Building relationships with fathers in a child protection context

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Today’s talk

1. Why are fathers important in child protection work?
2. What do fathers in the child protection system say works for them?
3. Is working with fathers different from working with mothers?
4. Not one homogenous group
5. What helps engage fathers in mainstream casework?
1. Why are fathers important in child protection work?
Why are fathers important in child protection work?

• Inclusive use of ‘fathers’ in this talk
• There is plenty of evidence that fathers influence long-term outcomes for children, positively and negatively.
• In a child protection context:
  – Fathers more likely than mothers to perpetrate some kinds of abuse
  – Services tend to work mostly with mothers
  – Child deaths often linked to failure to work with men
2. What do fathers in the child protection system say works for them?
Mellow Dads [http://www.mellowparenting.org/](http://www.mellowparenting.org/) (see McBeth et al., 2015)

Logic model

- **Transport and crèche**
  - Invite fathers by acknowledging difficult past experiences
  - Homework tasks

- **Visits to non-attendees**
  - Raise awareness of problem behaviours through discussion
  - Build up fathers’ relationships with each other

- **Mixed sex facilitation team**
  - Model play activities with children
  - Feedback on father-child videos encourages positive parenting style
  - Improvement in fathers’ attachment to children
Expectations before the first group session

When you first go there you see them as ‘social workers’, no offence, but you see them as a social worker, and then, but unfortunately, social workers … red warning when you see the words social workers.

I felt really withdrawn, frightened, scared, there is going to be drug addicts, is it going to be this and that? You know, I had my own problems I didn’t want to speak about. Nobody is going to notice if you are in the background. But you know, I just wanted to be the wallpaper the first week.
Relaxed atmosphere

They’ll have a laugh and a joke but at the end of the day we still get the work done at the same time.

If you see them walking in in the morning and they are relaxed and happy, it kind of makes you change and you feel relaxed and ready for the day and things like that.

They were down to earth, they felt like one of us sort of thing. They didn’t come across as too authoritative or anything like that.
Relationships with each other

It helped me quite a lot when it was there, because it brought me out of my depression quite quick, and I’ve got two or three good mates that I keep in touch with, sometimes. But if I’ve got a problem, I’ll give Jerry a phone and hae a blether.

It just helps you to open up a bit, be able to speak to the other dads. I never thought, this being my last week, that I would have a friendship with any of the other dads in the group, because I never came looking for that. But to walk away with that, I am quite happy to take that.
Learning skills

My wee boy enjoyed most of them. It was all right. I didn’t know how to make playdough or nothing so after a couple of wee things like that, my wee lassie, that is what we make just about every weekend now.

One time, (...) we were talking about getting children out of moods, and I started mucking about making him dance, dragging him off the chair and making him dance, or tickling him, things like that. And that worked a lot.

I used to be ‘do as you’re told, end of!’ Sergeant Major type person. Now I’m more, ‘okay, you’ve done that, it’s not the end of the world.’ Slight change. So now I can handle lots of situations where, beforehand, I would have just lost my rag.
3. Is working with fathers different from working with mothers?
• It’s just whole family work

• All service users are of course individuals

• That does not mean there are no socially patterned gender differences
The challenges of putting theory into practice in Mellow Dads

- High maintenance
- Children of all ages
- No homework if children not living with fathers
- Strengths-based approach
- How much can be achieved? (e.g. is it realistic to repair damaged attachment styles?)
- Limits on what can be opened up
4. Not one homogenous group
The Family Links Islamic Values course

Logic model
5. What helps engage fathers in mainstream casework?
e.g. Evidence-based training for social workers in child protection

• A two-day course in South Wales, designed to improve practitioners’ engagement with fathers
• One day of awareness-raising followed by a day on motivational interviewing
• A limited intervention – only with social workers and only a short course
• Feasible in the pressurised real world of practice?
Promising results
(Scourfield et al., 2012)

• An increase 2 months after the course in self-efficacy in work with fathers ($p<0.001$ for each one of the 17 statements offered to trainees)
• The (self-reported) rate of engagement of non-residential fathers doubled ($p<0.01$)
• Significant increase in the rate of engagement of non-risky residential fathers ($p=0.02$)
• No significant change in engagement of men who are putting children at risk
However.....

- What social workers say they are doing may not match what an objective observer would find.
- Improved self-efficacy is not necessarily evidence of improved practice.


http://workingwithfathers.weebly.com (report on Mellow Dads)