

Safeguard Guide No 11 – August 2019

Hidden Men/'Significant Others'

What is the issue?

Men and other significant family members can play very important roles in children's lives and have a big influence on the children they care for. Despite this, they can be ignored by professionals who sometimes focus almost exclusively on the care children receive from mothers and female carers.

In 2 recent local Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) it was known that partners and other members of the household played an active role in parenting the child or were frequent visitors to the home, however they did not feature in assessments or in any analysis of family dynamics.

An analysis of SCRs¹ identified two categories of 'hidden' men, those who:

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

Without basic information about significant people, it is unlikely that they will be contacted and this perpetuates the lack of information. Reasons put forward for not involving key individuals include: lack of engagement; unavailability due to work patterns or other commitments; separation/not living in household; mother requests no involvement; intimidation by the 'significant other'; assumption that they will not want to participate.

What are the risks of not including Men/Significant Others?

Key information is missing/information is not shared – Some professionals involved with men/significant others have information about potential risks or strengths, but do not share it, perhaps because they are unaware that they are having contact with children.

Mothers are the main source of information - If mothers are putting their own needs first, they may not be honest about the people involved in their life and the potential risks they pose to their children. They may act as 'gatekeepers', withhold information, or not see it as 'relevant'. Relying on one source of information limits the ability to verify accuracy and identify inconsistencies in accounts.

Significance of relationships and family dynamics is not understood – If 'significant' people are not included in conversations/assessments, the risk they present or the protection they can offer is missing. Exploring short-term, casual relationships as well as relationships with estranged partners or family members is important to a full understanding of risks and the child's experience of family life.

Meeting the child's emotional and psychological needs – The 'significant' other may play an important role in meeting the child's needs, ensuring their safety, stability and welfare which is vital to the child's healthy development; whilst this is important for the child, a lack of understanding of the extent of the 'hidden' support, may also mask areas of concern relating to the mother's ability to parent effectively.

Inaccurate perceptions/labelling – A misleading characterisation, for example, that they are reliable and trustworthy, without speaking to the person directly, may put a child at risk, conversely, if they are reported to be 'bad' or 'mad', for example, a potential source of support may be overlooked.

¹ https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1341/learning-from-case-reviews_hidden-men.pdf

What Should Practitioners Do?

- Discuss personal relationships with the mother
- During pregnancy and after birth, make active enquiries about the child's father
- From the outset identify 'significant' people in the child's life e.g. partners (current and 'estranged'), siblings, extended family members and friends and involve them in conversation
- Clarify who are the members of the household, their relationship to each other and the role they play – compile a Genogram to help to do this
- Take into account some people may be using nicknames, aliases, be given false status, for example, 'uncle'. When making checks, allow for different spellings of names
- Keep the focus on the child in assessment – how does the child experience life in this family/ household?
- Use different sources to gather information – the main carer of the child may be in a coercive/ controlling relationship and feel unable to share information without compromising their own or the child's safety
- Encourage and support the mother to see the importance of the role of the significant other in the child's life and subsequently in assessment and interventions; sharing decisions and responsibility where appropriate
- Make sure fathers and those with parental responsibility (including those who are not directly involved in mothers' and children's lives) know about concerns relating to their child
- Consult the 'significant other' about plans, invite them to multi-agency meetings (where possible), child protection conferences and include them on core groups
- Explore the potential of 'significant' others to support the family and serve as a protective factor for the child
- Be curious, questioning of the information provided and willing to explore further, especially if any information seems to be contradictory
- Find ways of involving fathers/partners/significant others in conversations, assessments and interventions, for example:
 1. *Take time to develop a working relationship with them if possible and from the outset emphasise how crucial their role is to the child's wellbeing*
 2. *Encourage them to attend ante-natal appointments and classes*
 3. *Make appointments at times convenient to them (such as evenings)*
 4. *Consider any gender bias and any other 'barriers' that may be present in the work you are undertaking and whether adjustments are needed*
 5. *Acknowledge any needs of their own and suggest how they can access support/services*

If you are concerned....

You can ask for advice from the **Multi Agency Screening Team** on 01422 393336

Out of hours contact the **Emergency Duty Team** on 01422 288000

[The Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme](#) known as 'Clare's Law' gives anyone who has concerns about their current or ex-partner the 'right to ask' to check whether they have a history of domestic abuse.

The [Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme](#) also known as 'Sara's Law' allows parents, carers and guardians to formally ask the police to tell them if someone has a record for child sexual offences.