

Study examines fathers' experiences of child protection process

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

New research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) challenges assumptions that men in child protection cases do not stay involved in children's lives and always, or only, pose a risk of harm to their child—fathers in this study were rarely 'absent'.

The study aims to improve policy and social work practice by addressing

the knowledge gap about men in [child](#) protection, by focusing on fathers' perspectives and supporting the involvement of men in the process.

Most men involved in the study, conducted by UEA's Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF), wanted to be part of their child's life and presented as both a risk and resource for their [children](#).

The findings will be discussed today at the Nuffield Foundation in London, which funded the innovative 'Counting Fathers In' project—the first to attempt to understand how men negotiate the day-to-day challenges of their encounters with the child protection system.

The team examined father involvement in 150 children's case files to provide a context for an in-depth study of 35 men's lives and their experiences of child protection over the course of a year, across three [local authorities](#). The group included men who had lost previous children to care, and men who were, or became the main carers for their child.

Lead researcher Dr Georgia Philip said the findings showed that social workers and multi-agency teams needed to be more curious about men's lives: "Very little is known about men's own views on the child protection process and this was at the heart of our study. This project has produced an important and vivid picture of how the system works for fathers."

For example, one father said: "I am a father to my children and I know a lot of men, well I can see why they do it now, it is so much easier just to let the women get on with it and see your kids whenever but I am not like that, I want to be an influence in my children's life." While another commented: "In my mind the system is geared up in a way to assume that everything will be okay with mum and that everything will inevitably cock up with dad. Do you get what I mean, and that is frustrating, that is hard to deal with."

The researchers found assessments of men tend to lack depth and context, and suggest that social workers should seek the fullest picture possible of their background, relationship dynamics, wellbeing and current circumstances. What they learn should inform a shared approach, which takes account of the benefits to the child's wellbeing fathers may bring, as well as any harm they pose. Dr Phillip said: "Fathers are important to children and, like mothers, most present a combination of positive and negative factors. Men and social workers need to recognise and work with this so that wherever possible children can still share and be involved with their fathers."

Other key messages for social work and wider child protection practice include:

- Pursuing active rather than passive involvement in working relationships with fathers—negotiation, flexibility and practical support may be needed to enable men to participate more fully in the work to protect the child;
- Engaging fathers should be seen as everyday practice in child protection - this may require organisations to tackle structural and cultural barriers to fathers' involvement, including challenging deep rooted assumptions about gender and parenting, where the father-child relationship is often seen as secondary and where the child protection system tends to prioritise mothers over fathers;
- Workers need confidence that managers will support them in this, while managers need to challenge risk-averse, procedurally driven culture and practice. These actions should be considered part of local authorities' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

The team found that even in the most difficult circumstances the majority of men were doing things to try to keep being fathers. Those

who wanted help to stay involved or to change things in their lives often felt their role as a father was overlooked and were often facing difficulties with health, housing, money or relationships, factors that had an impact on the children and fathering.

Most men experienced or perceived gender difference as a form of unfair treatment, and the study also looked at the issues of [domestic violence](#) and abuse in men's lives, which influenced the possibility of some having an active role in their child's care.

Principal investigator Prof Marian Brandon said: "Fathers' experiences from this study suggest that domestic violence and abuse is rightly taken very seriously as a factor in child [protection](#), but that mothers and [fathers](#) are not on an equal footing in relation to the assessment of abuse.

"A significant minority of men are victims of abuse from their female partners and the complexity of cases, and of domestic abuse itself, means that more sophisticated assessment procedures and training are needed for social workers and other professionals, including the police."

Key things men said were unhelpful about the [child protection](#) system were being included late or only as a last resort, getting labelled as difficult, not getting a fair hearing and lack of flexibility from social workers.

The main things they said helped were being involved early on in the process, social workers taking time to understand their situation, and having a social worker who was reliable, open, and who balanced criticism with praise.

The full research report will be available on the CRCF website from August, and a training course based on the project is being developed for [social workers](#).

Provided by University of East Anglia

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