



## T2. Fathers and The Family: Engaging Fathers in Family-Focused Service Provision

Tuesday, June 4, 2019  
3:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.

### Moderator:

- Barbara Spoor, Family Assistance Program Specialist, Office of Family Assistance, Washington, D.C.

### Presenters:

- Nigel Vann, Product Development Lead, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, Silver City, New Mexico
- James Worthy, Outreach Coordinator, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, Reisterstown, Maryland

**Barbara Spoor:** This is Fathers and The Family: Engaging Fathers in Family-Focused Service Provision. I had the privilege of working with both presenters for the last 15 to 20 years. The whole repository of everything you could want to know and need to know about fatherhood information and where to find it is all going to be in this session. I'm going to turn it over to Nigel.

**Nigel Vann:** I've been doing fatherhood work for just over 30 years. As of September, I'll be in this country for 40 years. I spent the first two years in Johnson City, Tennessee. Got my Masters at East Tennessee State University.

**James Worthy:** I am James Worthy from Reisterstown, Maryland. I don't know how I got into this work. I went to school for business management with a minor in hotel and restaurant management. I stepped into a Head Start room and the rest is history. I started doing male involvement and that introduced me to Nigel. For 25 years I've been all over the country supporting programs that really want to work with fathers. I always ask the same question when I look at these incredible human service agencies that have been doing great work all this time. Why do you want to get men involved? But, this work has been for me, a dad of three. I must brag for a couple of seconds. I have an 18-year-old who just graduated Valedictorian of his school. I have a 16-year-old who is being looked at by three D1 colleges for football and I have a 13-year-old who just won a state football championship. So that's what we do.

**Nigel Vann:** I have one boy, he's 34 and he actually won the state championship when he was 10. How many Head Start people in the room?

**James Worthy:** We have a few. Welcome.



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**Nigel Vann:** Any child welfare staff? A few. How about anyone who does home visiting with fathers?

**James Worthy:** Okay a few.

**Nigel Vann:** Eight people who are working directly with fathers. The reason I ask is I'm trying to get a gauge on the room. As you know the title of the session is Engaging Fathers in Family-Focused Services. So, we're not necessarily talking about bringing people into a fatherhood program, we're talking about how we're going to engage dads in a wider environment. We'll learn a bit more about what you're doing as we go along. To start, I'd like to take a look at these quotes and then I'd like a couple of people to respond to each one. The first one "Remember that children, marriages, and flower gardens reflect the kind of care they get." Is it speaking to anyone?

**Participant:** You have to water them and nurture them or else they will die. Embrace your children.

**Nigel Vann:** It's a big job for parents. It's a big job for family support workers too.

**Participant:** You reap what you sow.

**Participant:** I think when you focus on flower gardening it grows. When you desert it, it'll wear away and grow wild.

**Participant:** I was thinking about the flower gardens. What you get depends on the type of soil you use, so soil preparation is what you start with. How you prepare that soil is really important for the outcome you are looking for.

**Nigel Vann:** Maybe some training as to what type of soil to use. How about the other three quotes? Are they speaking to anyone?

**Participant:** The quote "Many non-resident fathers feel like no one's hearing them." I used to do fatherhood with different groups and that's what I would get when I would talk to groups. They felt that they were just a check and nothing more than a check.

**Nigel Vann:** How about that third one? "Caseworkers who received training were more likely to locate fathers than workers who did not receive training."

**Participant:** I work with child support agencies and I think we see that a lot just in a conversation with the custodial party and a casual conversation. You can get information like locating the father without asking the formal questions.





**Nigel Vann:** It's talking to someone like a human being and not stigmatizing them or being negative. I have a few more quotes from listening to some of the speakers this morning. James Murray said, "Child Support staff want to involve dads, but they don't always know how to engage them." We have to help our staff know how to do this and feel comfortable doing it. Carlis Williams said, and I'm paraphrasing, one in four children are living without their biological fathers. In a lot of those cases, dad is involved, or he wants to be.

The first fatherhood job I had was in Maryland, managing a program called the Absent Parent Employment Program. I didn't know what I was doing, but I took the job and one of the first things I realized was it was not the right name for the program. Absent Parents Employment. When you talk to these dads you soon realize they're not absent. They are involved in the lives of their children, and if they're not, they're feeling an awful lot of pain and they want to be involved. There are a few deadbeats but, by and large, they're a small minority. If we believe they are deadbeats, we're not going to engage them. You have to approach every father with the fact that he is a great father. He's a promising father. He just needs a helping hand. We're going to specifically focus on ways to recruit and engage fathers in the services that you provide. We're going to look at hiring, training, and supporting, staff to do that. How do we deliver effective services? We're going to share some specific tips from our responsible father toolkit. A lot of this information comes from going to fatherhood programs, a few of those programs are run by people in this room. We call the toolkit Resources from the Field, it includes activities you can use with dads and with staff. It is broken down into general background, tips on starting a program, building a program, and then the activities. It can be found at <https://www.fatherhood.gov/toolkit/home>.

**James Worthy:** Let me ask a quick question. When you saw the name of this session, why did you come? What did you think you were going to get? You read it? You needed something to do this afternoon?

**Participant:** The latest strategies for engaging fathers

**Participant:** Child support programs need to be more father friendly

**Participant:** Strategies for recruiting

**Participant:** We have an initiative with the National Fatherhood Initiative. We have a father friendly assessment that we are trying to build on.

**Participant:** We have a 13-week parenting program for dads, nurturing fathers, and it's great, but what else are we going to need? Case management? Employment and training opportunities? Mental health counseling? Mediation? They have to be a better dad. There is a barrier on the





other side of the equation, on the other side of that child, so how do they make the connection again?

**James Worthy:** That's like a three-day training, but I'm going to come back to it.

**Participant:** How do we get fathers to understand we're not the enemy.

**James Worthy:** That's a seven year training.

**Participant:** I worked for ACF as an emergency manager. I came to contribute to the conversation. To provide tools for programs that are working with fathers, that we can use to teach and engage fathers. Innovative community-based tools that will engage fathers and prepare them.

**Participants:** I work for a fatherhood program in Milwaukee County. I'm interested to hear what other programs you might talk about in this session since fatherhood programs are often siloed. I wanted to hear what other programs engage the whole family.

**Nigel Vann:** That's the theme of the summit really. That was mentioned right at the kickoff. If we're going to do this work properly, if we really want to nurture those children and make sure that garden grows, then we have all these services out there across the federal government and there is funding for different things.

What we need to do is make sure that we really are following through on that memorandum that Seth talked about at the beginning of the summit about interagency collaboration. That collaboration often doesn't happen on the local level. It doesn't happen in every state. So, depending on where you are, the local staff and the local directors need a helping hand. That's really the conversation that we want to try and have. Then we'll delve into as much of the rest of it as we can. If we could share a little bit about what some of the barriers are to getting dads involved in whatever program setting you work in. Even if you've been successful when you first started trying to involve dads. If you're working with a particular agency that is struggling to involve dads or if you've seen other people struggling, what is it that stops a family-focused service?

A program that is there to improve the life chances of children. It may be working primarily with the mother before birth or after birth. It may be a home visiting program that is touching dad or not touching dad, but whatever that program is doing, if it's family focused, in my mind anyway, family focused means we want to make the world a better place for those children in that family. So, what are the barriers to getting dads involved in those services?





**James Worthy:** And I'm going to ask us to be real We are some of the best professionals. Average people didn't come all the way to Tennessee to talk about fatherhood. So, my question is, if we're the best in the game, why are we having a conversation on how to get dads involved? Because there's something blocking the process.

**Participant:** I'm from a government agency that is too focused on compliance, not the customers.

**Participant:** You're talking about keeping them engaged with family focused services. A lot of times the biggest barrier is going to be the fathers' relationship with the mother of their children.

**Participant:** I work with child support, so obviously they look at us as all we want is money. We are there to help.

**Participant** Child support parents in Colorado. A lack of trust and understanding from the dads. They think we're tricking them. They think we will have them arrested when they come in for a meeting.

**Participant:** I'm an advocate for fathers in the court system. The barrier may be the mom. It's really hard working with parents addicted to opioids.

**Participant:** Family-focused services were originally structured to engage mothers, not fathers.

**Participant:** Customer service. These men are generally low income and navigating a myriad of other agencies around poverty and are also being impacted, touched by other agencies that have often let them down.

**Participant:** Men, by nature, are stoic creatures and aren't inclined to seek help.

**James Worthy:** That's the quickest way to get a man not to do something. Tell him what he needs to do.

**Participant:** Fatherhood program staff lack the passion to want to build a relationship with the fathers.

**Nigel Vann:** Let me just piggyback on that. I remember once we were in California doing fatherhood training. We always used to have a panel of dads come to talk in the training. We would always invite a few more than we needed because we never knew if they were going to show up. But there was one day we did it at an agency, and none of them showed up because they thought it was some kind of scam.





**Participant:** Dads perceive child support workers as being biased. They think they're judgmental. They think that because of the fact that you're forced to do a government program involved with some of the most important things in your life, your children, your money and your ex, that there is a prejudice that you're not a good dad, not a responsible dad. Otherwise you wouldn't be here.

**James Worthy:** A question for the moms in the room. What if I came up to you and said we want you to get into this responsible motherhood program? How many mothers would slap me? You made an assumption on me. So, here's why I'm doing this. I'm sorry but I know you.

**Participant:** Society has low expectations of fathers.

**James Worthy:** I worked in Baltimore City serving the hardest to serve. That's who we were geared to find. Every dad that we've ever served said the only reason we kept coming to your program was because it was real. What does that mean? We assessed honestly what the barriers were and for as much as we wanted to say it was them, that was the problem. Tell us what overcomes the barriers as you individually have overcome them?

**Participant:** This system is biased when we say because you're not in the home, the daughter is 16 times more likely to get pregnant. But if you flip that paradigm on its head, which is what we should do, you should say, because you're involved she's not going to get pregnant, your son's not going to jail. We use all this against the fathers and what you should do is just be positive and don't shake your head at him. Everyone needs a win. You have to meet them where they are and everyone's at a different spot. We have all these programs to help them if dads fail.

**James Worthy:** We have something for them called jail helping all day long. Straight to jail. I want to hear your solutions because the reality is, we want to engage fathers. You said meet them where they are. So, let's ask a question for those of us who are skilled getting dads to at least show, where are you meeting them? Where are you finding them? Neighborhoods? The street? Shooting gallery at two in the morning? Barbershop? Jail? The gym?

**Participant:** Because I'm living in a tribal community, on the weekends we have family functions and even though they are fathers that are not with the mothers, they still come. That function is filled. One of the things I found is a former alcohol and drug counselor who was saying be truthful with the school and with me, I will listen. But if I'm seeing that you're not being truthful, I can walk out that door. You'll never see me again.

**Nigel Vann:** This is where I want to stay because we were supposed to be talking about family focused services, right? So, it's not so much we have to go to the neighborhood to recruit dads, because we have the family. We have contact with a child, we have contact with the mom. But





the problem, a lot of times is, we haven't got contact with the dad. Or the dad doesn't trust us. So how are we going to overcome that?

**Participant:** What if you work for child protective services? That's part of the challenge. We have to help child protective services find the dads and engage with them.

**Participant:** Child Support has interfaces with DMV

**Nigel Vann:** But if you find them then how do you get their trust?

**Participant:** Some of the states, and I've worked in multiple states both east and west coast, are much more progressive than the Midwest closed minded states.

**Nigel Vann:** I think you're safe to say some offices are more open than others.

**Participant:** It seems like some states are much more progressive and much more what I call father friendly.

**Nigel Vann:** Even within states you have variations.

**Participant:** D.C. for example, is very father friendly. They have several programs that get a hold of dad and child support will waive arrears. They have programs that will work with the dad to get dad involved.

**Participant:** I'm actually from the state of Wyoming, which couldn't be more backwards. We're very progressive with customer service. We keep them in our program by relationship development. We don't focus on outcomes. We don't focus on rules right away. We focus on relationship development and making sure that not only is there mutual respect with dad, but also amongst the dads. We keep them in a group when they become allies and support and hold each other accountable and they get through the program as a group with an outcome of employment wrap around and budgeting. We service all of those different things. So, it becomes a family story. Develop your own recovery.

**Nigel Vann:** That's where the fatherhood program becomes a beautiful father program.

**James Worthy:** What we found in Baltimore, and 80% of the gentleman we worked with in Baltimore were not referrals from agencies, they were street outreach every week, every day. And I've done it in rural areas, the problem areas. The reality is once you find that one man to build the momentum to get all the other men, whether it's coming out of prison, out of substance abuse recovery, or whether it means getting them to go to child support. What else?





**Participant:** It depends. Everyone is on a continued growth. So even if a man or a woman was in the neighborhood and getting into different things, they may be at a point of not being clear about what their next step is, but clear that they aren't going back to that. Because these men may not necessarily trust someone or go back in that direction. But, we have to be careful about trying to bring fathers into an environment like this and just say, "let's ask the fathers." Depending on where those young men are, those fathers are on the cutting edge of their development. They might not be appreciated being made some horse and pony show.

**Nigel Vann:** You're going to have a one-on-one conversation with someone in a program. You're not putting him in front of strangers.

**Participant:** But the comment was made, and I'm not saying it's a bad idea, but you have to be very nuanced in a contextual type of situation when you're bringing a father before a group of quote unquote fatherhood social service professionals, and engaging and asking them those types of questions in the spirit of what we want to hear from fathers. But what does that look like?

**Nigel Vann:** It's what you hear from fathers. I think that's the point. We wouldn't hear from the fathers unless the fathers had been involved with somebody and there's trust and respect. In fact, Mr. Bowling's nodding his head because he has two participants from his program here for a workshop tomorrow.

**James Worthy:** Then we have people who have a lot of expectations. Everything that we've talked about, he hasn't dealt with that. So, there's no extreme. Let's kind of balance that conversation so that as we go into getting men into the human services, I just want to leave you with something to think about. This is from a father's perspective, from a man's perspective, from a woman's perspective. What happens if you don't control the space where the conversation is? You don't control the conversation. I'm going to talk to African American men for a minute. Gentlemen of African American descent. How often is the conversation about us not controlled by us? We have got to be very careful because it might not be the dog and pony show that offends them, but they may be offended that you control how I say what I'm feeling. [what matters is] how our agency structures their involvement, their voice, their communication. Because gentlemen have told me, and please don't take this offensively, when they go into a human services agency all gruff and loud, and then realize they have to make sure the caseworker is okay before they can get okay. Somebody tell me what that means to you.

**Participant** That means that I have to make sure that they're comfortable and I have to downplay myself, change the tone of my voice and my body language. In order for them to feel comfortable. You work with me before we have a conversation.

**James Worthy:** Here's what I'm going to ask you to do as you plan. I'm willing to engage more men, because I'm not saying anyone's not engaging everyone. How many of you know that many







of our young men don't believe you? Old people? What is your intention? What are you intentionally going to do to break that barrier down? What are you going to intentionally do when the African American or Hispanic brother, sister, or Pakistani brothers come in and the traditional service providers don't look like them? What is your intention? In the toolkit at <https://www.fatherhood.gov/toolkit/home> there is an entire section written by this gentleman [Nigel] talking about the different ethnicities, how to recruit, things that work, best practices, what you can do, what you can say, what you can't say. I found out some things that went on in the tribal community.

I want to tell the tribal community you can't use spirituality in your work. How many of you know that's going to put a damper on how they do 95% of the things they do? I say that because all of those areas are addressed and some of the new stuff that we've been coming out with are in the toolkit.

You hear a lot of great ideas at conferences, but when you get back to work the fires start up and you lose track of what to implement. Systems are set up so you don't have to think about change. Systems are set up so you don't have to think intentionally. It's to do what has been said is most effective. How many of you know that what was effective two years ago may not be effective today?

**Nigel Vann:** We have several tip cards including Tips for Expectant Dads and Tips for Fatherhood Programs on Recruiting. You can go on our website and print these off for your dads. We also have various tip cards for practitioners. Tips for recruitment. These are how we address some of those barriers. If you're not getting the buy-in of the leadership in an agency or the staff in an agency, we have to talk about why dads are important.

For anyone here, you would not be here if you didn't understand the importance of dads' involvement. But, unfortunately there's a few people out there that don't. What we really need to do is make sure that our staff are all comfortable talking to fathers. That is why we are talking about these father-friendly trainings. We are going to do an activity with these father-friendly assessments.

**James Worthy:** I'm going to ask a question, and this is totally voluntary if you choose.

**Nigel Vann:** This is an activity that you can download from our toolkit. It's an activity that was developed actually for the young unwed fathers pilot project in the early nineties. It's also part of the responsible fatherhood curriculum that was used in the Parents' Fair Share Project in the mid-nineties. We've done this an awful lot in training sessions, particularly with staff who have not been working with fathers. The premise is that you cannot engage a dad and be respectful of a dad if you've not processed your own stuff. This is particularly true in agencies where it's mainly female staffed...no derogatory meaning to females.





There was actually a study in an elementary and a pre-school where they filmed the teachers in the elementary school and in the pre-school and asked them, "Do you treat moms the same way you treat dads when they come into the center?" Everybody said yes, we really try to do that. So, they filmed them for a whole day and then showed them some clips afterwards. There was a major difference. This is female staff approaching the mother when she's dropping the children off or approaching the dad during dropping off or picking up. They stood farther away talking to the dads. They were not as engaging, without realizing it. And part of that could be that we have a negative perception, particularly if a guy comes in with baggy trousers halfway down. Or, if you had a bad experience with men in your life, then that can spill over into how you treat men. So that's why we think it's really important that any staff working with fathers do the kind of activities that dads are going to do if they come into group sessions. This is a session that's just to help staff think and talk about their own relationship with their father. And then think about how that has impacted their personal life and their professional life.

**James Worthy:** I want to do something with you. Totally voluntary. How many people in this room grew up or lost their dad? Stand up please. Or if you didn't have your dad in your life as you were growing up. Thank you for your honesty. Stay up. Do these people sitting in these chairs who grew up with their daddy really know how it feels? What you've been through? Do you think they really know how much it hurts? They don't know. Do you think they know the nights where you were wondering? No. So they don't know, they don't get it, they never will. I had to ask the questions.

We are some of the most highly educated, best loved, most passionate workers in this field and our colleagues don't believe we really know. I know, Master's, PhDs, we were the best at this, and we are going to say that we want to go and give the best programming to someone who doesn't roll like we roll. He may not have the words to describe his emotions like we do. So, the questions that you see here, when you start really evaluating how you go meet them where they are, give them the love and support because you know what the reality is? Six-two, ex-con, isn't a fun beautiful thing to help.

So, the question is, and I had to ask this question to myself when I first started working with men, what was your relationship with your father like when you were growing up? I grew up with my father, my grandfather, and my great grandfather, all in the same four block radius. I was always in the house with one of them. I wanted them to go away. I have some stuff I wanted to do. And when I first started working with men, I had a bias. I questioned your values. I made judgment calls on how you're supposed to get your life right based on my stuff. My stuff was, I thought, pretty worked for me. But now if we're going to do training, if we don't really work, we have to get everybody in the organization from the top down.





When I first started in this business, Nigel had been the co-author of a document showing ways to make a father friendly environment, make a male friendly environment. And he broke it down to what pictures were on the walls.

**Nigel Vann:** I have to confess, I was not the primary author on this. That was Pam Wilson.

**James Worthy:** Okay but the reality is if we go on to train staff on their documents, there are assessments that can be done, there are things that we can do when we start to have a real conversation, and I'm going to say this to my child support people. I love you because your job sucks. We'll just say that out loud. I wouldn't want it. It's hard, but I'm going to tell you, in Baltimore for 20 years we fought to help child support. You know what? We really started to have some success. I went into child support and I met some of the front-line workers. Some of my front-line workers had a couple baby daddies that were on the other side of the bulletproof glass, because in Baltimore you still get the glass and when she saw somebody that looked like or reminded her of him, your day was going to be rough. Until we address those biases or figure out what documents we can use, only then will we start to see how we can get people in because we will be able to look at it from a clean slate or at least a recognized slate. We know what we're dealing with.

**James Worthy:** We have a whole section in the toolkit around retention because retention starts with recruitment, with your hiring practices, and with your training. I think we heard Dr. Bennett say earlier today that customer service is good because the employees aren't getting any love and it shows, especially in our work.

**Participant:** I'm asking a father to be [inaudible]. Your voice matters. We want you to hear we care about you, but they're not. I need you to take this [inaudible], sign it because you don't have all the rights when she's gone. Paid his money. That's his mistake.

**James Worthy:** That's very disrespectful. I'm going to ask you to meet with a young lady about what's going on in Ohio. They've done some very progressive things. Milwaukee has done some very progressive things about that specific issue. They're training agencies to walk the dads through all the things, so he can at least see the child.

**Nigel Vann:** Let me just piggyback on that because I think one of the big challenges of this fatherhood work is policies are not father friendly We have to deal with the policies as they are, but we've also got to advocate for where the policies need to be changed. You have to help dads navigate it as it is now. It's really important to establish paternity. Although dads may say, I don't want to establish paternity because that means I have to pay child support, you have to explain that he has no rights if he doesn't do that.





**Participant:** As a father, when I'm able to connect with a man that's incarcerated that is currently absent, I can speak to them on that level. That's how I can continue to have a full class. And they continue to come every week.

**Nigel Vann:** One of the real magic moments you get when you're talking to a dad is when you get into talking about this, right? I want you to talk about this in a group of other fathers because you're saying stuff you may not have ever said before. You're saying stuff you may not have allowed yourself to even feel before. That's what bonds men. Someone used the word allies for their program. You know, it's that light bulb moment. When men say that to each other, they are immediately bonded. When we have shared our deepest personal stuff with another man. And so those men are true allies. That's a true peer support group and that's when you know it's a successful father program, when you can share that stuff with the other men and the staff knows that everybody's there respecting you and backing you.

**Participant:** We are working to change county policy so that men will not be arrested if they have child support arrears. Instead they will be connected to a fatherhood program.

**James Worthy:** How many people have the Summit app on their phone? If you would do me a favor as we have these conversations. We talked about Ohio. Look up a person in the book named Avis Files. She runs a program in Toledo. Look her up if you're talking about working a collaborative with child support and grass roots. Look up the people from Milwaukee but also here at the conference. Look up Vernon Wallace and Joe Jones on the app. You can ask to connect. That's the one thing we want out of this app. You can download information onto your phone when you connect through the app.

**Nigel Vann:** And he's been writing stuff on this app.

**James Worthy:** Yes, I'm pushing stuff out on the app because there were some key points, policies that somebody said the Midwest might be behind in. I talked to this man and we now have partnerships with Goodwill that are deeper than they have ever been in Baltimore. He's Goodwill Easter Seals in Minneapolis. So please connect to the toolkit, the fatherhood.gov, register and come to the table. Register for our listserv because one of the things we're launching is our community of practice and we're calling it a virtual community. We want to be able to have a place. I'd like to call it our own Facebook. Send me more information and we can keep these conversations going because the reality is, if your anything like I am, when I get back into the grind, the next time we talked was at the next conference. Anybody find themselves going through that? So, with the toolkit, the website, the resources, we could have come in here and said, "Hey, everything you asked about, go to fatherhood.gov, put in your search and it is there." But that's the reason that you don't remember, you have to talk about it. That's how dads, men, families, children, that's how they really get it. You guys have the answers to serve them. When they get there, 90% of the time you know what to do and how to do it when they walk through





the door. Let's be honest, we have policies that messed us up and we still overcome them. We have biases that mess us up and we still do it. We've been doing it for 30 years. The conversation hasn't changed much.

**Nigel Vann:** Let's give you guys the last word here. So, we put up key points that we think we would like you to take away. But what are your takeaways? What are a few things you're taking away from all this?

**Participant:** I used to sit at our headquarters. I would visit the customer service walk-in center. One of the things that I changed is I now sit there, at the customer service walk-in center. So pretty much every day I walk the floor, I greet the staff. Sometimes I sit in the waiting area and just sit in the back and listen. My point is, I think for me this is just removing another set of film in terms of my perspective as I continue to observe and seek to support my staff in full.