

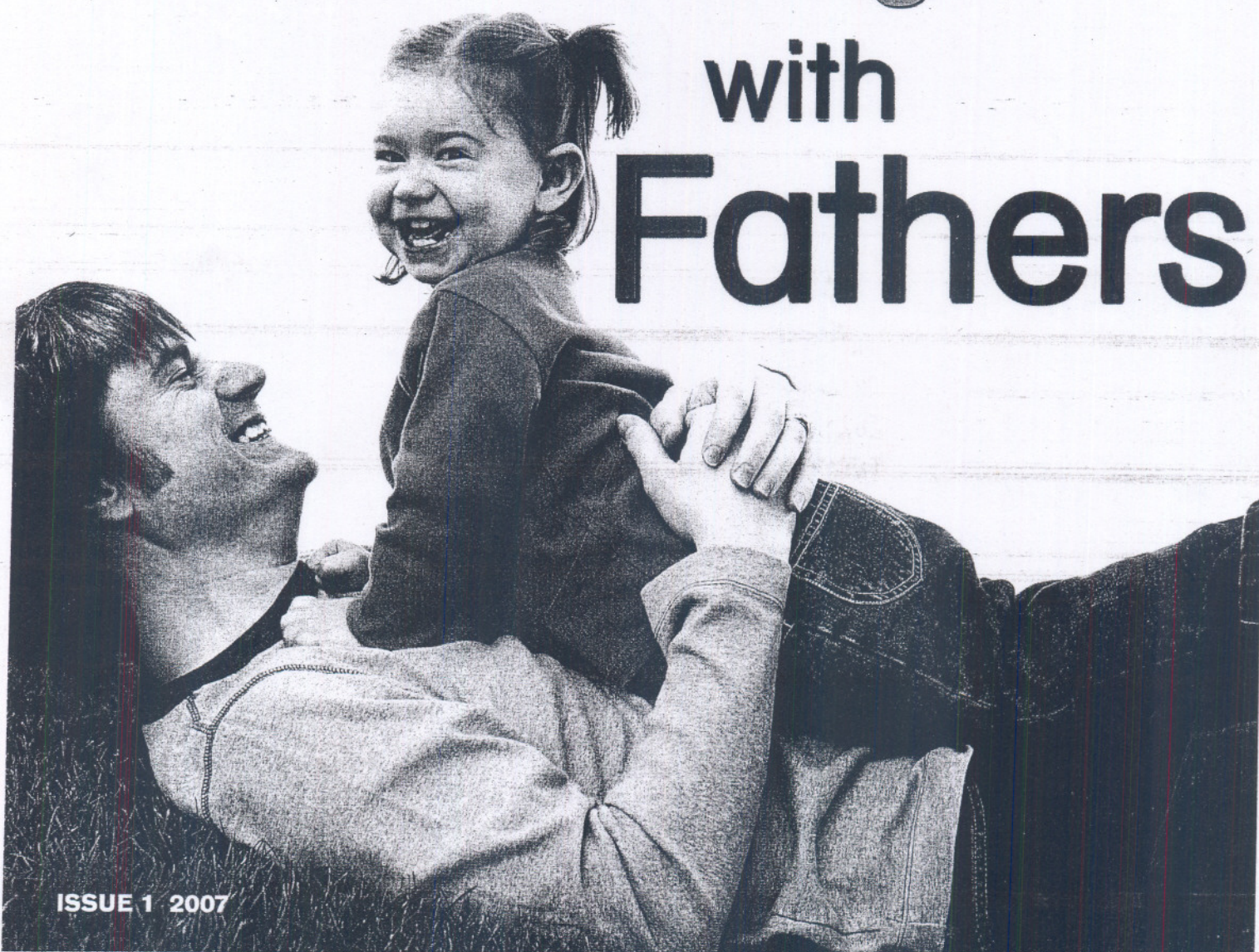


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Working with Fathers

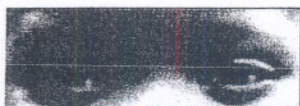


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Barnardos

No child gets left behind



Working with fathers



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Messages from research into good practice

It is now widely accepted that the exclusion of fathers from child and family work is problematic and needs to change. Our research into 24 'vulnerable' fathers and families who were known to social care agencies in Ireland confirms that for many there is a real problem here (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). However, in interviewing vulnerable working-class fathers, their partners, their children and the professionals who worked with them, we found that many such men are much more involved as fathers than typical stereotypes of being feckless or dangerous would allow. While the problem of men's exclusion from interventions by professionals and men's exclusion of themselves is a very real one, our study focused on cases where fathers were included and we want to share here some of what we learned about good practice with fathers and their families.



RECOGNISING THE MULTIPLE SIDES TO MEN

From the professionals, fathers, mothers and children we interviewed, we have uncovered a number of key aspects to how to work with fathers. A crucial first step is to recognise the complexity of men and masculinity. Men are excluded from social intervention for many reasons, the most powerful being because they are perceived as dangerous, unreachable and/or useless. Men and fathers are judged negatively on the basis of their appearance, such as having tattoos, a 'hard man' persona, lifestyle, doing hard physical work or aggressive, violence-prone work, like bouncing. This social construction draws on assumptions about gender which 'fix' men in their relationship to caring in deficit terms. Masculinity and caring, and especially 'rough' working-class men and caring, are regarded as incompatible. In our sample family centre, workers were much less prone to such a misreading of the men than social workers, yet some social workers were also able to see the multiple sides to men:

As I was coming away George (not his real name) said, 'Jesus, I'm sorry for being so weak' and I said to him 'George, you know tears aren't a sign of weakness, you know as far as I'm concerned that's a sign of strength'. And I told him that I think he's wasted, I think he should be in there telling other fathers and other men that it's OK to cry and it's OK to be and it's OK to make mistakes and it's OK to do, you know, just to be. And as I said earlier on he's up there, one of the highest people I know. (statutory social worker)

This 37-year-old lone-parent father of three had been crying because attempts had been made by a hospital social worker to take his children into care simply on the basis of his appearance. However, the community-based social worker was prepared to see beyond the man's appearance and fully assessed him, not simply as a risk, but as a resource to his children. This father not only had tattoos and a shaved head, but he was a boxer and worked as a bouncer. He felt entirely judged by social workers and the police because of these characteristics. A key best practice component was that the social worker engaged with the children as well as the man himself to establish their perspectives on this father and family life. For instance, among the many things his 15-year-old son said to us about him was:

Dad's kind of a mix of things, like he's very good like. Like he looks like the hard man and when you talk to him he's fierce quiet. He cares and like he's working as a bouncer so lots of people think that bouncers are the hard men you know, but he's not as hard. He thinks he's like hard, that he can take a lot mentally but he's not as hard as he

thinks he is because he gets sick like... All the stress and worry and stuff I think that's what drew it out of him and when my mam left it really came bad.

What is needed are techniques for getting beyond macho fixations to a genuine assessment of the man in himself and as a father. We are arguing that the current norms which support father absence need to be turned on their head: compelling grounds need to be available for professionals not to include the father. Here we are following the lead of some of the agencies and workers in our study who adopted such an approach to the extent that they refused to go ahead with family interviews if the father had not at least been invited. The feedback from fathers was how important it was to them that these kinds of efforts were made on their behalf.

A 'NOT KNOWING APPROACH'

The challenge is to take seriously what is known or suspected about the man while adopting a 'not knowing' stance. This produces the necessary information from the father and others on which to base a thorough assessment of him in terms of him being a possible risk and resource to his children and partner. This is complex. In part, the discrepancy between professional perceptions of men as useless and how active at caring some fathers actually are can be explained by the fact that some families kept the man's involvement hidden because of a criminal history. There was a fear of drawing negative attention on the family with the risk that the children may be removed. Father involvement was also hidden because the couple could acquire a better income if both parents claimed benefits as single people even if, in reality, they were cohabiting. In this way men were written out of the 'official' script of family life.

We found that even the most apparently wild & unreachable men have a capacity to talk about their love for their children & about intimacy, & to develop into good fathers & be a vital resource to their families.

To reach the active, nurturing side that the men expressed in private, but often feared showing in public, effective practitioners included the men from the start. They got the men to relate their story of fatherhood, their feelings for their children, what they feel they do well and how intervention might help them. We found that even the most apparently wild and unreachable men



have a capacity to talk about their love for their children and about intimacy, and to develop into good fathers and be a vital resource to their families. Michael, 19, had been homeless and in prison but relished the unplanned birth of his son two years previously. 'I just take him in me arms at night, if we're watching telly, like I cuddle and kiss him like. When he's in bed I tuck him in and all, kiss him goodnight and all this kind of stuff like. At night if he needs anything, more times I get up and I go to him, all that kind of stuff.' His young partner regarded him as a 'brilliant' father.

CREATING FATHER-FRIENDLY SPACES

Our findings suggest that care and attention need to be given to the context within which the actual practice goes on, in so far as professionals have this under their control. Intervention sites – social work offices, family centres – need first of all to be welcoming to all service-users. The provision of tea and food can be a very nurturing gesture, especially for very disadvantaged users for whom the centre may, among other things, be a haven from a heartless world. Special efforts must be made to send out father-friendly messages, by such things as having men's interest magazines in waiting rooms. When publications such as *Men's Health* and *FHM* (For Him Monthly) begin to rub shoulders in waiting rooms with *Cosmopolitan* and *Hello!*, men will know that these are equal spaces for them. There should also be an effort made to have male workers available. We are not arguing here that male workers should be working on all cases involving fathers. Our findings suggest that women can and do work very effectively with fathers. There are some instances where co-working by male and female colleagues is desirable. But at the very least men need to be visible in offices to help create images of male-friendly spaces.

QUALITY TIME WITH FATHERS

A range of services proved effective in working with men, from parenting classes to in-depth psycho-therapeutic work. Fathers engage much more purposefully when they can see, as well as feel, the active efforts that are being made on their behalf.

A great example is the family centre that ran a parenting course for a father at 8 am, timed to fit with his work commitments, and the social worker who agreed to attend with him. These gestures were crucial in turning the case around to help produce a father who, by his own account, was now able to believe that the services were on his side. His parenting capacities were developed to a level that prevented the children from entering care. Fathers and children were worked with together in a number of cases to improve their relationships, the father's communication skills and their understanding of and responsiveness to their children's needs.

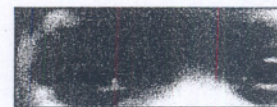
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Promoting change often also involved supporting invariably harassed mothers, for instance by helping them to realise that they did not have to be responsible for everything domestic and that their men needed to be trusted to do the childcare and chores in their own way.

Social work methods in particular need to be more purposeful in their approach to men. Social workers often reported to us that they did not have time to work with the father, or had enough to do focusing on the mother. Yet, our findings show that they often do spend at least some time with fathers, but too much of it can be wasted. They try and humour them, discuss the 'nicer things', as one put it. The real point is that the time that social workers do have to spend with fathers needs to be made into quality time. While they are sitting there they may as well be doing something worthwhile. Men, no less than women and children, can immediately sense if someone is interested in them or can't wait to get out of the room. There is an important spiritual component to helping relationships and the worker needs to communicate that they are prepared to sit with the user, through thick and more thick. Crucial to this is the worker feeling comfortable in her or his work with men, with the skill and confidence to know that they can engage and 'hold' the man in a therapeutic and supportive space.

INFORMALITY

Service-user fathers universally favour a style of professional working where the emphasis is on 'informality' as opposed to a more explicit model of the expert as all-knowing and dominant. Men need to feel 'talked with' not 'talked to'. As one male family centre worker advised: 'Sometimes I'm fearful that we get men into therapy to work on them. We work *with* women, we work *with* mothers but we work *on* fathers and we work *on* men! Which I think is a dangerous notion.' 'Informal' engagement represents a disposition to working with men which allows them to feel respected. Rather than entering into a patriarchal power struggle for dominance which judges or overtly controls them, the informality enables them to maintain a sense of being in control. The difference they recognise in being 'spoken *with*' and 'listened *to*', rather



than 'talked to' means that they do not need to defer or submit to experts who represent higher authority. This enables men to maintain a 'respectable masculine self', with its high value on being seen to cope and be in control, while at the same time changing that by submitting to their need for help.

As one father put it:

*It's very informal, that's the good thing about it.
You kind of sit down ... they were playing games ...
There was no kind of sitting there with pens and
papers or tape recorders ... just let the kids say
what they wanted to say. Listened. That's what it's
about really at the end of the day, listening.*

This does not mean compromising on the use of authority but using it to exercise good judgement in a way that is enabling. The paradox is that the more informal service-user fathers perceive the approach to be, the more likely they are to fully engage in child and family work with the seriousness it requires, which can include accepting limits being placed on their behaviour.

PRINCIPLES OF FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

In conclusion, a number of key features of organisations, professional approaches and practical steps can positively influence both the process of engaging with men and also the level of 'success' in strengthening families through working with fathers. Our findings suggest that a father-inclusive framework requires an integration of at least 10 things:

1. Clear father-inclusive policies in organisations.
2. An approach which ensures men are challenged to take

responsibility for any problems, such as violence, they cause.

3. An approach which ensures that men are supported to work through any problems they have.
4. Critically reflective self and organisational cultures which constantly monitor and challenge assumptions about gender roles, men and masculinities.
5. Practical skills and techniques to engage men and 'hold' them in the work.
6. Practical skills and techniques to work with women and children in their own right, and in integrating the impact on family relations of the work done with the father.
7. A belief that men can nurture and develop as carers.
8. An ethical concern with involving men in the lives of children and families.
9. A commitment to promoting 'democratic families' where women, children and men feel safe and where equality is practiced in day-to-day life in everything from housework, the management of money and time, to the communication of needs and feelings.
10. A belief that fathers matter to children and families and must be included, not just as good supportive or secondary parents to mothers, but as men who are important in and of themselves.

Many vulnerable men cherish being fathers because of the joy that loving and caring brings, but also because they see it as an opportunity to make something meaningful of their lives in a context of feeling like failures. It can only be in everyone's best interests that we do everything in our power to enable them to succeed.

REFERENCES

- Ferguson, H. and Hogan, F. (2004), *Strengthening Families through Fathers: Issues for Policy and Practice in Working with Vulnerable Fathers and their Families*, Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.