



Norfolk Safeguarding
Children Partnership

SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDE

Keeping Fathers in Sight good practice guide:

**For Independent Chairs for Child
Protection Case Conferences and
Independent Reviewing Officers for
Looked After Child Reviews**

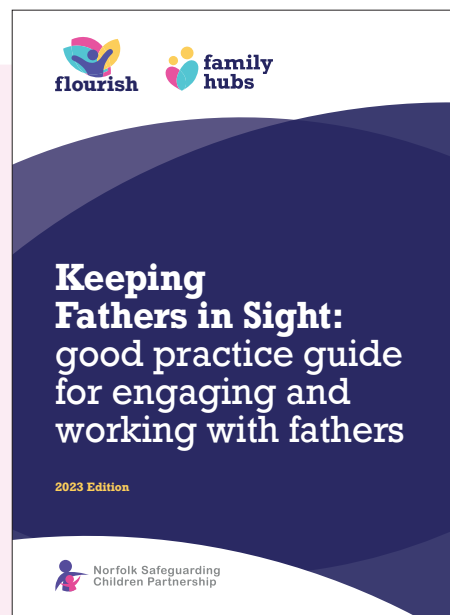
2023 Edition





This document is to be used in conjunction with:

Keeping Fathers in Sight: good practice guide for engaging and working with fathers.

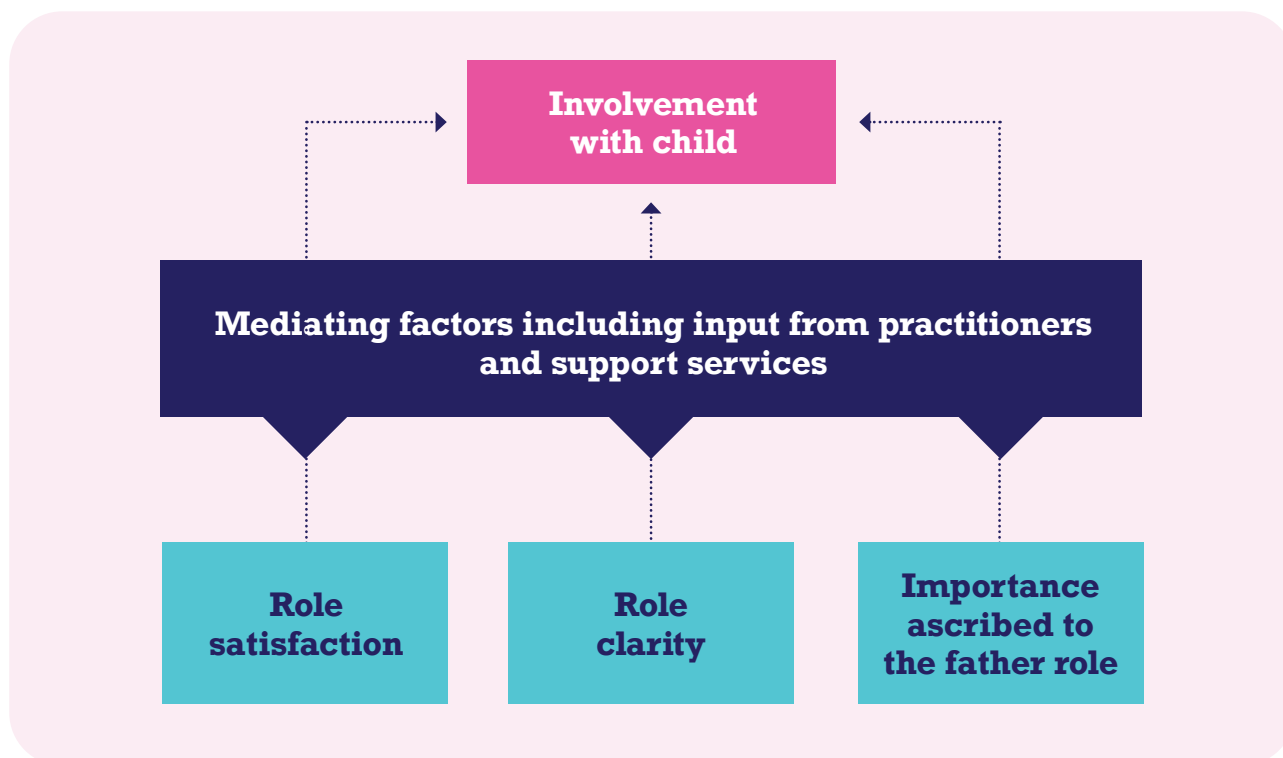


A father's input and involvement in his child's life is influenced by many considerations.

Key factors include:

- The importance ascribed to the fathering role by him and others around him.
- The clarity that he has about the role that he is playing and the impact that he has on the child and the family.
- The level of satisfaction that he derives from this role.

These three factors are influenced by other mediating factors including, but not exclusively, his own experience of being fathered, adverse childhood experiences, his relationship with the mother of the child and other family members, his cultural perception of gender. The list of these mediating factors is huge and also includes input from services. The role that practitioners and support services have is essential in his appreciation of these three key factors and therefore his interaction and involvement with his child.



There should be an expectation of the inclusion of fathers in Child Protection Case Conferences and Looked After Child Review meetings and any omission or exclusion should be questioned and the reasons clearly recorded. Exclusion from one meeting should not remove this as an ongoing and constant expectation. The fact that a father has not attended one meeting should not be a reason that he does not attend the next one. The reason for not including him should be revisited for each subsequent meeting. The Counting Fathers in¹ research identified that a focus on a father's attendance at initial meetings did not always result in an expectation that he would be encouraged to have sustained active involvement and that this was linked to gendered thinking about work and caring roles. As highlighted in the Norfolk Partnership good practice guide for engaging and working with fathers, early identification and



contact with fathers is key to good engagement. Fathers have a significant input to their child's lived experience and their inclusion from the earliest point should not be optional, it is essential. An absence of contact details for a father should not be accepted and should be regularly challenged.

Virtually all fathers want the best for their children and any assumption or belief that a father is not bothered or not interested should be challenged and regularly reviewed. This is frequently an expression of a lack of faith or trust in the child protection process. If men feel that they are not going to be listened to or treated fairly then withdrawal may feel to them like the only way that they can have some agency, control or voice. There is a likelihood that more could be done for the fathers to understand his importance in the process and the impact that his engagement will have for the outcomes for his child². Men may also express disinterest when they feel that they are in a vulnerable position as a way to avoid losing a sense of their own worth or self-esteem. This apparent disinterest may be exhibited through staying away from meetings or it may result in a lack of engagement during meetings. This was highlighted in the Brandon et. al. research:

“When I am there, I am frustrated because I feel like I want to say stuff, but I tend not to, I just tend to hold back, I don't want to make an idiot out of myself... If I'm chill then people think I don't care but if I really blow up they'll think I'm aggressive”

(Brandon et.al. 2017 p.100)


For some men, emotion management was a required strategy for coping with the child protection process, and this included not speaking, or not showing any emotional response. In the following quote, Jordan describes his decision to remain silent for the last hour of the ICPC.

“Somehow I make it worse... they try and belittle you... it makes you feel that the whole thing is pointless.”

(Jordan, non-resident birth father who had lost previous children to care, aged 27. (Brandon et.al. 2017 p.100)

¹ Brandon, M., Philip, G., & Clifton, J. (2017). 'Counting Fathers In': Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System. University of East Anglia https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/68000/1/Published_report_2017.pdf

² See worksheet *Fathers and children's outcomes*



In the UEA research men talked how the child protection system generated difficult emotions for them, which could often then jeopardise their involvement with the process. This was most noticeable in meetings, and they perceived gender differences in how their feelings were interpreted by professionals. A proportion of the fathers felt that they had quickly become seen as ‘difficult’ by social workers and as someone who couldn’t be worked with. The mistrust between men and social workers appeared to stem from men’s conduct in meetings and the way social workers’ viewed and managed their behaviour:

“Yes, I can be aggressive and hostile and everything like that but that is because they are not listening, you know I am banging my head up against a brick wall.”

“They thought I was going to punch Terri, but I wasn’t, I was just upset cos they took the baby.”

“Then they cancelled the meeting, said I was aggressive...I said ‘I talk the way I talk mate. I can’t help it. I’m not aggressive, I’m just pissed off.’”

(Brandon et.al. 2017 pp.98-99)

The engagement and involvement of fathers is improved when we consider the impact of masculinity on our interactions and when we employ a trauma informed approach. This approach includes understanding that meetings can result in a fight, flight or freeze response and is essential to draw men into meetings and other interactions:

“If she [the social worker] had been more down to earth, you know instead of just telling me to do all this. I thought who is she to tell me what I can and can’t do? When she started doing that, I started being the big man do you know what I mean?”

(Brandon et.al. 2017 p.84)

Fathers may find it difficult to engage in meetings if they feel that there is a lack of fairness in the approach taken during the child protection process. Fathers have highlighted in research that they can find the process prejudicial when they are first approached by professionals. This can occur when a practitioner has met with the mother and subsequently bases their line of inquiry on the narrative that the mother has given, rather than wanting to hear from the father about his own experience and his parental narrative. The father's voice should be heard in its own right, not just in reaction to the narrative provided by others in the room. Similarly, if a meeting has to be split, decision making should be balanced across both meetings, not decided in the first part of the meeting and presented to the second.

Any plans should differentiate father's and mother's roles, accountabilities and capacity and set out clear expectations about the father's contribution, ensuring that they have a share in responsibility and accountability. This should include explicit recognition of what value he brings to the plan, what changes are expected and how they will be reviewed. It is important that the specificity, clarity and nature of tasks or action points make them understandable, meaningful, fair, and feasible, for the father and for the mother.

Holding fathers directly to account for harmful or abusive behaviour should not automatically exclude the possibility of positive action and intervention and support; men can be held to account and challenged whilst being supported to have a positive role in their child's life. Finding ways to support their parenting role is more likely to encourage a positive engagement with the child protection process.

In Child Protection cases there is frequently more than one man in a parenting role and identification of birth father and/or resident fathers should not preclude understanding if there are any other men involved in parenting the child. Similarly, for Looked After Children, where there are men who have taken on parenting roles subsequent to the child coming into care, they should be included in reviews in a proportionate way, especially if they are to be involved in reunification plans or in ongoing family time.

Seven tips when engaging fathers in meetings

- 1. Check the father has been contacted to participate. If a father has not been involved in child protection conferences or an initial LAC Review, do not assume they do not wish to be involved moving forward.**
- 2. Understand how the father sees his role and look to help him and others to have clarity and satisfaction and place value on this role.**
- 3. Meet the father in advance of any meetings and establish a means of communication to act as a release valve if he is getting upset during the meeting. Consider split meetings, part one and part two reviews and other ways of including him if conflict between birth parents is likely (particularly for LAC Reviews where the child is often present and it is their meeting).**
- 4. Don't assume that mother and father have the same views.**
- 5. Do we have as clear a picture of the father and his parenting capacity as we do for the mother? Where children are in care, do we have as clear a picture of their ability to be involved in the child's journey through care as we do for the mother?**
- 6. Have we set out actions for him to the same level of detail as the mother?**
- 7. Apply the gender reversal approach i.e. would we think/say/do the same if we reversed the gender.**



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