



W3. All in The Family: Engagement Opportunities in Child Welfare

Wednesday, June 5, 2019
11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.

Moderator:

- Pooja Gupta, Social Science Research Analyst, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

Presenters:

- Dr. Matthew Stagner, Vice President and Director, Mathematica, Chicago, Illinois
- Scott Baumgartner, Researcher, Mathematica, Washington, D.C.
- Dr. Jennifer Bellamy, Associate Professor, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado

Pooja Gupta: Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Pooja Gupta. I work at the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families and am the Federal Project Officer for the Fathers and Continuous Learning Project. I'm going to briefly introduce our speakers and then turn it over to them. More complete bios are located in your session app. Dr. Matthew Stagner is the Vice President and Director of the Chicago office of Mathematica and Project Director for the Fathers and Continuous Learning Project. Scott Baumgartner is a Researcher at the Washington D.C. office of Mathematica, and has been involved in all facets of the parents and children together study that you'll be hearing about today. Dr. Jennifer Bellamy is the Associate Professor at the University of Denver and Principal Investigator of the Fathers and Continuous Learning Project.

Dr. Stagner: Thank you Pooja. Thank you for joining us this morning. As you know, the title is Engagement Opportunities in Child Welfare. In thinking about the session, our Fathers and Continuous Learning Project is in its early stages. We wanted to build on work that ACF (Administration for Children and Families) had already funded on fathers and asked Scott to come and present on the Parents and Children Together, PACT Project, and show you some interesting videos where fathers talk about the challenges of engagement in systems.

You will find that those videos don't always directly talk about child welfare, but we think they set the tone of some of the challenges that the child welfare system faces in engaging fathers; so, Scott is sort of our base to build on. Then Jen and I will talk a little more about the work that we've done and plan to do in the Fathers and Continuous Learning Project. Therefore, it may be helpful for us to get a sense of the room. I'm wondering if you could raise your hand if you are directly or somewhat connected to the child welfare system.





Maybe a third of you, which is what we were hoping for. How many of you are in government agencies other than child welfare, such as child support, other family serving systems and then community-based agencies? And shout out a couple of others if I didn't get to you.

Participant: Tribal Program

Participant: Private sector in child support

Dr. Stagner: This is a good mix and again, what we were hoping for because this conference is not solely focused on child welfare. As you'll see throughout the session, we see many of these challenges as multi-sectoral challenges. Child welfare has some peculiarities we will touch on that we think sometimes creates challenges that are extra for engagement of fathers and will be attentive to those. A lot of them you will be hearing about throughout this conference. I'm now going to turn it over to Scott who will talk about the PACT study, show you a few videos, and summarize some of the findings from that study including the challenges and opportunities of engaging fathers.

Scott Baumgartner: Thank you Matt, Pooja, Jen and everyone. Welcome to this session. I'm very excited because child welfare is sort of a new area for me. I've been working on the PACT study since 2013 when I started at Mathematica. I'm a Researcher at Mathematica and I'm going to share some insights from the PACT study about engaging fathers in public systems such as child welfare. PACT is a random assignment evaluation of a set of responsible fatherhood programs that received grants when it began in 2010 and is still going strong.

Part of my presentation, and some of the videos you will see today, come from an online report we just released. The report blends some of our evaluation findings with narratives and voices from the program managers and those who participated in the programs themselves.

Before I begin with the presentation, I do want to thank a large team of Mathematica and ACF staff. The PACT evaluation has been run by Heather Zaveri and Sarah Avellar and formerly by Robin Dion and Pam Holcomb with the qualitative study under which a lot of the videos and interviews were conducted. This project would not be possible without the Administration for Children and Families, and in particular, our Project Officer, Kathleen McCoy, Jen and formerly Seth Chamberlain. Most of all, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the four responsible fatherhood programs that have participated in this study with us: Connections To Success in Kansas City, Urban Ventures in Minneapolis, The Father Project in Minneapolis and St. Paul, which is run by Goodwill-Easter Seals, and the Father Support Center in St. Louis.

You should have on your chairs a handout with some details about the PACT evaluation. PACT included evaluations of both responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage programs, but today



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we're focusing on the responsible fatherhood side. PACT, as I mentioned, was a large random assignment study, which means that 50 percent of the people who enrolled in the programs received services and 50 percent of the people did not.

Between 2012 and 2015, PACT enrolled over 5,500 men across the four programs. There are three main components to the study. The first is a process study that documented how each of the responsible fatherhood (RF) programs were structured and operated. The second is a qualitative study which involved three rounds of in-depth interviews with a group of fathers about their lives and their experiences. The third is an impact study which looked at changes in fathers' outcomes 12 months after program enrollment.

Fatherhood, for the group of men who are in these programs, appeared to serve as a catalyst for them to make positive changes in their lives. Becoming a father prompted a new outlook and a desire to change their life course. As Michael summed up in the quote on the slide, "I'm not going to be no help to my kids in prison or debt." Fatherhood offered these men a chance to contribute something positive to be the father that they never had. And it provided them with an opportunity to help their children avoid making the same mistakes that they had. Or, as another dad in this study said, "To take the right road and not the wrong road." This in turn motivated them to enroll in RF programs in hopes that these programs could help them gain greater access to their children and to help them be a better father.

That didn't mean that fatherhood was necessarily going to be easy for these men. Almost half the men in this study had children by multiple women and less than a quarter of them were living with one of their children when they enrolled in this study. Fathers did tend to have some contact with their children, even if they didn't live with them, but more than a quarter of the fathers didn't have any contact with any of their children. This is interesting because depending on the child that you're thinking about, the fathers in the study could both be involved with their children and not involved at all with their children. The flip side of the handout provides a brief portrait of the men who were in the PACT programs.

As you can see, they're mostly black men, non-Hispanic, an average age of 35 and had between two and three children. Just over two-thirds of the men had a high school diploma or equivalent and just under half had not worked in the 30 days prior to enrolling in the program. More than half of the men had experienced some form of unstable housing and almost three quarters of them had been convicted of a crime at some point in their past. In other words, these men faced significant roadblocks to being involved with their children, including past trauma that was unaddressed, complex family situations, conflictual relationships with co-parents, and difficulty meeting their child support obligations.





We conducted in-depth interviews with approximately 90 fathers to better understand their life experiences going all the way back to their own childhoods. The men served by these programs had, as they often described it, rough upbringings. Their stories were about growing up in poverty, often living in dangerous neighborhoods, early and frequent exposure to drugs and violence. A recurrent theme was that they often had no positive father figure in their lives. Approximately two-thirds of the fathers interviewed said they had never lived with their biological fathers or had lived with them for only a short period. Overall, some of the men we interviewed did have positive things to say about their fathers, regardless of whether they were living in the home or not. The predominant sentiment of the men was that their fathers were not there for them when they were growing up.

The men felt this as a source of deep personal loss. Therefore, these stories that they told often led to a narrative in their lives that frequently involved engaging in risky behaviors as youth and young adults, such as using and dealing drugs and getting involved in street life. That, of course, in turn led to high rates of arrests and incarceration. I think the quote on the slide here by one of our group facilitators said it better than I could using summary statistics. He said, "So, a lot of our clients have seen things as children no child should ever have to see. A lot of them have had things done to them that no child should ever have to endure. Some of them were asked to take on adult roles long before they understood how to navigate an adult world and it's left them confused and broken."

The men in these programs wanted to be engaged fathers and they wanted to have a positive influence on their children's lives but didn't always have great examples to draw from. As I'm talking about this it sounds depressing but it's important to keep in mind the concept of resilience. Fathers entering the programs certainly faced a lot of hardship and they needed a lot of support from the fatherhood programs to overcome that hardship. But the men, and those who served them, strongly believed and carried with them the idea that the past is not prologue. To make this belief into a truth, programs focused heavily on developing father self-efficacy and helping them set goals around their motivation to be a positively involved father.

Based on our in-depth interviews and focus groups with fathers, there is a bright line of connection between the level of father involvement with their children and where things stood with the mother of that child and the tenor and quality of that relationship. Less than one-third of the dads were in a romantic relationship with the mothers of any of their children when they enrolled in the program. Most of these men had a contentious relationship with the mother even when they were together, or at least that was the case when those relationships ultimately dissolved. This friction persisted and the fathers we spoke to often described the relationships as stuck in a dysfunctional and sour dynamic. In a set of interviews with 59 fathers, more than two-thirds of them said that their co-parenting relationships were conflicted or completely disengaged.





They had no contact with their co-parents. From the father's perspective, these dysfunctional co-parenting relationships manifested themselves through various gate-keeping activities on the part of the mothers. Those ranged from refusing to grant access to the children, to frequently making last minute schedule changes to avoid seeing the fathers. Or as the quote from Mitchell on this slide illustrates, "Just not sharing information about the children with the fathers."

We only spoke to the fathers. We didn't get a chance to speak to the mothers, so there may be circumstances in which these avoidance and gatekeeping behaviors may have been entirely appropriate. We do have to keep in mind that we don't have the mother's perspective. In our in-depth interviews, we also heard from a small portion of fathers that there had been steps made toward improving their co-parenting relationships over time. That led to more communication and greater involvement with their children. To be clear, it's not as though change toward a more positive co-parenting relationship was impossible for these men and their co-parents, it's just that it was pretty infrequent and certainly not as much as the fathers themselves wanted.

I do want to switch gears just a bit and start to talk about the fathers' interactions with the child support system. By and large, child support was the public system with which men had the most interaction and which seems to take up the most space in their thoughts. As Matt said, "There may be some lessons here that we can draw on for child welfare." Few, if any of the fathers in this study mentioned an interaction with the child welfare system, whether that's because there was no need for them to be involved or because the child welfare system just hadn't engaged them. The reason I do want to dwell on child support is to really think about what lessons and how these systems might be similar. [What are] the fathers' perceptions of the system and their interactions with it?

Both public systems interact with the courts. They're tainted with negative associations that fathers may have with them. Both have a reputation for having had adversarial relationships with parents on some occasions and in some circumstances. Involvement with these systems can kind of salt the wounds of negative relationships between fathers and their co-parents. It can leave them feeling somewhat helpless. Unsurprisingly, both systems also have had difficulty in the past with engaging fathers, and that's part of the reason why we're here.

If you look back to your handout, you see that about 58 percent of the fathers in PACT had a child support order. About four in ten of those dads paid some formal child support and it averaged about \$150 in the month before they enrolled in the program. In most cases, fathers' child support payments were withheld from their paychecks due to low wages and intermittent employment. Even working fathers had trouble getting by after paying that child support. The experiences of Xavier and Andre, whose words are on the slide illustrate the difficulty that fathers face even to afford the bare minimum. "Child support was taking all of my paycheck."





Andre told us, "I stay in a little room. I got some roommates. I pay \$80 a week in rent. I drive a Ram pickup. It sucks gas. I buy me a little food and I can't even live paycheck to paycheck."

In addition to formal payments, nearly one-third of the fathers reported providing informal support at baseline. And of these fathers, nearly half of them did not actually have a formal child support order. This informal support involved giving cash directly to the mothers of the children as well as providing non-cash support such as buying food, clothes, school supplies, toys, etc. Such informal contributions tended to be sporadic and dependent on whether or not the father was working. The cash amount of a single informal contribution could range from a few dollars to a few hundred according to fathers. Some fathers prefer to provide this informal care because they knew that all the money would go to their children, even if the relationship with the mother was contentious. Therefore, Levi and Kyrie are examples of this mindset.

Levi expressed frustration with his state of arrears; and in his estimation, only 30 to 40 percent of what he paid actually went to his children. Darnell told us that he preferred to give only informal support because he would be sure that it all went to his children. These mindsets revealed a deep distrust in the child support system and skepticism of the idea that it existed to help their children. There were other fathers like Kyrie who preferred to have a child support order because it would show and prove that the fathers were doing something to support their children.

In Kyrie's mind, he felt that payment of child support should entitle him to see his children, although it didn't often work out like that in practice. Again, I'll note, we only have the father's perspective so there could have been very good reasons why these fathers did not have access to their children. In many cases, non-residential fathers did not have any parenting time agreements or any legal order establishing visitation rights. Part of that was because they had never been married to the mothers. Fathers are frustrated by this. Again, they felt powerless because they had no control or very little control over when and how often they could see their children. Establishing these types of orders is not a normal practice for parents who have never married. You can contrast that with divorcing parents where it's much more standard in many states.

So how did the RF programs engage these men? What lessons can we learn from them and how can we apply these to child welfare? In particular, how did RF programs partner with child support to engage fathers and work toward improving child well-being? First and foremost, the programs provided services to fathers that were relevant and meaningful to them. They capitalized primarily on the fathers' motivation to be better men and better fathers. These services included personal development, and content to help fathers develop foundational life skills and change attitudes.

Parenting [services] was not just providing parenting skills, but educating them about child development and having deep conversations about what it meant to be a father as well as





covering co-parenting. Economic security services included not just the resume prep and interview prep and how to answer that question on an interview about a felony record, but to prepare fathers not only for employment, but to obtain and retain a job. A lot of the programs also provided some form of work experience. The relationship skills focused primarily on co-parenting and the skills to identify and maintain positive, healthy relationships.

I think most of us in the room know that parenting, economic security, and relationship programming is what's required by the RF grant. But the personal development content was something that each program decided on its own was important to provide. In this video, we hear from program staff themselves about the types of programming that they provide.

Speaker: A fatherhood program is not only about parenting. It's about economics, mental health, and substance abuse. That's an issue. It's just so many things in order to get that gentleman to think clearly and differently and make different decisions and really understand and establish what value system means.

Speaker: One of the activities that the men do, and they do it in the third week, is called, *What's it been like? What's it been like* allows us and the fathers to walk through what it was like as a child and his relationship with his father. What is his relationship like with his children? And they tend to identify with things that they've been carrying for a while in their families. The stories are powerful. You get to learn a lot about how they ended up in some of the situations they did. They may not have had that proper support. They probably were raised in the streets. Learning how to be a man in that manner versus someone actually guiding them and teaching them about what it's like to be a father. What is it like to be a man? That's the opening for us that will allow us to go in and start dealing with those issues with them.

Stan [program staff]: Getting someone to invest in long term goals when people have been living in survival mode all their lives is a difficult thing to do. One of the ways I'm able to do it is, I can share my personal experience and tell my client, I have seven convictions, I have 32 misdemeanor convictions, I was addicted to crack cocaine for 20 years, I've been to prison, I've been homeless and I was an absentee father for 17 years. When I asked God to help me, what I heard him say was, "If I wanted to be helped, I needed to be helpful. If I wanted to be understood, I needed to be understanding and if I'm wanted to be forgiven, I needed to be forgiving."

I feel that I was given this ministry of helping other people understand how to set a course of action that you don't have to live your past the rest of your life. That there is hope in the future and good things do happen to good people when they work hard. Ask for help, accept help and be willing to change.





Scott Baumgarten: It's of course not just about what services were provided, but who was doing the service delivery. At the end of the last video, you heard Stan from Urban Ventures talk a little bit about his own personal background and journey and how that influenced how he saw his role. All the programs in PACT hired program graduates and people who had similar life experiences and backgrounds. This enabled programs to establish trust with the participants and create a safe, welcoming environment for them. In this video, Halbert Sullivan, who is the founder of Father Support Center, talks about how important this is to his program.

Halbert Sullivan: Personally, I'm the founder, but I'm also a member of that population. I was a deadbeat dad, I am an ex-con, and I'm a recovering drug addict. That's another benefit to hiring men out of the classroom to be your facilitators. We have some knowledge about this population and some knowledge about what these men will respond to. Our premise is to challenge them. In the first week I would go in and there'll be 15 to 20 men. Half of you aren't going to be here. Right away they started bonding. I'm going to be here. I'm going to call you. I'm going to check on you. We're going to be here. I look at sports. Men love a challenge.

Scott Baumgarten: The programs also encourage peer connections. Social networks can enhance individual well-being in both material and non-material ways. According to research, people with more social connections are more likely to be hired, housed, happy and healthy. But compared with national norms, the fathers in PACT tended to have small social circles. Fewer than half reported having more than five connections to family or friends. For comparison, the national average is about 23 supportive connections.

The programs provided important opportunities for men to socialize with each other, such as group meals before workshops and supervised outings with children. They also provided peer support groups. These groups gave men space to discuss what was on their minds, what challenges they were having, and to process the lessons that they were learning in the core workshops in a group, in a safe space.

Encouraging social connections was even baked into the structure of these programs. In the last video, Halbert says of his program or the men in the program that right away they start bonding. When they're challenged, they say, "I'm going to call you". Men love a challenge. Those peer connections were foundational to the programs that required daily attendance and also had all of the program fathers complete the activities together in a cohort model as a shared experience.

Earlier, we talked about how much of a burden and a barrier the child support was for the fathers. The programs in PACT looked for opportunities to form partnerships and provide incentives to address the systemic and legal barriers that fathers faced. All the programs in PACT had some relationship with child support, though the depth of the partnerships varied by jurisdiction. As a





real concrete example of this, Missouri's child support agency, at the time, could not reduce arrears administratively, whereas that was possible in Minnesota and in Kansas.

The child support enforcement staff were guest speakers at all the programs' and were available to answer questions from fathers about modifications, license reinstatement and getting their arrears reduced. Some of the programs went further. One program provided a workshop directly in the child support enforcement office and another program actually worked with its child support enforcement agency to have a dedicated child support enforcement case manager for all the dads in the program. This case manager worked in the program office a couple of days of the week, so it was easy for the men to come and see her.

Two of the programs in PACT also provided legal services to help fathers get visitation orders, modify child support, and resolve other family court issues. Legal services are not something that's allowable through the Responsible Fatherhood Grant Program, so these programs had to find creative ways to fund those services. One program partnered with a non-profit in the community that reserved a few slots for the program fathers. Another operated a clinic that used a sliding scale fee structure. The child support agencies also offered some incentives for program participation, including arrears reduction and license reinstatement.

In this video you'll hear from a child support case manager from the Ramsey County Child Support Office in Minnesota. She talks about her agency's approach to helping fathers in one of the PACT programs by reinstating their driver's license. She talks about how the child support system considered the circumstances and needs of the fathers in the program, and how some typical punitive measures for non-payment of child support could be counter-productive and make it harder for the dads to meet their child support obligations.

Speaker: A large need for them is driver's license reinstatement. One of the penalties of not paying your child support in Minnesota is to lose your driver's license. This is an important part of their working. They can get a job through the employment specialists at the Father Project, but if they can't get to work, it makes it difficult. One of the things that we have done is set up a payment plan for Father Project participants. If they have no income and they're actively participating in the program, we can reinstate their driver's license without them having to make any payments. Ordinarily, any dad just coming in off the street would have to pay his current support plus 20 percent to enter into an agreement in order to get his license back.

Scott Baumgarten: In summary, the fathers in PACT were motivated to play a positive role in the lives of their children, but they faced significant personal and societal barriers to making that a reality. What can we take from the experience of these programs and look to translate to other systems such as child welfare? To engage fathers, the RF programs in PACT did four things. They provided relevant and engaging services for fathers; prioritized by establishing a safe and





trusting environment built on those personal relationships and connections, not just between the men participating in the program but between the men and the program staff; treated fathers with compassion and respect; and offered a range of supports to address individual needs, and funded those in creative ways when needed. I'll turn it over to Jen to talk a little bit about child welfare.

Dr. Stagner: Thank you, Scott. We're going to switch gears now to a project that is just beginning. I don't know if we'll be here in nine years to talk about this project, but some of them do last that long. This project is called The Fathers and Continuous Learning Project. One of the things that we wanted to do was begin by understanding what the state of fathers' connections is to child welfare. I'm going to ask Jen to come up and lead us through a report that she developed that talks about what we were asked to call touchpoints of fathers to child welfare. Thinking about the places where fathers maybe aren't now engaged but could be engaged throughout the life of a child's involvement or a family's involvement with child welfare.

Dr. Bellamy: As Matt mentioned, this project is in its early stages. You have a handout that gives a bit of an overview of the larger efforts of the project. What I will be speaking to is some groundwork that we did, and how this work would move forward. One of the pieces of that effort was developing this touchpoints report. Touchpoints are opportunities across the arc of a potential case in the child welfare system where child welfare could engage fathers and paternal relatives. I think it's important for me to say I've done fatherhood work for a long time. I started out in RF programs in the state of Texas.

I've done a lot of research in child welfare. There aren't a lot of opportunities to think about those intersections from the research world. Most of my work is developing interventions and testing system engagement strategies to better engage men in child and family systems. It was really thrilling to have the opportunity, through this project, to bring together my passion for father engagement into my work in child welfare. A lot of that work, if you're familiar with this area, is really focused on fathers. One important element is to think not just about fathers in a vacuum but think about fathers in a family context. We're talking about paternal relatives as well. Sometimes you'll hear me say fathers and paternal relatives are FPRs and that's what I'm speaking about.

Another thing that I think is really important to highlight in the work of this project is that historically, at least from my experience from the research perspective, a lot of what we've done in thinking about engaging fathers, not just in child welfare but in a lot of child and family service efforts, is really discreet, limited approaches. Not thinking about a system-wide effort to really change practices in a big way to better engage fathers. We might have a small project that has a short lifespan. That's what happened to my RF projects in Texas. We got funding, and that big wave came in the late 90s, early 2000s around fatherhood work. We had a large number of programs and then many of them fell away and could not be sustained.





This project, however, has a big vision. Touchpoints are one way for us to try to think through the complexity of the child welfare system and all the various opportunities in the stages of a case to engage fathers and think about how things are inter-connected. If you think about the stages of a child welfare case, it's true that a lot of us who work in child welfare understand different staff, different administrators and different teams. Units have different purposes. The work of one unit, one team, has cascading effects that will have implications for our ability to better engage fathers.

If we only think in discreet and separated ways, we need to do some silo busting, like from the earlier presentations. This also helps us identify efficiencies and opportunities. There are strategies we could be using in one place in child welfare that may also be useful elsewhere. It doesn't mean that we're going to have a distinct strategy for every different group in child welfare or a different unit or worker. In some cases, we may be able to share resources and come together.

Participant: Can you give me a concrete example of efficiency or a specific way in which child welfare addresses these issues?

Dr. Bellamy: I think it's pointing out opportunities to do that, but I couldn't give you an example. In a lot of ways this was a thought exercise for us, and it was really exciting for me to think about if this could reveal the potential for where we may have something working over here that could be expanded over there.

Participant: So, years from now?

Dr. Bellamy: Yes, I hope that later, when this project grows and expands, we'll be able to give you those anecdotal examples, but we aren't quite there yet. Some of the things that we thought about in this thought exercise were touchpoint characteristics. Things that are important to acknowledge about the child welfare system also have implications for our ability to engage fathers moving forward. At different points in the life of a child welfare case, we have different authority over what happens. In some stages of a child welfare case, child welfare owns it. For my child welfare people in the room, what part of the case is really in-house? child welfare owns this part of what's going on.

Participant: The investigation

Dr. Bellamy: When we say child welfare system in this project, we think about a lot of other men that are coming in from other systems. That brings some complexity. So, who else is coming in? We have child support, community agencies, and we have faith-based individuals.





There are a lot of different people coming in. Those different actors are going to have different needs and we're going to have to think about them as we are trying to implement a grand vision for better engaging fathers and child welfare. Also, duration stages in the child welfare system give us different windows of opportunity to do something with fathers. If we think about that investigation stage, it goes quickly. What I hear a lot of in this summit, and I've heard a lot over the many years of my work in father engagement, is relationship is a big factor. There are stages in child welfare cases where we don't have a lot of opportunity to have the establishment of a relationship. Then the cascades I mentioned earlier, how things that happened early in the investigation. If we're not asking questions about dad, paternal relatives at those very earliest stages, it makes it much harder for the next team or worker to build upon that and bring in interventions that might have more opportunity for relationship building. Each of these stages have different qualities, different opportunities, and different challenges. What we did was organize the touchpoints into super touchpoints.

Early stages of prevention, intake, reporting, and screening are quick. Identifying fathers and paternal relatives, asking about them, getting information, and potentially connecting with child support and using their father-finding systems that they've developed, and coordinating is key. There are opportunities there. They're more ongoing touchpoints. I'm talking about courts and hearings, direct services provided by child welfare workers, coordination and planning meetings and, involvement in the child's life. Here is where we have a little bit more opportunity to partner with community agencies and build relationships. A lot of what Scott was talking about is that mistrust of the system. We talk about that in this project as well.

It's such an important role for responsible fatherhood programs to become another opportunity to relationship build if child welfare has that as a particular challenge. Then we wanted to recognize other touchpoints such as visitation. In child welfare, if children are no longer living at home, we have to think about those visits, not just with mom, but making sure dad has that opportunity, even if he was not living with the child when the child was removed. Also, paternal relatives, so the children can continue those relationships. It gets complicated. Then we thought all the way through to exit oriented services, whether that's reunification, preparing children to live on their own or something else. I think this was an important exercise for our team and for myself. I learned a lot from it.

Thinking not just what can we do in child welfare, but how would that look across the system. Another piece of early work was done by Reggie Covington, who is here, and Nikki Fung. They did a systematic review process where we were looking at the existing literature in terms of what we know about the efficacy of father engagement strategies in child welfare. The research world has had reviews around effective father engagement practices. This is the first time I've seen a real deep dive into child welfare specific evidence supported interventions. I have a brief overview of what those were and what rose to the top for us.





A lot of the strategies were around partnering with fathering and father engagement experts and staff. Partnering with RF program staff that have knowledge in the area of hiring more men was one strategy. Another was training. We know training is needed around the importance of fathers for their children, their family well-being overall, and also their success in the child welfare system. We have research showing we're going to get better child welfare outcomes if dads are better engaged. Getting that knowledge and practical strategies to workers would engage fathers better, but I'm not really sure how to do that.

There's other research that we identified around making the child welfare office more father friendly. I think that's largely reflective of a lot of the work that you are quite familiar with in thinking about organizations and father friendliness. We also identified services, some of which I have thought of as a child welfare person, as not being a father-engagement strategy. If we take a more family inclusive perspective, they make a lot of sense. For example, family group decision-making models. If we are taking a family inclusive approach, fathers are part of the family. Those type of models make a lot of sense along with another bucket of approaches around discussing the importance of fathers with mothers. We've talked a lot about how that mother-father relationship is important. Some of the research supported strategies were in this particular bucket.

Participant: Going to your bucket and the training, what training are you talking about specifically? Training on how to be more engaging with the fathers and/or does that include trying to get to where your own staff are on the spectrum with regard to fathers being involved? I find that in Western New York where I come from, we've had to change our message when we speak to an audience. If we start off with, "Hey, if you have dads involved, you'll get all of these great outcomes," you alienate a certain part of the room because they're negative or because of their totally absent experience with their own fathers. These are the staff that you need to get buy-in. What about accountable fatherhood, responsible fatherhood and using dads as a resource so that mom can have some time off. He is helpful and can help you in certain areas.

Dr. Bellamy: Reggie, would do you like to speak to this because I feel like you have a better detailed, nuanced sense of what you found.

Reggie Covington: Absolutely. That is part of the training. I think what we're highlighting is sustaining what some staff might have. Sometimes it's deeper because I've met trainers that come in and staff have broken down and cried, because the second you start talking about this is what we want our fathers to look like, they're thinking about their dads and they're traumatized. I'm looking at Jason. Jason, can you talk to us about this?





Jason Mahoney: Good morning. In Wake County, North Carolina we saw that we needed to do something different, something outside the box. We did some research and found we couldn't serve dads until workers' mindsets had changed. So, we did trauma-informed training, then a series of father engagement trainings that the entire child welfare staff were mandated to go through. The icebreaker was "what's going on with you?" in terms of their fathers. We had staff breakdown because it was that intense. Now all staff are fully trained on those modules and we are able to speak with one voice.

They now have a broad perspective to engage our community as well as talk about the departments and child support first. They also participated in extensive engagement training. We have one agency speaking with employees. And then with the actual services, we shifted our parent education unit to develop policies and schedules. Any time a child comes into foster care, or when a dad is involved with CPS, we automatically assign them to a child welfare specialist to be their advocate. We walk them through the process and hold them accountable. It's an overall training that has increased the unifications with dads.

Participant: What training did you use?

Jason Mahoney: It was a combination. We had Dr. Rodney Harris, trauma-informed and based in Wake County, come in as a trainer. He engaged the staff from different aspects, including the executive secretary. Patrick Patterson did learning circles. He engaged everyone from the front desk all the way to line workers management. From there we built the model for our father engagement training.

Dr. Bellamy: I'm aware that we're running a little short on time, but we do want to try to preserve some time for Q&A. Just to wrap up these pieces, I think the discussion has already highlighted well what I was hoping to say. That sort of complexity and nuanced view that the touchpoints work gave us and then the review of the strategies together. We must pull it all together in a comprehensive, systematic, ongoing approach. I'm going to hand it back over to Matt to talk about the framework that we're using to do that very complex process.

Dr. Stagner: I'm going to make a couple of points building on that. Once again, we've spent most of the time on this project preparing to engage sites. Wake County is one that we've been able to have an early relationship with and learn from. I also wanted to note that although Pooja is here representing OPRE, there are two other parts of ACF that are intimately involved in this project. One is the Children's Bureau, because we are trying to make some changes in the child welfare system, but also the Office of Family Assistance. It was in conversations with the Office of Family Assistance that we got this sense of what I think all of you have experienced, which is where a fatherhood focus comes in. It lasts as long as the grant and then the grant ends. Sustainability is not there, and more importantly, the system that was supposed to absorb this





didn't change. So, we went back to the drawing board to really think about what we were interested in from the start in continuous learning. How do you use a continuous learning process that has stickiness, has a way of spreading throughout the system? It's a systemic change, not just one little part of the complex system that Jen went over. How do we know it's still going to be there in the long term? We ended up with a focus on a thing called the "Breakthrough Series Collaborative." Would you raise your hand if you've ever heard of this or had some experience with it? So, a couple of you. This comes from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. The idea is that change can only happen when multiple levels of an organization are involved.

When there's a comprehensive framework that you're working from for systemic change and you go through learning cycles, you don't have it right to begin with. Consultants can come in and say, "Do X." You might pretend to do X and then the consultant goes away and you do Y, back to whatever business was. The idea of the breakthrough series is that a breakthrough idea is going to come because people at all levels of the organization and partners across the system are involved. Someone from the courts, from the community-based agency, a line worker, a supervisor, and a middle manager are there. Leadership has to be at the table, but it can't be driven by that. So, you form a cross disciplinary cross level team that works through a process of planning, does a study, and acts essentially to make a change.

I will lead you through these five elements and tell you a little bit about where we are, which is again early on, but we're very excited to be able to test this. This can make child welfare systems focus on fathers, not just as a side-light or a time limited project, but in terms of system change and stickiness. As I noted, it starts with a multi-level team in the hospital. That means you have to get the nurse and the orderly there, not just the surgeon if you're trying to do something that changes infection rates in the hospital.

You need everyone who touches a patient at different times or everyone who's involved with a family at different times and they're all equal on this team. Part of what they practice is if the surgeon speaks, or in this case the child welfare director speaks, the frontline worker needs to give input and the community-based fatherhood program needs to give input and recognize that everyone brings expertise to the table. Then faculty are content experts who coach in this process. But again, it's not experts coming in and telling the team what to do. It's a coaching process of, consider all these options, here are some supports I can bring you. It's really driven by the multi-disciplinary team.

There's a shared learning environment. These teams in different places talk to one another. We're currently building sites for this project. We'll have teams in different parts of the country who interact periodically to say, "Here's what we're really struggling with. How did you overcome that?" or, "Did you think about this? because in our context, this works." We're trying to find that sweet spot of people with a common mission but coming from different contexts and being able





to share those different contexts. We've just finalized, for Pooja's and her colleagues review, what's called the Collaborative Change Framework.

This again is a vision if the child welfare system is going to change. Here are a handful of things that must change and ways that we could go about doing that. It's comprehensive, it's the big picture, and over time these individual teams should touch every part of that, but they must begin somewhere. Late this summer they will begin the process of picking one part of that change framework to try to improve measures to see whether they're improving. Our touchpoints work in the prior research has helped inform this. We had a meeting with people from across the country to help inform this. It's gone back to ACF for review.

To make this point again, we're not trying to make a one-time small change. We're trying to change the system and we need to do all these things. The Racial Equity Lens, for example, is one of the columns out of five for this. Because so many fathers involved or not involved in the child welfare system come from minority communities, we can't change fatherhood practice without also thinking about that lens. That's how big a picture some of these are. Then they come down to very concrete things we're going to do around training or some action steps that will begin to change that. Out of that comes the model for improvement. The idea of this place in Wake County, given this change framework, we're going to take on this problem, we're going to work on it.

We're going to try to get it going and improve it. And we're trying to embed a long-term change mentality in the system. Part of the idea of this, from healthcare, is not that you make a change, check that box, and walk away and now infection rates are always going to be low. You have to keep your eye on the ball all the time. We hope that we walk away from these sites in a couple of years with them continuing a focus on fatherhood and recognizing that maybe they started doing some things better, but they have to keep at it and continue and watch the data that is telling them whether change is happening.

I'm really glad Jason brought up the point around training. Staff turnover in child welfare is a big challenge. Even staff who get the training in April, maybe by December they've somewhat slipped back to their old way of working. These are the kinds of things that have to keep us going, to keep improving. This will be a test of whether the change can be made. And, now we'll open it up to questions.

Participant: Fathers themselves are not actually integrated. Unless that's the actual tool and framework?

Dr. Stagner: They are in the multi-disciplinary team. Fathers are required to be part of that. They are at the table as well as paternal relatives. It might be a grandmother through the paternal





line who's saying, "Here's why your solution isn't going to work for me. It sounds good from where you sit, but from where I sit it doesn't." They're going to see the same data that says, workers are changing their practice in this way. and they're going to be able to say, the data says that, but I'm not so sure.

Participant: I work for a company that deals with child support and child welfare. I think one of the things that we've been trying to do is really try to get child welfare staff to essentially cross that bridge to child support. We know where the fathers are and can put them in contact with their family. I hate the word placement options. Send these children home so that these dads can be dads rather than non-familial placement or other placement options that are not ideal.

Dr. Stagner: Thinking about fathers and paternal relatives as part of their family from the beginning, they're not a part of the system. Family placement is in some ways not really placement. It's home, it's where a child belongs. That kind of language changes and action changes that follow, the language doesn't make it happen. But the language is certainly an indicator of the mindset of the system.

Participant: How would your organization or county child welfare get to be part of this process? Do they self-select or are they OFA funded?

Dr. Stagner: We've worked on many projects where the focus is a set of particular grantees. PACT is an example of that. There is a set of four PACT grantees that are in the latter stages. But looking at child welfare agencies that have an interest in this project, we mainly went through the regional offices and through connections that ACF has. We were looking for people with a range of familiarity with the breakthrough series collaborative. The Casey Foundation has worked with this method and has touched a few child welfare agencies with it.

Interestingly, I think the bottom line is that it didn't quite create all the sustainable change that people would've liked. So, we're looking at how to do it a little bit differently to create that. But, we're also looking for places that have leadership interest and a realization that this takes time. It's not extra work because it's related to the work you should be doing, but you have to be willing to say, "We want people at all levels of the organization and our partners in the community to participate in it."

Participant: Related to the research around the gender breakdown of welfare workers and child welfare workers, we do not have a very [inaudible] relationship with child welfare services. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that it is female dominated. I really think they don't feel like fathers are the parent to begin with. Which again, is incorrect. At the same time, I'm trying to tell them if you don't find the father, you don't find the family.





Dr. Stagner: I'm guessing there are probably women in that family.

Participant: Yes, and I think it's a huge issue.

Dr. Stagner: I'm glad you brought it up because I was thinking exactly the same thing during the earlier conversation and the things that Scott put up there about how important it was to those running fatherhood programs that they have the real life experience that connects with fathers. That's where I think the partnership question comes in and it's probably two stages of both opening minds in child welfare and the willingness to take some extra steps. But also recognizing that it may be through the partnership with a community-based agency that the connection might have to happen.

One site we've been talking with does have a father engagement specialist at every office, or certain offices, who can be brought in to change that initial experience that a father has and who ideally has had experience in the system. It was sort of seeing it through the father's eyes, but you're right, I don't know what the exact breakdown would be, but probably 80 percent plus of frontline child welfare workers are females. That's a big challenge and I think it's both opening the minds to take the steps, but we may, as a system, need help from other places to do that.

Participant: I'm working based on a tribal nation in Northern California. I'm somewhat challenged with the federal program. Because I think a lot of those tribes are in a really good place to do some of these systemic changes. Of course, our organization is a little nimbler than some of these large statewide organizations. My challenge is more on the federal program officers to do some outreach programs. How do we implement it at a more rapid pace? We know where the families are, who the families are, and we have enrollment information.

Dr. Stagner: Great point. The issue is the readiness of tribes or certain tribes, especially to take on these kinds of systemic changes because of the existing condition and the sort of freedom, especially for those who are separate from the agencies as opposed to embedded within the states. I do think that's not to pile onto the federal government but being present in the minds of the regional staff is really important as part of that process as well.

I'm going to move us on, but we'll be around the conference for further questions and answers. I noted that the doors were open to this the whole time. It's very comforting to us because researchers often feel like crashing through open doors, as we like to say. Like we knew that. We're out there in the field seeing that every day. That's where these kinds of interactions really help us by either having any of you say, "Some of this doesn't make sense to us." or, "Yes, you are on the right path from the way that we look at it." So, we do these systematic reviews, but touching base with you in this kind of setting is important.





Participant: Will this slide show be online or sent out?.

Scott Baumgarten: The PACT online report has a lot of great videos of the fathers talking about their experiences. We did a forum and all the videos should be online, either on the ACF website or the Mathematica website.

Pooja Gupta: Thank you all for coming today. Please join me in thanking our presenters. I know they've been really busy working on this project and the PACT findings.



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