Hidden men: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around ‘hidden’ men

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Men play a very important role in children’s lives and have a great influence on the children they care for. Despite this, they can be ignored by professionals who sometimes focus almost exclusively on the quality of care children receive from their mothers / female carers.

From our analysis of these case reviews, two categories of ‘hidden’ men emerged:

• men who posed a risk to the child which resulted in them suffering harm
• men, for example, estranged fathers who were capable of protecting and nurturing the child but were overlooked by professionals.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2008 which highlighted the issue of professionals not identifying and/or assessing key men, such as fathers, mothers’ partners, involved in the care of children who died or suffered harm.

In these case reviews, children died or suffered serious harm in a number of different ways:

• physical and sexual abuse by the mother’s partner
• killed by a father with mental health problems.

Risk factors for hidden men in case reviews

Lack of information sharing between adults’ and children’s services

Professionals involved with men who are fathers (such as substance misuse workers and probation officers) do not tend to share information about potential risks with other professionals supporting the children and partners of those men. This may be because they are unaware the men have contact with their children. Consequently, practitioners depend entirely on parents to share this information, which they may or may not do.
Relying too much on mothers for essential information

Professionals sometimes rely too much on mothers to tell them about men involved in their children’s lives. If mothers are putting their own needs first, they may not be honest about the risk these men pose to their children.

Professionals do not always talk enough to other people involved in a child’s life, such as the mother’s estranged partner(s), siblings, extended family and friends. This can result in them missing crucial information and failing to spot inconsistencies in the mother’s account.

Not wishing to appear judgmental about parents’ personal relationships

Professionals can be reluctant to judge the decisions parents make about their personal and sexual relationships. However this is to ignore the risks that might be posed to children by men who are in short-term, casual relationships with the mothers.

Overlooking the ability of estranged fathers to provide safe care for their children

Failing to identify and / or engage with fathers ignores their fundamental importance in a child’s emotional and psychological development. When a vulnerable child’s needs are not being met by their mother, an estranged father may be able to provide the protection and stability that the child needs.

Learning for improved practice

Identifying the men in the child’s life

- During pregnancy and after birth, make active enquiries about the child’s father, the mother’s relationships and any adults in contact with the child. Record these details.
- Identify and carry out checks on any new adults who have significant contact with vulnerable children. Always clarify who the members of a household are each time you visit a family.
- Be aware that some individuals will have a number of aliases. Try to find out what these are and carry out checks accordingly. You might also receive names which are incorrectly spelt. Make sure you carry out checks which allow for different spellings of a surname.
- In an assessment, always put the child’s needs before those of an adult.
- It can be difficult to get mothers to open up and discuss their partners’ involvement in their children’s lives. Supervisors should support practitioners to find ways to engage with mothers and build trust.
• Supervisors also need to offer guidance and training on working with fathers / male carers, monitor fathers’ engagement with services and evaluate how effective direct work with them is.

Involving fathers

• From the very beginning, emphasise to parents how crucial the father’s role is to the child’s wellbeing.
• Encourage fathers to attend ante-natal appointments and classes. Make appointments for times convenient to them (such as evenings).
• Involve fathers and male carers in assessments. Ask them directly about risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol use and offer them services based on their needs.
• Make sure fathers and male carers (including those who are not directly involved in mothers’ and children’s lives) know about concerns relating to their child. Consult them about plans, invite them to child protection conferences and include them on core groups.

Men as protectors

• Estranged fathers / ex-partners may be able to give crucial information about a mother and her children. Likewise, the siblings of an at-risk child can give insights into family dynamics and important people in their lives.
• Explore the potential of estranged fathers to offer protective care and stability.