

East Renfrewshire Child Protection Committee

Multi – Agency Summary Guidance for Practitioners & Managers



Engaging with Fathers

Working Together to Keep Our Children Safe

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

1. Introduction

1.1 Fathers (or those in a father role) involvement in their children's lives will have a significant impact on their children's later development. Research highlights the crucial role fathers can play in promoting better outcomes for children and young people, however often 'parenting' equates to mothers and fathers can be ignored and marginalised within services. More significantly, for vulnerable children and young people they will suffer most when this relationship is lacking and will benefit the most when this relationship is strong¹. It is therefore necessary to consider what agencies can do to enhance fathers' participation in our processes.

1.2 This East Renfrewshire Child Protection Committee guidance should be read in conjunction with the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2014 which details the role of all agencies in protecting children from harm and abuse.

www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/09134441/0

1.3 The Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) national approach requires practitioners across all services for children and adults to meet children's and young people's needs, working together where necessary to ensure they reach their full potential. The GIRFEC approach is incorporated into the working practices of all people working with children, young people and their families in Scotland.

www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright

2. Scope

2.1 This guidance is relevant for all staff working with children and young people across all services including those working in adult services with individuals who may be a parent or carer. It aims to provide guidance and advice for practitioners across all agencies on how to engage fathers (or those in a father role) in our services from initial referral to those children who may require further support or protection

3. Fatherhood Definitions

3.1 A practitioner may hear or see many terms to describe a father. Though the primary focus of our services may be in supporting the birth or legal father of the child, often there are other people that have been instrumental in a child's life. For example, the family may want a support such as a step- father and/or father figure to be a continued part of the child's life and attend any meetings. These natural supports can be instrumental in building protective factors in families through social connections and concrete supports. **However where a father, step-father or partner presents a risk to a child or young person**

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

this would not be appropriate or in the child's best interests.

- **Birth Father:** the natural or birth father of a child.
- **Legal Father:** one recognized as the legal father due to marriage to the mother at the time the child was born or by voluntary acknowledgment through a court order.
- **Putative/Alleged Father:** a man who has been named as the father of a child, but has not been established as the legal father.
- **Step-father:** a man that is married to or cohabitating with the child's mother and takes de facto responsibility for a child (step-father, live in boyfriend) but he is not the biological father.
- **Father Figure:** an individual that is unrelated by either birth or marriage but have an emotionally significant relationship with a child (mother's boyfriend, friend, neighbour etc) This may also include an individual who is a male biological relative with a significant parenting role with the child (grandfather, uncle, older brother).
- **Foster Father:** a person who has been assessed by a substitute care team as being deemed suitable to act as a parent or guardian of a child or young person in place of the child's parents but without legally adopting them.
- **Adoptive Father:** the creation by law of the relationship of parent (father) and child.

3.2 Engaging well with both parents is crucial from the outset of initial contact with an agency. This includes considering the physical environment ensuring that it is gender neutral and agency literature and posters which send a message that both parents play an important role in their child's life. Services should encourage fathers to take part in all activities, unless there are indicators that such involvement would place children and women at risk.

3.3 Fathers, like mothers, and children and young people are individuals. Service providers need to look beyond the stereotypes and engage with fathers in their individual context while considering that fathers as a group have diverse needs. Services need to engage with fathers, step-fathers, and father figures. This involves considering the different circumstances that these men may be living in for example not all men are employed and not all fathers will live with their children.

4. The Legal and Policy Context

4.1 The importance of the role fathers play is highlighted in several policy www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

documents issued by the Scottish Government.

The Early Years Framework (2009) provides a strategy on the services which should support parents at the earliest stage in delivery of services. The National Parenting Strategy (2012) offers the Government's commitment to addressing the specific needs of fathers in other policy areas and also to increase the number of men in the children's services workforce. The need to engage with men is also featured in the Getting Our Priorities Right Good Practice Guidance for practitioners working with children and families affected by problematic alcohol and/or drug use.

There are also strong international policy drivers for change. Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child."

The Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011 also states that all fathers are deemed a relevant person unless their parental rights have been removed by court; therefore birth fathers who do not have parental rights can be relevant persons. This provision gives fathers the right to participate in the children's hearing process.

4.2 The Importance of Fathers

4.3 The attachment a child develops with their mother is central to their future development. Fatherhood has an equally vital role in the healthy development of their children. Often mother and fathers parent differently bringing richness to the child's experience. Having an involved father is linked to better outcomes for children and young people².

Research shows that where fathers are involved in their child's early life:

- There is a more positive correlation with later educational achievement;
- There is an association with a good parent-child relationship in adolescence;
- Children growing up in separated families are better protected from mental health problems when their fathers are still involved;

4.4 Fully engaging with both parents can further enhance any protective factors which may support the child or young person. These factors may reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. For example where a mother has difficulties in relation to mental health problems or problematic drug misuse an engaged and involved father may be able to provide stability and security for a child or young person. Fathers extended family, including non resident fathers often provide a huge source of support both emotionally and practically for children and young people and agencies have a responsibility

to explore these relationships fully.

5. Fathers and the Child Protection System

- 5.1** There is very little research in the UK regarding the role of fathers in the child protection system. This may be reflective of the apparent lack of focus on fathers in child protection practice itself.

A recent small study in Scotland by Nick Smithers 2012³ suggests that there is a prevailing gender bias in child protection services leaving fathers without a voice where there are concerns regarding their children. This research further states that often fathers are viewed as 'dangerous' without a thorough assessment of their parenting role, or at best not considered to be able to nurture in the way that mothers often are.

Another study by Ryan in 2006⁴ found that professionals did not routinely examine how men are significant in children's lives and whether their involvement in subsequent planning would be of benefit. This raises other questions for agencies such as is the father resident? Do they present a risk or could they contribute to the child's protection? Are they interested in the child or are they remote?

- 5.2** There are various reasons why fathers are not currently engaged in child protection services:

- Men might have a smaller role in relation to parenting their children and therefore they are not seen as being as significant in the process of protecting their children.
- Entrenched beliefs and perceptions such as men not being seen as 'nurturers' can make men feel marginalised and feel that services are not meant for them.
- Complications regarding parents who have separated can mean women are reluctant to have former partners involved.
- Some fathers can view agencies negatively due to their past experiences.
- Professionals can perceive men who may have been implicated in abuse as being a threat both to other service users and to themselves. This can negate the possibility of working constructively with everyone who has a significant role to play in a child's life and those relevant to any concerns or abuse. East Renfrewshire Child Protection Committee and Adult Committee have produced practice guidance for staff - CAPP Working with Unco-operative or Hostile Families where staff have these types of concerns. Staff should consult their line manager to discuss the best way to engage men where they have genuine concerns about their own safety.

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

- Fathers may have difficulty accessing services particularly if they work or if they are non resident may not be aware of services involvement.

6. Fathers as perpetrators or suspected perpetrators

6.1 It is important to engage with fathers and/or a mother's current partner where there are concerns about the risk they might present. In several recent significant case reviews and child death inquiry reports assessments on the role of fathers and any current partner was absent both in terms of any risk they might present or in terms of any protection they might offer. If this is not explored this can leave the child at further risk.

Mothers can often be 'gatekeepers' of information regarding either their current partners or of the father of their child/ren. It is imperative that practitioners view any information regarding fathers or men's current or past involvement in parenting with an open mind and consider that the mother may have motivations which are not in keeping with the best interests of their child.

6.2 A significant reason for the lack of involvement of some fathers is their physical absence. Separation and divorce are stressful and challenging and can lead to ongoing conflicts and hostility regarding contact and access visits. Services such as Family Mediation can be accessed to assist with finding a mutually agreeable resolution to issues regarding contact.

On occasion agencies may contact a non-resident father that has expressed a desire not to have contact with his child, provides no supports and will not co-operate with the practitioner in exploring any issues or his role.

Practitioners should document all efforts to involve the father in processes and planning for the child as well as his responses to this. Practitioners may also face challenges from mothers about involving past partners and must be ready to explain the possible benefits for their children of exploring this relationship.

7. Specific Circumstances

7.1 Fathers in prison

Where there are no concerns about a fathers contact with his child and they are in prison, efforts should be made to maintain a child's connection with their father. Fathers should be encouraged to support children to visit, write or maintain telephone and help them to understand the current circumstances.

7.2 Multiple Fathers

In some families, children are living in the same household, yet have different fathers. Current living situations may seem complex as arrangements could include a number of examples. Children may be living with a step father or boyfriend instead of their birth father. There is potential for tension and confusion over roles. Who is responsible for the safety of the children, who plays the role of the father in the eyes of the child, and how are other adults portraying the father to his children may all be real challenges to assess and navigate. When working with a family with multiple fathers, it is important for the worker to understand the role each man plays in the family dynamic. Mapping a genogram with the family may be helpful to see and discuss the family connections for each child. The National Risk Framework to Support the Assessment of Children and Young People (2012) provides a range of tools to support practitioners in identifying risk and analysis of the information they gather.

www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/11/7143

7.3 Young Fathers

The Fatherhood Institute states that young fathers (aged 16-24) are some of the most invisible, marginalised and vulnerable parents in the UK.

Many, though by no means all, have grown up in difficult circumstances, are on low incomes or benefits, have few academic qualifications and relatively poor career prospects. Some are homeless, or live in cramped, temporary accommodation.

Positively involved young fathers can be a hugely important resource for their children and also for the mothers of their children. Research shows that young mothers who feel supported by their baby's father adjust better to motherhood and behave more positively towards their children – for whom a good relationship with “my dad” proves protective in face of other disadvantage.

This means that practitioners across all agencies should reach out to young fathers, in teenage pregnancy, youth services, early years, health, education and housing.

7.4 Contact Issues

Where possible children and young people are entitled to a relationship with both parents and there is no identified risk of harm. When a family breaks up, it is very important for children to keep and develop relationships with both their parents as well as other members of their family and relatives.

The best arrangements for maintaining these relationships are those that:

- keep children safe and free from any continuing family conflict, and

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

- ensure good parenting and care

Usually parents are the best people to make these arrangements however often after a relationship break up there can be ongoing conflict which prevents contact arrangements being agreed amicably. Practitioners can support parents through this difficult process. The Scottish Government have provided guidance designed for parents who are separating “Family Matters Parenting Agreement Scotland – Guide”.

www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/112209/0027303.pdf

Practitioners can support fathers and mothers to understand the importance of contact for their children:

- Putting children’s needs first
- Planning for each child’s different needs
- Informing and listening carefully to children
- Keeping children safe and feeling safe
- Trying to agree and co-operate
- Allowing for different views about parenting
- Being imaginative about contact arrangements
- Avoiding delays in arranging contact
- Ensuring children know what to expect and are not exposed to sudden changes unless it is unavoidable.

Contact is not simply about allocating time to be spent with a parent, the emphasis should be on the quality of the relationship with their parent, meeting their child’s needs and the value placed on the contact with their child.

8. Best Practice in Engaging Fathers

8.1 Many of the methods of engaging fathers are similar to engaging any hard to reach group.

8.2 Service delivery

- Flexibility of the service to respond to fathers particular circumstances i.e. hours of business may not make your service accessible;
- Positive images of men and families on promotional materials will make a service more inclusive;
- Offering more ‘hands on practical activities’ may be more appealing to some (though not all) fathers;
- Offering services specifically for men i.e. a dad’s group may make men more likely to attend a service;

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

- Consider men and fathers from culturally diverse backgrounds and any specific challenges they might face;
- Disabled fathers may also experience more barriers in accessing services and practitioners should be aware of this;

8.3 Staff capacity to engage effectively with fathers

Whether male or female, practitioners should consider whether they require additional training in how best to engage with fathers. East Renfrewshire Child Protection provides multi-agency training on engaging with fathers.

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/article/4265/ERCPC-Improving-Practice

The ability to include fathers in children and family services requires practitioners to have a range of competencies:

- Experience in working with men
- Ability to reflect on their practice and respond to any cultural stereotypes about men and how this impacts on attitudes and practice
- Skills in working with men in a one to one or group setting
- Skills in forming effective partnerships with service users

8.4 The Getting it Right for Every Child approach places an emphasis on early intervention. Gathering information about a child or young person's father at an early stage should form part of any assessment. This is the basis of forming a hypothesis about whether the father presents a risk or could be a protective factor.

Developing a strengths based approach to fathers and fathering

Engaging with fathers requires a commitment to equality and an approach which highlights fathers existing strengths and identifies those which can be built on to maximise the development of children and young people.

Research demonstrates that a strengths based approach with parents increases the effectiveness of services and improves parental engagement:

- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is characterised by a focus upon fathers' capacities and the value of fathering. In practice this can be:
 - sharing information with fathers about how they already contribute and how they can further contribute to the wellbeing of children; and
 - resisting an "expert" approach.
- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is especially important because:

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/ercpc

- fathers' competence in dealing with the emotional aspects of parenting small children can be underestimated within their own families and in the general community; and
- due to stereotypical views of men's abilities (as compared to women's) men may not realise their capacity to contribute positively to their children's health and development.

References

¹ Including Fathers in Early Years Services: Positive Practice for professionals, Children in Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, October 2008

² Lamb and Tamis-leMonda, 2004

³ Listening to Fathers - Men's experience of child protection in Central Scotland Circle, Nick Smithers, 2012

⁴ Ryan, M. (2006). The experiences of fathers involved with social services departments: a literature review. In *Fathers Matter 1 – Research findings on fathers and their involvement with social care services*. (eds Ashley, C., Featherstone, B., Roskill, C., Ryan, M. and White, S.) Family Rights Group: London, 13-24.

Best Practice Guide for Engaging Fathers and Non-Residential Parents, North Carolina Division of Social Services, 2012

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

Scottish Government - Family Matters Parenting Agreement Scotland – Guide, 2006

Engaging fathers in child and family services, Tehan, B & McDonald, M, Communities and Families Clearinghouse, Australia, 2010

Fathers and Child Protection: current research, Fatherhood Institute
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org

Action for Children's approach to working with fathers and male carers in our early years services, Action for Children Briefing, 2009

The Early Years Framework, Scottish Government, 2009

The Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act, 2011

The National Parenting Strategy, Scottish Government, 2012

National Risk Framework to Support the Assessment of Children and Young People (2012)

Resources

The Fatherhood Institute collates and publishes research on fathers and how this impacts on women and children and offers training and consultancy services -

www.fatherhoodinstitute.org

Family Mediation Scotland offers support to parents, children, young people and the wider family through family change and disruption, particularly where this has occurred as a result of separation, divorce or family restructuring -

www.relationships-scotland.org.uk/family

Families Outside offers support and information to families affected by imprisonment

www.familiesoutside.org.uk

Fathers Network Scotland - work with a range of organisations to help them make their family services father-friendly and inclusive. We do this through practical services including training, events, peer support and research –

www.fathersnetwork.org.uk