

Practice Guide: Thinking about fathers when making keeping in touch plans

Introduction

- > In many areas of children's social care, mothers remain the primary focus. Professionals tend to worry much more about risk when working with fathers, and the positives that fathers can have for their children are often overlooked.
- > Fathers need to be held accountable for the safe care of their children to the same degree as mothers. But, like mothers, they also need help, support and validation for their parenting.
- > Where fathers are not involved in plans for their children, this puts all the responsibility for parenting onto mothers and can allow fathers to 'opt out'. It also excludes fathers from the opportunity to contribute to their children's lives.
- > Fathers are frequently not included in contact plans for adopted children. Adopted young people often highlight a disappointing lack of information about and/or contact with their birth fathers.
- > The impact on fathers of losing children to care and/or adoption is profound and long lasting just as it is for mothers. However, fathers may show their feelings about losing their children differently to mothers. Professionals may also interpret fathers' feelings differently.
- > Fathers often feel shame and humiliation when their children are removed, and they may defend against these feelings through anger, threats, and a focus on 'fighting' to keep their children.
- > Birth fathers are less likely to be referred to, and to take up, birth parent adoption support services compared to birth mothers. In addition, some support services are aimed solely at mothers. As well as having less access to professional support, fathers may be less able than mothers to use informal support such as talking to friends.
- > The support needs of fathers are many and complex, including things like housing, poverty and poor mental health. Fathers, like mothers, of children in foster care or adoption often need longer term and wraparound support to stabilise their lives.
- > Most fathers of children in care present a combination of problems and potential, needs and strengths. Working effectively with fathers involves both support and challenge.

Working with fathers before their children are adopted

- > There is a need for better routine recording of accurate information about father's lives and circumstances. This includes information that is recorded to be passed on to adoptive parents and ultimately the adopted child about the child's background.
- > Aim to be transparent in reporting on which parents access services, attend meetings and so on. Be cautious about using the term parent/s - it is more helpful to be specific about when and how both mothers and fathers are working with services.
- > Early and proactive relationship building with fathers is vital, including trying to build trust with fathers.
- > Challenge assumptions and think about terminology. For example, a father might easily be described as 'absent' or 'non-resident'. Terms such as these can mask or prevent curiosity about father's circumstances and involvement. There needs to be a commitment to review and revisit father's needs and capacity for contributing to their children's lives.
- > Consider potential gatekeeping mechanisms that may open or close off opportunities for building relationships with fathers. For example: parental responsibility, residence, having care/contact with the child, definitions of what counts as couplehood, all present opportunities to open up or restrict father's involvement with their children.
- > Consider fathers as having needs and resources in their own right. Fathers are often vulnerable and they may pose risks arising from their vulnerabilities.
- > Be conscious of the damaging effects of shame and humiliation. Building working relationships with marginalised/vulnerable fathers involves understanding the reasons why fathers may appear threatening and being able to contain fathers' emotions.

Supporting fathers to maintain relationships with their children after adoption

- > Think creatively and flexibly about how connections can be maintained. Fathers, like mothers, can sometimes struggle with letter writing, planning meetings around precarious work, having to respond quickly to changes of plans or needing to contact social workers or other professionals.
- > Extended family members such as paternal grandparents, aunts or uncles may be important in supporting fathers with contact and helping build trust between fathers and professionals.
- > Family time supervisors/contact support workers are another group who fathers often feel positive about working with.
- > It's important to recognise that fathers are often highly fearful of failure, being a disappointment, saying/doing the wrong thing, being rejected, and making things worse.
- > For some fathers it can be easier to 'fight' for contact than to actually do it. They may need support to understand how they can be a good father to their children after adoption, including by supporting the child's place in the adoptive family.
- > Where risks prevent fathers from staying in touch with children after adoption, consider if there is anyone else on the child's paternal side of the family who can be involved. This can avoid the child having little or no information about one side of their family.

We are grateful for help of Dr Georgia Philip in preparing this briefing. These briefing notes are based on the evidence and insights from two major studies of fathers from the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia (UEA). Both studies were funded by the Nuffield Foundation:

- > **Counting Fathers In: Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System** (2017). (uea.ac.uk)
- > **Up Against It: Understanding Fathers' Repeat Appearance in Local Authority Care Proceedings** (2021). (uea.ac.uk)

They also draw on a range of other UEA studies looking at contact after adoption.

Click [here](#) to view all of the *Staying in touch: Contact after adoption* resources.

An open access resource hub for practitioners working with individuals to maintain meaningful relationships after adoption.

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