



A Presentation to the NUIG Gender and Child Welfare Conference, June 15th 2011

“Why Gender Matters in Child Welfare and Protection”

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Thank you for your invitation to contribute to this conference today. I have much to learn in this area of work and this conference provides an opportunity to engage with a subject in a way that challenges and informs. I am also very conscious of the presence of the many thought leaders in this field both on the platform behind me and in the audience and warn them that I am going to cite their studies and conclusions at great lengths. I am banking on them seeing it for what it is . recognition of their mastery.

One quarter of the population of Ireland are children and young people aged 18 and under, over 1,107,034 and Ireland has a higher proportion of children and young people under 18 than any other EU member state. In 2009 the last year for which figures have been published 91,954 children were living in consistent poverty in Ireland an increase of 26,684 on 2008 figures¹.

In Ireland today there are 6,122 children in care (April 2011). We have more than 12,000 that are known to the care system . that is, where an expression of concern has been made to the HSE about their wellbeing. Those figures are not presented broken down into gender but it would be interesting to have them in that format. Children in residential care inspected by HIQA show that boys were more likely to be in residential care than girls. We know there are many other children where there are concerns held by family members and/or professionals but have not as yet been communicated to the HSE.

Each of these children has two biological parents. Some do not parent the children together but they do influence their children's lives whether present or absent. The nature of that influence covers the widest range from the negative to the positive, from abuse of a very serious nature, to positive protection and affirmation often in very difficult circumstances.

¹ CSO (2010) EU Standards on Living Conditions 2009

Many of the children have experienced more than two parental figures - all practitioners know of the many partner figures, mostly men who have moved through the lives of children leaving a legacy behind them whether good or bad, but fundamentally the children learn about the transience of father figures in their lives. That lack of consistency can become the norm for them to expect. This in turn influences how they see and relate to other adults and situations. It is not safe to become attached, to work at relationships, to work at doing well in education or anything because it all changes.

We are also aware of the way gender is represented among children who come into the care of the state. Young boys are more likely to come into care than young girls and are more at risk of rejection and abuse. The pattern changes as children grow up and during the teenage years it is girls who are seen to be more at risk. The types of risk can be different for boys and girls particularly in the older years; boys are more at risk from offending and girls are more at risk of sexual crimes or risky sexual behaviour.

Constitutional and Legal Protection

One area where children of both genders face totally equal discrimination is under our Constitution in respect of their rights as individuals and also in the legal protections offered to their families. The Constitution recognises the paramountcy of parental rights while children's rights are almost invisible, in particular Articles 41 and 42 of the Constitution render the rights of married parents in relation to their children "*inalienable*". Families of children other than marital families are not afforded the same protections.

This was very clearly shown in the Baby Ann² adoption case whereby the marriage of the birth parents ensured the return of the child to them when much earlier the expressed wishes of the birth mother could be set aside. The actual welfare of the child involved had to take second place. That is not to say the final determination by the Supreme Court was not the best one for the child but rather why it became about.

On the other hand, the rights of children from married families that have irrecoverably broken down to have a second chance of full family membership are made almost impossible because of the protection offered by the Constitution to the married family. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Ireland is a signatory is more progressive in relation to the rights of children and does not set parents rights against children's rights.

The recent Civil Partnership Act of 2010 while very welcome gives no rights to children being raised by same-sex cohabiting couples and fails to provide an equal legal relationship for children to both their parents.

There are areas of course where gender does play a major role. In relation to adoption, for example, there was no provision requiring the consent of, or extending the right to be consulted to, the natural unmarried father of the child until 1998. The new Adoption Act of 2010 further clarifies the position but it is dependent on the natural father who wishes

² N and Others v Health Service Executive (2006) IESC 60

to oppose an adoption order for his child, making an application for Guardianship under the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 as amended.

The issue of joint guardianship of their children by both parents when they are not married is a highly contentious one and as yet there are no firm legislative proposals to amend the current position where unmarried mothers are automatically guardians of their children while unmarried fathers are not. Both the Labour Party Guardianship of Children Bill, 2010 and the Law Reform Commission (LRC) report *Legal Aspects of Family Relationship* including a draft Children and Parental Responsibility Bill 2010 are calling for reform in this area. While some elements in these Bills are welcome such as extending guardianship to de facto parents i.e. step parents, same sex parents and other members of the extended family. There are some concerns including insufficient safeguards of the child's best interest and welfare and the provision of automatic guardianship to all unmarried fathers purely on the basis of biological kinship, regardless of the actual relationship with and commitment to the child, even in cases where this is contrary to the safety or best interest of the child, such as in cases of rape or incest. It is suggested that neither of those Bills includes provisions to adequately protect children and parents experiencing domestic violence, nor do they adequately address the issues arising from Artificial Human Reproduction and the legalities that surround it.

Gender and the Criminal system

There are also gender differences in the way that the courts treat male and female offenders when they are facing criminal charges in relation to child abuse, e.g. mothers charged with incest face lesser penalties than fathers facing the same charges. It is significant that the principal Act in this matter remains the Punishment of Incest Acts 1908.

Another area where your gender means you will be treated differently under the law is found in the Sexual Offences Act 2006. This law was introduced following the Supreme Court decision in the CC case to provide for a defence of honest mistake where the child victim was between 15 and 17. While the offence to defile a child under Section 3 of the Act is gender neutral, females are exempted from prosecution under section 5 of the Act. This means that if there is consensual sexual activity between two underage young people only the male can be found guilty and the female cannot. This section of the Act was challenged in the High Court which ruled in March 2010 that society was entitled to place the burden of criminal sanction on those who bear the least adverse consequences of sexual activity, noting the adverse consequences of underage sexual activity falls to a greater extent on girls than on boys³. This matter was appealed to the Supreme Court which has yet to determine the issue to the best of my knowledge.

³ Supreme Court urged to overturn teenage sex law in Irish Times, 15th April 2011

Again gender differences can be seen in the applications for Special Care Orders. A special care order operates in circumstances where, by virtue of the behaviour of a child, there is a real and substantial risk to his or her life, health, safety development or welfare that requires special care or protection. Mark Brierley in his report Tracking and Tracing of Children Subject to a Special Care Application (2010) noted that females are more likely to be made the subject of applications and that their applications were more likely to lead to an admission than those for males. Females with the same real and substantial risks to self as males were much more likely to be admitted to special care.

Applications for special care are considered by an admissions group before it goes to the High Court as it removes a child's right to liberty. The number of applications for females where the concern is around what would have been termed in the past 'moral danger' is notable whilst there are no such applications for boys. One is reminded of past times, sadly not too distant past times, when girls were admitted to Industrial Schools for similar reasons and sent to Magdalene Laundries, as were women generally, without any representation to a Court. One of the more insidious aspects of the Magdalene Laundries regime was the denial of their name; girls and women were routinely given false names that they had to answer to. We know that for many the experience of such incarceration has had long term effects that are impossible to ameliorate. To the best of my knowledge, and I am glad that it was so, no such gender specific institutions existed for boys.

Both genders were sent to institutions under mental health acts and were incarcerated for similar spurious reasons, often with little or no evidence of a psychiatric illness and there they remained to await a more humane approach to human difficulties. Many of those incarcerated were young people trying to negotiate the adolescent years.

We also treat young offenders differently when we consider how they are accommodated once convicted of a crime and sentenced to be detained. Young males aged 16 and 17 are detained in St Patrick's Institution at Mountjoy prison. Girls of the same age thankfully are not housed in a women's prison. Shannon in his recent book on Child Care law⁴ notes that The Criminal Justice Act 2006 repealed Section 153 of the Children Act 2001 to allow for the retention of St Patrick's. This of course runs contrary to the ethos of the UNCRC and the Child Care Act 2001 which was to outlaw the use of prisons for young people.

So gender matters in the lives of all children and young people but it matters more to children whose life becomes detached from the usual family pathway.

It is accepted that, in general, children fare better if they can grow up safe in their families; this was not always accepted for all children in Ireland and until the 1970's we made it very difficult for single parents, mostly mothers, to raise their own children, believing initially that industrial schools were better for them and later that adoption was the best choice for them. So we have made progress and now are generally good at talking to children and young people about their lives and what is important to them.

⁴ Shannon, G. Round Hall, (2010) Child Law Second Edition

In Ireland's State of the Nation's Children Report (2010)⁵, 60% of children and young people interviewed reported that they find it easy to talk to their fathers when something is really bothering them. It was noted that there was a higher percentage of younger children and a lower percentage of girls who reported finding it easy to talk to their fathers. In the same survey 78% of children reported to find it easy to talk to their mothers.

Barnardos Childhood Poll (2007) was conducted with children and young people aged 12-17 years old and their parents using a sample controlled on gender, age, social class and region to reflect the known demographics of the population. The poll identified that both children and parents identified a loving family as first priority in factors contributing to a good childhood, nine out of ten parents surveyed said that listening to their children was the key factor influencing a positive relationship with their children and children reported feeling listened to. These findings while not surprising do tell us that children value adult time being available to them and parents know that.

There are few, if any, commentators on parenting today who would argue that fathers do not matter in children's lives. It is widely accepted by various studies that the amount of time that men who live with their children are involved with their children has significantly increased over a 20/30 year period as cited in a 1999 study.⁶

The National Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, issued by the Department of Health in the UK in 2004 summarised the research on fathers as follows: "Positive quality involvement by fathers in their children's learning is associated with better mental health, higher quality relationships throughout life, less incidence of criminality, better school attendance and behaviour and better examination results"⁷.

Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda⁸(2004) in an overview of research evidence into the role of fathers showed that "students of socialisation have consistently found that parental warmth, nurturance and closeness are associated with positive child outcomes regardless of the gender of the parent". Studies show that involving fathers in family services works and that it benefits children in the home after the end of the period of engagement with services has ended.

A meta-analysis of father focused research found that interventions involving fathers, as well as mothers, may be more effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and children's attachment, than just involving mothers alone and follow-up studies after six months suggest that men continued to be more supportive of their children's educational development and their children were better prepared on educational readiness measures.

⁵ Department of Children and Youth Affairs: State of the Nation's Children (2010)

⁶ Fisher, K, McCulloch, A & Gershuny, J, (1999) British Fathers and Children: A report for Channel 4 Dispatches. Institute for Social and Economic Research.

⁷ Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills (2004): National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. London

⁸ Lamb M.E and Tamis-LeMonda (2004). The role of the father; an introduction in Lamb M.E. the role of the Father in Child Development, New York

There is clear evidence that the quality of fathering as well as mothering mediates children's psychological outcomes (O'Brien 2004).⁹

There is wide recognition then that there is a value in ordinary dads (good men) spending quality time with their children while it can be argued that other dads (bad men) are not recognised in relation to their children.

When we move into the area of child welfare and protection, much of this positive development and views seem to completely disappear. It is undoubtedly true that in many child protection cases where violence against women is routine, that some men avoid contact with professionals around child welfare and child protection issues, some men use threatening demeanour to control child protection practitioners although women clients are actually more violent in practice, and male practitioners are at more risk of violence, this is noted in the literature and is something most social work practitioners are aware of. Women are seen as most culpable in respect of child neglect. Child neglect is the principal reason why children are referred to the Child Welfare and Protection System. Daniel and Taylor (2006) describe the assumption that neglect is an indication of a lack of nurturing; nurturing is carried out by mother; therefore when nurturing is absent the problem must be one of mothering. Fathers who might contribute to the problem or solution tend to be ignored.

When we consider a small number of the few reports on child abuse published in Ireland spanning the last 18 years there are some patterns that emerge both in regard to men and women who abuse. The reports did not on the whole comment directly on the gender issues that arose in the cases but there are references that echo findings in the literature.

The Kilkenny Incest Investigation (1993) describes a violent and controlling father, severe and consistent domestic violence and child abuse both physical and sexual over many years that were extremely vicious. The physical assaults caused lasting harm to this young woman. A facet of the behaviour of the father that was noted was his change in demeanour towards professionals which at times was extremely hostile and other times very concerned. His aggressive stance in relation to home visits was described as a significant feature of the case. The mother of the family was herself a victim of domestic violence and appears to have at best ignored the appalling treatment of her daughter. Justice McGuinness commented that "hostility by the abuser may result in the direct intimidation of professionals. Such threats will be used to sabotage intervention by professionals".

The report **Kelly: A Child is Dead** issued in 1996. Kelly, a child of 15 years died of meningococcal septicaemia having left Ireland by plane two days earlier. Both of her parents were charged with wilful neglect and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment. The report details all that happened to and all that did not happen for Kelly and a younger sister in their family. The report states "the father in this case was described

⁹ O'Brien, M. (2004): Fathers and Family Support Services, London (Understanding Serious Case Reviews and their Impact page 124)

variously by witnesses as talkative, non-communicative, aggressive, hostile, charming and intimidating; the mother as gentle, quiet, scheming, lying, pleasant, non-committal and calculating+. The report notes these are remarkably varied and contradictory sets of descriptions.

The **West of Ireland Farmer Case** followed in 1998. This case deals with the situation of six children who were systematically abused by their father, physically, sexually and emotionally for most of their childhoods. The level of abuse was constant and terrorising. The father was convicted of a large number of offences. The report highlights the threats to staff by the father, his refusal to have them in the house and states as follows: %given that there was an issue of personal protection and safety for the case worker and a direction not to undertake home visits no arrangements were made to monitor the children's safety+. Commenting on the expectation that the children could and should be protected by the non abusing parent, the report is clear %it is now understood in 1998 that adult victims of violence can feel powerless to protect even themselves or find a way out of their situation+.

The **Monageer Inquiry** published in 2008. The focus of this inquiry was on the deaths of two little girls and both their parents. The two children were smothered, the mother was strangled and the father died by hanging. The report comments %from the start the father emerged as the dominant personality in the family, he made all the arrangements, he cancelled appointments, he answered the door, and he controlled the finances. He misinformed services by furnishing misleading information. The family were isolated from relatives and community+. The mother was docile, childlike, compliant and subservient to her husband's wishes`. The report identified that no key worker had access to all the information on this family.

The **Roscommon Report** published in 2010. It was concerned with the management of the case of six children from a care perspective. The mother in the case was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for incest, neglect and ill-treatment. The father was sentenced to fourteen years in prison at a later hearing for rape and sexual assault. The report in its findings notes; %We are conscious that, in relation to the parents, most references in this report relate to the mother. This is because considerable focus was placed on her by the staff involved without reference to the father who for the most part was unemployed and at home. The report sets out the manner in which it judged the father monitored the work of the services, sabotaged the work with the children if it appeared to be getting close to the abuse he was perpetrating. It was noted he was always present when important matters were being discussed at Case Conferences. He ruled the home by exercising considerable control over each member of the household. In the same vein he also took a controlling stance in relation to the professionals working with his family and those involved in the decision making fora+.

When I reviewed these reports I was struck by the immediate resonance with the literature.

- A feature common of many studies (Corby 1987, Gibbons et al 1995, Buckley 2003) is the denial or minimisation by caregivers of their own responsibility for

the abuse. In all of the cases cited above, apart from the Monageer Case, the perpetrators and in particular the fathers are noted as having both denied and minimised their own role while seeking to place the blame on older children and on mothers.

- Domestic violence was a major factor in four of the cases. (Monageer does not deal with this). Mullender and Hague (2005) point to the evidence that workers require the woman to leave an abusive relationship even though the evidence is overwhelming that the period after leaving can be the most life threatening for women and children. The report on the West of Ireland Farmer notes the danger and in particular the unrealistic expectation on domestic abuse victims to protect children.
- The Roscommon report echoes the finding in the work of studies by Rutman et al 2002, Strega 2006 and others that fathers even when present are not engaged with. Brown et al in their 2009 research found that fathers are only occasionally mentioned within the 116 child protection files they examined.
- Again the four cases above supported the view that child protection policies often did not hold the violent, abusing father accountable for their actions (Scourfield 2003. Swift 1995). The Kilkenny report makes very sobering reading when the father that was abusing his daughter, not denying it but not admitting it, was allowed to make decisions about her and her son that kept the abusive scenario in his gift for many years.
- Again in the four relevant cases, the work of Stanley, 1997, Munro 1998 and others showed that child protection workers routinely disregard the dangerous men when assessing risk and family functioning. To that I would add that we must be aware not to disregard dangerous mothers either. The concept of dangerousness is dealt with in the Kelly report where both parents in their collusion posed very real threats to two of their children.

There is a very rich literature examining various pieces of the jigsaw that is child welfare and protection work and the issue of gender. In finishing of this part of my presentation I want to refer to an overview piece that resonated with me. Mayer et al (2003) note that fathers are often left out of intervention plans and this was clear in the Roscommon case where Case Conference after Case Conference listed tasks for the mother, for professionals and very few for the father although the parenting capacity assessment carried out belatedly did assess the capacity of both parents unlike the findings of Brown et al in their review of Canadian child protection files.

Sexual Abuse by Females

I want to look briefly at another area of child abuse that is child sexual abuse where females are the perpetrators. Take the spotlight off the males for a while.

It is recognised (Bunting, 2005¹⁰) that the sexual abuse of children poses a major threat to their safety and long term emotional and psychological well being. The focus has primarily been on male perpetrators initially but over last number of years female perpetrators have received more attention in research and policy and a number of seminars have been held to explore the issue. I am aware of the work of the CARI foundation on this issue. The adult survivors of Institutional abuse did reveal sexual abuse by females (Ryan Report) and the HSE counselling service has been working with those adult victims over the past number of years.

Bunting in 2005 completed an extensive literature review and found that 5% of all sexual offences against children are committed by women. There are a number of differences between female and male perpetrators for example female sex offenders have a higher rate of childhood victimisation than male sex offenders and are more likely to co offend. Maternal perpetrated abuse emerges as particularly damaging and the literature indicates that female sex offenders most often offend against their own children. Indeed when the mother in the Roscommon case was convicted and imprisoned in 2009 she was the first female convicted of incest in Ireland.

Bunting sets out references in the literature of incredulous and disbelieving reactions on the part of professionals to disclosures on abuse perpetrated by females which, in some instances had led to disclosures of children being dismissed as fabrication or inappropriate access being continued by the female to the children. She cites both Canadian and British research that has highlighted the potential for female perpetrated child sexual abuse to be taken less seriously than male perpetrated sexual abuse by professionals working in the child protection and criminal justice system.

Research notes that female sex offenders are much more likely to co-offend than male offenders. The recent case of kidnap and abuse of Jaycee Dugard in the US is an example of where the female colluded and co-offended with her husband. Recent cases in the UK in respect of female workers in early year settings actively abusing children as part of their online relationship with a male perpetrator are also significant. There are many others of course down the years including Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, Fred and Rosemary West but somehow society and indeed each one of us want to see the female behaviour as an aberration because to think otherwise might bring the walls of Jericho tumbling down.

The victims of female perpetrators manifest symptoms similar to those of victims of other types of sexual abuse but there is evidence to show that the victims of female offenders might experience particular difficulties. There can be an increased sense of isolation, betrayal and stigma as a key issue which can act as a barrier to the disclosure of abuse. There are few policies in place which specifically deal with female perpetrators.

¹⁰ Bunting, Lisa (2005) Females who Sexually Offend Against Children: Responses of the Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. NSPCC, London

Key issues that are raised in relation to the Child Welfare and Protection System includes:

- A tendency towards disbelief or minimisation.
- A lack of acceptance that females might have an equal role or instigate abuse by themselves.
- An assumption that females are coerced by male partners and seemingly higher evidential requirements for prosecution.

The Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements in the UK which monitors the post release supervision of sexual offenders identified the lack of risk assessment tools for female sex offenders; available appropriate interventions for females and the lack of appropriate accommodation as issues that need to be addressed.

Among a long list of recommendations I am highlighting some that resonate here in Ireland:

- That gender information is collected on perpetrators to facilitate the creation of baseline statistics.
- Recognition that females do commit sexual offences against children.
- Training for all professionals within the criminal justice system and the child protective services.
- Development of additional treatment modules for female offenders. I am not sure if there is an accredited treatment programme for female perpetrators.

Final Overview

In a final overview of this very wide topic, for example the issue of abuse and new technologies has not been touched on at all, I want to give a brief outline of what the literature is telling us and this will be further explored in all its facets in other presentations and workshops. The literature refers to the legacy issues that have to be overcome when we consider gender issues that arise in child welfare and protection work. One is the deep seated belief system in society that says women would do the housework and raise the children, that men would work outside the home and not be overly concerned with what went on inside. In relation to the workforce the practitioners are more often female, the client group are female and the managers of course particularly at senior level are frequently male.

Analyses of Serious Case Reviews, individual case reports in Ireland and further afield as well practitioner experiences echo some key points in relation to gender.

While there is clear evidence that positive and negative dimensions of fathers and mothers life histories can jointly influence their parenting and its impact on their children's lives (O'Brien, 2004), the series of biennial analysis of serious case reviews in England and similar reviews elsewhere found that:

- **Lack of Information**

There is often very scant information about men in many case files . we don't record their past histories, their experience of parenting, their relationships with their children . what they do with them, how they see them, what is the quality of the father/child attachment and bond, what do they enjoy together, how do they like being a dad?

In reviews of child deaths and serious case reviews the unknown male figure is often noted. Often when a new male joins the household, his presence appears not to be noticed or is minimised by professionals who know and the information not passed on to other key practitioners.

Other studies of child protection records specifically examined for the purposes of considering the information held on males in families found that 50% of cases had recorded no contact with fathers who were identified as a risk to mothers or children.

- **Lack of Involvement in Assessments**

There is a failure to take the male role into full account in assessments. Assessments and support plans tend to focus on mothers . their problems, their role as nurturers and protectors. Little attention is paid to the men in the household and the lack of information on their histories meant that workers did not have all the pieces of the jigsaw in trying to assess the risks to children. Fathers who are not resident with the family must be included; how do they fit in to current family dynamic, what role can they play in protecting the child etc.

- **Fixed Thinking about Men**

There can be polarisation into good men and bad men, somewhat reminiscent of earlier views of women. The attribution of the label depended on whether fathers were thought by professionals as reliable or unreliable, trustworthy or untrustworthy. Professionals can bring their own biases and opinions when judging fathers, for instance judged negatively because of appearance e.g. tattoos, doing hard physical work. Practitioners must move away from the notion of *working with* mothers and *working on* fathers. In the study by Buckley et al¹¹ into service users perceptions of the Irish Child Protection system one of the male participants spoke of the failure by the child protection practitioner to hear his concerns about the care of his children because they viewed him as unreliable. The Review analysis refers to the effect of a restricted way of thinking about fathers did indeed discount a bad dad's concern over his children. Dads who are perceived to have made some improvement sit at the other side of this fixed thinking, an example is given of a dad who had attended an anger

¹¹ OMCYA (2008) Service Users' Perceptions of the Irish Child Protection System, Department of Health and Children, Dublin

management programme, seen then as reformed and workers not hearing new information that did not support that thesis. In the Kelly case, previously referred to, one of the children was taken after much resistance by the father to attend for an assessment, the attendance then stopped but the assessment that the father was now cooperating gained currency.

- **Fear of Men**

The review of Service Users' Perceptions notes that the fear of the professionals could cloud their judgements. In one family the fear of the social worker led to an over reliance on the health visitor (Irish Public Health Nurse) in a case where the complexities and level of risk required a much greater involvement by professionals.

Some other themes that emerge include:

- The role of men in controlling by aggression. Workers who recognised that the fathers were a threat to professionals did not necessarily lead to the impact of that aggressive attitude being considered in relation to domestic violence in mothers and children. (Again reference here the Kilkenny, West of Ireland Farmer and the Kelly Case)
- The new start philosophy that ignores history in assessments and sees any small steps forward as the new reality . all of us have to be optimistic in this work and clearly the existence of previous inadequate parenting does not say change cannot occur but assessments must be aware of established patterns.
- How the professionals see the father figure is crucial. It can affect how the practitioner hears the father's concern over his children's welfare.

Scourfield (2006) ¹²suggests that men need to be regarded as core business, whether or not they have parental responsibility.

The good news is that Child Welfare and Protection services are now paying attention to the need to be aware of both genders in our work, to be aware of our own reactions and biases. Researchers are seeking the views of the users of the services and from those beginnings we can learn a great deal. One positive outcome from the Buckley research¹³ was that parents valued the Family Welfare Conference model and that contrary to concerns men did not use the opportunity to dominate those conferences.

¹² Scourfield, J (2001): Constructing men in Child Protection Work, Men and Masculinities; (2006): The Challenge of Engaging Fathers in the Child Protection Process, Critical Social Policy.

¹³ OMCYA (2008) Service Users' Perceptions of the Irish Child Protection System, Department of Health and Children, Dublin

However, I note that social work practitioners are still somewhat suspicious of the family welfare case conference and in Mark Brierley's work on Special Care Order applications despite it being a legal requirement that such a conference be held except in specified circumstances, there was a failure to do so in 70% of cases.

Once a problem is named there is some possibility it can be resolved and there are positives occurring most often in the child welfare services area although I stress the best interest of children are best served and can only be served when we see child welfare and child protection as part of a continuum.

Services need to:

- Seek out and engage with fathers both as potential risks and potential assets to their children.
- Include them in assessments and appointments unless doing so would put children and mums at risk.
- Respectfully engage with both parents: hear them, explain your role and actions to both.
- Highlight the responsibility of each parent in decision making fora: the changes both must make.
- Turn off mother as monitor.
- Insist information is gathered from fathers and if not recorded why this is not being done.
- Recognise the threat from violent parents, put strategies in place to meet that threat, and do not abandon children to a highly risky family environment.
- When providing services build in opportunities to involve fathers, this may require out of hours working, outreach, the type of activities offered and services that are more informal tend to be best.
- Reviewing all communication to reflect both parents . positive language and images.
- Employing male practitioners?
- Engaging with youth organisations that work with young males; share the learning.
- Provide training and skills to managers and staff . to help understand the needs of fathers and to engage effectively with them.
- There is an area that has always involved fathers; fostering and adoption services – good dads?

I want to outline briefly the work in one family support project that Barnardos provides with the HSE where some specific work was developed with fathers.

Barnardos Da Project

Operational in Barnardos Cherry Orchard Family Support Project, Dublin

It started with some staff training to improve confidence and competency around working with fathers and addressing staff fears, concerns or biases about involving

fathers. This then moved to improving our knowledge of the fathers of the children in the project and then contacting them to discuss the project. Following discussion with them about their hopes and fears for them and their children a programme of social activities for fathers and children was established. It was acknowledged that services for fathers cannot just be identical to services for mothers. For separated fathers, having a free place to spend time with their child can be a difficulty. In addition to this, the Da Project wanted to promote fatherhood in the community and did so by encouraging other agencies in the area to display positive imagery of fathers. Also a Father's Day Art and Poetry Competition were held in local primary schools and clubs.

As the project progressed it became an integrated piece of the family support work. When working with families this now automatically means working with fathers too. It also heightened mothers' awareness of the potentially beneficial role fathers' involvement can play in children's development. For fathers it meant that family support was not just a woman's arena but that the services welcomed them too.

A full evaluation of the Da project and a practice tool to encourage father inclusive practices was compiled and is available on the Barnardos website.

Conclusion

Should services and systems choose to ignore fathers there will continue to be:

- Failure to take account of the risks men may pose to children.
- Failure to recognise the benefits that men may offer to children.
- Failure to recognise the pressure on mothers.
- Failure to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Ultimately this may mean a failure to protect.

Thank You.

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