



Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Board

Briefing note for Practitioners and Managers

Learning from Local Serious Case Reviews Child B recommendations Engaging with Fathers/ Men

This briefing has been produced to help frontline practitioners and managers to learn lessons from national and [local serious case reviews](#)¹ and to apply this knowledge to their work with children and their families.

Our aim is to highlight ways of working more effectively and inclusively with men as fathers or father figures, and in particular to emphasise the crucial need for relationship building as part of this.

These practice messages have been organised in such a way that they relate to a number of aspects of practice that has emerged from research, serious case reviews both locally and nationally and interviews with fathers/ father figures².

What can we do?

1. Expect to identify all men (including “orbiting”) men in the child’s network. Make no assumption over birth status or residence and do not use this as the overriding factor in terms of who is important to the child or who is actually/potentially involved in their lives.
2. Be curious and identify birth fathers and the paternal network early. This will only improve the chances of building a constructive relationship with him both in and outside of formal meetings (and help to establish different birth fathers including other children connected to the family). Paternal relatives can also be important for helping to sustain or re-establish contact with fathers. A genogram can be helpful.
3. Persist with recording as full a picture as possible of men’s lives and circumstances, including family history, past and current involvement in the child’s life, physical and mental health, and current housing/work situation. This allows for a more effective analysis of resources and risk. Make sure this information is up to date.
4. Include men in early help assessments and child protection planning. The inclusion of fathers, from the outset, needs to be a routine organisational and cultural expectation. Persistence is needed and time should be allowed and invested to facilitate this.

¹ SCIE SCR Child B FINAL report <https://www.staffsscb.org.uk/Professionals/Case-Studies-Case-Reviews/Case-Studies-Case-Reviews.aspx>

² Counting Fathers In: Understanding Men’s Experiences of the Child Protection System Brandon et al. 2017 (As part of a study by the University of East Anglia)

An example where this could happen might be a refusal by the mother to share the father's details, or she may not even have them. In this instance, every effort should be made to contact the father and may involve writing to suspected addresses (where appropriate i.e. Domestic Abuse cases), without disclosing any of the child's details but to inform him of your involvement. When contact is received, it is then that confirmation can be gained and work can begin.

5. Share the responsibility between the parents and set clear expectations and accountabilities for fathers. Such expectations have to include explicit recognition of the value of each specific father to his child, based on the resources he offers, or could be supported to offer.

This may be apparent where children are residing with mum and are subject to Child Protection plans, with birth father having regular contact at weekends. Keeping Dad involved is imperative particularly because steps have to be taken to ensure the risks and concerns are known (i.e. Home and Police checks).

6. Don't forget to assess his needs and capacities as a parent, even where domestic abuse, mental ill health or substance misuse is a factor. Without this men's roles and responsibilities as parents are likely to be overlooked, and mothers are likely to continue to be unfairly held solely responsible for the care and protection of children.

Equally fathers should be made aware of any allegations made by the mother so that they have an opportunity to respond to those as part of their assessment.

7. Ensure men are meaningfully involved in any process. Don't postpone their inclusion or invite them at the last minute. Findings suggest that where professionals settle for *passive inclusion*, there is little or no opportunity for a working relationship to develop, and the professional's knowledge and understanding of the man's life and circumstances are limited.
8. Challenge your bias? Men are much more likely to become the non-resident parent as a result of separation or divorce. Many fathers are engaged in fathering activity that may be unseen or unrecognised by professionals. Whilst such activity may not necessarily be considered constructive, it is likely that most fathers (including those not living with, or permanently separated from their children) are doing something. In this way assumptions about father 'absence' can and should be challenged.
9. Be flexible: The value of offering some flexibility as a means to establishing or building a working relationship with men can't be underestimated. Flexibility can go beyond the recognised issues over timing and location of formal meetings, and can include methods of communication, regularity of communication, clearer or more open discussion of the process; management of men's expectations and responding to a man's particular circumstances. Being responsive and flexible also needs to include recognising the range of men's fathering activity and attending to how this is evaluated or could be supported.
10. Be reflective about your practice. Research illustrates ways in which longstanding ideas and ideals about gender roles impact on how men and professionals engage with each other. Working with men in the child protection process requires that attention be paid to parenting as a gendered experience³, and to how assumptions can be made or left unquestioned.

³ See Reference 2