supervisor and your team to develop safety plans, strategies and approaches when engaging violent or abusive men. Do not minimise domestic violence.

Top tips for managers

- Commission high quality perpetrator programmes that include a significant element of dealing with fatherhood. Ensure there is also evaluation in place to monitor impact.
- Change IT and assessment systems to ensure details of fathers are required and question if a father has not been included.
- Ensure workers have access to training or CPD that includes theories about masculinity, gender, cultural influences on masculinity and dealing with violent or threatening behaviour.
- Make sure services, including early intervention, are meeting the needs of men as well as women i.e. being open outside of working hours and catering for non-resident fathers.
- Foster better partnership working across commissioned services, particularly between domestic violence services and perpetrator programmes or the probation service.
- Assess the way that work is organised - Review policy, procedures and work environment to ensure they are ‘father friendly’ and not implicitly excluding fathers from being involved.
- Model expectations that fathers and male care givers will be involved and the importance of that involvement. Challenge teams to reconsider if the level of engagement of fathers/male care givers is acceptable for that case, and provide support if needed.

