Working with fathers: an overview of the research

This study is a review of the research from 2000 to 2010 about the barriers to better father engagement, as well as the very limited evidence on what works with maltreating fathers. Little is known about what works in engaging men, but there are some promising indicators from family support and child protection practice contexts. These include early identification and early involvement of fathers; a proactive approach, including an insistence on men’s involvement with services; and the use of practical activities.

What prevents fathers from engaging with child welfare services?

Workers views: the good father versus bad father:

In an analysis of Serious Case Reviews Brandon et al. (2009) found a tendency for professionals to adopt rigid or fixed thinking. Fathers were labelled as either all good or all bad, reliable and trustworthy or the opposite, with the consequence that workers did not take the views of ‘bad fathers’ seriously. At the same time, those fathers who did work successfully with them became ‘a reformed good dad’, and an optimistic, sometimes over optimistic, perspective became the dominant view, blurring the relevance of previous risk information.

Fathers were often labelled as dangerous without the professional having had any direct contact with them. A limited assessment in collaboration with family members became the basis for excluding fathers. Men were also described by social workers as absent, irrelevant, a threat and no use, with team members tending to reinforce each others' positive or negative construction of male service users.

Mothers as gatekeepers:

Mothers can either facilitate or block access for both resident and non-resident fathers. Malm et al. (2006) found that only one third of mothers identified the father when asked. There were several reasons for this including reluctance about letting the father know that child welfare services were involved or letting benefit agencies know the identity of the father, fear that the father may gain custody, anger at the father for being in a new relationship or fear of the father’s reaction, particularly if there had been a history of domestic abuse. Mothers may also be reluctant to divulge information to social workers for fear that they may lose their children, not wish to include fathers if there has been a history of abuse or conflict between them or may be unwilling to involve fathers in what they perceive to be ‘their territory’ (Ferguson & Hogan 2004). Of course in some cases the mother may be perfectly justified in her fear. Not all mothers restrict access to fathers. Roskill (2008) found many women expressed strong views that the involvement of men with children's services was very important.
Practitioners’ traditional practices in relation to gender and parenting

A failure to know about men has been a feature in many serious case reviews (Brandon et al. 2009), where information about men has not been passed on or pursued by caseworkers. Little is known about fathers or other men in the household, their relationships with the mother and the extent to which they are involved with the children. Child welfare workers tend to focus on mothers, who are seen as the primary caretakers, and exclude or at least make little effort to include fathers. The connection between mother blaming and father avoidance has been also been noted in several studies.

Low levels of engagement are also reported in relation to men who pose a risk to children. In Baynes & Holland’s (2010) English study over a third of fathers had no contact with a social worker prior to the first child protection meeting. In Roskill’s (2011) file audit of cases involving domestically violent men, the father was neither seen nor contacted by phone in 32% of the core assessments studied. It is also the case that practitioners know very little about, or do not always engage with birth fathers who are not living with their children.

Fathers as reluctant clients:
Fathers give the main reasons for avoiding contact with workers as the impact of their past experience with family services and a reluctance about seeking or accepting help. Many young fathers did not see a need for parenting support or substance abuse counselling even though many risk factors were present. Bayley et al. (2009) found that fathers were worried that parenting programmes would dictate how they should parent and believed such groups were more suitable for mothers. In addition family centres and family support services tend to be perceived by fathers as mothers’ places where women sit and chat. And it is true that in some cases, women felt that children’s centres were their domain and represented a safe place away from abusive partners, which made them reluctant to welcome fathers into these groups (Ghate et al. 2000). In other cases fathers, especially the unemployed, valued the time they had alone while their partners and children attended the centres. Most identified employment as the main need in their lives.

What facilitates father engagement with child welfare?
Early identification and involvement:
The earlier fathers can be engaged and involved the better, for instance, establishing paternity at birth is associated with greater father involvement in terms of contact, overnight stays, financial support, and attendance at Sure Start programmes (Lloyd et al. 2003). For young fathers without employment or educational prospects, fatherhood can offer them something meaningful which can help them to feel worthwhile (Ferguson & Hogan 2004). Young fathers appear to want help with negotiating relationships following the birth as well as support in caring for their offspring (Ashley 2011).
A proactive approach to engaging fathers

What makes a difference:
There are various practical measures that can be used in a proactive way to engage fathers:
- Referrals are not accepted without including fathers in some way
- Workers are willing to include, invite and have positive attitudes towards working with fathers
- Fathers are visited at home,
- Workers are persistent and consult fathers about the support they need
- The positive gains to children of father involvement are highlighted
- Fathers are actively targeted in children’s centres with male staff available
- Opening hours are flexible
- There are positive images of fathers and their children on display

It is also important for professionals to receive guidance on how best to support mothers to manage the emotional nature of father involvement.

Making services relevant to fathers:
Generally the research findings suggest that fathers prefer services that have been designed specifically for them and provide the opportunity for them to spend time with their children and where they can draw on peer support.

Fathers need incentives to draw them in and they prefer activity-based approaches which allow them to spend time with their children and take part in outdoor activities or skill-based exercises rather than classroom-based parenting sessions or discussion groups (Lloyd et al. 2003). It seems that in the context of family support work, the most effective interventions adopt a strengths-based approach which focus upon the important contribution fathers make to their children’s lives, where workers are positive about the father’s ability and are honest about the issues faced, yet which emphasize the father's existing skills and use solution-focused thinking to develop their skills and build confidence (Berlyn et al. 2008; Gearing et al. 2008).

What works for maltreating fathers?
There is still a lack of evidence about the effectiveness for fathers of parenting programmes which teach child management skills, however when fathers attend as well as mothers the result appears to be better child behaviour outcomes. It is still not certain though, that interventions that work well with mothers will work as well with fathers, as there seem to be some distinctive features of men who maltreat children.
Some studies suggest maltreating fathers differ from non-maltreating fathers in both cognitive and affective constructs, including their experience and expression of anger, parenting stress and level of empathy with their children (Francis & Wolfe 2008). Smithgall et al. (2009) found that those fathers described as being ‘negatively involved resident fathers’ did not understand the impact of their behaviour upon their children and were often resistant to services. These fathers were more likely to have been convicted of a violent crime with many reporting problems with substance abuse. The Caring Dads programme, on parenting, child maltreatment, readiness to change and domestic abuse, is currently in use in parts of the UK. The limited evaluations have shown promising results with a significant decrease in the men’s level of hostility, denigration and rejection of children, parenting stress and level of angry arousal in a family context.

**Motivational interviewing (MI)**
Motivational interviewing has been used successfully with perpetrators of domestic violence and with substance misusers. Fathers who pose a risk to women and children are likely to be resistant to authoritarian social workers, so it may be that MI has potential to engage these men more successfully, however there is no direct evidence that MI is effective with fathers in a child protection context and an approach that works in one field will not necessarily transfer to another.

To sum up, one of the main obstacles to father involvement in the child protection process is their labelling as either a ‘risk’or resource’ for their children as opposed to potentially a complex mix of both elements. Fathers may be excluded from child welfare work because of a pejorative practitioner culture, because mothers fail to identify them or are unwilling to include them, or because workers focus child welfare interventions upon the mother, possibly because of traditional assumptions about gender roles. In addition, fathers may avoid contact with workers, view parenting as the mother's role, or find that interventions are not focused upon their perceived needs or preferred activities. To overcome these barriers, the early identification and involvement of fathers appear to be a crucial first step in ensuring that they are contacted and understand that child welfare workers expect them to engaged.

For maltreating fathers, the evidence suggests that fathers do not always understand the negative effects of their behaviour upon their children. Little is known about which approaches are the most effective, but those which help fathers to consider their actions and how they affect others, perhaps on the basis of cognitive-behavioural principles look promising and MI appears to lend itself to work with resistant clients.
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Bibliography: