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A systemic approach to improving the engagement of fathers in child safeguarding

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Abstract

Increasing the involvement of fathers in child safeguarding is an issue which has seen relatively little practice innovation in mainstream services. This article concerns a bold attempt to improve practice in this domain through a systemic approach. Key findings are presented from an evaluation of a Fatherhood Institute project in six English local authorities. The intervention was positively received and the self-efficacy of Children's Services staff improved on most measures as a result of training. However, not all planned aspects of the project could be implemented. The article reflects on the challenge of achieving practice change in these areas – both child safeguarding and engaging fathers – where established practices are deep-rooted. There is also reflection on the challenge of public service innovation in a context of austerity.

Background

The relative dearth of father engagement in child safeguarding is well recognised. Numerous commentators and researchers have noted the tendency of statutory child protective services to work mostly with mothers and have little to do with men who have a fathering role (e.g. Parton and Parton, 1990; Milner, 1993; Farmer and Owen, 1999; Scourfield, 2003; Strega et al., 2008). There is of course a wide range of fathering relationships in contemporary families (Featherstone, 2009), including biological fathers, adoptive fathers, step fathers and mothers' boyfriends who may not have an established step-father role but nonetheless contribute to child care. In this article we use the term 'fathers' inclusively.

Given the importance of fathers for children's development, with studies showing children's longer-term well-being to be associated with both positive and negative aspects of fathering (Lamb, 2010), it tends to be assumed that better father involvement should be an aim for child welfare services, although there is in fact a lack of evidence to show that involving fathers better in services will improve outcomes for children.

The reasons for the dearth of father engagement by services are complex. Gordon *et al.*'s (2012) literature review describes the different ecological levels at which barriers operate: individual, family, service provider, programme, community and policy. In keeping with this ecological approach, this article describes an intervention to improve father engagement in safeguarding which attempted to influence more than one level of organisational functioning.

Previous attempts to improve father work in a child protection context are few and far between. The Family Rights Group in the UK have undertaken a series of ‘Fathers Matter’ projects (Ashley et al., 2006; Roskill, 2008; Ashley, 2011) which have raised awareness of the issue in specific local authorities, through case file audits and applied research. English, Brummel and Martens (2009) in the US ran a four-hour training course in one North Western US public child welfare agency and evaluated the impact of this. Scourfield et al. (2012, see also Maxwell et al., 2012), working in two Welsh local authorities, developed a two-day training course with an emphasis on skills development, using an introduction to motivational interviewing, to open up initial conversations with fathers and avoid alienating them. Swann’s (2013) approach to the issue aimed to have an impact right across the local authority where he was a senior manager. He placed an emphasis on working with front line staff members’ subjectivities, recognising that personal biographies play a part to play in orientations to fathers encountered in the child welfare system.

The project described in the current article was run by the Fatherhood Institute (FI), the UK’s ‘fatherhood think tank’, with additional input from the Family Rights Group (FRG), a UK charity that advises parents caught up in the child welfare system. To avoid confusion with any other initiatives to do with fathers and child welfare, it will be referred to throughout the article as the FI project.

The project can be described as systemic, not in the sense of being consciously rooted in systemic theory but because it involved a deliberate attempt to intervene with different levels of organisational life. The term ‘systemic’ has been used, for example in relation to school improvement. Adelman and Taylor (2007) have emphasised the need to influence school organisation at all levels in order to bring about cultural change:

Our focus is on district and school organization and operations and the networks that shape decision making about fundamental changes and subsequent implementation. From this perspective, systemic change involves modifications that amount to a cultural shift in institutionalized values (i.e., reculturalization). For interventionists, the problem is that the greater the distance and dissonance between the current culture of schools and intended school improvements, the more difficult it is to successfully accomplish major systemic changes. (Adelman and Taylor, 2007: 57)

Introduction to the Fatherhood Institute project

The Project was being delivered between April 2011 and March 2013 in six local authority areas in England. It was managed by a Project Manager on behalf of FI and four members of the Project Team, with significant previous experience of research and work with fathers, carried out the audit and consultancy work and delivered the training. Each local authority identified a link person, to be the key route to arrange delivery of the project and to communicate with the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board and other staff as necessary. An Advisory Group was set up, which met five times during the course of the project. Three of the local authorities had previously been involved in the FRG’s Fathers Matter projects or worked with FI, so could be seen to start from a fairly high level of awareness about father engagement.

The project aimed to impact at multiple levels within the Children's Social Care Departments and the Local Safeguarding Board and it involved a range of activities and products in each area: an audit of case files; an audit of policies and procedures, face-to-face training; the development and dissemination of an e-learning package; practitioner action learning sets; and local action plans.

The different components of both project and evaluation and the revised time-table are listed in Table 1 and displayed visually in Figure 1. Reasons for revisions to the original timetable included the time required to get the detailed Partnership Agreement signed off by the local authority and/or Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB); Ofsted Inspections taking place in two of the areas and staff absence.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Figure 1 about here

Evaluation methods

The main components of the independent evaluation (*Authors 2013*) were: an online survey of 72 LSCB members from a wide range of different organisations at two time points (only nine of the 72 gave data at both time points); telephone interviews with 20 LSCB members (9 at two time points); an online survey of 96 staff before and after they attended a half-day training course (only 20 staff responded at both time points); focus groups with eight social work practitioners; a review of the policy and procedures audit and collation of good practice information. These components and their timing are listed in Table 1. All interviews were recorded in note form rather than fully transcribed.

The practitioner survey included open questions and also Scourfield *et al.*'s (2012) self-efficacy scale for work with fathers, which was inspired by Holden *et al.*'s (2002) self-efficacy scale for social work. Respondents were asked the question 'how confident are you that you can...?' which was followed by seventeen statements about different aspects of work with fathers and a ten-point Likert scale for the response. There were 20 responses to this survey at time 2 (t2) from practitioners who had responded at time 1 (t1), making it just possible to examine change over time in this group via paired data. A non-parametric test was used (the Wilcoxon signed ranks test), as the data were not normally distributed. The LSCB survey used some questions from the English *et al.* (2009) study. Unfortunately only nine people responded at both t1 and t2, which did not allow for any analysis of paired data. A Wilcoxon rank sum test was used for analysis of independent samples. For all statistical tests, a conventional probability limit of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance.

It was originally intended that there would be analysis of routinely-collected quantitative data from the six areas to assess change. However, a scoping exercise was carried out to establish what routine quantitative data were being collected on father engagement. This found that data for the items the evaluation had hoped to access were collected in only one of the six areas. Other areas were not able to access the data from their IT systems e.g. fathers' attendance at child protection conferences. It was agreed to re-visit this at the end of the project, when it was found that the situation remained the same. It was also originally intended that there would be telephone interviews with fathers whose social workers had attended one of the training events. The evaluation team were, however, dependent on

practitioners to make an initial approach to fathers, asking their permission for the evaluation team to contact them and none of these permissions were forthcoming. It may be that permission was not given in some cases, but it is probably more likely that busy practitioners did not approach fathers about being interviewed.

Results

The impact on Children's Social Care staff

Web-based survey of staff who attended face-to-face training

Staff who attended the training course were asked about their perception of their own team's effectiveness at engaging with fathers and given a five-point scale to rate this, from 1=lowest to 5=highest. Responses from staff who responded at both time points – i.e. before the training and again six months later (n=20) - indicated an increase from t1 to t2 in the proportion rating effectiveness at 4 or 5 (mean at t1=2.95, mean at t2=3.68). The Wilcoxon signed ranks test found a significant increase from t1 to t2 (z=2.43, p=0.02). There were also significant positive improvements in confidence for twelve of the 17 statements about work with fathers (see Table 2). In the responses to four other statements the levels of confidence were already quite high (t1 mean >7.1 on a 10-point scale; t2 mean >7.5) and although they increased, it was not a significant change.

Insert Table 2 about here

The self-efficacy statements which did not show significant change at the 0.05 level included those about openness/honesty and empathy/trust, these being relationship qualities which are difficult to achieve in the context of potential conflict with parents about the well-being of children. Similarly, there was not any significant positive change in self-efficacy for working with hostile and aggressive men – arguably an issue requiring more specialist training. The non-significant finding for applying law on parental responsibility might suggest this issue did not have a high profile in the training offered. Scourfield *et al.*'s (2012) training resulted in significant change on all 17 statements, but this was a course over two whole days with a strong emphasis on micro-level skills. In the FI project evaluation, one Children's Social Care Safeguarding Manager (from Area 6) noted in an interview, when discussing training courses, 'we are good at giving knowledge, but not so good at skills'. Also it should be noted that when the second questionnaire was administered, the e-learning and action learning sets had yet not been delivered.

In the t2 survey, practitioners were also asked to describe any significant change to their practice as a result of the project. Some simply referred to 'increased awareness' of the need to engage fathers but others mentioned more detailed changes. Of particular interest were those comments where practitioners described specific actions:

Aiming to make sure that I make more of an effort to include the father in getting appropriate information relating to his child or children even if he is not the main carer. (Early intervention support worker, e-survey)

Where there is an identified risk to be aware that I can engage with the father separately so as not to exclude him and to reassure him that he is in the loop as to his child's care and future. (Early support worker, e-survey)

Using the practices of Case Conference chairs to model positive engagement with fathers to reinforce similar expectations of other professionals. (Senior manager, e-survey)

One of first changes I made was to get in touch with fathers on my current caseload to obtain their views. The overall impression was that of disempowerment and feeling marginalised in formal decision making. (Social worker, e-survey)

One local authority implemented a working with fathers practice guide and a 'Fathers' Champion' in each service.

Focus groups and telephone interviews with practitioners

Qualitative interviews and focus groups produced considerable discussion about the general issue of engaging fathers. Practitioners were clear that engaging fathers, including those who were more difficult to engage, was an important part of their work to improve outcomes for children. Some noted that quite apart from the FI project there were other drivers, including policy guidance and financial considerations, which encourage the placement of children involved in care proceedings with their paternal family.

Practitioners spoke about the various different levels of father engagement. The easiest level was working with those fathers keen to be involved and pro-active in the care of their children. These men were already being engaged by practitioners. A more challenging level was finding those who were the absent and invisible including 'shadowy men' (LSCB Manager, Area 5) who may pose a risk or be a positive part of a child's family network. Despite these challenges, some of these men could be contacted and were willing to turn up to meetings and conferences if invited.

A real challenge practitioners spoke about was working with mothers who are reluctant to give details of the child or children's father(s), whilst maintaining a constructive working relationship with both the mother and the father, despite what can at times be high levels of conflict between the parents. Research participants spoke about a range of creative solutions in this scenario, including explaining to the mother why it was important to involve the father, agreeing alternative times for meetings and working through others such as paternal grandmothers to engage the father or the extended family. Sharing ideas and creative solutions was the one of the most important gains from group discussions that were prompted by the FI project, either during the initial day training, via the action learning sets or in team meetings.

The impact on other agencies

Around half the LSCB members who took part in the follow-up survey, six months after the initial survey, thought there had been changes in the previous six months and half were not aware of any changes. There were respondents from all of the local authorities in both groups, so variation in response is therefore likely to reflect the different situations in respondents' own organisations more than differences between local authorities, although the project was not implemented equally well in each of the six areas, as we explain later in the article. Those working directly for the Safeguarding Board or in Children's Services were

more likely to give details of specific changes than those working elsewhere. LSCB members from the Police Service, the Probation Service and those who were designated child protection staff working for the NHS were generally aware of some parts if not all the components of the project. Positive changes were attributed not just to the project, but also to serious case reviews and Ofsted inspections. There was little mention of any policy and procedures changes, which were still in discussion at the point of this survey. Statistical analysis did not show any significant change in responses to the specific questions about father engagement that were repeated at t1 and t2 but, as explained earlier, few respondents completed questionnaires at both time points.

LSCB members had been asked in the initial interview about where their LSCB was placed on the journey to 'effective engagement'. At the second interview, there was near unanimous agreement of progress, although this was seen as faster by some interviewees than by others.

Beginning to embark on the journey. (Senior Police Inspector, Area 1)

On the LSCB there are 18 agencies. They are in different places, concentrating on different things. Fathers is more of an issue. We [*the board*] are kept regularly updated. It's on their antennae. (Safeguarding Manager, Children's Services, Area 1)

Quite far. Everybody's more aware. I had a meeting earlier today [looking at 25 child protection conference reports from GPs]. There's no mention of fathers in about half of them. (GP, Area 4)

Responses were less enthusiastic when asked about specific movement over the last six months.

I don't have enough information to say yes or no. Our relationship with Children's Services has improved a lot over the last year. (Senior Manager, Probation, Area 6)

Although LSCB interviewees reported that things were moving in the right direction, it was harder for them to identify specific examples to corroborate this. This was partly due to the plethora of changes in each area from management re-organisations, the impact of financial constraints and other initiatives. In addition, members outside of Children's Services and the Safeguarding Board were less aware of the case audits and other components of the project.

An agenda of improving father engagement was thought to be well aligned with other local and national priorities. Areas of focus that were mentioned included early intervention, 'Think Family' and working with the whole family, as well as specific work strands such as the prevention of domestic violence and neglect and work with gangs. Some of these other priorities could also compete with father engagement for local authorities' attention, however, sometimes squeezing out the FI project agenda.

Challenges

The challenges of changing practice with fathers through training have been highlighted by Maxwell *et al.* (2012). In this section, we add to Maxwell *et al.*'s insights by noting some of the political and organisational barriers to achieving systemic change.

The work took place against a background of significant financial constraint and a number of specific local challenges such as Ofsted inspections, responding to Serious Case Reviews and policy priorities such as learning the lessons from the Rochdale child sexual exploitation case. These factors posed a significant challenge for delivering the FI project agenda and for co-operating with the project evaluation.

The geographical spread and diversity of the six local authority areas also proved a challenge and there was some variation in the intensity of implementation. The reasons for involvement with the project varied between the six areas and this may have had an impact on how actively they engaged with the project during the 18 month period. It may have been over-ambitious to try and work across six geographically disparate areas, given that it was not possible to work intensively on building relationships with local staff in all these areas simultaneously and this kind of relationship-building is arguably essential for cultural change to be achieved.

Some Children's Social Care departments had previously worked with the either FI or FRG. Others welcomed the specialist training the project would provide. For some Children's Social Care departments and their LSCBs, it appeared like a positive opportunity given recent findings from Serious Case Reviews that had highlighted the need to increase engagement with fathers. But there were perhaps varying levels of commitment; especially in terms of buy-in from all levels of management.

In the initial LSCB interviews, members had been relatively enthusiastic about completing any e-learning on the topic that was offered to them. However, the reality was that few actually did so. There were serious problems with making the e-learning available. Local authorities wanted to be able to monitor completion of the e-learning and so did not want it freely available from a website to be used in an ad hoc manner. Instead they wanted it integrated into their local e-learning platforms. However, there were serious technical problems with doing this due to the size of the videos which were incorporated into the package. This led to months of delays in providing access for staff. Some LSCB members did access it direct from the Fatherhood Institute website. When asked about e-learning, in the post project interviews, interviewees raised a number of points.

Firstly, the evaluators were told that due to pressure of work, only training that is either mandatory or on a 'must do' list, as opposed to an 'it would be good to do' list, was going to get done. Also some respondents noted that learning cultures vary between organisations:

It's about cultures. Children's Services don't have a culture of doing e-learning. Occasionally something is enforced. (Safeguarding Manager, Children's Services, Area 6)

And some interviewees felt people would prefer to find time to discuss practice issue face to face with colleagues:

I don't want to spend more time 'sitting at my computer'. After I've done my emails, calendar. I look at the screen and think: 'God No!' I want to engage at a human level. (Manager, Third Sector, Area 3)

To combat this problem, the face-to-face training that the practitioners undertook was followed by the opportunity to attend action learning sets. But even that was not always seen as the solution in the context of multiple demands on staff.

People are getting action-learning-setted-out. The trouble is the workload is higher. Stress levels are going up. Expectations are higher. (Senior Manager, Probation, Area 6)

The challenge of obtaining and maintaining accurate contact details for fathers is a necessary, though not sufficient, step to effective engagement. But even doing this has its challenges. As one GP explained, 'they don't come to us as a family' so the primary care IT system does not link the names in the database. Even in Children's Social Care Departments, databases and recording cultures were often not geared towards keeping accurate data on fathers.

Research participants spoke about the impact of the current financial climate and the financial constraints that all types of organisations were dealing with in a context of austerity (Featherstone, Broadhurst and Holt, 2012; Jordan and Drakeford, 2013). Comments like the following came from all sectors and all areas.

To do stand-alone training on fathers is a luxury. (Education Welfare Service Manager, Area 4)

We are making progress but are constantly confounded by cuts. Everyone is busy doing the urgent rather than the important. (Public Health Advisor, Area 1)

We're reducing services, with a £33m cut two years ago. There's a further 20% starting on 1st April. Inevitably services go. There's a massively diminishing work force. The Police have a 20% cut. We are working on the wider neighbourhood stuff. (Safeguarding Manager, Children's Services, Area 1)

In such a context, one interviewee asked how engaging fathers could 'get into the must-do category?'

Services are stretched really stretched. People don't need to feel it's one more thing to provide. It can't be added to a long list of priorities. (Senior Manager Children's Charity, Area 3)

Conclusion

There were limitations to the project evaluation. Firstly, data on fathers' perspectives did not materialise at all and administrative databases in children's social care departments had very little robust information on fathers' involvement in cases. Secondly, where quantitative data were collected over time, relatively few respondents from t1 provided follow-up data, meaning that change could only be assessed to a very limited extent. Thirdly, the sample of practitioners for the qualitative data is very likely to be biased towards keen social workers who took the project seriously and could therefore not be said to be representative. Nonetheless, this multi-component evaluation does provide a certain picture of how the project was implemented. We can see positive indications and also identify where it is difficult to achieve change.

Compared with Scourfield *et al.*'s (2012) Fathers and Child Protection training, the practitioner self-efficacy outcomes are not so clearly positive. However, apart from the differences in training noted earlier, that study also had a larger sample of trainees who provided t2 data. It was also a smaller-scale and more localised initiative than the FI project and less ambitious. Scourfield *et al.*'s training was therefore easier to deliver and evaluate, but its reach was limited, focused as it was on practitioner training only.

It is difficult to compare findings directly with the evaluation of English *et al.*'s (2009) Father Involvement in Child Welfare pilot project, as the measures used were different, apart from some questions repeated in the FI evaluation but with inadequate data to assess change in individuals. English *et al.* found some evidence of actual change in practice, as recorded in case files. They particularly note an increase in the proportion of non-primary caregiver fathers identified as a resource. Similarly, Scourfield *et al.* found a marked increase in practitioners' self-reported engagement of non-residential fathers. The evaluation methods of the FI project did not allow for assessment of change in actual practice. Future initiatives to improve father engagement should keep in mind that it is a priority to assess actual change in practice, beyond practitioner self-report.

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Table 1: Key components of the revised project plan (white rows) and independent evaluation (grey rows)

Date	Component	<i>n</i> of participants
<i>2011-12</i>		
Jan to Mar 2012	One-day training course (4 areas)	
Jan to Mar 2012	Case audits (6 areas)	
	Policy and procedures audits (6 areas)	
Feb to Mar 2012	Evaluation: quantitative data scoping (6 areas)	
Mar to Apr 2012	Evaluation: LSCB on-line survey t1 (6 areas)	50
Mar to Apr 2012	Evaluation: Practitioner on-line survey t1 (6 areas)	90
Mar to Apr 2012	Evaluation: LSCB Tel interviews (5 areas)	17
<i>2012-13</i>		
Apr to June 2012	One-day training course (2 areas)	
Apr to June 2012	LSCB & Practitioner e-learning (only available in some areas)	
July 2012	Evaluation: Interim report	
Sept 2012	One-day training course (additional session in 1 area)	
Oct to Dec 2012	Practitioner Action Learning Sets	
Nov/Dec 2012	Area Action Plans from local authority link people	
Sept 2012	Evaluation: Focus groups (2 areas)	8
Oct to Nov 2012	Evaluation: LSCB on-line survey t2 (5 areas)	31 (9 of whom completed t1 survey)
Mar to Apr 2012	Evaluation: LSCB telephone interviews (5 areas)	12
Nov 2012	Evaluation: Practitioner on-line survey t2 (6 areas)	26 (20 of whom completed t1 survey)
Jan to Mar 2013	Practitioner Action learning sets	
Feb 2013	Evaluation: Practitioner telephone interviews (1 area)	4
Feb to March 2013	Evaluation: Final report	
Mar 2013	Round table event	

Table 2: Change in self-efficacy in practitioners who completed both pre- and post-training questionnaires (statements in order of magnitude of positive change)

Self-efficacy statement (How confident are you that you can.....?)	<i>z</i> *	sig. (2-tailed)	t1 n	t2 n	t1 mean	t2 mean	t2 - t1 (mean)	t1 SD	t2 SD	t2 - t1 (SD)
Assess when father engagement is most likely to be successful.	-3.072	0.002	20	20	6.15	7.60	1.45	1.84	1.39	-0.45
Help fathers to understand better the consequences of their behaviour for their partners	-2.542	0.011	20	20	6.00	7.40	1.40	1.59	0.94	-0.65
Help fathers to understand better the consequences of their behaviour for their children	-3.245	0.001	20	20	6.75	8.00	1.25	1.65	0.92	-0.73
Provide emotional support for fathers	-2.124	0.034	20	20	6.40	7.45	1.05	1.64	1.47	-0.17
Help fathers to changes ways of thinking that contribute to their problems	-2.956	0.003	20	20	6.10	7.15	1.05	1.52	1.31	-0.21
Motivate fathers to changes their problematic behaviours without increasing their resistance	-2.395	0.017	20	20	6.25	7.15	0.90	1.71	1.04	-0.67
Engage men who are abusive in discussion about their behaviour	-2.152	0.031	20	20	5.90	6.75	0.85	2.00	1.83	-0.17
Engage fathers in ways that don't jeopardise the safety of mothers and children	-1.958	0.050	20	20	6.90	7.70	0.80	1.74	1.59	-0.15
Highlight fathers' successes to increase their self-confidence	-2.161	0.031	20	20	7.35	8.10	0.75	1.57	1.41	-0.16
Teach fathers specific skills to deal with certain problems	-2.594	0.010	20	20	5.95	6.70	0.75	1.57	1.22	-0.35
Assess risk in relation to fathers	-2.360	0.018	20	20	6.90	7.65	0.75	1.52	1.42	-0.10
Work with men who appear hostile or aggressive	-1.609	0.108 ns	20	20	6.20	6.75	0.55	1.96	2.00	0.04
Assess fathers' positive qualities	-2.549	0.011	20	20	7.50	8.05	0.55	1.28	1.23	-0.05
Apply knowledge of the law on parental responsibility	-1.780	0.075 ns	20	20	7.20	7.70	0.50	1.80	1.66	-0.14
Develop a relationship with father where you feel able to be open and honest with them	-0.961	0.336 ns	20	20	7.60	8.05	0.45	1.37	1.43	0.06
Employ empathy to help fathers feel that they can trust you	-1.685	0.092 ns	20	20	7.55	8.00	0.45	1.28	1.34	0.06
Develop a relationship with fathers there they feel able to be open and honest with you	-1.751	0.080 ns	20	20	7.10	7.50	0.40	1.54	1.32	-0.22

* *Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test*
 ns *Not significant at the 0.05 level*

Figure 1: The change process model envisaged at the start of the project

