

Start for Life Conference: Working effectively with fathers to improve outcomes for children

March 2026

Dr Mark Osborn
Safeguarding and Intelligence
and Performance Co-ordinator



Norfolk Safeguarding
Children Partnership

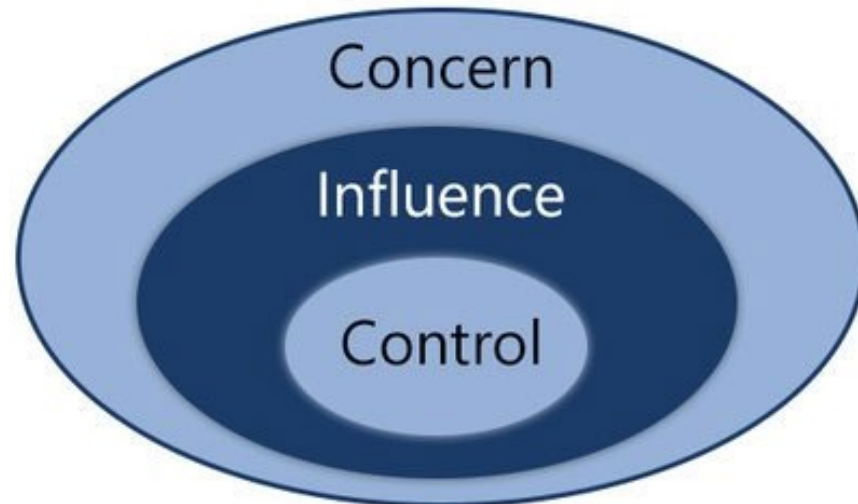
SWOT analysis

- Strengths
 - What is working well within:
 - Your organisation
 - Your own practice
 - Partner organisations
- Weaknesses
 - What are the gaps that need to be addressed
 - Where, when and how could father inclusive practice be strengthened



SWOT analysis

- Opportunities
 - To build on existing strengths
 - Challenge and reduce weaknesses
 - Innovation
- Threats



Progress in Norfolk



**Parent or carer?
Need advice
or support?**

Help is at hand at
www.norfolk.gov.uk/familyhubs and
www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/family-hubs

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**WEST NORFOLK
FATHERHOOD SERIES**

Supporting Dads of Children Under 3

Funded by the Norfolk Community Foundation
Delivered by TKG Church – Supporting Men in the Community

online Learning

FREE FOR NORFOLK FAMILIES

ACCESS CODE:
Jon70

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD

SOLIHULL APPROACH



**Norfolk Safeguarding
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For Fathers in King's Lynn & West Norfolk

The early years of fatherhood are special – but they can also be exhausting, uncertain and sometimes isolating.

Many dads want to be present and involved... they just don't always have a space where they can talk honestly.

SPR AO Jasmine

Recommendation 4: The partnership should develop specific resources for working with men when interactions between fathers and staff are seen as confrontational, lacking co-operation and proving ineffective.

NB Whilst this review was specifically about fathers, any resources produced should be mindful that any person in a care-giving role can have relationships with professionals that are seen as confrontational, lacking co-operation and ineffective.



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Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026

- Practitioners need to be particularly skilled in engaging and working with parents and carers whom services have found difficult to engage.
- Practitioners also need to recognise, engage, and work with parents and carers who are unwilling or unable to engage with services



Protecting vulnerable babies better

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (Feb 2026)

“When engagement is challenging or not straightforward, there need to be mechanisms within the system for all agencies and professionals to take a step back and ‘think slowly’ together. This could seem to be an inefficient use of scarce resources but, without such ‘slowing down’, there is a risk of entrenched and escalating action and reaction. This is, in turn, costly, time-consuming and, most importantly, unlikely to be in the interests of children.”



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Protecting vulnerable babies better

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It is therefore critical to distinguish between parents who are:

- reluctant or unable to engage due to trauma
- struggling to engage for other reasons
- consciously choosing not to engage

The professional response will need to be adapted for each scenario and family. In all cases, the child's welfare remains the central concern.

Professionals need to seek to understand individuals' past and present life experiences and how these may be shaping current behaviours. This understanding is not just helpful, it is foundational to delivering trauma-informed care that is responsive, respectful and effective



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Protecting vulnerable babies better

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (Feb 2026)

- Although trauma is increasingly recognised in safeguarding practice, how it manifests itself may be less well understood. Trauma often presents through behaviours that may seem irrational or resistant but are, in fact, protective coping mechanisms. Recognising and reframing these behaviours enables practitioners to move beyond surface-level assessments and engage more effectively with families.
- Practice should be trauma-literate and intersectional. Professionals need to recognise how trauma, discrimination and systemic bias may shape parental behaviour. Responses should be adapted to help parents feel safe enough to engage, while maintaining a clear focus on the child's welfare.



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Protecting vulnerable babies better

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (Feb 2026)

- Multi-agency reflection is essential. When parents do not engage, agencies should create structured opportunities for joint reflection and shared problem solving. Strong information sharing is not enough: there also needs to be a shared discussion space for analysis and co-ordinated action.



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Protecting vulnerable babies better

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (Feb 2026)

“safeguarding partners need to work with all relevant adult services to develop, implement and resource effective parental engagement strategies.”

“Evidence analysed for this review highlights the need for a system-wide, trauma informed approach to parental engagement. Practitioners need to be equipped with the time, skills and support necessary to build trust with parents who may be reluctant or unable to engage.”



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SPR AO Jasmine

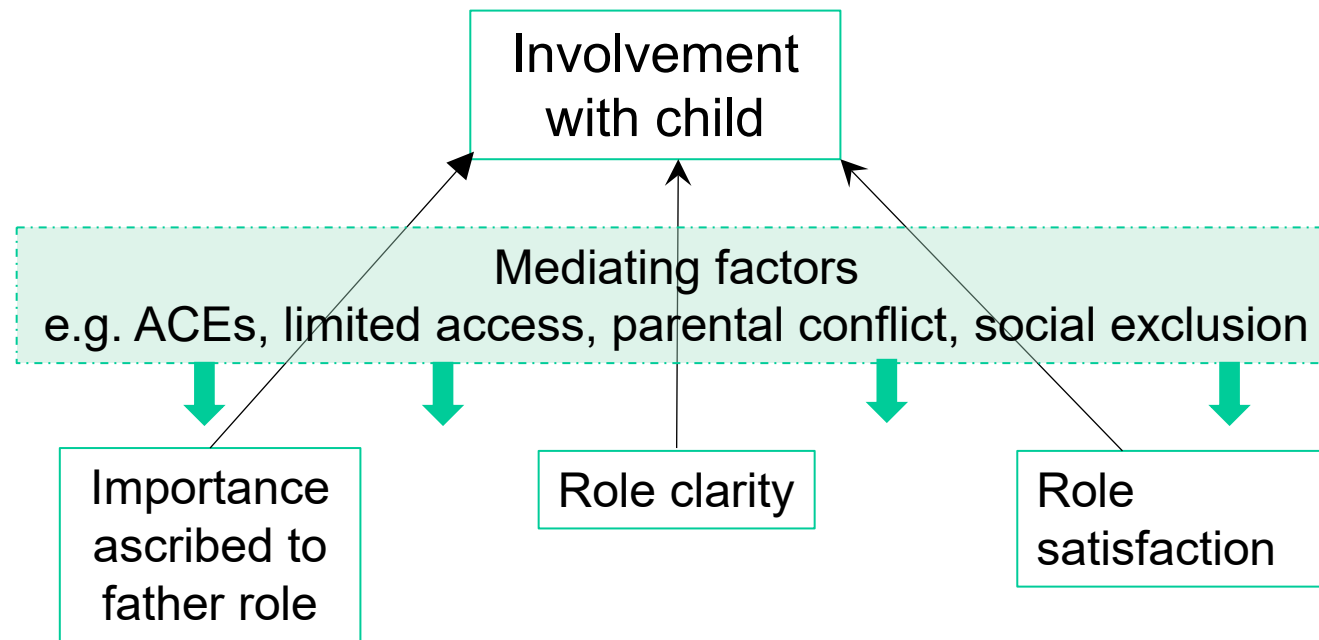
“He was never empowered in his role as her father. He never took responsibility. What were the expectations of him and how was this communicated?”

SPR Case AK

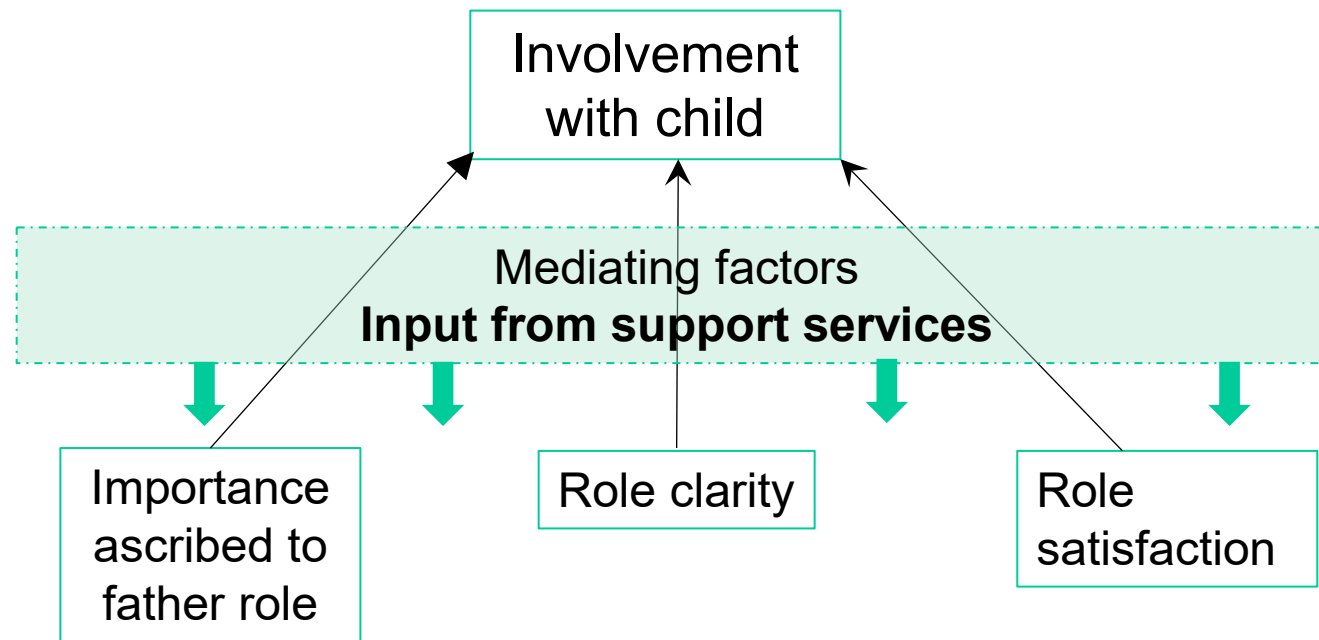
Fathers have spoken about being involved in their children’s lives for many years but of not knowing what services have been involved or the nature of the concerns held. They spoke about not knowing what was expected of them/what they needed to do in order to – in the words of a father – co-parent their child, and how they might be supported to do so



Factors that influence father's involvement with his child



Factors that influence father's involvement with his child



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Shifting
Culture with
Compassion,
Curiosity and
Commitment

**A Father-
Inclusive
Practice (FIP)
development
program**

in Family Help –
Children’s
Services, West
and Breckland
area

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Introductions

Anita Best

Intervention Expert Manager

Travis Britton

Father and Paternal Network
Practitioner

West and Breckland Family Help
Children's Services

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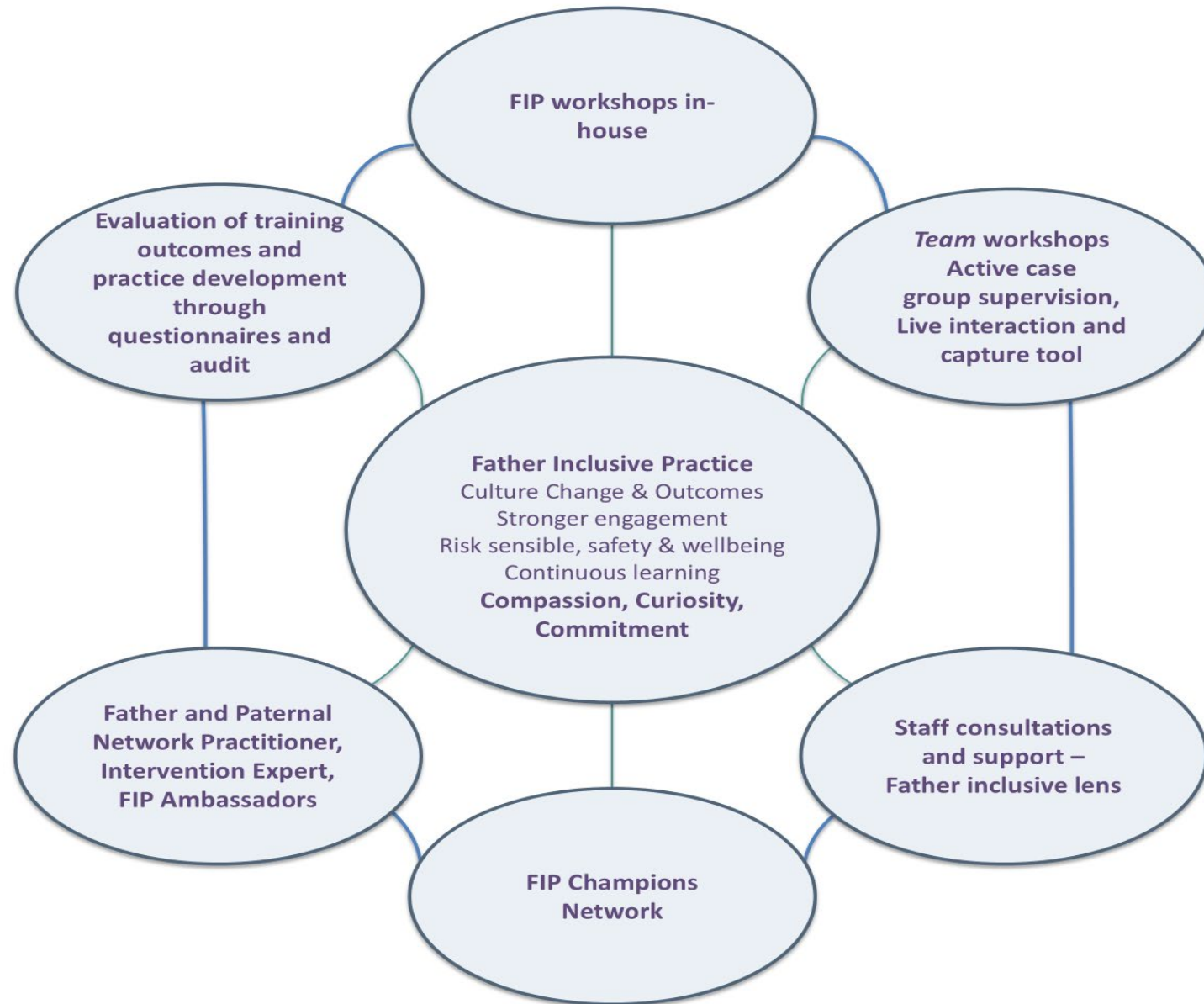
Service Context

Social care and Family support

Multi-disciplinary Family Help teams
6 teams in West and Breckland

- Social workers
- Family Support workers
- Intensive Support Workers
- Domestic Abuse workers
- Team managers
- Child protection expert managers

Interconnections - our learning approaches



An approach to training
that models what we
want to see in practice



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Progress evidenced so far

Post training questionnaire results

Key areas with the strongest improvements include:

Increased understanding and awareness of father-inclusive practice

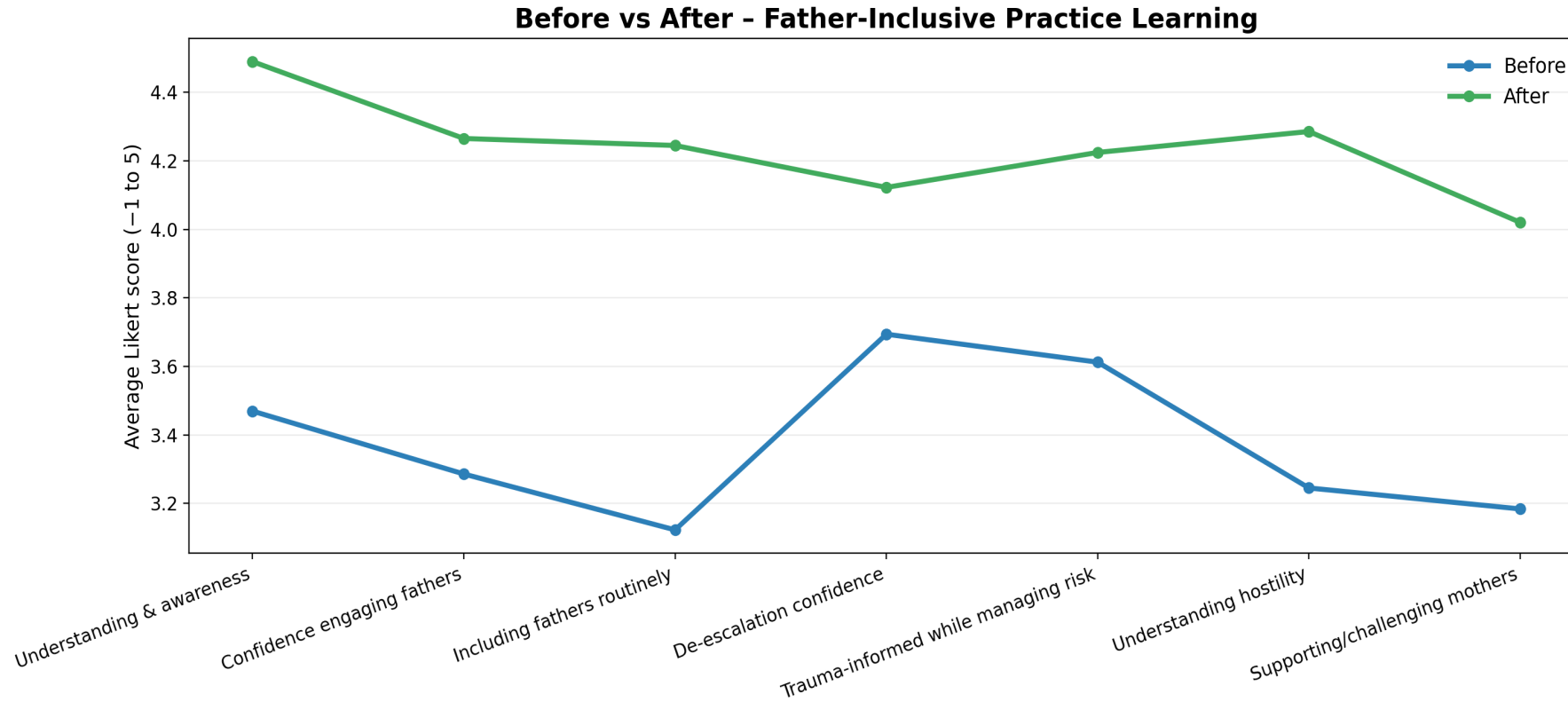
Greater confidence engaging fathers and male caregivers

Improved trauma-informed responses when managing risk

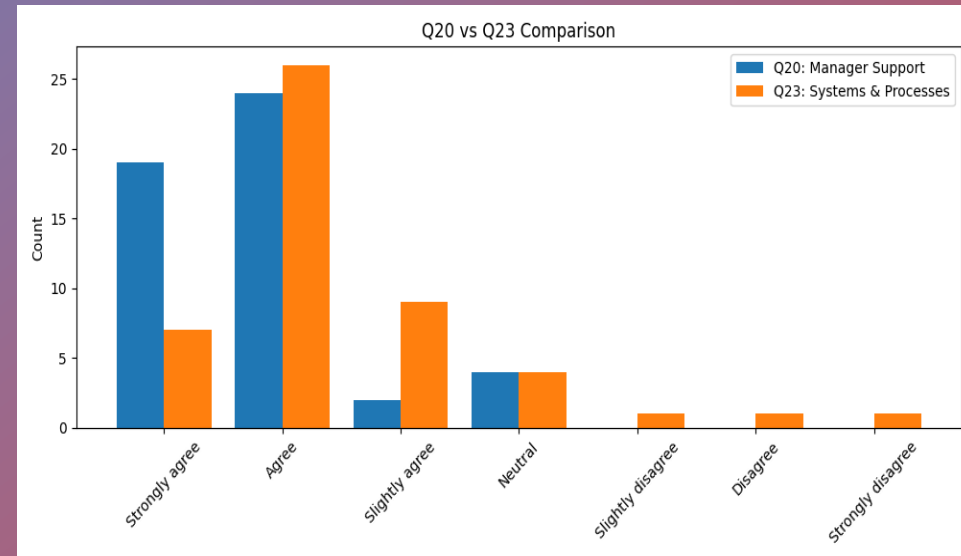
Better insight into drivers behind father hostility

More routine inclusion of fathers in practice

Workshop Before and After



Workers' perceptions of how Managers and Service systems and processes support father-inclusive practice



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Bias, Challenges, Fears & Worries

Key themes raised by practitioners:

Fear of hostility or conflict when engaging fathers

Worry about time pressures, capacity to include both parents

System gaps such as missing father contact details (CADS)

Bias: assumptions about fathers' interest or reliability

Anxiety around challenging mothers about father involvement

Concern about safety where domestic abuse is present

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Workshop feedback - What Practitioners Found Helpful

Most valued aspects of the
workshop sessions:

Interactive format and group
discussion

Use of Mentimeter to input
responses

Real case-based reflection
activities

Supportive facilitation and safe
environment

Pre-existing teams and managers
together

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Examples of Good Practice following the workshop

Practitioners reported their new effective approaches

Proactive contact with fathers,
including flexible timings

Trauma-informed conversations
to uncover barriers

Ensuring fathers' voices are
included in assessments

Sharing information equally with
both parents

Using reflective tools such as
timelines and scenarios

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Workshop feedback - What Practitioners Need Now

- Key next steps requested:

More training on dealing with paternal figures who may appear hostile or angry

More training on trauma-informed approaches

Consistent system processes for capturing father information

Ongoing reflective supervision / consultation / safe space



Responses to training



Next steps

Further training/workshops for Family Help on their identified areas

Independent chair and independent reviewing officer training

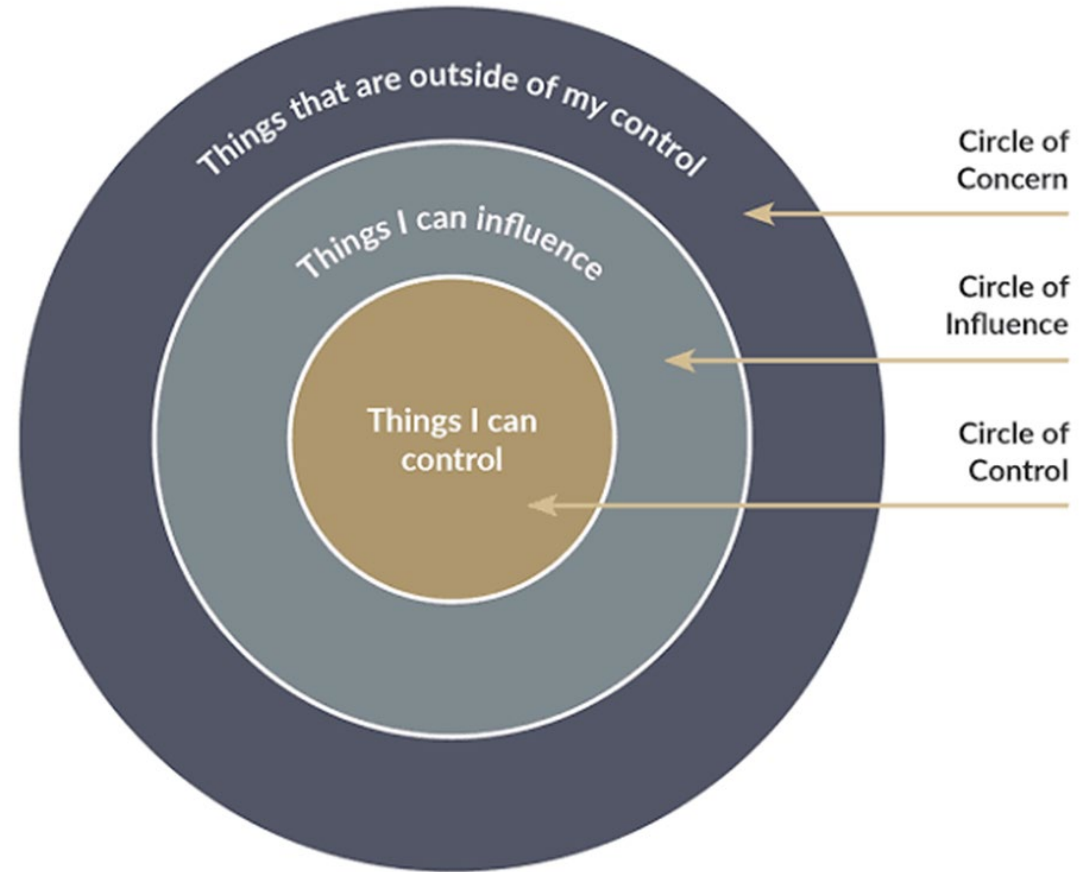
FIP Dip sample – targeted, collaborative, dynamic, shared

Report and recommendations to seniors and managers

FIP support via Father and Paternal Network Practitioner – advice, guidance, reflection, and direct work

Sharing resources across other children's services patches in Norfolk

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- Restorative Approaches model





Reflecting and
learning together

Your questions,
suggestions, and
comments...

Table Activity

Consider how approaches we've discussed might or might not work in your organisations.

Where is your work culture at currently?

How does a compassion, curiosity and commitment approach sit with your service?

Consider the circles of concern/influence and control for developing a Father Inclusive culture in your service.

What are the practical opportunities and barriers for your service?

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Compassionate enquiry conversation

What we have learned about shifting
to a Father Inclusive culture

Inspired by Gabor Maté



Final
thoughts



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Fathers & Cultural Competence

Abraham Eshetu

Strategic Lead for Race Equity and Practice Innovation
Norfolk Children's Services



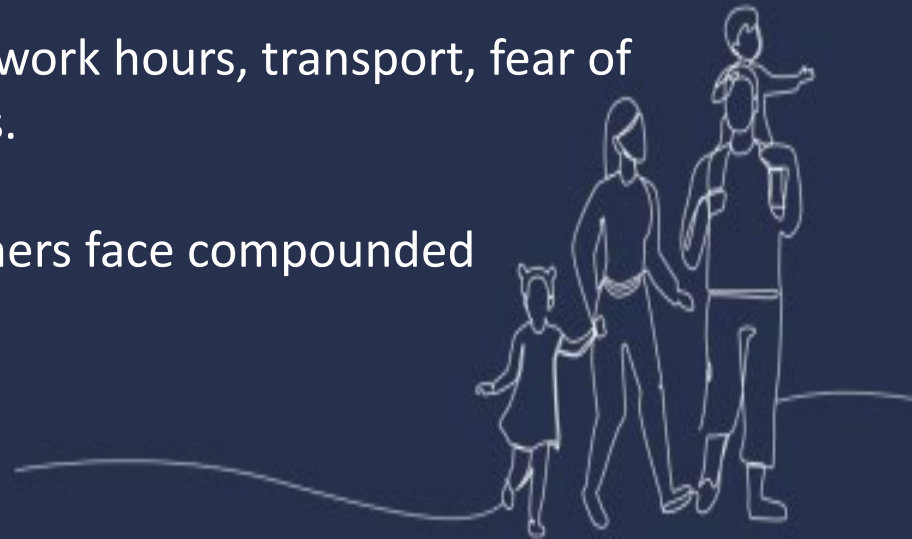
Why Fathers Matter

- Research shows fathers significantly improve children's emotional regulation, cognitive outcomes and long-term wellbeing.
- Consistent, meaningful father involvement strengthens attachment and family stability.
- Engaged fathers reduce risks linked to behavioural issues, school exclusion and relationship breakdown.
- Services that include fathers early improve multi-agency planning and safeguarding.



National Challenges

- Services remain mother-centric, often unintentionally excluding fathers.
- Professional assumptions and unconscious bias lead to fathers being seen as 'risky' or 'disengaged'.
- Fathers face structural barriers such as work hours, transport, fear of services or previous negative experiences.
- Young, migrant and minority ethnic fathers face compounded disadvantages.



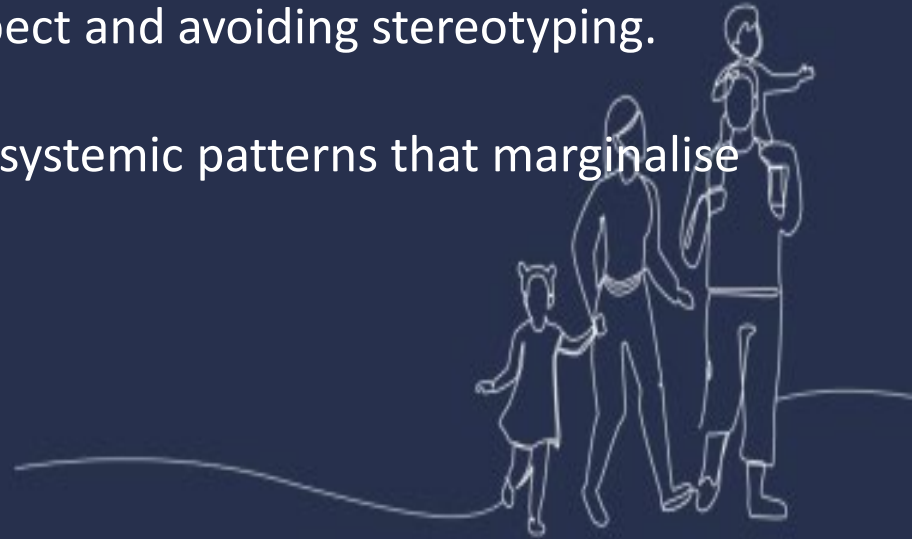
Norfolk Context

- Norfolk's rural geography and transport limitations shape father engagement opportunities.
- Although predominantly White British, Norfolk includes growing migrant communities, GRT populations and diverse cultural parenting norms.
- Non-resident fathers often live far from partners or lack stable housing.
- Limited local networks, language difficulties and digital exclusion affect father participation.



Cultural Competence

- Understanding how culture shapes fatherhood expectations is essential (e.g., work roles, communication styles).
- Practitioners must recognise cultural strengths, not only ‘risks’.
- Cultural humility involves curiosity, respect and avoiding stereotyping.
- Anti-racist practice requires identifying systemic patterns that marginalise fathers of colour.



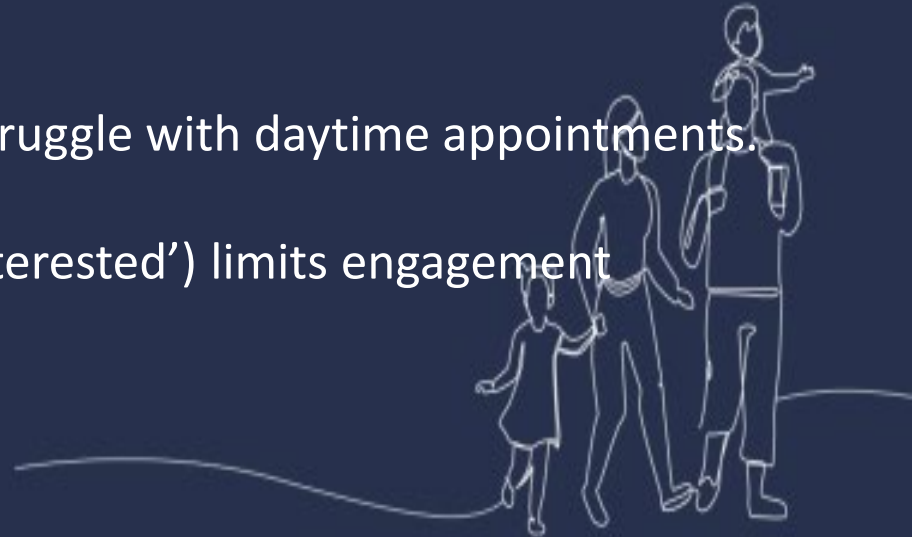
Intersectionality

- Fathers experience multiple, interconnected pressures: class, migration status, age, language, disability and racialisation.
- ‘Hard to reach’ often means ‘hard to trust’ due to past service experiences.
- Intersectionality helps practitioners understand behaviour in context, not as resistance.



Barriers for Fathers

- Professionals often communicate primarily with mothers, sidelining fathers.
- Forms, meetings and systems assume a single main parent (often coded as mother).
- Fathers with insecure employment struggle with daytime appointments.
- Stereotyping (e.g., 'aggressive', 'disinterested') limits engagement opportunities.



What We Must Do

- Proactively invite and welcome fathers into every stage of assessment and planning.
- Offer flexible meeting times and provide interpreters early.
- Take a strength-based approach, identifying skills, protective behaviours and family role.
- Challenge bias within teams and modelling inclusive practice across agencies.



Father-Friendly Practice

- Adapt all communication: letters, texts, forms and invites must be father-inclusive.
- Ensure visual materials reflect diverse fathers and family structures.
- Provide practical adjustments: remote meetings, flexible hours, interpreters, advocacy.
- Build trust through relational practice and transparency.



Multi-Agency Roles

- Schools, midwives, GPs, police and early help must consistently include fathers in information-sharing.
- Each agency plays a role in reducing stigma and improving access for marginalised fathers.
- Joint training strengthens consistent father-inclusive messaging.
- Cross-agency collaboration reduces fragmentation for families.



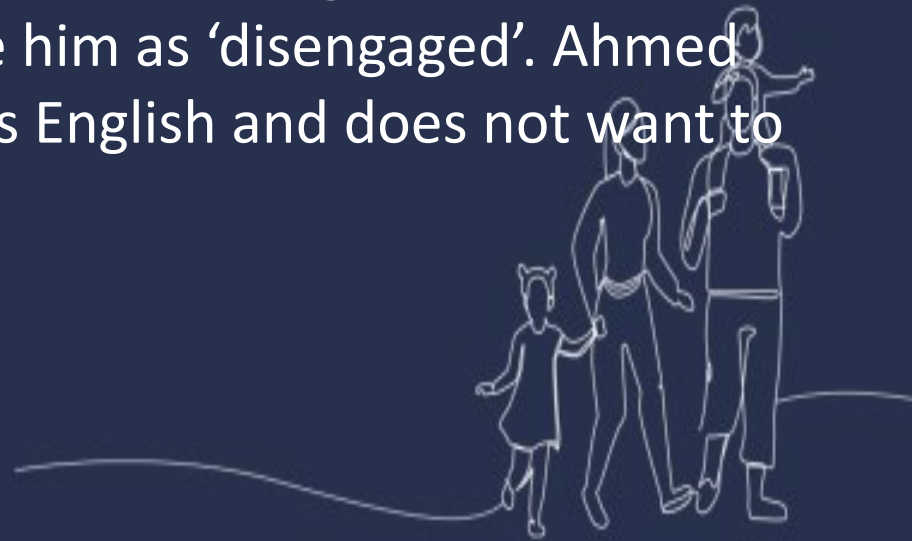
Table Activity: Barriers & Solutions

1. Identify THREE barriers fathers face engaging with your organisation.
2. Discuss how cultural norms, racism, language or system design contribute.
3. Consider father strengths that are overlooked.
4. Agree at least ONE actionable improvement per barrier.
5. Be ready to share your table's findings.



Case Study 1: Ahmed

Ahmed is a 32-year-old Sudanese father working long agricultural hours. He speaks limited English. His three-year-old child is on a child-in-need plan. All meetings have been scheduled during Ahmed's work hours, making attendance impossible. Practitioners describe him as 'disengaged'. Ahmed reports feeling ashamed about his English and does not want to appear disrespectful.



Discussion Questions

1. What cultural, structural or linguistic barriers affect Ahmed?
2. How have service decisions (e.g., timing) shaped perceptions of 'disengagement'?
3. What biases might influence professional judgement?
4. What practical steps would improve engagement?



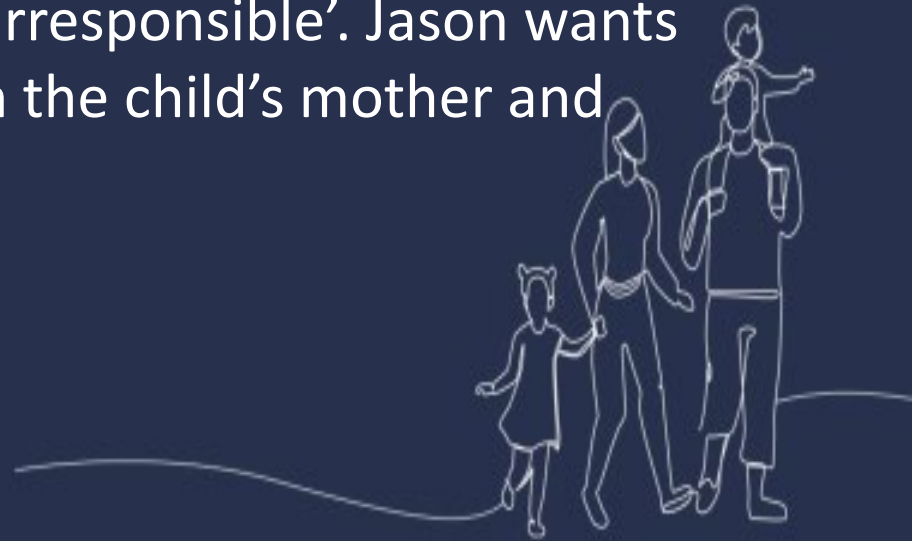
Discussion Points

- Structural conditions shape engagement more than motivation.
- Interpreter support and visual communication tools increase accessibility.
- Scheduling flexibility demonstrates respect for cultural and employment realities.
- Judgements must be evidence-based, not assumption-driven.



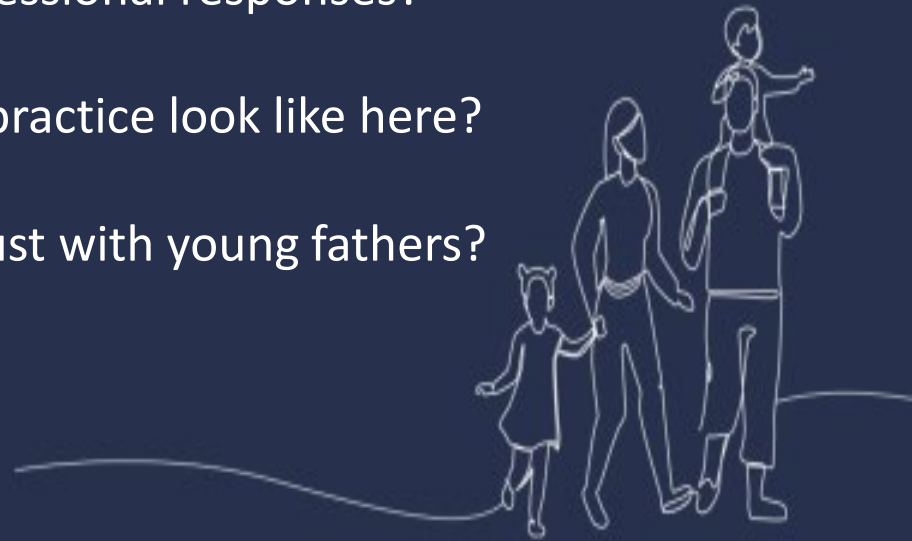
Case Study 2: Jason

Jason is a 19-year-old mixed-heritage father. He is non-resident. Jason has a history of exclusion from school, homelessness, and inconsistent contact with services. He expresses distrust toward professionals and feels judged as ‘irresponsible’. Jason wants involvement but fears conflict with the child’s mother and agencies.



Discussion Questions

1. How do Jason's age, race, class and past trauma shape his service engagement?
2. How might stereotypes influence professional responses?
3. What does anti-racist, trauma-aware practice look like here?
4. What approaches would help build trust with young fathers?



Discussion Points

- Young fathers require affirmation and relational consistency.
- Racialised assumptions can undermine father identity.
- Trauma-informed practice prioritises safety and trust.
- Clear communication reduces anxiety about involvement.



What are we saying

- Fathers matter for outcomes.
- Cultural competence improves engagement.
- Anti-racism must be active, reflective and embedded.
- Multi-agency alignment strengthens support.





Norfolk County Council

Thank You



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A person wearing a grey hoodie is seen from behind, looking out at a clear blue sky. The person's head is slightly tilted upwards. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

The Power of Pizza in Dad's Spaces

Establishing Fathers Support Groups in the Community



The myth that the first rule of being a dad means that they do not talk about being a dad

- **Dads tell us they often feel like the “second parent.”**
- **Work patterns make it harder for dads to be involved — and they feel the impact.**
- **These experiences are genuinely hard for dads — and they want support that feels accessible.**

The Dad's Unplugged Concept

- A space to “unplug”
- Activity-based conversations
- Led by curiosity, not lectures
- Fuelled by food
- Shoulder to shoulder, not face to face



Let's Be Practical Now

- **Where:** just like goldilocks – not too big, not too small – just right
- **When:** make it achievable
- **What:** not “parenting group”, but “Dad’s Unplugged”
- **Who:** Dads accessing partners and support
- **How:** Funding
- **Why:** Because Dad’s matter

Dad's Unplugged – Launching in May 2026

This isn't just a pilot. This is the beginning of something we hope will grow — something that will give dads in North Norfolk a place to breathe, talk, laugh, connect, and feel genuinely included.

Real change begins when we stop expecting dads to catch up — and start creating spaces where they can show up.



LAUNCHING 7TH MAY 2026

DAD'S

**BEING A DAD IS HARD.
DON'T DO IT ALONE.**

- Talk about the ups and downs of fatherhood
- Connect with other dads nearby

FIRST THURSDAY OF THE MONTH
6:30 - 8:30PM • YESU, 15 HIGH ST, SHERINGHAM

FREE A free meal at every session too!

**A GROUP OPEN TO ALL GUYS
IN FATHERING ROLES**

 family hubs  **come to YESU**
where people matter

 **Norfolk**
County Council

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CRAFTING MEN



MensCraft believes that happier, healthier men make better friends, partners, colleagues, brothers, sons and fathers.

Activity

Making a positive difference to men's health, wellbeing and ability to manage life's challenges.

Meaning

Promoting constructive conversations about men, maleness and masculinity.

Connection

Thought leadership and support for likeminded services, organisations.

OUR PRINCIPLES



collaboration

we work with **other providers**, inc. the UEA School of Social Work and across the new Integrated Care structures

we have strong connections with local social prescribers and receive referrals from across health and social work disciplines.

engagement

we encourage men to take part in our programme of meetings, **activity** groups and bonding sessions

we support men one-on-one or in groups dependent on their needs we offer participation and activities. We don't talk in terms of 'fixing' or 'mending'.

association

we emphasise the benefits of **connection** and involvement to mitigate feelings of hopelessness and isolation

we understand the social power of enabling men to meet and gather, shoulder-to-shoulder doing things together

non-discrimination

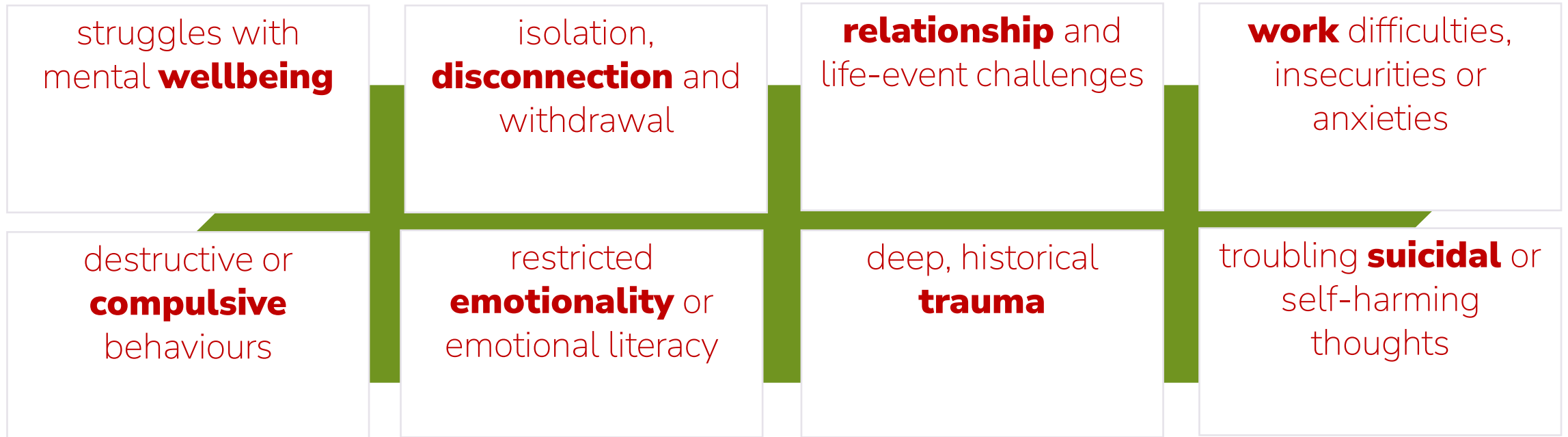
we offer an **inclusive** and open-minded service for everybody who identifies as male

we expect the same from all our partners, providers, associates and the men who engage with us.

MEN WE SUPPORT



We support men managing life's challenges; a vast array of issues, complexities and needs.



There are also men who are 'maintaining', doing better; working with us as volunteers or close support, giving back and imparting their experiences to others.

DadsOnside



A programme for men who are **struggling with fatherhood** and, or are, at risk of losing meaningful contact with their children.

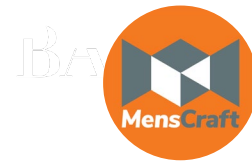


Online or –in-person courses and interactive discussions designed to provide positive, **empathetic and caring solutions** to put children first.

Funded by:



MEN NEED AND VALUE



accessibility

safe and confidential, psychologically-informed environments.

flexibility

willingness to meet men on their terms, where they are (i.e. outside work hours, evenings, channel neutral etc.).

consistency

streamline pathways, minimise potential for 'story repetition' and fatigue.
'Once heard' is enough.

patience

anticipate volatility and negative coping strategies, but accept these as symptoms.

transparency

collaborate to set expectations but define boundaries and reinforce and underline the importance of these.

validation

encouragement, confidence-nurturing and recognition of progress – at all steps – reflecting the reality that every man is unique.

autonomy

foster sense of authorship in their journey; embolden their purpose, self-responsibility, care and pride.

to better engage men in services rooted in what's distinct about male psychology

resources

funding gaps and climate of uncertainty.
personnel changes, fluidity and re-structures.

social

limited male emotional repertoire.
halting change within institutions (i.e. school, workplaces) to enable this.
intersectionality (gender, sexuality, race etc.)

variable

men entering services with mixed and complex diagnoses (where do they begin?).
wariness and competitiveness between services.

a cultural reset

greater collaboration between services to forge mutual trust and dependency.
increased dialogue and common forums to share knowledge, approaches and successes.

intuitive environments

peer support groups, spaces and activities where men can thrive, shoulder-to-shoulder, in comfort with other men.
importance of indirect conversations and stimulus to facilitate this.

a new language of maleness

male mentoring and positive examples during the transition from youth to adolescence.
enabling discussions on new 'codes' and conventions of male emotional literacy.

Challenges

Solutions

IMPACT AND TESTIMONY



I always used to have my hood up, I'd avoid looking at anyone. Now when I go outside I'm walking with my chest out.

It has completely transformed my perspective on fatherhood and helped me better understand and manage my own emotions, especially in how I respond to and support my daughter. The impact it's had on my parenting has been profound, and I'm incredibly grateful for the growth and insight it's given me.

I was apprehensive and not 100% sure I would get a lot from the course, but I am a lot more certain of it now.





Thank You.

info@menscraft.org.uk

referrals@menscraft.org.uk



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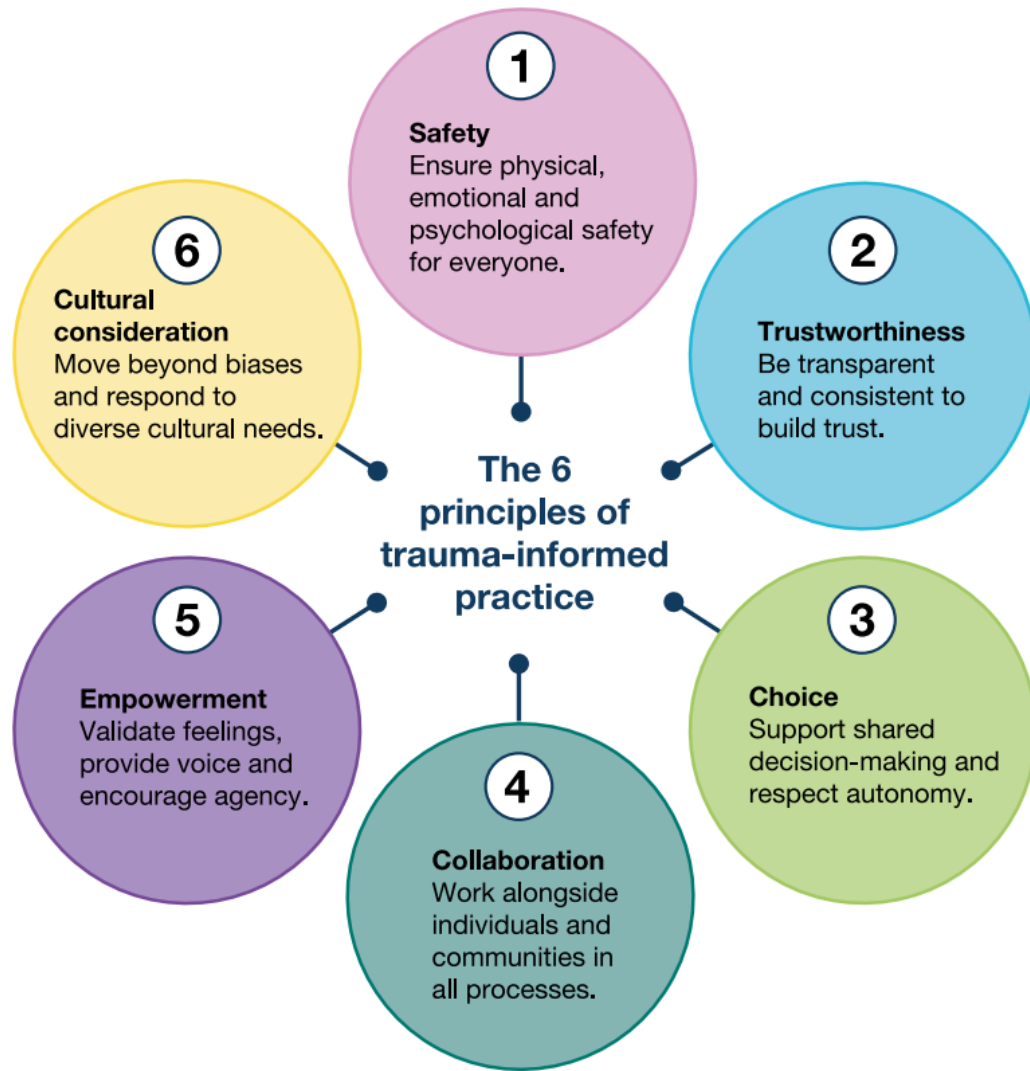
Conference 2026



Thanks for attending
and for your feedback



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