

### Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

#### Learning Outcomes

To assess parents' capacity to respond to the child's needs.

**Audience** Groups 2-6 (Working Together 2010)

**Time** 30 minutes

#### Key Reading

Daniel, B. and Taylor, J. (2005) 'Do they care? The role of fathers in cases of child neglect.' In J. Taylor and B. Daniel (eds) *Child Neglect: Practice Issues for Health and Social Care*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Featherstone, B. (2003) 'Taking fathers seriously'. *British Journal of Social Work* 33(2): 239-254.

Scourfield, J. (2003) *Gender and Child Protection*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan

#### Links to Common Core

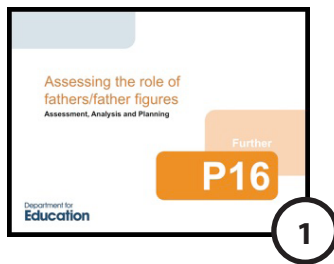
**Common Core 1** Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (skills: consultation and negotiation). Understand the key role and value of parents and carers; know when to refer them to further sources of information, advice or support.

**Common Core 1** Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (knowledge: importance of respect). Be self-aware: know how to demonstrate a commitment to treating all people fairly; be respectful by using active listening and avoiding assumptions.

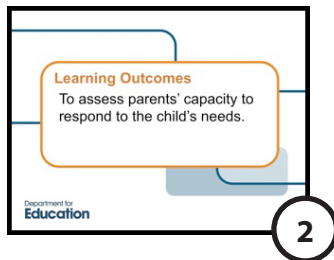
further

Assessing the role of fathers/  
father figures

**N16**<sub>1</sub>

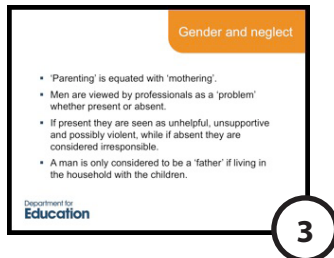


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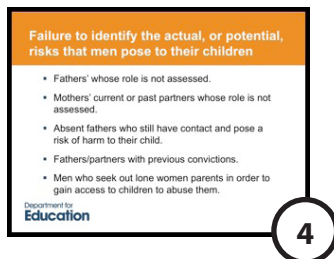
2

Learning outcomes.



3

There are many different ideological positions with regard to fathers – ranging from feminist analyses of gender and power to lobbyists for fathers and legal justice. It is important to stress that this presentation is based on the fundamental basis that all decisions should be based upon what is in the best interests of the child. It is also important to concentrate on issues in relation to fathers/father figures and neglect.



4

**Discussion point:** Quick question: ask participants how easy they find it to work with fathers in cases where children are neglected? Do you think father figures are in the background? If so, why is this?

There is a considerable body of research to suggest that traditionally child protection practice has been highly gendered and that fathers and father figures have been rendered invisible in practice. More recently the role of fathers has received more political and media attention.

However, the role of fathers is still often couched in the context of traditional gender roles – thus there is talk of the importance of fathers as a 'male role model' and as the parent who exerts discipline.

The role of fathers as nurturers is still less to the fore. Fathers may be absent – to which there can be questions about the child's view of that and how much information is available to the child about their father and their father's extended family. It is particularly important that the perspective and engagement with the male carer/father figure is pursued and undertaken (Munro 2011).

**Failure to recognise the positive contribution of men to their children**

- Fathers as nurturing parents.
- Partners who support mothers.
- Fathers' extended families as resources to the child and family.
- Children's own attachment networks.

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5

The lack of attention to fathers is limiting for two reasons – it ignores the potential risks and assets of men to children. It is especially important in cases of neglect to be alert to the role of fathers and other male figures in the household. Women whose children are neglected are frequently themselves vulnerable to the attentions of men who are dangerous to children either directly or indirectly.

**Study of 244 five year old children**

- No significant differences in neglect according to presence or absence of fathers and suggestion that another adult in the household could fulfil the role of 'father'.
- In sub-sample where 117 interviewed, neglect was less likely when the father:
  - was involved with the family for a longer period
  - expressed more parenting effectiveness
  - was more involved in household tasks
  - was less involved in child care.

(Dubowitz et al. 2000)

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6

By the same token, the nature of the relationship between the father or father figure and the child may not be considered by practitioners.

**Assessing the role of fathers/father figures**

Both the quality of the relationship [with the child] and the fathers' involvement seem to be more important than the biological relationship of the father or where he resides'

(Dubowitz et al. 2000 p.140)

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7

Dubowitz et al. (2000) is one of the few studies to look at the role of fathers in neglect. The findings are mixed, but the sub-sample gives some interesting pointers.

**Assessing fathers/father figures**

Information must be separately recorded and analysed about:

- the child's birth mother
- the child's birth father
- mother's current partner/s or other father figure/s in the child's life
- the nature of the relationship of each of these people with the child
- the nature of their relationships with each other.

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8

Dubowitz et al.'s (2000) research raises a broader question about whether it is the gender of adults in the households that matter rather than that there is more than one adult to help with child care.

**Assessing potential risks of harm to the child**

- What is his role in the family?
- Is he harming the children?
- Is he spending the money on a substance misuse habit?
- Is he undermining the mother's confidence?
- Is he violent to the mother?
- Is he bringing dangerous people to the house?
- Is he limiting the mother's capacity to be an effective parent?

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9

This slide stresses the importance of including attention to fathers and father figures in assessments. Irrespective of whether the father is absent or present in the child's life, he may still be a salient figure to the child. The absence of a father, or lack of information about him can affect the child's sense of self.

**Implications for professionals**

- Staff working in probation, adult mental health, substance misuse settings, learning disability settings must all consider the implications for children of their work with adults.
- Health visitors (home visiting nurses) can play a vital role in noticing who is in the household.
- No version of events or personal history should be taken at face value.

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10

In an assessment, one of the tasks is to assess the actual or potential risks of harm posed by the father and/or father figures to the child together with the protective factors.

further

Assessing the role of fathers/  
father figures

N16<sup>3</sup>

**Planning to reduce risks of actual or potential harm**

- If the father is violent to the child or mother, then address his violence, all responsibility for protection of the child should not be placed upon the mother.
- When a child is neglected consider the father's part in this neglect (positive and negative contributions) and include him in the plans.
- It must be remembered that where there is domestic abuse, post-separation is most dangerous time for the mother and children.

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11

As above, the slide suggests a role for a range of professions.

**Assessing potential strengths**

- Does the child have a secure attachment to the father/father figure?
- Is the child attached to the paternal extended family (or potentially so)?
- Does the father/father figure show an interest in the child's pre-school or schooling?
- Does he, or could he, provide physical and emotional care for the child?
- Is he a support to the mother?

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12

The child's plan should include what actions should be taken in relation to the father and/or father figure, in particular attention to ameliorating potential or actual risks of harm.

**Planning to enhance strengths of father's relationship**

- Be clear about your goals.
- Encourage nurturing of the child and especially secure attachments.
- Increase paternal involvement with schooling.
- Provide relationship counselling for men.
- Offer individual support to the father.

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13

In the same way, the assessment should incorporate attention to the ways in which the father could be supported in their positive interactions with the child.

**Fathers may need help**

**To address:**

- violent behaviour
- alcohol or drug problems
- finances
- housing
- mental health problems
- relationships with partners and/or children
- own childhood experiences of abuse and neglect.

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14

Again, the child's plan should include ways to maximise the strengths and positive contributions of the father and his extended family, whether or not the father lives in the same household as the child.

**Improving nurturing**

Health care workers should encourage fathers to be 'optimally nurturing'

- include fathers and develop more programmes for fathers
- facilitate fathers' emotional and material support to mothers
- recognise that a father can be a significant figure to the child, even if not in the same household
- facilitate contact by offering practical and emotional support on a sustained basis.

(Dubowitz et al. 2007)

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15

This and the next two slides give some pointers for practice to build on the positive impact of fathers in the lives of their children.

**Attention to child's schooling**

- Fathers of neglected children may have had difficult experiences at school and need help to appreciate the importance of education and of the benefits of father involvement.
- Need to consider ways in which the father could be engaged to help with school matters.
- School records may not hold accurate information about both parents.

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16

As above.

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Assessing the role of fathers/  
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N16 4

Promote readiness for a secure attachment relationship with the child

- Support in becoming aware of previous attachment relationships.
- Explore and help develop positive attitudes towards becoming a parent.
- Provide information about behaviours that are known to promote attachment.
- Explore with both parents how they wish to divide tasks and what roles they each envisage taking with the child.

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17

Fathers appear to have a specific positive impact on their child's schooling if they show an interest in the child's education.

Promote the development of secure attachments

- Help with acceptance of the pregnancy.
- Encourage father to organise time and space for a child in his life.
- Maximise opportunities for the father to be involved with the baby in the womb.
- Build upon the 'engrossment' that the father shows towards his new-born baby.
- Encourage, advise and support fathers in sensitive, reciprocal interaction with the child.

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18

**Discussion point:** Quick question: what is the role of fathers?

There are a number of complexities about how a man may view masculinity, fatherhood and parenthood. What is most salient for the child is that the person is a human. Men can have very different ideas about what being a father means. Practitioners therefore need to be aware simultaneously of the potential in all men and the specifics of the individual situation. Feelings of effectiveness are what matter.

Fathers whose children are the subject of concerns about neglect may themselves have experienced neglect in their own childhoods and have low self-efficacy and low self-esteem as a consequence. They, themselves, may not have experienced any positive parenting by a male figure in their own lives and so will have no models to base their behaviour on.

The parameters of what may be different about the way in which fathers and mothers contribute to meeting the needs of their children might go some way towards explaining why the research is so confused about fathers' contributions. The only unique aspect of a father and all his personal traits is his gender. Sometimes people suggest that a father is needed to provide a good 'male role-model', but there is a lack of common consensus about what a 'good male' should be. Perhaps we should be looking to both mothers and fathers to act as good 'human role models'. In relation to neglect it is important not to make assumptions that nurturing can be undertaken solely by women.

To make a positive contribution to the child's life, the father does not necessarily need to be present in the household and in some cases, certainly should not be. One of the fundamental ways in which a father can enhance his child's development is by being psychologically available. Availability need not necessarily denote physical presence in the household in which the child lives. Most of the evidence points to the primacy of the quality of the relationship, not the physical living arrangements.

The presence of a violent father can be as damaging as the absence of a 'good' father. Fatherhood debates tend to conflate physical and psychological presence. There is an assumption that resident fathers are always present for their children, whereas absent fathers are neither physically nor emotionally available. Clearly this is a biased account, as fathers can be 'technically present but functionally absent'. Some resident fathers provide little for their children, while many 'absent' fathers maintain excellent relationships with their children. In cases of neglect where there may be several children, perhaps with different fathers, and a number of different father figures, it is vital to assess carefully the contribution that each may offer to each child.

further

Assessing the role of fathers/  
father figures

N16 5

Repair or change unhelpful attachment patterns

- Encourage situations of play and fun between father and child.
- Use games, video, role-play and so on.
- Advise the father of ways in which the child might try to repeat unhelpful patterns of attachment from their past.

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19

Infants show separation protest from their fathers and the majority are attached to both parents. As long ago as 1964, Schaffer and Emerson found, that by 18 months most infants will protest at separation from the father. Other studies have also suggested that by eight months most infants are attached to both parents. There is now, therefore, consensus that infants can form attachments to fathers.

As to whether patterns of attachment are similar, there is some evidence that when under stress, and in a position to choose between the mother and father, infants will turn to the mother. However, studies where the roles are swapped show that if the father is the main caregiver, they turn to the father. It is the role, not the gender that seems crucial. In majority of families the gender roles diverge quickly along gender-stereotypical lines.

## Notes

further

Assessing the role of fathers/  
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N16 6