



Counting Fathers In: Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System

Executive Summary

Marian Brandon, Georgia Philip, John Clifton



About the authors

- Marian Brandon is a Professor of Social Work and Director of the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia.
- Dr Georgia Philip is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia.
- Dr John Clifton is a Senior Research Associate in the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia.

This project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.



The full report will be available in August 2017 from the Foundation www.nuffieldfoundation.org/ and the CRCF <https://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family>

1. Key messages	3
2. Background	4
3. Methodology	4
4. Key findings from the case file analysis	5
5. Fathers' Lives	6
6. Domestic violence and abuse in men's lives	7
7. Men and agency	7
8. Time and timing – whose time is it anyway?	8
9. Fathers perceptions of unfairness in child protection	9
10. Gatekeeping and working relationships with men	10
11. Model of fathers' encounters with the child protection system	11
12. Implications for policy and practice	12
13. Conclusion	13
14. References	15

1. Key messages

The purpose of the study is to improve policy and social work practice by addressing the knowledge gap about men in child protection, by focusing on men's own perspectives.

The study challenges assumptions that men in child protection cases do not stay involved in children's lives and always, or only, pose a risk of harm to their child. Most men in this study wanted to be part of their child's life and presented as both a risk and a resource for their children.

...I am a father to my children and I know a lot of men, well I can see why they do it now as well, it is so much easier just to let the women get on with it and see your kids whenever but I am not like that, I want to be an influence in my children's life (Kyle).

The wider context of men's lives as fathers however, was rarely explored. We present the child protection process as a particular form of gatekeeping for men which may facilitate or inhibit their involvement with child protection and with their child. We also argue that the longstanding issue of 'father engagement' is better understood as an interactive, two-directional process, rather than a 'problem' with either men or social workers.

Key messages for social work and wider child protection practice:

Building a full picture of men's lives as fathers

Child protection assessments of men tend to lack depth and context. In order to assess and evaluate the balance of resource and risk of harm a father figure may present, social workers need to understand men's lives as fathers. They should seek the fullest picture possible of the background, relationship dynamics, wellbeing, and current circumstances of the child's father or father figure. Social workers and the multi-agency team need to be curious about men's lives, their perspectives and narratives. What they learn should inform a shared approach which takes account of the benefits to the child's wellbeing fathers may bring, as well as any harm they may pose.

Working relationships with fathers: pursuing active rather than passive involvement

Negotiation and support may be needed to enable men to participate more fully in the work to protect the child. Similarly, men may need support to stay involved with their child. Active involvement is part of a strengths-based approach where honest communication about child protection concerns does not preclude recognising the positive contributions a father can, or could make.

I don't think anyone really listens to the father most of the time, I think it is one of these 'well as long as the mum is happy and the kids are sorted' do you know it has always been the same (Jesse).

Bringing organisations into step to support better practice

Engaging fathers should be seen as everyday practice in child protection. Better engagement may require organisations to tackle structural and cultural barriers to fathers' involvement. This includes challenging deep rooted assumptions about gender and parenting, where the father-child relationship is often seen as secondary and where the child protection system tends to prioritise mothers over fathers. Workers need confidence that managers will support them in this and managers themselves need to challenge risk-averse, procedurally driven culture and practice. These actions should be considered part of local authorities' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Because they are not in the household, we will focus quite a lot of the assessment work and the intervention with the resident parent...they are almost forgotten and then seen as insignificant in the network (Social work manager).

2. Background

Engaging with fathers is yet to be seen as part of the “core business” of social work (Zanoni et al 2013) and the issue of how local authorities may fail to work effectively with men in families is longstanding (Scourfield, 2014; Clapton, 2013). Most studies about parental engagement in child protection do not distinguish between male and female parents (for example Forrester, et al. 2012; Platt, 2008; Ofsted 2014). This tends to be the case even when studies make specific efforts to include men for example the study by Ghaffar and colleagues (2012). Indeed, policy documents and guidance also fail to differentiate between mothers and fathers, for example *Working Together* (HM Government, 2015). The few studies that include men's perspectives have focused on men's *retrospective* criticisms of child protection agencies (e.g., Dominelli et al 2010; Morris, et al. 2017) rather than attempting to understand how men involved in this process negotiate the day-to-day challenges of their encounter with the child protection system. Given this dearth of understanding, Zanoni and colleagues' (2013) conclude that child protection practice with men is only likely to advance if it can draw on the rich insights to be gleaned from qualitative research into fathers' and father figures' own perspectives, especially in real time.

3. Methodology

The central innovative aspect of the research was the year-long study of 35 men's experiences of child protection processes across three local authorities as they unfolded in real time (Saldana, 2003; Thomson, 2007). Each man was a father or father figure for a child with a

newly made child protection plan. We aimed to capture critical moments in the child protection process and in the men's narratives which had significance for men's lives and for their engagement with child protection plans and services. To contextualise the findings from these 35 men we studied the case files of 150 children with newly made child protection plans (50 from each of three local authorities). From the files we examined how many men were a father or father figure for the 150 children and the nature of their involvement in child protection processes. We were also able to compare the profiles of fathers and father figures for the 150 children with our sample to check that the 35 men were reasonably representative of men in child protection and of those living in these local authority areas (which was the case). We held focus groups in the three authorities to 'sense check' preliminary findings with social workers and managers.

Limitations

One limitation of our sample of 35 men is that it under-represents men not invited to, or not attending, the initial child protection conference. This means our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of more 'committed' fathers. However, a further implication is that the barriers to engagement and relationship building are likely to be even greater for men who are missing from the initial conference. Another area where the sample of 35 men is not diverse is in relation to ethnicity (all but three participants were White British). Although the sample did reflect the ethnic profile of the local authority areas, we had few opportunities to illustrate this aspect of diversity. In addition, we were not able to recruit any very young fathers although some of the 35 men were very young when they first became fathers.

4. Key findings from the case file analysis

The case files showed that men 'in' child protection were *present* rather than absent in the 150 children's lives with evidence of 139 men in a parental or caregiving role. Not only were men present, but they also tended to stay involved in their children's lives even when they were not living in the same household. One year on, only 39 of the 139 men were no longer in contact with their child and there was a similar pattern of contact for resident and non-resident fathers over the year. Although men were more mobile than mothers, moving in and out of families, for many men separation did not appear to have been an insurmountable barrier to staying in touch.

The men were linked in different ways to the child protection concern with some being held responsible or partly responsible, others seen as a protective, or a partly protective factor, while for many men their position was unclear or unknown. This reflected the problem of

building a coherent picture about the men from the files because information about them was patchy and very limited.

Without better information and more consistent recording in case files men will remain a shadowy or a 'missing' group. It will remain difficult to assess and make decisions about men as a risk or a resource for their child on an individual basis. Similarly it will be difficult, in a wider auditing sense, to discern the extent to which men are engaged with child protection, and which men subsequently become a resource for children and for children's services.

5. Fathers' Lives

The circumstances and preoccupations that fathers brought to the child protection process provided an essential context to their engagement with child protection and with their child. It was striking that well over half of our 35 men reported a significant illness, disability or other impairment. A number of men lived with chronic physical health conditions and a many others reported various mental health challenges including depression, anxiety, chronic stress, substance misuse, instances of self-harm and panic attacks.

But I mean I am on 28 tablets a day...I have got them for the pain you know, I wouldn't say it is a physical depression, err a mental depression, it is more a physical depression if you know what I mean, if there is such a thing...(Jimmy.)

Most of the fathers were also living economically precarious lives with diminishing access to benefits, insecure work and increasing debt. We found little in the fathers' accounts to indicate that social workers or other members of the multi-agency team were addressing the inequalities inherent in these fathers' health issues and their precarious circumstances (Bywaters, 2016; Bywaters, et al. 2015). These factors will clearly have had an impact on the children the men were parenting.

The complex networks of relationships surrounding fathers and their children meant that men were continually balancing sometimes conflicting demands to maintain their income, meet the needs of their children, meet their own intimacy needs, keep current partners inside whilst negotiating contact with previous children with ex-partners. We found a common pattern at the end of a relationship for fathers rather than mothers to leave their shared home. Given that parents with children on child protection plans and in care proceedings are at particular risk of relationship breakdown, the consequent accommodation issues are likely to impact fathering disproportionately.

6. Domestic violence and abuse in men's lives

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) influenced the possibility of some fathers having an active role in their child's care. The men's stated disapproval of domestic violence towards female partners was near universal. A minority of men (4) admitted committing such violence though their admissions were often accompanied by accounts in mitigation. A number of fathers protested that assessments of DVA complaints were unfair, in that police automatically believed women's complaints and failed to hear men's accounts.

Five fathers claimed that they had suffered DVA from their partners and two had been disbelieved until they presented video evidence. Others said that the abuse had been mutual. In three cases, contested DVA allegations delayed the eventual placement of children with fathers.

The men's views and experiences of DVA raise highly controversial issues, which are echoed in the wider research literature. Fathers' experiences from this study suggest that DVA is rightly taken very seriously as a factor in child protection but that mothers and fathers are not on an equal footing in relation to the assessment of suspected DVA and that being identified as a perpetrator has differential consequences for mothers and fathers.

... if there is domestic violence towards a woman, they get legal aid. If there is domestic violence towards a man, you don't get anything (Kyle).

7. Men and agency

Most fathers recounted formative figures in their past whose positive and negative messages continue to resonate. Fathers' narratives showed that past positives can be reclaimed and the destructive power of negative events and relationships can be reduced. This can clear the way for fathers to invest in their relationships with their children and exercise agency as fathers. Most men claimed to have a close bond with the child who had a child protection plan. Some assumed sole or significant responsibility for their child's day-to-day care but many delegated the main care to female partners. Working fathers were divided between those committed to involvement in day to day care and those who frankly preferred the world of work. The former fathers found it stressful to combine the two roles. The latter, aware of the societal expectation that fathers should be "involved" tended to emphasise their role as arrangers of outings, visits and activities.

I could sort of understand where they were coming from, that I was all work and no family as such but we still have days out, we go all over the place...I hardly feel I am an absent father and I do feel that it is one of the ways I provide for the family with my work (Barry).

Fathers who had stepped in to take on their child's care because the child's mother was unable to do so safely, emphasized the actions they took to take control of their children's disordered lives and spoke of restoring routine. They were wary of allowing social workers or others to work with their children on emotional issues from previous experiences feeling that this was likely to pathologise them. Instead, they believed that their everyday commonsense care promoted children's happiness. In keeping with this view, they spoke little about listening to their children and more about reassuring and encouraging them.

Around one third of our 35 men expressed some ambivalence about their child which could have been related to the circumstances of the child's conception and other ensuing relationship complexities. Relationships between fathers and adolescent children were sometimes fraught especially when fathers were "in the frame" for abuse. A small number of fathers in this ambivalent group had to disengage with fathering, at least temporarily, either seeking to avoid the grief and distress that followed a baby's compulsory adoption or because they felt betrayed by an adolescent child who had complained about them to social workers.

I ain't got no bond with him, I know in my heart and soul what's going to happen (Shane).

The quality and intensity of a father's relationship with his children correlated with the strength of his agency as a father in dealing with the authorities. One continuing significant factor for the exercise of agency as a father was the assumption by social workers, mothers and fathers of the primacy of mothers' relationship with children. The degree of agency exercised by fathers in the study varied according to the presence of four factors: persistence, sense of entitlement, quality of agency and the father's relationship with the child. Fifteen fathers were judged to be exercising some degree of agency, with 18 largely resigned from real influence and agency.

I feel like a dad in the sense that I am doing something for my kids, I don't feel like a dad in the sense that my kids aren't here (Mark).

8. Time and timing - whose time is it anyway?

Different, or clashing, perceptions of time between men and social workers, can disrupt or undermine men's confidence in the child protection process and/or in their dealings with their social worker. The timing of when, and how social workers seek men's perspective, or include him in an assessment has practical and relational consequences for the direction of the case (and so, the child) and the working relationship between social workers and men. Without knowledge of men's lives and their past, decision-making about children's care and

safety is likely to be limited. This underlines the need for persistence and flexibility in relationship building with men. The interactive, responsive nature of men's encounters with social workers, indicated that both could be seen as accountable and within the relationship, both could trigger change.

Conflicting 'timeframes' between those working in the child protection system and fathers produces tensions. Fathers experienced social work time as both 'rushed and slow'. Official timeframes lead to the undervaluing of fathers' lived experience and the pressures on them and their time.

Well how the hell am I going to get money in the bank if you keep making me take time off work... They say, 'right it is 4.59, I finish in a minute so we are going to cut the meeting short'.... you can't just be a Social Worker from 9 till 5, what happens if a kid gets beaten up at 6 o'clock? (Greg).

Fathers' life trajectories revealed how key transitions and turning points played out in their lives. Life events affect men's capacity and ambition to engage in the child protection process and to commit to involved fathering.

9. Fathers' perceptions of unfairness in the child protection system

Most of the men experienced or perceived gender difference as a form of unfair treatment in child protection practice. There were three particular examples of this, firstly in the ways in which men's emotions (particularly anger) were interpreted, secondly in the handling of the child protection enquiry and allegations or concerns about domestic abuse or harm to children and thirdly, the ways in which men's parenting was recognised and evaluated.

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 (Will).

If a woman is angry towards you and she is the sole carer of those children you don't really have a choice but to continue trying to engage with her, so I think it is a lot easier to cut a man out of that process at that point than it is to cut a woman out (Social worker).

The perception of unfair treatment in these contexts was also supported by the comments made in our focus group discussions with social workers and managers. We argue the need for a gender-sensitive approach to practice in child protection, which takes account of the differences in the way men and women are constructed by, and experience services.

Gender sensitivity, as opposed to gendered thinking, is likely to enable rather than inhibit more effective relationship building with men in child protection.

In my mind it is still just part of the way that the system is geared up in a way to assume that everything will be okay with mum and that everything will inevitably cock up with dad. Yeah do you get what I mean, and that is frustrating, that is hard to deal with (Luke).

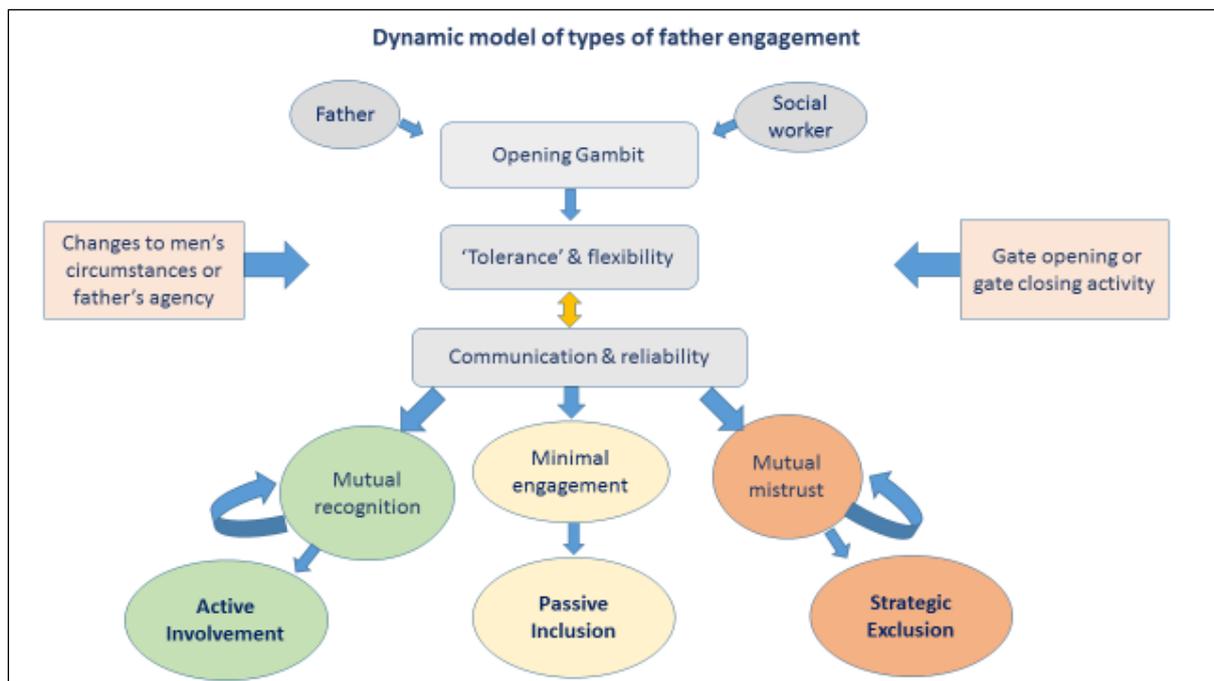
10. Gatekeeping and working relationships with men

Social workers and their managers were able to generate, or act on '**gate opening**' and '**gate closing**' opportunities for men's involvement as fathers. Men in turn, could also influence such opportunities arising and create their own gate opening or closing moments. The quality of the working relationship with the social worker was central to this process. Most men wanted a relationship with their social worker and acknowledged the two-way nature of the encounter. They wanted to be listened to and taken seriously and wanted the relationship to have some reciprocity. They also wanted (often practical) support.

A 'bearable' working relationship, had enough mutual respect, receptiveness, flexibility and reliability to generate some shared understanding as a basis to discuss the man's involvement in the child's life. Barriers to forming working relationships included men and social workers mirroring a sceptical view of each other, with each describing the other as 'hard to reach', evasive or defensive. However, things could, and did, change for most men. Most men either described 'ups and downs' in their relationship, or could recall at least one previous social worker with whom they had worked well. Yet a significant minority of men experienced mutual scepticism and mistrust as reinforcing, and did not develop any constructive relationship with the social worker.

Factors that may have helped or hindered gate opening or closing and the development of working relationships, included managing 'opening gambits', and the capacity of social workers to 'tolerate' men's emotions, and be flexible and reliable. A combination of organisational and attitudinal factors contributed to the gatekeeping mechanisms for men in child protection. Our model of interaction between men and social workers shows how different types or degrees of father engagement may emerge with three different kinds of engagement with fathers. Although '**strategic exclusion**' may be necessary for the wellbeing and safety of the child in some cases, when this occurs, opportunities can be lost for fresh thinking and rehabilitative possibilities. There appears to be a tendency for social workers to settle for '**passive inclusion**', yet when there is '**active involvement**' the results can be transformative.

A dynamic model of types of father engagement.

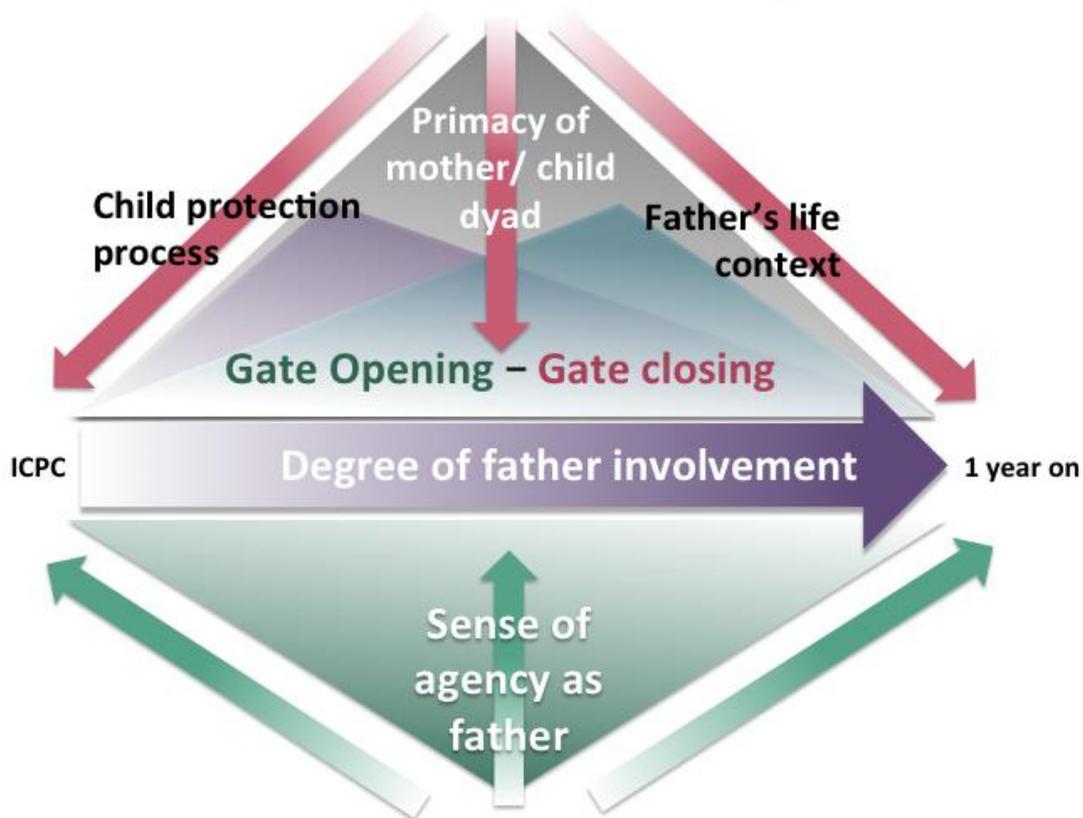


11. Model of fathers' encounters with the child protection system

The longitudinal nature of our contact with the 35 men meant we were able to analyse change over time in relation to their child protection involvement. From this we have established a model to make sense of the ways in which men's lives and the child protection system interacted.

Our overall model of fathers' encounters with the child protection system suggests that fathers' engagement with the particular child protection concerns is influenced by *both* the child protection system *and* each father's own life events. Life events and the child protection system operate in tandem and also influence each other in parallel. Underlying these factors is the presumption by men and child protection professionals of the priority of mothers' relationships with their children. This makes fathering particularly sensitive to the context in which it takes place and more dependent on, or influenced by, the presence or absence of material and social resources. The actions of social workers and men's unfolding life events mediate these factors in 'gate opening' and (more frequently) 'gate closing' moments. Counterbalancing these forces is each father's sense of agency.

Model of fatherhood as contextually sensitive



12. Implications for Policy and Practice

We have argued throughout, for a 'both-and' approach, where effective engagement with men involves both authoritative and empathic interaction, to hold men accountable, and to directly value their parenting on its own terms. Whilst there is a prevailing organisational interest in 'strengths based' work with families, we suggest that this does not necessarily offer the solution to the entrenched problem of poor father engagement. Our findings point to the value of a more gender differentiated approach in order to understand the experience of motherhood and fatherhood, and in turn, design or adapt services that can respond supportively to each parent. A differentiated approach needs to be signalled in policy documents and routine paperwork, for example, letters to parents, by considering referring and/or writing to the mother and the father separately. This has important implications for multi-agency guidance and the redrafting of Working Together.

Access to the law

Social workers, as the lead professionals in child protection, need better knowledge and understanding of how and when fathers might need access to the law. Local Authorities we worked alongside were mostly overlooking the potential to use the current exemptions and legal resources under the LASPO Regulations (Legal Aid, Sentencing & Punishment of Offenders Act 2012) to strengthen child protection plans or to enable fathers to access legal representation. We found examples where fathers were disadvantaged in relation to Child Arrangement Order applications in cases where the mother's care was deemed unsatisfactory but the case had not reached the Section 31 threshold.

Dealing with domestic violence and abuse

Child protection (and other public agencies, including the Police service) policy and practice guidance needs to be reviewed in the light of increasing evidence that although most domestic violence and abuse is committed by men against women, a significant minority of men are victims of abuse from their female partners. The complexity of DVA means that more sophisticated assessments procedures and training are needed for social workers and other professionals (Ali et al., 2016).

The range of interventions offered where there is DVA needs to reflect what is known about the greater variety of causes, types, degrees and consequences of abuse on all family members. Programmes for addressing men's DVA are often limited or reliant on short-term funding. A more proactive approach is needed for men who have lost more than one child to public care, who often, but not always, have offending histories related to domestic violence. This group of men present complex combinations of vulnerabilities and risk factors, and both pose, and face, the greatest rehabilitative challenges. Currently such men are offered fewer services than mothers who have experienced recurrent care proceedings (Broadhurst & Mason, 2017). Where fathers are incorrectly held responsible for DVA, this may delay or even rule out the possibility of otherwise viable fathers taking on the care of their children.

13. Conclusion

Overall, the study illustrates the possible benefits for fathers and their children of countering gender inequalities in the child protection process and developing a deeper appreciation of the unique circumstances of each father's life and what he may contribute to his children's future. We suggest that improving child protection practice with men involves, firstly, the

development of a gender sensitive approach to practice, supported by organisational and strategic mechanisms and management support. The value of holding in mind that fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, opportunities and constraints around their parenting, is pertinent, despite social work's longstanding concern with gender equality. The established approach of gender 'neutrality' may have the unintended consequence of ignoring important differences in men and women's experiences of parenting, leading to, or perpetuating inequalities in how mothers and fathers fare within local authority services and systems. Secondly, we argue the relevance of understanding men's wider lives as fathers, as a necessary part of child protection enquiry and assessment. The need for professional curiosity, persistence and time to create opportunities for hearing men's stories is directly relevant to evaluative decisions about their competence and safety as parents, but equally, to building a working relationship out of which such decisions may be 'fairly' reached. We suggest that responding to fathers as people with needs and concerns of their own, through a curiosity about their lives and what they are actually doing, is also likely to improve their agency and ability to be effective, involved, fathers.

References

- Ali, P, Dhingra, K & McGarry, J (2016), A literature review of intimate partner violence and its classifications, *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 31. pp. 16-25. ISSN 1359-1789
- Broadhurst, K & Mason, C (2017) Birth parents and the collateral consequences of child removal: towards a comprehensive framework. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 41-59.
- Bywaters, P, Brady, G, Sparks, T, Bos, E, Bunting, L, Daniel, B, Featherstone, B, Morris, K & Scourfield, J (2015), Exploring inequities in child welfare and child protection services, *Children & Youth Services Review*, 57, pp98-105
- Bywaters, P (2016), Inequalities in child welfare: towards a new policy, research and action agenda. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45 (1), 6-23.
- Clapton, G (2009) How and Why Social Work Fails Fathers: Redressing an Imbalance, Social Work's Role and Responsibility, Practice: *Social Work in Action*, 21:1, 17-34, DOI: [10.1080/09503150902745989](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503150902745989)
- Clapton, G (2013) *Social Work with Fathers: Positive Practice*, Edinburgh, Dunedin
- Dominelli, L., Strega, S., Walmsley, C., Callahan, M., & Brown, L. (2010) 'Here's my story': Fathers of 'looked after' children recount their experiences in the Canadian child welfare system. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41 351–367.
- Equality Act 2010 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>
- Featherstone, B, Gupta, A, Morris, K & Warner, J (2016), Let's stop feeding the risk monster: Towards a social model of child protection, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, doi: 10.1332/204674316X14552878034622
- Ghaffar, W, Manby, M & Race, T (2012) Exploring the experiences of parents and carers whose children have been subject to child protection plans, *British Journal of Social Work*, 42 (5): 887-905.
- Legal Aid, Sentencing & Punishment of Offenders Act (2012)
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/10/pdfs/ukpga_20120010_en.pdf
- Morris, K, Archard, P, Laird, S, & Clawson, R (2017): Family Experiences of Children's Social Care Involvement Following a Social Work Change Programme, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2017.1326473
- Ofsted (2014) In the child's time: professional responses to neglect,
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140059.
- Platt, D (2008) Care or Control? The effects of investigations and initial assessments on the social worker-parent relationship, *Journal of Social Work*, Vol.22 (3)
- Saldaña, J., 2003. *Longitudinal qualitative research*. New York: Altamira Press.
- Scourfield, J (2014) Improving work with fathers to prevent child maltreatment, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol.38 pp974-981
- Thomson R (2007). The qualitative longitudinal case history: practical, methodological and ethical reflections. *Social Policy and Society* 6(4): 571–582.
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015) HM Government
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/592101/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children_20170213.pdf
- Zanoni, L, Warburton, W, Bussey, K & McMaugh, A (2013), Fathers as 'core business' in child welfare practice and research, *Children & Youth Services Review*, 35, pp1055-1070