

Guidance for Professionals: Engaging with 'Unseen' Men



Introduction

Children with supportive, warm, and positively involved fathers tend to be more well-adjusted, have greater cognitive ability, social behaviour and psychological well-being, and do better at school.

Fathers, like mothers, can also have negative impacts, and may pose serious risks to children – but services are much less likely to engage with and assess men in their parenting roles, or provide appropriate support and challenge.

Men can play a vital role in their children's development and wellbeing and have a major influence on the children they care for. However, as highlighted in 'The Myth of Invisible Men' (Crown, 2021), a national review by England's Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, male caregivers and male partners sometimes go 'unseen' by services involved with children.

Reasons for an oversight often include:

Engagement	Female Focus	Information Sharing
a lack of professional engagement and curiosity	an over-focus on the quality of the care children receive from their mothers	inadequate information sharing between services

Further, 'Unseen Men: Learning from Case Reviews' (NSPCC 2022) identified two types of unseen men:

1. Those who posed a risk, which resulted in death or significant harm;
2. Those who could've protected and nurtured but were overlooked.

This requires us to balance risks and strengths as part of our collective assessment and planning for children.

Purpose

This guidance supports professionals in identifying, assessing, and engaging with **unseen, hidden or absent men** (all referred to for the purpose of this guidance as unseen) - fathers, father figures, partners, or other male carers who are often overlooked in assessments and interventions. It promotes inclusive, safe, and holistic practice in working with families and safeguarding children.

Understanding the Circumstances

"Unseen men" may include:

Biological fathers not living with the child.

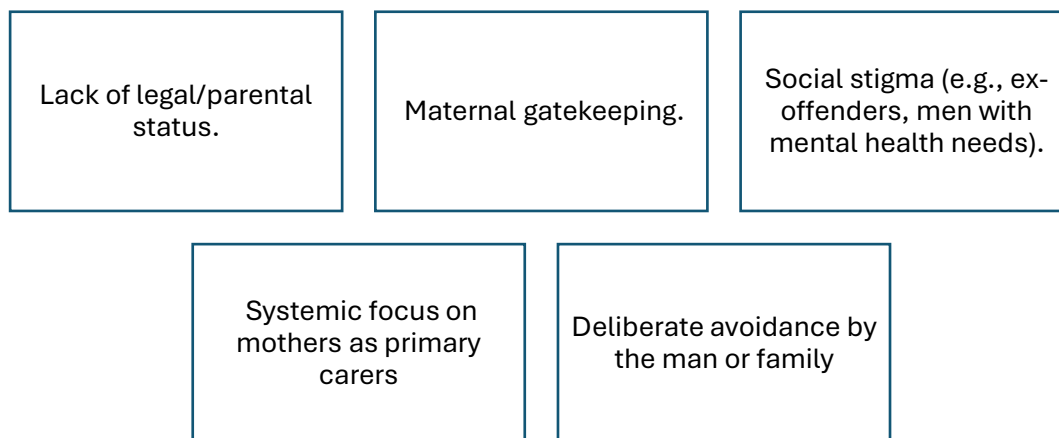
New or transient partners of the mother.

Stepfathers or long-term male carers.

Male relatives (e.g., uncles, grandfathers) involved in caregiving.

Men with no formal relationship to the family but who may pose risks (e.g., acquaintances staying in the household)

They may be unseen due to:



Ignoring or under-assessing men in families can result in:

- Unidentified safeguarding risks, especially regarding domestic abuse, substance misuse, or criminal activity.
- Missed opportunities to engage positive male role models or support networks.
- Incomplete family assessments, leading to flawed decisions.
- Gender-biased practice, reinforcing stereotypes and overlooking men's caregiving roles and responsibilities.

Key Principles for Practice

a. Be Curious and Inquisitive

- Ask about all adults involved in a child’s life—who lives in the home, who visits, who provides care.
- Avoid assumptions that men are not involved or relevant.
- Listen to children about the men in their lives.
- The Look, Listen, Ask, Connect Prompts can support us in developing this practice (Prompts for Professional Curiosity, ECPC 2026).

b. Map and Record Relationships

- Use family trees, eco-maps, and chronologies to identify men and explore the care-giving role they play.
- Engage children directly, wherever possible, by using tools like *Talking Mats*, *Words and Pictures* and *Three Houses*.
- Ask direct but sensitive questions like, “Are there any other adults involved in [child’s name]’s life?”

c. Engage Men Proactively

- Make direct contact where safe and appropriate.
- Offer appointments at times and locations that suit working men.
- Acknowledge past issues but focus on potential for positive change and engagement.
- Work sensitively with mothers to understand any barriers or boundaries in communication and agree an approach.

d. Balance Risk and Strengths

- Recognise risks posed by men (e.g., history of violence) but also consider protective factors.
- Consider a nuanced approach to risk assessment, where there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elements and develop an approach that is characterised by support and challenge, by both listening to and holding to account is required.
- Assess capacity for change, not just past behaviour.

e. Work Collaboratively

- Liaise with **multi-agency partners** (e.g., Justice Services, substance misuse services, schools) who may know the man.
- Share information appropriately.

For more information refer to the [10-step guide to sharing information to safeguard children](#) (Information Commissioner’s Office).

Addressing Barriers to Engagement

Barrier	Response
Men not attending meetings	Offer flexible times. Be up-front about the reasons for the meeting. Clarify their role and value.
Mothers excluding men	Explore reasons carefully. Be mindful of safety and coercion. Partner with the main caregiver to make a plan.
Fear of blame or judgment	Use a strengths-based approach. Explain your role and the purpose of your involvement clearly.
Intersectional equality and diversity	Be culturally competent. Avoid assumptions.

Working with Risk

- Always consider domestic abuse dynamics; never pressure women to disclose or involve men if it puts them at risk.
- If a man is suspected of posing a risk (e.g., registered sex offender, history of DV), follow child protection procedures, where required, and use formal routes to seek and share information with other agencies.
- If a man is actively avoiding involvement or demonstrating elements of disguised compliance, reflect and assess why?

Reflective Practice and Supervision

Use reflective supervision and support (formal or informal) to explore:

- Your own assumptions about male carers.
- Challenges in engaging men.
- Safety implications of engaging (or not engaging) unseen men.

Promote a learning culture where gendered practice is challenged.

Review language in assessments to avoid “mother-centric” narratives.

Foster multi-agency strategies for identifying and engaging men (e.g., through police, GPs, schools, services focused on working with adults).

Key Messages

- Children’s lives are shaped by all adults around them - known and unknown.
- To support a child’s wellbeing and protect them from harm, we should employ a whole-family approach and seek to understand different parts of the system.
- Unseen men are not irrelevant men - they may present risks or offer strengths.
- Engaging men is essential to holistic safeguarding and ethical practice.
- Balancing curiosity with safety is the key to responsible practice.

Further Reading & Resources

[Engaging with Men in Social Care: a good practice guide](#) – Fatherhood Institute 2013

["Counting Fathers In": Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System](#), Brandon et al 2017

[Working effectively with men in families](#) – Featherstone for Research in Practice, 2017

[The Myth of Invisible Men](#), Crown 2021

[Unseen men: learning from case reviews](#), NSPCC 2022

Acknowledgement

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