

Chapter Four

This study shows that different kinds of intervention work needs go on with fathers and families according to their particular difficulties and stage in the life-course. In child and family work a particular responsibility and challenge surrounds engaging and working with families where there is violence and abuse. Inevitably, then, child and adult protection formed a significant focus in this study. Our focus in this chapter is on the kinds of intervention work necessary with men and families where there has been violence, great chaos, danger and risk. The chapter is built around two case studies which involve men who were in various ways, viewed as violent and a danger to their children and partners, but who were assisted through social intervention to become nurturing fathers. Each of the men are engaged in some kind of 'security' work as bouncers, 'working the doors of pubs and clubs'. Thus issues to do with violence and the threat of it pervades these men's working and domestic lives. They embody danger in other ways too, in how they physically appear, be it with muscles, shaven heads and/or tattoos. These cases show the capacity of men to 'grow' into the changing demands of what it means to be a 'good enough' father, evidencing the developmental, constantly changing multi-faceted and competing demands of fatherhood. We elicit from these narratives some key strategies for engaging and working with 'dangerous men' and show how intervention work makes it possible to

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Developing men
who care:
Violence,
intervention work
and the
transformation of
'dangerous men'
into nurturing
fathers

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turn such men into responsible nurturing fathers.

4.1 Men, child care and violence

George Sullivan is 37 years old and lives as a sole father with his three teenage children, Hugh 15, and twins Victoria and Geraldine 13. He works as a bouncer and is a former boxing champion. George's story is of a 14 year marriage in which he was regularly beaten by his wife - here called Christine - who he describes as a 'manic depressive'. He related countless stories of her inability to cope with the children due to her mental illness, and of her violence towards both himself and the children.

I'm telling you people wouldn't believe what I was going through, 14 years of it. When somebody's spitting in your face and pelting you with things and whatever and you can't do no wrong, you just start crying inside in a corner and say, who's going to help me, there's no one helps you. But my kids were often beat by her, thrown around the room, her tearing them by their hair, all because no one would listen.

According to 15 year old Hugh, when he was 'about three' his mother would 'lock him up all day long' and as he grew older would throw his dinner into the bin and leave him go hungry. His mother's 'controlling' behaviours and violence were allegedly extensive:

It was everything, emotional and physical all compacted at once you know what I mean. I couldn't put a word like that, I'd say there's domestic and emotional violence. I'd have to call it both because there was physical violence and there was emotional on people as well. The thing is that like, on my dad, he was getting the physical stuff and then we were watching. We were all crying you know, our family you know what I mean, [my sisters] and me, my sisters, we'd be watching it then what'd be happening to my dad like and we'd be all crying.

Hugh also claimed that his mother tried to goad his father into hitting her so that she could use his physical strength against him in the knowledge that the police would never believe

that she started it. According to George, his wife “controlled everything in the home, she planned the children, she picked the names, she wouldn’t even let me make a cup of tea, she wanted to do everything.” He used to go along with her, ‘just to keep the peace.’ According to Hugh his mother undermined all his father’s attempts to involve himself in the housework. “No, if my dad done it she went over it.” In their research interview the two girls, Geraldine and Victoria, made similar comments describing their mother as violent to their father and to them and Hugh, while depicting their father as non-violent.

George would have left Christine on many occasions had it not been for the children. His own family advised him just to leave, advice which highlights the gendered division of social attitudes to parenting, where ‘any sort’ of mother - even an allegedly violent and mentally ill one - was considered better than ‘any’ father at all. According to both George and Hugh, Christine’s violence towards him had significantly reduced for about two years because Hugh challenged her when she was beating up his father. “It took my son to come in and stop her, he came in and stopped her. And to this day he’s still with me, so it stopped her, no bother, he said stop it”.

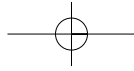
Despite such a chaotic history, it was only recently that social services had anything to do with the family, and after the parents had separated. Hugh was living with his father, while the girls were living with their mother in the maternal grandmother’s home. However there were many arguments between Christine and her daughters which regularly resulted in their being thrown out of their grandmother’s home and having to go to their father. George (and Hugh) believed that it was as a consequence of ‘all of the hassle’ that Geraldine ended up being hospitalised for ‘strange behaviour’, refusing to eat and compulsively washing herself for hours on end. She spent four months in psychiatric hospital and it was as a result of this that community care social workers became involved. The referral by the hospital represented this father as essentially a dangerous man, even though he was caring for both of his other teenage children. The entire direction of the case was to exclude him, until a community care social worker re-framed it, by going beyond the images of dangerousness to engage directly with the father and his daughter and recognise his capacities to provide good enough for his children.

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Barry McGuire has been fully separated from his wife for a year and now has sole custody of their three children, aged 18, 15 and 11. He is 38 years old, a skilled worker and does some 'security work' - he's a bouncer - on the side. Barry and his family had been known, on and off, to community care social workers for some years, and to the family centre for about a year. Social workers initially became involved due to concerns about domestic violence, in the context of heavy drinking by both parents. 'Mary', Barry's wife, was a very heavy drinker and at the time of the research interviews was believed to be sleeping rough. Mary had reported Barry to the police and social services and, according to him, had him arrested for violence on at least one occasion, even though he claimed never to have touched her (on those occasions at least) and was soon released without charge. In his own words, they had become involved in a "tit-for-tat" scenario each blaming the other for family problems and involving outside agencies in their disputes. She reported him for physically abusing one of the children some years ago, which he confessed to, seeing it as excessive justifiable corporal punishment. She had quite recently, while drunk, rung the hospital where he did voluntary work with sick children and told them he was a paedophile.

He admitted to hitting her twice, on both occasions hurting her, framing this as self-defence, as "attacking back". His narrative was dominated by constructing her as the initiator of the violence:

[She] hit me with anything she could find and would kick, punch. The thing was I should have walked away at this stage even walked out of the house on those occasions, but I stayed and tried to calm things down, which only made things worse on occasions. And I'm a big guy, [Mary's] only a small little woman, she's tiny. But she used hit me with anything she could lay her hands on, but unfortunately the two occasions when I did hit back I hurt her because I am strong. And I just lost it on a couple of occasions and I could have killed her, I could have damaged her. And I remember picking her up one day with one hand and throwing her away from me and she banged her head and it frightened me, it frightened me that I could do this. And it frightened me that one of these days if I didn't do something about it I would do something. And I had to, eventually I had to do something about it. I've spent the last year, year and a half fighting it.

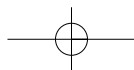


He did not really construct himself as a victim of domestic violence as such, regarding the violence as a product of a very unhappy "tit-for-tat" relationship.

The family centre became involved at the request of the social work department. The centre's role was to work with the children therapeutically because of all the trauma they'd experienced over the years, witnessing extreme marital conflict, violence and a mother allegedly drinking herself into oblivion. There were concerns that 15 year old Janice had begun misusing drugs, substances and alcohol while 17 year old Louise had violent fights with her mother. According to the family worker the children would have spoken about "quite horrific violence between both parents. ...when they were quite young and they'd be waking up to violence, waking up to violent incidences, and how they dealt with that when they were younger. And lots of beatings and they would have spoken about having seen their mum beaten very badly by their father". They also "spoke a lot about their mum's drinking and also about violence in fact from mother to father but more of it actually was father to mother". The community care social worker confirmed that their involvement over the years was because of concerns about suspected NAI by Barry and domestic violence. Their recent involvement was to complete a court report regarding the family law/custody case, but not to provide an on-going service to the family. This was the role of the family centre to whom the social worker supported the referral.

4.2 'Dangerous' men, hegemonic masculinity and conversations of curiosity

As we have already argued, the most powerful reason why men are excluded from social intervention is because they are perceived as dangerous and/or unreachable. Connell (1995) has developed the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' to account for the dominant construction of maleness that holds in a society. In Ireland the hegemonic form of masculinity which governs how men in general are seen, constructs them as emotionally unavailable, rational and in control, as 'sturdy oaks' who are invulnerable and have no need for or interest in being helped (Ferguson, 1998; 2001). This is not necessarily how men actually are. Few men can in fact live up to the exemplary standards and in reality there are a variety of types of manhood and 'masculinities'. As this study is showing, some practitioners are able to see beyond this dominant ideology of masculinity and engage men



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in their full humanity. Nevertheless, the assumptions about how men are, or should be, that are embedded in hegemonic masculinity have a powerful influence. Ironically perhaps, this is not necessarily personal as it affects how men are seen even if little or nothing is actually known about them as individuals. Thus George Sullivan was judged dangerous and excluded as a father by a medical social worker on the basis of his appearance alone without even having been engaged with. Constructions of hegemonic masculinity in welfare practice are heavily infused with notions of 'danger'. Potential male service users are not only seen as rational and emotionally unavailable, but as a risk to their partners, families and often to practitioners too. While these assumptions influence how men from all social backgrounds are perceived, they link to social class in a profound way. It is the most marginal men who are seen to embody danger and risk and are most likely to be judged in this way. This way of seeing men constitutes what we will call a 'hegemonic fixation' which has to be worked through by professionals in every case.

George's first comments at the research interview were in relation to his shaved head, earrings and tattoos. He was a championship boxer and continued to work out and keep fit. Everybody involved in the case agreed that George was 'rough looking', including George himself who felt that his appearance often went against him. He considered that his 'looks' had more to do with the side of town he grew up on rather than an expression of his masculinity.

Being from the north side of the city I have tattoos, a lot of people would actually judge us by the way you look, cops especially and social workers, they take you on the way you look. People would say to me that I look rough and ready. There's people judging you, probably that's what's wrong with me like, there's nothing wrong with tattoos, I see nothing wrong with them. It's just that where I was brought up I got tattoos and whatever I don't know but I'm just caring too.

Although it was some time since he had boxed George still embodied a very striking, formidable physical body. He now kept in shape by walking the dog and training Hugh who had followed in his father's footsteps, with his own success at boxing. Barry McGuire liked to work out as a body builder and by his own admission looks 'hard' with a bulked up physique and skinhead haircut.

These respondents inherently challenged the strongly held prejudices both of us researchers had in relation to 'hard man' life style choices like boxing and bouncing. We began by seeing these fathers through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and relating primarily to the 'hard men' in front of us, to the exclusion of all other aspects of them. They scared us. So much so that when Barry McGuire explained that he was a bouncer in his opening account of himself one of us nervously replied: "I'm not going to argue with you then!". Even before the tape recorder was turned on he asked bluntly "what's a vulnerable father?" - a phrase he picked up from the letter of invitation to do the interview. This felt like a challenge, even though the reply was readily accepted. Our unease was well placed, given the negative public image of bouncers. In his recent study of bouncers in the North-East of England, Winslow (2001) shows how excluded men use their (hard) bodies and capacities for violence, often in connection with an underworld of crime, to create a new occupational opportunity. However, Winslow's study treats bouncers solely as public men and we are told little about what else is going on in their lives. They are one-dimensional characters, over-dosing on violence and control, the staple diet of traditional masculinity, albeit in a post modern context. The lesson is our acute awareness of how threatening it felt to be starting with a dialogue about vulnerability with what we were judging to be hard unreachable men. This is precisely what the professionals in our study tended to do by becoming fixated on images of dangerousness and hegemonic masculinity. What is needed then are techniques for getting beyond this hegemonic fixation to a genuine assessment of the man in himself and as a father.

In becoming aware of this, for us elements of the interviews had to take on the form of 'conversations of curiosity' (Cecchin, 1987) where rather than ignoring or denying prejudices, the interviewer actively uses them as a means of exploration and learning. The conversation takes the style, for instance, of asking the interviewee to 'please explain what it means to you to be a boxer as I have always believed it to be such a violent sport?' It is in working through these types of curious conversations that the possibility of getting to know the 'Other' lies.

The complexities of the men's identities soon became apparent. Barry quickly disclosed that his wife hit him throughout his marriage, although he did not regard himself as a 'victim'

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as such. As well bouncing, being a full-time worker/provider, lone-father and “a good dad”, he did voluntary work with terminally ill children. This includes “sitting down with children and rubbing their hands, massaging their hands or their feet. .. I enjoy doing it for them and they enjoy getting it” and he is the only man doing such work for the organisation. He is aware of how he is initially seen by the parents of children at the hospital who “get a bit frightened” when they see a man with his appearance doing this, but he soon relaxes them and gets them to join in.

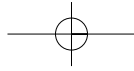
Rather than being primarily associated with indiscriminate aggression or violence, for both George and Hugh boxing was character forming, especially in relation to ‘discipline’. They both valued doing it as an activity for shared time together. For Hugh it was his father’s training and discipline in the boxing ring that actually got him through the most difficult times of living with the domestic violence:

He’s a very quiet man you know what I mean and I think what gave him that was the boxing you know what I mean, self-discipline, which I think helped him when he was getting hit. I mean he’s used to getting hit, you know what I mean, he’s used to getting hit inside the ring, you know what I mean so that was nothing to him. You know he said that’s not new the getting hit you know what I mean you get used to it and he said she couldn’t hurt him. I mean, because he said like, she was very small like she was anorexic like and he said like she’d be hitting him and she wouldn’t be hurting him but the only thing she used to hurt him when she’d pick up weapons and she was dangerous. And you wouldn’t know what she was going to do if she had a knife she could stab you, you know what I mean. She choked him, she tried to choke him but his neck is too big you know what I mean. She couldn’t choke him you know what I mean.

Being a boxer also seems to have been George’s access route into his job as a bouncer. He felt there were ‘only two more good years in him’ as a bouncer, the job ending for most men when they reach the age of 40. Contrary to reflecting a ‘need for’ or being drawn to violence, for George the rationale for this job choice was that it enabled him to earn money, and at night, so that he could be at home for his children during the day and evenings.

Even during the time he and his wife were together, he claims he was a full-time parent. He was working in order to provide for the children, rather than using work as a way of avoiding time with them. Indeed, even at the most dangerous and difficult times of the job as a bouncer, it was his focus on his love for his children that helped to get him through:

It's a hard way of making money yeah, do you know. I have to put things to the back of my mind, where I'd be, say on the door and I often worked on the door on my own and I'm nearly five foot nine. I worked in drug bars for years, they'd be high on drugs. I'd go in and I'd three kids at home, my wife was gone I was working on the door on my own. I was getting forty quid for it. I needed the money I had to feed the kids and whatever. I ran into a situation, I don't know they said your man is after starting inside. I went in trying to calm him down I know him personally. I know him so I'm down there on my tod [own] on a Sunday night. Fuck it I said, is it nearly time to go home I said, look at you. It's the kind of job you're in so there I am anyway he starts inside with me. So I says relax, I says you know. He was after firing one or two things around the place and I said [name] relax I says, forget about it I says you know. I know he's high because I can see by his eyes you know. And whatever way he just turned he just turned, fuck you, he says you know, all this crap so he attacked me. I'm there on my tod, I says, fucking hell how am I going to deal with this? I started to grab him and headlock him grand, I got him down into a headlock, now there's people sitting down with their drink. I'm there with my kids in my head. I know this fella and he's after throwing a few glasses at me, you know he's throwing glasses around the place. He had a glass, so I got the glass out of his hand and I went and I got him into a headlock and he was strong because he was high on drugs, they get very strong. So he was lifting me, he was the same size as me but he was beating me off the side of the television unit. So I says, here we are my kids are at home so I said I'm going out of here. That's the way I had to think straight away of my kids. So I caught him by the throat and pinned him against the thing and I ran him out of the door, out the door and throwing him a few slaps, I had to, to calm him down. Grand then, he went off. I got into the car and went home, got the breakfast ready and continued on as normal. And even my girlfriend says it to me I don't know how you do it, but it's the only way I can make money outside working during the day, but with the kids I'm going to lose all that you can't



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win like.

Barry's motivation for bouncing is social, it gets him out of the house. He is convinced that despite all their hard exteriors, the bouncers he works with are "real gentlemen", basically sensitive men and caring fathers. Moreover, Barry insists that he is always emotionally open and honest with them, so much so that they constantly use him as a sounding board for discussing their personal struggles and problems. Barry attempts to sanitise bouncing according to his own caring ideology.

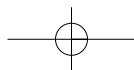
I'm not a puncher, I don't look for trouble in any shape or form. I will deal with it verbally 99% of the time. But if push comes to shove I will do what I have to do, with anybody.

In effect, through engaging in 'conversations of curiosity' our respondents helped us to make sense of their tattooed, muscled bodily appearances and what activities like bouncing and boxing meant to them within their life-world. While in some cases there may indeed be links between these men's practices and violence, we were challenged to be open to seeing them as expressions of responsible fatherhood rather than as simply signs of protest and danger. This is the step beyond hegemonic fixations that all welfare professionals need to take.

4.3 Inscrutable masculinity, marginality, and the social isolation of vulnerable men

Traditionally, male identity has been constituted in terms of the classic binary opposition between the masculine and (repudiation of) the feminine. Being vulnerable and seeking help in the context of hegemonic masculinity are seen as signs of weakness ('sissy stuff'), a failure of what real men are meant to be. Barry McGuire lived this out in an exemplary way and it was fundamental to what kept him from seeking help:

Because you lose control of your own manliness, your own masculinity, if you go looking for help, you know. The old cliché: the man is the breadwinner, the man is the hunter/gatherer, you know, the man is the one that does everything. But if he



looks for help he loses a bit of that masculinity or manliness, he becomes a bit more feminine, to ask for help. So you don't do that.

His story is dominated by a narrative of trying to prove his (traditional) masculinity. He was always "a bit of a wild one", which accounted for his difficult relationship with his own mother as a child. His celebrations on first becoming a father at 19 (unplanned - "nothing in my marriage was planned") had less to do with the joy of bringing his child into the world than with having proved his manhood: "I thought it was great! I was going to be a dad, and it worked: I was able to make somebody pregnant! It was not a kind of a fatherhood thing, it was, I don't know. No I never looked at it like that at all." In this idiom, becoming a man is a negative achievement and defined in terms of loss and what men should attempt not to be (Real, 1997). Thus for Barry:

I was always in control of everything in my life. ... if I let go of that control I was lost. I had to be the one that made the decisions, that took care of everything and made sure things happened. And it didn't go that way in the end and I had to start admitting that I couldn't, that's how I felt, I couldn't believe that I had lost. I'd lost and I could never take failure. I'm not very good at losing and failure to me was a subject I wouldn't accept it.

Men's feelings of failure on becoming the subject of social intervention and having to let go of something precious, to how they see themselves is an important message from this research. Professionals need to be alert to this, and openly engage men about it and what they stand to gain. Men resist this even when the problems in their lives are intolerable, but they present a quite different face to the world. As Barry McGuire put it in relation to the violence in his marriage:

It [the violence] demeans you. I used to feel very small, I thought, I thought I was a hard one of a case, you know. Take on anybody, take on anything, but no... The violence, I don't know, it just, it tore me apart inside. I never told no-one nothing. I wouldn't even tell my family, friends anything that went on at home. We never told anybody anything. When I went to work I was [Barry] the happy father, the joker, a bit of a laugh, the craic.

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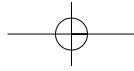
... the paradox that men resist getting help most at the very time of crisis when they most need support

Robert Morrell (1998) has developed the notion of 'inscrutable masculinity' to capture the paradox that men resist getting help most at the very time of crisis when they most need support. But inscrutable masculinity is not simply a psychological condition associated with being male, it is socially produced. The poverty of such men, and the identification of them by the police and welfare professionals with a particular type of dangerous marginal masculinity, places the men in a structural position where accessing help ceases to be an option. Help seeking is resisted not merely because it would go against the man's dominant hegemonic definition of himself as an invulnerable, controlled, coping male, but because it is seen as a real threat and would only add to their problems.

The more violent Christine was the more cut off from social or professional supports the family became. What stopped them from seeking help seems to have been a combination of trying to 'save face' in light of being 'proud' men, not wanting to get Christine into any form of trouble and, crucially, and an awareness of the negative judgements that would flow from George's appearance and marginal status. As Hugh put it,

She'd be trying to drive him out of the house so he'd leave. And he wouldn't leave he just wouldn't leave, he kind of held in there you know what I mean and we all knew what was happening was wrong but we couldn't do nothing about it because if my dad went to anyone they'd go against him. They wouldn't help him you know what I mean he never actually went to anyone he never ratted on her like because my dad's kind of a proud man like.

Yet this male pride seems to have been a factor in the continuing disintegration of Christine's and the children's mental health. Hugh remembered how his mother would often 'just break down' ending up in bed for days on end. Ultimately Christine was only hospitalised following a suicide attempt (overdose), which Hugh and George discovered. But even in responding to this crisis father and son did not want to call an ambulance for fear of causing 'a scene' in the neighbourhood, so George took her to the hospital in the car.



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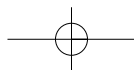
George never felt that his side of the story was or would be believed. On a number of occasions when Christine assaulted him she phoned the Guards to report him as being violent and he was removed from the family home. The Guards never, ever, took his side of the story, which didn't surprise George, who felt that Christine actively used his appearance to her advantage against him,

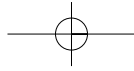
she'd be saying I was abusing her, hitting her and whatever but she was ill she was ill for years and I never knew it and a lot of people wouldn't realise that she was ill because she was, she was a great liar. Oh she'd lie away, she'd lie her way out of anything. She'd tell lies that I'm doing things and whatever. And if you were the cops and you walked in and you saw the small thin little woman and you saw a fella 5 foot 9, 5 foot 10 shaved head, tattoos or whatever you're bound to side with her. I wouldn't blame the cops at the time.

Even on the occasions when George did attempt to put his side of the story, the Guards still sided with her against him, removing him from the family home rather than trying to do anything with Christine. As a result George learned that he could not use the Guards as a support or for protection for himself and so he never sought help for her violence. He was often in fact barred from the family home and sometimes spent months - and on one occasion as long as nine months - living apart from, and not seeing his children because she blocked him. He felt isolated and was poverty stricken because of the double burden of working to maintain the family while trying to maintain himself.

This financial trap is especially difficult for working class fathers who can find themselves trying to keep up with maintenance payments in return for their access time with their children (Sheehan, 1997). One of the consequences for unemployed and poorly paid men, is that the double burden of maintaining two households is untenable with the result that they end up living in accommodation that is unfit for habitation and overnight access visits for their children.

I'd be away staying in flats the size of rat holes and you'd have nothing like you know, you'd fucking nothing you wouldn't get your dinner, you'd have no money





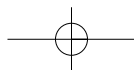
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and you'd be there struggling along and you'd be cold in the flat. There'd be no heating and she's there in the house when you're working and paying for it and you'd be worried about your kids and if you'd know her you wouldn't know what she'd do like.

Hugh recognises that, contrary to the hard man image, there are many sides to his father, and was deeply aware of the costs that all the stress and keeping things in had for his father's health.

Dad's kind of a mix of things like he's very good like. Like he looks like the hard man and when you talk to him he's fierce quiet. He cares and like he's working as a bouncer so lots of people think that bouncers are the hard men you know but he's not as hard. He thinks he's like hard, that he can take a lot mentally but he's not as hard as he thinks he is because he gets sick like. Like dad suffers from a bowel, a bowel disorder comes on, and his bowels come at him. I mean very sick like you know what I mean. Shitting blood, he's on a lot of medication over that, he's on disability allowance like over it. He's disabled over it like it's kind of a disability like. And it's because of what happened all down through the years like, he said he didn't know then what was wrong with him like when he gets very sick he starts shitting blood you know what I mean. All the stress and worry and stuff I think that's what drew it out of him and when my mam left it really came bad.

According to the twins, Victoria and Geraldine, "dad looks tough but he really isn't." In fact Hugh himself, at 15, has evidently already internalised an ethic of inscrutability. He coped because he had to as he felt he had to keep it all to himself because there was not "somewhere else to go. We just had no one to talk to really." He tried to get on with things, by burying the difficult emotions, although "they'd always be in the back of my head". Both he and his father used their bodies and one of the ultimate embodiments of inscrutable masculinity, boxing, as a resource for coping, to 'train' their way out of feelings of upset, rather than talking with someone about their feelings:



I talked to myself, I just walked and I trained and that's what I do. I ride my mountain bike or I walk that's how I deal with things do you know.

[George]

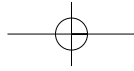
I just like it. You can control yourself like if you're angry like. You can come up and hit a bag or whatever you know what I mean and it's good to get out. You know what I mean or mental problems like you know what I mean. Like when my mam and dad were fighting like that you know what I mean you'd feel, you'd be a lot more angry or stressed out. You know what I mean you go up and hit the bag and go up and sparring with another fella like and it just takes your mind off everything boxing. When you're up in the club, you don't think about home you're just so caught up in you know training, circuit training and you go out and do your run you don't be thinking about what's going on and you don't think about school like. You just completely forget about everything. So it's a good like it's good to mind yourself, you know what I mean?

[Hugh]

Hugh does, however, show sensitivity and signs of emotional literacy in the research interview, which may reflect, in part, the impact of the social intervention that has occurred in more recent times.

4.4 The challenges of being called into active fathering

For many of the fathers in this study a life crisis was often the challenge that called them into active hands-on fathering. In George's case it was his teenage daughter's serious mental health problems coupled with the children's mother leaving the family home. In an obvious sense this was also an opportunity given that Christine had allegedly been violent for 14 years. For Barry it was the realisation that his children were suffering due to the domestic violence, and his wife's inability to care due to alcohol misuse. Barry McGuire's marriage was a traditional arrangement and he did little or nothing in the house or with the children. When the marriage broke up and his wife moved out, to his surprise, his parents or siblings did not rush in to help and he got little family support. He had a lot to



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learn: "really housework was not my forte. I'd paint, decorate, build extensions, plumb, do anything maintenance wise, make railings, gates, I'd build the bloody house, but not clean it! You know, that was me". Now he does "the lot", including still learning to cook. "I still have days when I go Jesus, what have I put myself in for here? But no. I know I'm a good dad, as good as any mother".

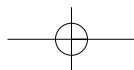
Not having to put so much energy into a failing marriage has helped to free him up to be an active carer:

because I'm let do it now the way I want to do it. ... without having to watch somebody else, without having to say look at somebody else's problems. I'm looking after me, I'm responsible for me, I'm responsible for my kids, and I'm the only one I have. I'm the only one. Again, now if I need help, I will go and get it.

George recognised that in the early part of his marriage he did not do housework or cooking. He saw his role as being a good provider, working long days late into the evening while Christine took all the domestic responsibility. The more mental health problems his wife experienced, the more he found himself doing at home, partly as a way to be there to protect the children. He had a lot of learning to do, as Hugh put it, "He told me that he just couldn't understand how to mind kids, he didn't know how to change a nappy. He said like he didn't have a clue".

Now George always feels challenged by the demands of domestic work and child care, which relates partly to his normative construction of gender roles:

You know being a father's a very hard job especially when you're on your own. Women find it easier than men to cope with kids like they can do 3 or 4 things at once. I don't know you see I'd have to do the one thing at a time like put out the washing. I find it awkward like where I'd see (girlfriend) she'll do the cooking and ironing and she'll do the washing all together you know what I'm trying to say. Where I don't know, it's something passed down the genes, I can't understand it. But they can do more things at once, where men can't like you know. But I do find it hard, Jesus.



While George finds managing the housework hard, at the same time he sees his doing things for his children as being an expression of his love for them.

But I love, I love the three kids like, Jesus if they went in the morning I'd go mad you know. I love doing things for them, like I love, I love going out with Hugh to the boxing now and the girls Jesus, even if it's talking about the way they want their bedroom done up you know. They're into doing up their room now. This is the thing now, they don't like the colour on their own room. I'll do that for Christmas for them you know, I'll do it. I'll paint the room and I'm not saying anything to them because I'll surprise them, the twins.

George was acutely conscious of his own vulnerability in living with and caring for young teenage women. Geraldine was continuously washing herself and refusing to leave the shower for hours on end. Actively intervening in the cycle of this behaviour necessitated involving himself in quite an intimate way with his naked daughter in the bathroom. This heightened awareness of the 'risk' involved in being a male carer for his teenage daughters, was influenced by his previous experiences of 'false' accusations of domestic violence which had been believed due to perceptions of him:

The problem was I had no one to talk to and I mean I'd no one, d'you know. I couldn't talk to anybody to ask them for help. I had no girlfriend at the time or whatever. The girl I was going out with I wasn't going to drag her into it. I was trying to deal with it myself as I always do. Jesus, I don't know how I got there. I just went day by day with it and don't know how I got there.

Thus help-seeking even on behalf of his distressed daughter ceased to be an option for fear that he would be judged an unsafe and not good enough carer.

4.5 The construction of men in child welfare referrals

According to the community care social worker in George Sullivan's case, the initial referral from the hospital social worker was constructed as a child protection case and her role was

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to organise an alternative care placement for Geraldine, initially exploring the option of relative care. This arose from the demonisation of the father and how the mother (due to mental health problems) was for the first time in 14 years recognised as 'unable' to care for her daughter. As the community care social worker observed:

Dad wasn't in the picture. Mum had given a very bad account of dad and said that he was very abusive to her, that he had been violent toward her and really he wouldn't be any fit parent really for the girls. I spoke to a social worker in the hospital who was very much against dad. Like he looks you know, he has the tattoos, the shaved head you know and I think she just felt you know on presentation alone that he just was like you know we won't even go there.

The 'truth' of the allegations about George's violence were never verified by the hospital social worker, who was prejudiced against him without any assessment of the father's side of the story, or his ability to offer safe care of his children. A case conference had even been arranged to try to organise appropriate foster care. It was not until the possibilities of relative care were exhausted that even the community care social worker considered George as a possible carer of his own daughter. It was actually Geraldine herself who suggested it:

I went to the hospital to visit Geraldine, I asked her what she would like, what would she like to happen and she said she was anxious about going home to her mum. She wasn't sure that that was the best place for her to be. She mentioned the uncle that we had been with and I was honest with her and said you know ... that wasn't open to us and then she said well what about my dad? So I said OK we'll have a look and we'll see.

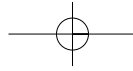
The social worker made contact with the father:

I had the history from mum that he was you know abusive, that he was violent towards her and I had the presentation from the hospital that he had tattoos and a skinhead and you know maybe like we shouldn't be looking at him you know. But

I still felt look, I have the case and I need to see for myself that whether this is OK or not. Whether we can you know go with this man or exclude him, right? So at that stage I rang dad and I asked him if he could come into meet me and we'd discuss what we were going to do with Geraldine and in he arrived. And he was rough looking, he did have the tattoos and he did have the skinhead and he came in and we started talking and I said, I told him what I was thinking about you know, that I was thinking that our options were either him or foster care. And he was very taken aback I think at that stage d'you know and angry. And he said to me you know, everything isn't as it appears, you know I'm not the bad guy here.

The social worker did not get a feeling or a sense of him as being violent. She also met with Christine whose story she felt just did not seem to always fit. Some of Christine's extended family also spoke well of George as a father and significantly he was already caring for both Hugh and Victoria without any concerns being raised about their safety. She felt George showed genuine concern about the erratic nature of the previous care of the girls. George was invited to the case conference, but didn't attend as he did not want to be in the same room as his (ex) wife. At the conference Christine signed the voluntary care forms but George could not bring himself to place his daughter in care. He told the social worker, "I'll take her home if I can have support. I'll do the best I can. And we'll see how it goes. So that's what happened."

Barry felt that even once he had accessed help, being a man made a difference to the response he got from social services, as "a guy as well I was left a little bit to fend for yourself". He was critical of social services and positive about the family centre. He got little considered response from social workers, even at the time when he had battered his wife, and the social workers intervened. "And god knows, anything can be going on in people's houses, you know, unless the people chase them themselves". He spoke of a community care social work system that is perceived to be in great difficulty, without the resources to offer help even to those who want it. But what the family centre has offered has changed his life.



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Barry's narrative is now dominated by a story of change and development, which is joyfully and triumphantly rendered, and in a manner that is now almost defiant in the face of traditional masculinity.

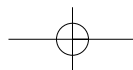
I would ask anybody for help now, if I think I need help. And I know if anything I'm more a man now than I ever was, much more in every shape and form. It doesn't bother me at all. The more help you get, if it helps you, it helps someone else.

Barry has integrated an understanding of his vulnerability into his masculine identity. He has become a self-consciously vulnerable father, a shift he frames in the most positive terms possible.

Well, like I say, in the last couple of years, I think I've grown so much since I've got the kids and since I've got away from [Mary]. But I'm the oldest teenager on the block! I'm learning, learning so much. ... And the last 3 years I've been like a broken record. I've emptied out everything that was going on.... I still haven't stopped talking, I don't think I ever will.

4.6 Beyond inscrutable masculinity: Fateful moments and expressive family support

Family crises, then, do not merely call men to take more active child care responsibility, they create what we call 'fateful moments' when the strategies surrounding the maintenance of inscrutable masculinity are no longer sustainable. While there is nothing inevitable about this as, crisis or no crisis, some men remain stuck in the inscrutable mode, newly self-consciously vulnerable fathers become more open to taking the risk of outside intervention and their relationship to help-seeking changes. This is partly because the men lack the skills and confidence to be able to carry such responsibility, and fear they cannot cope and may lose the children without support and also because more active engagement with children opens up the man to emotional life and develops him in a manner which leads to a redefinition of his masculinity. How such fateful moments are used by welfare professionals is crucial to (inscrutable) men's development as fathers, creating opportunities for what we will call 'expressive family support work'.

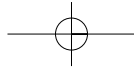


George's recognition of his need for support was exemplified by his asking the social worker to be with him on the occasion of Geraldine coming home from hospital. The social worker believed that her way of working with all people was based on a respectful listening to all sides of the story. For George it was the social worker's confidence in 'talking straight' that made the difference. Initially, Hugh was reluctant to trust the social worker, fearing she would be 'just like the social worker in the hospital' and not believe or support his father. However he soon felt that 'She listened to the kids and she helped my dad':

She's a good worker like you know, a good social worker. She's good at her work. ... She just tells my dad kind of what to do with the girls, she'd be kind of like teaching him how to deal with my sisters and me like or whatever. Because she's a woman and a mother like she's confident then to go out and do it and that kind of helps him out a bit too like.

George identified a number of key instances where he felt intervention made a difference to him as a father. These fateful moments can be seen as fitting with a 'generative approach' to working with men and fathers (Fagan & Hawkins 2001, Hawkins & Dollahite 1997). After so many years of problems, George's self-esteem and confidence were very low. The social worker not only listened to him but also told him that she believed in him, his story, and his ability as a father. For him, she offered 'official' belief in him.

[The social worker] said look Christine's after signing. I said signing what? Is she after signing her own daughter over? She said yeah. She says, you have Victoria out there you seem to be managing with Victoria, I said yeah. I said I've Hugh I says and Geraldine now might upset what I have going, I says so I don't know. I was thinking and thinking. So she says look the form is there look she says, there's one form there you can read it and that's grand you know to voluntarily sign over the full care of Geraldine. I was reading it down and I said fucking hell, I was speaking to myself like and I said, is this for real or what? And she says yeah. And she says well, what do you want to do? I couldn't sign it. I wouldn't sign it, no way I said to myself I couldn't do that. I'll go through I said to [social worker], I'll take a bash off it I says but I'm not going to sign over no way. How could any woman sign their



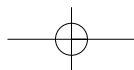
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own daughter away so I said I wouldn't do it. So I started crying inside there, she knew it then. [Social worker] knew I was alright. 'George I'm delighted', she said 'you're in', she said I always knew it. She said I said it to them, to the doctors and the rest of them that you wouldn't do it, that you'd mind them in the end. She had faith in me in fairness now like.

**Moving beyond
inscrutability
to feel and
express what
is inside
creates great
fear and
discomfort for
men . . .**

Expressing this 'faith' in George, based on his apparent capacity to parent his other two children, was significant for him in establishing his own confidence in himself as a capable and conscientious father. The social worker continued this approach by praising and supporting George in front of the children during her weekly home visits, and giving advice which normalised the struggles of rearing teenagers, all of which helped to support Geraldine's re-entry into the family. This also involved the social worker in going into the emotional 'depths' with the family as they began to express a range of feelings for one another. On one memorable occasion she visited when the father was "exhausted and absolutely worn out from the fighting and the arguing." The girls "became hysterical" fearing their father was going to place them in care. Each family member ended up crying in a separate room and, as the social worker explains, she eventually reunited them with the father announcing:

I love ye. Ye wouldn't be here if I didn't. Now I won't let you go I won't ever put you into care but ye also have to give me a little bit and he said all I'm looking for is peace. And I just want you to get along and not to argue. And he sobbed and sobbed and the girls sat down and cried with him and had their arms around one another and I was just, I felt so privileged to see it do you know. I was sitting there going oh my god. I know without going two months down the line, I know that was, that's their whole step forward. The girls saw how vulnerable he was because I really think they saw him as the hard guy, the tough man, the guy who used to shout at them when they did something wrong. They thought that everything was OK for him. He had [girlfriend] and he had Hugh he didn't need them do you know. And they saw it they saw it as real as you could see anything you know. He said to



them at one stage, 'the reason I left your mother was for your safety, I saw her beat ye and I was the one who held her back.' They both broke down as well and like they remembered it you know and after a while everyone stopped crying.

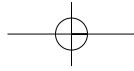
Inscrutable men can appear inscrutable even to their loved ones. And breaking this inscrutability down not only demands that they begin to let go of the control that has for so long defined them and clear out the feelings they have held in, but that they are seen to do so. Crucially, in not being afraid to take the risk of going after this man's feelings and sitting with ('holding') him as he entered into the rawness of them, the social worker managed to enable the expression of emotions that not only helped him, but began to change how the father was perceived within the family and the overall direction of the case.

Moving beyond inscrutability to feel and express what is inside creates great fear and discomfort for men. In this moment George struggled with his sense of how he 'should' have behaved as a man and apologised for showing his emotions, which produced yet another fateful moment for the social worker to affirm him and a new kind of masculinity:

As I was coming away George said, Jesus he said, I'm sorry for being so weak and I said to him George you know tears aren't a sign of weakness you know as far as I'm concerned that's a sign of strength. And I told him, I think he's wasted, I think he should be in there telling other fathers and other men that it's OK to cry and it's OK to be and it's OK to make mistakes and it's OK to do, you know just to be. And as I said earlier on he's up there, one of the highest people I know.

The referral for child and family work also created a fateful moment for Barry McGuire and his children which the family centre used in a creative way. Initially, the whole family attended, although Barry primarily wanted the children to be involved, it was "100% about them".

...So I thought by talking to somebody else, if they couldn't talk to me, that it might help them as well, because they've been through an awful lot, they've been through so much.



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His wife attended the first meeting (at the centre's request), but then "drifted away and didn't want to be involved in it. She felt victimised, so she said." The family workers' approach to work with the children included Barry more than he initially expected. He liked their approach:

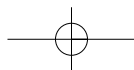
I was involved a lot, not all of it, but there was sessions where ... I was sitting down here and they were upstairs. It's very informal, that's the good thing about it. ... There's no kind of old time kind of, the old type psychology involved. It's very informal. You kind of sit down...they were playing games ... There was no kind of sitting there with pens and papers or tape recorders. They were able to just buzz off them a little bit. ... You know, and just let the kids say what they wanted to say. Listened. That's what it's about really at the end of the day, listening.

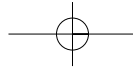
They didn't give advice. They kind of did it in a very round about way, which was great. You know, they weren't trying to tell you how to live or how to do this or how to do that, they listened. And they let you make the decisions. You know and I felt I enjoyed coming. I felt good about the people here, you know. I think they're good people you know.

So called informality and listening mean a huge amount to vulnerable fathers.

... It's the way they handle people. ...This is a very informal place, like a home. You're not being met as a surgery on the door kind of thing, or a chief psychologist written on it or it's not you know, it's not. When you come in here you're not talking to somebody that you are like talking to the doctor or talking to, you know. You're talking to normal people. People like that offer you a cup of coffee and you sit down and you can relax and you can talk about anything you want. It's relaxed. Now, the time slot OK, you know, you're kind of looking down, oops I've only another 10 minutes left. But, no like, the 2 girls I did work with, I, I only know [centre manager] a little bit. Again, I think more guys should be involved in it, a lot more.

These men point towards a style of working where they don't feel judged, can still make their own decisions, yet are challenged by the workers and indeed their children to change.





Chapter 4

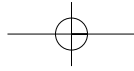
Facilitating communication between them and the children was central to the learning that went on for all concerned. Another example of such expressive family support was how Barry was confronted with his controlling nature and his "sergeant major" tendencies. The family worker's approach was to reflect back to the father the children's concerns: "So in family sessions then we would have addressed that with him and they were able to bring those things back to him". Barry really valued the sensitive way this tricky process was handled:

*You know, they [the family workers] would say: would you say you're a loud person? And I'd know exactly what they meant, that the kids had said it, you know. But they didn't kind of say, you know, you shouldn't be doing that. They'd do it in a roundabout way, very good, much more approachable. Now I knew exactly what they meant when they'd say something...
You don't feel like that, yeah, you're in trouble!*

Here again the inscrutability and 'control' of the man is inherently challenged as his children get to be honestly heard as well as seen. He too gets to voice his own feelings and concerns and is witnessed in that vulnerability. Workers 'hold' the family members together in a safe, trusting space that facilitates honest expression, listening and learning. Barry is convinced that the intervention work "did do the children good. Letting them "open up a little bit" and frames what he got out the work in a self-less, child-centred way:

I got out of it what the kids got out of it and what they were getting out of it. If I thought they were getting something out of it, it was making me feel better.

He may have let go of something of his traditional need to control, but there is still some resistance to admitting to accepting help for himself. He can allow himself to be seen to be needy through the legitimate route of helping his children. His narrative embodies a struggle for men which Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) characterise in terms of the maintenance of a 'respectable masculine self', one which - in this instance - walks a fine line between the threat that intervention poses to the high value men place on values of



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rationality, and control and the opportunity it poses in terms of getting genuine relief with problems. Barry manages this threat to his self-identity through his children, framing the benefits of intervention in terms of meeting their needs, but still sees real growth and learning for himself:

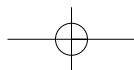
Me, I was able to learn, I mean at first they wanted me to go on a parenting course. And I said, no bloody way! I'm not being told, that's one thing I will not do. I will not be told how to, I'd try to change, I'm not going to start getting Dr Spock's version of how to be a parent. No, I'm not going to do that. I do it my way. But I will take advice. But going to one of these courses when they're telling you how to, no, no that's not for me at all. I think the way they did it here was much better. They gave you, you know, discreet advice, you know. For me, that's much better. You know. They let me elaborate on my problems, my own fears, my own insecurities. You know, poor me, they let me talk about poor me. You know. And I felt when I left here, I've got that off me chest!

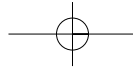
This expresses well the balance of approaches this research suggests is necessary to effectively work with men, between practical support such as parenting courses and skill development and emotion work.

4.7 Concluding recommendations

These men's stories are compelling examples of how men can change out of a context of violence and trauma for children, and develop to become active, 'good enough' fathers. While both cases involved sole fathers, we believe that there are lessons here for intervention work with fathers and families whatever their living formation. Having to take responsibility for the children when their partners were no longer able to care was crucial to bringing them into responsibility. Clearly, however, the professionals still helped to 'tame' and develop the men in significant ways to enable their transition to a more intimate, care-based masculinity.

We are not suggesting that all suspected violent men are either not really violent or really nice lads underneath. On the contrary, Barry McGuire was by his own admission violent.





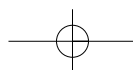
The point rather concerns the necessity for professionals to approach the man with a 'not-knowing' stance (Anderson and Goolishian 1992), in a manner which acknowledges the multiple sides there are to men. The most effective father-inclusive workers in this study and who got the most positive feedback from service users, were those who were able to be aware of and take seriously suspicions of violence, but still be open to engaging with the man in a manner which does not prejudge him. As one family worker exemplified it:

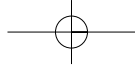
not to be intimidated and just to basically to try as much as possible, I mean obviously to have a history of someone is important before they come in here, but as much as possible to put that history, you know, behind you as well, or just to allow them to come here with a clean sheet. [Female family centre worker]

The professionals working with Barry saw no problem with his being a bouncer and were able to work through any hegemonic fixations and go beyond danger, which is precisely why they worked so respectfully and effectively with him. The irony in social care is that even while such men display a vulnerable masculinity, or at some level are eager to, the hegemonic fixations of professionals means, they still tend not to relate to the vulnerable man. The corollary of this is that the focus then is on the mother, and often in oppressive, blaming ways (Scourfield, 2001). The key implication for practice is that a holistic view of men is required which explores and attempts to relate to the multiple selves that men are.

The analysis also suggests that a strengths based approach to such work is of crucial importance, where the father and family are affirmed and enabled to build on the positives they bring to their relationships and responsibilities. We recommend that strengths based work with fathers and families is placed at the centre of social care training and agency responses.

It also demonstrates the importance of working with children to heal the trauma of childhood maltreatment and witnessing of violence. While this has equal value for both genders, the analysis has shown the significance that intervention work has for boys and young men in enabling them to go beyond the construction of an inscrutable masculinity to be the kinds of men that intervention has helped their fathers to become.





Leaving Fathers Out

