

“Every conversation starts with the child” Engaging with Fathers



As a result of some recent audit work, I thought it would be useful start a conversation about how well we involve fathers in our work and to develop a PSW blog which focuses on why and how we ensure that we have a high level of meaningful engagement with men, fathers, putative fathers, partners, carers... in our work with children. Some information shared with me recently regarding a case suggested that in one case the workers understood that a strategy meeting was necessary to allow the LA to share information with a child's father as the father did not live in the same household with the child. In another case the father had not been contacted following a referral to CSC regarding his child as the details of the concerns did not include concerns about his care of the child. Evidence from audits would suggest that whilst there is some extremely strong work with fathers there are clearly areas where this could be developed.

I think it is a really useful debate to have and I am, as always interested in your views.

First and foremost, the Children Act 1989 clearly states;

A father usually has parental responsibility if he's either:

- married to the child's mother
- listed on the birth certificate (after a certain date, depending on which part of the UK the child was born in)

If the parents of a child are married when the child is born, or if they've jointly adopted a child, both have parental responsibility.

They both keep parental responsibility if they later divorce.

Unmarried parents

An unmarried father can get parental responsibility for his child in 1 of 3 ways:

- jointly registering the birth of the child with the mother (from 1 December 2003)
- getting a parental responsibility agreement with the mother
- getting a parental responsibility order from a court

Jon Symonds (SW lecturer university of Bristol) considered fatherhood in the context of Social work and found that;

"It is now well established that fathers matter to children's wellbeing. When fathers are positively involved in their children's lives, their children are more likely to do better at school, have better relationships with their peers, have better mental health and are less likely to be in trouble with the police. When social workers work with fathers to improve their involvement with children, they can help to improve outcomes for children."

It could be argued that the position of fathers in children's lives has changed significantly in recent years and although the majority of children may live with two parents family structures are increasingly varied and complex. The most recent data I can find suggests that between 1971 and 2011 the number of families with dependent children who were parented by a couple fell from 92% to 78% and my own hypothesis would be that this is likely to have fallen further. It continues to be the case that following separation the majority of children remain in the care of the mother and this can have significant implications for children and their relationship with the non-resident parent (usually the father) in 2011 92% of single parents were female.

Research has consistently criticised Social Work for appearing to focus on female carers/mothers and that father often only feature superficially in children's case recording, home visits, direct work, and that multi-agency planning meetings often focus on the mothers care of the children and plans identify ways in which she needs to develop to enable 'her' to keep the children safe. I have seen this previously (not in York) in contact arrangements when mothers who have been the victim of domestic abuse have been ordered by the court to supervise contact between their children and the abusive parent.

It's significant, that the most recent research I can find which considers the involvement of fathers was undertaken in 2014 (Osborn 2014). The research reported that fathers were only invited to 55% of child protection conferences although interestingly, resident fathers were more likely to be invited but less likely to attend, and conversely non-resident fathers were less likely to be invited but more likely to attend. I think we need to ask ourselves how routinely do we speak with non-resident fathers prior to the child's conference and how robustly do we involve non-resident parents in assessment?



In some cases, information about an absent father may not be immediately available and may involve a level of professional curiosity and potentially difficult conversations with families who might challenge an absent or putative father's right to know about and to be involved in any assessments or interventions regarding their child.

Information about new partners within the household is important and in some cases abuse by a new partner's has led to significant

injury and in some cases the death of the child. There has been some useful research undertaken in Australia in 2015 which provides some recommendations about how we might approach gaining this information.

- Being explicit with mothers about the importance of speaking to the father and including him in the process, while also ensuring that she would not be put at risk.
- Speaking separately to the father rather than gathering information solely from the mother.
- Arranging separate home visits if necessary to explain the relevance of his involvement with the child, communicating a willingness to include home in decisions.

As previously discussed there have been a number of serious case reviews in which fathers appear to have been excluded from assessments and where mother's new partner was not included in the assessment process or interventions, most prominently the case of Peter Connelly. The Biennial review of SCR's undertaken in 2011 found that;

'Serious case reviews repeatedly find that although men around a child who died had posed a risk, this had not been identified or acted upon; and that men who could have been a resource often had information which agencies would have found helpful in understanding the child's situation, if only they had been in touch or had been listened to' (OFSTED, 2011; Brandon et al., 2011).

Most of you will be familiar with the case of Peter Connelly and the injuries which were inflicted on Peter by his mother's partner which, ultimately led to his death. Peter's father was estranged from Peter's mother and did not have care of him at the time of his death. The SCR identifies opportunities when the LA and multi-agency partners failed to engage Peter's father; When Peter was admitted to hospital with unexplained injuries, father had agreed to take time off work to care for Peter and according to school records this had been the agreed plan. However Peter was discharged to the care of his mother, apparently as a result of her suggesting that father had, prior to attending parenting classes, hit his children, this was never discussed with father or the subject of any further assessment. It was in fact, Peter's father who expressed concerns and shared information regarding mother's new partner.

Peter's father was not informed of the injuries to Peter in June and information was not sought from him as part of the s.47 enquiry or Police investigation. As a father (with PR) he should have been told of the concerns as a priority. Given his frequent contact with the children it is possible that he might have been able to provide relevant information. Even more

critically, during the debate between Police and CYPS whether or not Peter should be placed outside the family home, no consideration appears to have been given to the potential for his father to provide care. He was not consulted or informed of proposed arrangements.

Another male who appears to have been absent in this case is mother's partner who was living in the maternal home with Peter, his siblings and his mother. When Peter's mother was questioned as part of the assessment she indicated that her 'new partner' was 'very supportive' and a strategy discussion in 2006 made reference to him as 'a friend who helps' mother, this information was never questioned by the SW.

There appears to have been no attempt in this case by professionals to exercise professional curiosity in relation to mother's honesty and openness or in regard to her relationship with her new partner who she described to different professionals in a number of different ways; 'friend, boyfriend, and lodger'. Nor did they seek to make an assessment of the partner, nor ironically did they consider including him in the potential pool of perpetrators following the initial injuries to Peter. It is clear from the SCR report that professionals understood the partner's role as a 'supportive' friend of mother, the denial of a relationship between them appears to have stopped subsequent exploration of their relationship, the meaning of his being 'supportive' and what this might signify in terms of his involvement with Peter and his siblings.

So... how can we ensure that we are engaging with fathers and male carers?



Engaging with men in social care:
a good practice guide



Research undertaken by the fatherhood institute and the family rights group identifies that;

'Some practitioners lack a clear understanding of the law about engaging fathers and other men. There may also be concerns about whether engaging more with some fathers will increase risks to the child, mother and/or themselves, or increase family tensions. Many practitioners also lack confidence and skills to engage effectively with men, and do not have a clear understanding about how important it is to do so. Some may hold negative attitudes' towards men' (P: 3

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/FAT-91768-FI-SafeGUarding-A4-16pp-aw1.pdf>).

They go on to suggest that as a result, children are likely to be placed at greater risk through:

- Failure to identify important males in children's lives (especially when the man is living in another household)
- Inadequate understanding of the roles fathers and other men play in the lives of at-risk children
- Poor assessments of the risks posed by some men
- Failure to challenge risky men's behaviour enough – pressuring mothers to manage the risk or get the men out
- Failure to strengthen men's positive contributions to their children's

Wellbeing.

So, we should seek to identify and involve fathers as early as possible, unless to do so is assessed as unsafe (and even then other ways of working may be feasible). MOSAIC needs to have full information about the child including the name and the full and up-to-date contact details of the birth father, whether he holds PR and information about any other significant father figures. While it is also important to record whether a father has PR, this does not mean that we should only engage with men who have it. Many of the men who pose the greatest risk to children will not have PR and others, who may be a resource, including stepfathers and some unmarried fathers, may not have it either. It is also important to engage effectively with paternal as well as maternal relatives.

If a child becomes looked after, the first choice of placement is with the other parent provided it is consistent with their welfare (s.22C Children Act 1989); so the birth father should always be consulted (and where appropriate assessed) when you are considering where to place child, whether or not he has PR. If a father or father figure does not agree with the outcome of your assessment, his views should be recorded, placed on the child's file and responded to accordingly



Please let me know what you think. How well do we include fathers, what might we do differently, are there any resources or really good pieces of work you can share with your colleagues?

Finally don't forget **NAAS**, speak with your manager about becoming endorsed. This will enable you to access all of the resources which are available on the NAAS website and to engage in the development of NAAS preparation workshops which will be led by the AP team at the end of the year. York has committed to accrediting 30% of our workforce within the first 12 months, including senior managers so please do complete the paperwork, its short and easy to complete, particularly as you are now needing to complete the SWE information and could easily use the same information for both. Give me a call if you would like to know more. Some colleagues have asked when the assessment centres will open again and at this stage we don't know the answer to this however it is likely to be early summer 2021 so loads of time to prepare.

Don't forget the PSW email for you to use to let me know your views and any comments regarding the blog, any contributions you would like included or themes you would like I to consider. prinicpalsocialworker@york.gov.uk

What is going well	What is not going well	What would you like to change
Comments		

Dallas

Principal Social Worker
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- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/haringey-local-safeguarding-children-board-first-serious-case-review-child-a>
- <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/FAT-91768-FI-SafeGUarding-A4-16pp-aw1.pdf>.