



RESEARCH TO PRACTICE NETWORK

Fathers and the Child Welfare System

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Introduction

Today, men are present in the lives of child welfare involved children as resident or non-resident fathers, step-fathers, the mothers' partner, the mother's brother or father, and family friends. Yet the overwhelming focus of child welfare policy, practice, research and education is mothers. This essay explores why men and fathers are often not involved in child welfare services, describes how to encourage their involvement, and identifies some of the complexities of increased father involvement in child welfare.

In Canada 80% of first level child protection social workers are women (Fallon et al., 2003), and historically child welfare has been viewed as a practice that takes place between women (Davies, 2005; Callahan and Walmsley, 2007; Scourfield, 2006). Although men are found in the field today often as managers, parenting experts and child development researchers, research, education, and practice in child welfare has remained focused on mothers.¹ In a recent analysis of child

¹ Only 3 papers about fathering were given at the annual Canadian Association for Social Work Education conference in comparison to 21 papers about mothering in the six-year period ending in 2007. Child and adolescent psychology research has a similar trend. Researchers focus on mothers and ignore fathers (Phares, 1992; Phares et al., 2005; Cassano et al., 2006). A search of the (U.S.) National

protection practice, social workers considered fathers irrelevant to both mothers and children 50% of the time (Strega et al., 2007). Men's potential violence may be a reason to avoid them in practice (Buckley, 2003), but clearly, social workers gave little importance to involving fathers in planning for a child's care. In our society, caring work is constructed as feminized activity (Christie, 2006), and with the feminization of the child welfare workplace, men perceive social services as designed for women (Devault et al., 2003), or mother-centric (Ball & George, 2006).

Processes that exclude, marginalize or render fathers invisible are not unique to child welfare. A study of popular parenting literature (Fleming and Tobin, 2005) found that although most books are written for the gender-neutral "parent", the images portraying adults with children were most frequently female (69.1%) in comparison to male (22.9%). In parent education materials, fathers are often depicted only in peripheral ways as sideline participants or helpers (Hodgins, 2007). A study of popular parenting materials in Britain and the United States found fathers portrayed as doing little more than stepping in and helping, whereas mothers are viewed as the full-time parent (Sunderland, 2004). As recent as the 1950s, Dr. Spock, a US parenting expert, advised "it was fine for fathers to change a diaper or make the formula occasionally" after a day's work outside the home, but parenting was fundamentally viewed as a mother's work (Carter and McGoldrick, 1999, p. 252). Today fathers are portrayed as "helping" at home, but co-parenting still means "Mom's responsible, Dad helps out" (Carter and McGoldrick, 1999, p. 255). The gendering of parenting to view childcare as 'mother's work' is expressed in child welfare practice by focusing on mothers and ignoring or excluding fathers.

Fathers and Child Welfare Research

Studies that explore men or fathers' participation in the lives of child welfare involved children are not numerous. McKinnon, Davies and Rains (2001) noted three dominant and sometimes overlapping constructions of men in the lives of Canadian teenage mothers. Men were seen as violent and irresponsible, as

Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect found 3031 "mother" documents and 1023 "father" documents—a 3:1 ratio. Similarly, a search of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (Public Health Agency of Canada) found 1419 "mother" documents and 300 "father" documents, close to a 5:1 ratio.

romantic attachments, or as involved in fathering. Scourfield (2003) described six constructions of men in the occupational discourse of UK child welfare social workers. Men were seen as a threat, as no use, as irrelevant, as absent, as no different from women, and as better than women. Neither of these studies involved or interviewed men themselves. These studies and others (Strega et al., 2008, Swift, 1995, Ryan, 2000) suggest a gendered occupational discourse in child welfare supports absenting men and holds mothers responsible for the effect of men's behaviour on children. This discourse fails to recognize men have assets beyond economic support and these could be beneficial to mothers and children, that some could be more beneficial if given support and/or help to resolve their issues, and others should not be ignored as they may cause harm to mothers and children.

To better understand social workers' practice with fathers, a recent Canadian study randomly sampled 282 child protection case files in a mid-size Canadian city (Strega et al., 2007).² Social workers' descriptions of fathers in formal and informal file recordings resulted in four analytic categories: father as risk, father as asset, father as risk and asset, and father as irrelevant. Analysis of file data found social workers considered almost 50% of fathers irrelevant to both mothers and children.³ Nearly 20% were viewed as a risk to mothers and children while 20% were considered an asset. Over half (60%) of the fathers who were identified as a risk to children were not contacted by social workers and similarly not contacted 50% of the time when they were considered a risk to mothers. They were contacted only 50% of the time when considered an asset to mothers and contacted 75% of the time when viewed as an asset to children. These findings about the lack of contact with fathers, irrespective of whether they are perceived as risks or assets, are congruent with other studies of social work practice with fathers, as summarized by Daniel and Taylor (1999) and Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003). A further qualitative analysis of this file data was conducted. In previous studies (Rutman et al., 2002; Callahan et al., 2004; Callahan et al.,

2 Birth/biological fathers, stepfathers and men providing emotional, financial or social support to a child or children were included (Strega et al, 2008). The files were dated between 1997 and 2005 and were restricted to those files where the mother was an adolescent (19 years of age or younger) at the time of the birth of at least one child.

3 Categories of 'risk', 'asset' and 'irrelevant' were quantified based on social workers' expressed description of fathers (in both formal and informal file recordings), actions taken or not taken by social workers in relation to fathers (e.g. instituting or not instituting risk assessment procedures, including or excluding father in parenting assessments) and the number and type of social worker contacts or attempted contacts with fathers.

2005; Strega, 2006), the active presence of fathers within the family had been noted, although it was often unacknowledged by child welfare.

Frequently, there were a series of fathers coming and going such as non-resident fathers who played a role in the lives of the women and children and hidden fathers who were scarcely acknowledged because mothers were not willing to do so. In this qualitative analysis, the word “ghost” was used to describe these fathers as they *exist* in the lives of women and children in child welfare, but are *rarely seen* by social workers, even when present (Brown et al., forthcoming).

Social workers rarely hold fathers to account for their absence and their violence. If fathers are not in the home, they are not seen as “neglecting” their children for child welfare purposes (Scourfield, 2003; Swift, 1995). If they are abusing their spouses, it is seen as a police matter or taken up in terms of a mother’s responsibility to protect her children from this violence (Dominelli et al., 2005; Radhakrishna et al., 2001; Scourfield, 2003). Social workers have been found to routinely disregard dangerous men when assessing risk and family functioning (Munro, 1998; Stanley, 1997). Cavanagh, Dobash and Dobash (2007), who examined 26 fatal child abuse cases in which a child had been killed by a father or father figure, found that even when fathers perpetrated serious assaults they received minimal attention. Coohy and Zang (2006) found fathers who had physically abused their children were excluded from risk assessments, and Mayer et al. (2003) noted fathers are often left out of intervention plans. Whenever a parenting capacity assessment appeared in the files, only the mother had been assessed regardless of whether or not a man was actively participating in parenting. Many treatment or risk reduction plans involve instructing fathers to leave the home and threaten the mother with the loss of her children if she is unable to effect this (Strega, 2006).

One recent Canadian study interviewed 11 fathers whose children had child welfare involvement to better understand fathers’ experience of child welfare (Strega et al., 2008). These fathers ‘stepped up to the plate’ and took responsibility to care for their children. Yet they experienced child welfare services as an encounter with absolute power, felt an ongoing need to prove they were adequate parents, sometimes saw themselves as better caregivers than the women in their lives, and always felt under the surveillance of child welfare officials. At the same time, they wanted to be seen as both deserving and promising candidates for assistance by

social workers. Other studies that interviewed young fathers found they lacked education and economic advantages to financially support the mothers and their children (Glikman, 2004). They also felt unsupported and rarely encouraged by social workers to become involved with their children (Speake et al., 1997; Tyrer et al., 2005).

Involved Fatherhood

For over thirty years popular and academic discourse has been arguing the benefits of involved fatherhood.⁴ There are websites, research projects, father support programs and father-specific education booklets available to encourage fathers to actively care for their children (Father Involvement Research Alliance, Fatherhood Institute, Devault et al., 2005, Hoffman, 2008, Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre, 2007). Researchers have argued there are many benefits to increased father involvement (Long, 2008). However, as Featherstone (2004) notes, trying to disentangle whether poor outcomes for children in mother-led families are a result of father absence or the absence of a second parent is difficult, as most often the second parent is equated with being male. This raises the question whether it is the male sex role that is essential or the fulfillment of economic, social and emotional roles in child development that makes the difference.

Practice Implications

Social workers need to re-conceptualize child welfare practice from its present 'gender-neutral' construct, with its implicit focus on mothers, to become father inclusive. To begin, child protection agencies need to acknowledge fathers and fathering persons exist in the lives of child welfare involved children and plan to include them at all stages of intervention. At a basic level, social workers need to search for contact information for both birth fathers and other significant father figures, record it in child protection files, and describe whether birth fathers or other father figures are actively involved with the child.

More substantively, they need to take the necessary time to interview fathers

⁴ The first edition of *The role of the father in child development* by Michael Lamb was published in 1976.

and fathering persons to understand their role(s) within the family. Children's views about their relationships with both parents and fathering men in their lives need to be explored, and social workers need "to engage with fathers' versions of events in an open and exploratory way" (Family Rights Group, 2008). Follow-up communication and official correspondence should be sent to both mothers and fathers, and forms need to be designed to provide space for the views of fathers and not just those of 'parents'. Resident and non-resident fathers should be systematically invited to attend child protection conferences and planning meetings. Social workers should also consider requiring men's participation in assessments and family interventions when they are involved with children. Scourfield (2003) argues to not do so could be dangerous to mothers and children. Fathers' presence or absence should be routinely recorded in the file, and their views, when different from those of other family members or the child protection agency, should be noted in the file. To encourage fathers' participation in child protection conferences and meetings, social workers should take into account the distance fathers have to travel to the meeting (particularly in the case of non-resident fathers) and schedule them around fathers' work commitments. In general, fathers should be involved at all stages of the child protection process unless a specific and well-documented reason justifies their exclusion.

Social workers need to recognize the importance of positive father involvement, and be prepared to assist fathers resolve issues that might hinder their parenting ability such as addictions, violence, unemployment, limited education, and mental health. When a father needs education or treatment, social workers can help maintain father involvement by searching for resources within a father's extended family to provide care for a child. These resources might be grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family members. Their participation in planning for a child through a family group conference can ensure a child grows and develops within a supportive family network.⁵

Different ways exist to be a father in spite of Euro-Canadian society's idealized image of the "good father". Marginalized mothers often recognize men's day-to-day performance with their children as a more realistic and substantive definition of fathering (Haney & March, 2003) than the formal biological, institutional and financial connections that policymakers recognize. Today, men contribute to

⁵ The many specific suggestions in this section are derived from Featherstone, Rivett and Scourfield (2007), Daniel and Taylor (2001), the Family Rights Group (2008), Ferguson and Hogan (2004), Ryan (2000), and our own work (Brown et al., in press).

children's lives in a range of ways that sometimes highly resembling the work of mothering (Doucet, 2006). In specific families, the allocation of tasks and responsibilities will be unique and can vary with time, and not reflect gender, class, or 'race' assumptions (Ryan, 2000).

Being able to identify the strengths of a man's engagement as a father rather than simply his deficits is key. Not all men at all times lack the capacity to have an active caring role with children. However, in a child welfare system attuned to the assessment of safety risks to children, men involved with children can all become potential risks as perpetrators of abuse. Fathers have identified how often social workers focused on problems and saw their deficits and incapacities before they recognized any of their strengths (Brown et al., in press). With support, encouragement, and recognition more fathers will play active and positive roles with children. A father who has support to make progress on his own issues will have a greater capacity to care for his children.

Working with the Abusive or Violent Father

The reality of men's violence towards women and children presents the most complex challenge for practitioners engaging with fathers. As Featherstone (2003) notes:

An agenda in relation to tackling family violence appears to have developed separately from that of engaging fathers. In this agenda, those who are violent are constructed as offenders who should be dealt with in the criminal justice system but they are often fathers and most frequently men. Are they the same fathers whose involvement is to be encouraged or are they different? (Featherstone, 2003, p. 248)

There is an extensive literature on fathering, men who batter, and the impact of violence on children, but little research considers men who batter as fathers (Guille, 2003; Peled, 2000). Studies about battering from the point of view of the male batterer are scarce and "it is even more rare to find a study that explores their perspective regarding their children and their roles as fathers" (Guille, 2003, p. 155). As Scourfield (2006) notes, "Abusive men are indeed the cause of most child protection concerns, often directly as abusers, or at least at one remove, perhaps as a threatening presence that affects a mother's parenting" (p. 441). But at the same time, he notes, "Most children want contact with most fathers." (p. 441). Research on children with violent fathers has found they are caught between

strong opposing emotions, seeing either the good and loving father or the bad and abusive father and are often unable to deal with the contradictions (Peled, 2000). At the same time, family policies have focused on maintaining family links, constructing fatherhood as non-violent and seeing virtually any involvement by fathers as 'good-enough' fathering (Eriksson & Hester, 2001).

Little research on the outcome of parenting education work with abusive men exists, and these men are simply 'let off the parenting hook' (Peled, 2000). Mothers then become responsible for managing these men in their children's lives and find themselves blamed when their children are harmed. Although some argue social workers should work with abusive fathers (Scourfield, 2003), the difficulty is distinguishing situations where social work intervention with violent and/or abusive fathers would benefit mothers and children and situations where it would increase the risk of harm or further harm them.

Substantive research in this area is not available, but a number of cautionary practice principles can be identified from the existing literature. First, to engage with violent/abusive men, social workers should not put themselves at risk or endanger the safety of mothers and children (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). Initial intervention with abusive fathers should not focus on the development of child-management skills as the primary issues for these men are overly controlling behavior, a sense of entitlement, and self-centered attitudes. These issues need to be addressed successfully before parenting issues can be explored (Scott and Crooks, 2004). Intervention programs should assume that many men have little motivation to change. "Maltreating fathers typically do not seek intervention voluntarily, nor are they intrinsically motivated to change their parenting style" (Scott and Crooks, 2004, p. 101).

Abusive men may also justify their behavior on the basis of traditional gender stereotypes, and these attitudes need to be explicitly addressed in treatment as they provide an underlying framework for child maltreatment (Scott & Crooks, 2004). Abusive men also need to understand that the relationship they have with their children is not independent of the relationship they have with the children's mother. "Intervention needs to convey... that being a good father requires that they avoid or end abuse against their children's mother and that they develop a relationship with her that is respectful" (Scott & Crooks, 2004, p. 104). As little is known about the effectiveness of parenting intervention with abusive men, any

attempt to intervene directly “should be based on a carefully designed model which takes into consideration the danger involved, and is fully agreed upon and co-coordinated with the children and the victim-survivor” (Peled, 2000, p. 33). Abusive fathers who attempt to rebuild relationships with their children also need to recognize the relationship is complex and fundamentally damaged. They need to be patient to allow children adequate time to rebuild the trust that has been violated (Scott & Crooks, 2004).

While identifying safe conditions for fathers with a history of violence and abuse to re-engage with their families is important, there are some situations where families should be supported to end contact with fathers. These include “men who are withdrawing from their family, who have already caused substantial harm to their children, and who are actively avoiding services that challenge their behavior” (Scott and Crooks, 2004, p. 107). In other cases, where men may be able to benefit from services, they should have their contacts with their children supervised. Ending or limiting contact with fathers should involve a carefully developed retrospective and prospective assessment of the harm to children and mothers of ongoing contact.

Conclusion

Child welfare agencies that “see” fathers, and provide policy and practice guidance to their staff about engaging with fathers will, in the long term, reduce the risk of harm to children and mothers. Social workers who create a space for fathers to reflect on their behaviour in intimate relationships and heal from their traumas will enable them to become more positively involved with their children and, ultimately, have better ongoing relationships with children and grandchildren.

Note

The author is a member of the Fathering and Child Welfare Research Group situated at the University of Victoria School of Social Work with the following members: Dr. Leslie Brown, Dr. Marilyn Callahan, Dr. Lena Dominelli, and Dr. Susan Strega. Some research described in this essay has resulted from this group’s work.

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