

*Bringing Back the Dads:  
Engaging Non-Resident  
Fathers in the Child  
Welfare System*

**PROTECTING  
CHILDREN**

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## Engaging Non-Resident Fathers — Challenging the System

### Karen Jenkins

Karen Jenkins is currently the director of public child welfare initiatives at American Humane and is the project director of the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System. She has more than 25 years' experience in county and state public child welfare systems.

We are pleased to present the first of two publications from American Humane dedicated to the engagement of non-resident fathers. In this issue, you will find information intended to enhance your knowledge regarding fathers' relationships with their children and the system's responsibility to encourage and support those relationships. No one would argue that the child welfare system is not a complicated and often crisis-driven system. Promoting child safety is foremost on the minds of those social workers and caseworkers who have the primary responsibility to deliver services and provide resources to families that ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. However, historically, the child welfare system has principally interacted with mothers and very little with fathers. Frequently the primary caretakers, mothers have often been the "identified client." This has resulted in interactions that have grown into mother-centric practices, services, and cultural competencies directed specifically toward supporting maternal relationships and in the responsibility to improve parental skills placed largely on the mother. It is not the intention of the project to minimize the importance of supporting mothers, but rather to emphasize equal attention to the paternal relationships that have the potential to provide additional resources such as medical, emotional, financial, and other informal supports that are often unrealized and underused.

In the last decade, for these reasons and other systemic concerns, the Children's Bureau began closely examining states' child welfare systems' interaction with fathers through the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), the *What About the Dads?* report (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006), and later the *More About the Dads* report (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008). Both the CFSRs on state child welfare systems and the *What About the Dads?* report indicate there is very little meaningful engagement occurring between the child welfare system and fathers. Using this information as a foundation, the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF) was designed to promote additional knowledge development regarding the engagement of non-resident fathers and paternal kin with children who are involved in the child welfare system. The QIC-NRF is a national partnership with the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Fatherhood Initiative. The purpose of this project is to determine, through a research design, the impact of non-resident father involvement on child welfare outcomes. Child welfare outcomes include child safety, permanence, and well-being. Included in this design is the examination of the relationship between children and non-resident fathers and/or paternal relatives. This 5-year project is currently in Year 3. A second publication dedicated to father engagement will describe the results of the research conducted in four project sites and is projected to be published in September 2011.

We believe the articles in this issue will stimulate your thinking about how you engage fathers in your work and perhaps help you design strategies to enhance your engagement with fathers through practice, teaching, research, or other areas of focus. We also hope they illuminate



your understanding of collaboration within the child welfare system. Challenging the system requires rethinking what the root of collaboration should be. Collaboration does not mean “rubber stamping” the agency’s plan or a provider’s proposal. Collaboration literally means “to colabor” — to examine what the task is, openly discuss possible stratagems, and share the heavy lifting, in both the service and public arenas, that comes with challenging a challenging system.<sup>1</sup>

### In This Issue

In *Engaging Fathers With the Child Welfare System, Phase I of a Knowledge Development Project: What Does It Take?*, Sonia Velázquez, Myles Edwards, Stefanie Vincent, and Joanna Reynolds describe the QIC-NRF. The project consists of two phases and this article gives a detailed description of Phase I activities: the comprehensive needs assessment and literature review and the development of a model program intervention. The authors summarize qualitative and quantitative data to discuss barriers to, promising approaches for, knowledge gaps in, and themes on non-resident fathers’ interactions with the child welfare system.

Many have noted that in the United States, father absenteeism is a growing problem and historically, child welfare agencies have focused primarily on engaging mothers. In *Engaging and Involving Fathers in a Child’s Life and in the Child Welfare Case*, Jill Raichel examines multiple reasons behind fathers’ lack of involvement in their children’s lives, especially children involved in the child welfare system. Raichel then describes how caseworkers can involve fathers in child welfare cases and how this can benefit children.

In *Fathers’ Effects on Children’s Brain Development*, Tomás Reyes demonstrates the relevance of father involvement and brain development research to child welfare. Reyes shows how advances in brain-based father involvement efforts from the field of early education can influence child welfare workers’ practice and facilitate courts’ decision making.

Next, *Black Fathers: Are They a Missing Link in the Education of School-Age Children?* provides insight on Black fathers’ attitudes and behaviors toward their children. Gertrude C. Jackson and Delia Robinson Richards discuss Black fathers’ relationships with their children’s teachers and schools, as well as teachers’ perceptions of Black fathers. Finally, the authors give recommendations for child welfare workers’ participation in bridging and building relationships between teachers and Black fathers.

Marsha Kline Pruett, Carolyn Pape Cowan, Philip A. Cowan, and Kyle Pruett present their ongoing Supporting Father Involvement study, which is a randomized clinical trial of two interventions for families involved with the child welfare system due to reports of child abuse or neglect. Their article, *Fathers as Resources in Families Involved in the Child Welfare System*, describes this study in detail and enumerates practice and policy implications.

Finally, Keith Cherry and Christopher Brown present their study, involving 24 in-depth interviews with non-resident fathers, designed to inform strategies for encouraging fathers to enroll in child welfare services. *Helping Child Welfare Workers Better Understand and Engage Non-Resident Fathers* presents the study’s methods, findings, and conclusions, as well as suggestions for future research.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Timothy Travis of the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Legal and Judicial Issues for his thoughts on “colaboring,” used here.

In conclusion, we hope that all the readers of this issue of *Protecting Children* will be inspired by the contributions of these authors and motivated to inspire others in their work with fathers. Recently, American Humane presented its annual Vincent De Francis award to William C. Bell of Casey Family Programs. He has challenged and continues to challenge the system, striving for the best possible outcomes for children and families, and has challenged each of us to consider the impact we will have in history and our contribution to a better society.

Our challenge to you is to mark your place in history through your work with fathers. We hope this issue of *Protecting Children* provides you some tools and a little motivation to accept your place in history and find others to colabor with to challenge a challenging child welfare system, because both mothers and fathers are important to children.

## References

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## ***Engaging Fathers With the Child Welfare System, Phase I of a Knowledge Development Project: What Does It Take?***

**Sonia Velázquez, Myles Edwards, Stefanie Vincent, and Joanna Reynolds**

Since 2004, Sonia C. Velázquez, C.S.S., has served as vice president of the Children's Division at American Humane, where she provides program leadership and oversees professionals working in research and evaluation, systems improvement and practice advancement, child welfare training and policy, and child abuse prevention programs. She is the principal investigator of the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System. Ms. Velázquez's nearly 30 years of experience include working throughout the United States and internationally with some of the largest child-focused development organizations. Until 2004, she was the director of the federally funded National Resource Center for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention.

Myles T. Edwards, Ph.D., currently serves as director of research and evaluation for children and animals at American Humane. Recently, Dr. Edwards completed several workload study projects and now leads research teams in two major federally funded evaluations, the non-resident father program and an ongoing collaboration across systems for substance-abusing parents.

Stefanie Vincent joined American Humane in 2006. As a child welfare program specialist/analyst, she assumed the role of the site coordinator for the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System. In this role, she managed all programmatic and evaluation aspects of the subgrantees and provided them with ongoing technical assistance. She is currently with the State of Colorado, Division of Youth Services.

Joanna Reynolds, M.A., has worked as a research associate for American Humane since February 2005. She has worked in project evaluation, impact assessment, outcome measurement, workload studies, and data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative. She is currently serving as the lead cross-site evaluator for the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers.

Child welfare agencies are committed to family engagement, but very little meaningful engagement occurs between the child welfare system and non-resident fathers (fathers who do not live in the same home as their children). When child protection agencies become responsible for the safety, permanency, and well-being of a child in need of services, the involvement of the child's absent father can make a difference toward the successful attainment of the goals for the child and the ability of the child protection system to do its job. The low level of involvement of fathers by child welfare workers is an unfortunate reality that has been confirmed by the ongoing federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) and the seminal report, *What About the Dads?* (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). Based on this foundation, the Children's Bureau responded to the need for further learning and experimentation to understand the gaps in and barriers to fathers' involvement and to disseminate best practices that could equip child welfare agencies to effectively involve fathers in their children's lives.

A National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF) was created to promote knowledge development and offer evidence of impact related to non-resident fathers' engagement with their children who are

involved in the child welfare system. In 2006, the Children’s Bureau funded the American Humane Association and its partners, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and the National Fatherhood Initiative, to create and run the QIC-NRF for a period of 5 years. The ultimate goal of the QIC-NRF is to positively impact child safety, permanency, and well-being through enhanced knowledge, services, policy, child welfare training, and coordination across systems when involving non-resident fathers and paternal kin.

The overall project goals are to:

- promote innovation, evidence-based practice improvements, and advancement of knowledge about child welfare outcomes by involving non-resident fathers through experimental research designs testing promising practices;
- establish a national problem-solving and collaborative information-sharing network among subgrantees, the Children’s Bureau Technical Assistance network, public child welfare agencies, private service providers, fatherhood and healthy marriage groups, and other stakeholders about the involvement of non-resident fathers and child welfare outcomes; and
- build evidence and knowledge that answers the question, “Is there a difference in child and family outcomes based on non-resident father involvement?” and that points at effective practices related to improving child welfare outcomes through non-resident father involvement.

The QIC-NRF proceeds in two phases. Phase I, implemented in 2007, included a comprehensive needs assessment and literature review to identify the knowledge gaps, service gaps, research priorities, and need for experimentation, as well

as legal, cultural, or administrative issues that would become the priorities for a request for proposals from sites across the country. During the first year, the project partners and a national advisory board of experts in child welfare, fatherhood, child support, child welfare laws, and other related disciplines collaborated to assess the gaps in existing knowledge, and clarify the focus of the research to be carried out during the remaining 4 years. A supplemental activity in Phase I was the creation of a standard program model to facilitate the work of the research sites and to ensure consistency of practice and data collection. The program model included a new curriculum and supplemental resources that responded to the identification of key gaps in Phase I. The Children’s Bureau approved additional financial support that allowed for this development. A description of the Model Intervention and the Model Program Intervention found in the following pages will illustrate the approach and contents of the program model.

Phase II, which began after the approval of the proposed research focus by the Children’s Bureau, includes the implementation of the research design at four sites across the country, and the development of a dissemination process that will provide the most current information to practitioners, policymakers, administrators, and researchers. This article focuses on the activities and findings of Phase I.

### **Qualitative Data and Supporting Documents**

A generalized perception found during Phase I is that engaging the non-resident father in the child’s case increases the work demands and the complexity of the case. Reasons cited included the common beliefs that non-resident fathers are not reliable; are involved in negative situations such as child support arrears, violent behaviors, transient jobs, and transient residences; must



respond to multiple household obligations and other partners different from the child’s mother; and have other problems including substance abuse and incarceration. For those charged with preventing abuse and protecting children, the decision to spend energy and resources to engage fathers and paternal relatives is usually weighed against many other demands of a caseworker’s time, and the impact of father engagement is viewed and measured through the lenses of child safety, permanency, and well-being. Thus, any program calling on social workers to invest effort to engage fathers should establish at the outset, among other things, that father engagement contributes to a child’s safety, by showing that the presence of a father in a child’s life can be seen to be related to a lower rate of repeat reports. In addition, a program should establish that the presence of a father in a child’s life can be seen to be related to a shorter length of stay in foster care, a higher reunification rate, fewer repeat placements, and greater stability of foster care. Lastly, such a program should establish that a father’s presence contributes to a number of facets of a child’s general well-being, including good school attendance and grades, good health or responsive health care, and fewer behavioral problems. Administrative data from the states chosen for the project bear out these assertions.

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### **Quantitative Baseline Evidence From Administrative Data: NCANDS and AFCARS**

In order to build a baseline picture of child safety and permanency outcomes as mapped against the children’s living situations at removal, QIC-NRF staff makes use of two national administrative databases, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). NCANDS represents annually collected information on reports of abuse and neglect in states and territories, and its technical team produces the report *Child Maltreatment*.<sup>1</sup> The

primary unit of analysis in its “child file” is the report-child combination. Each report-child record includes fields relating to the demographics of the child and her family, the report disposition, the nature of the maltreatment(s), the perpetrator(s), and the child’s living situation. AFCARS provides information on each child placement. The unit of analysis is the child-placement combination, and each record includes demographic information about the child and family, number of placements, date of previous discharge, reason for current discharge, and services provided.<sup>2</sup>

QIC-NRF staff is using these data both for baseline information at outset and for comparison purposes. During the early stages of the project, analyses of baseline data indicated some differences in outcome depending on whether a child’s father was present in her life. The data, however, are collected less comprehensively



<sup>1</sup>*Child Maltreatment* can be accessed through [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov).  
<sup>2</sup>AFCARS data sets are available from [www.ndacan.cornell.edu](http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu).

in some states than in others. By this very inconsistency, the data reveal how much farther we have to go in our conceptions of and attentions to family.

**Living Arrangements as Shown in NCANDS**

The NCANDS database contains a field (Child Living Arrangements) which indicates the child’s household structure at the time of report. Prescribed values are “married parents,” “married parent and stepparent,” “single parent — mother only,” “single parent — father only,” “non-parent relative caregiver,” “non-relative caregiver,” “group home or residential facility,” “other setting,” and “unknown.” Of these values, “single parent — mother only” is used as an unambiguous indicator of a non-resident father.

Two of the four states from which sites were eventually chosen as QIC-NRF project sites populate the living arrangements field in the NCANDS database. It can be seen from the percentage of unknowns in this field that entering this information into SACWIS and then NCANDS is not always straightforward. However, among those report-child records for which the living situation is known, the single mother category shows the highest percentage of reports.

Table 1 shows that in Colorado, 17% of all report-child records show “single parent — mother only” as the living arrangement for the child, while 57% of all report-child records show the living arrangement to be unknown. Table 2 shows that in Indiana, less than 2% of report-child records show “single parent — mother only” as the living arrangement for the child, yet this is still the highest percentage (61%) of those report-child records for which the living arrangement is known.

**Safety**

Table 3 shows the substantiated reabuse rate for federal fiscal years 2006 and 2007. Although these percentages are generally referred to as “reabuse within 6 months,” the measurement for CFSR purposes considers only the first two substantiated reports in a given federal fiscal year and considers only those pairs for which the first report occurred in the first half of the given year. Although procedure used to arrive at these percentages does not capture some 6-month pairs, the rigor of this method allows sound comparisons across states and across time and allows assessment of conformity with benchmarks. These then are the baseline statistics against which we will be comparing the child safety outcomes for the focal children in the study as results emerge.

**Table 1. Living Arrangements of Colorado Children – All Reports**

Living Arrangements	% of Report-Child Records	% of Known Arrangements (42.96% of Total)
Married parents	8.61	20.05
Married parent and stepparent	2.26	5.26
Single parent — mother only	16.90	39.34
Single parent — father only	3.41	7.93
Non-parent relative caregiver	5.57	12.96
Non-relative caregiver	4.06	9.44
Group home or residential facility	1.04	2.41
Other setting	1.12	2.60
Unknown	56.90	
Total	99.86	100.00



**Table 2. Living Arrangements of Indiana Children – All Reports**

Living Arrangements	% of Report-Child Records	% of Known Arrangements (2.72% of Total)
Married parents	0.43	15.76
Married parent and stepparent	0.18	6.44
Single parent — mother only	1.66	61.02
Unmarried parents	0.24	8.64
Parent and cohabitating partner	0.02	0.85
Both parents, marital status unknown	0.02	0.68
Single parent — father only	0.17	6.27
Single parent, mother & other adult	0.01	0.34
Unknown	97.28	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table 3. Percent of Children With Reabuse Within 6 Months (CFSR Measure)**

State	Reabuse	2006	2007
CO	No	95.74	95.30
	Yes	4.26	4.70
IN	No	92.30	93.29
	Yes	7.70	6.71
TX	No	95.71	96.18
	Yes	4.29	3.82
WA	No	92.01	92.75
	Yes	7.99	7.25

As shown in Table 4, a 6-month computation was performed in order to compare safety across family structure groups. Since in Texas and Washington, NCANDS Living Arrangement field values were not available, the AFCARS Caretaker Status values were merged back into NCANDS to provide data for all states. The term “single female,” as used in AFCARS, should not be confused with the term “single parent – mother only,” as used in NCANDS. It was our working hypothesis that children in the care of a single mother had more substantiated rereports than those of married parents (“married parents” was the only value showing the unambiguous

presence of a father). Where substantiated rereport rates were compared, only the rereport rates in Colorado bore out this hypothesis. In Texas and Washington, percentages did not bear out this working hypothesis, possibly because the “married parents” value in the AFCARS database does not distinguish between biological parents and stepparents.

**Table 4. Percent of Total Having a Second Report Within 6 Months — FFY 2007 (NCANDS Substantiated Reports)**

State	Married Parents (AFCARS)	Single Female (AFCARS)
CO	4.6	8.2
IN	11.7	11.7
TX	17.4	16.4
WA	10.6	10.7

**Permanency**

Data from AFCARS, federal fiscal year 2007, for the four states eventually chosen for sites suggest that differences among children’s family status affect length of stay, reunification, and length of time in the home before a subsequent removal. A Kaplan-Meier survival analysis of length of stay in

foster care reveals differences between “married parents” and “single female” to be significant (Colorado:  $p = 0.011$ , Tarone-Ware; Indiana:  $p = 0.001$ , Tarone-Ware; Texas,  $p = 0.006$ , Tarone-Ware; Washington,  $p = 0.000$ , Tarone-Ware; among these four states, median lengths of stay ranged from 100 to 262 days). Differences in length of stay by caretaker status are shown in the median lengths of stay for the discharged children: Among those children entering care in Colorado in federal fiscal year 2007 and discharged before the end of the fiscal year, median length of stay was 39 days for children removed from married-parent households, and 51 days for children removed from single-female households. For children entering and discharged from foster care in Indiana in 2007, the median length of stay for children removed from married-parent households was 28 days, while those for children removed from single-female households was 34 days. In Washington, median lengths of stay for children who entered care and were discharged in 2007 were 4 days for children removed from married-parent households and 6 days for children removed from single-female households. In Texas, however, the pattern differs: the median lengths of stay for children entering and discharged from foster care in 2007 were 242 for children removed from married-parent households and 240 for children removed from single-female households.

There are dramatic differences in the median lengths of stay in foster care reported for the caretaker groups between states. These differences reflect the overall foster care discharge lengths of stay. Texas has the longest lengths of stay, as reflected in greater medians for children from both married-couple and single-female households than those from any other

state. Conversely, Washington’s results reflect the lowest length-of-stay numbers. The important point for this analysis is that the median length of stay for children of married parents is consistently less than the median length of stay for children of single mothers, except in Texas. While the median lengths of stays in Texas are close to those of the other states, the overall pattern of exits from foster care shows higher exit rates for children of married parents, which is the consistent result from the other states.

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### The median length of stay for children of married parents is consistently less than the median length of stay for children of single mothers.

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Despite different entry times during the year, overall, children entering care from married-parent households were more likely to leave care during the same year. In Colorado, almost 60% of children

removed from married-parent households who entered care in federal fiscal year 2007 remained in care at the end of the year, while more than 61% removed from single-female households remained in care. In Indiana, 73% of children entering care from married-parent households in 2007 remained in care at the end of the fiscal year, while almost 77% of children entering care from single-female households remained in care at the end of the fiscal year. In Texas, more than 87% of children entering care from married-parent households in 2007 remained in care at the end of the fiscal year, while 91% of those from single-female households remained in care. In Washington, 55% of children from married-parent households entering care in 2007 remained in care at the end of the fiscal year, while almost 68% of children entering from single-female households remained in care at the end of the fiscal year.

Reunification rates for the AFCARS exit cohort of federal fiscal year 2007 show some significant differences in discharges across family status



groups. The AFCARS field allows population by the values “reunification,” “living with other relatives,” “adoption,” “emancipation,” “guardianship,” “transfer to another agency,” “runaway,” and “death.” A cross-tabulation of reason for discharge with family structure revealed that reunification rates for single-female families tend to be lower than reunification rates for other family structures. In Texas, for example, 28% of children removed from single-female households were reunified with their families, while 40% of children removed from unmarried couples were reunified. The remaining proportions fell somewhere in between, and in Indiana, 60% of children removed from single-female households were reunified, while 68% of children from married couples were reunified, and the remaining percentages fell somewhere in between. In two other states, the percentages of children from single-female families who were reunified were the second lowest.

### ***How Much Do We Really Know?***

While tests on data where these fields are populated suggest that living situation (NCANDS) or family structure (AFCARS) make a difference, in Colorado, fully 56% of child reports show unknown living situations, and in Indiana, 97% of child reports show unknown living situations.

A frequency count using NCANDS for federal fiscal year 2006 for all states (see Table 5) shows that combined unknown and missing information in the Child Living Arrangements field ranges from 0 to 100%, 21 states and territories show missing and unknown living arrangements for less than 50% of all report-child combinations, 13 states and territories show 50- 99% missing and unknown living arrangements, and 17 states show missing and/or unknown living arrangements for 100% of report-child combinations. While data collection for NCANDS is voluntary, the extent to

which the living arrangements variable remains unpopulated is symptomatic of the need for more attention to the fathers’ side of the children’s family situation.

The AFCARS variable Caretaker Family Status reports information analogous to the NCANDS variable Child Living Arrangements. However, the AFCARS variable does not capture as many distinctions as does the NCANDS variable. Existing summaries of this variable eluded both Google and Child Welfare Information Gateway searches.

This relative lack of information on and attention to the child’s living situation in data collection practice mirrors the challenges facing child welfare systems in conducting comprehensive outreach to both sides of a child’s family. These challenges appear in data from the literature review, interviews, focus groups, and information summits conducted during Phase I of the project.

### **Qualitative Activities and Interviews**

To initiate the needs analysis, the QIC-NRF studied and adapted the framework from the *What About the Dads* report (Malm et al., 2006). The QIC-NRF’s research design and knowledge development is based on five specific elements of non-resident father and child welfare agency activities: location, identification, contact, engagement, and interagency collaboration. Phase I consisted of a series of qualitative data-gathering activities including key informant interviews, information summits, and focus groups. Questions were designed to address each of the five areas of focus, as well as each specific audience.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with more than 75 experts from a variety of fields such as child welfare, academia, law, and research.



Table 5. NCANDS Child Living Arrangement Field, FY 2006

Level of Missing Data					
Low: 0-50%		Medium: 50.01%-99.99%		High: 100%	
State	Missing or Unknown	State	Missing or Unknown	State	Missing or Unknown
CT	0.00	CO	62.10	FL	100.00
PA	0.05	KS	89.40	GA	100.00
VT	1.34	WY	89.79	IA	100.00
UT	1.87	NH	91.37	ID	100.00
ME	2.17	DC	92.51	LA	100.00
WI	2.76	CA	94.02	MO	100.00
DE	3.04	IL	95.44	MS	100.00
AK	4.99	HI	95.99	NC	100.00
MN	5.02	KY	97.00	ND	100.00
TN	5.30	MA	97.61	NM	100.00
NJ	5.62	IN	98.63	NV	100.00
MT	5.96	MI	98.64	OH	100.00
AR	11.70	TX	98.81	OK	100.00
NE	12.23			PR	100.00
NY	14.96			SD	100.00
AZ	15.69			VA	100.00
RI	19.72			WA	100.00
AL	20.10				
SC	20.34				
WV	26.73				
OR	46.90				

Additionally, 10 focus group discussions were held between December 2006 and July 2007. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to gather information from targeted groups related to the five substantive areas. Questions were designed to address the five areas and were customized to each group. The groups that participated were public and private child welfare caseworkers, supervisors and administrators, legal personnel, federal subgrantees, domestic violence specialists, fatherhood program staff, fathers, and youth.

Last, two information summits were held, one in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and one in Itasca, Illinois, in June 2007. The purpose of these summits was to gather information from professionals from various backgrounds related to the five substantive areas of research. Questions were designed to address each of the areas specifically. Professionals of various backgrounds — public and private child welfare caseworkers, supervisors, and administrators; legal personnel; federal subgrantees; domestic violence specialists; fatherhood program specialists; and non-resident fathers themselves — joined the summits.



## Barriers, Promising Approaches and Knowledge Gaps and Themes

A convergent analysis of the data and information reveals that the literature review supports many of the findings from the interviews and discussions. The issues and gaps that received the most attention are discussed here, in descending order of frequency. A wealth of information emerged from the key informant interviews regarding barriers, promising practices, and knowledge gaps and themes within each of the five QIC-NRF focus areas of identification, location, contact, engagement, and collaboration.

Gaps in policies, procedures, and training were issues cited most often, not only in the interviews and discussions, but also in the literature review. Many informants called for policy development and training of social workers in the importance of a paternal presence, in using available databases and relatives to identify and locate fathers, and in nonthreatening techniques for interacting with fathers. Similarly, much of the reviewed literature acknowledges a lack of policy manuals, structures, frameworks, guidance, models, and curricula pertaining to child welfare systems in the context of identifying, locating, contacting, and engaging non-resident fathers.

Next, inequitable treatment of fathers in the child welfare and judicial systems was cited almost as often as gaps in policies and procedures. Informants called for training for social workers on the importance of fathers in children's lives, training to eliminate bias, and policies and procedures for a more equitable treatment of fathers. Available literature also

emphasizes that, historically, the child welfare system works with and provides the bulk of its services to mothers. These studies propose that fathers often have to demonstrate to the agency their connection to the child, whereas agencies presume mothers' connection. Such studies also find that even when fathers have the same or more service needs, child welfare caseworkers' efforts to address fathers' needs are minimal, in comparison to their efforts to address mothers' needs.

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**Inconsistent services, as well as services not readily available, were significant barriers to the meaningful engagement of fathers.**

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Studies suggest that the earlier a father is identified and located, the greater the chance he will be contacted by the agency (however, it must be noted that there is little information on whether early identification promotes more positive outcomes). While several child welfare agency policy

manuals and court improvement programs provide guidance to social workers and courts on what steps should be taken to locate non-resident parents, this guidance puts the focus on locating non-resident fathers later in a case, sometimes not until termination of parental rights or adoption proceedings commence.

### Five Areas of Focus

With regard to the five focus areas of identification, location, contact, engagement, and interagency collaboration, the information collected in focus groups, interviews, and summits paralleled findings presented in the literature review. Individual interviews, focus groups, information summits, and available literature all pointed to engagement as the most difficult of the five QIC-NRF focus areas, followed by collaboration, identification, location, and contact. The greatest gap in knowledge occurred



in how to effectively engage non-resident fathers from the beginning and over the long term. Overcoming child welfare bias, conflicting priorities of funding resources, and inequitable treatment of fathers by the child welfare system and the courts were all areas that need to be further explored.

Inconsistent services, as well as services not readily available, were significant barriers to the meaningful engagement of fathers. Another major obstacle was the failure of the vast majority of state child welfare systems to engage fathers in case planning. Also, many fathers perceive that agencies are biased against them, which ultimately thwarts engagement. Finally, involving fathers right from the beginning of the child's life was identified several times as an especially effective way of establishing and sustaining meaningful engagement.

Overall, the research gathered from the literature review and qualitative interviews revealed a paucity of effective father engagement strategies (see Table 6). To engage fathers effectively in the child welfare system, fathers must be recognized as equal to mothers in their parental roles and rights and agencies need to invest as much effort in finding fathers and paternal kin as they do in finding mothers or maternal kin. Agency best practices should also require that both parents (not just the custodian) are contacted when problems and the need for decisions arise. Our examination also revealed that child welfare services have been predominantly mother-centered and the engagement approaches are often not as considerate of a father-friendly culture as they are of a mother-friendly culture.

Therefore, our needs assessment suggested that sociopsychological approaches for engaging fathers should be different from those for engaging mothers, and sensitivity to gender and

cultural assumptions of gender roles must be part of a successful program.

## **Conceptual Framework Guiding QIC-NRF Knowledge Development**

### ***Stakeholder Input***

In accordance with the project design, two groups of volunteer stakeholders have been instrumental in making decisions regarding resources developed, research focus selection, adequacy of the materials, selection of sites, and other key aspects. The first group is the QIC's National Advisory Board, composed of representatives from the legal, fatherhood, child welfare, and child support enforcement fields, and the second is the Dads' Council, which initially convened fathers with diverse experience as non-resident fathers, and has now been expanded to include representatives from the selected sites.

### ***Logic Model***

To further develop the QIC -NRF logic model toward a narrowed research focus, the project team developed three separate scenarios of logic models and mapped out the top three priorities, with specific emphasis on fathers, frontline workers, and collaboration. They also mapped the outputs and other logic model elements to illustrate, develop, and assess the potential and natural linkages within single issues and the likelihood of sponsoring other viable knowledge-building subgrants to meet the purposes of the project. The project also recast its conceptual framework for knowledge development to include an evidence-based research methodology. The result of this 10-month process is reflected in the selection of the highest ranking subaward logic model. We are not presenting here a full comparison of the three scenarios, but given that within the QIC project model, the selection of a narrower focus is a key decision, this strategy helped us validate our selection of the research



**Table 6: Thematic Counts on Barriers to Father Engagement**

Structural Elements	Barriers to Good Practice	Informant Interviews	Focus Groups	Summits and Symposia
Various	Other <sup>a</sup>	156	53	0
Identification, Location, Contact	Gap in policy, procedure, or training	74	20	19
Identification, Location, Contact	Inequitable treatment of fathers (bad)	72	0	15
Identification, Location	Mom as gatekeeper — protecting or not knowing dad	44	5	14
Engagement	Domestic violence, concerns for safety	0	40	9
All	Funding, resources, conflicting priorities (contact, engagement)	37	4	15
Collaboration, Location	Lack of collaboration between IV-D and child welfare (identifying, locating)	33	7	15
Location, Engagement	Geographic separation (incl. military service, migration)	33	1	4
All	Mom as gatekeeper — excluding dad; tensions with mom	31	6	8
Engagement	Unemployment and poverty	29	5	4
Engagement	Dad not interested	25	5	0
Identification, Location, Engagement	Avoidance of child welfare system and attendant judicial system	25	0	9
Location, Engagement	Transience	21	3	6
Engagement	Incarceration	19	8	2
Location, Engagement	Avoidance of IV-D	19	3	1
Engagement	Logistics (transportation, etc).	11	0	0

Table 6. (cont.)

All	Historical absence	10	2	3
Engagement	Dad's misconceptions about parental role	7	0	0
Location, Engagement	Avoidance of criminal justice system	8	1	2
All	Multiple problems	6	0	0
Contact	Notice by publication not effective	6	0	0
Location, Engagement, Custody	Gap in law	5	0	0
All	Lack of dedicated personnel	0	5	0
Location	Lack of information	4	0	7
Location, Contact	Concerns for timely permanency and procedural onerousness	3	0	0
Engagement	Fathers not guaranteed representation	3	0	6
All	Immigration issues	0	0	4

\*The barriers are enumerated in this table in descending order of frequency for informant interviews.

question that would more directly support finding evidence on the relationship of father-engagement and child-welfare outcomes.

**Model Intervention**

The information and data gathered during Phase I shaped and informed the development of an intervention framework that is focused on experimentation around the elements of contact and engagement. The selected framework has two distinct practice interventions, which span policy, protocols, collaboration, workload, training, funding, and other systemic elements. Based on our findings, the two selected practice interventions are gender-specific first contact and peer-led, solution-focused intervention.

**Gender-specific first contact**

Our research has indicated that the first contact between the agency and the non-resident father is a unique opportunity to establish a basis for a positive, strengths-based relationship free of commonly identified negative assumptions about the father's interest in a relationship with his child. This meaningful first contact can set the basis for continued frequency and quality of father-caseworker interaction that ultimately benefits the child. Our review showed that a first contact can be a deterrent, particularly when it is biased, dismissive of the father, not strengths-based, not engaging of the non-resident father, or not supportive of the unique role that the father can have in the parent-child relationship. It was perceived that not only caseworkers, but also legal professionals or other system workers, may have unsupportive attitudes.



The first contact is an opportunity for non-resident fathers to form a constructive relationship with other males or gender-sensitive females who might be willing to understand what the father might be experiencing. The first contact also provides an opportunity to identify effective strategies to address concerns expressed by fathers. Therefore, designing a first contact in which a male or gender-sensitive worker contacts non-resident fathers surfaced as a critical and meaningful element worthy of research.

### ***Peer-led, solution-focused intervention***

As hinted above, Phase I research indicated that while many states and jurisdictions have adequate policies, protocols, and professional training designed to support the involvement of non-resident fathers, significant barriers to true engagement arise. If the father is not aware of the existing resources or does not have the ability to overcome his own barriers, a new interaction with the system will negatively add to already existing frustrations (on the part of the worker and the father) and lessen the potential for successful engagement with the child and other children he might have in care of the child welfare system. We found that not only were fathers' feelings of low self-worth a barrier to working with systems, but also, once fathers agree to the interaction, the frustrations can rapidly grow if the system is not able to engage these men. These frustrations will continue to arise as fathers engage with the child welfare and legal systems, and if support is not present, they can produce attitudes that prevent fathers' positive involvement over the long term. We found that a peer-led group could release and resolve feelings of low self-worth, offer a gender-sensitive model for father participation, and provide mutual support to address and promote solutions to frustrations that are expected to continue to arise.

While the framework is focused on only two elements, it was understood that the other elements of identification, location, and

collaboration would be either embedded in the experimentation or a prerequisite for the subgrantees that agree to pilot the interventions.

### **Experimental Design**

The QIC-NRF's conceptual framework for knowledge development integrates the intervention development approach of the Institute of Medicine (Mrazek and Haggerty, 1994) and the evidence development method of the Society for Prevention Research (Flay et al., 2005). The basic research design was a treatment-control comparison using participant observations over time. After obtaining informed consent pursuant to review board-approved protocols, participating non-resident fathers were to be assigned randomly to either the Model Program or a services-as-usual group. This constituted a randomized control group design, allowing the assessment of the impact of the Model Program Intervention separate from other intervening variables or contextual factors.

### ***Designing the Model Program Intervention***

Using supplemental funds provided by the Children's Bureau, as described at the beginning of this article, American Humane worked with experts in the field to create a curriculum that will carry out the elements mentioned previously. The curriculum provides the project with the opportunity to evaluate the effects of one consistent model intervention across the subgrantees. The curriculum calls for a consistent and reliable facilitator whom the fathers can depend on and for the participation and attendance of representatives from various community agencies and organizations. The subgrantees have been strongly encouraged to find male representatives whenever possible. Given the frustrations and potentially negative experiences non-resident fathers may have, it is important to identify representatives who understand and value the importance of

involving fathers in their children's lives and child welfare cases and to help reconcile the fathers' experiences with the necessity and reality of understanding and working with these agencies.

### ***Request for Applications***

To kick off Phase II of the project, the QIC-NRF sent a request for applications to more than 10,000 public and private child welfare organizations across the country. The request for applications asked public child welfare agencies to submit applications to pilot the model intervention and evaluate child outcomes. The request was the key instrument used to announce the availability of funding, present key findings that led to research priorities, specify the key elements of research and experimentation design, and describe a vision of a partnership with sites for knowledge development over the next 4 years.

Special requirements were included in the request, including a plan concerning the fidelity to the originally agreed-upon research model and compliance with human subjects approach recommended by the QIC's internal review board. Through this competitive process, four sites were selected and announced in January 2008. The four sites are located in El Paso County, Colorado; Marion County, Indiana; Tarrant County, Texas; and King County, Washington.

### ***Designing the Research and Evaluation***

The evaluation plan was developed with the collaboration and input of the evaluators hired by the chosen sites. The fathers receive the usual child welfare services such fathers would receive and the Model Intervention Program, and data on these fathers and their children are collected to determine the success of the interventions in terms of the outcomes discussed previously.

As planned, the implementation processes are evaluated with respect to fidelity to model, barriers to successful delivery and participation, strategies developed to overcome these barriers, and lessons learned. The QIC staff places a high value on the formative evaluation; thus a certain degree of adaptability will be welcomed.

The project is also evaluated with respect to outcomes. The majority of outcomes data will come directly from the fathers themselves, in the form of a series of interviews given to them (the interview protocols are available upon request by emailing [qicnrf@americanhumane.org](mailto:qicnrf@americanhumane.org)). These variables measure the outcomes of father attitudes toward, and ease of interaction with, the child welfare and court systems, as well as the nature and quality of engagement with their children in foster care. These outcomes will be measured against initial factors such as past history with systems, relationship with the mother, and various demographic characteristics. Information gained at these interviews will go into a fathers' dataset.

Many of the variables in the datasets will have a temporal dimension. Certain data will be collected at intake ( $T_1$ , baseline), during the program ( $T_2$ , short-term outcomes), and at or close to exit from the program or at program closing ( $T_3$ , intermediate-term outcomes). The notation  $T_i$  is used for general reference to this temporality.

### ***Child outcomes measurement***

A discussion of child safety and permanency outcomes was provided previously in the presentation of general baseline information. Child well-being generally poses greater challenges. The CFSRs rate provision of services necessary to meet children's needs in mental health, health, and school performance.<sup>3</sup> This information is challenging to collect, for some jurisdictions have an infrastructure in place to

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Colorado CFSR Report, pp. 38-49, retrieved July 21, 2009, <http://stateboard.cdhs.state.co.us/CFSRreport.pdf>



collect information on schools, and some do not. The sites are to develop their own indicators and measures of child well-being.

Child outcomes measurements include safety and permanency indicators from administrative data, which will have coded IDs but no direct identifiers. These include data from AFCARS, NCANDS, and case records. These analyses are performed statewide for baseline information and at or after exit from the program for children of participating fathers. Baseline figures for safety and permanency will be compared throughout the project to analogous results for children in the project. Using NCANDS, safety will be assessed by measuring the percentage of children with a second indicated report within 6 months of a first report, the first substantiated report taking place in the first half of the given fiscal year. Permanency measures include length of stay in foster care, reasons for discharge, length of stay in home after discharge, and stability of foster care. Baseline information for length of stay and reunification has been provided previously. For each site, comparisons will be made among three groups: children of treatment group fathers, children of control group fathers, and the countywide or statewide population of children in the NCANDS database.

### ***Father outcomes***

Research to date, from focus groups, information summits, and interviews with the first cohorts from the sites, reveals that these groups of fathers defy stereotypes. The series of three father interviews developed for the project seeks to capture changes in fathers' understanding of their children, the nature of their engagement with their children, their attitudes toward the child protection system and workers with whom they interact, and their abilities to work with their children's mothers to promote the interests and meet the needs of their children. Information gathered from these

interviews to date provides a picture of fathers who "want to be there" for their children and who are frustrated by the dismissive treatment they receive by child protection agencies, but who are willing, nevertheless, to acknowledge change or improvement.

Where possible, examination of case records will supplement fathers' self-reports about the indicators of increase in case planning participation and the increase in the frequency of visitation.

Figure 1 shows the various groups to be examined, as originally planned. The chart indicates that in addition to the fathers in the treatment and measurement-only groups, data on eligible fathers who decline the offer will also be collected. This part of the analysis is not part of the cross-site analysis, but will be performed by one site. A breakdown of reasons for ineligibility will also be collected.

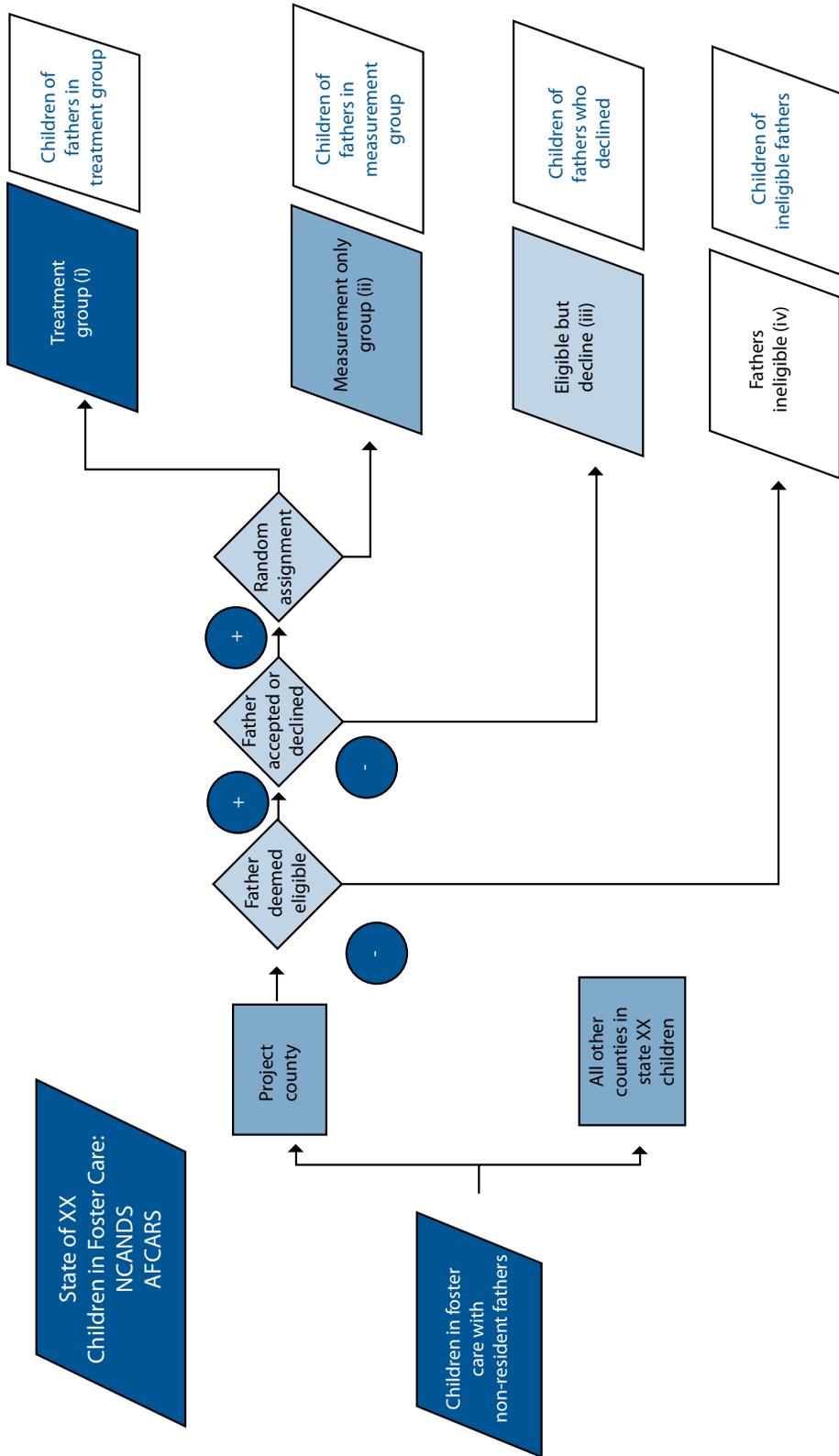
A more elaborate description of the collection, management, and analysis of data can be found in the Evaluation Plan, which is available upon request by emailing [qicnrf@americanhumane.org](mailto:qicnrf@americanhumane.org).

### ***System ecology and desired outcomes***

System change will also be measured. Recruitment statistics within 6 months of baseline show many challenges facing recruiters. In the first cohorts, from four county pools of non-resident fathers ranging in number from 91 to 169, outreach workers actually reached between 4 and 18. Much of this stark drop stemmed from resources expended and challenges in obtaining contact information for the fathers of these children. A secondary program intervention involving social worker training will be piloted during the course of the program. It is hoped that by raising awareness among caseworkers, supervisors, and directors, this project can promote an increase in the



Figure 1. QIC-NRF Research Procedure



successful identification and location of fathers, and can promote the kind of interaction between caseworker and father that will contribute substantially to meeting the children's needs.

These system changes will be measured by caseworker surveys, questions in the father interviews, and comparison of recruitment statistics from the early and later cohorts.

### ***Institutional Review Board and Site Evaluation Requirement***

The complexities of the start-up of the sites are not described in this article, but it is important to mention the requirements of review by the review board at the central and site levels and the need for each site to have a site evaluator in place. During Phase II, the role of the QIC is concentrated on cross-site evaluation, hence the need for local counterparts to guide the data collection and evaluation work of each participating site.

### **Phase II and Beyond**

#### ***Provision of Support and Technical Assistance to Subgrantees***

American Humane continues to coordinate the provision of ongoing support, guidance, and technical assistance to QIC-NRF subgrantee projects. The subject matter expertise of the three partners' staff and consultants will be made available to the subgrantee projects with ongoing availability, flexibility, support, and information, and will largely revolve around topics of project implementation, data collection, and evaluation procedures.

#### ***What We Are Learning***

While the research and evaluation plan concentrates on father and child outcomes, our major learnings to date have concerned the child welfare systems and the challenges they face in identifying, locating, and engaging fathers. Despite mandates of policies and procedures, actual social work practice yields far less

information on fathers and paternal families than policy would seem to indicate, and the reasons for this shortfall are manifold and complex. The four sites chosen have instituted some innovative practices to try to identify and locate fathers. One site has engaged graduate student interns to find eligible fathers, while another has held focus groups among mothers and engaged a streetwise liaison with years of experience with this population.

Interestingly, although the four regions under examination share some challenges, each has its own characteristics and barriers. El Paso County, Colorado, facilitators report that they deal with a large military population and thus face a higher rate of transiency than the national norm. QIC staff described the fathers they met in Marion County, Indiana, on a recent site visit as committed and excited to help the project succeed. In King County, Washington, facilitators described the county's population as able to meet multiple challenges and the site in Tarrant County, Texas, has reported that it is working out ways to overcome language barriers.

#### ***Dissemination of Knowledge***

Over the next 2 years, the sites will pilot the model intervention curriculum, as well as two other curricula: one geared toward attorneys and one geared toward social workers. Sites will conduct interviews with the fathers at the beginning, middle, and end of the 20-week curriculum to ascertain outcomes. Outcomes will be tracked and evaluated to develop and disseminate knowledge to broad national audiences through websites, conferences, journals, and other means. Collectively, the interventions will add to existing knowledge and become the impetus for system change.

The QIC-NRF, its partners, subgrantees, and other affiliates are committed to discovering the impact of non-resident father involvement on child welfare outcomes. The latest information on the QIC-NRF can be obtained by visiting [www.fatherhoodqic.org](http://www.fatherhoodqic.org).

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## CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT AND CALL FOR PRESENTATIONS

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AMERICAN HUMANE



Family Group Decision Making

## *Engaging and Involving Fathers in a Child's Life and in the Child Welfare Case*

### **Jill Raichel**

Jill Raichel, M.A., M.P.A., has worked for the past 25 years as a child and family therapist, parent trainer, and child welfare caseworker. She has researched and presented her findings on parent-child attachment and bonding, children of incarcerated parents, and gangs in past and present U.S. society; and developed several parenting curricula. Ms. Raichel is a current member of the Washington County Commission on Children and Families in Oregon and is a training and development specialist for the Oregon Department of Human Services, Children and Families Division.

#### In the United States:

Father Absenteeism is a significant problem. Over twenty-five million American children (or 33.5 percent of children in the U.S.) live without their biological father. These numbers are higher among some minority groups. Half of all African-American children, one in four Hispanic children and one in six white children live with single mothers. (National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System [NQICNRF], 2007, p. 3)

Historically, there has been little meaningful engagement between fathers and the child welfare system, as evidenced in the federal Child and Family Service Reviews on state child welfare performance.

In an overall review of 22 CFSRs from 2001-2004, it was noted that there was a lack of father and paternal relative involvement in the child welfare case, including case planning and contact by the caseworkers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

This indicates child welfare agencies across the country have historically disregarded children's fathers and focused their efforts on the mothers. Current practice does not involve fathers in child welfare case planning or involve fathers' family in the child's life.

"Engaging fathers to participate in the child welfare process, when safety and child well-being are not jeopardized, are [sic] critical to developing or maintaining the parent-child relationship, making placement or permanency decisions, and gaining access to resources for the child" (NQICNRF, 2007, p. 7). This paper focuses on fathers who are not the perpetrators of child abuse or did not perpetrate domestic violence against the mothers of their children, and cites case examples from the author's own casework experience.

Studies on fathers and their relationships with their children have found that fathers can be protective and nurturing. Fathers play a significant role in their children's lives when they nurture their children, which, according to Rosenberg & Wilcox:

- "helps fathers build close relationships with their children;
- fosters psychological well-being and self-worth in their children;



- provides children with a healthy model of masculinity; and
- helps protect girls from prematurely seeking the romantic and sexual attention of men.” (2006, p. 21)

## Reasons Fathers Are Not Involved in Their Children’s Lives

### *Caseworker Bias*

A caseworker’s view regarding a father’s ability to parent and be a placement resource may be affected by the caseworker’s own experience with men. This experience can be on a personal level, as in the relationship between the caseworker and his or her father, the caseworker’s experience with men in his or her personal life, or the caseworker’s negative experience with men in other child welfare cases. These experiences may lead to a bias or preconception about all men who are not involved in their children’s lives. It is therefore important to recognize and understand one’s own biases and preconceptions when working with fathers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

When supervisors and managers are working with caseworkers, they need to recognize if this bias exists with a caseworker and address it with the caseworker if it does, to prevent the exclusion of the father in the child welfare case. This is particularly true with female caseworkers, as it has been noted that male caseworkers are more likely than female caseworkers are to place a child with his or her father, and report fewer frustrations in working with fathers than do female caseworkers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

In addition to addressing bias, a caseworker’s ability to communicate empathy, respect, and genuineness will strongly influence whether he or she will build a relationship with the father. The father-caseworker relationship is characterized by cooperation or hostility and distrust. The caseworker-father relationship is important in involving the father in the child’s life and child welfare case.

### *Mothers as Gatekeepers*

Another reason for fathers’ noninvolvement in their children’s lives is the relationship with the children’s mother. Mothers who decide whether a child has contact with the non-resident father, or mothers who decide the specifics of the contact, are known as “gatekeepers” (Scalera, 2001). In instances of abuse or domestic violence, the mother may be appropriately acting as a gatekeeper. But many times, gatekeepers have had some negative history with the father of

the child. Gatekeepers then decide, based on that history, that the father has no right to see his child. If a caseworker learns this is occurring, he or she should address this with the mother to help her understand that her personal feelings for the father should never interfere with the father-child relationship. Mothers need to view fathers as team

players in raising their children, even if they are not together.

For example, in one case, the mother was upset with the father because he left her for another woman. The mother believed that he had no right to see his child because he had abandoned both of them. When the caseworker explored the situation with the mother, the mother realized that the father had been a good father and wanted to spend time with the child, but she did not want

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**A caseworker’s view  
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him to be with the child as a punishment to him. The child wanted to spend time with the father as well. The mother came to realize that she was punishing her child as well as the father, and that the child would grow to resent her for this. When the caseworker helped the mother reach the conclusion that she was actually hurting the child more than the father, the mother did not want to continue to do this. The mother was able to reach this conclusion on her own with the assistance of the caseworker, rather than the caseworker stating it for the mother. This allowed the mother to feel that she still had control in the situation and the decision-making process.

### ***Other Reasons for Noninvolvement***

Caseworkers should remember that fathers do not always know how to be a father. Many non-resident fathers have not had a positive father role model in their lives. They may have been raised well by their mothers, but did not have a real father figure. The idea of being a father is foreign to them. It should not be interpreted that they do not want to be fathers; they just do not know how to do it. They are not sure how to relate and communicate to their children, based on their own childhood history.

In child abuse cases where the father is not the perpetrator, the father may perceive what has happened to his child and react in various ways, depending on his cultural views of manhood and fatherhood. For example, a father who has lived in a culture that believes a man's role is to protect and care for his child may feel that he has failed to be a good father, even though he was not responsible for the abuse. He may believe that he should have prevented the abuse even though

it was beyond his control and by not preventing the abuse, he is a weak man. When caseworkers understand fathers' reactions and feelings regarding abuse, they can become empathetic with fathers and be able to engage them in addressing the situation that led to the abuse (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

## **Caseworkers should remember that fathers do not always know how to be a father.**

Financial reasons also prevent some fathers from being involved with their children. Some men are unemployed and therefore cannot pay child support

or give their children things they believe the children need and want. Many men work, but are in low-paying jobs that barely allow them to meet their own basic living expenses. They, too, cannot afford to pay child support. These men have avoided contact with local and state agencies for this reason. For them, it is not about not wanting to support their children; they simply have no funds to do so. These men may further feel that since they are not paying child support, they do not have any rights to their children, thus they stop visiting the children and will not have any contact with any type of governmental agency. This is further compounded by the way child welfare agencies deal with these fathers. When caseworkers learn about a father's identity and whereabouts, the first thing they do is contact the child support division and give them the information on the father to start the child support collection process. Next, caseworkers attempt to contact the father by sending him a letter on agency stationary. This letter is usually thrown away, as the father does not want to respond for fear of having to pay child support he does not have money for. This is not the way to engage a father (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).



## Engaging Fathers

### *Initial Contact With Fathers*

When a father has been identified and located, a caseworker should work toward engaging him through personal contact. The way a caseworker makes the initial contact, how the caseworker communicates, and the caseworker's view of the father will determine whether the father becomes engaged or not. The child welfare agency staff also plays a role in the engagement process.

Engaging a non-resident father takes more than sending him a letter.

The National Family Preservation Network has found that sending letters to fathers is a very ineffective way to engage them.

Fathers receive these letters negatively because they are coming from a government agency, and therefore do not generally read or respond to them. The National Family Preservation Network has suggested going to places where fathers can be found and engaging them on their own turf, such as athletic venues, parks, barbershops, etc. For example, in one case, the caseworker was unable to locate the father through conventional avenues. The caseworker spoke with the father's mother, which led the caseworker to a corner gas station where the father worked. The caseworker went to the station and talked with the father about his child and the child welfare case. Physically going to the father eventually led to him becoming involved in his child's life and case services. It was the personal contact, rather than an impersonal agency letter, that created a connection between the father and caseworker and led to the father becoming engaged with his child and in services.

### *Communicating With Fathers*

How a worker approaches the father — through nonverbal communication, the worker's tone

of voice, and the words and questions the caseworker chooses to use — can affect how the father responds. Caseworkers need to be respectful at all times and keep this approach in mind when attempting to engage fathers. Caseworkers should be aware that fathers may come across with an "attitude" or appear to be aloof. These behaviors can actually be part of the fathers' defense system; many fathers feel they have been prejudged by the child welfare system and want to protect themselves. This is especially true in cases where the father wants to have contact with his daughter. Many times,

the father is judged as being a sexual predator, even though he has not been guilty of any sexual abuse. Having an "attitude" helps fathers feel safe and keeps the caseworker away.

Caseworkers must work through this with fathers

and build relationships with them so they feel safe, respected, and not judged.

For example, a father who has had a negative experience with his previous caseworker may appear to be rude to his new caseworker. The new caseworker should not take this personally and try to understand where his behavior is coming from. The caseworker could begin by showing him empathy and asking him what he is feeling and why. In one case, a caseworker did this by assuring the father that she understood it was difficult to have a child in foster care and to have had several different caseworkers. She further informed him that she was there to help him and that she could only do this if he told her what the issue was and what he needed. The father told the new caseworker that he had been involved with his child and had regular visits with him. The case was then assigned to another worker who told him that since he did not have a job and did not pay child support, he would never have his child with him and the child would be adopted. Once the child was adopted, the father would no longer

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**Engaging a non-resident  
father takes more than  
sending him a letter.**

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have any legal rights to the child and he would no longer be able to see him. The father then decided to stop visiting his son and working on his case plan, as he felt there was no hope. He wanted to do what was best for his son, even if that meant his son would be adopted by another family and he would never get to see him again. The currently assigned worker stated that she was there to help him, which meant setting up visits and helping him find a job and that the primary goal for the case was reunification with a parent. The father calmed down and listened to her. They worked out a plan together, which included the father obtaining a job, and he later regained custody of his son. Caseworkers need to be empathetic to how fathers may be feeling about the current situation or their perception of the situation.

Additionally, fathers believe they need to prove themselves as worthy parents much more frequently and to a higher degree than mothers do (Urban Institute, 2006). This plays a part in fathers not even trying to be involved in their children's lives or seeking custody. When communicating with fathers, caseworkers should look for fathers' strengths, not their weaknesses, and let them know what strengths they have. Caseworkers should be solution-focused and ask what fathers need, not tell them what they want or need. If caseworkers only focus on the current problem without input from fathers, this will lead to the reappearance of the fathers' defense system. Caseworkers should empower fathers and play a role in helping them become a more active part of their children's lives. Fathers need help in making goals and a plan to help their children and themselves. Caseworkers can assist them in developing these goals. The process needs to be father-driven, rather than caseworker-driven.

### ***Team Effort to Engagement***

Engaging fathers is not just the caseworker's responsibility; it is the responsibility of all child welfare staff members with whom the father may

have contact. Child welfare staff involved in the engagement process ranges from the clerical and support staff to the supervisor and manager. The focus needs to be on improving the father-child relationship and how this benefits the child, and it takes a team to accomplish this. Further, this engagement process needs to be part of the initial stage and continue throughout the case rather than making first contact with the father at the termination of parental rights phase. The engagement process takes more than one contact; it is an ongoing process. Paternal relatives play a role in this process as well. "Fathers whose children were placed with paternal relatives had more contact on average with caseworkers than those whose children were placed with maternal relatives" (O'Donnell, 2002, p. 12). This contact is due to fathers feeling more comfortable and more at ease with their own relatives. They feel less judged and are more open to parenting suggestions with paternal relatives than with the child's maternal relatives, thus leading to fathers visiting more often and becoming more involved with their children.

### **Involving Fathers**

Involving fathers in their children's lives may require creativity. Many visits between fathers and their children occur in a child welfare office and may be uncomfortable for the father. This may not be the most suitable place for a father and child to reconnect with each other. There are ways to assist fathers in reconnecting with their children and becoming involved in their children's lives and child welfare cases.

### ***Creative Visits Between Father and Child***

Caseworkers can assist fathers in their visits by holding the visits at locations in the community where the father and child like to go and can enjoy each other in a comfortable setting, such as a local park, where they can play ball together or the father can push the child on a swing.



Allowing fathers to develop their own ideas for the visit helps them feel empowered and helps caseworkers create a fun-filled visit. For example, in one case, the children had not been a part of the father's life for several years. The fondest memory they all had together was fishing at a nearby river. The first visit with them took place at their fishing spot. The father brought all the fishing gear and refreshments. The caseworker supervised the visit while the father and children talked about the old memories they shared of fishing there. The awkward silence of a visitation room in a child welfare office was not present. It was a natural setting for them, they could share good memories, and it was conducive to talking.

Another case example is with a father who had been incarcerated for years and had no contact with his son during his incarceration. The father and son had enjoyed bowling prior to his incarceration. On their first visit, they went bowling together and enjoyed a lunch afterward. This visit was held in a place that held fond memories for both of them. Their memories started a conversation which continued throughout their lunch.

Caseworkers should keep in mind when supervising a visit that it should be in a place where all the parties are comfortable and allowed to talk freely. For example, movie theaters do not allow for conversation and thus would not be a good choice. Holding a visit in the public library's children's section is a great way to have fathers and children interact with each other and it is free. Community and recreation centers are another source of free activities for fathers and children to involve themselves in. The idea is for fathers to understand that they just need to spend quality time with their children and not a lot of money. Visitation in child welfare offices may not always be successful due to the environment, and many times fathers feel uncomfortable and unsure exactly what they are supposed to be doing. If the initial visit must

occur in a child welfare office, caseworkers should do some research on activities that the child and parent can enjoy together and that will allow for conversation. These activities could include arts and crafts, reading a book together, or playing cards or board games. There should be no watching television or movies or playing video games, as this does not allow the same type of interaction as the other activities mentioned.

### ***Quality Time***

Research has found that:

Spending time together enables a father to get to know and to be known by his child. A father who spends lots of time with his child tends to be better caring. Children often do see time as an indicator of a parent's love for them. (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, p. 20)

To support this statement, in a research project (Raichel, 2002) in which children were given a list of rewards they would choose for themselves, most children chose an activity in which they would spend time engaged with their parent. The activities chosen were baking cookies, playing a game, or reading a book with a parent. Activities rarely chosen by the children involved purchased items such as video games, going to the movies, or buying a new toy. The children valued quality time with a parent more than any material possession the parent could buy for them. Conversely, when the parents of these children were given the same list, they chose the material items, then made comments that they could not afford to purchase the item they chose. When the parents were informed of their children's choices, they were surprised and stated that they rarely did the activities the children chose. The parents then used this new information to extinguish some of the negative behaviors the children were exhibiting, and were able to begin to more closely bond with their children, which was rewarding for both the children and the parents.



Fathers interact differently with their children than mothers do. Fathers need to spend considerable time with their children playing and having fun in physical ways, such as tossing a football, playing basketball, or hiking. These activities are more valuable for their relationship and for their child's emotional well-being, social development, and physical fitness, than is spending time in passive activities such as watching television (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). This is one of the major reasons it is important that the visit be held where this type of play can take place.

Being a father is not always about having fun and playing; fathers need to engage their children in day-to-day activities to demonstrate that fathers also have to clean and do laundry. When working with fathers, caseworkers need to let them know it is OK for them to involve the children in daily living activities. During overnight and weekend visits, fathers should engage in productive activities with their children such as household chores, washing dishes after dinner, or cleaning up the backyard. "Research consistently shows that such shared activities promote a sense of responsibility and significance in children that is, in turn, linked to greater self-esteem, academic and occupational achievement, psychological well-being, and civic engagement later in life" (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, p. 21).

Daily activities include the child's education. Fathers need to help with homework and be involved with their children's educational program to whatever level they feel comfortable. This involvement includes attending children's performances and school conferences, and maybe volunteering in the classroom or on a field trip. "Some studies suggest that fathers' involvement in educational activities — from reading to their children to meeting with their child's teacher — is more important for their children's academic success than their mother's involvement" (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, p. 21). Reading and

assisting with homework can occur in the father's home and at visits, even in the child welfare office.

Father-child visitation helps maintain the parent-child connection, and preserves the continuity of the relationship. Research has found that more frequent parent-child visitation is associated with shorter placements in foster care and increased likelihood of children being returned to their parent's care. Visitation decreases children's behavioral problems in foster care when visits are provided on a regular basis (Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Ganger, 1996; Mech, 1985).

Keeping fathers involved in their children's lives and in child welfare cases can best be accomplished with regular visits (see the appendix, *Ideas for Fathers to Keep Connected With Their Children*). The tips in the appendix can also be used with fathers who are not able to maintain regular contact, such as military fathers on deployment, incarcerated fathers, and fathers living outside their children's area.

### ***Military, Incarcerated, and Out-of-Area Fathers***

Fathers in the military, fathers who are incarcerated, and fathers who live outside their children's area or out of state share similar problems in being involved in their children's lives in that they are not easily accessible to the children, the caseworker, or services. They have special needs to help them reconnect and become involved with their children.

#### ***Military fathers***

For fathers in the military, there are military liaisons available to assist caseworkers in locating fathers and making contact with them. The military also provides an array of services to fathers and their families. The American Red Cross is also a resource for caseworkers in working with military fathers. Even when fathers are stationed on the other side of the world,



today's technology can assist them in maintaining contact with their children (see the appendix for more ideas).

### ***Incarcerated fathers***

According to the Urban Institute (2006):

Many child welfare supervisors and managers noted that involvement with the criminal justice system may make caseworkers less likely to engage a father. Some supervisors and managers noted an internal conflict between wanting to put an incarcerated father in a child's case plan yet recognizing that an unrealistic service expectation would then follow. Arranging for children to visit incarcerated fathers can be time-consuming if extensive travel is involved or prisons have complex protocols for admitting visitors. Some administrators also said that the process of visitation might be traumatic for children and intimidating to caseworkers. (p. 26-27)

Though these things may be true, more and more programs are available that work with men in prison not only to prepare them for returning to a productive role in society, but also, and just as importantly, to prepare them for being good fathers upon their return. These programs work with men on issues related to fatherhood not only out of a commitment to connecting men with their children, but also to ensure that men who leave prison are prepared to take an active role in their families. This may be one of the best ways to motivate men to avoid the behaviors that got them into prison in the first place. Recidivism rates are lower among those prisoners who have built relationships with their children and

maintain those relationships after release from prison. Most children of prisoners who are not the perpetrator of child abuse need to have ongoing contact with the incarcerated parent, within the child welfare agency and/or prison policy. This ongoing contact can be visits between the father and child at the prison or videoconferencing, with the child at a child welfare office and the father in a videoconference area in the prison.

Caseworkers working with fathers in prison need to determine where the father is incarcerated and be in communication with the appropriate prison staff. This communication should address the safety concerns for the child, if any; determine the prison's policy regarding visitation and other contact modes between child and father; review visitation guidelines; and uncover programs available to the father, including parenting classes, that can assist him in meeting court-ordered services (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, p. 34).

Caseworkers should keep in mind that children need to remain in contact with their fathers. Ideally, children should have a contact visit with their fathers twice a month. If there are relatives involved in the child's life and/or in the child welfare case and these relatives visit the father

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**Recidivism rates are lower among those prisoners who have built relationships with their children and maintain those relationships after release from prison.**

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in prison, they could be a resource in facilitating visits between the child and father at the prison. As another option, caseworkers should encourage children and fathers to write letters to each other. Telephone calls are the easiest way to keep the relationship alive, but be aware that

these calls are very expensive. The father has to make the call collect, and the charges for this call could cost the family caring for the child quite a large sum of money. The average cost for one



of these calls is between \$10 and \$20 each. If the prison allows, having the father read a book on tape and playing the tape for the child so that he can hear his father read a story at night is another useful tool. Exchanging photographs is beneficial as well (see the appendix for more ideas).

### ***Out-of-area fathers***

Working with fathers out of state, involving them in their children's lives, and providing services to them is similar to working with military fathers who are deployed. Both types of fathers are away and there can be considerable distance or other barriers that keep them from visiting their children. Using the tips in the appendix can help fathers begin to develop a relationship with their children. Caseworkers can work with the local child welfare agency in the father's area, to assist the father in obtaining referrals to service providers and accessing needed services. For visits less than 30 days between out-of-state fathers and their children, the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) need not be considered. However, if the plan is for a child to reunite and be placed with the father, ICPC will need to be involved.

### **Conclusion**

Involving fathers in a child's life is crucial. Research has found that it is not whether the child is living with the father that is important, but that the father is involved and a support to the child, even if the father is deployed, incarcerated, or lives in another geographic location.

There are many ways for caseworkers to involve fathers in their children's lives, including helping build relationships between the father and mother, the caseworker and father, and the father and child. Caseworkers, supervisors, and managers need to be aware of certain biases regarding fathers and address those biases so that fathers can become involved with their children.

Engaging fathers in their children's lives and welfare cases should be done with the father in mind, using the concepts of empathy, respect, and genuineness. When a father believes he is an important part of his child's life, he is more likely to become engaged and stay connected to the child, even when he is not physically near the child.

Further, involving fathers in their children's lives and in child welfare cases can lead to better family connections, higher self-esteem, and early permanent placement for the children.

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## Appendix



### Ideas for Fathers to Keep Connected With Their Children

Fathers who live away from their children, are in the military, or are incarcerated still need to stay connected with their children so their relationship continues to grow and develop. The following are some ideas to help you keep connected with your children during your absence.

- Send your child a photograph of yourself with him or her when the both of you were sharing a special moment together.
- Send your child a photograph of yourself in the location you are living. For example, if you are in a different state or country, show something significant of that state or country in the background. Write something about that area.
- Obtain a copy of your child's favorite book, replace the main character's name with your child's name, and send it to your child.
- Make a CD or tape of yourself reading a book and send that tape with the book to your child.
- Make a CD or tape of yourself telling a family story and send a picture of the people in the story. For example, tell a story about you and your mother and send a picture of you and your mother together. This not only connects you with your child, but also gives the child a sense of family history. For instance, if the child likes to sing, and his grandmother was a singer, the child will like learning that he received his interest in singing from his grandmother.
- Write a story about what you do all day. If you can, provide pictures of some of these activities. It may seem boring, but it will help the child feel he is there with you and sharing in some of your day.
- Include little surprises with your letters to your child, such as stickers, artwork you have done (this can be very simple — children enjoy what their parents make), clippings from a newspaper of something he is interested in (for example, if your child likes baseball, a story about his favorite team and some comments by you will make it personal), a picture cut up for the child to assemble (like a puzzle), or any item that you can relate a story to. This will help him feel more in touch with you.
- Email each other and include items of interest that you can share and comment on.
- Communicate (e.g., email, phone, and letters) with your child on a regular basis.
- Write a newsletter about the events that have occurred over the week with you. Make the events sound funny.
- Send the child a “day letter,” in which every hour, you write down the time and what you are doing. He will read it and feel like he has spent the day with you.
- Play an Internet game with your child.
- Develop a book of lessons learned. Write down a couple of problems you have experienced and how you solved them. When you have 10 or more pages, send this to your child. It will help him understand that you also have problems and that you learn how to solve them. It will help the child understand he is not alone and will also teach problem-solving skills.
- Make up a book with your child as the main character. Draw simple pictures or glue pictures from magazines to correspond with the story. For example, make up a story about you and your child going fishing. Draw or find pictures of people fishing, rivers and lakes, fishing boats, and fish. Send the book to your child.

- Send your child a large envelope with seven smaller envelopes inside, each marked with a different day of the week. Include a note that he should read the contents of the appropriate envelope each morning before he starts his day. In each envelope, enclose a message that reflects something special between the two of you so that your child will think about you during the day.
- Make a card or picture for special events, such as holidays, birthdays, graduations, etc., and send it to your child.
- Listen to what your child is telling you and respond accordingly. Children want open and honest communication with their parents.
- Keep your promises. If you promise your child you will be there to visit in 6 weeks, be sure you can do this. Children pressure parents to make promises they can't keep. Be honest. If you can't keep a promise, don't make it.
- Stay connected with your child's mother or caregiver. Even if you don't have a romantic relationship with her, she is providing day-to-day care for your child and you need to have a cordial relationship with her.
- Develop a plan on how you will stay connected with your child and stick to the plan. It is easy to begin with making promises that you will write every day, then fail to live up to the promise. If you say you will write every day, plan how you will accomplish this. Maybe every day is not realistic, but you can write every week or write a week's worth of letters on one day, then mail them out each day. Think about how you want to stay in contact with your child and develop a plan to do this. Be sure to follow that plan.
- Children will ask why you are not there. Be honest with your answers and don't get into personal issues. They need to know, but they also need to be respected and their age will guide you on how much or how little to tell them.
- Learn about the different ways you can stay connected with your child from where you are. Learn how you and your child can access technology such as videoconferencing.
- Children may be upset that you are not there with them and may respond in a way that you are not expecting. Don't be surprised that your child is angry because you are away from him or that you have missed something important in his life. Tell him you love him and wish you could be there, but since you can't, you want to hear all about it. Ask him to take pictures of the event and send them to you.
- Support your child emotionally, financially, and spiritually as much as possible. This does not mean you need to buy your child everything he or she asks for. But, if you can afford to send little gifts that he would find special throughout the year, do that. Let him know that you are there to listen to him, even if you can't be with him physically.
- If you are having difficulty with your current situation, get help from a counselor to work through your issues. Don't use your child to work through them.
- Take the time spent away from your child to decide what kind of father you want to be and how you can do that. When you are with your child, make the most of the time you have together. They are only children for a short period.
- Encourage your child to do some of these same things for you. Praise him when he sends you a story or picture. You want an open exchange between the two of you.



## *Fathers' Effects on Children's Brain Development*

### **Tomás Reyes**

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Estimates are that 905,000 children in the U.S. were victims of maltreatment in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008). In a recent effort to update scientific knowledge on early development and the role of early experiences, the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, established a committee that reviewed a multidisciplinary body of research on how early experiences in life affect children's development (National Research Council Institute of Medicine [NRCIM], 2000).

Among its findings, the committee concluded that parents are a critical factor in shaping the development of their children, including the neural circuitry of their brains. Parental influence can be supportive or threatening to healthy development. According to the National Research Council Institute of Medicine (2000), child abuse and neglect are threats to the developing central nervous system.

Knowledge about the developing brain and the interdependence of cognitive, social, and emotional development offers an opportunity to understand the interplay of father involvement and child welfare. This article demonstrates the relevance of father involvement and brain development research to child welfare. It further shows how advances around brain-based father involvement efforts from the field of early education and care can influence child welfare workers' practice, and facilitate courts' decision making.

### **Brain Development and Child Welfare**

According to scientists from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006a), the brain begins to develop before birth and continues to grow through the early adult years. This process is influenced by the reciprocal interaction of genes passed on from the parents to the child, the environment in the mother's womb, and the child's experiences during infancy and childhood.

A child is born with over 100 billion neurons, or brain cells, which when interconnected, make up the wiring or circuitry of the brain. At the age of 8 months, an infant may have 1,000 trillion of these connections. And each of those connections represents a learning experience, a skill, or a pathway for organism functioning. Connections that are frequently activated are retained, while those that are not used may die away as the brain operates on a "use it or lose it" principle.



Recent research suggests that a child's relationship with primary care providers and the level of rich or impoverished complexity of his or her early environment has a direct impact on the formation of the brain's neural pathways (NRCIM, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2006b). When brains are exposed to challenging and stimulating environments, they grow more interneuron connections and are healthier.

According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006b), the brain's response to challenging and rich environments is to create "more connections between neurons, more cells called glia that support the functioning of neurons and their connections, and a denser network of capillaries supplying blood to the brain" (p. 1).

These findings suggest that parental and caregiving practices can shape the brain's evolving circuitry to support or disrupt healthy development of the child's inherited attributes. When nurturing and responsive relationships are present, healthy brain architecture is built, thus providing a child a strong foundation as she initiates her journey through life.

However, early experiences of abuse and neglect can subject the child's brain to progressive dysfunction. When protective relationships are not provided, elevated levels of stress hormones (i.e., cortisol) can impair cell growth and interfere with the formation of healthy neural circuits (NSCDC, 2006a).

Abuse, toxic substances, and neglect can disrupt the development of the brain's architecture. The nature and severity of that disruption depend on the type of substance or neglect, the level and duration of exposure, and

the point during the developmental process at which it takes place. Early assaults can lead to a broad range of lifelong problems in physical and mental health with devastating human and financial costs to families and society.

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## Early experiences of abuse and neglect can subject the child's brain to progressive dysfunction.

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Researchers from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006a) have classified such assaults in three types of stress: positive, tolerable, and toxic.

The term *stress* refers to changes in the brain that are set into motion when threats to a child's well-being are present. Many of these neurochemical changes take place in brain structures (e.g., the hypothalamus and brainstem) that regulate body functions such as heart rate, respiration, food intake and digestion, reproduction, and growth (NRCIM, 2000).

The neuroscientific research on brain development presented herein suggests that the children warranting the greatest concern are those subjected to abusive and neglectful care. The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (see USDHHS, 2003), defines child abuse and neglect as:

any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm. (p. 45)

There are several types of abuse and neglect (e.g., physical abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse) as defined under CAPTA. According to Rosenberg and Wilcox (2006), physical and psychological abuse is associated



with depression, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminal behavior. Sexual abuse is associated with depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal behavior, and promiscuity. Neglect is associated with low levels of physical and intellectual development, attachment disorders, aggression, and difficulty dealing with others.

Amen (2000) has suggested that such variables (i.e., depression, aggression, impulse control, decision making, learning, thought, and behavior), are symptomatic of poor brain functioning and brain abnormalities. Research conducted with the use of computerized imaging from the field of nuclear medicine has allowed researchers to establish direct relationships between brain malfunctioning and CAPTA's types of abuse and neglect.

The child welfare system can use knowledge about indicators of abuse or neglect to prevent maltreatment and thus human pain and high societal costs. Understanding how a child's relationship with his primary care providers and environment can impair his brain architecture, brain circuitry, and brain performance can support child welfare prevention efforts. Child welfare workers can use this knowledge to design and implement brain-based interventions targeted to decrease child abuse and neglect associated with parents in general, and fathers in particular.

### Father Involvement and Child Welfare

Researchers from the National Center on Fathers and Families (2001) define father involvement as configured by six categories of father participation: 1) father presence, 2) caregiving, 3) child social competence and academic achievement, 4) cooperative parenting, 5) healthy living, and 6) material and financial contributions.

For the purpose of this article, father involvement is a construct referencing father or father-figure participation in the child's life, including the child's academic setting, and the child's biophysical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. This encompassing definition of father involvement was conceptualized to support the development of the Intentional Fatherhood Inventory (Reyes, 2006), an assessment system designed to measure how much intentionality to work with fathers is built into an agency or program's systems and work processes. The assessment system was designed to stimulate reflection and action around fatherhood initiatives in Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

According to a 2008 report to Congress (USDHHS), an estimated 905,000 children were found to be victims of maltreatment. A shocking number (586,861) were abused and neglected by parents acting alone, together, and with others. As Table 1 shows, fathers are associated with 36% of all maltreatment perpetrated by parents.

**Table 1. Victims by Parents as Perpetrators, 2006**

Perpetrator	Number of Victims	Percentage
Mother only	284,326	39.9
Father only	125,353	17.6
Mother and father	126,992	17.8
Mother and other	43,175	6.1
Father and other	7,015	1.0
Totals	586,861	82.4

*Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). Child maltreatment 2006. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.*

The share of abuse and neglect attributed to fathers suggests that the role fathers play in their children’s welfare may merit a closer look at the effects they may have on their children’s lives, including their brain development. In a comprehensive review of fatherhood for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Sylvester and Reich (2002) came to two fundamental conclusions:

1. Father absence matters, as indicated by the fact that children raised without fathers at home are more likely to perform poorly in school; develop emotional problems; engage in risky behaviors, such as early sexual activity and drug and alcohol abuse; experience violence as children; and, if they are boys, increase their likelihood of becoming violent men.
2. Father presence matters, as indicated by the fact that children raised with fathers at home are more likely to have higher perceptual abilities, relationship-forming abilities and self-esteem, and are better learners and less likely to be depressed. In addition, children of involved fathers do significantly better in school and are more likely to become responsible fathers themselves.

Reyes and Galligan (2006), conducted a national survey throughout regional offices (N = 10) managing Head Start and Early Head Start programs to collect information on the state of father involvement initiatives in the Head Start community. The survey consisted of six questions, including one about activities conducted in support of fatherhood. Based on the father participation level that the activities suggested, the researchers developed three stages of father

involvement development:

**Third Stage: Intentional Fatherhood**

Intentionally building fatherhood into all program systems



**Second Stage: Father-Supportive**

Fatherhood training, partnerships for fathers, father/male mentoring, etc.



**First Stage: Father-Friendly**

Volunteering, sporting events, field trips, photos depicting male figures, etc.

The scientific literature reviewed herein indicates that fathers have an important role to play in their children’s welfare. According to Hawley (2000), interactions are the protein, fat, and vitamins of the developing brain. Brain-based father-child interactions stimulate neural interconnections that can play a central role in how the child learns, interprets information, responds to his environment, and thrives in the child welfare system.

Intentional father-child interactions are play-based activities that stimulate physical coordination, emotional maturity, skills development, and self-confidence. They include brain-based parental practices and child-led activities, which help children learn by increasing the number of interneuron connections in their brains.

The underlying hypothesis is that healthy brain structures and interneuron connections produce resilient and ready-to-learn children. As this paper shows, brain-based parental practices promote healthy cortical, lobular, and limbic growth and functioning.



Some effective brain-based parental practices are spending quality time with the child, making physical and emotional contact with him, and storytelling (see Figure 1 for more brain-based practices). Rather than spending time with the child in chronological terms, as in traditional visiting, the intentional father-child interaction approach is focused on the quality of the time spent with the child (e.g., how much brain stimulation takes place, how much love is shared, etc.).

On the other hand, making physical and emotional contact with the child refers to opportunities for active listening, expressing love through touch, offering positive reinforcement, and understanding the child's concerns. Fathers can intentionally seek these opportunities to stimulate socioemotional development.

Because of its versatility, a core parental practice in the intentional approach is

**Figure 1. A List of Brain-Based Father Practices**

- Holding and rocking a baby to make him feel secure
- Taking children on outdoor walks to explore and discover
- Encouraging and supporting children socially and emotionally
- Reading to or with children
- Showing respect to the child's mother
- Eating meals with children as frequently as possible
- Introducing children to other cultures



storytelling. Storytelling about people, colors, food, animals, and feelings stimulates the child's imagination; vocabulary; understanding and use of numbers and geometrical forms; decision making; problem solving; understanding and dealing with anger, pain, or loss; art appreciation; goal setting; acquisition of a second language; and informed risk taking, and helps transfer traditions and values. Storytelling is particularly effective for fathers with low literacy levels and fathers of children with special needs.

## Conclusions

The scientific advances on brain development, and the effects of fathers on children's brain development, can support the child welfare system in accomplishing its goals and mandated responsibilities. McCarthy et al. (2003) list a series of work functions for which the public child welfare system is responsible, including helping families solve the problems that cause abuse or neglect.

To accomplish the goals and objectives derived from those work functions or responsibilities, the federal government, states, and communities have adopted a series of shared values and principles. These values and principles are family- and parent-centered (i.e., parents determine the help they need, services are "family-driven," families are involved in planning the services they will receive, and services focus on each family's strengths), in an attempt to involve families in more meaningful ways.

According to McCarthy et al. (2003), the child welfare system finds that "children can be better protected if the full community and the family help provide for the safety of children" (p. 94). Hence, many agencies have adopted family-centered approaches such as family mediation, family group decision making, and family-to-family initiatives, among others. While these practices build on the family's strengths rather

than focus on their weaknesses, child welfare systems could benefit from a brain-based approach to help parents and fathers identify and eliminate causes underlying abuse or neglect in their family settings.

The statistics reported on child maltreatment are unequivocal on the fact that parents and fathers are accountable for a vast portion of child abuse and neglect (USDHHS, 2008). If father involvement has substantial effects in cognitive, motor, and socioemotional skill formation, then brain-based parent or father involvement to support child welfare may make sense. An effective parent or father involvement approach will have the following ingredients:

- Buy-in and support from system leadership and top management
- A program philosophy that embraces fathers as parents
- Committed and gifted staff to work with fathers
- Identification of fathers' needs and interests
- Programming and community partnerships that address fathers' needs
- Cultural and language sensibility
- Sustaining the father initiative

Rather than being family-centered, a brain-based father involvement approach is child-centered, and its final goal is to help each child have at least one stable, supportive relationship with an adult early in life. The assumption is that disruption of brain growth and impairment of brain circuitry can be prevented, curtailing dysfunctional parental practices resulting in maltreatment, and translating into future human sorrow and societal challenges.

The responsibility of the child welfare system is to help every child have a safe and secure home life. Child welfare agencies and all their partners can benefit by integrating an intentional brain-based approach to preventing and managing the abuse and neglect attributable to fathers. As Figure 2 shows, designing and implementing a brain-based father initiative can be thought of as a four-stage process centered on father-child and family system interactions.

Each stage includes carefully planned steps and activities to intentionally build fatherhood into all child protective services. Carefully planned steps are not fixed or lineal actions, but as synchronized as possible to the unique and specific needs assessed and as individualized as possible to the child, father, and family system. The following are some steps for child welfare agencies to consider:

### **Stage 1: Getting educated**

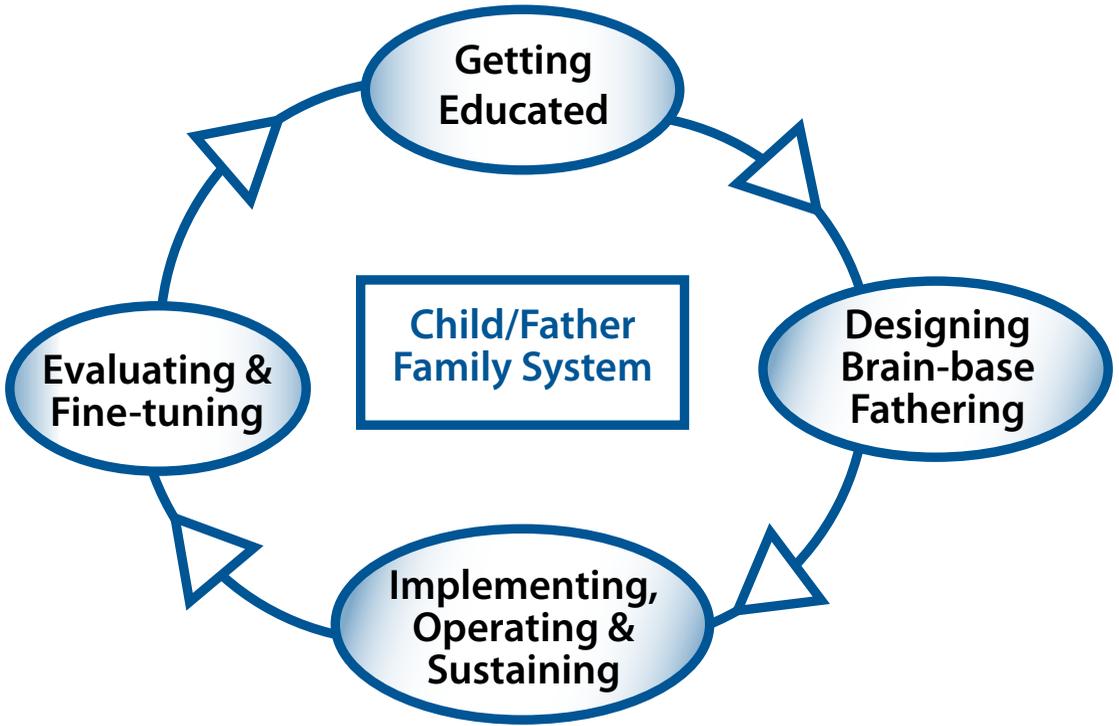
- Conduct cross-agency or cross-program training on the roles and contributions of fathers and fatherhood issues.
- Develop an understanding and appreciation for the role of fathers in children's lives.
- Build total staff commitment.
- Create a long-term strategic training plan.
- Provide ongoing coaching and support.

### **Stage 2: Designing brain-based fathering**

- Diagnose underlying factors associated with maltreatment attributed to fathers.
- Assess needs of:
  - Reported abusing fathers.
  - Fathers at risk of becoming abusive.
  - Men in process of becoming fathers.



Figure 2. Intentional Fatherhood: A Four-Stage Process



- Plan and design brain-based intervention to reeducate fathers, centered on previously identified needs.
  - Apply varied strategies to reeducate fathers, including:
    - One-on-one counseling.
    - Peer group activities.
    - Mentoring.
    - Behavior modification.
  - Take steps to gain mothers' support with the focus on the child's welfare.
  - Work closely with:
    - Community agencies.
    - Faith-based organizations.
    - Colleges and universities.
    - Local businesses and employment services.
    - Men's health and special needs: substance abuse, legal assistance, mental health, etc.
  - Residential and nonresidential fathers.
  - Incarcerated fathers.
  - Significant father-/male figures.
  - Create a father-ready environment, physically and psychologically inviting to men.
  - Create a public image of the program as welcoming and helpful.
- Stage 3: Implementing, operating, and sustaining**
- Set realistic, achievable, and measurable outcomes.
  - Develop policies and procedures to support the program.
  - Budget with brain-based fathering in mind.
  - Form new community partnerships and create written agreements, when needed.



### Stage 4: Evaluating and fine-tuning

- Assess both outcomes and process.
- Fine-tune to maximize return on investment.

The research examined herein suggests that all interactions and activities parents do with their children influence their children's brains whether intended or not. Consequently, the goal is to build intentionality into all interactions, and build it in a particular direction to provide children the brain architecture and neuronal circuitry they need to live healthy and productive lives.

As the research discussed herein shows, physical and psychological abuse is associated with an array of dysfunctionalities (e.g., depression, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, low levels of intellectual development, attachment disorders, etc.). If father involvement has substantial effects in cognitive, motor, and socioemotional skill formation, as discussed in this paper, it would make sense to invest in scientific-based father involvement strategies to tackle that 36% of maltreatment attributable to fathers.

Fathering is a complex business that requires learning on the part of fathers and of the family system. Men are not born knowing how to be a father, and male abusers have learned it the wrong way. Child welfare workers can use brain-based interventions to reeducate parents in general and fathers in particular, as an additional tool to attack child abuse and neglect. Investing in healthy brains and brain-based intentional fathering for all children may very well turn into an investment in the nation's prosperity and future.

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## ***Black Fathers: Are They a Missing Link in the Education of School-Age Children?***

### **Gertrude C. Jackson and Delia Robinson Richards**

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During middle childhood, children experience important changes in how they think, feel, and behave (Berk, 2007; Rice, 2001). They learn and develop skills to help them become socially

competent outside of their homes (Berk; Rice). In addition, they develop skills in reading, writing, and mathematical computations (Berk). For children to successfully accomplish these tasks, the active and consistent participation of fathers in their social and academic development is essential (Brown, Michelsen, Halle, & Moore, 2001). Thus, when fathers are involved in their children's learning, children are successful: they learn more, perform better, and exhibit healthier behavior (National Center for Fathering, 2008).

When teachers and schools collaborate with parents, particularly fathers, children's educational success is maximized. For Black families, positive school and home relationships are associated with their children's completion of high school, higher academic achievement, social abilities, and emotional control (Barnard, 2004).

This article explores how Black, employed fathers who earn an annual income from \$30,000 to \$89,000 participate in and contribute to the academic life and success of their school-age children, and their relationships with their children's teachers and schools.

### **The Roles of Black Fathers in the Academic Success of Children**

Prior literature on Black families and urban schools proposed that Black parents are "their children's first and most important teachers" (Reglin, 1995, p. 114). However, research on Black fathers' participation in their children's learning is limited. Most research on parent involvement in children's learning has focused on



mothers (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Davis and Perkins (1999) concluded that the paucity of research on fathers from different backgrounds limits our understanding of fathers' relationships to their children.

Black parents provide the social, cultural, and emotional supports children need to be successful in school (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Sampson (2002) suggested there is a need to study school-related behavior at home and with families. He concluded that to understand the achievement patterns of economically disadvantaged students, it is important to look at their families' educational support because parental academic involvement at home has been shown to be pivotal in the academic success of Black children.

Research shows that fathers are interested and involved in their children's learning. For example, prior studies suggested that Black fathers across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds support their children's learning by monitoring school activities, making clear expectations about the children's success, reading to children, assisting with homework, and attending school meetings and functions (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992; Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 1998; Hamer, 2001). Other studies suggested that Black fathers have positive attitudes and high expectations for their children (Hamer) and they want their children to receive a higher education and to learn how to cope in a variety of situations (Bright & Williams, 1996; Hamer; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 2006). Recent studies have shown an association of father involvement with positive school outcomes (Bryant, 2003), positive child development (Coleman & Garfield, 2004), children's educational persistence and attainment (Richardson, 1999), fewer discipline problems, and children becoming more responsible adults (National Center for Fathering, 2000).

## Black Parents and Schools

Case studies and reports on effective urban schools suggest that Black parents are critical partners in the education of their children (Koonce & Harper, 2005). Schools that educate Black children need parents' mutual assistance in educating the children and increasing their academic achievement (Reglin, 1995). This is achieved by establishing relationships between teachers and parents and by encouraging parents' participation in activities, such as communicating with teachers and school personnel and volunteering at school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). A parent-teacher relationship is associated with increased parental involvement, which influences the child's academic success. This relationship is influenced by how teachers establish the partnership and how parents perceive the relationship (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

The literature (Casper, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Knopf & Swick, 2007) suggests that relationships between parents and schools reinforce what children learn, and support higher academic achievement and increased parental involvement. Other research (Hill & Taylor, 2004) suggests that socioeconomic status, work schedule, transportation, culture, and ethnicity are associated with teachers' perceptions of parents, teacher-parent relationships, and parents' involvement in schooling.

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**Research shows that fathers are interested and involved in their children's learning.**

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## Background of Study

Between spring 2006 and spring 2007, 15 Black fathers and 11 teachers were recruited to participate in a cross-sectional, purposive study. The key objectives were to:

- identify fathers' attitudes and behaviors toward their children's learning;
- identify fathers' perceptions of how teachers and school personnel engage them in the academic life of their children; and
- identify how teachers perceive Black fathers' roles in the schooling of their children.

Participants were recruited from churches and public and charter schools in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

Fifteen Black employed fathers, ranging from 29 to 59 years old, participated in the study. Thirteen of the fathers were married to their children's mothers, one was separated, and one was divorced. Fourteen were biological fathers and one was nonbiological (stepfather). The fathers' incomes ranged from \$30,000 to \$89,000 a year. Of the 15 fathers, 12 provided educational information: Two completed college, eight completed less than 3 years of college, and two completed high school. The fathers' children ranged in age from 8 to 15 years old.

Eleven teachers participated in the study. Six were male and five were female. Their incomes ranged from \$30,000 to \$49,000 a year. The teachers taught 3rd to 11th grade and had been at their present school between 1 and 9 years. Six of the teachers were Black and five were White. Six were certified. In addition, six teachers had college degrees and four had master's degrees. The teachers spent 20 minutes to 2 hours per day disciplining children in the classroom.

Four focus groups, two for teachers and two for fathers, were conducted. The researchers developed semistandardized, open-ended questions. For example, fathers were asked, "What do you do to contribute to your child doing well in school?" and "How important is your involvement in the academic success of your child?" Teachers were asked, "What kinds of interactions do you have with the students' fathers?" and "How important are these interactions for helping students to be successful in school?"

Small sample size, nonprobability sample, a researcher-designed questionnaire, and self-reporting restricted the generalization of data for this study. Data are specific to the population in the study's sample. Thus caution should be taken when using the information. However, the findings are helpful in identifying areas in family relations, parent-child relations, and teacher-parent relationships to advance the research on Black fathers and their children.

### *Black Fathers' Involvement*

In this study, the fathers agreed that it is important for Black fathers to be involved in all aspects of their children's lives, to help prepare them for life and help them succeed. Most agreed that love and respect for their children were most important. They value their children and believe they need to be available to provide instruction and guidance, serve as role models, protect against external societal influences, and show love and respect. Some of the fathers gave examples:

Father 2: I've always been involved with my children from birth. Never left them to themselves. It is very important to me about what they do in life because I try to encourage them in every way, to understand life as it is. I love my children. You know, I live for them.



Father 8: I believe fathers' roles are very important because of the changes in time. I must be there on all levels for my children, not just educational level. I must be there.

Father 12: I share every aspect of my everyday life with my children. I always emphasize that education is important. I must show my children love and teach by example, pointing out their surroundings and different people in their walk of life. Love is the key. If you do not show your children the love and caring they should receive at home, then they may go and look for it in the wrong places, with the wrong friends. Therefore, I feel that children should receive all of their nurturing and discipline at home, with parents they can look up to and respect.

Also, the fathers believed there are many ways to contribute to children performing well in school. They were interested in the development of the whole child and the external factors affecting the child. Fathers stated that their multiple responsibilities include:

- Listening to the child
  - Being a role model
  - Providing love and patience
  - Showing interest in the child's learning
  - Teaching the child good work habits
  - Monitoring the child's homework
  - Showing the child how to study
  - Asking the child questions
  - Being available
  - Teaching the child to respect others
  - Providing a home environment conducive to learning
- Providing rules and set standards for behavior
  - Providing rewards and punishments
  - Volunteering at school
  - Teaching the disciplines of life
  - Praying
  - Being a provider

For most of the fathers, listening is essential for learning. For example, Father 3 described listening as being able to hear and understand the child. Listening helps build trust between father and child. He stated, "It is being able to tell you what I [the child] did today, being able to tell you what my teacher said, what my teacher showed me; what information I'm understanding." Other fathers agreed:

Father 2: I agree with him 100 percent. I'm a very good listener to my children. Listening is very important...they learn to trust you that way. They will tell you things, how they feel, when they are feeling pain, when they're sad and when they're happy. They go straight to father because he has a different way of loving them, like he said, they come home and tell you everything about what they did in school, how it was. Was it good? Was it bad?

Father 1: I agree with that. Listening is the key to everything. When he [my son] gets home, he calls me right away and I ask him how was school? What happened today? He explains everything that he did, how much homework he needs to do. I ask him, "Did you listen to your teacher? Did you have problems with your teacher today?" I always let him know what he needs to do; so once you put him on track, just help them to stay focused.



For other fathers, helping children succeed in school required meeting both instrumental and expressive needs. Father 4 stated:

As a father, first of all, I think in order for anyone to do well at school, they must have the material support needed at home. Material support in terms of food, shelter, whatever it is. And I make sure my children are fully covered in those regards. Also separated from the material support, you need to have love for the family, and have that love knowing that whatever they do, you support them. So I contribute all around, academically, materially, and spiritually. That is what a father can do.

In regards to homework, one father expressed that teachers could not do everything and that fathers should assist, even though they may not always understand; however, fathers should take time to understand and help the child identify the means for understanding the assignment. Father 7 stated:

You can't expect the teacher to do everything. When children come home, they are puzzled by some of their homework. Even though I may not know, I am still going to sit down with the children and learn while helping them.

Father 4: I see myself as a student a lot of times in that I am doing homework with them. If they don't understand, then I try to put my own [spin] on things to try to see if they can understand it from a different way. Sometimes it conflicts with what the teacher does, but if you [the child] are not learning how the teacher does it, it simply means there ought to be another way to learn it. The important thing is to understand.

Father 15: I know my presence is important for my child to achieve. I sometimes have to challenge myself with helping him to

do his homework because some of the 6th grade homework is hard. School is really challenging, now with state tests and all; but we have to do our part in helping out kids. I am not an educator. I'm just a father and there are areas where I am weak, but I find someone to help out if necessary. The difference is being patient.

Most fathers acknowledged their spouses as primarily responsible for their children's learning and making a difference in their academic performances:

Father 2: All the credit goes to my wife. The only thing I do is to keep the disciplinary action going right. Although she works very hard, she spends a lot of time with them in their books.

Father 1: My wife is very serious when it comes to the children. She makes certain that all of their homework and any school assignments have been completed; and if not, she will make the kids redo it. If she receives a call concerning them, she immediately informs me so that I can deal with it immediately. We have a very good relationship with each other and also the teachers.

### ***Black Fathers' Relationships With Teachers***

The fathers described a positive relationship with their children's teachers. They agreed that fathers need to establish and maintain contact with teachers and keep communication open. For example, one father made certain that the teacher had his cell phone number, email address, and home number to contact him "if anything was going on with his child" before the child arrived home. Father 1 stated, "Most of the time the kids will let me know what went on at school and if they had problems. I would inform them that the teacher had contacted me about it."

Fathers wanted teachers to know that they are available for their children. They wanted to know firsthand what their children are doing. They desired to hear the good progress reports.

The fathers expressed that sometimes they are overwhelmed with work and most of the time teachers will just contact the mother, even when fathers are interested and concerned. Fathers who had contact with their children's teachers expressed having good relationships with them:

Father 9: I feel I have built a good relationship with my kids' teachers. It gives me and the teacher a positive effect. We both are contributing factors for the children. I feel that teachers will go the extra mile for my children because the mother and I take an interest in their lives and education.

Father 4: I have a good rapport with teachers. Anytime a teacher contacts me for a problem or concern, I discipline my children immediately. I gave the teacher permission to discipline my children and I feel the teacher is always correct. Even though I will meet with the teacher, as far as I am concerned, the teacher is correct. I am from the old school. Any adult can discipline my children. When the teacher knows that you have their back, they are more willing to work with you.

One of the fathers expressed shame for not having contact with a teacher:

Father 3: I have never really been involved in a parent-teacher relationship. Maybe a few times I sat in a classroom, but as far as a parent-teacher relationship, there has never

been one. My wife is the one who gets the emails and telephone calls. She tells me about it. If there is something going on, particularly with a male teacher, then I handle it.

Otherwise, I am not involved. I do attend parent and teacher's meetings, but there has never been a real connection.

Most of the fathers agreed that their relationships with the teachers were important for helping their children succeed

in school. It was important that fathers take the time to know their children's teachers and for the teachers to know that they are available for their children. They wanted to be informed about everything that concerned their children. They supported the teacher, but only one father gave full authority for the teacher to discipline his child.

### ***Teachers' Relationships With Black Fathers***

Within the focus groups, teachers believed that Black fathers were interested in their children's learning. However, the teachers admitted that if they have to call the home because of a concern regarding a child, they do not usually speak to fathers, but to whoever answers the telephone at the child's home. Many times the person on the phone is the mother or an extended family member, but rarely the father. The teachers have not made a habit of speaking to the fathers, although when there is a problem they will attempt to contact a father if he is available. The only other time that teachers engaged fathers is when the father had developed a relationship with school personnel, including the school secretary, the principal, or the teacher.

The fathers agreed that it is important for Black fathers to be involved in all aspects of their children's lives, to help prepare them for life and help them succeed.



### ***Black Fathers' Perspective: Barriers Hindering School Involvement***

The fathers divided barriers into two types: barriers to helping their children at home and barriers to participating in activities at school. At home, few barriers were identified as a hindrance to their children's learning. One father denied having any barriers and stated, "Nothing stops me." For another father, barriers included "the ones that you put up for yourself," such as being tired, being lazy, and not feeling like doing something. For most of them, time at work was the major barrier. All of the fathers worked; most of the fathers worked 40 hours per week and several had more than one job. Time at work conflicted with their availability to participate in school activities. One father stated, "It is rare to see a male at an activity. They are at work."

Barriers with the teacher and school were more pronounced. A major concern of the fathers was how teachers and the school view them. For example, a teacher might give a father a shocked expression and ask, "Do you live in the home with the children?" They believed teachers and schools are not used to seeing Black fathers around the school and active in their children's education. In addition, when the fathers met with teachers, the teachers talked more about behavioral problems instead of academics. One father stated, "They don't act very well when they see a male."

### ***Teachers' Perspective: Barriers Hindering Black Fathers' Involvement***

Teachers believed that time, work, and exhaustion affect their ability to assist fathers in being involved in their child's school. Teachers have many demands in work preparation, meeting state standards, and the No Child Left Behind legislation. Many times the father is not in the household because of custody issues, divorce, or separation or he is starting a new family. Some fathers suffer from different emotional

issues because they have experienced these kinds of circumstances. Lastly, the school policy allows teachers to communicate only with the identified person on the school record because of confidentiality regulations.

### ***Sponsored School Activities to Encourage Black Fathers' Participation***

Teachers discussed activities for fathers to participate in. They commented, "There isn't anything outside of the standardized PTO and open school events." After this comment, there was no discussion regarding developing or implementing additional activities for fathers' involvement in the school.

Fathers observed that school-related activities were generalized for all parents. Some fathers were more comfortable with participating in father and son-centered activities than in daughter-centered activities. Fathers suggested giving rewards because they needed a pat on the back. On the other hand, some did not think fathers should be targeted because too many children do not have fathers. One father stated, "Some kids don't have fathers in the house, so we are not going to do anything to insult or upset the family." Overall, the majority of fathers were active in one school-sponsored event.

### ***Recommendations for Improving Father and Teacher/School Relationships***

Fathers provided recommendations for what Black men can do to improve the father-child relationship, father-teacher relationship, and father-school relationship.



## ***Black Fathers' Relationships With Children***

To improve their relationships with their children, the fathers recommended:

**Communication.** Communication involves fathers asking questions about their children's day at school. Fathers should inquire about school work, friends, teachers, the child's feelings, and what he or she likes and dislikes. Fathers should also allow children to query them about anything they want to know.

Fathers can use games, computers, television, and whatever interests the child to engage discussion, and to develop the child's decision-making and problem-solving skills.

**Playing and participating in family activities.** Father should play involved sports, and a variety of games that are not gender-specific. Fathers should encourage their daughters to play team sports to learn discipline, leadership skills, teamwork, and confidence. Family activities also include household chores. Fathers can use chores to delegate tasks, share responsibilities, and help children learn interdependence. This allows children to observe fathers helping with household and child care responsibilities.

**Helping with homework.** This task involves reviewing completed homework assignments for accuracy, and being able to answer any questions to provide clarity when children do not understand. It involves establishing

rules and providing a home environment conducive to learning. For example, one rule might be having children complete homework prior to watching television and playing. Fathers should show children how to study, and set expectations for learning without being overbearing and demanding

all A's. Helping with homework includes using positive reinforcements such as hugs, kisses, and praises such as "Daddy is proud of you." Fathers should tell their children it is OK to make mistakes because learning involves making mistakes.

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Several teachers expressed that students whose father and mother are involved in the school do a lot better academically than students with only one parent, grandparent, or extended family member involved.

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## ***Black Fathers' Relationships With Teachers***

To improve their relationships with their children's teachers, the fathers recommended:

**Showing up.** Fathers should go to their children's schools, have face-to-face contact, and provide teachers and schools with their home, work, and cell phone numbers, and work and home email addresses. The goal for fathers is to be visible and accessible to the school.

**Establishing rapport with teachers.** Partnering between fathers and teachers helps open communication (Knopf & Swick, 2007). One father shared that partnering with a teacher helped him work with teachers to monitor his son's behavior, advocate for his son, and identify appropriate social services for his son. One father stated, "When fathers have a relationship with teachers, it helps the children to have a relationship with teachers."



**Communicating with teachers and school personnel (principal and support staff).**

Fathers are encouraged to have conversations with teachers about teaching styles, children’s learning styles, and parents’ and teachers’ expectations for children. “Teachers can use fathers’ perceptions as knowledge for constructing ways for parents to be involved and to value their participation” (Knopf & Swick, 2007, p. 291).

***Black Fathers’ Relationships With Schools***

To improve their relationships with their children’s schools, the fathers recommended:

**Attending all events involving the child.**

Fathers are advised to attend parent-teacher

association meetings, parent and teacher conferences, and all events (e.g., ceremonies for honor roll or perfect attendance, father and child luncheons) that can support their children. The National Center for Fathering (2000) recommends that educators and childcare workers consider strategies for inviting, engaging, and supporting Black fathers’ involvement. One suggestion is recruiting older fathers to serve as mentors to younger fathers.

***Teachers’ Perspective***

The teachers felt fathers’ involvement in school was critical. Several teachers expressed that students whose father and mother are involved in the school do a lot better academically than

**Suggestions for Promoting Black Fathers’ Involvement and Improving Relationships With Schools**

- Child welfare agencies and schools should implement staff training programs that raise awareness about Black fathers’ involvement. Awareness programs help address biases and stereotypes embedded in practice, programs, and policies that involve Black men, children, and families. These programs should address fathers’ strengths and needs.
- Child welfare workers should include fathers in the decision-making process. Black fathers have significant beliefs and expectations for their children. They want to be active and recognized.
- Child welfare and school programs should reevaluate and adjust school policies that hinder nonresidential fathers’ participation in the educational process. One barrier that fathers disclosed was sometimes the mother and father are not together and the mother does not want the father involved with their child. This may be an obstacle that child welfare workers may want to help mothers put into perspective.
- Child welfare workers should provide culturally focused training or workshops for Black families to show mothers how their children will benefit from both parents being involved with the child’s teacher and school.
- Child welfare workers should become proactive and creative by helping schools and teachers recruit fathers to participate in the school and support fathers who are active.
- Child welfare workers should help mobilize communities to become more active in engaging and supporting Black men’s parental roles.



students with only one parent, grandparent, or extended family member involved. In addition, teachers expressed that from their experiences, students do very well when their fathers are involved and interested in their academics. Research indicates the important role fathers play in their children's academic success and how early involvement has long-lasting effects (Gadsden & Ray, 2002).

In terms of discipline, teachers felt that fathers tend to be extremely strong in supporting academic performance when it comes to the child's behavior interfering with academics. Teachers said fathers usually respond about the child's behavior by saying "Oh really, we'll get this corrected," "Sorry this happened," or "When they come home we'll get it straightened out."

The teachers expressed that there were limited programs for fathers to be involved with at their school outside of the standard parent-teacher association meetings and open school events. However, the teachers recommended that there be sponsored father and son dinners, sponsored Father's Day events, bring-your-father-to-school day and father awards presentations. Schools and children benefit from more father involvement. Teachers' reports of children having few problems at school, such as poor attendance or failing a grade, are associated with children's reports of positive paternal behavior (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000).

## Conclusion

In this study, fathers had different perceptions of and roles in being involved with their children's education and academic success. Regardless of their differences, all concurred that Black fathers and teachers must improve their relationships to ensure children's academic success. Teachers in this study acknowledged their schools do not actively engage fathers' involvement. The National Center for Fathering (2000) suggests that it "may be natural for some educators and childcare workers to assume that fathers do not want to be

involved, and mothers of children may think that schools do not want fathers to be involved" (p. 16). Therefore, educators, fathers, and child-care workers should consider coordinating their efforts to generate strategies to engage and support Black fathers in the educational process.

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## *Fathers as Resources in Families Involved in the Child Welfare System*

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The ongoing presence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in our society poses major challenges for the lawmakers and policymakers charged with keeping children safe and the mental health professionals charged with treating them when they are not. As public awareness of the problem has grown, reports of child maltreatment have increased exponentially: From 1976 to 1993 the number of reported child maltreatment instances increased 347% (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 1996), stressing the child welfare system's capacity to respond in a timely and effective



manner. To respond to this surge in abuse, program developers and policymakers began speaking about the need to generate community and neighborhood supports to strengthen parenting, family relationships, and communities (Scherer, 1998). A general consensus formed that the “it takes a village” approach is necessary for success.

This paper describes an opportunity to identify and use fathers as family and community resources. Until recently, fathers were rarely recognized as positive resources for reducing risks and strengthening protective factors for children at risk of abuse and neglect, and consequently they were rarely included in social welfare programs aimed at protecting children. Even as positive father involvement became accepted as a proven resource in the life of families over the past 2 decades (Pruett, 2000; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001), there was little to no indication about the effectiveness of fatherhood programs for high-risk families (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007) and little acceptance of such programs for families involved in child protective services. A program emphasis evolved that focused on family-centered, community-based, culturally competent, and outcome-oriented care (McCrosky & Meezan, 1998; Wynn, Costello, Halpern, & Richman, 1994), but it was not clear what role fathers played in the equation. Instances of child abuse and domestic violence in many families (Campbell, 1994) led to a wariness and distrust of paternal engagement and a continued focus on only mothers and their children.

The California Department of Social Services, Office of Child Abuse Prevention, initiated and funded The Supporting Father Involvement study in collaboration with a team of four academic specialists in prevention programs and evaluation research and five California family resource centers. The study was designed to evaluate the effects of a theoretically driven, group-based model program on parents and their young

children in low-income, at-risk families who were not involved in the child welfare system. Supporting Father Involvement is the first father-involvement preventive program designed specifically for such families and evaluated with a randomized clinical trial design.

This paper reports on a study in progress. Based on a successful randomized clinical trial of two father-involvement interventions (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009) with the first 540 primarily low-income families, the Office of Child Abuse Prevention requested that the Supporting Father Involvement study be modified and extended to conduct a new test of its effectiveness for families that have been involved with the child welfare system because of reported child abuse or neglect. What follows is a brief outline of the intervention approach and the early results, followed by issues involved in adapting the intervention for higher-risk families.

### **Completed Phases of the Supporting Father Involvement Study**

The intervention model targeted five domains of family life identified as risk or protective factors for adults’ and children’s well-being (Cowan & Cowan, 2000):

1. Family members’ mental health and well-being
2. Quality of the relationship between the parents as partners and coparents (among cohabiting, married, separated, or divorced parents)
3. Quality of the parent-child relationship
4. Three-generational transmission of expectations and behavior patterns (grandparents to parents to children)
5. Balance of life stresses and social supports in the family’s relationships with peers, schools, work, and other social systems

The program was predicated on the belief that reducing symptoms of parents' distress would affect the quality of their relationships as a couple, with the child, and with their kin. Along with helping parents use support resources more effectively, it was hypothesized that the program would reduce the probability of family violence, child abuse, and neglect.

Supporting Father Involvement (described in detail elsewhere — see Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009;

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Pruett, 2009) entails two types of interventions to which participants were randomly assigned: a fathers-only group and a couples group, each lasting 32 hours over 16 weeks and co-led by a clinically trained male-female team. Organizational change efforts aimed at increasing father friendliness at the family resource centers were also implemented. Families who participated in the groups for fathers or couples were compared with parents in a control group, who attended a 3-hour information session about the importance of fathers to children's development and well-being. All intervention and control group families received ongoing case management for referrals to other services as needed.

Phase I included only biological fathers and mothers committed to coparenting at least one child from birth to age 7 ( $N = 276$  families); two thirds of the participants were Mexican American, 75% were married, and 66% were low-income, defined as below twice the federal poverty level (Pruett, et al., 2009). Phase II, with new participants, expanded program criteria to include African American families, a youngest child up to 11 years, and any self- and mother-

identified father figure (e.g., uncle, long-term boyfriend, etc.). This phase included 312 families with comparable demographics and descriptive

characteristics at baseline to families in Phase I.

In both phases, families with an open case in the child welfare system were excluded from the study and referred to other services.

In all three conditions (information-only control group, fathers groups, couples groups), parents were assessed using a large variety of self-report instruments targeting the

five domains of family life described previously, administered orally prior to the intervention (baseline), and 2 months (post-test) and 11 months (follow-up) after the intervention ended.

Results demonstrate the program's effectiveness in reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Compared to participants in the control group, parents in the couples groups showed increased father involvement, couple satisfaction maintained over time, and decreased personal and parenting distress. Moreover, children whose parents participated in the fathers and couples groups had no increases in problem behavior (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity, or depression), while control group children did. Parents in the fathers groups made fewer gains but showed more significant positive effects on father involvement than did control group families. The intervention effects held across ethnic group membership, income level, and marital status. Agencies housing the Supporting Father Involvement study showed improvement in father-inclusive policies, procedures, and services (for details on the sample, intervention, and findings, see Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett,

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**Compared to participants in the control group, parents in the couples groups showed increased father involvement, couple satisfaction maintained over time, and decreased personal and parenting distress.**

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& Wong, 2009). Results of Phase II were consistent with those in Phase I, with some intervention effects emerging even more strongly.

### **A Planning Phase**

Based on these positive results obtained with more than 500 families, Phase IV will examine the impact of Supporting Father Involvement on families who are at even higher risk for child abuse or neglect, including those with open cases in the child welfare system. The study is currently being adapted for families who voluntarily choose to participate in it concurrently or after involvement in the child welfare system.

### **Phase IV: Adaptation of the Study to Families in the Child Welfare System**

The clinical research team and the staff of five family resource centers are working closely with child protective services agencies, developing appropriate screening procedures for inclusion, adapting curricula and assessment materials, designing additional staff training, and putting procedures in place to ensure the safety of all participants. Various groups are now being conducted with mixed referrals of families from both the child welfare system and the broader community.

### **Staffing**

Staff at each site will continue to consist of a project director, two clinically trained group leaders (each at approximately 20 hours per week), two case managers, and one data coordinator. The clinician/researchers will continue to be actively involved, leading group phone consultations for each staff group, analyzing the data, and conducting semiannual all-site training meetings. Phase IV will also include ongoing consultation by an expert in domestic violence and child abuse issues, in order to guide the development team and to consult with all site staff as the program expands to include families whose risk for

subsequent abuse or neglect is higher than it was for families in the earlier program phases.

### **Recruitment and Collaboration With Child Welfare Services**

Previously, recruitment occurred through community channels, including local agency referrals, newspaper and radio advertisements, staff appearances at community events, and eventually, word of mouth. In the newest phase, community-based recruitment will continue, but many families will be referred by child welfare workers. This new referral source requires a different level of collaboration with county liaisons and caseworkers from the state agency. Phone and face-to-face meetings have provided opportunities to introduce county child welfare agencies to the program and address a number of unresolved questions.

First, criteria were established for exclusion of families. While accepting higher-risk families into the study, provisions had to be established to ensure that ongoing family violence did not contraindicate working with both parents together in a group. In addition, families whose children have been removed and who are not approaching or beginning reunification will be excluded. Second, it was felt that child welfare workers needed a better understanding of the necessity for the program to remain a controlled study while determining if it is effective for child welfare system families. Because some representatives of the child welfare system objected to a no-treatment or very low-dose treatment option in the study (the information-only control group used in the initial phase), a delayed treatment condition was adopted as a comparison group. In this condition, families will be randomly assigned, to the intervention or to services already available in the community, with an offer to participate in a Supporting Father Involvement group 7 months after the initial referral and baseline assessment. This option

will allow service provision to all families, while allowing a comparison of the effectiveness of the Supporting Father Involvement intervention with each county's "treatment-as-usual" options.

Other criteria for inclusion remain the same as those in earlier phases: Both parents must

agree to participate;  
at least one child must be 7 years or younger; the father or father figure can be any male coparenting figure (not necessarily the biological father); and neither parent has mental illness, substance abuse, or violence problems

severe enough to compromise his or her daily functioning as parent or partner, or call into question his or her ability to parent the child adequately and participate in a family program that will be safe for all participants. Typically, when a biological father is involved to any extent in the child's life, he is the one who participates with the mother. When a father figure who has been involved with the biological mother participates instead, they are encouraged to coparent together while accepting the possibility of the biological father's involvement to remain or be resumed in the child's life. Typically, this male figure is a family member or psychological parent to the child by virtue of being involved with the mother for some time, in contrast with the biological father who has been unavailable.

In regard to the inclusion of child welfare services, the eligibility criteria include those families in which 1) calls to child welfare services have been made but not substantiated; 2) calls to child welfare services have been made, investigated, and deemed suitable for community treatment; 3) the family is completing other mandated treatments and accepts an additional,

voluntary referral to Supporting Father Involvement; and 4) reunified families have begun unsupervised visits. Referrals will be handled case by case, first evaluated by the child welfare worker, then assessed by Supporting Father Involvement program staff using the project's

own assessment tool for suitability. Families with open cases will be individually evaluated to ascertain that father involvement is indicated, considering the type of violence and abuse that led to child welfare involvement, with the child's and parents' safety the primary consideration.

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A memorandum of understanding with each county allows some flexibility for decisions across agencies that have diverse populations, operating structures, and policies. The key point is active, ongoing consultation and collaboration on the plan between child welfare workers and staff of Supporting Father Involvement.

One challenge in accepting child welfare service referrals is defining roles for case managers from both the child welfare system and the Supporting Father Involvement study, and setting a communication structure that will guide the types of information to be communicated between the two workers. The primary concern involves coordination between agencies when there is an open case. In this circumstance, the child welfare worker will retain major responsibility for monitoring the family's case plan and follow-up. Supporting Father Involvement will function in ways that are similar to those of community agencies to which child welfare workers currently refer their families: The Supporting Father Involvement case manager will focus on making sure that participants complete



study assessments and attend the ongoing intervention groups.

### Adaptation of Screening Procedures

Supporting Father Involvement has had a screening instrument in place to determine whether a family was suitable for participation. An interview process was developed that screens for levels of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and impairment in parental health and mental health, including suicide risk — all self-reported. For families referred by child welfare workers, several elements have been added to the former screen. First, a comprehensive definition of domestic violence was added:

*A pattern of abuse and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse as well as economic coercion used against an intimate partner. The abuse often involves the use of a combination of tactics aimed at establishing control of one partner over another.*

Similarly, an expanded definition of child abuse that includes physical and psychological or emotional abuse or injury (California Department of Social Services Regulations, 2005) was explicated.

Next, a careful assessment of any incidents is conducted with individual partners, with a detailed protocol for responding to various scenarios that could arise from parents' responses during the screening process.

Additional domestic violence considerations have been included in the assessment process, such as:

- Does the (batterer) accept responsibility for the violence without self-justification, blame, denial, or minimization?
- Does this person show high controlling behavior of spouse or children?

- Is there a level of entitlement to be violent or to be boss?

Additional considerations regarding child abuse and neglect have been included. The parent is asked:

- As far as you know, have there been any instances in which:
  - your child has been disciplined physically?
  - your child has been touched sexually by an adult?
  - your child has been left alone for long periods or not taken care of?
- Do you think that children are supposed to meet parents' needs?
- Do you think that children *belong* to their parents?

### Adaptation of Assessment and Evaluation Procedures

To be more relevant to child welfare families, evaluation in the next phase will continue longitudinal assessments (baseline, 2 months after groups end, and follow-up at 1 year after post-assessments). New instruments have been added to the evaluation materials to determine any self-reported changes in levels of abuse, neglect, or family violence. Another addition is a videotaped assessment of each parent interacting with his or her youngest child at baseline and the follow-up (done in earlier program phases only at follow-up) and videotaped discussions of a current conflict between mother and father pairs. Notably, county welfare data about past or current involvement of participants in the child welfare system will be collected to learn whether the interventions are making a difference to participants' involvement in the system after their involvement in Supporting Father Involvement.

## Curriculum Changes

The Supporting Father Involvement curriculum involves 32 hours of attendance in groups meeting for 11 to 16 weeks. Meetings include an open-ended check-in, plus a discussion focus at each meeting on one of the five aspects of family life outlined above: the well-being of each individual adult, the couple/coparenting relationship, parent-child relationships, intergenerational family patterns, and life stresses and social support outside the nuclear family. Two meetings are devoted to each aspect of family life. A brief didactic piece is combined with a choice of activities, allowing for consistency across groups and room for individualizing to fit the learning objectives to a particular group's needs.

After extensive consultation about the curriculum, along with a literature search on interventions pertaining to child abuse and domestic violence, it became clear that the existing curriculum aptly included major risk and protective factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Information on parenting stress and many other relevant aspects of family relationships that affect or indirectly lead to abuse and neglect had previously been integrated into the curriculum. Specific materials on child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence were then developed and integrated into the curriculum. Relevant content includes signs and symptoms of each type of abuse and violence; statistics of incidence, prevalence, and known correlates of abuse or family violence; effects of abuse or violence on children; and additional sources and resources.

## Advanced Training

Before fully launching this new program phase, 11 staff members participated in didactic and interactive 3-day trainings on child abuse, domestic violence, and patterns of individual and couple behavior to observe and follow in assessments, case management contacts, and ongoing groups. Group leaders will also focus on group management considerations in groups consisting of families who are and are not involved in the child welfare system. The groups will aim for a mix of families from the community and the child welfare system. The goal is to include mostly families involved in the child welfare system, because the purpose of this

phase is to assess the intervention's effectiveness with this population. Group leader feedback from initial groups was that many of the original study families' psychological and social difficulties

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**Many of the original study families' psychological and social difficulties were severe enough that they had difficulty offering support and advice to other families in similar situations.**

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were severe enough that they had difficulty offering support and advice to other families in similar situations. Enrolling some higher functioning families in a group with those experiencing more severe symptoms and problems provided the needier families with insights, ideas, and a vision of how changes could positively affect them and their children. Mixing groups in this way will require keeping a careful eye on group dynamics to ascertain that all couples feel supported, a sense of belonging in the group, and that there is ample opportunity for their own issues to be heard and considered by the leaders and the group. Although regular telephone consultation will continue with all group leaders, achieving this group atmosphere will fall largely to the skill of the leaders, reinforcing the emphasis on using highly skilled, clinically experienced facilitators.



## Additional Safety and Clinical Considerations

A licensed clinician will consult 5 hours per week with the sites, as needed, regarding clinical emergencies (e.g., safety and reporting issues), and participate in staff trainings. While the university-based clinician-researcher teams have considerable expertise, a person dedicated to immediate responsiveness to the sites, and who is experienced in working with families of color and with child welfare populations will provide another means of protection for the families and quality assurance for the program.

Whenever questions arise, internet listservs for research staff and teams from all sites allow collaborative discussions of concerns regarding individual families from their acceptance into the program to the final assessment 18 months later. In addition, a safety net of communication between program staff and child welfare agencies enables swift contact and follow-through as necessary for the safety of any child or family.

## Practice and Policy Implications

A careful consideration of the behaviors and attitudes revealed in the groups during the most recent project phases suggests some policy implications that were not as clear in the initial phases of the study. Many fatherhood involvement programs are reluctant to raise domestic violence and abuse issues in parenting groups for fear it will discourage fathers' participation (Williams, Boggess, & Carter, 2001). Yet such groups led by skilled practitioners (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996) can be instrumental in improving

fathers' (and mothers') interpersonal skills, offering mutual aid, encouraging confrontation of denial and aggressive behavior, setting positive norms for individual and group change, and maximizing social rewards for change (Bennette & Williams, 1999). The experiences of Supporting Father Involvement group leaders thus far have borne this out. Parents raise issues of abuse and violence cautiously but openly, and, when encouraged, are willing to examine their own and their family's behavioral patterns that reinforce the abuse or neglect.

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**Parents raise issues of abuse and violence cautiously but openly, and, when encouraged, are willing to examine their own and their family's behavioral patterns that reinforce the abuse or neglect.**

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As more groups are conducted in the newest phase, we expect to gain additional insights about how parents are struggling to eradicate old patterns that have become ingrained. Because change often does not take place without sufficient time and encouragement, the

curriculum will be held to a 32-hour standard, although child welfare workers initially doubted whether disorganized families could sustain their involvement over that period. So far, they have been able to do so, though often with much difficulty and the help of case managers to maximize their continued involvement. In fact, many families have clamored for more when the intervention is completed, and Supporting Father Involvement has devised ways for them to be involved through the family resource centers and periodic events specific to the program.

Supporting Father Involvement, with its inclusion of training for case managers and clinicians and its work with organizations on their father-friendly policies and practices, attempts to address institutional and intrafamilial barriers to including fathers as positive resources in the lives of their children, especially in high-risk families. As noted elsewhere (Cowan, Cowan,

Pruett, & Pruett, 2009), barriers stem from stereotypes within child protective services that favor mothers as children's primary parents. Government programs often consider fathers as sources of financial rather than emotional support, research and intervention programs continue to include mothers far more often than they do fathers, and most important for this paper, family service agencies primarily address mothers. Initially, the host agencies' physical facilities were mother-oriented in terms of pictures on walls, magazines, hours open, and staff composition. Case files often had only mothers' names, even when they were married to children's fathers. It was as if no one in the agency expected fathers to be around for long. It is not clear, however, which expectation affects which in the circularity that has become "further proof" of fathers' relative disposability in child welfare situations.

### **Overcoming Barriers to Father Involvement in Child Welfare**

Low income fathers from both White and non-White ethnic groups can be recruited to participate in relatively long (32-hour) intervention and they may even plead for additional time as the groups draw to a close. Keys to the success of the project include a proactive staff of both males and females willing to show up at community events, shopping centers, and soccer games at times that fathers are likely to be there; case managers and group leaders who make extra efforts to stay in touch when one or both partners miss groups; and skilled group leaders guided by a curriculum that does not tell men what to do, but raises topics that relate to both men's and women's day-to-day experiences.

Programs can address both parents together as coparents whenever it is possible to do so safely. This means focusing on neither parent to the exclusion of the other. In fact, in light of the power of married and unmarried mothers to influence fathers' access to their children (see Pruett,

Arthur, & Ebling, 2007; Williams et al., 2001), and the powerful influence of fathers on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, parents must be helped to work together for the interests of their children. The ongoing vigor of the relationship between partners as potential coparents must be respected and acknowledged if the relationship is to become more functional as a tool for healthy familial change and development.

Research-based interventions must be developed and supported. Research combined with intervention has a role that is yet unrealized to its fullest potential. Williams et al. (2001) call on researchers to explore the usefulness of groups to better understand the intersection of domestic violence and fatherhood. They point out how little is known about how fathering themes influence effective parenting and the reduction of violence among men who are batterers and abusers. Parenting and violence may be affected simultaneously or sequentially; the causative agents for any change in this regard remain questions for future research. In addition, little is known about how programs like Supporting Father Involvement can augment men's motivation to actively parent their children and become more effective fathers and partners in the process. Similarly, it will be the challenge for father involvement programs to articulate just how they are able to effect positive change in cooperative parenting relationships in families faced with histories of violence, abuse, and multiple stressors. Initial experience with adaptation of the Supporting Father Involvement intervention has shown that parents do change for the better with intervention; similarly, some men who batter also change their ways (Gondolf, 1998). Not yet known is whether men who change from abusers to nurturers increase their children's well-being (Williams et al., 2001), and what scars remain. It also remains as a research agenda to understand which fathers and mothers are able to change into more lovingly involved parents, and in what ways.



Supporting Father Involvement intervenes with families before a child in the family is 7 years old. Early intervention has been touted as a key to stemming abuse and neglect (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Zero to Three Policy Center, 2007). Mother-based program efforts must now include fathers if we are to capitalize on the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 2000) as a sensitive “touchpoint” (Brazelton, 1994) in which fathers and mothers may be more open to intervention than at later periods of life.

Turnover and burnout in social services is high, and child abuse workers face stress and discouragement on a daily basis. Among the lessons learned from this program thus far is that social workers and community-based care providers reported that their own lives improved as a result of participation in this program. Their reports on couple relationships, relationships with fathers and with children, and optimism about the possibility for change are from a staff that has stayed with the program over its 6-year longevity. The key has been in the systems of communication and support through phone conferences, listservs, enforced weekly staff meetings, semiannual cross-site 2-day meetings, and open access to the researchers.

Just as research interventions can help determine how parental collaborations are developed, strengthened, and supported, future work must also elucidate how agency collaborations, such as those between universities and family resource centers in Supporting Father Involvement or between the program and the child welfare workers and supervisors, support healthy parenting, coparenting, and child development, especially in an era of shrinking resources.

## Conclusions

In this father involvement study, hundreds of Mexican American, African American, and European American fathers who say they are eager to become involved with their children also reported that they are uncertain how to do that. Supporting Father Involvement has been learning how best to provide them with the skills and supports that enable them to draw on their motivation to be involved parents and partners.

While child abuse and parenting programs have been implemented widely through large and small initiatives, program effects have been modest and inconsistent, and research has rarely incorporated random assignment or reliable outcome measures (McCrosky & Meezan, 1998). Ten years after McCrosky and Meezan’s review, too few programs target the whole family, are systematically evaluated, or take a primary prevention tack by focusing on the early years of parenting, despite evidence of the rocky start to family life that so many families experience (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Gottman & Gottman, 2007) — even those not facing chronic and severe life stressors. Without the synthesis of these ingredients, society will continue to engage in two simultaneous uphill battles: reducing child abuse and neglect and positively involving at-risk fathers in the lives of their children. It is time to marshal our fullest knowledge base and resources to protect children and strengthen families, despite the many complexities we face in doing so.

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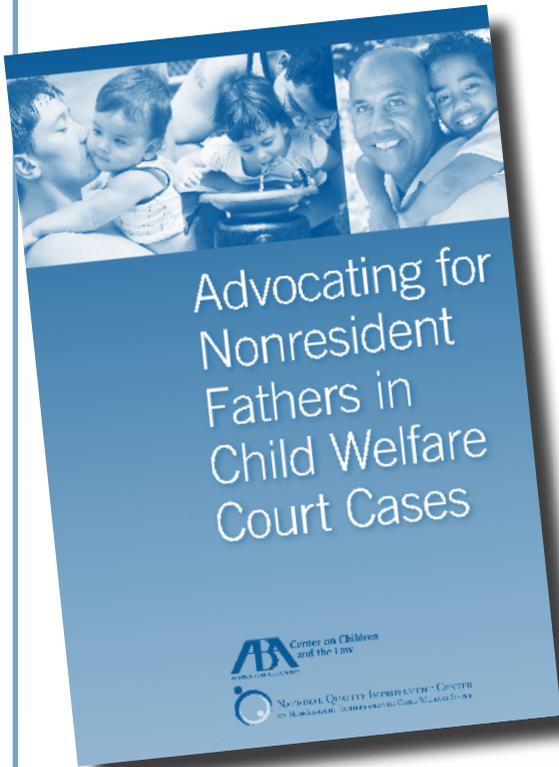
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# The National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System Announces a New Book



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**NATIONAL QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER  
ON NON-RESIDENT FATHERS AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM**

## *Helping Child Welfare Workers Better Understand and Engage Non-Resident Fathers*

### **Keith Cherry and Christopher Brown**

Dr. Keith Cherry is a leader in Deloitte Consulting's federal Health and Human Services practice. Dr. Cherry has directed more than 100 consumer research and education projects for state, federal, and international government agencies. He has also held teaching and research appointments at the University of South Florida, College of Arts and Sciences and College of Medicine, the James H. Haley Veterans Medical Center, and George Washington University. Dr. Cherry has delivered invited lectures around the world and numerous major media outlets, including the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the Associated Press have cited the results of his research.

Christopher Brown is senior vice president of national programming with National Fatherhood Initiative. Mr. Brown trains individuals and organizations on how to create father-friendly organizations and on developing, marketing, and evaluating fatherhood programs. He is the author or coauthor of National Fatherhood Initiative curricula, including 24/7 Dad™ and many other products. He has lent his expertise as a fatherhood expert for various media, including the *L.A. Times*, *New York Times*, *Nick Jr. Magazine*, and CNN.

More children are growing up in homes without their biological fathers than at any other point in American history. Almost 17 million American children (or 22.8% of children in the U.S.) live without their biological fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). These numbers are higher among some minority groups. Half of all African American children, one in four Hispanic children,

and one in six Caucasian children live with single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau). A variety of factors such as high divorce rates and increasing out-of-wedlock births reduce the daily presence of fathers in the lives of their children. This is particularly true of those engaged with the public child welfare system. Also, Acs and Nelson (2003) show that 42% of children living in families whose incomes are below the federal poverty line live with their mothers, but not their fathers.

Research shows that father absence has a profound impact on children. Amato (2005) found that compared to living with both parents, living in a single-parent home significantly increases the risk that a child will suffer physical, emotional, or educational problems. Pong and Ju (2000), analyzing a group of eighth graders who initially resided with both biological parents, show that children in households that experienced a change in family structure had school dropout rates two to three times higher than peers whose families did not change. Lammers, Ireland, Resnick, and Blum (2000) found that teens living in single-parent households were more likely to engage in premarital sex than those living in two-parent households.

To date, child welfare agencies have faced significant challenges in identifying, locating, and involving non-resident fathers in the child welfare process. In a study of almost 2,000 cases of children who were removed by child welfare agencies from their homes where their biological fathers did not reside, Malm, Murray, and Geen (2006) showed that 88% of non-resident fathers were identified by the child welfare agency, 55%



of non-resident fathers were contacted by the caseworker, 30% of non-resident fathers visited their children, and 28% of non-resident fathers expressed an interest in assuming custody of their children. Despite these numbers, the report found that the majority of caseworkers (70%) had received training on engaging fathers. In a follow-up study, Malm, Zielewski, and Chen (2008) found that having an involved father is associated with shorter case length and a greater likelihood of reunification.

Scholars have called for the development of models for constructively engaging non-resident fathers (Malm et al., 2006). However, little research has been done to understand non-resident fathers, their circumstances, and their motivations for being either present or absent in the lives of their children. To address the lack of research and to develop models for improving the ability of child welfare systems to engage non-resident fathers successfully, the federal Agency for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, funded the development of a National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF), a five-year collaboration between the bureau and a team of organizations composed of the American Humane Association, the American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law, and National Fatherhood Initiative.

This study emerges from QIC-NRF's efforts to help child welfare agencies engage non-resident fathers after they have been identified and located. It was designed to inform strategies for encouraging fathers to enroll in child welfare services. The findings, however, can also be linked to identification and location of fathers because they shed light on non-resident fatherhood from the perspective of men who are experiencing it firsthand. In hearing directly from non-resident fathers, child welfare workers can better understand these men. In doing so, child welfare workers can overcome biases that may

hinder full engagement, develop strategies for helping non-resident fathers succeed in meeting their parental responsibilities, and use tips to improve case outcomes.

## Methods

Twenty-four in-depth interviews were conducted with non-resident fathers in Newport News, Virginia; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Carrollton, Alabama; and San Antonio, Texas. Fatherhood programs in each of these locations recruited participants and the interviews were held on-site at each program's office. Respondents were screened using a standard tool to determine eligibility based on demographic criteria and residency. In order to qualify, participants had to be non-resident fathers who self-reported having had 50% or less visitation time annually with their children. The majority of respondents were African American (18) and the remaining were Hispanic (6). Four fatherhood program directors were also interviewed.

Interviews were audiotaped after obtaining informed consent from each respondent and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Respondents (not including program directors) were given a \$25 honorarium for participating in the study. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using themes the authors developed while debriefing after visits to each research site and at the conclusion of the field research. The analysis yielded a common set of themes across all interviews.

## Findings

### *The Devastation of Absence*

All respondents said that being a non-resident father was emotionally and financially devastating. Each father expressed a sincere desire to be with his children, several had limited visitation patterns, and some were seeking full custody. In fact, most fathers expressed concern



about the welfare of their children, all of whom were living with their mothers. One San Antonio respondent, only 16 years old, talked about his worries:

I think he'll be better off with me than with his mom. He's always dirty. Like they really never bathe him over there, and every time I see him, I always bathe him and stuff. She really never has nothing for him. She never has diapers, milk, or anything. I always have to send them. She wants me to provide everything, but then she don't want me to see him.

Another father expressed the emotional strain of absence: "When I think about 'em, I just stay all worried, you know what I'm saying? I'm kind of in a daze — like when you don't see your kids for that long, you know ... geez."

Financially, non-resident fatherhood is also a severe strain. All of the respondents interviewed were poor, lacked education, and had difficulty finding jobs that paid well. Against these odds, fathers found it exasperating to make ends meet. One Carrollton man shared:

They get more than I get after they get through ... after I get through payin' all my bills, still, they take out my insurance ... think they get something like \$500 a month — probably about 500-something.

Despite the heavy burden of child support, most men interviewed did not complain about paying the money; they accepted the fact that this is what they have to do. Instead, the men expressed resentment based on their perception of how the mothers of their children allegedly manipulated them and the system for financial gain. Many noted that on top of their child support, they are often asked to pay for numerous extras — food, school clothes, toys — and they wonder where all the money goes. For these men, the financial battles they encounter create a strong need for

recognition and respect. Most noted that their children are not even aware that the fathers pay child support and they often reported that they believe the mothers purposely keep this information from the children to diminish the fathers' role and contribution. One father summarized his feelings in this way:

For a child, it's like mother doing everything ... like mother taking her shopping, mother doing this, mother doing that ... so now that they are at the age, I show them. Like, "look, this what's coming out of my check. You see that? It says child support. That's you and your sister, you see what I'm saying?"

Yet despite the pressure, many men interviewed were not trying to escape payment; rather, they said they did their best and even sometimes found a sense of pride in the sacrifice. One Newport News father said:

You gonna have to pay because you got children. Children got to be taken care of and it's not nobody else's responsibility to do that but the father. So, it really makes you feel like you going about the thing right.

Unfortunately, however, the strain of being a non-resident father cannot be fully masked by the respondent's sense of pride and responsibility. In fact, with many men, exasperation and despair were always close to the surface during the interviews, as shown by one Carrollton man who said, "I ain't gonna lie to you, I thought about it, man ... I thought about hurtin' myself ... I don't know how many times. I feel like all the weight is on me."

Respondents across all sites made it clear that for them, the problems of non-resident fatherhood are primarily financial. Affirming previous research (Maldonado, 2006) that conceptualizes these fathers as dead-broke rather than deadbeat, the fathers interviewed expressed a sincere desire to both parent and



financially support their children. However, these men, like many non-residential fathers, are poor and often unemployed or work at low-wage jobs. The strain of trying to follow through with their commitments is evident in the way these men assign blame to the mothers, express frustration with how their children are being raised, and even talk about suicide.

Yet, within this mix of blame and despair, one can see a sense of responsibility and emotional attachment that can serve as a foundation for helping fathers improve their lives and their children's lives. Child welfare workers can best assist non-residential fathers by engaging them in ways that recognize the strain fathers are under and their desire to be better providers for their children. In practical terms, child welfare workers can also refer fathers to programs that can help them find good jobs, manage their finances, and learn how to navigate the systemic barriers they face. Additionally, workers can help fathers better document the financial contributions they make in addition to child support, as this documentation is essential to creating equitable and financially feasible child support payment structures. Finally, workers can consider the role of mental illness and substance use as barriers to positive fathering outcomes. Anxiety and depression can be readily seen in the words of the men here and many respondents also talked openly about their struggles with alcohol and illicit drugs. Referrals to mental health and substance abuse treatment providers could be extremely beneficial in helping these fathers gain the stability they need to succeed.

### ***Feelings of Extortion***

Non-resident fathers interviewed find themselves constantly having to negotiate with their children's mothers, the children being central bargaining chips. Respondents reported that they believe they have to tread lightly with mothers to have access to their children and even then, the mothers often act arbitrarily in refusing

visitation. Above all, fathers expressed feelings of extortion, either emotionally or financially. They feel that they have to be completely submissive and obsequious or provide extra funding, or run the risk of losing the ability to see their children. Some of these fathers said:

*The mama, she get mad at me, she take the kid away from me.*

*She'd be nice with me one day, you know what I'm saying, for the money, see? And then when you don't got no money, she go crazy on me.*

*They turn the child into a property ... you know? Like, like merchandise or something ... like if you ain't paying for it, you ain't gonna' see your kids.*

This constant process of negotiation and perceived extortion creates several difficult implications for the father, mother, and children. First, several of the men interviewed struggle with anger problems and do not have the skills needed to stay calm under the pressure of negotiation. As one Milwaukee man said, "My first instinct is to jump off the porch," referencing his tendency to fight physically rather than talk. Others described epic arguments they engaged in with the child's mother, some that led to police intervention. Respondents noted that such a thing is not good for the children to see and of course, it puts them in the precarious position of running afoul of the law, thereby potentially jeopardizing their ability to see their children on an ongoing basis.

Second, this negotiation process places the perceived expectation on fathers that they must spoil their kids to be a good parent. Many respondents noted that their idea of being a good father was to buy their children things. This idea, combined with the pervasive notion that the kids are property, most certainly has a long-term impact on the psychological health of the children. The economic situation of the fathers interviewed and the financial pressure they experience ultimately drives men completely out



of the lives of their children. As one respondent noted:

*A lot of guys don't spend time with their kids because they don't have the money they think they need ... whereas the child probably just wants to spend that time at the park, you know? Time at the park running around or something.*

The feelings of extortion respondents expressed are often driven by fundamental relationship problems that separated these men from the mothers of their children. Many respondents were young when their children were born or were still quite young when interviewed for this study. They lacked experience communicating effectively with the mothers and expressed frustration in never seeming to know the right thing to say or do. Additionally, these men struggled with understanding positive fathering skills, given that many did not have good fathering role models. However, many of these men attended fatherhood programs that offered practical advice they used in bettering relationships with mothers and their children. As one Carrolton man said, "I was glad that they organized this [fatherhood] program. You have a problem and you need somebody to talk to. That's what I'm sayin' ... somebody that you can trust." Fatherhood programs can be a positive resource for fathers, helping them become better parenting partners with mothers. Child welfare workers should consider it a priority to create relationships with, and actively refer men to, local fatherhood programs.

### ***Loss of Control and Hopelessness***

The fathers interviewed for this study have experienced considerable economic, psychological, and even physical pain in their lives. All were born in poverty, many had absent fathers, and most struggle to stay out of jail and hold down meaningful jobs. As a result, these men feel that their lives are out of their control. Additionally, they have low self-esteem, grapple with anger, and have many regrets. One Newport

News man summarized his feelings this way: "Life ain't no joke. I'm mad that I'm fixin' to be 29, I wish I can go back to when I was just 17 years old ... not even 17, I'd say 15."

The expression that others were responsible for the problems in their lives was common among respondents. In fact, many of them felt that the mothers of their children were central to their misfortune. Ultimately, fathers feel that the deck is stacked against them. A Newport News man said, "Mostly in these situations, the women have that upper hand or we give 'em that upper hand."

Another father added, "Just the fact that I was able to produce children was a great thing. But the more I tried to stay on track, the moms threw me off track."

In this environment, the men find it difficult to stay positive about their situation. The director of a Milwaukee fatherhood program shared:

*They've been in jail, they're not seeing their kids, they can't get a job because of their record, so they're pretty much hopeless. There is just a lot of hopelessness I see in that room and a lot of guys stuck ... It drains the energy out of the room ... it really does.*

Yet in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, fathers do find strength, often through support from fatherhood programs, in the faces of their children, or through the determination to prove that they can make their lives better. One San Antonio man said:

*If you ain't trying to find nobody to help you or support you, then you might as well just give it all up. I'm not sayin' kill yourself or nothing, but if you ain't gonna try to be no factor to the world ... do something ... help somebody from going down the wrong road, then you might as well stay in jail, because you're just taking up space.*



Finally, discovering the joy of fatherhood gave most men the energy they needed to make changes. One Milwaukee man expressed this joy best when he said:

I've never felt how I felt when my son was born ... he's changed my life a lot. I got this second shift job when he was born, and I've had it for almost three years now. It's changed my life a lot. I used to be drunk almost every day, in the bar and hanging out with the wrong kind of people. He's really shown me what love is.

Other fathers shared:

I mean the way he's so smart, intelligent. . . he shows me that he can be something, so he makes me want to do better.

My kids made me feel good about myself knowin' I can be a dad and tell them ... what to do or what not to do. No that's wrong, don't do that, don't talk to grown people like that, respect your elders, and stuff like that.

It is important for child welfare workers to understand that the attitudes and behaviors of non-resident fathers are influenced by feelings of lack of control and hopelessness. These feelings are expressed in the anger and blame men cast toward the mothers of their children and their struggles to create workable solutions for fulfilling their financial and parenting responsibilities. To be sure, there are men engaged in child welfare and child support enforcement systems who are doing their best to avoid taking responsibility. However, as the interviews presented here show, there are also men who are willing to accept and even embrace accountability. Yet some of these men are coming out of correctional settings, where any sense of control is taken away, while others have experienced long periods of unemployment or underemployment and feel helpless about improving their situation.

Child welfare workers who can provide non-resident fathers with a sense of agency, control, and hope will likely dramatically improve engagement with them. Giving these men tools to improve their situation, recognizing the challenges they face and their commitment to succeed despite these challenges, and helping them boost their self-esteem through positive parenting of their children are tangible actions child welfare workers can take to encourage these men. Punishment is not a motivator for the non-resident fathers in this study. They are used to being in jail or being told that they are failures. Providing them instead with a sense of worth and a clear path toward being with their children in positive ways fosters unique feelings for these men. In giving men a sense of control and hope, child welfare workers can improve non-resident father behavior and help them strive toward better outcomes.

### ***The Judicial System: Fostering Poor Fatherhood***

The judicial and child support enforcement systems play a central role in the lives of all respondents. Many fathers have little knowledge of how the systems work and what they need to do to improve visitation or custody circumstances. As most men interviewed had criminal histories, they were very reluctant to proactively engage the system, they did not have access to a court-appointed attorney, or they felt these attorneys had failed them, and they simply did not have the money needed to hire another lawyer to advocate on their behalf. As a result, some men dramatically worsen their situation by doing nothing. Some pay more child support than they can actually afford and many do not have the full visitation rights entitled them. A Newport News fatherhood program director highlighted the basic situation as he sees it for most men:

A lot of these guys have no idea how the system works. They have just come out of prison and haven't seen their kids in years. So



they're like completely in a fog about where to go, the certain connections you need to make, or the paperwork to file a motion.

A Milwaukee father punctuated this feeling when he said, "The court system ... it's like chess. It's not like checkers where you can go in and get what you want right away; you have to keep going in increments."

The judicial system seems to fail some men completely, as in the case of a Carrollton man who talked about his problems with child support enforcement and trying to prove paternity:

I stayed in jail for four or five months, but I had been payin' before it. I got \$2,000 to get out. Then they asked for another \$500, the month after I got out. But instead of me giving them the \$500, I got the child and went and took a blood test for \$450, and it came back that he was not mine, and I couldn't get my \$2,000 back either. I couldn't get none of that money — all that I had paid. I had paid over probably \$10,000 or \$15,000.

Unfortunately, this man had other children he had to support and was underemployed, thus his cycle of debt, courts, and jail was likely to continue. In fact, this cycle seems quite common. Another Carrollton man shared:

They lock you up and lay you out so long ... you get far behind. You get out then they ask for so much money. If you ain't got that much money when they want it, they might lock you up again for about three or four months. Then they want you to call people and try to borrow the money to get out. And so, you end up borrowin' somebody's money. Then you get out. You got to try to pay them back. Then you got to try to pay the state for child support. So they're putting you deep in the hole and it's just a cycle. With your kid and everything, want to be around 'em and stuff like that ... it makes you feel real good. But when they put

me in the system and with them putting all that cash on me, I running the red line ... see that make me change the feelin' about that. Well, the system did that because they got me runnin' in circles.

Exacerbating their problems with the law, many men feel that they are stigmatized by the courts, child support agencies, and mothers. Fathers interviewed suggested that the worst is automatically assumed about them. One San Antonio man talked about his feelings of being stereotyped when he said, "They look at you like you're a drug dealer or a criminal, you know? They just judge you."

A Newport News father, feeling similar stigma, pleaded:

Just give single fathers a chance. Just give 'em a chance to show that they are good fathers because it's like the stereotype I hear that, you know, dads, they're not there for their kids. It's always about the moms, and they just need to give fathers a chance, you know, because every father is not bad 'cause they been away from their kids.

Lacking knowledge about how the court system works, with no money to hire adequate legal counsel, some non-resident fathers also feel unduly punished by the stereotypes that prevail around them. Moreover, respondents reported that mothers seem to know more about the system and they believe the system inherently favors the mother in all cases. Sadly, these factors together push fathers further from their children even at times when men are trying hard to do what is expected of them. This scenario was painted vividly by a Newport News man who described the first supervised visit he had with his son after being released from prison. The man's inexperience with the system and his lack of understanding as to how the visit would play out from the child welfare point of view, speaks



volumes about the problems he would face in reuniting with his son. He said:

I was visiting him over at Social Service and the psychiatrist was saying that he wasn't coming to me or anything like that. I told her, "how could you say that? He's a child." My son likes toys. He's just like me when I was little. He sees toys, he blocks everybody out, and he wants to go see what this toy is about. They looked at that when he first came in the room ... he went straight to the toys, but he said, "hey daddy," but he went straight to the toys and started playing, so they looked at it like "oh, he didn't want to be around me," so that was her whole reason for saying that she thinks he needs a little time before he comes around me again, and that kind of hurt. That hurt me because I can't talk to him, can't talk to him at all or anything. She told me that she was gonna be visiting, but I didn't know she was gonna be looking through the mirror and seein' ... I'm thinkin' she's gonna be in the same room.

While some stigma likely exists for these men, it is critical to note that they carry a long history of failure around with them. Thus, feelings of inadequacy taint each interaction non-resident fathers have with the child welfare system. These men know that they have made mistakes and are likely very sensitive to interactions, however trivial, that reinforce their sense of failure. They are likely to read stigma into most interactions as protection against the frailty they feel. Additionally, they do not understand how the judicial system works as it relates to child welfare. They get out of jail or are brought into the system based on a complaint initiated by the mother and the state. It makes sense that mothers know more about the system, because they are the ones who are put in the position of having to legally obtain child support. These men are defendants, yet their words suggest that they never quite understood that they were engaged in legal wrongdoing. Thus,

they were overwhelmed by a system designed to punish them and they did not have the resources to respond in effective and appropriate ways. Most men, feeling a sense of paralysis, chose to do nothing, thus exacerbating their situations.

The naiveté of these men is readily seen in the example of the Newport News man's first interaction with social services. During this interview, he expressed amazement at how the visit transpired. He did not realize that the visit was a test he had to pass, that the social worker would be behind a one-way mirror, and that he would lose contact with his son if things did not go well. His lack of understanding and preparation put him further from his child and left him feeling bitter about the system. The same is true for the Carrolton men interviewed who are seemingly caught in a revolving door of court and jail that will never allow them to become financially capable of making required child support payments and being reunited with their children.

Policymakers must consider how to realign child welfare and child support enforcement in ways that are more supportive of non-resident fathers if we are to see major changes in how these fathers respond to their legal and parental responsibilities. Child welfare workers can help by understanding the stigma these men feel and engage them in supportive, rather than punitive, ways. Child welfare workers should also assume that these fathers do not know how child welfare processes work and create educational opportunities that can help them abide by the procedures set forth. Workers cannot excuse these men from meeting their responsibilities, but they can create mechanisms to better help non-resident fathers understand what they need to do to meet the expectations of the child welfare and child support enforcement systems.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The perspectives portrayed here present only one side of multi-faceted stories. While it is easy to sympathize with the struggles of these men, we must remember that their children and many women are engaged in the struggle as well. Likewise, we must not mistake the words of these men as the absolute truth and then seek to refute them in favor of the mothers' plight. Rather, the stories presented here offer a window into the complex experience of non-resident fathers, and veracity aside, they are remarkably consistent in what they can tell us about how to help child welfare workers better understand these men's challenges and their desire to be good fathers.

Child welfare agencies and their staffs will benefit from a number of lessons these men teach us. First, we as social workers should reframe our understanding of non-resident fathers. Common perceptions peg them as elusive delinquents, trying their best to avoid economic and emotional responsibility. There can be no doubt that some men fit into this category, but it seems equally likely, based on the interviews presented here, that there are also many more fathers who sincerely want to do the right thing. They love their children and battle to create situations where they can be a part of their children's lives. Yet in stereotyping all men as guilty until proven innocent, we only set forces in motion that work against them becoming better fathers and, ultimately, improving the well-being of children.

One of the most immovable barriers these fathers face is being trapped in a perpetual cycle of court, jail, and release due to child support enforcement. Extracting money from fathers that they do not have is not going to solve the economic problems of single mothers and their children. Non-resident fathers are often held to impossible payment standards, especially those related to the payment of high interest rates. Men cannot earn money when in jail and poor

men will never reach the economic viability needed to repay the principal and interest that accumulates while they are behind bars or in the community. Additionally, we must recognize that money is not the only factor contributing to the successful raising of a child. Thus, when child support is overly emphasized, the system drives an emotional wedge between fathers and their children rather than bringing them closer. This is not meant to be an indictment of the child support enforcement system because several state and local child support enforcement agencies have enacted progressive policies to assist non-resident fathers (e.g., forgiving arrears in return for attending fatherhood programs instead of going to jail). Rather, a healthy query is in order as to how this system can continue to improve in a way that fosters robust economic and emotional attachments between non-resident fathers and their children. A key part of this query is to examine ways to raise the awareness among child welfare workers of the impact that child support has on many non-resident fathers. To start, child welfare workers can consider the following recommendations to improve engagement with non-resident fathers.

### 1. **Understand that non-resident fathers need emotional support and encouragement.**

These men are isolated, alienated, angry, and distrustful, sometimes for good reasons and sometimes not. Child welfare workers can provide a calm port in the storm for these men. Workers who effectively understand the emotional turmoil of non-resident fathers and tap into their real needs for recognition, connection, and respect will go a long way toward engaging them. Non-resident fathers lack self-esteem, they often are not taken seriously as fathers, and they rarely have confidential places they can go to share their experiences and be listened to. Child welfare workers can offer the type of genuine relationship these men have lacked in their lives and provide a model for how men can be



better fathers and parenting partners to their children's mothers.

**2. Recognize that non-resident fatherhood has a large financial obligation.**

Child welfare workers might find it easier to work with fathers if they refocus their activities on helping men meet their immediate needs — needs that, when unmet, often interfere with their abilities to be better fathers. First and foremost, these fathers need help securing stable employment that will allow them to pay child support. Without good jobs, these men will either disappear or end up in jail — either way, child support is not paid and children will continue to lack a father in their lives.

**3. Help non-resident fathers navigate the child welfare and child support systems.**

This research points to the utter lack of understanding most non-resident fathers have about these systems. Most men prefer to take the path of least resistance because of past criminal history or fear of losing their children completely. As a result, men end up in situations where they cannot possibly support court-ordered demands, they make mistakes that further isolate them from their children, and they ultimately become bitter toward mothers and the system itself. Creating educational programs to teach non-resident fathers about how child welfare works and what is expected of them can go far in helping these men meet their obligations and succeed as fathers.

**4. Create partnerships with social services and fatherhood programs.**

Non-resident fathers need more help than can be provided by a child welfare worker. Men may need job training, anger management assistance, counseling on how to better communicate with mothers, fatherhood training, and help with mental illness and substance abuse.

The child welfare worker who can access a broad range of referral services for non-resident fathers will enhance the likelihood of engagement and create support systems fathers need in achieving positive outcomes.

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