# Working with fathers and male caregivers

Why does it matter?

Research evidence suggests that effectively engaging fathers in Early Help and Social Work has a positive effect on children’s outcomes, including:

* Improved educational attainment
* Improved cognitive development
* Better emotion regulation
* Positive effect on behaviour
* Improved social competence
* Better self-esteem.

The research also suggests a reduced need for statutory service support and better outcomes for all family members (Bateman, Darwin and Galdas, 2017).

A failure to engage with fathers reduces our ability to hold them to account for their negative actions (e.g. domestic abuse perpetration) or to strengthen their capacity as protective resources (e.g. Child Q Serious Case Review).

Top Tips for working with dads and male caregivers

1. Pay attention to what dads say works for them and follow that advice. Research by Brandon et al (2017) shows that dads value:
   1. Being included early on
   2. Being listened to
   3. Workers who are reliable and do what they say they will do
   4. A balance of criticism and praise
   5. Practical support
2. Get the basics right. Oxfordshire data (2019) shows that dads are less likely to be involved if they do not live in the family home. Make sure that you have contact details including telephone number, address (if different from the main family home) and email. Speak to dad as part of the assessment and invite him to meetings.
3. Complete Genogram and Chronology. Genograms help to know who is in both the immediate and wider family. It also helps to build a picture of the family’s background and history, which will help with your assessment and planning. Chronologies give you an overview of significant life events. See OSCB guidance on genograms and chronologies for more information.
4. Involve dads in planning: Try to schedule meetings for a time when he is available to attend. If this is not possible, seek his views beforehand and make sure he has copies of the minutes afterwards (unless it is not appropriate to do so). When writing plans, be SMART. This includes being specific about who is to undertake each action. Avoid phrases such as ‘Parents will…’ – instead, use the person’s name. If the parents have an acrimonious relationship, or if there are multiple parents, consider whether it is best to have one meeting or to split the meeting into two or more parts with different attendees.
5. Be mindful of ‘Maternal Gatekeeping: In some instances, mums may make statements that dad chooses not to be involved, that he would not engage, or she may request that you do not make contact (and vice versa). There may be good reasons for this, and it may not be appropriate for him to be part of the process. However, any such decision should be based on evidence, not hearsay. Avoid making assumptions or taking such statements at face value. Check the information for yourself and make a deliberate, conscious decision. Equally, if the parents do live together and/ or have a positive relationship, make sure to get everyone’s views. Do not take one parent’s view as a sufficient representation of the whole family’s perspective.
6. Pay attention to other barriers: Is there a culture in your team of only working with mums? Might you have any unconscious bias based on your own lived experience? Are you fearful of engaging with dad based on what you have read about him? Discuss with your supervisor, colleagues and other professionals to ensure you have an informed, impartial view.
7. Remember that the aim of our support is to improve outcomes for children. We should be child-centred at all times. Is it in the child’s best interests for dad to be involved or not?
8. Manage Risk: Some men are violent or abusive and may pose a risk to staff, family or members of the public. We still need to engage with these men in order to hold them to account for their actions, but we must also do so in a way that manages the risk they pose. Make sure you have appropriate risk management plans in place which are shared across relevant professionals. If the risk posed is serious, this might need to include a MAPPA (Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement). Similarly, Perpetrator Programmes are designed to work with perpetrators of domestic abuse to change behaviour and develop respectful, non-abusive relationships.
9. Indirect Intervention: Some research suggests that men engage better when intervention is combined with another activity. E.g. McGale et al 2011, which reviewed a sports/ exercise and mental health programme in Dublin. This found that dads were more open to support than they would have been without the exercise component. Think about how you might best get fathers to open up and talk to you. This might be more challenging during COVID-19 but not impossible! Be creative!
10. Your own learning and development: The OSCB runs a 1-day Working With Fathers and Male Caregivers course. Additionally, Research in Practice ([www.rip.org.uk](http://www.rip.org.uk)) has research, resources and materials.