



Improving Children's Services Engagement of Fathers in Child Protection: Logic Model for an Organisational Development and Staff Training Intervention

Jonathan Scourfield¹ · Jeremy Davies² · Kathy Jones² · Nina Maxwell¹

Accepted: 15 June 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

There is a long-standing and ongoing problem of practice with at-risk families in child welfare work focusing primarily on mothers and failing to properly engage fathers. The article describes a child welfare innovation from the UK designed to tackle this issue—the ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention, developed by The Fatherhood Institute and The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University and based on two previous separate interventions which had positive initial evaluations. ISAFE combines in-service social work practitioner training with other elements of organisational development to improve the engagement of fathers. Activities targeting organisational culture are case file audits, identification and training of team champions, and a webinar for service leaders. The practitioner training involves both awareness raising about the importance of engaging men and skills development via an introduction to motivational interviewing. ISAFE's theory of change is summarised in the form of a logic model. Limitations of the intervention and its evaluation are discussed.

Keywords Children's social care · Child welfare · Gender · Men · Professional development · Skills development

Background

The tendency for child protection practice to focus on the scrutiny of mothering was first noted in the UK by Parton and Parton (1988). A few years later, Milner (1993) was disarmingly honest in acknowledging that despite espousing a

✉ Jonathan Scourfield
scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk

¹ Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

² Fatherhood Institute, London, UK

feminist approach, she found herself, on returning to child protection social work practice, working almost exclusively with women and failing to engage men in families. Various studies in several countries, mostly qualitative, have continued to document this tendency since then (see reviews by Gordon et al., 2012; Maxwell et al. 2012a; Zanoni et al., 2013). The perception of the first author of our paper is that there has been little or no change since he did his ethnographic PhD research on the topic in the late 1990s (Scourfield, 2003). Recent research shows that many of the same issues still pertain in everyday practice (Davies, 2021; Philip et al., 2019).

The reasons for relatively little involvement of fathers in the child protection process are complex. (Note that we use the term ‘fathers’ inclusively in our article, to mean any men in a fathering role, whether or not biologically related to the children.) These reasons include the attitudes and behaviour of fathers themselves, gatekeeping by mothers, and the role of professionals (Gordon et al., 2012; Maxwell et al., 2012a), as well as organisational processes (Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023) and community and policy influences (Gordon et al., 2012). Because of the complexity of the issue, any attempt at positive change needs to target several different levels, including practice, policy, and organisational processes.

A few previous attempts to improve the engagement of fathers in child protection have been documented in academic journals. English et al. (2009) reported on a pilot project in North West USA which included training of child welfare social workers and measures to assess change over time: pre-post self-assessment by administrators and case reviews. The developmental evaluation found some concrete changes in policy over the period of implementation, including increased funding for work with fathers. A social worker survey found some modest attitudinal changes, but positive views of father engagement had already been expressed before the pilot project. The impact of the project on actual work with fathers was not clear.

Scourfield et al. (2012)’s UK intervention was limited to training of child protection social workers, using a combination of awareness raising (day one) and skills development (day two) via an introduction to motivational interviewing. They found increases over time in all practitioner self-efficacy items, as well as practitioner-reported engagement of men who were not putting children at risk—both those living with children and not, though no change was found in practitioner-reported engagement of risky men. Osborne (2014) and Scourfield et al. (2015) have described a more complex approach in UK child protection which involved case audits, action plans, and work with senior leaders of multiple agencies, as well as one day of practitioner training (plus e-learning) and action learning sets. All practitioner self-efficacy items improved, though the number responding to the post-intervention survey was small ($n=20$) and some ratings of self-efficacy were high before the intervention so not all changes were significant. Some respondents gave examples of specific changes made to their practice. In focus groups and interviews, practitioners highlighted the importance of sharing ideas and creative solutions through the training, action learning sets, or in subsequent team meetings. Senior leaders spoke positively about the intervention but could not point to concrete changes made as a result.

In addition, moving away a little from the child protection context, Burn et al. (2019) studied the effectiveness of a short training course, both face to face and online, to improve the engagement of fathers in parenting programmes in Australia (see also Jiang et al., 2018). Sawrikar et al. (2023) then evaluated the online version for a range of staff working with families in the UK and Canada, mostly psychologists. Both studies found improvements in self-reported confidence and competence for engaging fathers after participation in the training, but effectiveness of the online training tailed off over time, compared with the face-to-face version.

These previous initiatives have had promising results but there has been no point of comparison, with all being single-arm evaluations. In an important advance in the evidence base, a new UK initiative which builds on previous ones is currently undergoing a cluster-randomised controlled trial (Bierman et al., 2022). I-SAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) was developed by UK charity The Fatherhood Institute and The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University and funded by Foundations, the English national What Works Centre for children and families. In the following section we outline the initiative and its theory of change.

A Logic Model for ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding Through Audited Father-Engagement)

A full account of ISAFE is presented in the intervention protocol published by Foundations (Davies et al., 2023), but a summary can be seen in the logic model (Fig. 1). A logic model is a tool that summarises the logical linkages between intervention resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes, in both the shorter and longer terms (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). This one was developed by the intervention team in discussion with the evaluation team. The acronym 'WWCSC' refers to What Works for Children's Social Care which was the name of the funder before its merger with the Early Intervention Foundation to form Foundations. The acronym 'LAS' is for local authorities which have responsibility for delivering child welfare services. Another UK context reference is to Ofsted who are the English service inspectorate.

Fundamental to the theory of change is the assumption that practitioner training alone is not enough to ensure organisational change. The intervention activities therefore include the following:

- Case file audits done by local authority quality assurance staff, after being trained in this
- A father engagement 'champion' in each team, trained in this role
- A webinar for senior leaders
- Two days of online training for social work practitioners, consisting of awareness raising about the importance of better father engagement (SW1) and skills development, using role play and an introduction to some aspects of motivational interviewing applied to father scenarios (SW2).

The mix of elements follows from the two earlier separate interventions of the Fatherhood Institute (Scourfield et al., 2015) and Cardiff University (Scourfield et al., 2012). The

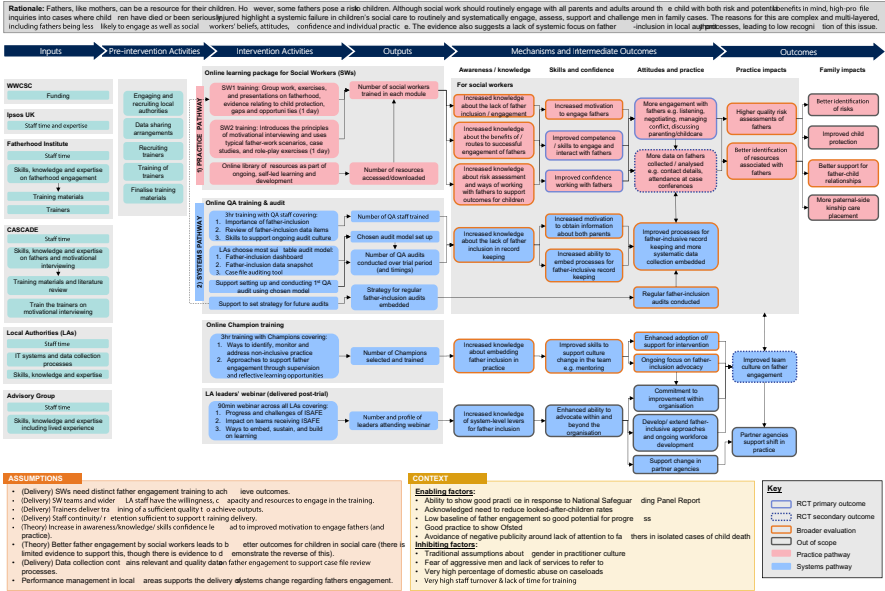


Fig. 1 Logic model for ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement). Reproduced from Bierman et al. (2022) and Davies et al. (2023). Note that the logic model was initiated by the Fatherhood Institute and CASCADE and then revised by evaluators Ipsos UK following co-design workshops

earlier Fatherhood Institute intervention included all of the above activities, so these have been followed through to ISAFE, with the approach to training being based on Scourfield et al. (2012), namely a two-day programme that combines awareness raising about the importance of engaging fathers with skills training, which uses motivational interviewing for work with children and families, following the work of CASCADE academics (Forrester et al., 2021). There is therefore some empirical support for ISAFE, insofar as it is based on a combination of two previous training and organisational development initiatives that have had some initially favourable evaluation, but the specific combination of elements in the form of ISAFE has not been previously implemented. ISAFE was thought by the funders to be trial ready because of previous evaluation evidence.

These elements of ISAFE in combination are hypothesised to lead to improvements in awareness and knowledge; skills and confidence; and attitudes and practice; all of these bolstered by more supportive team culture and partner agencies. The hypothesised ultimate impacts are better risk assessments and identification of father-related resources, leading to improved risk identification, protection of children, and support for children's relationships with fathers, as well as more kinship care placements with paternal family members.

The effectiveness of ISAFE will be measured for the cluster-randomised trial against a control group of social work teams who have not taken part in ISAFE. Sixty-three teams/clusters of social workers ($n=530$) are taking part in the trial across eight local authorities, between April, 2023, and April, 2024, with the trial reporting in autumn, 2024. Half of the teams/clusters are allocated to the

intervention arm and half to the control arm. The trial's primary outcome (see Bierman et al., 2022) is practitioner-reported father engagement practices, using Jiang et al.'s (2018) measure, with sub-scales for confidence in working with fathers, competence in using engagement strategies, perceived effectiveness of engagement strategies, frequency of strategy use, and organizational practices for father engagement. The impacts of the intervention on families will not be measured—the trial funding was not sufficient to cover the costs of such an expensive follow-up study. The trial does not consider the impact of the webinar for leaders, as that was offered across whole local authorities, therefore to teams randomised to the control group as well as those in the intervention group.

There are assumed to be some enabling factors such as perceived need, due to policy expectations, to respond to the National Safeguarding Panel Report (Davies, 2021), having good practice to bring to the attention of inspectors, and the avoidance of negative publicity about failure to engage fathers if there were to be a high-profile child death. Constraining factors are assumed to include traditional gendered assumptions among staff, fear of aggressive men and a dearth of relevant services for them, very high prevalence of domestic violence, and very high staff turnover and lack of training time.

Discussion

Changing practice to improve father engagement and reduce the scrutiny of mothering is very challenging territory, as Maxwell et al. (2012b) documented in their qualitative research. ISAFE attempts to influence more than one level of the ecology of influences on father engagement, by targeting organisational culture and processes as well as practitioner awareness and skills. The current RCT is a step forward in the evidence base by introducing a control condition. Despite these positive developments, it should be acknowledged that there are limitations to the intervention.

Firstly, the focus, as with other previous interventions in the child welfare field (English et al., 2009; Scourfield et al., 2012; Scourfield et al., 2015), is on social work services and not on other sectors such as the health service or education. Although reference is made in the logic model to partner agencies, in fact, it cannot really be expected that ISAFE will have a direct impact on other sectors. Professionals other than social workers are very important to setting expectations for father engagement—for example, midwives and health visitors who meet parents very early in a child's life—and ISAFE does not directly work with these groups. A future need is to adapt the intervention for other sectors.

Secondly, the training, by popular request from children's services managers, has run as an online course rather than face to face. Burn et al. (2019) found face-to-face training to be more effective than the same course online. Skills training in particular, involving interactive elements such as role play, may well be more effective in person. That said, learning and practice itself have developed since the enforced working from home during Covid lockdowns, so it is perhaps best to keep an open mind about format. The more recent online training evaluated by Sawrikar et al. (2023) had positive results.

Thirdly, social worker capacity presents a challenge to delivery, since high vacancy rates and caseloads, especially among more senior social workers, limit participants' availability to attend training. In a 2022 English Local Government Association survey, 83% of authorities who responded said they were experiencing difficulties recruiting children's social workers, with 72% saying retention was a problem. In June of that year, one in five (19%) children's social worker roles lay vacant—up from 14.6% the year before (Community Care, 2023). In the Children's Services Omnibus, 94% of local authorities said they found it difficult (42%) or very difficult (52%) to fill vacancies for experienced social workers (Department for Education, 2022).

In addition to intervention limitations, the evaluation is also limited in some respects. In particular, its outcomes are confidence reported by practitioners. One risk of this is that the Dunning-Kruger effect might be found (Dunning et al., 2003) wherein self-perceived ability can be inversely related to actual accomplishment. Ideally, future studies will consider the impact of training and organisational development on objectively observed practice change and, ultimately, families' experiences and outcomes for children and adults. Researching these within reasonable budgetary limits is challenging. Administrative data systems tend not to routinely record work with fathers and there are multiple practical and ethical challenges to observation and family member questionnaire data collection in child protection practice with vulnerable families. Another limitation of the evaluation is the point noted above that it will not consider the impact of the webinar for leaders.

Conclusion

There is an ongoing problem in child welfare of gendered practice, that often works against the interests of mothers, fathers, and children. ISAFE is a recent attempt to tackle this within children's social services, targeting both organisational development and individual practitioners. The RCT of the approach is welcome in advancing the evidence base. Its results will be studied with interest.

Funding The ISAFE intervention delivery and randomised controlled trial are funded by Foundations, the What Works Centre for Children and Families. The CASCADE partnership receives infrastructure funding from Health and Care Research Wales. Jonathan Scourfield receives funding from Health and Care Research Wales as a Senior Research Leader.

Data Availability There are no research data relevant to this paper, as it is a description of a practice innovation and not a report on findings from an empirical study.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bierman, R., Ashworth, K., Akhurst, E., & Ozan, J. (2022). *Randomised controlled trial of the ISAFE training and organisational development programme (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) Trial evaluation protocol*. Foundation, the national What Works Centre for Children and Families. <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ISAFE-Evaluation-Protocol-1.pdf>
- Burn, M., Tully, L. A., Jiang, Y., Piotrowska, P. J., Collins, D. A. J., Sargeant, K., Hawes, D., Moul, C., Lenroot, R. K., Frick, P. J., Anderson, V., Kimonis, E. R., & Dadds, M. R. (2019). Evaluating practitioner training to improve competencies and organizational practices for engaging fathers in parenting interventions. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, *50*, 230–244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-018-0836-2>
- Community Care. (2023). Most councils struggling to recruit and retain social workers, finds LGA. 20 January. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2023/01/20/most-councils-struggling-to-recruit-and-retain-social-workers-finds-lga/>
- Davies, J. (2021). *The Myth of Invisible Men Safeguarding children under 1 from non-accidental injury caused by male carers*. Department for Education.
- Davies, J., Jones, K., & Scourfield, J. (2023). *ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention protocol*. London, What Works for Children's Social Care. <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-project/isafe-improving-safeguarding-through-audited-father-engagement/>
- Department for Education. (2022). Children's Services Omnibus Wave 6 Research Report, December. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1123954/Childrens_services_Survey_Wave_6_Dec22.pdf
- Dunning, D., Johnson, K., Ehrlinger, J., & Kruger, J. (2003). Why people fail to recognize their own incompetence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *12*(3), 83–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.01235>
- English, D. J., Brummel, S., & Martens, P. (2009). Fatherhood in the child welfare system: Evaluation of a pilot project to improve father involvement. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *3*(3), 213–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548730903129764>
- Forrester, D., Wilkins, D., & Whittaker, C. (2021). *Motivational interviewing for working with children and families: A practical guide for early intervention and Child protection*. Jessica Kingsley Publications.
- Gordon, D. M., Oliveros, A., Hawes, S. W., Iwamoto, D. K., & Rayford, B. S. (2012). Engaging fathers in child protection services: A review of factors and strategies across ecological systems. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *34*(8), 1399–1417. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.03.021>
- Jiang, Y., Tully, L. A., Burn, M. T., Piotrowska, P., Collins, D. A. J., Moul, C., Frick, P. J., Hawes, D. J., Kimonis, E. R., Lenroot, R. K., Anderson, V., & Dadds, M. R. (2018). Development and psychometric evaluation of the father engagement questionnaire. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *27*, 3457–3467. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1195-0>
- Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J., Featherstone, B., Holland, S., & Tolman, R. (2012a). Engaging fathers in child welfare services: A narrative review of recent research evidence. *Child and Family Social Work*, *17*(2), 160–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00827.x>

- Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J., Featherstone, B., Holland, S., & Lee, J. (2012b). The benefits and challenges of training child protection social workers in father engagement. *Child Abuse Review*, 21(4), 299–310. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2218>
- McLaughlin, J. A., & Jordan, G. B. (1999). Logic models: A tool for telling your program's performance story. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 22(1), 65–72. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189\(98\)00042-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189(98)00042-1)
- Milner, J. (1993). A disappearing act: The differing career paths of fathers and mothers in child protection investigations. *Critical Social Policy*, 13(38), 48–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101839301303803>
- Osborn, M. (2014). Working with fathers to safeguard children: Failure to work with fathers around the child occurs regularly. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 38(6), 993–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.05.004>
- Parton, C., & Parton, N. (1988). Women, the family and child protection. *Critical Social Policy*, 8(24), 38–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101838800802403>
- Perez-Vaisvidovsky, N., Halpern, A. & Mizrahi, R. (2023) A systemic perspective on father engagement with child-and family-related social work interventions in Israel, in Tarrant, A., Ladlow, L. & Way, L. (Eds.) *Men and their Welfare*. London, Routledge.
- Philip, G., Clifton, J., & Brandon, M. (2019). The trouble with fathers: The impact of time and gendered thinking on working relationships between fathers and social workers in child protection practice in England. *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(16), 2288–2309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18792682>
- Sawrikar, V., Plant, A. L., Andrade, B., Woolgar, M., Scott, S., Gardner, E., Dean, C., Tully, L. A., Hawes, D. J., & Dadds, M. R. (2023). Global workforce development in father engagement competencies for family-based interventions using an online training program: A mixed-method feasibility study. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 54, 758–769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-021-01282-8>
- Scourfield, J. (2003). *Gender and Child protection*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scourfield, J., Tolman, R., Maxwell, N., Holland, S., Bullock, A., & Sloan, L. (2012). Results of a training course for social workers on engaging fathers in child protection. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(8), 1425–1432. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2012.03.022>
- Scourfield, J., Smail, P., & Butler, D. (2015). A systemic approach to improving the engagement of fathers in child safeguarding. *Child Abuse Review*, 24, 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2333>
- Zanoni, L., Warburton, W., Bussey, K., & McMaugh, A. (2013). Fathers as 'core business' in child welfare practice and research: An interdisciplinary review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(7), 1055–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2013.04.018>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.