

Fathers and Child Protection: Current Research

The role of fathers has been much debated in research and press. Fathers have been shown to be as responsive to their children's needs as mothers, and in families where fathers can offer kindness, care and warmth children do better at school, have stronger social skills and exhibit less criminality. Following parental separation children whose parents preserve good relationships, and who see their father regularly, fare best.

In the most vulnerable families, however, there is a pressing need to address the role of fathers, in particular how to enhance their participation in child protection.

A general demographic view of fathers

- There are an estimated six million fathers of dependent children in the UK.
- The great majority of children continue to live with – or have substantial contact with – both parents, and fathers have no contact at all.
- Data from the 1992 British Household Panel Survey showed that most fathers, 85 per cent, resided with their children.
- There are 1.6 million lone parent families, a tenth of which contain lone fathers.
- Nine-tenths of non-resident fathers had at some time been married to, or cohabited with, the mother of their child.

Findings from the prevalence study “Child Maltreatment in the UK”

In 2000, the NSPCC published the first of a series of reports arising from a landmark survey of the experience of childhood in the UK. The random probability sample of 2869 young people aged 18-24 is a rich source of information on child rearing and the prevalence of child abuse. Analysis is still underway on the data, and future reports may cast more light on the roles of parents, and specifically fathers, but the first report contained the following findings:

- Three quarters of the respondents reported close relationships with their fathers.
- Although fathers were less likely to be verbally aggressive or involved in physical discipline, they were also less likely to be seen as offering closeness, support and good role models than were mothers.
- A fifth of the sample were ‘sometimes really afraid’ of their fathers or stepfathers.
- Concerning the respondents’ experiences of child maltreatment:
- 78% of respondents had received some form of violent treatment at home, with 7% experiencing serious physical abuse.
- Of the overall violent treatment, 40% experienced this from fathers and 5% from stepfathers. This compares to 49% from mothers and 3% by stepmothers.

- 1% of respondents had experienced contact sexual abuse by parents and carers. Two fifths of this sexual abuse was by father-figures. A very small number of the total sample were sexually abused by their mother-figures. A further 2% were abused by other relatives, largely brothers and stepbrothers.
- The NSPCC survey does not break down these figures by family type or analyse the identity of the perpetrator in the different forms of violence, emotional abuse or neglect. So it is difficult to draw strong conclusions from these figures.

Fathers and the child protection system

Research regarding child protection in the UK has not thoroughly covered the role of fathers in the child protection system. Ryan reviewed Department of Health research into child protection, and her findings suggest that this is partly reflective of the apparent lack of focus on fathers in child protection practice itself.

Gibbons followed referrals through the child protection system. At the referrals stage, natural fathers and stepfathers were noted as playing a part in the lives of most of the children, and by the stage of registration they were still mentioned as significant in 65% and 25% of registrations respectively. Two thirds of natural fathers mentioned as significant at this stage were resident, as were nearly nine in ten of the stepfathers.

Yet despite this, Ryan's research found professionals do not routinely examine how these men are significant in their children's lives, and whether their involvement in subsequent planning would be of benefit. Several questions arise when considering what part fathers might play in child protection proceedings. Are they resident? Are they a risk or could they contribute to protection? Are they interested in the child's life or remote?

Other research gives us a fuller picture about the fathers and father figures in families where there are child protection concerns, and the difficult relationships many fathers in this population have with their children.

The majority of families that are subject to a referral have no wage-earner, and even where two parents are present a high percentage of the fathers are unemployed.

Domestic violence and partner discord are both high in this group at all stages of the process. There is currently almost no information on domestically violent men's perceptions of their children or their parenting role, but increasing recognition of the impact these stressors have on children's development, and the strength of the link with child abuse.

Egan-Sage and Carpenter found the youngest and oldest fathers have more children on the register, perhaps the former lacking parenting skills and experience and the latter having a less tolerant parenting style.

A number of reasons emerge as to why fathers are not currently engaged with child protection work.

- Men tend to play a smaller role in the lives of their children, leading professionals to conclude that they are less significant in the process of protecting children.
- Among fathers who are not particularly involved in the lives of their children, the presence of social work professionals tends to exacerbate these distant relationships rather than address them.
- Fathers generally can perceive the involvement of social workers negatively
- Non-offending fathers of sexual abuse victims can believe they should avoid physical and other forms of contact with their children, or don't know how they should respond, i.e. they do nothing to avoid doing any harm'
- Fathers, both abusive and non-abusive, may leave the home for a variety of reasons.
- Where parents have separated, mothers are often resistant to their former partners' involvement
- Professionals can perceive men, particularly those implicated in abuse, as a threat both to their clients and to themselves. This reduces the potential for working constructively with all those significant in the lives of the children, and relevant to their abuse.
- Scourfield found that despite the mutually negative perceptions of professionals and fathers, their lack of involvement in the process was usually considered to be a bad thing. There is a need to find ways to address the needs of families constructively without aggravating tensions.
- Non-offending fathers can have a significant role in the recovery process if they can provide verbal, emotional, and physical reassurance to their child. Stott found in her sample of abused children, that nearly four fifths of the children had a non-offending father figure. This emphasises the potential value of involving these men in their child's support.

Men as Perpetrators and Suspected Perpetrators

Fathers are most visible in the child protection system when they are implicated in the suspected abuse. Yet even here it is not always clear how the system is handling them. Suspected abusive parents leave the home, but systems are rarely in place to monitor or treat these potential future abusers. This is most marked in sexual abuse cases. Farmer and Owen suggested 60% of alleged sexual abusers leave the household, compared to 14% of other alleged perpetrators. Subsequent professional attention thereafter tends to focus on advising and supporting mothers

During the pre-case conference stage their departure is not apparently a direct result of social services' inquiries or involvement: in only 4.5% of physical abuse investigations, and 13% of sexual abuse investigations was action taken to remove the perpetrator (male or female) from the household. In 73% of cases at the investigation stage, no protective action was being taken.

The presence of father-figures does however decrease throughout the child protection process. This includes cases in which the father has not been implicated in the suspected abuse. The stress experienced by families subject to child protection enquiries can cause relationship discord and breakdown. .

Referrals are more likely to be filtered out without investigation if there are no men in the household (especially not stepfather figures). If cases are investigated, they are less likely to result in a case conference if the household is all female.

Both during and after social services investigations, it is not particularly common for familial abuse to be handled by criminal courts. Gibbons found during the investigative stage alleged perpetrators were facing charges or convictions in 4% of physical abuse and 16% of sexual abuse cases. The NSPCC's research on child protection registers in the 1980s showed only around a quarter of all sexual abuse registrations involved any planned prosecutions, and this is less likely where the perpetrator is a family member.

Bagley and Pritchard studied men convicted of sexual abuse, and found 18% were biological relatives (roughly half of them fathers), 10% were stepfathers or cohabitants, and 72% had no family connection to the children. This, they claim, suggests prosecutions are less commonly pursued against family members, perhaps partly because of sensitivity to the potential trauma for the child of a trial.

They also felt there were significant differences in the characteristics of the familial and the non-familial offenders in their study. But other research has suggested there are strong links between familial and extrafamilial sexual abuse, and that the two should not be treated so separately. The NSPCC survey found a fifth of female sexual abuse victims, and over a quarter of male victims were abused by more than one person.

Non-resident fathers

Another vital factor in the lack of involvement of fathers is their physical absence, whatever the reason. Less than a quarter of mothers in the child protection system have never married, but many of these marriages are no longer intact. There are 1.46 million lone mother families, a two fifths of mothers are single and 30% are divorced.

Separation can lead to simmering hostility finding flashpoints in the context of access/contact visits. Conflicts are not only in front of children, increasing their exposure to it, but also often about them. Research has suggested that domestically violent men are more likely to use to their children as pawns to retain control and influence within the family. Children in domestically violent households can experience a conflict between concern for themselves or their abused parent and fear of losing contact with the abusive parent.

Allegations of abuse occasionally surface during the break-up of relationships, and in the course of custody/ access/ residence disputes. There are some suggestions that these

allegations receive less investigation, perhaps assumed to be an attempt to strengthen one parent's hand in the case. No UK data is available, but several studies in other countries have examined 'false' allegations both in and out of the context of separation, and found little difference in the rates of occurrence or the person who makes the allegation (mothers, fathers and others).

The issues of separation are not confined to those children in violent or abusive families. At current divorce rates (the latest figures show a decline in divorce not entirely attributable to the decline in marriages, but the rate is still high) more than a quarter of children will see their parents' divorce before they are sixteen. Nine-tenths of absent fathers had at some time been married to, or cohabited with, the mother of their child.

Mothers are often seen as the 'gatekeepers' of father-child relationships, both during marriage and after divorce or separation. The break up of marriages in which fathers take an active role in parenting has serious consequences for the children, who experience the loss of a more prominent parent.

The NSPCC maltreatment study showed that while a minority lack of close paternal relationships it is not uncommon, and often borders on fearfulness. Childline has reported fathers are poorly represented when children identify their sources of support. These feelings of closeness and warmth are among the most important parental qualities, and are strongly associated with positive child outcomes.

Bradshaw et al found half of all absent fathers see their children once a week, and the great majority of absent fathers were attempting to maintain relationships with their children. As mentioned above, in most relationships the warmth and closeness of this contact is more significant than the frequency of the contact.

Conclusion

The findings of much of the research suggest a need for change in the approach to fathers in the child protection system. Despite the often negative perceptions of men, their absence from planning is usually considered to be a bad thing. Fundamentally, there is a need to consider in each case what serves the best interests of the child.

Careful assessment should be conducted to identify significant father figures in the lives of children, and consider how fathers can play a useful role, where their own service needs must be addressed, and where engaging the father is likely to be counter productive.

In the case of abusive fathers, there is a need to examine how systems handle the abuser and the abused. Children will need help overcome their abuse and address their complex and conflicting feelings for their fathers. There need to be appropriate mechanisms in place to minimise the possibility of further abuse from men already known to the child protection system.

In a more general context, it is also worth examining how fathers of all kinds can participate in positive and safe relations with their children and families. Research with children suggests they want their parents to be positive role models, to spend time with them, to provide support, stability and guidance, love and physical contact. This applies equally to both genders.

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