



‘Both-and’ Getting alongside fathers in recurrent care proceedings



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'Up Against It' - project overview

- Mixed methods project, involving **20 participating local authorities and 8 voluntary organisations** from a wide geographic spread across England, carried out between 2017 and 2019.
- **Statistical analysis of administrative data held by Cafcass** on all formal care proceedings cases brought by local authorities in England between 2010/11 and 2017/18 (Bedston et al., 2019).
- **Survey of fathers involved in care proceedings**, across 18 local authorities: two-part (father and practitioner), paper-based questionnaire (n = 127)
- **Qualitative longitudinal (QL) study**, of 26 men's experiences of repeat child loss. Two interviews and monthly phone calls over 12 months (Philip et al., 2020).
- **Learning network and focus groups with practitioners.**

Opening arguments – some food for thought

“Dads love just as hard as mums”

- Recurrent fathers are vulnerable; they may well pose risks arising from their vulnerabilities, but they should also be seen as at risk themselves.
- Fathers are able to opt out of parenting in ways not available to mothers, but they are also more likely to be seen as optional; fathers in care proceedings need *both* challenge *and* support.

Headline points from the court data analysis

- While there are 'missing' fathers in care proceedings, in 80% of recorded cases the father is known and named as a party to those proceedings.
- Fathers had a much lower rate of entering subsequent care proceedings than mothers, nearly half that of mothers. **After five years we see that 12% of fathers have returned, while for mothers we see 22%.**
- **Of the fathers who do return to court, three out of four (79%) do so with the same partner.** Recurrent couples are part of the overall picture.
- **The younger recurrent fathers are at the first set of care proceedings, the more likely they are to return.** Recurrent parents tend to concentrate in an earlier stage of the adult life course, and also enter with younger children than non-recurrent parents.

Who were the 26 repeat loss fathers in the QL study?



- All but 2 were White British, aged between 23-51, younger age of entry to fatherhood.
- Over half had experienced serious childhood adversities (including being in out of home care), were unemployed, living in social housing and not living with youngest child.
- Almost all had *some* contact with children they didn't live with. Only a minority (3) had no contact with any child.
- Chronic and/or multiple physical (6) and mental health issues (17), including diagnosed learning disability (8) or autistic spectrum condition (2).
- Over half had some history of substance misuse (alcohol and cannabis most common) and offending (often in adolescence). Seven fathers had been cautioned or charged with a domestic violence offence, but none had been imprisoned for violence against their partners.
- Neglect, substance misuse, domestic abuse, poor mental health and learning disability were the most common child welfare concerns.

Relationships

- Childhood relationships characterised by maltreatment, primarily in relation to physical, sexual and emotional abuse arising from their immediate or wider familial network. Compounded by other forms of loss, instability or disruption.
- In their intimate partnerships, over a third of the fathers were in longstanding relationships (often including periods of separation). Notable that couples had experienced repeat child protection processes and care proceedings together.
- These enduring relationships were often fraught with recurring and/or co-dependent difficulties that exacerbated problems and escalated professional concerns.

“Social Services trying to divide and conquer you, that’s what they do, at times when as a couple we should have been having meetings they made them separate every time”.

Emotional Impact: Grief, Shame, Guilt.

“When they were taken it is like grieving, it’s the grieving process because I’m, even though my kids are not dead... there is a sadness”.

- The emotional pain and distress experienced by recurrent fathers is long-lasting.
- Painful emotions are not static; they overlap, ebb and flow, subside and intensify in different contexts and over time.
- Some fathers experienced an incremental emotional shut down which was damaging to their mental health and relationships, including with professionals.
- A minority of fathers actively resisted shame using ‘bravado’, or fighting for their children until the bitter end as a means of defending moral and paternal identity.
- ‘Bearable guilt’ allowed some recurrent fathers to retain a stake in fatherhood.

Reclaiming fatherhood

- The majority of fathers were making attempts to reclaim/rebuild fathering to some, or all of their children, though with varying degrees of confidence, capacity and success.
- Factors associated with reclaiming fatherhood were: some level of stabilisation or basic life security; positive change in relationships with partners/mothers; responding to an opportunity to reconnect with a child, for example a request for contact.
- Reclaiming fathers wanted to prove to themselves, their children, partners and others that they could be reliable and credible parents.

“...I tell my kids I go on these courses, I tell them and they are proud, they realise that here, look if dad is making any mistakes he is doing his best to change...”

Takeaway points for practice (1)

“I am not going to be known as the dad that didn’t care, never!”

- **Clear need for bespoke and longer-term support for men when children are removed** to mitigate harmful coping strategies, which further exclude them from being seen as suitable fathers in the future or from reclaiming fatherhood.
- **The pattern of recurrent fathers with unresolved childhood trauma that blights capacity for emotional regulation, nurturing relationships and family functioning was notable.** There is an urgent need for services to engage with this.
- **Fathers and couples need resources and support to manage *emotions* and *relationships* differently.** Without this, couple conflict and its impact on parenting remains a key factor in families becoming stuck in a cycle of recurrence.

Takeaway points for practice (2)

- **Be conscious of the damaging effects of shame and humiliation.** Building working relationships with recurrent fathers involves minimising a defensive response.
- **Holding the balance between supporting someone to accept responsibility without annihilating their sense of moral worth** is a central challenge for working with fathers (and mothers) who have experienced child removal.
- **Fathers are doing something!** Challenge assumptions of 'absence' and be alert to where this may close off opportunities for review and/or rebuilding fatherhood for the benefit of the child.
- **Need to think expansively about how fathers permanently separated from their children can be supported to retain a stake in fatherhood which benefits those children.**

“I am not going to be known as the dad that didn’t care, never!”