



Engaging with Father Figures

Practice Tool

Engaging with father figures

Understanding factors that might impact on a father's ability to parent safely and at different stages of a child's life is vital to improve outcomes for all children and provide opportunities for effective early intervention and support. This practice tool has been developed to help practitioners have conversations with fathers and families with the aim of positively including them in work with their children. Studies show that when fathers/father figures are engaged early on, children have better educational, emotional, and social outcomes.

So what do we mean when we use the term father?

While this working tool uses the term fathers, it is shorthand for men involved in a parenting capacity with a child. So, it includes fathers, stepfathers, parents' boyfriends or partners and anyone seen as a father figure. The term 'father' refers both to men who live with the child full-time and those who do not but have regular contact and influence in children's lives.



Why is a practice tool needed?

Across the Essex partnerships, it is recognised that there is a need to improve engagement with father figures.

In September 2021, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published a report into the deaths of babies under 1 year old who had been harmed or killed by their fathers. The review incorporated interviews with fathers who were serving prison sentences for harming babies as well as an analysis of other cases referred to the Panel where an infant had sustained significant non-accidental injuries.

One of the key findings from the review titled 'The Myth of Invisible Men', was the lack of engagement by professionals with fathers across all systems, resulting in a deficit of knowledge and assessment as to the role that they play in a child's life, their history of parenting, their own experiences as children and how this might affect them as adults [The Myth of Invisible Men](#).

In December 2022, the multiagency partnership across West Essex held a conference on the Myth of Invisible Men. An outcome from the conference was to develop a 'practice tool' to prompt practitioners to have conversations with or ask questions about the men involved in the care of children.



Things to consider when working with men

Self-awareness: As professionals, we bring elements of ourselves to the work we do. This can include our experiences, both professionally and personally, as well as who we are as individuals. Therefore, it is helpful to consider how our identity as individuals influences how we engage with males involved in the care of children.

Anticipating barriers: Gender may influence our professional relationship with fathers. For male workers, there may be a sense of having something in common or a shared understanding. For female workers, relating to some of a father's experiences may be less intuitive. For both male and female workers, the lived experience of significant men in our lives may also impact how we relate to and engage with fathers. Societal norms around masculinity, fear of judgement, or the lack of male-friendly services make it more difficult and fathers may feel side-lined.

Perspective: Sometimes the way we behave can be linked to how we feel, and at times professionals may experience fathers as angry or aggressive. Being mindful of how a father may be feeling can help us to understand why they may be presenting in a particular way. Sometimes anxiety or feelings of lack of power underlie an aggressive presentation.

Expectations and prior experiences: We are aware that at times a story or professional view can follow a family through work with multi-agency partners. There could be a certain discourse around the father that would benefit from being reviewed as to how helpful or unhelpful it is. Sometimes, being curious about the story that has followed an individual can help us be open to seeing things differently.

Supervision: If you have reflective supervision, this should provide a space for you to talk about the factors that may influence how you work with males involved with childcare and what feelings arise in you.

Antenatal involvement: Importance of involving father figures as early as possible including during the antenatal process.

How to use this practice tool

The practice tool is a list of questions/prompts aimed to support curious conversations with care givers to consider the child's lived experience. It aids the identification of both protective factors and potential risks, and to consider how possible risks might be mitigated.

You could use this practice tool to plan a session with a family to explore the role of father figures with the child. The practice tool could also be used to reflect on what you know about a child's time with a father and identify what is known and not known. You could also use the practice tool in supervision when discussing a child.

The practice tool should support planning for children and families within organisations and networks.

Links to Resources

- [Toolkit for male victims of domestic abuse](#) (NSPCC)
- [The Change Project](#) – caring dads a 17 week program, domestic abuse perpetrator program, bespoke 1:1 interventions, counselling.
- [Unseen men learning from case reviews](#) (NSPCC)
- [Better together dads](#)
- [Parents 1st](#) – for expectant dads and partners
- [The myth of invisible men](#) (CSPR Panel - Gov.uk)
- [Mankind](#)
- [Dads unlimited](#) - Support for male victims of domestic abuse, supporting men with family separation, and supporting men's mental health.
- [Lads need dads](#) – Equipping, engaging and inspiring young men
- [Mens Shed](#) – Happy and healthy men.
- [Music Football Fatherhood](#) – Open conversations about fatherhood
- [For Babys Sake](#) – Breaking the cycles of domestic abuse