

A Guide to supporting inclusion of Fathers/Male Caregivers in Children’s lives within services that work with children.

**A toolkit to assist local services in self-assessing against available evidence.**

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South Gloucestershire Children’s Partnership

Introduction

## Purpose of This Guide

Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the principle that “both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child……The best interests of the child will be their basic concern” and “States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities”.

Fathers (resident or non-resident, biological or step[[1]](#footnote-2)) can have a significant impact (both positively and negatively) on the lives of their children, so it is important that services take the father-child relationship into account when considering what support should be provided to a family (McAllister and Burgess, 2012). Some services may be wary of engaging with fathers, due to concerns about risks to children. Concerns about risks from a parent should always be taken seriously, however most fathers (like mothers), can be supported to learn skills and be supported to strengthen their parenting (Burgess and Bartlett, 2004). Most fathers (both resident and non-resident) are keen to be involved in their children’s lives and take on a more active role. Levels of father involvement established early on tend to endure, and the antenatal period seems to be a period when fathers are most receptive to engagement (Children in Wales, 2008).

Research (Utting, 2006; Children in Wales, 2008; Fatherhood Institute, 2010; McAllister and Burgess, 2012) shows that there are many benefits to children of a father’s involvement[[2]](#footnote-3):

*“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[[3]](#footnote-4).”*

## Aim and Methods

Aim: Review and summarise evidence of best practice for incorporating the voice of the father/male caregiver in children's services and encouraging and facilitating engagement in their child’s development.

Methods: In August 2023 we looked initially for national guidance and best practice documents. There was also follow on searching of the academic literature that were referenced in national guidance and best practice documents. We based the review on publicly available documents rather than contacting Local Authorities or other organisations.

## How to use this Guide

This guide provides the key descriptors of evidence-based ways of working with fathers/male caregivers. This can include partners, stepparents, males in same sex partnerships and any male with caring responsibilities in the child's life. It is a self-assessment and planning tool, the outcome of which should lead to a clearer and shared understanding of the current ways of working with fathers within a service and what steps need to be taken to progress. Whilst this research was conducted specifically around fathers, many of the actions within will also apply to other male, or indeed, any other, caregivers. Recognising that many children do not live within traditional family structures, this tool can also be used to consider how we support inclusion of other key figures in children’s lives to engage positively with services, recognising that a team of people who are involved in, and care about the wellbeing of a child is a positive thing for their growth and development.

## Conducting a self-assessment

There are a number of different ways information can be gathered for this self-assessment:

1. Interviewing/surveying fathers about their experiences within a service;
2. Reviewing forms and procedures to assess how well they comply with recommendations;
3. Auditing data and records to understand how well data is captured about fathers and any gaps;
4. Interviewing/surveying staff.

**Key themes from current research**

Key themes from this research were:

* Consider making services more accessible to fathers;
* Use multiple sources of data/intelligence to find out about fathers;
* Consider use of language;
* How to create good working relationships with fathers.

 This information can also be accessed and shared [via this video](https://youtu.be/djhdnlzk3Qk).

**The self-assessment**

## This self-assessment is structured as five sections focusing on the key themes above. This tool is intended for use by services or teams rather than individual practitioners: to identify, on average, their score for the individual descriptors, what is working well, the evidence that shows this, and plans for what will be prioritised next. A date should then be set for re-audit, to establish whether planned improvements have taken place.

## Scoring system

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|  |
| 0Early stage | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|  Mature |
| There are no or few elements of this descriptor in place with no plan for development. | Planning has started and is at an early stage of development. It is too early for evidence of impact. | There is a plan to achieve this and some evidence that this is being implemented. It’s too early to demonstrate impact/outcomes from this work. | There is some good evidence of progress – to some extent / across many elements. There may be some emerging evidence of the outcomes/ impact. The nextsteps are clear. | This is largely in place although not yet fully established or embedded. There is some good evidence of outcomes/impact. There is a plan for continuous development. | This is in place and well established.There is strong evidence that developments are having impact where needed. There is a commitment to continuous development. |

**The self-assessment descriptors**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Make services more accessible to fathers** | **Self- assessment score 0 to 5** | **What is working well and what evidence do you have?** | **What are you prioritising next?** | **Not applicable for this service** |
| **1** | We make it easy and inviting for men to come into the building. * Ahigh scoring servicehas receptions and waiting rooms with reading materials and posters that are inclusive and avoid sending messages that men are not expected in these places.
* *From fathers in a variety of different family arrangements e.g., non-heterosexual and non-nuclear.*
* *From fathers from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.*
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| **2** | We make meetings accessible to fathers.* We consider the timing of any meetings / appointments or other services to enable the attendance of fathers who are at work.
* We take into account where the father lives and the distance he has to travel, his working schedule, and his other caring responsibilities.
* We arrange separate visits at venues/locations convenient to the father if necessary to explain the relevance of his involvement with the child and communicate a willingness to include him in decisions. We are flexible in terms of visit times.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **3** | We invite fathers and mothers to events that cater to both parties to proactively build relationships and trust. Specific activities will be planned that will appeal to men and women.  |  |  |  |  |
| **4** | We endeavour to offer alternative locations. * For fathers of children involved in child protection processes, we work with non-statutory agencies where necessary to provide alternative locations for provision and facilitate engagement with fathers who might be unwilling to engage with local authority services.
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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Use multiple sources of data/intelligence to find out about fathers** | **Self- assessment score 0 to 5** | **What is working well and what evidence do you have?** | **What are you prioritising next?** | **Not applicable for this service** |
| **1** | We ensure our templates are set up to record details of fathers as well as mothers. * We collect and record father's GP details as well as mothers where relevant.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **2** | We liaise with partner agencies within GDPR regulations.* We attempt to ascertain correct contact information for fathers utilising information from partner agencies, such as Health, Education, Department of Work and Pensions, Inland Revenue, Police.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **3** | We share information with other family services within GDPR regulations.* After obtaining these details, we share with other relevant agencies who may not have up to date or correct contact information, to ensure the father remains involved with other services involved with the family, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **4** | Where possible, we obtain information from the father firsthand.* We encourage staff to contact the child/ren’s father firsthand (once parental responsibility has been established), if appropriate, rather than relying upon the mother to gather information from them regarding the referral being made about their child. This ensures that the father’s views are obtained from the point of the family’s initial contact with services.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **5** | We use several avenues to contact fathers.* We ensure that several avenues are taken to contact the father, including phone calls, voicemail messages, text messages, letters and visits to the home address if appropriate.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **6** | We take reasonable steps to identify and obtain father's details.* We ask the child's mother for details on the father. This will often involve building trust with mothers (as gatekeepers) and being creative and empathic.

 * We ask the wider family network on a routine basis for details on the father from the maternal and paternal extended families if appropriate.
* We endeavour to record 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.
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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Consider use of language** | **Self- assessment score 0 to 5** | **What is working well and what evidence do you have?** | **What are you prioritising next?** | **Not applicable for this service** |
| **1** | We explicitly address the father in official documents (e.g., Minutes or Quality Assurance documents) and correspondence. |  |  |  |  |
| **2** | We communicate with both parents as standard practice. As often as possible, letters and other forms of communication should be addressed to mother and father of… or both caregivers by name if non-traditional family structure.  |  |  |  |  |
| **3** | We consider how language may discourage fathers from engaging. Bear in mind that fathers may be more likely to participate in events badged as briefings or updates, rather than ‘support groups’. |  |  |  |  |

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|  | **How to create good working relationships with fathers** | **Self- assessment score 0 to 5** | **What is working well and what evidence do you have?** | **What are you prioritising next?** | **Not applicable for this service** |
| **1** | We advocate for fathers.* We understand that fathers are the real experts on their own support needs. We advocate for fathers across a range of areas that benefits the whole man. For example, help with housing, finding employment, and debt.
* We advocate for fathers who cannot attend meetings about their child if it is appropriate for them to attend but they are unable to do so. We always ensure that their views are ascertained and shared at the meeting, so that there is input from the father in his absence and he has a voice. We contact the father prior to the meeting taking place, so we can discuss their involvement with the child and gain his views.
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| **2** | We recognise the importance of direct contact.* We invest time in making direct contact with fathers from the outset of engaging with them.
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| **3** | We aim for consistency of staff and approach.* We minimise changes of staff engaging with fathers where possible. We encourage staff to be reliable, responsive or flexible in their approach with fathers. We encourage staff to be consistent in what they say, in the information they provide and authentic in the way they treat fathers.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **4** | We acknowledge the importance of time, timing and timeliness.* We provide clarity and transparency over when things happen and how long they will take (and why). We are honest that delays may happen and we inform the father in a prompt manner when delays occur. We encourage staff to be on time for meetings and engagements with fathers.
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| **5** | We provide ongoing support. * We prepare our staff through routine discussions, training and supervision to provide ongoing support to fathers; poor past experiences with services can get in the way of asking for help.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **6** | We are respectful.* We ensure our staff are respectful in all interactions with fathers. Respect has a particular relevance for men. This is evident through popular culture about respect and disrespect in masculine worlds for example; in sport and music. If staff communicate respect throughout then they are more likely to engage the father and keep him involved.
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| **7** | We recognise that many fathers may feel vulnerable.* We recognise that many fathers may feel vulnerable and may either withdraw or be threatening as a form of defence.
 |  |  |  |  |
| **8** | We are positive.* We use a strengths-based approach when interacting with fathers. We provide the father with observations and feedback particularly positives and areas of development.
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Please provide feedback on the checklist here: <https://forms.office.com/e/i6Ln8UCdJE>

1. References to ‘fathers’ applies to fathers (resident or non-resident, biological or step), male carers including foster carers and extended family members. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [Parenting engagement and support: guidance for providers | GOV.WALES](https://www.gov.wales/parenting-engagement-and-support-guidance-providers) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [Working with fathers: key advice from research - Community Care](https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/19/working-fathers-key-advice-research/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)