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Fathers as 'core business' in child welfare practice and research: An interdisciplinary review

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ABSTRACT

This literature review draws from a wide array of interdisciplinary research to argue that fathers need to be included in child welfare practice and research to the same extent as mothers. Social work and child maltreatment literature highlight that fathers are often overlooked and viewed more negatively than mothers in child welfare practice. There are noteworthy theoretical and practical reasons for this poor engagement of fathers in practice. However, advances in attachment theory and recent research findings from developmental and fathering literature indicate that fathers influence their children independently from mothers and equally strongly. Further research demonstrates that fathers and father figures can be both potential risk factors and protective factors in the lives of vulnerable children. Therefore, children are placed at increased risk if dangerous fathers are not engaged, and are also significantly disadvantaged if supportive fathers are not engaged. The review concludes with practical implications for child welfare practice and research.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, many western countries have initiated public policies to raise awareness of the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children (e.g. The National Fatherhood Initiative in the US, The Father Involvement Research Alliance in Canada, The Fatherhood Institute in the UK, and the 2006 Family Law reforms in Australia). These initiatives are, at least in part, a response to the overwhelming research evidence that has accumulated over the past 30 years demonstrating that fathers play a vital role in the lives of their children (Lero, Ashbourne, & Whitehead, 2006). However, child welfare services appear to be quite resistant to father-inclusive practice. The lack of attention to fathers in child welfare services has been well-documented in general social work literature internationally and, according to some, ignoring fathers is deeply embedded in child welfare practice (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Dominelli, Strega, Walmsley, Callahan, & Brown, 2011; Strega et al., 2008). Scourfield (2006) posits that there is an assumption that men are not the 'core business' of child protection workers since women are considered the main client base. Others claim there is a pervasive negative stereotype of fathers and father figures in child welfare families and that, as a result, they are treated with suspicion and assumed to be absent, unimportant, dangerous and generally 'bad' (Bellamy, 2009; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). These negative perceptions may lead to a lack of engagement by workers and a tendency to exclude fathers from at-risk children's lives. Therefore, despite the fact that in the wider public arena father involvement is being encouraged, child welfare policies and practices tend to promote *uninvolved*, rather than involved, fathering (Brown et al., 2009).

There are, however, valid reasons, from both theory and practice, why child welfare services and research have focused on mothers and not fathers for decades. From a theoretical perspective, Western society has embraced the traditional hierarchical model of attachment theory which postulates that attachment to the mother is most important for children's socio-emotional well-being (Lewis & Lamb, 2007). In practice, including fathers can be very challenging due to factors such as the complexities of modern family composition, mothers not wanting fathers involved, avoidance and resistance from fathers themselves, and the fear of violent men. Therefore, since there are significant reasons to avoid fathers in child welfare families, a very convincing argument is required to justify altering current practice and expending scarce resources to engage and study fathers.

It will be argued that there are persuasive theoretical reasons, as well as compelling research evidence, that *do* justify engaging and studying fathers from child welfare families. Attachment theory is being revised in the light of a solid body of research evidence demonstrating that fathers have an equally important and independent influence on children's well-being (Newland & Coyl, 2010). In addition, ecological theories of child maltreatment also highlight the need to include all significant adults in a child's life when addressing child-focused problems. Hence, by failing to routinely and comprehensively include fathers, child welfare services can profoundly fail children,

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since fathers can be just as much a protective factor or risk factor in the life of a child as the mother (Brown et al., 2009; Strega et al., 2008). In essence, when fathers are overlooked, children may suffer the consequences.

This literature review addresses a gap in the child welfare literature by integrating research from a variety of different fields, including social work, child welfare, fathering and developmental psychology, to examine the problem of poor father engagement in child welfare practice, as well as the causes, importance to child outcomes, and possible solutions (see Fig. 1). By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this problem can be analyzed holistically by drawing from a comprehensive body of literature. In particular, this review utilizes recent fathering and developmental research to challenge existing mother-focused theory, practice and research. It also aims to increase awareness of the research evidence demonstrating that fathers, just like mothers, play a vital role in their children's lives, since it is this research that provides the compelling argument for including fathers in all aspects of practice and research (Fleming, 2007). This review also augments the fathering literature as there is a dearth of research on fathers in child welfare families as a sub-group.

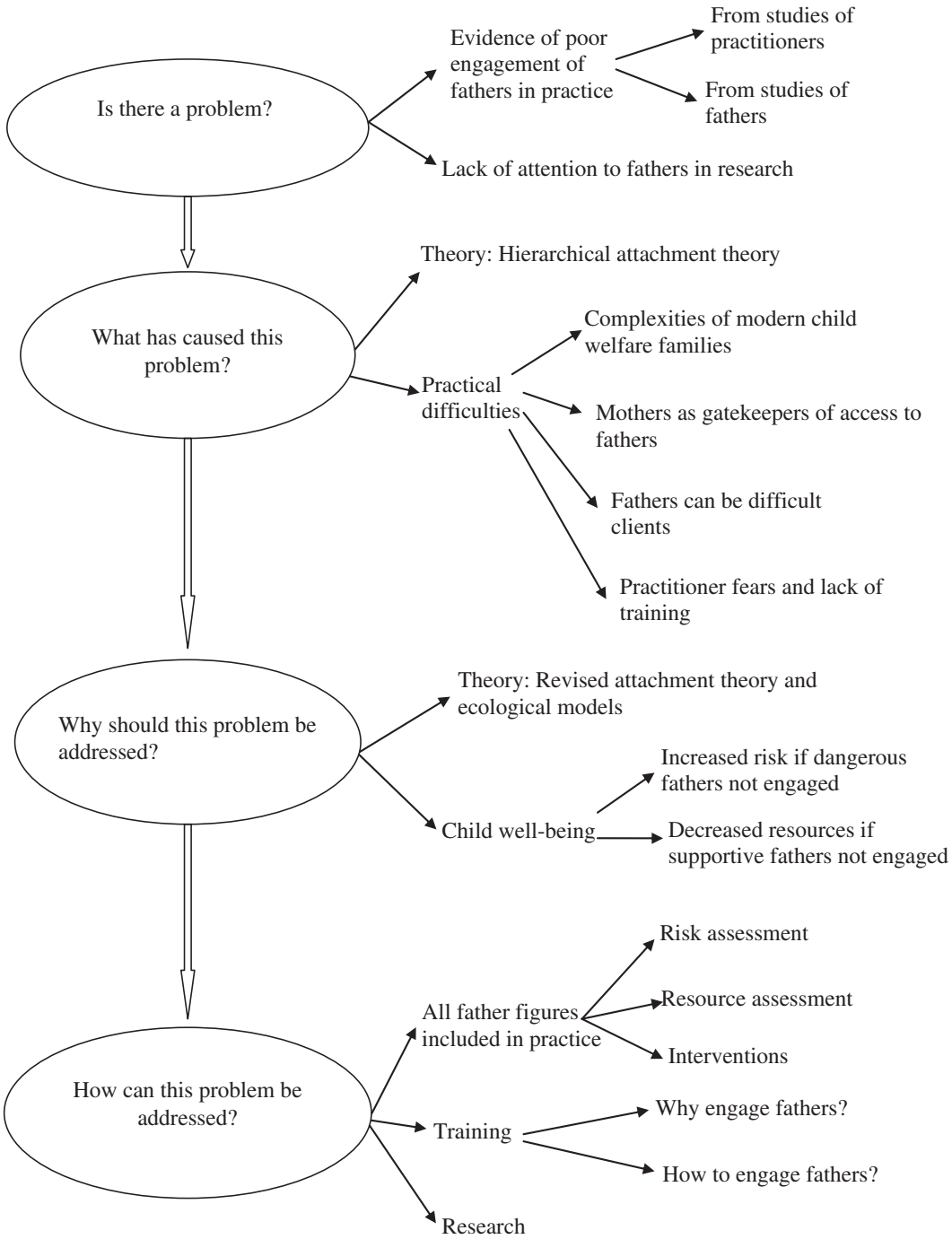

Fig. 1. Structure of this interdisciplinary literature review.

2. Evidence that fathers have been overlooked in child welfare practice

2.1. From studies of practitioners

Recent studies of child welfare practitioners in various Western countries have found a general lack of inclusion of fathers in practice. For example, in Canada, a study of 116 randomly selected child protection files showed that social workers rarely asked about, or involved, fathers in their casework (Strega et al., 2008). In these files, social workers described the fathers as irrelevant in 50% of cases, a risk to their children in 20% and an asset in 20% of cases. Even when fathers were considered a risk to their children they were not contacted by social workers in 60% of cases. Social workers also failed to include those fathers who were involved and supportive (Strega et al., 2008). Of 1203 caseworkers surveyed from one US state, only 37% agreed or strongly agreed that they worked with fathers in most of their cases (Huebner, Werner, Hartwig, White, & Shewa, 2008). In another US study where 1222 foster care caseworkers were interviewed, only 55% reported that the non-resident father had been contacted, even though 88% of caseworkers knew the identity of the father (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). In a separate study of 1958 children in foster care in the US, only 4% of children's permanency goal was reunification with their father, compared to 36% of cases where the goal was reunification with the mother. This was despite evidence that 54% of these children experienced maltreatment by their mother and only 19% by their father (Malm & Zielewski, 2009).

There is evidence that fathers in child welfare have been overlooked in the UK and Ireland as well. According to O'Hagan (1997), the neglect of fathers by child welfare workers has been consistently highlighted in child abuse enquiry reports in the UK over the past 20 years, and has not improved during that period. An ethnographic study of practice culture in a social work office in the UK found that men were generally viewed as a potential threat to children, mothers and social workers, were considered to contribute very little to the family, and were thought to be incompetent carers. In addition, workers did not view it as part of their job to work with fathers (Scourfield, 2001). In a recent study of 40 child protection case files in one English local area, recorded levels of engagement with fathers was comparatively low throughout the child protection process (Baynes & Holland, 2012). In this study, less than half the fathers were invited to the initial child protection meeting and 60.3% of fathers were not contacted by a social worker prior to the initial child protection meeting. In Ireland, a qualitative study of 24 fathers, 20 professionals, 12 mothers and 12 children found that the overall orientation of the welfare system was to exclude fathers because they were viewed as dangerous and incapable of nurturing children (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). In this study, some men were not engaged due to their appearance (e.g. tattoos and 'skin head') or because they were considered dangerous, even if they were never known to have actually been violent.

Gendered practice has also been found in Sweden and Australia. In Sweden, 417 randomly selected social workers were given realistic vignettes involving a single mother or single father involved with social welfare. Even though the single fathers faced similar problems to those faced by the mothers, single fathers were assessed by the workers as having more serious problems, being less deserving of support, and were recommended fewer support services than single mothers (Kullberg, 2005). In Australia, a recent qualitative study of 10 experienced Australian child and family welfare professionals found that their practice was gendered, with a focus on mothering and an avoidance of fathers (Fleming, 2010). Despite recognition that there were certain benefits to engaging with fathers and intentions to be more father inclusive, participants' actual engagement with fathers in their work was quite limited. In addition, the participants indicated a lack of knowledge of the fathers and were ambivalent about working with them, even though half the professionals were themselves male. Participants reported that including fathers increased their workload, so it was considered easier and a more valuable use of time to assume fathers were absent and instead focus on mothers (Fleming, 2010).

2.2. From studies of fathers

Qualitative studies of fathers from child welfare families in different countries indicate that many fathers feel less supported than mothers and believe that workers are biased against them. For example, a study of seven fathers with current or past contact with child welfare services in Norway found that fathers believed the workers did not want any contact with them and did not really listen to them. They felt they were treated as irrelevant in the life of their child, not capable of caring for their child, and had to prove they could be good caregivers (Storhaug & Øien, 2012). In the US, a study of 339 fathers involved in child protection services found that less than half these fathers agreed or strongly agreed that a social service worker had regular contact with them (47.8%) and that the staff were professional and polite (46.9%), compared to nearly 80% of mothers in child protection services who were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the services provided (Huebner et al., 2008). A recent Canadian study found that seven of the 18 fathers interviewed were quite negative about their involvement with child welfare, six were fairly positive and five had mixed experiences. Often what distinguished men's perceptions of a good worker from a bad one were demonstrations of common courtesy such as whether or not they treated the fathers with respect, listened to their side of the story, were honest with them and kept them fully informed (Cameron, Coady, & Hoy, 2012). Another Canadian study of 11 fathers with current or past involvement with the child protection system revealed that these men felt they were not treated with respect by workers, were assumed to be 'bad' dads, and had to go to great lengths to prove they could be trusted to care for their children (Dominelli et al., 2011). Similar themes were found in two recent studies of homeless fathers in Australia (Barker, Kolar, Mallet, McArthur, & Saunders, 2011; Bui & Graham, 2006). For example, a participant in the study of Barker et al. (2011) noted that, "because I wasn't a woman I could get no help and I was always the bad person for some reason" (p. 55). Another father from the Bui and Graham (2006) study stated that, "because I am a bloke, I had to prove I can look after him. I know I am a good father… But I am being questioned by authority constantly about my availability and ability to look after my children" (p. 36).

In summary, there is a broad base of international research revealing lower levels of engagement with, and support of, fathers in child welfare practice, compared to mothers. Although many studies are largely qualitative and involve small sample sizes, there is overall consistency in the findings, regardless of the country where the study was conducted and whether the research participants were child welfare practitioners or fathers.

3. Research has also overlooked fathers in child welfare families

Mirroring this lack of attention to fathers in child welfare practice, little research has been conducted on the role of fathers in families with child protection issues (Lamb, 2001; Lee, Bellamy, & Guterman, 2009; Strega et al., 2008). There is need for more research examining the influence of fathers in cases of physical child abuse and neglect as little is known about their role, responsibilities, problems, needs and strengths (Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Lee et al., 2009; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). Although it is recognized that fathers are the perpetrators of child physical abuse in approximately as many cases as mothers, and are responsible for some cases of neglect, the existing knowledge about the predictors of child physical abuse and neglect is based almost exclusively on research with mothers (Schaeffer, Alexander, Bethke, & Kretz, 2005).

Several literature reviews have highlighted this focus on mothers in child maltreatment research. For instance, a review of child maltreatment research across a 22-year period found that mothers were significantly more likely than fathers to be included in child physical abuse literature (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003). Another more recent review of research on fathers' involvement in programs for the prevention of child maltreatment found that few studies included fathers, and in those that did include fathers, men represented only a small percentage of participants (Smith, Duggan, Bair-Merritt, & Cox, 2012). Due to the small numbers of fathers in these studies, results were not presented separately for mothers compared to fathers, and therefore it is unknown to what extent fathers benefited from these programs (Smith et al., 2012). Similarly, a review of studies of home visiting programs found that otherwise well-designed and well-executed scientific studies failed to address the engagement of fathers and fathers' parenting outcomes (Duggan et al., 2004). Finally, Shapiro and Krysik (2010) searched five social work journals and one family focused interdisciplinary journal to examine the prevalence of recent research on fathers. They found that only 24% of the family focused articles included father variables, compared to 53% that examined mother variables. Only 12.5% of studies actually included fathers as participants in the research.

Use of the gender neutral terms 'parents', 'families' and 'caregivers' in research further obscures knowledge about fathers (Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011). Some studies use these terms to describe participants when in fact the research primarily or exclusively involved mothers (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003; Strega et al., 2008). For instance, in Shapiro and Krysik's (2010) review of six journals, 43% of the articles did not state if the terms 'caregivers' or 'parents' referred to mothers exclusively, or some combination of fathers and mothers, or other caregivers. Likewise, even though the Triple P parenting program is reported within the literature as being effective for 'parents', the underpinning studies used data primarily from mothers (Fletcher et al., 2011). Of 28 randomized studies of Triple P, only 20% of participants were fathers and in one third of the studies, the number of fathers recruited was not given. Only approximately a third of these Triple P studies reported separate information for mothers and fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). Similarly, in a narrative review of research from 2000 to 2012 on factors that hinder and facilitate improved engagement with fathers in child welfare services, many papers could not be included as it was not clear whether the data related to fathers as opposed to 'parents' or 'mothers' (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012).

Clearly, to advance the understanding of fathers in child welfare families, fathers need to be included as participants in research in the same numbers as mothers, and their outcomes need to be reported separately from mothers. However, since fewer fathers are involved in services and interventions than mothers, the smaller numbers of men as study participants may be inevitable until this imbalance in child welfare practice is rectified (see Fig. 2).

4. Reasons why fathers have been overlooked in practice and research

Why have fathers been relatively overlooked, compared to mothers, in child welfare practice and research across the Western world? There are a number of valid reasons, both from theory and practice, why services and research have focused predominantly on mothers.

4.1. Traditional attachment theory

According to Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003), the belief that a child's mother is the main influence on a child's well-being is widespread in Western society. This focus on mothering as the most important ingredient to a child's well-being can be traced back to John Bowlby's highly influential attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Daniel & Taylor, 2006; Milner, 1993; O'Hagan, 1997). According to traditional attachment theory, the mother is a child's primary attachment figure. A child's life-long emotional adjustment and relational success depends on the mother providing the child with a secure base from which to explore the world (Bowlby, 1988). According to Bowlby's original theory, fathers are theorized to be secondary attachment figures and therefore less influential than mothers on the child's developing schemas of the self and others. Hence, attachment theory research has concentrated on the mother-child relationship for decades (Caldera, 2004).

4.2. Practical difficulties working with fathers

In addition to the pervasive belief that mothers are the main influence in children's lives and that fathers only play a secondary role, there are other reasons why fathers have been comparatively overlooked. In particular, there are numerous practical difficulties that workers face when trying to engage men in child welfare families. These include complicated family compositions, mothers limiting workers' access to fathers, fathers being more difficult clients, and workers' feelings of fear and inadequate training in how to engage men.

4.2.1. Complexities of modern child welfare families

It is well documented that single mother families are overrepresented in child protection investigations, with research suggesting they comprise over 73% of child protection families (O'Hagan, 1997; Strega et al., 2008). This is not to say that single motherhood as a family structure causes higher incidents of child maltreatment since there is evidence that other related factors, such as reduced economic and social resources, best explain this association (Lamb, 2012a). The high prevalence of single mother households involved in child welfare has led to the assumption that children in these families do not have a father involved in their life (Bellamy, 2009; Dubowitz, 2009). However, 72–88% of children at risk of maltreatment do have a father or father figure involved in their life (Bellamy, 2009; Lee et al., 2009), and 60% of single mothers in child protection families have male partners living with them for varying amounts of time (O'Hagan, 1997). Although most, but not all, children in single mother child protection families do have some father figure involved in their life, many of these family compositions are complex. Each child may have a different biological father. Furthermore, the mother may have a boyfriend either living in the house or visiting frequently (Daniel & Taylor, 2006). It might be difficult for a caseworker to know if the mother's boyfriend is a stable father figure or a temporary, peripheral figure (Daniel & Taylor, 1999). Alternatively, the biological father may never have had a meaningful relationship with the mother or child, and to include the father would be inappropriate (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Therefore, each family may have no father involvement, or have multiple biological fathers and father figures, with levels of family engagement ranging from minimal involvement to full parental involvement (O'Donnell et al., 2005). It is important to note that this diversity and complexity in fathering roles in not unique to child welfare families but is becoming increasingly typical of modern Western families (Baxter, Edwards, & Maguire, 2012; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). In fact, the vast majority of families in the industrialized world are not "traditional" (i.e. consisting of a bread-winning father married to a stay-at-home mother) (Lamb, 2012a). In addition, some women choose to parent without any male involvement even before the birth of their child (Golombok & Badger, 2010). This diversity in family types presents a definite challenge for workers as there may be more than one father or male who should be engaged, and the amount of influence each man has on family dynamics needs to be determined case by case. Alternatively, there may never have been a father involved in a child's life.

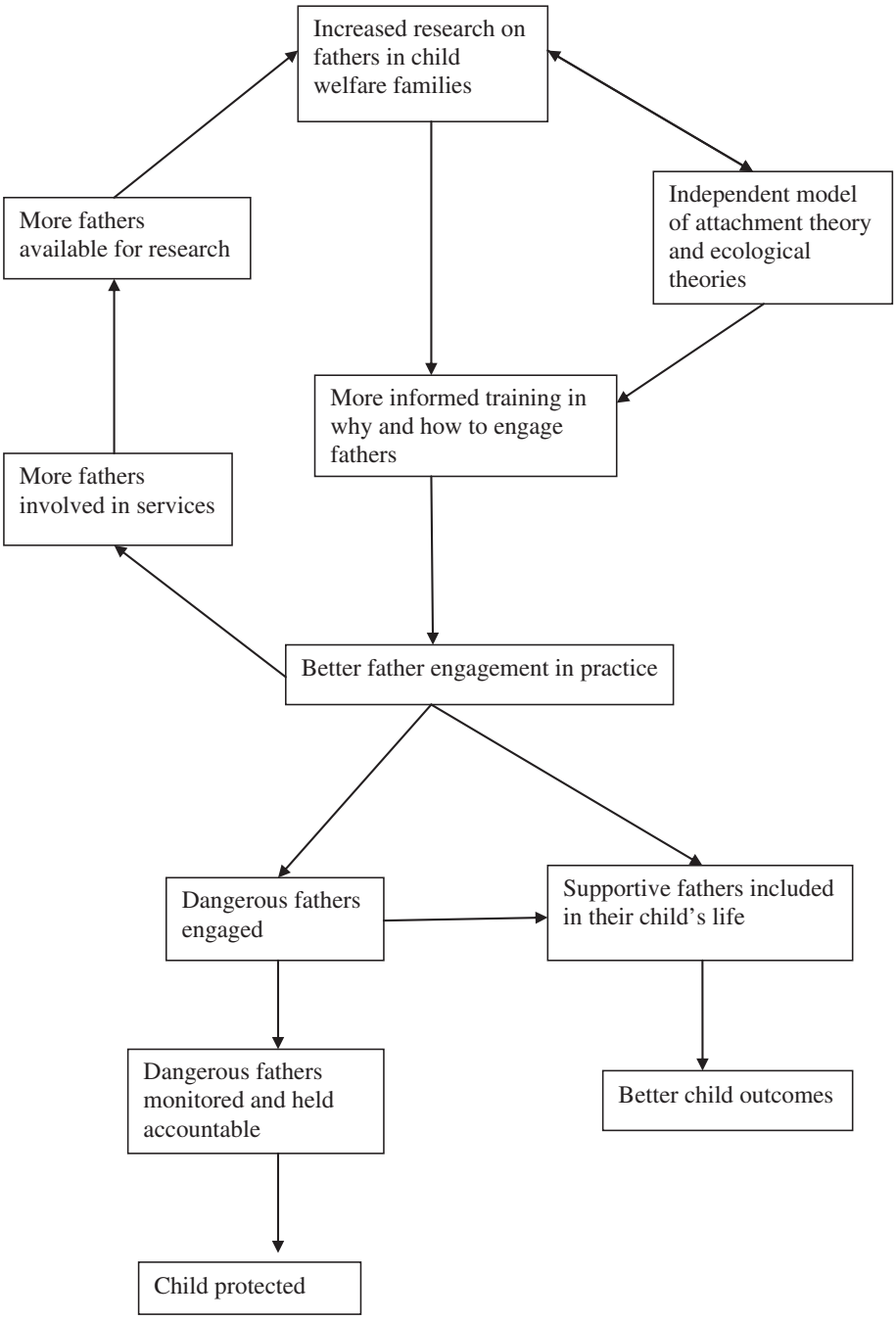

Fig. 2. The relationship between research, theory, improved father engagement and child outcomes.

4.2.2. Mothers as gatekeepers of access to fathers

In addition to the complicated nature of the family composition, mothers often act as gatekeepers of worker access to a child's father (Maxwell, Scourfield, Holland, Featherstone, & Lee, 2012). Many single mothers withhold the father's name or contact details, or else provide a false name (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Nearly three quarters of 1203 caseworkers surveyed in one US state said that birth mothers are reluctant to give social service workers information about the child's father (Huebner et al., 2008). Mothers may deliberately refuse to divulge the identity of a child's father for fear of losing social benefits or because they do not want the biological father involved in their child's life (Brown et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2008; Scourfield, 2001; Strega et al., 2008). Mothers' resistance to paternal involvement was also reported in a study of a home visiting program for 643 at-risk families in Hawaii (Duggan et al., 2004). In some cases, however, mothers honestly do not know the identity of the father (Huebner et al., 2008).

4.2.3. Fathers can be difficult clients

The attitudes and behaviors of fathers themselves often present an additional challenge to workers. In focus group discussions with 34 direct service staff in the US, staff mentioned that many men actively avoided contact with them and treated them with suspicion. Workers said that fathers are more easily frustrated and resent having to "jump through the hoops" if they do not feel responsible for their child's maltreatment. Some female caseworkers felt that fathers resented or disparaged them because they were young women (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Others have noted that some men in child protection families have hostile, threatening demeanors (Scourfield,

2006). In a study of 1222 caseworkers, only 50% of contacted fathers expressed an interest in having their child live with them. Other issues that prevented placement with fathers included 58% of contacted fathers having drug or alcohol abuse problems, 50% of fathers being involved in the criminal justice system, and only 23% of fathers complying with the services offered them (Malm et al., 2006).

In addition, fathers are less inclined to participate in services, interventions and research. Many fathers believe services and programs are designed for mothers and do not address the fathering role or their needs (Dubowitz, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2005). For example, in a study of outreach efforts to birthparents of 143 children in out-of-home care, birthfathers did not respond to outreach attempts by caseworkers to the same degree as birthmothers (Franck, 2001). Clinicians were not successful in engaging fathers in a home visiting program for at-risk families of newborns, even though more than two thirds of families were targeted at least in part due to father risk factors (Duggan et al., 2004). In a survey of 1203 caseworkers, it was reported that 78% of fathers were referred to parenting classes, but only 25% attended. Similarly, caseworkers reported referring 84% of fathers to drug and alcohol support, yet only 13% availed themselves of this service (Huebner et al., 2008). Further, fathers are typically more difficult than mothers to recruit for research, especially those with low incomes (Asla, de Paúl, & Pérez-Albéniz, 2011; Bradley, Shears, Roggman, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2006; Haskett, Smith Scott, Grant, Ward, & Robinson, 2003). In fact, the Three City Study in 2006 was forced to discontinue its father study component due to poor response rates (Bradley et al., 2006).

4.2.4. Worker fears and lack of training

As well as being more difficult clients in general, workers may also fear fathers (Brandon et al., 2008). According to Milner (1993), it is common for social workers to be afraid of violent men, yet this fear is frequently not addressed within social work. Given that a high proportion of men in child welfare families have substance abuse issues, a criminal record and have been accused and possibly convicted of violence, there are valid reasons for such fear (O'Hagan, 1997). It is also sensible and necessary for workers to avoid drunken or abusive men (O'Hagan, 1997). However, due to the high proportion of men they work with who are abusive, workers can generalize their experiences and become hostile and distrustful of all men (O'Hagan, 1997). Indeed, fathers are sometimes labeled as dangerous without a worker ever having met them (Maxwell et al., 2012). This fear of attack or intimidation can induce social workers, male workers included, to avoid male clients (O'Hagan, 1997).

Related to this fear, most service workers are not trained to work with men, especially not men with mental health, substance abuse or violence issues, and consequently tend to avoid them (Brown et al., 2009). Workers have indicated that they particularly desire adequate training in techniques and methods that are effective in dealing with dangerous, aggressive men (Maxwell et al., 2012; Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2004; Scourfield et al., 2012). However, in a survey of 32 undergraduate social work programs in Canada, fewer than 5% of courses contained content related to fathers in any way (Brown et al., 2009). In one US study, caseworkers acknowledged their need for training in how to engage fathers and address father specific issues (Huebner et al., 2008). In another US study, home visitors reported they did not feel competent to deal with fathers (Duggan et al., 2004). According to Scourfield (2006), teaching the skills and knowledge needed for engaging men is not recognized as a core learning need for child protection staff in the UK. Therefore, feelings of fear and inadequate training all contribute to workers' avoidance of fathers.

In summary, fathers have been overlooked in child welfare practice and research due to a variety of reasons, including the influence of Bowlby's traditional attachment theory, the complexities of modern welfare family composition, mothers' frequent unwillingness to divulge details of their child's father, challenging behaviors from fathers themselves, and practitioner fears of personal safety and lack of training in father engagement.

5. Why it is necessary to include fathers in practice and research

If mothers are children's primary attachment figure and the main influence in their life, as purported by traditional attachment theory, and it is time consuming and difficult to engage fathers in child welfare families, then the most pertinent question remains, is the effort required to engage fathers truly warranted?

5.1. Revised attachment theory

One reason why it is necessary to comprehensively include fathers in practice (and research) is because the ubiquitous belief that mothers are children's primary attachment figure has been seriously challenged in recent years. Recent theory and research within the field of developmental psychology indicates that attachment theory is evolving and heading in new theoretical directions (Newland & Coyl, 2010). For instance, Newland and Coyl note that Sir Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby, acknowledged in a recent interview that his father only recognized the role of fathers late in his career and that his father's intense focus on mothers has distorted cultural values. Sir Richard Bowlby has stated that he would like to change the place of fathers within attachment theory by proposing that in families where children are raised by a mother and a father, both parents are primary attachment figures, but with different, yet overlapping, attachment roles. According to Richard Bowlby, both mothers and fathers are equally significant to the child, with the main attachment role of the mother being to provide love and security, and the main attachment role of the father being to encourage exploration (Newland & Coyl, 2010). It should be noted that attachment theory assumes children will be cared for by both a mother and a father. However, as discussed previously, modern families in industrialized countries are very diverse (although how attachment theory applies to the many different family types is outside the scope of this paper). What should be acknowledged, though, is that there is a substantial amount of research evidence that it is the quality of the child–parent relationship, the quality of the relationships between parents and significant others, and the availability of economic and social resources, that best predict children's socio-emotional adjustment, regardless of family type (Lamb, 2012a).

Others besides Richard Bowlby have proposed that fathers tend to fulfill the attachment role of encouraging exploration to a greater extent than mothers. Grossmann et al. (2002) have suggested that, in general, fathers provide children with a companion and protector to feel secure exploring, whereas mothers are more inclined to provide comfort when a child is in distress. Paquette and Bigras (2010) have suggested that it is more the role of fathers to develop a child's exploration system by opening children to the outside world, encouraging risk-taking, exploration, and standing up for themselves. How do fathers fulfill this exploration attachment role? It has been proposed that, in the West at least, physical play is central to fathers' attachment relationship with their child and that the exploration behavioral system of attachment theory is developed primarily through physical play (John & Halliburton, 2010; Paquette & Bigras, 2010). Although both mothers and fathers provide both comfort and play, fathers spend a larger proportion of their time with children playing than caregiving, and fathers' play is more vigorous and more risky than mothers' play (Dumont & Paquette, 2012; Grossmann et al., 2002). Fathers tend to stimulate and excite, whereas mothers tend to calm and comfort (Paquette, 2004). Even fathers who are principal caregivers engage in more play than mothers (Lamb, 2002, as cited in Paquette, 2004). There is some recent preliminary research, however, suggesting it is the quality of father–child play, not the play itself, that is associated with positive child outcomes. For play to be beneficial for children, fathers need to express enjoyment

during the interaction, and be good natured and affirming with their children (Fletcher, StGeorge, & Freeman, 2012).

Empirical evidence for these differences in mother and father interaction with their children has been found in recent research. For example, in a study of 18 preschoolers and their parents, mothers tended to guide, teach and engage in empathic conversations with their children, whereas fathers tended to engage in more physical play, behave like playmates and challenge their children (John, Halliburton, & Humphrey, 2012). In interviews with 41 couples of primary school aged children, the majority of parents said their children first sought their mother for comfort. Fathers more often provided verbal reassurance of safety (Coyl-Shepherd & Newland, 2012). A study of 199 families in the US and Taiwan found that fathers reported greater involvement in physical play/exploration and outdoor games and sports than mothers. In addition, the primary school aged children in these families described their fathers as strong protectors and active and challenging playmates. They described their mothers more as loving, affectionate and safe (Newland et al., 2012). Finally, results from a recent large scale, nationally representative study of children and families in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) revealed significant differences between fathers' and mothers' parenting styles. In particular, fathers reported less warmth and less overprotection than mothers (Baxter & Smart, 2010).

Also supporting the theory of different but complementary attachment roles in two-parent heterosexual families, research has demonstrated that, in contrast to mothers, children attach to fathers more through play than comfort seeking. For example, a study of 102 preschoolers found that rough-housing play was a unique predictor of father–child attachment security, after controlling for father sensitivity and parenting consistency (Newland, Coyl, & Freeman, 2008). In a longitudinal study of 44 families, fathers' sensitive and challenging play with their 2 year old, and not the child's comfort seeking behavior, was a strong predictor of the child's attachment representation at ages 10 and 16 (Grossmann et al., 2002). In contrast, infant comfort seeking behaviors with their mothers, but not the mothers' challenging play, predicted a child's attachment representation at ages 6 and 10 (Grossmann et al., 2002). A study of 53 father–child dyads showed that children's socio-emotional development at 30–36 months was predicted by the earlier activation and exploration relationship between father and child, but not the comfort seeking relationship between father and child (Dumont & Paquette, 2012). Another recent study found that the father–child activation relationship, as observed in the home of 127 families, was associated with lower levels of children's behavior dysregulation and higher levels of child sociability one year later (Stevenson & Crnic, 2012). Similarly, a study of 274 fathers or father figures of 8–11 year old children in the US and Taiwan found that children's higher scores on a scale that measured the extent that a parent encouraged trying new things, taking risks and rough-and-tumble play, were associated with higher self-esteem, self-reliance and good interpersonal skills (Newland, Coyl, & Hui-Hua, 2010). In another recent study, fathers from 45 families who reported that they valued play interactions had preschool children who were rated by their teachers as having fewer internalizing behavior problems than those who did not value play interactions. This association was not found for mothers (Dubeau, Coutu, & Lavigueur, 2012).

Other research indicates that rough physical and even frightening play has different effects on child outcomes depending if it is initiated by the mother or the father. This difference was evident in a study of 62 infants which found that physical play significantly related to infant displays of pleasure only if playing with their father. Physical play with mothers was not as enjoyable for infants and sometimes upset them (Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002). A longitudinal study of 125 families found that more than 40% of fathers engaged in frightening behaviors with their infants, which was significantly more than mothers. When frightening behaviors (e.g. suddenly grabbing their leg or roaring at them) were performed by mothers they predicted children's internalizing problems years later and this association was not mitigated by sensitive caregiving. In contrast, fathers' insensitivity to their infant, not their frightening behaviors, related to attention problems at age 7 (Hazena, McFarland, Jacobvitz, & Boyd-Soisson, 2010).

Since there is evidence that fathers in two-parent heterosexual families in general interact with their children differently to mothers, and that rough, even frightening, physical play fulfills a unique role in developing the father–child attachment relationship and encouraging exploration, it is plausible that fathers' involvement with their children differentially predicts child outcomes (Hazena et al., 2010). Evidence from recent studies involving a range of countries and children of different ages supports this presumption. For example, a Portuguese study of 35 families found that children more securely attached to their father at age 2–3, were significantly more likely to have more peer friendships in preschool at age 4–5, even when attachment to the mother was controlled. In contrast, the correlation between attachment security to the mother and number of reciprocal friendships did not reach significance (Veríssimo et al., 2009). A study of 122 8–12 year olds in France indicated that a child's perceived quality of their relationship with their father was the only significant predictor of both academic self-concept and grade point average in language mastery, after controlling for child sex, age and general cognitive performance. Attachment to their mother was not correlated with language mastery (Bacro, 2012). A study of 1289 Taiwanese 13 and 14 year olds found that paternal attachment had a more substantial influence on depressive symptoms than maternal attachment, whereas maternal attachment was more influential in predicting family support for girls than paternal attachment (Liu, 2008). A study of 552 primary school children in Belgium found that paternal positive affection had a greater influence than maternal factors on children's emotional symptoms. For peer problems and prosocial behavior, however, maternal factors explained more of the variance in the models (Michiels, Grietens, Onghena, & Kuppens, 2010). Differential effects of mothers and fathers on child outcomes have been found in additional studies in Finland (Kouvo & Silvén, 2010), Argentina (Richaud de Minzi, 2010), Spain (Gallarin & Alonso-Arbiol, 2012), Canada (Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2011), the Netherlands (Hoeve, Dubas, Gerris, van der Laan, & Smeenk, 2011) and the US (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996). In fact, only one study was found where there were no independent effects of attachment to the father (Kamkar, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2012).

Overall, these recent studies provide evidence against the hierarchical model of attachment theory which posits that infants attach first and foremost to their mother, and that maternal attachment security then influences attachment security of all subsequent relationships (Lamb, 2012b). Maternal attachment has not been found to be the best predictor of social and emotional child adjustment measures. Instead, the studies discussed previously, and many others, support the independent model of attachment theory which posits that each attachment relationship is independent both in quality and its developmental influence (Liu, 2008). Illustrating this point, a study of 203 adolescents in Israel showed that adolescents securely attached to both parents reported significantly better socio-emotional adjustment than those attached to their mother only. In fact, those adolescents attached to their mothers only had significantly poorer adjustment than those attached to both parents, and were not significantly better adjusted than those insecurely attached to both parents (Al-Yagon, 2011). Similarly, a US study of 126, 6 to 11 year olds found that greater attachment security with both parents was associated with greater teacher-rated and self-rated competence than children securely attached to one parent only, regardless of which parent (Diener, Isabella, & Behunin, 2008). A study of 2722 adolescents in the UK found the unique effect of father involvement carried more weight than mother involvement for self-reported happiness (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). A longitudinal study of 87 children found that

children who had been securely attached to at least one parent, whether mother or father, at 15 months old were rated by their teachers as having fewer behavioral problems than those who had not been attached to either parent (Kochanska & Kim, 2012). The researchers of this study commented that in their many statistical analyses they failed to find evidence of the primacy of the mother. Finally, the large-scale and nationally representative study of Australian families (LSAC) has shown that most measures of fathering were independently associated with children's socio-emotional and learning outcomes, after taking into account the contribution of mothers (Baxter & Smart, 2010).

In summary, recent advances in attachment theory propose that fathers and mothers in two-parent heterosexual families are both primary attachment figures for their children but with different, yet overlapping, attachment roles. The main attachment role of mothers is to provide comfort and security and the main role of fathers is to encourage exploration of the wider world. These different roles are fulfilled though different parenting behavior foci, with physical play being uniquely important in developing father–child attachment and the exploration behavior attachment system (Paquette & Bigras, 2010). In addition, recent research has demonstrated that attachment to fathers compared to attachment to mothers differentially, but equally strongly, predicts child outcomes. This new theoretical direction supported by recent research highlights the critical role fathers play in the lives of their children.

5.2. Ecological theory of child maltreatment

In addition to recent advances in attachment theory, ecological models of child maltreatment are important for understanding the multiple influences in children's lives (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Within child abuse and neglect research, the ecological framework for understanding child maltreatment first suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and then applied to child maltreatment by Belsky (1980, 1993) has been widely accepted (Dubowitz, 2006, 2009). According to this theory, multiple factors contribute to child maltreatment, including the characteristics of each parent, the child's characteristics, and the broader context, such as quality of the marital relationship and parents' employment (Lee, Guterman, & Lee, 2008). Belsky's model suggests that fathers influence child outcomes both directly and indirectly. The mental health of a father, for example, can directly affect his parenting behaviors towards his child, whereas the father's support of the mother's parenting can indirectly affect a child (Duggan et al., 2004). Ecological models highlight the need to consider the wider family context and engage with all adults in a child's life, whether mother, biological father or mother's partner, as each of these people can directly and indirectly influence the well-being of a child (Duggan et al., 2004). Therefore, the use of ecological models of child maltreatment is important for research and informing appropriate practice (Sidebotham & Golding, 2001).

5.3. Fathers as perpetrators and risk factors for child maltreatment

Apart from theoretical justifications, there are two other important reasons for the greater inclusion of fathers in child welfare practice. Firstly, not engaging fathers increases risks to children. Secondly, not all fathers are harmful and many (if not most) can provide valuable emotional resources for a child that protects them and enhances their well-being (Ferguson, 2012).

Since fathers play a major, not minor, role in children's lives, the effects of poor paternal parenting and abuse can have devastating consequences for children. Excluding sexual abuse, most child abuse and neglect is perpetrated by a child's own parents, both mothers and fathers. One study in the US found that mothers were perpetrators of child abuse and neglect in 57.8% of cases and fathers in 42.2% (Huebner et al., 2008). A Canadian study of 1110 families with substantiated neglect cases showed that even though mothers are usually held responsible for child neglect, fathers and father figures were present in the majority (72%) of neglect families (Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivée, & Trocmé, 2008). Of those who indicated that they had been physically abused before the age of 15 in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey in 2005, 26% said they were abused by mothers or step mothers and 55.6% by fathers or stepfathers (Lamont, 2011). Furthermore, fathers and father figures are over-represented as perpetrators of severe physical abuse. In 600 cases of the death of an under five year old child due to maltreatment in the US, mothers or mother substitutes were alleged perpetrators in 20.5% of cases whereas fathers or father substitutes were alleged perpetrators in 45% of cases (Klevens & Leeb, 2010). Approximately 60% of child deaths due to head trauma, shaken baby syndrome or other physical abuse is attributed to men (Klevens & Leeb, 2010).

Although fathers and father figures are known to be at least equally responsible for child maltreatment as mothers, dangerous men tend to be avoided by child welfare services, especially if they are also perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV). The co-occurrence of child maltreatment and IPV is well acknowledged. A study of 105 families with alleged child maltreatment in the UK estimated a co-occurrence rate of 41%, with fathers perpetrating violence to both partner and child in 57% of families, and mothers perpetrating violence to both partner and child in 26% of families (Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Browne, & Ostapuik, 2007). However, when male IPV and child maltreatment co-occur, mothers tend to be held responsible for keeping their children safe. Protective services tend to avoid violent fathers, thus failing to hold them accountable and facilitate rehabilitation. For instance, in a review of 13 publications which explore child protection intervention in the context of domestic violence, a common pattern across countries and over time was found (Humphreys & Absler, 2011). The male perpetrators of abuse were frequently not contacted, little to no information about them was recorded in case files, they were largely absent during assessments, and were not included in intervention processes. Women were held accountable for 'failure to protect' and fathers were not held responsible for their behavior (Humphreys & Absler, 2011). Furthermore, research from the National Survey of Families and Households study of several thousand American families suggests that men who are violent towards their partner parent differently to other fathers. They were found to engage in harsher parenting (e.g. more spanking, arguing and yelling), rate their children more negatively, and praise them less often (Fox & Benson, 2004).

It is important for child welfare workers to confront and hold responsible domestically violent fathers rather than blaming non-abusing mothers for a failure to protect their children, for a number of reasons (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Howe, 2008; Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Kopels & Sheridan, 2002; Magen, 1999). Firstly, by failing to confront perpetrators of IPV and the effect it has on the children in the house, and by failing to deliver consequences for their actions, abusive behavior is implicitly condoned and permitted to continue (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008). In fact, a multisite evaluation of batterers programs found that compared to men who did not reassault their partners, those who did reassault were those who did not receive negative consequences for their violence (Gondolf, 2002). A second, but related, point is that IPV is usually caused by the belief system of abusive men, not mutual interpersonal conflict, so these men will continue to abuse unless they are forced to reconsider their belief system and pattern of behaviors towards their intimate partners (Bancroft, 2002; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Abusive men often continue, and sometimes escalate, their domestic violence after separation and so leaving an abusive partner does not guarantee safety. Abusers also continue their abuse with new partners and continue to father and step-father other children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Rivett, 2010). Therefore, insisting a mother separates from her partner is an inadequate strategy to protect mothers and children

(Brown, Strega, Dominelli, Walmsley, & Callahan, 2009). Thirdly, it is simply just and fair that the perpetrators of abuse are held responsible for, and bear the consequences of, their behavior and how it affects their children (and this has criminal justice system implications as well). It is not just and fair to transfer responsibility onto non-abusing mothers by blaming them for a failure to protect their children (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Magen, 1999; Slote et al., 2005). Usually mothers do their very best to protect their children from domestic violence, but they cannot control their partner's behavior (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Kopels & Sheridan, 2002; Magen, 1999; Slote et al., 2005). Finally, there is evidence that for some men, receiving consequences for their abusive behaviors and focusing on their role as fathers can act as powerful motivators to change their lives (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Fox, Sayers, & Bruce, 2001; Rivett, 2010). It can be a "wake up call" that triggers reflection, remorse, regret and the desire to change and become better fathers (Fox et al., 2001). Therefore, engaging with domestically violent fathers and holding them fully responsible for their behavior and its effect on their children will provide better outcomes for children and mothers, and can potentially benefit the abusive fathers themselves (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Fox et al., 2001).

In addition to the increased risk associated with IPV, the presence of a non-biological father figure in the home can also increase the risk of child abuse. This was demonstrated in a longitudinal study of at-risk children in the US, where children who had a non-biological father living in the home were twice as likely to be reported for maltreatment after his entry into the home as those with a biological father or no father figure in the home. Across the eight years of the study, households with a non-biological male partner had the highest prevalence of maltreatment reports, controlling for race, mother's education, maternal depression and number of siblings in the home (Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, & Kotch, 2001). More recently, a study of 2297 families from the Fragile Families longitudinal study in the US also found that families with the highest risk of child protection involvement were those where a man who was not the biological father of any of the children lived with the mother, after controlling for both mother and father characteristics. Even though social selection was found to play a part in this relationship, the association remained significant even when mother selection factors were controlled for (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009). Using data from a study of 3978 families in contact with the US child welfare system, Bellamy (2009) found that children who lived with an adult male who was not the child's biological, step or adoptive father, were the most likely to enter out-of-home care, even after controlling for demographics and family violence-related covariates. Another study investigating approximately 600 substantiated incidents of child maltreatment found that if the father figure was not the biological father of all children in the family, the risk that child maltreatment would re-occur increased by approximately 66% (Coohey, 2006). Using the same cases of child maltreatment, a separate study found that when the mother's partner was not the biological father of all her children, or if he had drug or alcohol or mental health issues, the family was more likely to have a persistent or chronic problem with supervisory neglect (Coohey & Zhang, 2006). Finally, of the 26 cases of fatal child abuse perpetrated by fathers in the Murder in Britain study, 62% of these men were non-biological fathers (Cavanagh, Dobash, & Dobash, 2007). Therefore, even though there is a tendency for child welfare workers to consider biological fathers the only men relevant to their cases (Fleming, 2010), there is evidence that the mother's current partner may pose a risk to children and hence also needs to be comprehensively included in child welfare practice.

It should also be noted that in comparative studies of abusive mothers and fathers, gender differences in the factors related to their abusive behavior were found in 67% of cases (Schaeffer et al., 2005). Specifically, abusive and at-risk fathers and father figures have more rigid expectations of children and have more difficulty taking the perspectives of others compared to abusive and at-risk mothers (Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2004; Pittman & Buckley, 2006). A study of 124 filicide perpetrators in Austria and Finland found the breakdown of the intimate partner relationship was a major risk factor for fathers but not for mothers (Putkonen et al., 2011). Other studies have also highlighted common characteristics of men who abuse and even kill their children. These include problems in childhood, minimal education, persistent unemployment, criminal convictions, a history of violence, unreasonable expectations of children and low tolerance of normal childhood behavior, jealousy and resentment towards the child victim, the belief that they have a right to attention from their partner and silence from the child, and a strong sense of entitlement (Cavanagh et al., 2007; Dixon et al., 2007; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Putkonen et al., 2011).

Overall, the evidence suggests that avoiding biological fathers and mothers' partners who are suspected perpetrators of IPV, or who display the above risk factors, places children at considerable risk (Brown et al., 2009). It is no exaggeration to say that children sometimes die when fathers are overlooked by child protection services. One specific example is the case of Sukina Hammond in the UK who was killed by her father. There had been eight case conferences over a period of three years, attended by 54 professionals. Although there were hundreds of reports, there was no information about the character or violent history of her father (O'Hagan, 1997). Hence, to adequately protect children it is just as important to identify, engage, understand and intervene with all the relevant father figures in a child's life, as well as with mothers (Cavanagh et al., 2007; Klevens & Leeb, 2010).

In addition to perpetrating child maltreatment, fathers and father figures can have negative influences on their children through substance abuse and mental health issues. For instance, a study of 3027 families from the Fragile Families study found that the negative effect of a father's substance abuse on child outcomes was not significantly less than that of mothers, even when non-resident fathers were included (Osborne & Berger, 2009). In fact, 86% of families with paternal substance abuse issues did not have a resident father, and yet children with a substance abusing father had more reported aggression, ODD and ADHD (Osborne & Berger, 2009). Regarding mental health, a large longitudinal study of 14,138 children living in the UK demonstrated that paternal depression significantly increases the risk of child maltreatment (Sidebotham & Golding, 2001). Similarly, using data from interviews with 1773 fathers as part of the Fragile Families study, it was found that depressed fathers were approximately three times more likely to report having spanked their 1 year old infant in the last month compared to non-depressed fathers (Davis, Davis, Freed, & Clark, 2011). In addition, the recent World Mental Health survey of 51,507 people from nationally representative samples in 22 countries, found the influence of father's mental health on offspring lifetime psychopathology was not significantly different to mothers' influence and was found across country, culture and class (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Furthermore, data from the LSAC study of Australian families found that fathers' poor mental health was strongly related to children's negative socio-emotional outcomes, via decreased positive and increased negative parenting behaviors (Baxter & Smart, 2010).

In summary, there is international evidence suggesting that fathers and father figures are at least as responsible for child maltreatment and for negatively influencing their children as are mothers, even though mothers are normally the primary care giver and fathers frequently live elsewhere.

5.4. Fathers as assets and protective factors

Even though fathers can harm their children, just like mothers, it is important to note that abusive parents are a small minority of the population (Hunter & Price-Robertson, 2012). Specifically, although non-biological father figures pose a statistically increased risk, by far

the majority are not perpetrators of child maltreatment (Berger et al., 2009). In fact, there is evidence from the Fragile Families study that involvement by resident father figures is as beneficial for child well-being as involvement by resident biological fathers (Bzostek, 2008). Most fathers and father figures are a positive influence in their child's life, as demonstrated by three decades of research on fathering. This substantial literature has provided evidence of unique and independent associations between positive father involvement and a wide range of emotional, social and cognitive benefits for children (Flouri, 2005; Lamb, 2001, 2010). However, most of the earlier studies on the associations between fathering and child outcomes tended to use stable, two-parent, middle-class, participants (Lamb, 2001). This raises the possibility that whilst encouraging fathers to be involved with their children is in the best interests of children from middle-class, stable, low-risk families, it might *not* be in the best interest of children from low SES, unstable, high-risk families. Indeed, this is the implicit assumption underlying much of the avoidance of men by child protection workers (Brown et al., 2009). However, little is known about fathers in families at risk of child maltreatment (Shapiro, Krysik, & Pennar, 2011). In particular, there is a paucity of research on fathers in child welfare families who are potential assets to their children and are not identified as violent or unfit to parent (Storhaug & Øien, 2012). There is also little research on fathers' involvement as a protective factor for maternal child abuse (Guterman, Lee, Lee, Waldfogel, & Rathouz, 2009).

Some recent research, however, has demonstrated that fathers *can* be a protective factor and a resource in the lives of children from high-risk, or even child protection involved, families. The absence of a father from the home has been recognized as a risk factor for child maltreatment (Lamb, 2001; Lee et al., 2009). One estimate is that children in single-parent families have a 77% increased risk of physical abuse and an 87% greater risk of physical neglect (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Father absence has also been associated with economic deprivation, with 34% of single mother headed households living below the poverty line in the US (Guterman & Lee, 2005) and 26.7% of sole-parent families living in poverty in Australia (Hunter & Price-Robertson, 2012). Also noteworthy, a longitudinal study of 14,138 children in the UK found that one of six factors that predicted if a mother had a child registered with child protection was her own father being absent during her childhood (Sidebotham & Golding, 2001). This suggests that the presence of the father in the home may possibly have intergenerational protective benefits (Sidebotham & Golding, 2001).

Other studies have shown that the presence of involved, supportive fathers or father figures in the lives of at-risk and child protection children can reduce the risks of child maltreatment. For example, using data from a sample of 3978 families in contact with the US child welfare system, Bellamy (2009) found that children who had contact with a noncustodial parent, most often their father, were 46% less likely to enter out-of-home care, even after controlling for demographics and family violence-related covariates. Another study based on data from 2297 families in the Fragile Families study found that families where the mother was living with the biological father of all her children self-reported the lowest rate of child protection services involvement compared to all other family types, even after controlling for a range of mother selection factors and father characteristics and behaviors (Berger et al., 2009). Additional research using the data of 1480 families from the Fragile Families study found an association between positive father involvement with a child and lower maternal child physical abuse risk, as measured by mothers' self-reported spanking and physical aggression scales (Guterman et al., 2009).

In addition to mitigating risk, fathers from at-risk child welfare families can enhance their children's lives. For example, a study of 855 high risk children from a longitudinal study on the long-term effects of maltreatment on children's health and development in the US (LONGSCAN), found that children who reported having a father figure in their life had higher cognitive scores and better perceived competence and social acceptance, compared to those children without a father figure. Even after controlling for site, welfare benefits and maternal education, a significant association was found between greater perceived father figure support and greater perceived competence and social acceptance and fewer depressive symptoms. These associations did not differ by race, gender of child or whether or not the father figure was the child's biological father (Dubowitz et al., 2001). Using a subset of 182 families with child welfare cases from the LONGSCAN study, the presence of an adult male in some form of father-like relationship with the child was associated with lower levels of aggression and a 35–50% lower depression score than children without a father figure. After controlling for the child's gender, mother's ethnicity, number of referrals to child protection services and the presence of domestic violence, the direct effect of fathers and father figures was no longer significant but remained a significant interaction term in the multivariate models, along with ethnicity and religious affiliation (Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). Using a different subset of 285 children from the LONGSCAN study, it was found that the most important predictor of permanent placement stability for children removed from their homes and not adopted was the presence of a maximally involved father figure (Proctor et al., 2011). Similarly, interviews with 1222 caseworkers in the US indicated that foster children with non-resident fathers who provided financial and nonfinancial support were more than two times as likely to have a reunification outcome than children whose father provided no support (Malm & Zielewski, 2009). In addition, a recent study of 60 randomly selected foster care case records revealed that children with fathers who complied with the case plan were in foster care for less than half the length of time of children whose father did not comply (Coakley, 2012). The study also found that children whose fathers complied with the case plans were more often placed with a parent or relative after foster care.

Overall, there are compelling reasons why all father and father figures in a child's life should be as involved in child welfare services and interventions as are mothers. The independent model of attachment theory posits that both mothers and fathers in two-parent heterosexual families are primary attachment figures who have overlapping, yet distinct, attachment roles. Research findings substantiate the independent and equally strong association between fathering and child outcomes. The ecological theory of child maltreatment highlights the need to involve all adults significant in a child's life. This theory is supported by research demonstrating that fathers can be as much a risk factor in the life of a vulnerable child as the mother, regardless of biological relatedness and coresidence. However, research has also provided evidence that involved, supportive fathers and father figures can be resources and assets to children in at-risk and child protection families, whether living in the same household or not. In short, fathers can exert as much influence as mothers on their children's well-being.

6. Implications

6.1. Implications for practice

Having now reviewed research showing that fathers are relatively overlooked in child welfare practice and research compared to mothers and the reasons why, and having also reviewed theories and research evidence demonstrating the equally important influence of fathers, both as potential risks and resources for vulnerable children, what are the implications for practice? The first and most obvious implication is that fathers should be included as 'core business' in all child welfare services and research along with mothers (Scourfield, 2006). All father figures in a child's life should be included in the assessment of risk, the assessment of resources, and interventions and services. This includes

non-resident biological fathers and mothers' romantic partners. The second implication for practice is that all workers in the child welfare industry should receive adequate training in why and how to engage fathers. Finally, more research on fathers in child welfare families needs to be conducted to inform policy and practice. Research plays a pivotal role in the advancement of father engagement and hence the improvement of child outcomes, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

6.1.1. Assessment of risk

As noted previously, fathers and father figures can be perpetrators of child maltreatment as often as mothers. Therefore, to accurately assess risk it is essential to engage with all the father figures in a child's life, whether or not they are biologically related to the child, whether or not they currently reside with the child, and whether or not the mother wants them involved. Direct contact should be made with these men rather than just accepting the mother's opinion as fact (Daniel & Taylor, 1999). Since the presence of non-biological father figures in the home can increase the risk of child maltreatment, it is important not to overlook the mother's resident romantic partner in assessments and services. Fathers and father figures need to be assessed for a range of risk factors, such as IPV, a history of violence, substance abuse, and depression. As the composition of at-risk families can be complex and include a number of father figures, agencies need to recognize the additional time and resources required to identify, contact and engage with all the relevant men in a vulnerable child's life.

6.1.2. Assessment of resources

In addition to assessing fathers for risk factors, it is also important to assess fathers for their positive contributions to the well-being of their child (Dubowitz, 2009). Assessing fathers as potential resources as well as risks should become standard practice, unless there is compelling evidence to exclude them, such as documented evidence of past violence (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). Involved fathers and father figures can serve a protective role in the lives of at-risk children and can contribute to positive developmental outcomes. The assumption that fathers in child welfare families are absent or unimportant needs to be challenged, as does the stereotype of such men as dangerous, non-nurturing and incompetent carers (Bellamy, 2009; Dubowitz, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2005). Instead, each man's ability to parent should be assessed without bias. Furthermore, given there are proven long term socio-emotional and developmental benefits to children from having a close attachment relationship with their father, contact between children and their father should be encouraged, unless there are substantiated safety risks. Fathers should also be included in case plans and non-resident fathers should be routinely considered as placement options for their children requiring out-of-home care.

To operationalize this inclusion of fathers into risk and resource assessments, there should be separate mother and father data collection for all official forms rather than just “parent” information (Milner, 1993). This paperwork should also include details of the mother's partner as well as the biological father, in case they are different. Fathers' information should be routinely included in all social service agencies, including information about risk factors such as substance abuse and violence, and protective factors, such as financial support and child care (Huebner et al., 2008).

6.1.3. Interventions and services

Interventions need to address fathers' issues as well as those of mothers. This is especially important in light of the evidence that fathers parent somewhat differently to mothers and may have a different attachment role focus to that of mothers. Fathers may, therefore, have different needs and issues to those of mothers and father-relevant factors should be examined separately from mothers to guide interventions for fathers (O'Donnell et al., 2005). To give one example, Dubowitz (2006) suggests it is important to understand cultural influences and men's motivations in fathering, as well as their frustrations and their needs. Furthermore, since parenting efficacy has been associated with reduced risk of neglect, building fathers' parenting skills and confidence is very important (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000). It has been suggested that some fathers may need to be taught more basic parenting knowledge and skills than mothers (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Other suggestions from the literature are that some fathers may require interventions that teach them how to express their love to their children, as well as inviting and challenging them to be responsible for their children (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004).

As a consequence of the differences between mothers and fathers, there is a need for more father-specific resources and interventions (Saleh, 2012). A narrative review of the literature found that fathers prefer services that have been designed specifically for them (Maxwell et al., 2012). They also prefer skills-based exercises and activity-based approaches that give them the opportunity to interact with their children (Maxwell et al., 2012). Similarly, a study of eight service centers across Australia found that the services that were most successful in engaging fathers were specifically tailored for men, were exclusive to fathers, and catered to men's communication style and preference for activity-based learning (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008). There is also evidence that fathers involved in child protection want father support groups where they can share and learn from each other (Berlyn et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2008). It has been suggested that parenting materials need to be developed specifically for fathers of children in care as they face unique challenges (Franck, 2001). In addition, many men from child welfare families are socially marginalized and struggle with personal issues and therefore need as many services and interventions as mothers (Scourfield, 2006). Assisting fathers heal their own lives and address issues such as substance abuse and depression can bring significant benefits to their children. For example, a pilot study of a program for fathers with alcohol abuse or dependence that combined Behavioral Couple Therapy and Parent Skills significantly reduced the number of open child protection cases in those families at a 12 month follow-up (Lam, Fals-Stewart, & Kelley, 2009). Therefore, there is evidence that father-specific services and interventions for child welfare families need to be developed, rather than simply trying to include fathers in programs and services designed for mothers.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that some fathers in child welfare families can and do change for the sake of their children, if provided support and effective intervention (Coady, Hoy, & Cameron, 2012). Although there is a paucity of research on parenting intervention programs for at-risk, negligent or abusive fathers, it has been suggested that these men require unique, tailored programs and that traditional parenting programs are not effective (Scott & Crooks, 2004). Even programs designed for at-risk parents may need to be adapted to father-only programs that address father specific issues, since fathers have been found to benefit less from a program designed for both at-risk mothers and fathers (Weymouth & Howe, 2011). Batterers programs designed specifically for fathers, such as Caring Dads (Crooks, Scott, Francis, Kelly, & Reid, 2006; Scott & Lishak, 2012) and Strong Fathers (Pennell, 2012), are a relatively new but very promising development in intervention services (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Featherstone, Rivett, & Scourfield, 2007). These programs address men's lack of empathy for their children, their sense of entitlement, and their control-based parenting (Scott & Crooks, 2006). Program participants can be resistant and hostile to begin with and may require multiple attempts at starting a program before they are ready to truly engage with the program and make the necessary changes (Scott & Crooks, 2006). However, there is some preliminary evidence that abuse-prone fathers can become less hostile and angry, and more emotionally available to their children, with the assistance of a well-designed and father-focused intervention program (Scott & Crooks, 2007; Scott & Lishak, 2012). The proposed model in Fig. 2 acknowledges

the possibility of change with a link from 'dangerous' to 'supportive' father. When trying to decide if a man has genuinely changed and will not reassault after attending a batterers program, it is important to know how to identify genuine change. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) suggest 12 indicators of true change, and they caution against simply accepting a man's claims to have changed. Some key indicators of true change are: Has he taken full responsibility for his actions or is he still blaming others and minimizing or excusing his own behaviors? Does he show empathy for how his abuse has affected his partner and children? Does he accept the consequences of his actions? Can he treat others with respect and respond to conflict in a reasonable way? Does his partner report that his violence and other forms of abuse have stopped? (Bancroft, 2002; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Mederos, 2004).

6.1.4. Worker training — why engage fathers?

To ensure that fathers are included in all assessments and services, practitioners and workers in the area of child welfare need to be well trained. In training, it is critical that workers understand and appreciate the reasons why fathers need to be included as 'core business' in their practice (Fleming, 2010). Since men in child welfare families can be difficult clients, the extra time, effort and potential risk required to engage with them needs to be well justified. For this reason, the traditional hierarchical model of attachment theory that presumes the primacy of attachment to the mother needs to be replaced with the more recent independent model of attachment theory, along with ecological models of child maltreatment, that construct fathers as equally important influences in a child's life. Furthermore, findings from research within developmental psychology and the fathering literature that provide evidence of the unique but equally profound effects of father–child attachment and father involvement on child outcomes need to be incorporated into child welfare education.

6.1.5. Worker training — how to engage fathers

Workers should also be informed of the most effective manner in which to engage fathers. For example, it has been suggested that workers who engage 'with' fathers, instead of exercising power over them, are more successful in gaining their cooperation (Brown et al., 2009). A recent study found that child welfare workers who fathers considered 'good' were those who treated them with respect rather than condescension, did not make judgments until the men had explained their side of the story, tried to understand the men's negative emotions, did what they said they would do, and genuinely tried to help them (Cameron et al., 2012). In another recent study, child welfare professionals experienced in working with fathers, highlighted the need to use de-escalation techniques, focus discussion on the child, include fathers in decision making, be open, honest and straightforward in communication, acknowledge men's feelings and views, and listen with empathy rather than judgment (Saleh, 2012). The study of Australian services mentioned previously also found that workers who successfully engage with fathers tend to be honest, open, non-judgmental, empathic and respectful (Berlyn et al., 2008). According to Berlyn et al. (2008), the cornerstone of successful engagement of fathers is building rapport and a relationship of trust.

The need to treat fathers with respect and understanding and to build a good working relationship with them also applies to fathers and father figures who are perpetrators of IPV (Featherstone et al., 2007; Mederos, 2004; Scott & Crooks, 2006). Being cold and judgmental towards abusers can provoke oppositional behavior, and being avoidant and fearful can reinforce abusive behavior (Mederos, 2004). In addition, focusing discussion on the parenting role of fathers and their desire to be a better father can provide a powerful motivator for violent fathers to change (Fox et al., 2001; Mederos, 2004; Scott & Crooks, 2006). Of particular importance when working with abusive men, however, is the need for practitioners to complement a strengths-based approach with assertive practice that does not succumb to intimidation by abusive men (Laird, 2013). Workers need to develop a healthy resilience to aggressive parental behavior and be confident in exercising their professional authority, rather than avoiding a parent because it is highly stressful to engage with them (Laird, 2013). In addition to aggressive, intimidating behavior, it is quite characteristic of abusers to be reluctant to fully accept responsibility for their behaviors and blame their partner or external factors instead (Guille, 2004; Mederos, 2004). Attempting to manipulate workers and the system is also fairly common (Mederos, 2004; Scott & Crooks, 2006). Therefore, whilst appealing to men's strengths and assuming they are willing and able to change, it is important to simultaneously hold them accountable for their behaviors, challenge attempts to shift blame, deceive and manipulate others, and enact consequences for continued violence (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). To ensure the safety of women and children, these men need to be continually monitored by regularly speaking with their partners (Mederos, 2004; Scott & Crooks, 2006). Successfully working with violent fathers is possible, but challenging, because it involves balancing a supportive, caring role with that of an authority figure (Laird, 2013). It involves recognizing that such men can be eager to be better fathers and open to change, building rapport and focusing on strengths, whilst at the same time constantly assessing risk to children and mothers, challenging and holding accountable (Rivett, 2010).

Finally, in light of contrary evidence, the stereotyping of all fathers in child welfare families as unwilling, uninterested, unimportant, uncaring and unsafe needs to be confronted and challenged (Cameron et al., 2012; Dubowitz, 2009; Milner, 1993). Fathers in child welfare families are often involved even in single-mother households and they can be very influential in their child's life, even if not residing with them (Dubowitz, 2009). Ferguson and Hogan (2004) have suggested that within child welfare training programs men should be presented as multilayered and complex, and as having the capacity to care for children as well as pose a possible risk. In addition, workers would benefit from being taught to take a proactive approach to engaging fathers by actively including and inviting them, since services targeted at 'parents' tend to attract mothers only (Berlyn et al., 2008; Maxwell et al., 2012). Finally, but very importantly, the issues of domestic violence and workers' personal safety need to be addressed to reduce some of the fear surrounding working with men (Malm et al., 2006; Milner, 1993).

6.2. Implications for research

In addition to the need to include fathers in child welfare practice, there is a need for more research on fathers in child protection families. Very little is known about fathers and father figures in child protection families and how best to work with them (Franck, 2001). This lack of knowledge seriously limits the quantity and quality of training for workers and therefore also hinders the provision of appropriate services to fathers (Lee et al., 2009). There is also a need for more prevention and intervention studies that specifically target fathers from child protection families (Lee et al., 2009). To better understand the complex relationship between fathers and child maltreatment, more qualitative studies based on interviews with the fathers themselves should be conducted (Bellamy, 2009; Dubowitz, 2009; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). Although there has been a growing number of qualitative studies recently, research on fathers has often been based on second hand reports from mothers and workers rather than from the men themselves (Bellamy, 2009; Franck, 2001; Guterman & Lee, 2005). Clearly, every effort should be made to include fathers as participants in research on child maltreatment. However, increasing the number of fathers participating in research will continue to be difficult if men are not engaged in services and interventions to the same extent as mothers.

To increase the knowledge base about fathers, mother and father data, such as participant recruitment and outcomes, should always be reported and analyzed separately rather than combined under the terms 'parent' or 'caregiver' (Fletcher et al., 2011). In addition, little is known about how to successfully engage fathers in parent

training (Lee et al., 2009). Since there is evidence that fathers' roles, needs and problems are distinct from those of mothers, research on interventions and services should not assume the benefits will be the same for mothers and fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). For example, in a recent meta-analysis of the Triple P parenting program, fathers displayed lower mean effect sizes than mothers in improvement of parenting practice for almost all Triple P formats (Fletcher et al., 2011). Similarly, a meta-analysis of general parent training programs found that fathers benefit from programs less than mothers, making fewer changes in their behaviors and perceptions of child rearing (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008).

In summary, there are no quick and easy answers to the problem of engaging men in child welfare practice and research (Scourfield, 2006). Fathers and father figures need to be routinely included in risk and resource assessments, with detailed information gathered for all father figures in a child's life. Father-specific services and interventions may be the best way to reach and assist fathers in child welfare families. There is also a need to teach child welfare workers the reasons why it is important to include fathers, from both the perspective of theory and of research, and how best to engage fathers so they have the confidence to do so (O'Hagan, 1997). Although fathers in child welfare families can be difficult to engage in research as well as services, the effort is essential for the sake of enhanced training and practice (Dubowitz, 2009). Researchers should 'lead the way' in how best to engage fathers by informing practitioners of effective techniques and interventions (Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). The proposed model in Fig. 2 illustrates the critical role of research in informing training, which leads to improved practice and engagement with fathers, which in turn benefits children and enhances their safety.

7. Conclusion

Although there have been some indications of improvements in engaging fathers in child welfare practice in recent years, especially by individual workers (e.g. Berlyn et al., 2008; Coady et al., 2012; Saleh, 2012), there remains a long way to go before all fathers are consistently considered 'core business' within child welfare, and are treated with equal inclusion and value as mothers. For extensive and enduring change to occur, the reasons why fathers in child welfare families have been avoided and overlooked in the first place need to be understood and addressed. The ubiquitous traditional theoretical and procedural focus on the mother–child relationship needs to be replaced with a theoretical understanding of the importance of fathers in two-parent heterosexual families as posited in the independent model of attachment theory and ecological theories of child maltreatment. These models have been supported by a wealth of research. Furthermore, the many practical difficulties in engaging child welfare fathers, in addition to stereotyped perceptions and the fear of violent men, must be adequately addressed within worker training. However, possibly the most important factor to encourage further change in child welfare practice and research is to promulgate the reasons why it is essential for the safety and well-being of children to thoroughly engage fathers. Research evidence demonstrates that fathers profoundly affect children's lives, either as perpetrators or protectors, risks or resources, or both. Effectively assessing and engaging with at-risk fathers is critical to protecting and enhancing the lives and safety of vulnerable children (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Trying to provide the optimally safe environment for children without including fathers is akin to attempting to complete a jigsaw puzzle by ignoring half the pieces.

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