

‘Counting Fathers in’: Men’s Experiences of the Child Protection System

RESEARCH SUMMARY *May 2017*

The research project you helped us with has produced an important and vivid picture of how the child protection system works for fathers. This is a summary of the main findings from the research, and the main points we are making to social workers and managers.

Overall messages about fathers in the child protection system:

Fathers in child protection were rarely ‘absent’. Even in the most difficult circumstances, the majority of men were doing things to try to keep being fathers, and wanted to stay involved in their child’s life.

Being an involved father requires practical, social and emotional support. Men who said they wanted help to stay involved, or to change things in their lives, often felt their role as fathers was overlooked and were often facing difficulties with health, housing, money or relationships.

Fathers in child protection are rarely *either* ‘all bad’ or ‘all good’. Fathers are important to children, and (like mothers) most present a *combination* of positive *and* negative factors. Men and social workers need to recognise this so that, wherever possible, children can stay safe and be involved with their fathers.

Overall messages for social workers in the child protection system:

Social workers are ‘hard to reach’. Men’s experience was that social workers were often difficult to contact and this makes it hard to build relationships or trust.

Social work seems ‘rushed and slow’. Men experienced the child protection system as *both* rushed *and* slow! There would be an urgent meeting or a sudden burst of action, followed by a long period where it felt like little or nothing was happening. This was confusing and frustrating.

Expect fathers to be involved and persist with contacting them. Fathers and social workers are suspicious of each other and it is too easy to give up or assume the father isn’t interested.

Get the full picture of a man’s life. This is vital for understanding what he can do as a father, and for making a child protection plan that involves him in a fair way.

Say what needs to change, but recognise the ‘good’. Social workers need to look at the whole picture of what a father offers. Social workers have to be honest about their concerns but also willing to work with the positives, and listen to the father’s perspective. This includes taking a balanced view of the past, and being prepared to give fathers a fair chance in the future.

What were the key things men said were unhelpful about the child protection system?

Being included late or only as a last resort: Some men, particularly non-resident fathers, felt that social workers delayed involving them. When social workers were concerned about the mother's care of the child, fathers felt that they were not taken seriously or supported to become more involved. In five cases, a father was only approached to take on care of their child when the local authority was about to start court proceedings. Being seen as a 'last resort' was frustrating and often made it more difficult for fathers to organise being able to care full time for their child.

Getting labelled as 'difficult': This was one important way in which men felt unfairly treated by social workers. If men get angry or upset they can quickly find themselves kept at arm's length from the child protection process and their child. If men challenged this, it could make things worse.

Not getting a fair hearing: When there were allegations of domestic abuse, or conflict between fathers and mothers over what happened to a child, men felt that their perspectives were not always taken seriously. This was linked to how and when the social worker talked to fathers, how child protection conferences were organised, and how social workers and other professionals handled allegations of domestic abuse. This issue of fairness was talked about by men who accepted responsibility for abusive behaviour and by men who felt wrongly accused.

Lack of flexibility from social workers: There were clashes between men and social workers over how each expected time to be given and spent. Many men felt that social workers were not prepared to negotiate over how meetings or visits were arranged, or that there were double standards over things like being on time or being flexible. This had important consequences for men, because if they did not go to meetings or fit in with the child protection plan, social workers saw them as 'disengaged' or as not caring about their child.

What were the main things men said helped to build trust with social workers?

Getting in early: Most men appreciated when social workers met or phoned them before the initial child protection conference. This can be a chance for social workers and fathers to sound each other out and at least begin to build a working relationship. However, it was also important that social workers were consistent in what they said *to* fathers, and what they said *about* fathers in reports.

Paying attention: Men found it easier to build trust with a social worker if they took time to understand his situation, took his views as seriously as those of mothers, and were not judgmental of him as a person. Social workers need to be genuinely interested in fathers' lives and in what makes being an involved father harder or easier for each individual man.

Being reliable: Being reliable involved social workers doing what they said they would do, replying to messages in reasonable time, and being straight with men. Building trust with social workers took time and this was very difficult when there were lots of changes of worker, or when social workers did not keep men updated with what was happening.

Balancing criticism and praise: Men wanted social workers to be honest about their concerns, but also to look at the whole picture of what a father could offer. It was easier for men to accept criticism if there was also some recognition of positive factors. When men only felt criticised, they were more likely to reject the social worker or withdraw from the child protection process. Focusing on strengths as well as problems made it more likely that a father and social worker could work together.

Direct support for fathers: When men spoke positively about social workers, they said that the social worker had ‘helped’. What men found helpful was some kind of practical support for them as fathers, but also when a social worker had listened and taken account of their particular situation. Men who had a more positive experience spoke about social workers helping with housing, advice on welfare benefits, or in building good relationships with local children’s centres.

What does the study show overall?

What had happened to the children’s cases by the end of the 12 months?	
Still in Child Protection	5 cases
Had a Child in Need plan	8 cases
Case had been closed because things improved	10 cases
A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) had been made	3 cases
An adoption order had been made	2 cases
Unknown (because the man left the study)	5 cases

Our yearlong study showed that **men experienced the child protection system as both *rushed and slow***. Some things seemed to happen too quickly and others too slowly and this often made the process confusing and frustrating.

Although men’s circumstances varied and the reasons for the child protection plan were different, **overall the child protection system acted as a form of gatekeeping for fathers**. This meant that men’s involvement in the child protection process and in their child’s life could become more restricted (gate closing) or more supported (gate opening).

The attitudes and actions of social workers and managers were crucial factors in this, but so too was the interaction between social workers and fathers. Changes in men’s actions or in their situations could also bring about change in how social workers viewed them as fathers. In our study, as the year went on, most men described moments where they felt pushed out or overlooked as fathers, and moments where they felt supported or taken seriously. Only three men felt supported and had a good working relationship with the social worker for the whole 12 months.

Our findings show two other important patterns. One was that when there were concerns about mothers' care of the child, social workers were often slow to include fathers, or only considered them as a 'last resort'. The second was that when there were concerns about a father's past or if allegations of domestic abuse were made, social workers found it hard to look at the whole picture, and to include men's perspectives. Men in these situations were most likely to experience 'gate closing' and to feel that their chances of staying involved with their child were slim. Overall, although men understood the purpose of child protection, they felt that when it came to dealing with allegations of domestic abuse and men raising concerns about mothers, social workers did treat fathers differently and often unfairly in comparison with mothers.

What are we doing next?

Since we last wrote to you, we have been analysing all the research material and writing a full report on the whole project for our funders, the Nuffield Foundation. This report will be freely available on our research centre website from August 2017 <https://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family>. Over the summer, we will be meeting with managers and social workers in all three of the local authorities who took part, to share our findings and the key points for improving social work practice with fathers. We will also be presenting the key findings to policy makers, family support charities, Children's Services managers from other local authorities, and other academic researchers, at a meeting in London, in July.

In addition, we will be working hard to anonymise all your research material so that our project can be stored (electronically) in a Data Archive. This means that your stories will be preserved for the future, and that other researchers interested in fathers' lives will be able to make use of them.

We are also developing a training course based on this project, to be available to social workers in East Anglia from September. This will involve using some of your stories and experiences to help social workers see child protection from men's perspective, and work more effectively with fathers. We have been given a small amount of extra funding to do this work and we will be in touch again to discuss ways in which you may like to be involved in helping us.

Lastly, we have put in a new funding application to the Nuffield Foundation to do another project, with the University of Lancaster, looking at the experiences of fathers who have had more than one child adopted or placed in foster care. If we are successful, this project will start in August.

Finally, we would like to thank you once again for your help with this important piece of research. Your commitment and willingness to keep in touch and talk to us about your lives has been what made this study a success. We wish you and your families the very best for the future.

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