

Unseen Adults and Safeguarding Children:

Men can play a vital role in their children's development and wellbeing and have a major influence on the children they care for. Unseen men are sometimes referred to as 'hidden' men, but this language is unhelpful, and these men are not hidden; they do not hide behind a sofa when practitioners visit, and they are not camouflaged against a wall. These men are often not hidden but are 'unseen'. **It should be noted that whilst the research and case studies are based on unseen men, the principles can equally be applied to women within a household who provide care for the children either as a co-parent or in any other capacity, and practitioners should be mindful of this. This briefing is based on the research and case studies available at this time.**

Two main types of unseen men have been identified in case reviews:

- men who posed a risk to a child, which resulted in the child suffering serious harm or death
- men who could have protected and nurtured the child in their life but were overlooked by professionals



Why do male caregivers need to be 'seen'?

At every stage in a child's life, male caregivers such as fathers, stepfathers or mother's partners play an important role in a child's cognitive, emotional and physical development. They may be primary caregivers or provide support sharing caring responsibilities. Yet in some cases fathers and male carers are not able to access services or appropriate parenting support and education to allow them to be the best parent they can be. Without including men, professionals may also fail to identify positive caring factors or detect potential safeguarding concerns in a child's life.

Thinking about who is 'unseen' or 'unknown' can help professionals to focus on how to identify and engage with the men in a child's life and consider any support or protection needs.



Key Issues:

An analysis of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews shows that fathers, male caregivers and male or female partners sometimes go 'unseen' by services involved with children. The research and case studies is often based on unseen men, however there are many cases where children are murdered by female caregivers, a recent example being Star Hobson, Star was murdered by her mothers girlfriend.

Lack of information sharing between services:

Some case reviews highlight how a lack of information sharing between agencies caused men to go 'unseen'. For example, practitioners in adult services (such as substance misuse or mental health) may be unaware that a man they are supporting is in contact with children and therefore do not share potential safeguarding concerns with professionals working directly with children and families. Fathers and male caregivers may also not be kept up to date with health or safeguarding concerns involving their child, due to services communicating solely with mothers and so are not able to participate fully in caring for them and protecting them.

Lack of professional engagement and curiosity

Professionals avoided asking mothers about the men in a child's life due to worries that the questions were invasive. This led to professionals not being aware of an adult male's presence in a home and the true amount of time that he was spending with a child. When practitioners met new men in a child's life, there was a lack of curiosity about the role they were playing and the level of influence they were having on the family. For example, there was a lack of further enquiry into explanations given by new male caregivers for a child's change in behaviour.

Professional anxiety or sensitivity

If a man in the household of a child was threatening or intimidating, practitioners avoided engaging with them due to fear and anxiety and sometimes failed to spot an unsafe man in a child's life because they felt uncomfortable assessing the mother's personal relationships.

Over-focus and reliance on mothers

Male care givers may be overlooked for inclusion on services because some professionals may wrongly assume that women are the sole or main caregivers and that men do not want to participate. Analysis of case reviews found that services relied on the mother to provide information on their child's life when there were male caregivers with knowledge or concerns to share.

Overlooking the ability of male carers to provide safe care

Case reviews highlighted the lack of consideration, both by individual practitioners and services, of the role men could play in caring for a child. Significant men in a child's life, such as fathers or male partners, may have had the potential capacity to care for the child but were not given the support they needed to do so. Male members in the extended family, such as grandfathers, who did care or could care for the child were only assessed if they were judged as a risk, and not noted as or considered a protective factor.

Learning for improving practice:

Learning from case reviews has shown how agencies can identify and involve men or other care givers in a child's life.

Identify- ask questions and work with a child's primary caregivers to identify men in a child's life. Record different names or aliases fathers and male carers use such as nicknames. 'See the adult behind the child' and work with other agencies to find out members of a child's household and any new adults the child has significant contact with.

Involve- Expand universal service appointment times to allow fathers and male caregivers to accompany their child to services and start a dialogue with fathers and male carers about any concerns or harmful behaviours in their own lives.

Voice of the child- Practitioners must seek out and include the child's perspective on the men in their lives so that there is an accurate record of their lived experience. It is important to gain knowledge from children about the men in their lives and their other family relationships, as their accounts may differ from those of the adults in the household. A change in a child's behaviour needs to be investigated by professionals and services involved with the child, especially when the behaviour change occurs with the arrival of a new male in their life, such as mother's partner.

Decision-making- Information about the men in a child's life collated by professionals needs to be used to assess if they pose a risk to the child or if they have the capacity to be protective factors, so that decisions can be made on what actions to take. When assessing risks in a child's life this should include any concerns posed by significant men in their life. Fathers, male carers and male partners should be involved in assessments.

Key points to take away.

Identifying fathers or male caregivers who are unseen will:

- Build a fuller picture of the network of relationships around a child
- Identify potential child protection concerns or protective factors in a child's life
- Recognise men in need of support for themselves or help with parenting
- Help fathers and male carers access support and education to best care for their child.

Further Reading:

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021) "[The myth of invisible men": safeguarding children under 1 from non-accidental injury caused by male carers.](#) London: HM Government.

NSPCC Learning – [Unseen Men: Learning from Case Reviews](#)

NSPCC Learning – [Why Language Matters 'hidden' in plain sight](#)