**Making Fathers Visible**

**Background:**

Research shows that that social workers overly concentrate on women and fail to identify, investigate, assess and intervene with men who may be important in children’s lives. This means, without a doubt, that children involved within child protection systems are at increased risk because fathers, (and other men involved with the child), go unassessed. (Ofsted: 2011, Featherstone et al: 2010). Studies repeatedly show that child protection work tends to focus on mothers, with fathers having a peripheral presence in case files, child protection conferences and home visits. This has given rise to a series of descriptions of fathers as ‘invisible’ (Strega et al, 2008); ‘ghosts’ (Brown et al, 2009), or ‘shadows’ (Ewart-Boyle et al, 2015).

Literature suggests there are many barriers to engagement including;

* The father living some distance from the child with anticipated transportation difficulties.
* Work related reasons: Some fathers may work long hours or be stationed in another location, making it difficult for them to be present in their child’s life.
* The father being in prison . Fathers who are in prison are unable to be present in their child’s life, which can have long term effects on the child’s wellbeing.
* Failure or refusal to establish paternity
* Mother being unsure of the identity of the father
* Divorce or separation. Once of the most common reasons for a father’s absence is due to divorce or separation from the child’s mother.
* Death: some cases, a fathers absence may be due to their death, leaving the child to grow up without a father figure.
* Unintentional reasons: Sometimes, fathers may be absent due to unforeseen circumstances such as illness or disability.

Some researchers have found that having a positive relationship with the father, who is a supportive and encouraging presence in their child’s life, helps the social development and self-esteem of children.

In addition, they grow up with a better sense of their worth and are more self-confident, and children with such qualities have a much easier time adjusting to school and new environments.

**The Impact on Children with Invisible Fathers:**

**Behavioural Problems**: The negative effects of father absence can impact a child’s well-being in a way that causes behavioural problems, especially in adolescence and adulthood.

For example, many children who grow up without a fully present father try to come off as domineering among their peers in an attempt to keep their emotional issues hidden.

As a result, they could have trouble adjusting in school or finding friends because they are too preoccupied with maintaining this “persona.”

**Attachment Trauma**: Dealing with father absence, whether it be physical or emotional, from an early age can lead to a child developing attachment trauma, or an attachment style that will cause relationship trouble in the future. There are four attachment styles that are developed in childhood:

* Secure;
* Anxious;
* Avoidant;
* Fearful-avoidant;

The **secure attachment** style is the healthiest one and develops when a child receives consistent care, affection, and emotional support from their parent/s.

Even if the child is being raised by only one parent or caregiver, they can still develop a secure attachment style.

But if one of the parents, such as the father, is inconsistent, absent, or doesn’t respond to the child’s needs, then this is fertile ground for developing attachment trauma.

**How to Recognise an Absent Father**

When we think of fatherlessness, we usually jump to scenarios where the dad is completely out of the picture, whether it be by choice or as a consequence of a tragic event.

The truth is that a father can be absent even in families where the parents are still together and living under one roof. After all, simply living with their father won’t stop children from feeling the negative effects of father absence. Some models of masculinity lead some men to think that being heavily involved in their children’s lives is not their role, as a result they may not put themselves forward for active parenting roles for their children.

In fact, both parents, whether they be male or female, should be actively engaged in their children’s upbringing for a healthy and happy childhood.

That’s why it’s very important to know how to recognise an absent dad so that you can deal with the problem right away.

**Lack of responsibility:** Men who do not put any effort into caring for their child early on can easily turn into absent fathers.

**Selfishness:** An absent father, on the other hand, always puts his own plans first and doesn’t even think to make time or include his children in his day.

**Substance/Alcohol Misuse**: Children who grow up with a father who is battling addiction are often fatherless, as a person who struggles with substance abuse can rarely be a fully present parent.

**How to involve fathers to make them visible**

* Having high expectations. The earlier fathers can be engaged the better. Registration, enrolment or referral processes should record both parents’ details. Whether a father is resident or not, services which insist on referrals with information about the father have higher levels of father engagement. Equally, efforts to ensure the father’s name is on the birth certificate is a strong predictor of continuing future involvement in the child’s life. This is especially important for young fathers who may feel excluded.
* Be explicit with mothers about the importance of speaking to the father and including him in the process, while also ensuring that she would not be put at risk;
* Speak separately to the father rather than gathering information solely through the mother;
* Arrange separate home visits if necessary to explain the relevance of his involvement with the child, communicating a willingness to include him in decisions.
* Gender-differentiation is often necessary. If you want to involve all parents then fathers might need to be targeted specifically.
* Consider the timing of any meetings or other services to enable the attendance of fathers who are at work.
* Communicating with both parents as standard practice. As often as possible, letters and other forms of communication should be addressed to both parents using their given names. When fathers read the word ‘parent’ they regularly assume that the letter is intended for the mother. Bear in mind that fathers may be more likely to participate in events badged as briefings or updates, rather than ‘support groups’.
* Inviting dads personally to specific hands-on activities. Schools that do this through breakfast clubs, for example, have found that fathers will come. Nurseries have successfully reached out by asking for help on specific projects such as building a Wendy House.
* Making it easier for men to come into the building. Receptions and waiting rooms and their respective reading materials and posters should avoid sending messages that men are not expected in these places.
* Understanding that fathers are the real experts on their own support needs; often advocacy work across a range of areas that benefits the whole man. For example, help with housing, finding employment, and debt, helps boost trust and reduces any feelings of suspicion he may have.
* Workers should take the time to consider and understand the best methods of explaining issues to the father. Helping a father see the ‘evidence’ of a problem such as sharing information and assessment results may encourage him to take part in services.
* For fathers of children involved in child protection processes, working with non-statutory agencies can provide alternative locations for provision and facilitate engagement with fathers who might be unwilling to engage with local authority services.
* Being prepared to hang in there with fathers; male ego and pride can get in the way of asking for help.
* Mothers’ encouragement can be crucial. A children’s needs approach rather than a fathers’ rights one is more likely to be effective. Whether a father is absent, absents himself or is absented, a child will continue to have a mental space marked ‘father’ and will fill this with demonization or a fantasy. Workers should ask about the father, and wherever possible, include him in future plans, as well as understand that whoever he is, knowing and knowing of him, is a crucial part of a child’s development.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the absence of a father in a child's life can have significant impacts on their emotional and psychological well-being. Children who grow up without a father may struggle with a range of challenges, including behavioural problems, lower academic achievement, and difficulties forming healthy relationships. Understanding the reasons why fathers may be absent from their child's life is crucial in developing strategies to support and help these children overcome the challenges they face. It is important for policymakers and organizations to work towards creating policies and programs that support fathers in being present in their children's lives and promoting positive father-child relationships

Resources

[CommunityCare](https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/19/working-fathers-key-advice-research/)

[Young Parents Advice](https://frg.org.uk/ypa/need-help-or-advice/young-fathers)

[NSPCC](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2987/learning-from-case-reviews-unseen-men.pdf)

[Working with men: Sharing learning from Leeds | Research in Practice](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/working-with-men-sharing-learning-from-leeds/)

<https://thedadpad.co.uk/neonatal/>