

Fathers, Child Abuse and Child Protection

When I was studying to become a social worker at the University of Bradford in the mid-1980s, a buzz went around the department one day because one of the lecturers, Jeff Hearn, gave a public seminar on men in which fatherhood was a key theme (Hearn, 1983). The excitement reflected not only the novelty of the topic, but how unusual it was for masculinity and fatherhood to be openly talked about by a man – who was also a father. In the 25 years or so that have passed since, we have witnessed a huge growth of interest in fatherhood and in men and masculinities more generally among social scientists, the media, advertising and in social policy and practice (Kimmel *et al.*, 2005). The aim of this special issue is to contribute to further advancing knowledge in relation to fathers, child abuse and child protection.

That university seminar in 1983 and the ‘discovery’ of fatherhood would not have been possible were it not for feminism and the women’s movement from the 1970s challenging assumptions about power in families, intimate violence, motherhood and women’s and children’s lives. Much of the research into child protection and welfare practice over the past two decades has shown that ‘parenting’ has been regarded as synonymous with mothering, and it has been with women, and to a lesser extent children and young people, that professional relationships have been formed (Milner, 1996; Peckover, 2002). A decade ago, Jonathan Scourfield (2003) showed in his pioneering study of gender and child protection that fathers were too often ignored by social workers, even when it was men who were the cause of the risk and harm to children and women. For organisations, systems and professionals involved in protecting children and working with families to change this orientation, will require a sea change in attitude, culture and approach.

The term ‘father’ must be understood in its broadest sense to include all men – ‘father figures’ – who live with or have significant contact with children and their mothers. At least two key reasons can be given for focusing on ‘fathers’ in child protection. First, our understanding of the risks to children of fathers not being worked with has increased. Studies of serious case reviews where children have died or been seriously harmed have consistently highlighted a lack of attention to abusive men among the most common practice shortcomings (Brandon *et al.*, 2008; Sinclair and Bullock, 2002). Safeguarding work involves violence and risk from some fathers, who professionals avoid due to fears for their own safety and a lack of confidence and skills in working with them. Men are also ignored due to perceptions of their dangerousness based on their ‘hard’ appearance or assumptions of fecklessness due to perceptions

* Correspondence to: Harry Ferguson, Centre for Social Work, School of Sociology & Social Policy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK. E-mail: Harry.Ferguson@nottingham.ac.uk
†Twitter: harr_ferguson

Editorial

Guest Editor

Harry Ferguson

Centre for Social Work, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, UK

‘A huge growth of interest in fatherhood and in men and masculinities more generally’

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that lower working-class men can’t and don’t care (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Challenging and overcoming such assumptions are crucial to making practice father-inclusive.

A second reason for focusing on fathers is that while some are harmful to children, research evidence broadly supports the involvement of fathers as being good for children (Lamb and Lewis, 2004; see also the range of insights, policy analysis and resources at www.fatherhoodinstitute.org). This is broadly the position adopted in recent UK child protection policy (HM Government, 2010). Lamb (2001) emphasises the impact of abuse on child development and the value of studying maltreatment in the context of children’s relationships, not only with their biological mothers but with biological fathers and father figures as well. However, he concludes that much more needs to be known about the quality and longevity of the relationships between these men, their partners and their surrogate children, to understand more fully their roles and impact.

In their ground-breaking study of fathers and child neglect (based on a sample of 244 families, where interviews and observation took place with 117 fathers), Dubowitz *et al.* (2000) found that, in low-income communities, many men play important roles in their children’s lives even if they do not live in the home. Both the quality of the relationship and the father’s involvement seem to be more important than the biological relationship of the father or where he resides. The study suggested an association between greater father involvement and a lower risk for neglect. Fathers’ sense of effectiveness was associated with lower neglect ratings, which suggests the need for safeguarding work to help men develop a sense of competency and efficacy as fathers. They suggest that the pressing question, ‘may be how to encourage fathers to be more involved with their children in ways that are optimally nurturing’ (Dubowitz *et al.*, 2000, p. 138).

These insights resonate with Brid Featherstone’s important conceptual work which suggests that fathers in child welfare can be categorised in three ways: as resources; as vulnerable; and as risks (Featherstone, 2004, 2009). Non-engagement of fathers is problematic for achieving positive outcomes for children and women because it means that men are not held accountable for their abuse, challenged or supported to change. Women and children are also disadvantaged when men’s resourcefulness as carers is left undeveloped. Men themselves lose out because they miss the opportunity that intervention brings to develop their parenting abilities and relationships with their children, while the men’s own vulnerability, trauma and suffering also go unaided.

The growth of interest in fatherhood is reflected in the fact that the call for papers for this special issue produced several more papers than there was space for. The six papers that are included have been chosen in combination because they deal with different aspects of the issues: prevention; interventions with abusive fathers through group work and casework; case conferences; fathers as carers; and professional training. The issue also includes a training update on child protection case conferences by Kay Bell (2012).

The first paper by Tyler K. Smith and colleagues (2012) addresses what is known about the extent to which programmes for the primary prevention of child maltreatment involve fathers. Based on a systematic review of the literature, the paper identified 15 prevention programmes that included fathers in their aim to reduce the incidence of child maltreatment before it had occurred. However, they found a high proportion of other programmes did not involve

fathers at all. When programmes did include fathers they represented only a small percentage of the participants. Smith *et al.* (2012) show that the invisibility of fathers is also found in research, which too often focuses on mothers while the presence or absence of fathers is not remarked upon. Only a small number of studies in their review provided information specific to fathers. This reflects a failure to recognise or evaluate the implications of fathers' presence. This means that it was not possible to determine the impact of the interventions on fathers and whether they succeeded in reducing paternal risk factors for child abuse and neglect, because the evaluations did not separate the results for mothers and fathers. The authors conclude that prevention programmes need to improve their efforts to recruit fathers and research needs to be much more gender-sensitive and outcomes focused.

A striking trend in the history of child abuse as a social problem is the manner in which definitions of the problem have developed and changed over time (Ferguson, 2011). A telling example of this trend is increased awareness of domestic violence and the harm it does to children. This is further reflected in the fact that domestic violence was the topic covered in more papers submitted for the special issue than any other form of maltreatment. While for some time there has been concern that violent men have not been worked with, two papers submitted in this special issue help to move the literature forward by giving a new kind of attention not just to men who are perpetrators of domestic violence but to the fathering of these men. The papers provide new insights into how these identities, of father and domestic violence perpetrator, intersect, and the implications for intervention.

Brid Featherstone and Claire Fraser's (2012) paper is based on research into the views of a total of 34 academics and practitioners about what existing perpetrator programmes are doing on fathering and what other initiatives are being developed in relation to fathers and domestic violence. Two-thirds of respondents had knowledge of interventions that were working with fathering and domestic violence in some way. There were concerns that limited progress has been made in engaging fathers who were violent. Featherstone and Fraser identify key debates and tensions surrounding the tendency for many interventions to focus on violence against partners but less so, or not at all, on the impact men have as fathers. This goes hand in hand with tensions concerning the merits of group work programmes and more individualised responses to abusive fathers and the need for greater research knowledge into what works to make men safer.

The next paper by Nicky Stanley, Nicola Graham-Kevan and Rachel Borthwick (Stanley *et al.*, 2012) helps to shed light on precisely some of the tensions that Featherstone and Fraser (2012) identify, as it is based on an evaluation of a domestic violence perpetrators' programme that included attention to the men's identities as fathers. The programme was designed to be used by men on a voluntary basis and worked with them through a mixture of individual and group sessions. Some men self-referred while others joined having been signposted by health and children's social care services. Some men engaged well with the programme while others did not. The programme did not have a specific remit to work with men on their fathering but it did have some impact in this regard. The research found that men who were currently involved with children's services were very much more likely to be included in the engaged group than those who did not have such involvement. Involvement with children's services facilitated rather than hindered men's engagement. For some

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men in the study their identity as fathers operated as a source of intrinsic motivation to change and become a safer man and ‘better father’. The findings, albeit from a small-scale study, provide some evidence of positive developments in how child protection services are engaging violent men as fathers and how such interventions can help fathers to become safer to children and women.

Sarah Goff’s (2012) paper then turns the spotlight onto working with fathers at case conferences. Most work on fathers has focused on the challenges of engaging them through casework or in group work programmes, such as in early intervention and parenting classes, or perpetrator programmes for domestic violence. While important work has been done on involving fathers in family group conferences (Holland *et al.*, 2005), Goff’s paper is highly original in the attention it gives to formal multidisciplinary working with fathers and in the context of the case conference. It also addresses another neglected issue which pervades practice: the challenge of working with cases that involve multiple fathers. Goff draws on 13 years’ experience as an independent chair of child protection case conferences to provide insights into the skills and strategies that need to be adopted pre-conference, in the conference itself and afterwards to maximise the involvement of fathers. Goff emphasises how this can be done in ways that are relationship based and safe and respectful to women and children, while also treating men with respect and giving them the message that they are important to their children and need to be involved in decisions about them.

Of course, fathers are not always ‘the problem’ and the reason for the intervention in child protection work. They can be a resource for children and where mothers are the source of risk and vulnerability, fathers can be pivotal to children remaining within their families. Catherine Flynn’s (2012) paper sheds valuable light on the role of fathers who care for the children of imprisoned mothers. Flynn argues that while fathers have played a small but significant role in this care, they have been largely absent from any discussion or debate about caring, with what little attention there is focusing on grandparents’ care. Flynn’s study focused on gaining the perspectives of mothers and children on the quality of care provided by fathers in a very small sample of cases. The often considerable care provided by fathers was most often described by children and mothers with mixed feelings or dissatisfaction. But, as Flynn points out, it is important to examine placement satisfaction in context. Unhappiness with the quality of the care by the father was attributed to some aspects of the men’s attitude and behaviour. But it was also significantly mediated by other factors such as the nature of the relationship between the father and imprisoned mother or a father’s new partner. As Flynn concludes, direct knowledge and accounts from fathers themselves about the care they provide for the children of imprisoned mothers are lacking and further research is needed.

The preceding papers show that in the past decade or so awareness of fathers and attempts to work with them have progressed to some extent, and no doubt unevenly across different countries and even within countries. Yet, there remains a huge way to go. How can further change and development come about? The final paper by Nichola Maxwell, Jonathan Scourfield, Sally Holland, Brid Featherstone and Jacquie Lee (2012) shows the vital importance of training and intervention to change attitudes and practices around fathers, not only in influencing the knowledge and skills of individuals but also at the level of systems and occupational cultures. Maxwell *et al.* (2012) outline

a two-day training course they developed for 50 social workers on working with fathers, and the results of their qualitative evaluation of the course. The course sought to raise professionals' awareness of fathers and gender issues and increase social workers' knowledge and skills to work with men, specifically in motivational interviewing. Among the fascinating insights that the paper offers is the tendency for course participants to fall into thinking that 'fathers' referred to birth fathers, to the exclusion of a wider group of men who are present in children's lives and warrant attention. The motivational interviewing approach received a mixed response, some finding it useful, but others feeling, for instance, that its relevance was restricted by their role and the limited time they have to do such methodologically skilled work. Some valued the way in which it slowed interviews down, stopped them from rapidly trotting out pre-determined questions and created a space that gave themselves and fathers more space to talk, think and, hopefully, create much needed change.

'To raise professionals' awareness of fathers and gender issues and increase social workers' knowledge and skills to work with men'

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